CHAPTER 6

FREEDOM OF THE SEAS

The Stoic Sailor

Sailing is, for many of us, about freedom. Casting off the lines to shore is a figurative and sometimes literal release from the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, the insolence of office, and a thousand other insults to our sense of autonomy. On a passage, with the wind drawing in the sails and the wake lengthening behind us, we feel as much freedom, perhaps, as the human condition allows. The paradox, however, is that sailing necessarily requires subjecting our perceived autonomy to elemental forces far beyond our control, among them winds, weather, tides, and storm.

To a significant extent, the art of seamanship resides in a clear-eyed grasp of our agency: understanding the fine lines between what we can control, what we can influence but not control, and the vast world that is beyond our control. The annals of exploration and modern recreational sailing are replete with tales of sailors who came to grief from overestimating their agency. Yet, as many tales can be told of those who lingered on the shore, or pettered safely about the bay, or unnecessarily called the Coast Guard for rescue from failure to appreciate the true scope of their agency.

Many philosophical perspectives speak to agency, but one of the more ancient, and pertinent to the joys and sorrows of seamanship, is the
classical philosophy of Stoicism. Stoicism has a reputation as a cheerless, pessimistic philosophy useful only to those who must endure pain, torture, or the other slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It has little superficial appeal to those of us living in industrial nations with social safety nets, good health and nutrition, material prosperity, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. But, as William B. Irvine showed in his recent book, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, Stoicism is ultimately concerned with the joy of living. For sailors, Stoicism has much to offer as a means to create and sustain the sense of joy we seek in sailing.

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium in ancient Greece around 300 BCE, but it had its greatest impact several centuries later during the Roman period, when it powerfully shaped the lives and characters of leading Roman philosophers and statesmen such as Cicero (106–43 BCE), Seneca (circa 4 BCE–65 CE), Epictetus (circa 55–135 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). Philosophy, for the ancient Stoics, was not a theoretical discipline or body of speculative doctrines. It was a way of life, a practical guide to the art of living. Like Socrates, the Stoics believed that “care of the soul” — virtue, excellence of character — should be our primary concern. In fact, the Stoics believed that virtue is the only thing that is strictly “good,” all other so-called goods (pleasure, wealth, reputation, health, relationships, even life itself) being at best “preferred.” The ancient Stoics believed that the universe is pervaded and wisely governed by God (the divine Logos); that human souls are “sparks” or “fragments” of God; that all events are inexorably fated to occur as they do; that virtue is the sole human good; that virtue consists in “living according to nature”; and that living according to nature — for rational beings such as ourselves — consists in willing the universal good, having the right motives and intentions, standing strong and unbowed in the face of adversity, and accepting with equanimity and even thankfulness whatever misfortunes life throws in one’s path. The Stoics developed a number of practical techniques to achieve virtue and enduring inner peace. Let’s look at three of these techniques — cheerful resignation, self-sufficiency, and negative visualization — and their application to sailing and seamanship.

**Cheerful Resignation**

As noted above, the ancient Stoics believed that whatever happens is fated to happen by God, the all-wise and benevolent Logos. The Stoics deduced from this that everything happens for the best and that all “discord” is but “harmony not understood.” This doesn’t mean that nothing bad ever happens to individuals. God’s primary concern is with the welfare of the universe as a whole, and what’s good for the whole is not necessarily what’s good for each of its parts. Can individuals, then, justly complain when they suffer personal tragedy or misfortune? Not at all, for reason — that holy spark of divinity that lies within each of us — requires that we abandon self-centered desires and egocentric perspectives and look at things from the point of view of the universe. From that cosmic, God’s-eye perspective, there can be no grounds for murmurings or complaint. Whatever happens to us in this life, good or bad, we must accept cheerfully as part of God’s wise and beneficent plan.

In explaining this Stoic attitude of cheerful resignation, Epictetus famously compares life to a play:

> Remember that you are an actor in a play the character of which is determined by the author — if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it should be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, see that you act it well; or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen. For this is your business, to act well the given part; but to choose it belongs to God."

Elsewhere, Epictetus writes:

> True instruction is this — learning to desire that things should happen as they do ... I must die; must I die groaning too? I must be exiled; does anyone keep me from going smiling, and cheerful, and serene? ... “Then I will fetter you.” What do you say, man? Fetter me? You will fetter my leg, but not even Zeus himself can get the better of my free will."

The freedom of the seas entails the possibility, even the probability, of long career in sailing, of experiencing storms or other conditions that reduce our scope of action to its lowest point. The boat is hove to, the tiller lashed, all secured above and below, and there seems nothing more one can do but resign oneself to fate. That sense of resignation from the need for physical action can be a tremendous psychological relief. But there is always one thing more we can do, and should: maintain a cheerful composure.

