

St. Brendan the Navigator Episcopal Church

“A Spring in the Desert” Reflection

I have two stories to share with you this evening that resonate with the parable of the Good Samaritan and our current Lenten theme, "A Spring in the Desert."

In October of 2023, my husband, Andy, and I embarked on a grand adventure, cruising from our home on Eggemoggin Reach to the chain of Abacos in the Bahamas. We traveled over 6,000 nautical miles and lived on board our 1961 wooden Penbo Trawler, named Eider, for nearly seven months. After 45 years of sailing where we relied on the wind and occasionally an outboard engine, navigating a journey entirely dependent on a diesel engine was going to be a completely new experience for us. I couldn't help but think what would we do if the engine fails to start or cuts out unexpectedly while we are in the middle of the ocean? Thankfully, if you are cruising in the United States there are SeaTow and BoatUS, services that can offer assistance if you're in trouble, similar to AAA for automobiles. However, it was a known fact in the Bahamas there were more navigational risks and limited availability of marine services. We did have our fair share of older boat problems, but fortunately none of them proved to be life-threatening. That being said, my stories will reveal the overwhelming kindness of strangers; the good Samaritans who came to our rescue when we needed it most.

As we traveled south along the East Coast to the Intracoastal Waterway and ultimately across the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas, we had the unforeseen pleasure of meeting and spending time with many fellow transient cruisers, some who have become our lifelong friends. We thoroughly enjoyed hearing about people's personal boating experiences and appreciated their willingness to provide us with valuable maritime information. The camaraderie among cruisers and the unwavering mutual support was simply astonishing. If you needed a particular boat part or where to find the best place to get fuel, water or fresh produce, there was always someone ready to help you. It didn't take long for us to realize how fortunate we were to be part of such a unique and wonderful community.

Throughout my life as an educator, coach, artist, volunteer, and trustee, I have had the privilege of immersing myself in several remarkable communities that share my core value: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

After clearing customs and spending a few days on Grand Bahama Island waiting for a northerly to pass, we continued our journey and headed for a small cay off Little Bahama Bank called Great Sale. It was a scraggly secluded island with no inhabitants. Surrounded by pristine turquoise water, we noticed that we were the only boat anchored offshore for the night. We welcomed the peacefulness of our anchorage and marveled at being in such a beautiful, remote part of the world. The next morning we woke up to a gorgeous sunrise, excited to head for charming GreenTurtle Cay in the Abacos. However, when Andy went to start the engine, it would not turn over. I immediately had that sinking feeling of dread and despair...what are we going to do if we can not get the engine going? We were completely isolated from civilization. To make matters worse, there was no cell service and we remained out of VHF range. After several unsuccessful attempts, Andy jumped down into the engine room and began hitting the starter with a hammer. On the final attempt, the engine eventually engaged and we were back in business...so to speak. I remember when I finally heard the engine turn over, I couldn't help but yell and rejoice....Praise the Lord, and thank you! Once we were under way, I couldn't stop thinking about how much we relied on Eider to keep us safe. It was a sobering reflection on our journey.

Once we arrived at Green Turtle Cay, we anchored in the harbor, turned off the engine to see if we could start it again, which we could not. Everyone in the harbor could hear us trying to get Eider started again. A very nice Bahamian man approached us and said he was the owner of a nearby Marina. Knowing we were in trouble, he generously offered to tow us to one of his slips. When we arrived at the dock there were three men eagerly waiting for us. When they asked what our problem was, we explained that the starter wasn't firing. One of the men promptly replied, “if you would like, I'm pretty sure I can fix that for you!” The three men all lived on boats in the harbor and could not have been more excited to come aboard and check out our problem.

Steve, a retired mechanic from Detroit, began taking our starter apart and confirmed it just needed cleaning. While Steve was working on the starter, the other two men, Gary & John, explained to us how to best navigate the five feet of water of Abaco Sound. Over the course of the next three days, our three new friends installed a new float switch in our bilge and made several other minor repairs for us. Needless to say, we were enormously grateful and touched by their profound kindness. When we repeatedly thanked Steve, Gary and John, I will never forget Steve's response, he looked right at me and said "You always help when you can!" I couldn't agree more. This is a principle I have always tried to live by as well.

As it turned out, our engine trouble was not the only time people came to our rescue. My second story begins one morning as we were getting Eider ready to cruise back to the United States. Our plan was to leave the following day, so Andy was busy checking all the fluids in the engine room when he accidentally sliced the back of his leg on a razor sharp engine clamp. When he showed me the laceration, I didn't like what I saw. Andy assured me it didn't hurt, it would be fine, just put a bandage on it. I was very uneasy about the situation, but we were currently tied up to a marina dock on a small island without a hospital or any medical clinic. So, I went ahead and treated his wound, cleaned it thoroughly with hydrogen peroxide and bandaged it the best I could with what I found in our medical kit. By mid-afternoon, I was concerned about the cut on Andy's leg. I wasn't confident that I was able to bandage it adequately. I made the decision to see if anyone on the other boats that were docked with us, might have some steri-strips. As I wandered down the docks, I wasn't having much success, until I approached a sailboat with a lively group of people enjoying the lovely Bahamian afternoon. I apologized for the interruption and asked if they had any steri-strips that I could have for my husband who had cut his leg. To my delight, one of the men said, I think I have what you need and he went down below to retrieve his medical kit. While waiting, I chatted with his family about their sailing trip and they inquired about Andy's injury. One of the women gave me a big smile and said, "you're in luck, my husband is a doctor!" In fact, he was a retired neurosurgeon who had practiced in Florida for 30 years. When Dr. Mike returned to the cockpit with his very substantial medical kit, he said without any hesitation, "Let's go take care of your husband."

I was so touched by his willingness to step away from his family outing to help us out. Once aboard Eider, Dr. Mike examined the cut on Andy's leg and determined that stitches were definitely necessary. Despite his casual appearance in a floppy sun hat, floral shirt and colorful beads around his neck, Dr. Mike proceeded with his great sense of humor and expertise as a veteran surgeon to put seven stitches in Andy's leg. I watched him in amazement and was overwhelmed with heartfelt gratitude that Andy's Guardian Angel had delivered Dr. Mike to us in our time of need. After Dr. Mike finished dressing Andy's wound, he said he would come back later with some antibiotics. When he returned with the antibiotics, he insisted on giving me his cell phone number and asked me to send him a daily photo of the stitches to ensure the wound was healing properly.... which I did. On day six, which was Easter Sunday, I sent another photo to Dr. Mike. He responded that everything looked great and said it was time for me to remove Andy's stitches. I will never forget Dr. Mike's selfless compassion, generous care, thoughtful attention and unfailing kindness. He will forever be a blessing in our lives.

In the spirit of reflection, I want to share that my "desert" wilderness experience on Eider was defined by navigating the adversity and inherent risks of cruising on the ocean. As much as I love the beauty and wonder of the ocean, I also know it is unpredictable and dangerous. When you are out on the ocean, miles from shore with no land in sight or anchored in a secluded harbor, the lack of typical provisions, services, security and healthcare makes you incredibly vulnerable. It is both the vulnerability and the thrill of an adventure that shaped my desert. After reflecting on what truly represents the "spring" in my desert, I have come to realize it is the extraordinary people—my family, friends, communities and strangers, who nourish my faith, offer help when needed and fill my life with gratitude, happiness, love, support and goodness.

