

Captain Bluewater

July 21, 2010 and Beyond

I know there were probably many of you out there worried sick about my return voyage back. You were wondering how the old captain was going to face three more weeks or longer crossing the North Pacific and the Gulf of Alaska. You were thinking how is he going to cope, especially without smiling Jack aboard? I was wondering about all of these things myself. It kind of hung over my head like a dark cloud in the background during all the sun shining times in Hawaii.

Well, I just want to testify that miracles still happen. I am not sure why but everything is different. It might have happened when I went into the closet sized head for the first time as we headed off into the blue Pacific void, sailing north from Hanalei Bay. Behind me were the palm trees, the gorgeous sand beach, the resort, and the quiet anchorage. Ahead of me was ocean, nothing but ocean for 2400 miles. I was about to have a private breakdown right there, rolling about in the head when suddenly I thought, "This is what I am doing right now. It is what I am supposed to be doing right now... I can do this! I am not in Solla Sollew where they never have troubles at least very few. I am in the ocean and the ocean troubles are going to have trouble with me. (courtesy of Dr. Seuss) Me and the ocean are going to get along."

I stepped out of the head no longer mild-mannered Captain Clarke but instead I was transformed into Captain Bluewater, sailor of the seven seas. (well, one anyway). It's been eight days since my telephone booth experience and I must tell you so far I have been great, thoroughly enjoying myself. The ocean is the same, chaotic as ever, blue, wet and indifferent, knocking and rolling us about in our little shell, but I am different. I am actually liking this. How do you like that? Oh, I would still prefer a nice anchorage every night, but this has its own special allure. One has to get into the ocean's rhythm and music.

I am really putting on my meditation cap to try and figure out why this change happened because it could alter my attitude about a lot of things. Maybe the spirit of Jack has come upon me. I haven't yet said 'I just love it out here' but I have to admit, a certain connection has been made. I am actually afraid I might get to Glacier Bay and be sorry the passage was over. I've taken to sitting for hours at the helm with Jack's silly grin on my face, just gazing at wave after wave and marveling at how Porpoise slides and glides over them. I hang on and exult in this wild cadence of a horizontal toboggan ride. When she heels down to a gust of wind I feel like a jockey hunkering down tight in the saddle to give my thoroughbred her head and and let her find her stride. She gallops along at breakneck speed, hour after hour after hour and neither of us get tired. The other day they had to drag me off the helm to come in for dinner.

Mal de Mer? Scrambled brain? A thing of the past. About the spirit of Jack coming upon me, Don't worry, I haven't taken up with his happy hour habit of rum and cokes but I do start getting a little nappish at two and fiddly at three and talkative at 4:00. I have to admit the conditions have been good and we have not been in any serious

weather so my grand attitudes could deteriorate quickly should the ocean become unkind. I also have to admit that I like being on the homeward journey to the north and I also have to admit to fears of notorious Gulf of Alaska low pressure systems. I will be happy to get across and into the inland waters. In spite of all that I know that something has changed

I'm trying not to be smug about my new found buoyancy as I go whistling about the boat. Lyza looks strangely at me once in awhile as though I am somebody different. (I told her I'm captain blue water now) I swing through the boat from one hand hold to another like Tarzan to land nimbly on my feet in front of her with a grin to ask if she needs anything. Then I am off to tend to the rigging or something. Lyza is doing very well too but on the way over she was pretty much Jane, catering to all our needs and coming up with splendid meals and going on about how she could do this indefinitely. Then she had a little bout of vertigo in Maui that shook her confidence a tad so for the first few days on the way back she was a little unsteady in her head. It was nice to have the shoe on the other foot for awhile and be able to affirm my male capableness.

I have decided the ocean though scary and unmannerly, is, after all a compatible enough companion if you just accept her as she is. I have also firmly decided I don't really want to get to know her cantankerous side. Suffice it to read other people's sea war stories. "Just keep thee steady trades up all the way to Alaska please Lord."

