

On The Water

January 26, 2009

Albert Pyle

I would rather be on the water than not. I have thought about this predilection for bobbing about from time to time. Not very hard, you understand. Thinking about one's tendencies borders on introspection. And introspection, particularly rigorous introspection, comes entirely too close to research. I believe I have made it clear to this assembly that I would rather not do research. I have friends who relish research, digging into microfilms and tax records at every opportunity. Not me. I would, as I said, rather be up to my neck in a river or lake or pool or ocean.

Here are what I think are the main reasons for preferring to be in the drink to plodding around on terra firma. Not that I have anything against terra firma. Far from it. You can do a lot of fun stuff on hard ground, but the problem with dry land in my book is that it's very easy to get caught doing it. Having fun, I mean. There's always someone on patrol. Someone trying to stop you from having fun. I'm going to drift here for a moment.

For most of us the first such patrolman, the primal joykiller in life, the guy who stops you from having fun is usually the old paterfamilias. There may be one or two of you here tonight who enjoyed a genuinely happy fatherly relationship, the kind of father-son deal where the old man, having returned from the city after a day at the office, liked to set down his briefcase, take off his coat, loosen his tie, and talk with you about how your day had gone, talk man to man with you about, say, how you could disarm the schoolyard bully in a manly way, promising, after solving the bully problem, to break down the hard bits in your math assignment in an orderly and easy to reconstruct fashion as soon as you had finished your nourishing and well prepared supper. And even as he was simplifying your life and subtly providing the kinds of lessons that would stick with you for a lifetime, this paragon was zinging thoughtfully instructional sidearm pitches into that well-oiled baseball glove he had selected with you and paid for with pleasure at the downtown sports store. To those one or two of you who cherish these kinds of paternal memories I would say congratulations, but I would also suggest that either your

memory may be getting more than a little selective in your old age or that your old man might have been on Valium.

For most of us, Dad was the enforcer, the guy who knew exactly where to find you when you were goofing off and having fun, who enjoyed in his dark heart letting you know that he was on his wrathful way to your hiding place to wield justice. You got early warning through the earth from the vibrations of his heavy footfall. And those vibrations would put you in in a high state of panic so that when he at last reached your pitiful refuge, the pain was heightened when he grabbed your arm in his mighty claw and yanked you from under the potting bench in the tool shed to drag you into the house to dry the dishes and then do the math homework on your own since that's your own responsibility, thank you very much.

So I think one of the reasons I like being on the water is that my old man couldn't swim. Still can't as far as I know. For me, it was a happy and very valuable discovery in my earliest days to learn that when I was bobbing about in the Antarctic cold of Lake Michigan's windward shore or paddling in the suspiciously warm waters of the village swimming pool, I was somewhere safe, somewhere I couldn't be yanked out of before freezing to near-death or dying of chlorine poisoning. The old man was reduced to glowering on the shore. He was rendered inaudible by the crash of the waves, and if the sun was behind him, I couldn't see his furious face. I would like to generalize from this personal and particular experience and point out that Somali pirates in motorized feluccas seem to be able to bob about in the Indian Ocean as free from the reach of authority as a nine year old in a swimming pool. Although no one ever parachuted three million dollars down to my air mattress.

Another reason I like being on the water is that I float. In a world full of things I cannot do and have diminishing chances every year of ever being able to do, floating is one of the reliables, and I am glad for it. Every now and then I have run across someone who sinks like a stone at the first opportunity, and I must say that if I don't exactly relish seeing that happen when it does, not often enough, I do think it something of a moral failing on the part of the unhappy sinker.

My belief in the goofing off powers of the water's surface was confirmed absolutely by my time in the United States Navy, an institution built around some of the

greatest wastes and wasters of time ever known to man. The day I walked down the Norfolk destroyer and submarine piers and caught sight of, tied up in a nest of three, the elderly, unmodernised, fuel gulping destroyer that would be my home for two blissful years, I felt a shudder of pleasure. Not only would I be afloat, where I would rather be than not, but I would be afloat on one of the most beautiful pieces of sculpture ever riveted out by the Bath shipworks. If you have never seen the bow of a Fletcher class destroyer, gentlemen, you have never seen true beauty. Beauty with a purpose, I remind you. Beauty with the mission of taking 300 sailors and officers out to sea for months at a time, poking into interesting ports, slipping amongst unknowable islands, slamming into heavy seas just for the hell of it, and issuing good as gold paychecks every two weeks for something you would, in truth, do for free. No, actually, I would pay good money now to find myself on somebody's fantail after watch, steaming at 20 knots and staring over the taffrail into the soft purple swells of the Aegean...but that's getting a little too introspective.

