

Adventures in Second Sailing (or, Hands-On Learning as Central to a Liberal Arts Education)

Kirsten Jacobson, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Maine

Rainer Maria Rilke once reflected: “Our greatest task is this: to find a written language which can withstand our tears and re-create before us—clear, pure, precise—the beautiful goodbyes of those who sailed the seas” (*The Inner Sky*, p. 41). Even if you have never gone to sea, I believe that, should you take a moment to imagine a sailor’s parting words to family, friends, a child, or a lover, you will be able to feel at least a hint of the earth-shattering and, alternately, exhilarating force of a goodbye that can know no secure promise of a homecoming, a goodbye that juxtaposes the certainty of the now and how one has come to this present with the utter unfathomability of what is to come. What might Rilke be suggesting when he makes the bold and intriguing suggestion that our ultimate task is to find a way to write *this* goodbye? If such writing is *our* ultimate task, surely we must no longer be talking about something that only matters to sailors. We must be talking about a goodbye that *we all share*. I will come back to Rilke’s challenge later, but for the moment, I will turn away from it, for it was only by doing so in my own life that I became able to face the core of such a question more directly.

For many years, I have wondered over the vital questions of how we connect with others through language, as well as how our intimate use of language is deeply embedded in our explicit or implicit awareness of our vulnerability and, ultimately, our mortality. And, I have been particularly interested in how meaning is lived and experienced by us in spatially thick terms. My research has focused on the nature of home and dwelling, “disturbed” spatial experiences (such as those found in agoraphobia, anorexia, hypochondria, and spatial neglect), the significance of space in political life, and the spatial roots of memory and identity.

About a decade ago, these interests took on a seemingly idiosyncratic character: I began to wonder after the intensity of a ship's spatial reality. After nine years of relatively disembodied and meandering nautical musings, I dove head on into this fascination by signing on as a trainee crewmember of the three-masted, square-rigged, sail-training vessel the *Picton Castle*. Before describing anything specific about this hands-on education into sailing, I want first to paint a fuller picture of what drew me into this fascination. As unsophisticated as it may sound, I was lured into the seafaring world by the Hollywood blockbuster "Master and Commander." More than any aspect of the film's plot, its characters, its scenery, or Russell Crowe, I was struck by its emotionally-rich portrayal of the way in which a ship must become a self-sustaining world-unto-itself when it cuts its umbilical lines to any given port. Being at port is pointedly not where a ship belongs or is at home; it belongs at sea, cut off, one might think, from the stability, safety, and regularity of terrestrial life. Yet, neither "Master and Commander" nor, more significantly, real life reports of ship-life tend to depict a frightened or cut-off crew; instead, they reveal a functioning microcosmic reality. A ship offers an exceptionally focused model of people working together with one another, their available resources, the elements of nature around them and the predicted as well as chance situations that arise. It was especially fascinating to me that sailors are able not only to work and survive, but also to be at home and often to thrive in an environment—the wide open and often wildly difficult sea—that can seem and often be unfathomable and terrifying. Perhaps as intriguing to me were the notions that such a small space serves as a home to so many people; carries cargo and missives and ideas between places at "opposite ends of the earth"; and has for so much of human history been the platform by which some of the greatest and grandest adventures, explorations, and business ventures have been undertaken.

As my sabbatical year from teaching at the University of Maine approached in 2012, I knew I wanted to continue my phenomenological studies of spatiality and its ability to reveal significant aspects of our existential reality and health, and to do so through an immersive research experience that would help bring to the fore issues that often remain concealed to us owing to their familiarity in our lives. After taking a trial two-week passage up the eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada as a sailor-in-training, I determined that the experience of voyaging on a working square-rigged ship would provide an excellent observation ground for continuing my research into spatial experience, the nature of home, existential health, and interpersonal relations. And, so, with only a twinge of academic qualm, I signed onto the Picton Castle for an additional four-month journey throughout the South Pacific as an integral part of my sabbatical research plan.

At the start of this adventure, I was quite a competent person: I had been driving a car for over half my life, been living on my own for twenty years, had both a bachelor's degree and a doctorate, had been teaching philosophy at the university level for eight years, and was very recently tenured at my university. These were and are signs, I believe, of being able to understand and do many significant things. And, yet suddenly, when I stepped aboard the ship, I was a true novice again: never since I was a child had I been in a situation that returned me to such a state of not-knowing, of needing to start at the beginning. I had to learn anew nearly every move I made—from walking on a swell-shifting and often slippery surface to tackling sail setting and the 175-plus lines that must be mastered to do so; from considering the significance of the sky and its multitudinous signs of weather and wind to how to moderate one's voice on a ship that sometimes required the quietness befitting a workplace with three shifts and sometimes required the bellowing voice required to reach from rigging ten stories aloft down to the deck