The crew is also compatible enough now reduced to Matt, Chris, Myself and Lyza. Lyza likes being with the boys well enough, especially her boys, though we aren't the female conversationalists she is used to. Matt and Chris are fairly laid back types and easy to please. They are also very willing workers as crew. Time has a way of becoming simultaneously shortened and lengthened out here kind of like what I think eternity to be like. You can't be anxious to get anywhere or meet schedules and deadlines because the Porpoise ain't going to go any faster and the ocean won't get any smaller. You are just there existing, and every moment is everything and nothing. The shifts, the meals (especially the meals), the readings and the sleepings tick off the days and nights until you wonder if this is all there is and all there ever has been. Nights are a wonder under the Milky Way on a moonless night where no artificial light dims the brightness and closeness of the heavens. Under sail there are no sounds but the wind in the rigging, the rush of water on the hull and Porpoise's few arthritic creaks and groans. You are alone and your aloneness is good and where God waits and watches. Daylight touches the horizon, first a dull lightness you think you are imagining. Then there are wave outlines, and movement discernable beside the boat, until suddenly you know again where east is and the light collects in a gathering place on the sea. Brighter and brighter the glow, and shapes of clouds hang on the rim of the world changing color from grey to white to yellow-gold to orange-red and then the psalm comes to life. "In them He has made a tabernacle for the sun, who comes forth as a bridegroom from his chamber and rejoices as a strong man to run a race."

Another day has begun and the morning watchman shakes the cold from his limbs and removes his hood to receive the beginnings of the morning rays to warm his body and soul until the rest of the crew begins to stir and then... Coffee! Oh yes blessed coffee!

The sea has given up three Mahi Mahi to us while still in tropical waters, which we feasted upon royally. No tuna found us but later 500 miles out from Alaska much to our surprise we caught a salmon on our tropical rapala plug and then another. What royal feasting it is to harvest your own fish from the sea as you go. We have had a raucous but fair wind passage so far with the trade winds serving us well. We make a heading of almost due north which is how we go round the north pacific high and then swing slightly east to 35 degrees and Glacier Bay. That turn we have now made on the tenth day which is in good time. It is said this leg of the trip is a fair bash to head north into the northeasterly trades especially if they are blowing hard. They blew softly for us at first, a nice fifteen knots on the beam slightly more easterly so as to help us keep the heading. Sometimes you have to almost head for China at first to get round the high so you can head home. We only gave up two degrees longitude over the ten days (that's about 120 miles). We have now made this back up on our turn to the east and are currently 43 degrees North and 158 west, which by the twelfth day is somewhere along the Oregon Coast. Every day the water and air get a few degrees cooler until we had to get out of our shorts and into our pants and sweatshirts. I even put on a pair of socks today, first in two months. You don't really need clothes in Hawaii. We did wear some however.

We are definitely missing Jack but on the other hand I kind of like being the undisputed captain. Lyza insists on being called co-captain instead of first mate, which is OK by me as long as I still get to wear the hat and be in charge when it really counts. Without Jack around I make all the calls about sail changes and observations about weather and where we should head and how we should catch fish. I've even taken to grimacing when someone asks me a question and saying 'Waaaalllll...I don't know about that' and then laughing in that nobody knows sort of way. The boys let me have my way but I can't pull the wool over their eyes with yarns that never happened. They know too much. We figure Jack is still watching over us through the satellites as we send out our co-ordinates through the sat phone and wait for weather info to come back through Al, Jack's friend. Problem is Jack took off on vacation just as we left Hawaii so we haven't heard a thing from him but we already know what he would say.

"Well you pretty well gotta just take what you get anyway. There's nothing you can do about it." So much for worrying about weather reports.

As I have already said I have made emphatic agreements with the Lord about storms in the Gulf of Alaska and this trip back. I just want to get home and I don't want any sermon illustrations or book anecdotes to color our way. It's not worth it. I am tired of being sermon fodder. I figure I can talk about the benefits of heaving to in storm conditions without actually being in one. Somehow I don't think God thinks so, because He sure lets the storms happen. Be that as it may I have still been very clear about this particular sailing trip. I believe He has heard and is being kind to me. That's

my position anyway but I suppose it's a little like Jack and his weather comments. You pretty well have to take what you get like it or not. There's not a lot of bargaining with the Almighty. Maybe a little if you are Abraham or something.

