

To Strive, To Seek, To Find

Some look for paradise in the world beyond. For some it's right here on the Bay.

by Janie Meneely

Iwould not be Ulysses. Not on a bet. That idle king by his still hearth, yearning to adventure again through the untraveled world ever leading beyond the bound of human thought.

Tennyson (that would be Alfred Tennyson, the Victorian poet) couched well an old sailor's thoughts in his poem about the Greek skipper who stretched a two-week return trip into a monumental 10-year voyage ("Ulysses" circa 1830). Tennyson's heroic monologue presents the aging monarch staggering under the confining cloak of age and calling to his equally ancient crew to set off again for points unknown. "Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." Read it if you haven't already. Read it again.

What is it with old men? Titans of industry, veterans of small business management, heroes of the nine-to-five—you'd think they'd be happy to retire, finally, after striking eight bells on a career, negotiating the wine-dark seas of family responsibilities, outwitting the sorceress of life. You'd think they'd be glad to kick back with nothing better to do than tell their grandsons to get a haircut. But noooooo. They rise up and march like penguins to the nearest boat show, plunk down their hard-earned retirement dollars, reinvent themselves as barefoot albeit paunchy vagabonds and shove off for the Caribbean (those Happy Isles!) as their bewildered wives wonder where to stow the good china in the scanty capacity of a 35-foot twin-diesel trireme. (At least they take their wives; Ulysses, you'll recall, did not.)

God bless 'em. Probably half have never done anything so crazy in their whole lives (which is what the wives say, anyway, and I've chatted with quite a few). My father was one. His trip home from the figurative Trojan War of his youth was more direct, and he had to wait till he was 60 before he could venture forth, no timetable to restrain him, no tuitions due. He could hardly wait. He tossed the keys to his kingdom to my brother with instructions to forward any checks. And he gave me his foul weather gear. "I'm not expecting any bad weather," he said. "And if we get any, I'll just send your mother out to work the lines. She has her own gear." Then he and my mother packed a cooler and left.

What a pair. They traded in, traded up, traded down again, going from one vessel to another—maybe as many as five in that last stretch. They gallivanted up and down the coast, spending a season here, a season there. My father puttered around the boat; my mother knit sweaters. Their odyssey lasted twenty years, double Ulysses' journey, and in the doing they learned the hard truth that one can never sail beyond the sunset, no matter how hard or how often one tries. One can only watch someone else do that, and in that watching comes the sad realization that this too shall end. This and all things, all people, those we hold dear, will vanish and have been. They had no regrets, mind you. They just came home, finally, and my father died. So did Ulysses, certainly, though that part of his story went unremarked.

Now we use Tennyson's words to lay our friends to rest. I heard them at a memorial service just recently, which is why I stopped and found the text again, to read it more carefully at my leisure. In Ulysses' voice, Tennyson admonishes us to go to those far ends. Go till you die and die in the going. I felt my heart flutter with possibilities, and I calculated the years it would take before Paul and I could at last set sail for the golf courses of the world. But then I stopped short.

I think it's not so easy for some. Plenty of new-launched liveboards return quickly after one

winter away, or they never quite make it to their Bali Hai. Instead they'll break down in, say, Oriental, South Carolina, linger long enough to make friends, and find the place too delightful to pass. Or they'll drop the hook once and for all in Man O' War Cay, discovering one of many paradises and content with the discovery. Life is good, and long, and satisfying after all. Sunsets begin to mark time, not distance.

Me? I'm content to stay here, explore the Bay, go up and down and back again, as my own hair goes grayer. There's a freedom in the familiarity, in the knowing where the soft spots are in the places I return to, and return again. If there is a sight more splendid than a blue heron in the cove at dusk, I've no need to see it. I spot the blue heron and am renewed. Isn't that enough? For me the farthest sunset, intriguing as it is, holds not nearly the appeal of the morning sun coming through Petrel's forward hatch, just so. For that, I can be anywhere. So long as I'm on my boat, I'm there. And I don't even have to start the engine. Call me Penelope, maybe. Ulysses no.

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