Minnesota schoolteacher Gerry Spiess certainly needed — and exhibited — the Stoic virtues during his epic 1979 crossing of the North Atlantic in his home-made plywood ten-foot sailboat, *Yankee Girl*. Tossed for days in a howling storm, Spiess’ tiny boat was repeatedly flooded and was eventually capsized by a rogue wave. Miraculously, Spiess managed to
right Yankee Girl before the next wave rolled the boat all the way over. As the sun set, an exhausted Spiess slipped back into the hatch and gripped the rails, preparing to face another night of the North Atlantic’s fury. “At that moment,” he wrote,

I wanted more than anything to give up—to get away from the agony, to escape the fear. I wanted to close my eyes and open them again and be somewhere else—back home in Minnesota, in safety and security, with my family and friends.

I bowed my head. I would cry out to God for his help.

But then, surprisingly, I found myself hesitating...

God had given me all of the resources I needed to survive this storm and any other that came along. It was up to me to use them—and not to ask for more.

Instead of pleading for help, I said a prayer of thanks. I was alive, and my boat was whole. That was enough.

One of the most difficult passages on record was that of the James Caird, a twenty-two-foot converted lifeboat sailed by Sir Ernest Shackleton, Captain Frank Worsley, and a four-man crew on an eight-hundred-mile voyage through the winter storms of the Southern Ocean, from Elephant Island to South Georgia Island. Under the most trying conditions imaginable, the crew of the James Caird struggled against nearly hopeless odds to find and safely land on South Georgia, driven by the need to seek rescue for their twenty-two fellow sailors stranded on Elephant Island. Throughout the ordeal, the crew maintained a disciplined composure and even the ability to laugh, as Worsley recounted in his attempts to fix their broken cooiker: “My subsequent antics with the crumpled-up thing that now bears a faint resemblance to a lady’s hat that I am endeavoring to trim, sends everyone into yells of laughter, in which, after a while, I cannot help joining too.” During the worst moments, attempting to claw off the bleak western cliffs of South Georgia Island against hurricane-force winds, the crew did not give in to despair. Worsley related:

As we looked at that hellish rock-bound coast, with its roaring breakers, we wondered, impersonally, at which spot our end was to come. The thoughts of the others I did not know—mine were regret for having brought my diary and annoyance that no one would ever know we had got so far. At intervals we lied [to each other], saying: “I think she’ll clear it.”

Sterling seamanship and a providential wind shift allowed the Caird to clear the rocks, and after sixteen days at sea the crew landed safely in a remote inlet. Following an equally epic overland journey to reach a manned whaling station, all of the expedition’s sailors were later rescued, in no small part due to the Stoic virtues employed by Shackleton, Worsley, and others, including the virtue of remaining calm and even cheerful in the worst of circumstances.

Self-Sufficiency

Like Socrates, the Stoics believed that “no evil can happen to a good man.” Why? Because only what harms the soul is evil, and nothing can harm the soul except vice, which no good man commits. A good man, therefore, is self-sufficient. His happiness and well-being lie entirely within his own control. All that is good—an upright heart and an invincible will—is within his power. All that is evil—anything that corrupts the soul—can be avoided through an act of will. Thus, “indifferents” such as death, pain, poverty, and loss have no terrors for him. Like the English poet William Earnest Henley, he can proclaim:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Even with modern technology and conveniences—EPIRBs, satellite phones, and a full-service boatyard in every port—the ethos of sailing has demanded and will always demand the maximum practical self-sufficiency. A landsman can travel many thousands of miles by automobile without having the slightest idea how to change the oil or a tire, but no sailor on even the shortest passage should be ignorant of how to splice a line, bleed air out of a fuel line, or unclog the head. Stoicism also stresses the virtue of self-sufficiency, but with an emphasis on the psychological: simply, our essential happiness and tranquility should depend as little as possible on the approval or actions of others, and still less on the functioning of plumbing facilities on board.

One of the many reasons sailors go to sea is to enjoy companionship with like-minded souls, and to spend as little time as possible among the harpies of the shore. Yet, the social life on board a small boat can be fraught with tension, misunderstandings, and festering annoyances. Extended cruises
can be particularly hard on marriages and family relations, as attested by
the number of boats for sale in tropical ports at divorce-rate prices. As
Irvine notes, in difficult social situations the Stoic philosophers recommend
first reflecting on our own shortcomings and doing what we can to elimi-
nate our own annoying behavior. The Stoics note that becoming annoyed
or angry at another's behavior will almost always be more detrimental to us
than the behavior itself, and simply make the situation worse. If all else
fails, we can always reflect on the brevity of life and the triviality of human
differences sub specie aeternitatis ("from the standpoint of eternity") and do
what we can to maintain the attitude of cheerful tolerance and emotional
self-sufficiency so necessary for life on board a small vessel.

