

THE OLD MAN AT THE END OF THE DOCK

As a boy, my happiest days were accompanying my father to “the boat,” a 19-foot wooden skiff that we kept at a public park in the town where I was raised. In those days we knew nothing of sailboats. Stink pots were good for fishing and that’s what my father wanted to do.

It was only later in life that we discovered the serenity and absolute peace of sailing. Fortunately my father accompanied me on that journey to paradise before his years were up. We rented sailboats, but I never owned one until after my father’s passing.

In the ten years or more that I have owned a sailboat, I have drifted thru some real quality time at the end of the dock and on the boat with my own son, Joshua Herbert, named for my father. On many of those occasions we did nothing more than linger on the dock with nothing better to do than smell the salt air and watch the boats tie up to their moorings. I would engage in long conversation with an elderly gentlemen named Steve.

Steve, very lean and short of physical stature, loved to explain how he owned the same boat for 30 years; a 19-foot red Rhodes 19 keel boat. Steve also claimed that he had been at the public park mooring his boat continuously for more years than anyone else in the history of the park and the park has a long history. The public park was once the summer home of the Chrysler family and was donated by the family to the town well before the 1950s. I know not when.

Finally Steve sold his boat. He just could not handle it anymore. Steve’s wife was unable to sail with him and she was a constant companion. Steve himself had become somewhat frail although he looked much younger than his years and was always happy to go out sailing with any of the younger folks who would take him.

One day I learned that Steve was moving to California so that he and his wife could be near one of their children. Why, I wondered, would any of his children move from this most bucolic and perfect spot. Probably, as Steve explained to me, it was for a menial thing called “opportunity” or “jobs.”

Steve was to be honored at a dinner given by the park’s sailing club. Unfortunately I could not attend and I expressed to Steve my regrets. I told Steve how I would miss him and his image at the end of the dock every night when I went down with my son to sail or simply to watch the sunset.

Steve told me how he would miss all of his old friends and the dock as well. He then said, “When I was a young man there was an old man at the end of the dock. I always wondered what would become of him. Now I am that old man at the end of the dock.”

There was something about his words that I found searing. Perhaps Steve’s words made me think of my own mortality. I feel as though I, too, am becoming and surely will become the next old man at the end of the dock. I hope that some young sailor will remember me as somebody who greeted all people cheerfully and had a bit of sailing advice for anyone patient enough to listen.

The old man at the end of the dock is now in California in an assisted living environment where his daughter and son-in-law can keep a close watch over him. “Are they sailors,” I asked. He looked at me sadly and said “no.” He had no explanation for why he failed as a father to imbue his children with the love of sailing, but he seemed reconciled and perhaps even happy nevertheless. He was trading the dock for the comfort of family love and the watchful eyes of devoted offspring.

Steve is no longer the old man at the end of the dock, but if I do not take his place, someone surely will.

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