

## The Points of the Compass

The sailboat's compass glowed red in the 3 AM darkness. Quetzal, a late '80s Kaufman & Ladd 47 foot monohull, purpose built for the Bermuda race she had won, sliced through the North Atlantic almost silently. The cloudy skies blotted out the blanket of stars in the moonless sky, but their glow still seeped through, revealing the cylindrical wall of mist and fog about a mile out in all directions that defined the borders of my encapsulated, mobile world.

The sea state was mystical. The seas, the same North Atlantic Ocean that swallowed the Titanic a few hundred miles away, were as glassy flat as on that fateful night, with nary a ripple to reveal a breeze. But through some once-a-decade twist of meteorological fate, Quetzal's anemometer measured eight to 10 knots of wind at the top of the mast. The bottoms of the sails were lifeless, but the top 2/3rds were taught, generating enough power to drive us through the still seas at a steady five to six knots.

The resulting silent motion, with only the quiet gurgle of our wake belying our passage, added to the beauty and wonder of my favorite time on a sailboat, solo night watch on an ocean passage, alone on the boundless sea.

I shifted my weight from right foot to left on the transom, the movement rattling the caribiner of my safety harness tether clipped on the backstay. I cupped my chin in my hand and peered over the bimini, softly cursing the huge fields of red and green light cast by our bow navigation lights. While the red glow of the compass was designed to preserve night vision, the navigation lights, especially the white stern light, conspired to compromise it.

It didn't really matter that much, as I'd long before done the mental calculations of how many seconds I'd have to react to the sight of a freighter breaking out of the mist bearing down on us at 20 knots. At our slow rate of advance, there would be basically nothing I could do except shout to wake the rest of the crew and unclip myself from the boat to keep from being pulled down into a watery grave as Quetzal plunged to her eternal home hundreds of fathoms below.

This was the moment I'd anticipated when I stepped on the boat in Ft. Lauderdale and learned it had no radar. I then walked to the foredeck and had a long, measured conversation with myself about the intelligence of knowingly sailing into the some of the most fogbound waters on earth without what is today considered as common a piece of sailing equipment as a compass and a boat hook. Radar is particularly customary for ocean passages across busy fishing grounds and shipping lanes populated by 900 foot long behemoth freighters whose crews wouldn't even feel the crunch as we disappeared beneath them. As I examined the standing rigging, I weighed the risks of a 1,400 nautical mile journey with no way to know the S.S. Grim Reaper was inbound through the fog at flank speed.

In the end, I decided to live the passage as the sailors of the past did. Like theirs, the boat was very simple, with only a handheld GPS as a concession to modern electronic navigation capabilities. In the worst case scenario, the GPS ensured we would know within 30 feet exactly where we were run down, and the satellite phone, if we could reach it in time, would allow us to leave a message for our loved ones as we enjoyed the 30 minutes before we lost consciousness in the cold waters of the Labrador Current. We had one survival immersion suit on board, and one woman, so all four of the crew's men knew what our fates would be, the same as the 90% of the second class male passengers who perished on the Titanic.

Dirk and Spencer, the other male crewmen, worked diligently learning celestial navigation from John, our captain, during the passage, which added to our sense of living our journey in concert with the sailors of bygone eras. Their endless sextant sightings, calculations, plottings and clipped conversations in arcane phrases made it easy to see why ordinary seamen of the past suspected their navigators of being warlocks in consort with ungodly forces who magically produced the ship's position on cryptic charts. Similarly, our nightly dram of rum seemed more natural and fitting once the bag of ice cubes melted and we sloshed it down at ambient temperature like the mariners of old. Radar be damned. We'd listen for foghorns and maintain an alert watch, regardless of the realities of closing speed.

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With nothing between me and the sea except my feet on the teak rail of the transom, I looked out over the bimini again, the mist beginning to clear. Visibility was increasing, my gliding cylinder of reality expanding out to the horizon of the open ocean, with some stars beginning to poke through the thinning clouds. To my left lay Polaris, the North star, silent sentinel of Northern hemisphere navigation since the first sailor took to the sea to seek new lands, about 50 degrees above the horizon. If all else failed, I knew we could use it to guide us to our landfall in Nova Scotia, just as the discoverers of that land did centuries before. In fact, we could have used it all the way from where we departed on the Southern tip of Florida, but like almost all modern mariners, we simply looked down at our GPS to ascertain our location on the rolling sea.