Murphy was an Optimist: Negative Visualization

The third, and perhaps most important, Stoic technique is what William
Irvine calls "negative visualization," which is essentially the practice of
periodically and systematically imagining what could go wrong in life
and the loss of something dear to you (possessions, status, loved ones, life
itself). The point of such an exercise is not to develop a morose sense of
fatalism but quite the opposite: to free ourselves as much as possible of
the fear of loss, and hence to increase the capacity for experiencing joy.

Negative visualization has immediate practical implications for sailors.
For example, by imagining a scenario in which we experience sudden
loss of auxiliary engine power when docking in a crowded marina, we are
prompted to prepare ourselves for that eventuality by having the sails
ready to set, the anchor ready to deploy, and a provisional plan for using
either to avoid collision or grounding. By imagining the loss of our rudder
at sea, we are prompted to prepare ourselves, both to prevent that
loss to the extent we can (by proper maintenance and periodic inspections)
and also by learning how to jury-rig a replacement if the rudder is
someday lost despite our precautions. As sailors, we can take negative
visualization one step further and actually practice deprivation, for ex-
ample by shutting off the engine and practicing how to dock under sail, or
by learning to navigate by sextant as a backup to the modern electronic
navigation instruments at our disposal. As Seneca remarks,

Everyone approaches with more courage a hazard to which he has long
squared himself, and resists harsh circumstances by contemplating them in

advance. But the man without preparation panics at even the lightest
troubles. We must see to it that nothing comes to us unexpectedly, and
since novelty makes all things more burdensome, constant meditation will
guarantee that you are not a raw recruit for any misfortune.9

Perhaps even more important than the physical preparations prompted
by negative visualization is the effect on our emotional and mental states.
By engaging in systematic contemplation of what could go wrong while
sailing, we are far more likely to react calmly, quickly, and therefore
effectively to emergencies and difficult situations, even those that we
have not specifically contemplated or prepared against. As Seneca writes,

Unexpected disasters weigh more heavily; novelty adds weight to calamities,
and there is no mortal man who has not felt more grief at something
that left him in amazement. So we should make sure nothing is unforeseen;
we must send our mind ahead to face everything and think not of whatever
usually happens but whatever can happen.9

At a less practical but no less important level, negative visualization
allows us to better appreciate what we do possess and all that has gone
right in life's voyage. It is a common human failing to take much for
granted (good health, a sound boat, pleasant weather, and so on). It is
somewhat paradoxical, but, if we imagine the loss of those things we tend
to take for granted, we can truly appreciate them, perhaps for the first
time, and take real joy in their presence. Stated differently, by undergoing
the difficult emotional work of visualizing the loss of something dear to
us or that we take for granted, we can diminish our fear of loss and the
crippling effects of fear.

As Marcus Aurelius noted, fear is often rooted in false values and lack
of perspective. We fear death, but death is part of nature, causes us no
harm (since, as he supposes, there is either a happy afterlife or we don't
exist to be harmed), and is necessary for the universal good. We fear loss
of creature comforts, power, reputation, pleasure, and youthful good
looks, but what are these from the perspective of eternity? Nothing but
smoke and bling. All that endures is goodness and truth, for then we
participate in something eternal and god-like.

Aside from injury or loss of life, what sailors dread most is to lose their
sailboat to storm or reef. The legendary circumnavigator Bernard
Moitessier built and lost three boats in his lifetime, including Joshua, the
steel ketch that he helmed in the first round-th-world, non-stop,
single-handed race, in 1968. After seven months of solo racing, Moitessier
famously turned back from the finish line in Plymouth, England, and sailed non-stop half again around the world to Tahiti, for a total of thirty-five thousand miles alone under sail. After a decade of activism and further adventures in the South Pacific, Moitessier and Joshua were anchored off Cabo San Lucas when an unexpected storm drove a number of boats onto the beach, including Joshua. With no funds to salvage his beloved ketch, Moitessier gave the hulk to a friend and for the third time in his life moved on from shipwreck. His life in close communion with the seas had given him the perspective necessary to absorb such losses with something approaching tranquility.