below; from how to bathe, wash dishes, and clean clothes using an endless supply of salt water, but limited fresh water to steering a 180 foot-long vessel according to the compass, the wind, or the “landmarks” of the sky above; from moving about at night with the aid of only moon and starlight and the occasional red lamp to fitting into a rigid chain of authority; from sleeping in odd temporal rhythms and physical positions to any dozen upon dozen techniques of ship’s maintenance. In the four months I spent learning the ways and insights of sailors of centuries past, my body and soul and habits of moving about in the world were indelibly changed: I began to become a sailor. This education was not one of books or even of much lengthy discussion: it was an education from doing and being, an education of the hands, limbs, and their successful (and quite regularly mistake-ridden) engagement with the surrounding world.

Accustomed in my life as a professor and scholar to learning through the intellectual endeavors of reason and description, I learned aboard the ship that there is nothing like feeling the resistance of the helm under one’s hand, the flow of telltales aloft, the wind upon one’s face and the fill of the sail to help one learn—deep in one’s body—when one has taken a right or a wrong turn. Amongst other practical lessons, at sea, it came palpably home to me that wind and water are indisputably partners, perhaps even closer than that: a system whose parts can never be held apart from one another and still make sense. The human challenge, then, was to discover how to successfully introduce the sailing vessel into this system, and, on a grander scale, how we are to navigate our way through this elemental and human world. Many of Joseph Conrad’s words in *The Mirror of the Sea* finally came home to me during this adventure; he writes: “Of all the living creatures upon land and sea, it is ships alone that cannot be taken in by barren pretenses, that will not put up with bad art from their masters.” Later, he connects this lesson to the deepest matters of humanity: “All vessels are handled in the same way as far as theory goes,

just as you may deal with all men on broad and rigid principles. But if you want that success in life which comes from the affection and confidence of your fellows, then with no two men, however similar they may appear in their nature, will you deal in the same way. There may be a rule of conduct; there is no rule of human fellowship. To deal with men is as fine an art as it is to deal with ships” (Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, VIII). Conrad’s insights here and in his many great books are not speculations made at arm’s length, but rather the fruit-filled outpourings of someone who was first a sailor and only much later an author.

So, how does this relate to the liberal arts and, given my own launching point today, to the ability to say a “proper goodbye”? Well, to begin, I’ll note that in my experience, it is an understatement to say that the liberal arts are under attack these days. At the University of Maine, I spoke on a panel just this past week about the value of liberal arts in higher education. This topic was not, however, poised as a celebration as it largely is here this week; rather, the topic was one of vital necessity for my university: local financial stakeholders are increasingly seeing the liberal arts as “optional” and as “luxuries.” So, I felt a pressing need on that panel to advocate for the essential role of the living value of the liberal arts. While I’ve never had a moment’s doubt about the value of my relationship with the liberal arts, I’ve noticed that my ability to articulate their significance in “real world terms” was radically amplified by my own move to temporarily leave behind my formal studies in order to head to sea as a sailor—not immediately the place one would imagine the liberal arts to be enacted or celebrated. And yet, there aboard my ship, I felt more palpably than ever that the liberal arts must never be seen merely as matters of dinner party conversation or even classroom discussion, as engaging and enriching as such conversations may be for our lives. The liberal arts are not topics reserved for

conferences, formal studies, or moments of self-reflection; indeed, they are not mere “topics” at all.

The liberal arts are practices of action, of deciding upon and making commitments within our everyday lives. If these practices have been developed into fields for study and private or social reflection, it is because they arise from the issues, questions, and activities of our very real and very demanding human lives. I felt this reality every day aboard the ship—whether I was working on the mathematics and celestial navigation involved in charting our course; the physics of setting and trimming sail; the psychology of interpersonal dynamics and chains of authority in tight and demanding quarters; the history, literature, and music of sailors’ adventures gone by; or, the philosophical reflections and wonderment opened up by the wide open sea and the questions it can prompt in us regarding mortality, our hopes, ethics, and what truly matters to us. The ship inspired me daily to livingly engage with such aspects of human reality as the significance and nature of privacy, community, hierarchy, equilibrium, wonder, apprenticeship, eros, work, loneliness, the elements, boredom, communication, becoming, unfathomability, adventure, nature, learning, clothing, skill, beauty, tradition, death, music, embodiment, disappointment, hope, fear, ritual, space, property, responsibility, home, and, truly, so much more. While these themes are wide ranging, they share in common the fact that they are matters of deep human concern; and also that my awareness of and relationship to these living issues were directly and significantly developed through my sailing experience. I was in each case brought to see anew these significant dimensions of everyday human life, and to be able to articulate something I deem important about human life through this unique, and yet utterly relatable undertaking.