Just like a sailor sighting Polaris, the GPS looked to the skies and locked in on the dozen satellites available in the unhindered hemisphere above and instantaneously updated our position. It showed us just off the North Atlantic's Grand Banks, where the first European explorers, the Genoese Cabots sailing for England, dipped and retrieved buckets brimming with Atlantic Cod from the teeming waters below. In those days, the Cod swam so thick no lures, bait or nets were required. Now, there were essentially no Cod left. The Cod species was fished out and subsequently crashed more than a decade ago. The Grand Banks were arguably the most important economic asset the English ever discovered in the New World, but now they were nearly empty, all assets withdrawn, no deposits being made.

With the Grand Banks nearly bereft of sea life, a horizon devoid of shipping, and a sky barren of aircraft, I was utterly alone in the North Atlantic. With only the moonless, star filled sky to accompany me, I was comforted by the wide swath of the Milky Way, so bright I could nearly read a newspaper by its light. The imponderable number of stars and planets contained therein presented infinite possibilities for philosophical thought, and reminded me of many long nights of discussions with friends during my 49 years.

Shaking myself from my reverie, I slowly scanned all 360 degrees of the horizon. Still nothing. I dipped my head below the bimini from my perch on the taffrail and checked our course, track, speed and velocity made good. All systems nominal, and Quetzal was steady on her course.

I admired her for that. She had a compass and she had a course. For myself, I wasn't convinced I had either.

Just a few years ago, I was running a multi-million dollar, 25 employee company, leading an industry, writing monthly magazine columns and living a generally luxurious life in one of the world's most desirable communities surrounded by whatever material conveniences, do-dads and toys the marketing mavens of Madison Avenue could convince us we absolutely had to have to survive, enhance our lives or prove our worth to our family, friends and neighbors.

Between then and now, I'd gone from workaholic to sabbatical to semi-retired to retired, traveled a good portion of the world by motorcycle, sold our home and most of our vehicles, sold or donated most of our furniture and toys and was contemplating dumping what was left of our material goods and setting out to further explore the world via sailboat. I'd gone from absolute type A company and industry leader to a sometimes type A who spent more time contemplating the lessons I'd learned from the common people and holy men of our world travels than how to further conquer the business world. I'd gone from a poster child of the materialistic, consumerist society to questioning the value of material goods. I'd gone from freeway stormer to 3<sup>rd</sup> world pathway wanderer. I'd gone from reasonably well-read and traveled but entrenched and addicted to my cultural comfort zone to feeling out of place and misaligned within it.

What I had been was gone, but I was unsure where I was going.

In my old life, I had a compass, and I knew what each direction would bring. There were directions for family, friendships, relationships, personal growth, spirituality, recreation and interests, but I didn't spend much time with those directions on my compass' lubber's line.

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In my old life, there was a direction labeled business that produced material wealth. I spent most of my time walking, jogging and running in that direction, ever forward to that rainbow's end, willingly strapped to the wage slave treadmill. My puritan work ethic kept whispering in my ear that if I kept my head down and worked long enough and hard enough that something good would eventually happen. I never quite knew what that something was, but in conversations with other people strapped to their own treadmills it was reverently spoken of as "making it."

One day, through a combination of foresight, planning, hard work, being betrayed by those I trusted and my own character flaws worthy of Greek mythology, I was liberated from my treadmill. The plug was pulled. The belt stopped. The straps were cut. I was free.

A moment that most can only dream of while their sweat drips down and splatters on the endless belts of their treadmills had arrived for me. But I was, regardless of my planning, woefully psychologically unprepared. How could I relate to a life with no treadmill? What do you do with an endless supply of puritan work ethic when there is no work?

And what happened to my comfortable, well known business direction on the compass? It was gone, and the remaining directions ranged from unfamiliar to practically unknown. Like a convict who is finally released after serving their time and then quickly commits a crime to return to the only life they know - back in prison, I was tempted to return to business, to those comforting velvet handcuffs on yet another treadmill.

But I couldn't go back. Something had happened, something had changed. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew that I was working with a new compass now, and I needed to understand the directions on it before I could ever set a new course for the next chapter of my life.

My friend Lee Wochner suggested two directions for my new compass, Escape and Engagement. I find the contrast of those directions interesting, but the range limited. I attribute the relative sparseness of Lee's compass to his profession as a playwright, and the resulting need to compress choices down to stark, drama inducing conflicts that can be resolved in three acts or less.