Agency and Control

The Stoic sailor is distinguished, above all, by an accurate understanding of what seamanship can and cannot accomplish. In 2008, veteran offshore sailor Skip Allen was returning solo from Hawaii on board Wildflower, the Wylie 27 he built in 1975, after winning the single-handed TransPac race. For three days he rode out a gale off the coast of California, running before the wind and twenty-five-to-thirty-five-foot waves under storm sail and autopiloting, trailing a drogue. The autopilot continued to work flawlessly, but if it failed a broach was inevitable before Allen could regain control of the boat. Exhausted, and with the gale forecasted to strengthen and extend for at least three more days, Allen had a choice: stay with his still-seaworthy boat or radio for rescue from a freighter in the vicinity. He was extremely loathe to abandon his companion of thirty-four years. Still, the sixty-year-old reminded himself that he was responsible not only for his own life but also for taking care of an elderly family member. As Allen described it in an online forum, “I cried, pounded my fist, looked out through the hatch numerous times at the wave mountains, remembered all the good times I had shared with Wildflower, and came to a decision.”10 He radioed for rescue. In a final act of seamanship, Allen opened a seawater intake on his beloved boat before leaping onto the freighter’s ladder, so that Wildflower would sink beneath the waves rather than drift as a menace to navigation.

Allen’s story illustrates a key distinction that Stoics make between what is within our control (limited mostly to our goals, reactions, desires, and other internal states) and what is not within our control (pretty much everything else). The latter category can be further divided into things that we can influence but not completely control (for example, how well our crew performs during a sailing race) and things we have little or no influence over (the tide, wind direction, how other racers perform, and so on), resulting in what Irvine calls the “trichotomy of control.” Stoics devote most of their mental energy and discipline to the first category (control of our goals, reactions, desires, and internal states), knowing that success in that regard will increase the amount of influence we can bring to bear on external events not within our control. Stoics strive to remain emotionally indifferent to the universe of events completely beyond our control.

As an experienced offshore sailor, Allen was as prepared as possible for the gale, but events beyond his control forced him to make a difficult emotional decision. He focused on what he could control (his goals and desires) and made what was almost certainly the correct judgment in the circumstances: to abandon his vessel. Importantly, though, he continued to influence events to the maximum extent, and even in the act of abandoning Wildflower exercised his agency and seamanship to ensure his beloved boat would endanger no others.

Sometimes there is nothing to be done but endure, and it is then that Stoicism can help most. In the 1996 Vendée Globe single-handed race around the world, Raphael Dinelli’s boat was capsized and dismasted in hurricane-force winds in the cold Southern Ocean, over five hundred miles from the nearest land. With the boat awash and slowly sinking, liferaft torn away, he stood in the cockpit for twenty-four hours, dancing like a madman to stave off hypothermia. “I wasn’t afraid,” he remembered. He was angry that death was coming, but knew he “had to keep fighting mentally, because if you don’t fight ceaselessly, you’re finished.”11

The next day an Australian long-range search-and-rescue plane dropped him a liferaft, and he clambered it into minutes before his boat finally succumbed to the waves. Inside the raft was a message that Pete Goss, a fellow Vendée Globe racer, was ten hours away, beating upwind in gale-force winds to reach him. Goss was Dinelli’s only hope of rescue. A bottle of champagne bobbed to the surface from the wreck, and Dinelli grabbed it with numb fingers. Exposure was taking its toll. He spent the night in the raft, frozen and paralyzed, only the hope of seeing Goss in the morning keeping him alive.

The next morning the plane reappeared and flashed its lights. Dinelli thought, “That’s it, Pete Goss must have broken his mast or something, he’s not coming, I’ll never last another day.”12 But the plane was guiding Goss to the bobbing raft, almost invisible in the immense waves, and ten
minutes later Goss's sailboat appeared. Dinelli carefully handed up the bottle of champagne, and Goss heaved the hypothermic sailor aboard. Against all odds, Dinelli had endured.

Fate, Freedom, and Sailing

Ironically, it is because so much of our lives is "fated" and beyond our control that we have the potential to experience true freedom -- a freedom of the mind that, once gained, no man or externality can ever take away from us. Imagine a sailboat coasting along in light winds; the tide turns and the speed over ground slows to zero. Many sailors would curse, fire up the iron genny, and bash against the tidal current, even if in no particular hurry. A Stoic sailor might smile, toss out the anchor, sit in the cockpit reading his Epictetus, and cheerfully wait for the tide to turn again. As Epictetus notes, accepting what is necessary with inner calm is the true secret to freedom and contentment in this storm-tossed world:

Remember ... that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, and take what belongs to others for your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own ... then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, and you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will. 13

Sailing has an almost unique capacity to teach us patience, and to reward us for practicing the Stoic virtues. We cannot control the winds or tide, sometimes reefs appear off our bow, and always our brief voyage on this planet is over too soon. But, with the help of the Stoic virtues, our seamanship, and a keen understanding of our agency, we can shape a course free of fear and full of joy.

NOTES

3 Ibid., p. 376.
6 Ibid., p. 144.
9 Ibid., pp. 188–189.
12 Ibid.