Oh by the way, along those lines, I have some backsliding that I have to confess which occurred around a little incident the other day. It happened like this. Night before last I was descending the companion way in the dark about 11:30 when I noticed an alarm had gone off on the panel. On closer inspection it was the oil pressure alarm. I quickly turned the engine off, got down into the compartment to pull the dipstick. The oil didn't even appear on it. I started adding oil to discover it needed two full gallons to come back on the stick. That was totally frightening. It was only ten days previous in Hanalei bay where I checked it and marveled at how little oils this engine burned. Something more drastic than burning oil had to be happening. I was just about to turn the engine back on when I had a strong check in my mind. If I just turned the engine back on we could soon be out of engine oil in short order and I had only two liters left to spare after the two gallons. There was no oil in the bilge nor blue smoke when the engine ran. There had to be an unusual cause. What? We had been sailing steady for the last week but now we were in the doldrums. We either sat and drifted or ran the engine. No engine was a disaster I didn't want to contemplate.

I won't bore you with all the engine part terminology but suffice it to say something or someone put a hand on my shoulder and cautioned me not to turn the engine back on without thinking the situation out. What I suspected was that the oil cooler had failed. It was the only explanation I could think of as to where all that oil could have gone (If this component breaks down oil from the engine can leak into the raw seawater that cools the engine and pass out into the sea with the exhaust water without you noticing it.) My mentor, the previous Porpoise owner, had taught me to always carry a spare everything. I pulled out my spare oil cooler and decided to change it. (Not a pleasant prospect at 1:00AM in a rolling ocean) With no more spare oil and twelve hundred miles to the nearest shore and store it was not an option to misdiagnose our situation. Chris got out of bed and helped me dis-attach oil lines and water lines and insert our spare part. After a bout with a rusted bolt on a clamp and some resisting of some long unused language that sprung to mind the job was done and we moved to the ignition key with heart in our throats. Engine fired, cooling water flowed out the exhaust with no evidence of escaping oil and we were moving again. You can't imagine the anxiety of not moving when you are where we were. For the next few days my eyes remained glued to the oil pressure gauge and the exhaust water while under power. Thankfully a light breeze arose just after fixing the part and we sailed the rest of the night and on into the next week except when charging the batteries.

So what was the backsliding about? The back sliding occurred later in the night and the next morning when I awoke after about three hours sleep and let my mind run away with me. My overwrought brain went through all the worst case scenarios you could imagine. It went something like this. What if the engine is wrecked or even if it just needs a major rebuild. What if I used the wrong kind of oil when I changed it in Honolulu. (I had used a new engine oil upon recommendation of my mechanic) If the

engine is gone then we are totally reliant on the wind and who knows what it will do. (It blows withersoever it willeth you know). If we can't use the engine then our batteries will wear down. Then we'll lose all the food in the freezer and fridge and eventually our electronic gear will fail. (That means ultimately the GPS without which we are pretty much lost.) Lyza and Chris have been taking sun sights with the sextant but that's been just a little shall we say.... unreliable) . We could be reduced to...let's see the sun rises in the east and goes down in the west. Let's head for the sun. That will work while the sun is up. Sort of. By the end of my imaginings we were a drifting ship traveling in circles with our emaciated bodies clinging to the lifelines under a merciless sun. Yes we did have a back up GPS that could run on batteries and yes we still had a compass and yes we were after all a sailboat but you know how it is when your mind takes off and it's not hard to get on the fearful side out here.

Then I went beyond the mere survival aspects and took on our prospects for life in general even supposing we survived. Even if we could manage to sail back to civilization we would have to head for a place to repair the wrecked engine. Victoria instead of Alaska likely, and whatever the engine repair was it could take weeks to rebuild. Mechanics are too busy in the summer to have time for major jobs. Then of course the cost when we were already stretched beyond our limit with this adventure. Of course we would have to cancel the charter we had lined up which was going to help us pay for our expenses. By the end of my dark morning musings we were either lost at sea resorting to cannibalism or we had made it home to face financial disaster and a life of begging on the streets. By coffee time I had confessed to Lyza my dark contemplations of the betrayal of the universe. She had given me her pitying 'you are really a sad case' look, patted me on the head and talked me down and back to reality.