I did pay good money once for rowing lessons. I had seen enough of rowing on the broadcasts of the Olympic contests, the only time that rowing is ever shown on the airwaves, to realize that here was a sport I would like much more than the hours and hours of running I was doing every week for lack of a better idea. One thing all that mindless running had taught me was that I, even if I had no blinding speed, I did have more endurance than most. Enough at any rate to take on longer and longer distances without collapsing from the infarctions that plague lesser beings. And I was able to descry that rowing, a sport where endurance is king, required none of that fancy hand to eye coordination that has been my downfall in the better known and better paying sports. So here was something exhausting that I could do on the water where I like to be. I signed up for the lessons at the secret local rowing place that you get to by going to Newport and driving through the slightly sinister James Taylor Park to a crummy gravel lane under a bridge that ends at a large steel building and a couple of floating docks hidden behind trees. An immensely interesting place, if you ask me.

The rowing lessons were taught by a gang of annoyingly fit young women who barked through megaphones. Their educational process involved much walking around with upside down boats over one's head and a considerable amount of stepping up over

the top of one's socks into greenish sucking mud alongside the murky Licking River, but I found it all a great pleasure. I got just enough of a taste of rowing before the barking women were through with us to know that I would have been a remarkably good young oarsman if the village school board had seen fit to invest in the, I must admit, shamelessly expensive shells at the heart of that beautiful sport. .

I learned to my disappointment after getting the hang of pulling an oar that there were no corporate sponsors for teams of elderly rowing gentlemen. There were, in fact, no local teams of elderly gentlemen at all, even though there seemed to be no end of ladies teams of all ages churning up and down the river at all hours. I don't know if this is the dark side of Title IX or whatever, but I do know that it is sad and unfair. So there was to be no rowing in my life. Just teasing memories of rowing and rowing theory.

One might think, after the great rowing heartbreak, and I do not use the word lightly, that it would be hard to suck me into further water-based sporting lessons, but one would be wrong. A few years back, I received an invitation with my wife to spend a week with friends at the Chautauqua Institute in extreme western New York. It was made known to me by our host months in advance of our visit, that I had decisions to make about how to spend my days in that WASP retreat where idleness is subject to fine. I was presented with a catalogue of Chautauqua lectures, courses, and uplifting activities in a surprisingly thick tabloid sort of newspaper and advised to choose something to keep me busy. Those of you who have spent time in that highly specialized environment know that the primary reason to spend one's time and money at Chautauqua is the opportunity to gain wisdom from the great smorgasbord of worthy and enlightening lectures that is the heart and soul of the Institute. Well, actually, the primary reason to spend one's time and money at Chautauqua is the opportunity to enjoy the sensation of being one's most virtuous self at those lectures surrounded by people exactly like oneself, with the secondary reason the chance to enter the daily hideous footwear competition. Rather than signing up to learn how to start my own Non Governmental Organization, I signed up for adult sailing lessons. I quickly sent off a not inconsiderable sum to purchase a week of sailing lessons from the Chautauquans.

There were no barking women and no chaffing men at the little sailing school since Chautauqua is institutionally gentle. I was not quite the oldest in a class of perhaps

ten would-be sailors, all of us intensely well-behaved in the classroom sessions where we did our best to absorb the theory of something we had never done. Then we tried to do it, trekking down to the dock where were nested the garish little sunfish sailing boats on which we would train. Some of us had greater success in training than others. I was in the group that was thrown routinely from the sunfish by evil invisible forces. Did any of you ever have one of those little plastic mummy and sarcophagus sets with hidden magnets? You don't see them any more because some trial lawyer's child choked on one, but their special feature was that if you didn't know how to put King Tut in his tomb the right way he would pop out of the coffin. That is what it was like with me and the sunfish. That or Buster Keaton at the dude ranch trying to ride the meanest bronco in the west. I would throw a leg over and almost instantly, catch a bit of wind, and go straight in the drink. I lost track of how many times I got thrown, but hour by hour, day by day, I got a little bit more of the hang of it until I could sail around two or three buoys and mostly stay afloat. The sitting in the sunfish was damned uncomfortable, and ducking under the boom when coming about became unavoidable was first time everytime, but I have to tell you, in those all too few instances when the wind caught that towering sail and the plastic hull slid up on top of Lake Chautauqua, it was heaven. When I got back to town, my sensible friend, who knows her sailing and knows Chautauqua, asked what the hell I was doing in a kid's boat and why didn't they put me in a laser, the next bigger thing. I'm seriously thinking about going back for round two.