Escape is not a viable direction. While many friends and family look upon my opportunity as a way to escape everyday life, the reality of the experience soon shows that escape in that sense is a fool's errand, with no possible way to fill that particular black hole of psychological need. Escaping in that way is impossible. You always loop back to your own yawning chasm of unmet needs, desires, wants and longings. Seeking that escape is as pointless as seeking satisfaction from material goods or relationships. There will always be a bigger, newer, fancier, faster whatever and anyone you have a relationship with will always be riddled with human flaws and failings. That route to escape promises only frustration. The only way to escape, the only way out, is to change what you seek, to change your compass.

Consequently, for my compass, instead of Lee's Escape, I started with Encounter. Encounter, as in "a meeting, especially one that is unplanned or unexpected" is exactly the type of experience that has so enriched our travels. Encounters with those whom I can learn from lie in that direction.

Next I added Lee's Engagement. Engagement, especially "to involve oneself or become occupied; participate" or "to become meshed or interlocked" or "to draw into; involve" is a direction that manifests a worthy goal. Engagement is immersion in the experience, precisely what we have found so rewarding in our travels to, and interactions with, foreign cultures. Further engagement with people and societies, and the lessons they can teach me, is a direction worth pursuing.

Encounter and Engagement, those worked well, but I needed two complementary directions. No compass has just North and East. I needed a South and West to balance out the four points of my compass.

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For the third point I chose Exploration, "to search into or travel in for the purpose of discovery." There is little I find more rewarding. "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page," Augustine, (AD 354-430), says it all. The direction of Exploration brings the next town, the next county, the next state, the next country, the next continent, all waiting, filled with interaction, insights and discoveries.

And lastly, Enlightenment, meaning "having extensive information or understanding," or "having knowledge and spiritual insight," or "having or based on relevant experience," or perhaps most importantly, "freed from illusion." There is no more reliable source of information and understanding than first hand experience, and nothing will free you from illusion like going somewhere and seeing for yourself what is actually happening on the ground. Enlightenment is perhaps the ultimate direction.

Encounter. Engagement. Exploration. Enlightenment. Four points of direction for my life. A balanced compass with meaningful destinations. I could finally set a course.

I looked down again at Quetzal's compass. Floating level beneath its glass dome, it pointed a steady heading. She was happy, her rig quiet, her sails full, her motion smooth.

Quetzal was named for the royal bird of the Mayans, a brightly feathered tropical bird of singular beauty that lives only in the wild, unable to survive once caged or confined. She seemed in her natural element here, crossing another limitless ocean, heading for another new port, approaching another fresh land to explore, her fine bow slicing through the still sea. Confined to storage on land or tied to a mooring in a stagnant harbor, Quetzal would quickly die. Free to explore the world's oceans, she thrived. Hungry for her next discoveries, she held steady on her heading.

In classic sailing parlance, headings were stated as combinations of the cardinal points of the compass. The use of modern precision navigational aids has given rise to headings given in absolute degrees, which, while being precise, lack the vernacular poetry and romance of the antiquated syntax, much as the digital watch has ushered in such time measurements as three forty five instead of "a quarter to four." Quetzal's compass read a steady 80 degrees, but I preferred the classic version, East by Northeast.

Scanning the horizon, I saw no land, no lights, no ships, no people. I was alone on night watch in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. Yet even so very alone I felt comfortable, at home and at peace.

Like Quetzal, I knew I could never again be caged in. I knew I could not survive strapped to a treadmill, making money for the sake of acquiring more material goods of questionable value. I knew I could never again be satiated by the extrinsic rewards, transient adoration and counterfeit loyalty of business leadership. Like Quetzal, I knew I could only live in freedom. I knew I would die in the materialistic confinement of hollow rewards. Like Quetzal, I needed to seek out further new horizons, new lands and new cultures and learn the secrets and revelations they held.

When my night watch began, I envied the navigational sureness of her compass and her solid, unchanging heading.

But now, like Quetzal, I had a compass.

And now, like Quetzal, I had a heading.

I set my course midway between Enlightenment and Exploration. Encounters would come. Engagement would follow. For now, my heading was Enlightenment by Exploration.

The compass glowed red.

Silently, we sailed into the night.