"What is reality" I said looking at her plaintively. She said, "Reality is... this is a sail boat.... A sail boat.. It sails. We sail. What do you think they did for centuries without motors and electronics.

"Yeah but what about our finances? We would be ruined."

She stared me down. "You.... such a great man of faith. God has been so unfaithful in providing for us in the past that we should now assume He now wants to wipe us out. We should assume He has set us up here to be a welfare case. Come on. Get a grip on yourself. We'll just do whatever we have to. It will be Ok. God loves us and He'll get us through it whatever it is. There's no use fretting about it. "

She's such a little squirt to always be putting me in my place. Nevertheless considering I had been up all night with my face in the bilge trying to be Christian in my language toward obstreperous nuts and bolts she was pretty compassionate, She told me she could really understand how I might have gotten in such a state. She's always been good about the emotional validation thing. Anyway I did come out of it but that's my confession and I am ashamed that I gave in to the sea demons of fear so easily. By lunch time we had run a couple of hours on the engine without any loss of oil and I was back to my captain bluewater self.

Matt keeps insisting we aren't drilled enough in safety procedures especially in the matter of saving a man gone overboard. Our usual victim for such exercises is George a floating buoy with a red and yellow distress flag on it. On sail training trips we throw him overboard while under sail and then have to come about and rescue him before he drowns. So the other day we were hove to in the middle of the ocean in order to bring in a Mahi Mahi that Chris hooked and while we were trying to land it Matt decides to take a bucket bath for some reason. Matt is like this especially with regard to water warm or cold. While scooping with a bucket of sea water to douse himself it became unhooked and floated off behind us while hove to. All of a sudden Matt figures it is rescue man overboard time. I would probably have just let the bucket go, but you know I have to appear ready in season and out of season, so I proceeded to try to bring the boat out of hove to position and rescue the bucket. All this in a 20 knot wind. We had never tried the exercise from the hove to position before and suffice it to say we got all fouled up made a pass at the bucket, missed it and then lost complete sight of it. Now it's out there with Wilson floating about the seas looking for its owner. Of course this only confirmed to Matt that if he falls over board he will only suffer the same fate as the bucket and Jack's words of 'if you fall overboard just sink fast' were not much comfort.

These are about the only excitements as we make up our days sailing, sailing and more sailing over this eternity of ocean. I'll report in again if anything eventful turns up as long as it's not storms. Remember, no storms.

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Soooo... We made it. That's right the old Porpoise is steady as a rock and motoring down a calm little channel on its way to pick up Julie, Kai and Carol (Chris's mom) in Juneau Alaska. We've been sleeping in calm anchorages now for five nights and is that ever blissful sleep. I can't believe we did it.

We sailed right across the pea pickin' ocean for heaven's sake. For seven days after the tropical trades we traveled through thick ocean fog with almost zero visibility and it got colder and colder and colder. It was fog, fog, fog, fog every day every night and every morning. We began to feel like we had drifted into some whitened twilight zone from which we would never return. No dreams came true like in the Voyage of the Dawn Treader but we did wonder if we would ever come out or if there was any other world than our little boat capsule kept lit by the twelve volt bulbs and warmed by the little diesel heater which became a very beloved piece of equipment. Though our world was reduced to 100ft of visibility we also knew we sailed upon a vast ocean crisscrossed by huge freighters which could plow over top of the Porpoise and bury us without waking the captain. We could imagine the huge prow suddenly emerging and towering over us without notice to our quick demise. Our only defense was again the tiny GPS screen and the little red triangles that materialized on it when a freighter was ten or twelve miles away. If the GPS range was set on a large setting like 25 miles the triangle could appear upon us in what appeared as an imminent collision course. After the first few initial shocks we discovered upon investigation that they were still ten miles off and

were far from hitting us. We would try to rouse them especially at night on the VHF radio channel 16 to make sure they knew we were there and that a little red triangle was also appearing on their screens that said "Porpoise, little insignificant sailing vessel. Don't run it over and make a miserable end of the old pastor alias 'captain bluewater'."