I see my nautical adventure and its lessons as a sort of second sailing in my personal, interpersonal, and intellectual life. While Socrates' second sailing is one that ostensibly turns him toward the intelligible realm, I would equally argue that his turn was not one of leaving "this" palpable world behind. Far from this, we see Socrates again and again moving up the ladder of truth from a deeply engaged and erotic situation within this human world. Socrates does not model for us the life of a disembodied philosopher, a life of an education of the mind alone. Rather, he takes up questions of what seemingly lies beyond from the vantage point of the here and now; he is inspired by his situation, what it demands of its participants, and what, with his guidance, they can open themselves to seeing anew. The image of a "second sailing" comes, as you may already know, from a practical situation sometimes faced in the undertaking of sailing—namely, the loss of wind that can carry a ship forward on its path. If winds cannot fill a ship's sails adequately enough, sailors may be called upon to use their own bodies and resources to row the ship along its course, and this is their "second sailing." This is certainly not an act of turning away from one's embodiment or one's situation in the world; rather, it is one of facing the fact that to get to one's destination, one cannot always rely on an external force—whether the wind or free-floating rationality—to get where one aims; instead, one must recognize one's own determination and work to be integral to achieving a new position—whether physical or intellectual—beyond one's present situation. Further, we are challenged to acknowledge that former approaches and even areas of expertise can secure neither our relationship to the truth nor to our future; indeed, we may very well need to let go of past competencies and situations of comfort in order to venture insightfully into something new.

In going to sea, I most certainly left behind my competencies and comforts, and in doing so, I arrived somewhere quite different than where I began. While further details of that

transformation belong to another writing, I will speak briefly now to changes I experienced in my sense of what it means to say goodbye. Most straightforwardly, I began my trip thinking, quite reasonably, that a goodbye is most fundamentally the marker of some sort of ending. Yet, without claiming to be speaking to the entirety of Rilke's challenge to us to learn to write the sailor's goodbye, I'd now propose that the sailor's goodbye is a goodbye that is pointedly not a closure or a move away from life, but rather the undertaking of learning how to make an authentic opening to life. The sailor's goodbye, like a second sailing, is one, I would argue, that brings us home to the key existential recognitions that 1) without our effort, nothing will be accomplished: there simply will be no sailing without our sense of personal responsibility and our participation; 2) as much as a new venture makes a break with former ways of being, to be a successful sailor, you must not forget the land from which you came even when you leave its sight; you must remember that when you're sailing away, you are only able to do so because you are also always sailing from some specific here; 3) it is only by saying goodbye to our former positions of comfort and certainty that we can say our next hellos; and, I would argue that this reflective leave-taking and vista-opening is the very activity of our never-ending, always-demanding adventure of pursuing an examined life; 4) we forever require the push and pull of others as well as of new and unsettling experiences to continue to prompt us to the practice of reflective and engaged living; I also only learn how to engage life with both commitment and openness through companionship with others who are also engaged in the practice of caring for our shared world and for another; and, finally, 5) pursuing the examined life is necessarily a journey of uncertainty; just as the sailor faces in her voyage, the person living the examined life must go out into the unknown, with the only certainty being that she will arrive at her next destination a different person than when she departed. If she makes landfall, she will do so with

such pressing questions as: Will those ashore be ready to greet me anew? Will they have waited for me, and, if so, will they, too, have traveled in such a way that they can resume being active companions for me in this life's journey? Who have I become? Who should or must I become to arrive where next I ought to go? Is death my final destination, and if so, how ought I prepare for it?

These questions return me once again and in conclusion to the significance of the liberal arts: for whether in conversation around a seminar table or working with others aloft in the rigging of the *Picton Castle*, I have found throughout my life that it is the liberal arts that provide us with both the grounding and the unsettling experiences that bring us humanely together in the activity of pursuing an examined life, and that prompt us to think, talk, and ultimately write about this undertaking. If I identify the sailor's goodbye as one that acknowledges that we can never say enough to secure our relationships and their meaning once and for all, and one that also recognizes that we are not thereby excused from attempting to do so, the liberal arts can be seen as the practice and living testaments of our attempts of enacting this unending meaning making. Whether aboard a ship or collected in a classroom, may we heed the call, addressed to both our bodies and our minds, to keep alive and well this practice of "writing our existence", and in so doing, never cease trying to figure out how to say a living goodbye. Said again, may we sail onwards, under second sail, towards our always-still-to-come homecoming.