

Safe at Anchor

A Year End Reflection

Working virtually has led to the establishment of a routine. Most afternoons Aragorn and me take a walk up the road to where the golf course crosses the asphalt and follows the Currituck sound. If we've timed it right we'll have the 7th and 8th hole to ourselves. Aragorn gets to sniff to his heart's content, me, well I get to reflect, plan or berate myself depending on the day. It's a pristine and silent journey when the offshore winds are napping, simply a soothing one when they make their presence felt.

Today as I stare out across the marsh grasses bordering the brackish water, an image appears about 20 yards out from shore. An ancient wooden rowboat, oar slots empty, whitewash long faded, revealing a weathered and graying appearance, rope dangling from the bow into the water.

A young girl sits still as Buddha, on the middle bench wrapped in a coarse woolen out coat, hair tucked into a dark colored cloth hat.

I'm guessing seven or eight years old. Utterly alone.

This is an image that has been branded into my consciousness by my Mom.

"Jim, I had that dream last night."

I'm startled. I don't recall my mother ever talking to me about a dream, never mind a recurring one. This happened right before age and disease robbed her of a rich inner life.

I listened.

She's a little girl, all alone, in a rowboat, drifting away from shore, without any discernable way to return to land.

I know this about my mother's early life. The youngest of three children, born into a loveless marriage, from the age of six, she was sent from her home in New Haven to a summer camp located

on a Maine lake, the day after school closed for the summer, not to return until the day before school reopened in September. Materially advantaged, emotionally impoverished.

I know that my mother made a conscious, willful decision some time in her young life to become a very different person than either of her parents. She succeeded magnificently.

Today, as Aragorn sniffs, I reflect. As usual, about the pandemic, the central question being how do I keep us safe - our staff, our clients? How do I help us get through this? I stall out at the intersection of faith and fear. It seems like I'm trying to hide behind variables that feel like giant bowling balls, while trying to avoid routes that traipse about in circuitous loops.

"Jim, are you trying your best?"

"Yeah, Mom, I am."

"Well then."

"OK Mom."

"Have a little faith . . ."

We arrive at the bench on the course where we take a little water break. I'm trying to engage Aragorn in a dialogue. He's having none of it.

So, I maintain that my mother made an existential choice to be a good and loving person, an engaging and always helpful presence. It's when I get to the point where I say that she did this largely on the strength of her own will that I would get immediate and forceful pushback. Jane Shirley Washburn would cite being the lucky little sister to a couple of older big brothers who I suspect shielded her from the arbitrary and often capricious behavior of their parents.

Jane Washburn Cuddy would point to the endearing, 35-year relationship she shared with my Dad, which allowed her to be the parent she not only wanted to be but knew she could be.

Jane Cuddy Mullaney would talk about the choices she made in late middle-age to enter into a new partnership after my Dad died, which allowed her to create an extended family from a group of middle-aged adults and their offspring. She displayed a generosity of spirit that resulted from her deep connection to others.

"Jim, it's not about what came first, essence or existence. That's a false choice. It's about the ability to extend ourselves to others. That's the path. That's what makes us human."

I return to the image. The rope previously limply attached to the bow is now in the little girl's hand. A light Spring zephyr has sprung up. The bow creates a ripple in the still water as it glides back to a once-empty shore now lined by a cheering crowd.

"Ridin' out the storm
Like a ship safe at anchor
Waitin' out the long voyage
Round the Cape of Hope we'll take her"

-Kate Wolf, "Safe at Anchor"

Jim Cuddy
December, 2020

Some of you may recognize this from the eulogy I delivered at my mother's funeral service two years ago.

On the night of the day I took this walk with Aragorn, he suffered a massive seizure and died. I feel my heart breaking as I write this.