"Hallo, this is the sailing vessel Porpoise hailing the freighter five miles off to our starboard. Do you read?" ..... Silence..... "This is the sailing vessel Porpoise..etc.....etc..." ..... Finally ..... "This is tanker Arctic Stalker. What you want?"

"Uh this is the sailing vessel Porpoise on a heading of 155 degrees magnetic at 43 degrees north and 145 degree 35 minutes west heading for Sitka, Alaska. We just want to make sure you know we are here and don't run us over."

"Hokay.....Porpoise....we do not see you yet. What you say you are?"

"We are a sailing vessel you bonehead and we don't want to be another accident statistic because you are asleep, or watching movies on the bridge or playing Parcheesi while you should be watching for people like us" (We didn't really...) "HO...Hokay we see you now on radar."

"Do you see us on your AIS?"

"No.... didn't see you. Ah, Ah....now we see you.... Hokay Porpoise ... you okay now we no run you over... .. Have nice trip."

We thought the fog would never end and actually it never did completely, though it began to turn more into an Alaska drizzle. It's always cold and wet in this part of the world even in mid August. We are beginning to suspect we will not really see summer this year. I guess that is penance for our time in Hawaii. We were back in full layered clothing and rain gear feeling like we were headed to the Arctic Circle. The wind kept up and we were on a starboard tack almost the whole way which was very unusual. This meant we sailed off the north pacific high the whole way without picking up the westerlies and also escaped the low pressure systems that roll off the top of the high. Three days out of Sitka we picked up the northwest winds and switched to a port tack speeding along under winds gusting into the thirties. Finally we came into Sitka harbor in the darkness of night on the twentieth day. Twenty days is an amazing time in which to make this crossing which can easily run to four weeks. Thank you Jesus!!!! I am a coastal sailor again but also a blue water guy. We can do this.

I must tell you we were accosted about five hundred miles out by a humungous fin whale. Fin whales are the second biggest mammals in the world next to blue whales (we looked him up when we got to Sitka). This one charged up on us out of the blue or I should say grey, and made sport with the Porpoise for about forty minutes while we were alternately shrieking with delight and biting our fingernails in fear that he would knock our rudder loose. Evidently he took our name Porpoise literally and acted like a porpoise himself gamboling about the bow and then sounding to reappear fifteen feet off our stern as though he had taken the fish line we had out. I have a picture of Matt holding the fish pole gesticulating madly with this gargantuan whale on his line off the

back of the boat. A couple of times he surfaced (I'm not kidding you ten feet off the port side) blew out his spout like a great steam engine and then rolled on his side to look us over with his little eye stuck on the side of his great head. Lyza literally peed her pants. (not much just a little) She said I could tell the truth about this (you would have done it too). I figure he must have been a teen-ager as he was only slightly bigger than the Porpoise and by the exuberant spirit of his engagement with us, rushing to the bow then the stern and then appearing half a mile off from us. They can go 25 to 30 knots, the fastest whale around. It was not helpful later to read 'Adrift' the story of a young man whose sailboat was rammed by a whale and sunk. He spent 72 days at sea in a life raft and barely survived. I was quite concerned that this rambunctious teenager might accidentally take out our rudder or playfully flip us over on our side. At one point he brought a friend over to see us and the two of them accompanied us for some distance. We were tremendously glad he didn't take us for being some kind of potential playmate or even mate, as his affections might have done us real harm. Finally he charged off over the horizon to do whatever whales do and we were left stunned with some cool video footage to show for it.

Now we are in Alaskan waters, we are back to the usual humpback whales, sea lion and sea otters that make regular appearances. Alaska is cold but full of life. I will see if I can get something off to you about it before we pick up our charter in Bella Bella, BC. It is indeed an amazing feeling to have done what we have done and will carry it with us for the rest of our lives. There is something transforming about seeing the Lord on the face of the great deep. I am glad to be back to a coastal sailor but I know that captain bluewater is there somewhere deep down and that he will emerge to take the helm in the offshore passages of life.

P.S. I hear there have been some complaints about bad spelling, bad grammar and zero proof reading. To that I can only say too bad. This is not a book you know and you are lucky to get anything that takes this much effort. Just want to give you a little taste of it all so don't worry if some of it is in bad taste. C.B.W.