

Three Years Before the Mast: A Lesson in Risk-Taking

Isabella Conti, Ph.D.

Twenty-five years ago, my husband and I sold our comfortable home in the Berkeley hills with a grand view of the San Francisco Bay and bought a 50-foot ketch to sail around the world. We had no previous sailing experience. As if that didn't seem crazy enough to our friends, we were taking our four-year-old son, who didn't have much choice in the matter. We were making this jump into the unknown for no reason that we could explain rationally at the time.

For several years our lives had been following a steady, predictable course that included advanced degrees, a good family life, and the beginning of promising careers. The future looked rosy and very predictable, and this was the problem. I could close my eyes and visualize every detail of my life five, ten years into the future: a path already well travelled even before the journey had begun, no growth, no changes, just repetitions.

We both felt the need to experience the many possible ways to live our lives, not just the single path we seemed to have chosen. To find these ways, we had to look with new eyes. To find new eyes, we had to step outside the boundaries of the known. To sail around the world seemed to summarize in one image our deep need for change and evolution. We had picked a very vivid metaphor and we decided to live it.

Some time into the journey, anchored in the lagoon of a beautiful atoll in the middle of the South Pacific, I wrote in my diary:

I'm sitting on deck, I hear the ocean waves crashing on the coral reef; the boat sits still in the calm green water of the lagoon. The rest of the world does not exist anymore. It is one year and one month since we left Berkeley, since we sailed from the pier on a chilly afternoon wrapped in fog.

“Good-bye! Farewell!” four people shout from the pier as we pull away. That’s it, we are leaving, farewell, closed, ended. I’m leaving behind a lifetime; the house sold, the furniture sold, cases of books stored in someone’s attic, Nathaniel (the dog), entrusted to a friend. Closed, finished, farewell. The endless ocean is waiting.

The feeling is not homesickness, it is not sadness, it is not fear. It’s an emotion perceived only for brief moments in the past: the airplane touching ground once when I returned to Italy after a long absence; the U.S. immigration officer welcoming me back into the country: “Welcome home!” But this time the emotion is a thousand times stronger; it comes from the depth like a wave pushing against a cliff, breaking into white foam.

Tears streak down my face; I hadn’t even noticed. Farewell, farewell. I turn my back to Berkeley and find myself in front of the Golden Gate opening on the ocean. I bend my head slightly and take a small step forward. It’s like crossing a threshold; I’ve started a new life.

During three and a half years at sea, visiting distant lands, there were experiences to last me for a lifetime. The risk was well worth taking. People still ask me: “Were you not afraid when you started?” Of course I was; in fact, I was terrified. Before we left, during the two years that it took to plan and organize this voyage, I visited every corner of fear. There were plenty of them. Killer whales could attack and sink the boat; it had happened more than once. Pirates could sneak aboard and kill all of us; the sailing magazines had been reporting more and more horror stories on this subject lately. A hurricane could toss the boat on the waves until it crashed and sank. One of us could fall overboard at night, never to be found again. One could suffer a ruptured appendix during an ocean crossing and would probably end up buried at sea. We could be eaten by a shark while diving and catching fish for our dinner.

Then there were less extreme dangers, nevertheless appalling. We could make a navigational error and beach the boat on a deserted atoll where we would watch the ocean surf pound it to shreds on the coral reef. We might survive on a coconut diet until rescued, but the boat which represented all our savings would be lost. The main mast could snap during a storm and then it could take four months of slow and painful navigation to reach land. We could catch a tropical disease on one of these beautiful paradise-like islands; the medical manual on this subject had plenty of graphic color pictures to show me the consequences. We could be jailed in

some rat and lice infested prison on some thin excuse for no other reason than flying the American flag.

Finally, there were the minor yet serious aggravations. What happens if one loses a filling, gets a bad cut, cannot get over sea sickness? What if we have miscalculated and run low on water? This list was very long.

All these fears, not only for myself but for my family and for the two friends who had entrusted their lives to us by joining us in this journey, weighed heavily on my mind. Yet in spite of it all, I still wanted very much to go. When I compared the sum of all the fears with the deep need to change my life and find a new me at the other end of the world, at the other side of fear, I knew very clearly and without hesitation what I wanted to do. Going on this journey was no longer a choice, it had become for me an inner commitment. All I could do was to understand the nature of each risk so it could be reduced.

I learned very quickly, for example, that radioing the Coast Guard for help once outside the territorial waters wouldn't be of much use; consequently we had to rely entirely on our own resources. True, we didn't have any sailing experience, but we had a long friendship with the sea and much practice with power boats, diving, spear fishing. We had spent vacations on desert islands and remote stretches of coast. I was married to a mechanical genius; I knew from past experience that he could fix anything with almost nothing.

We outfitted the boat with life lines running from bow to stern; made a rule that every time anyone was alone on deck he or she should be attached to a line. This prevented accidental falls during the first year, when we were green and awkward in our movements at sea. Later we would attach ourselves only during storms and for dangerous sail work on the bowsprit.

We charted a careful course that kept us out of pirate-infested waters, of the waters of unfriendly nations, of hurricane seasons. We featured the best equipped medicine cabinet of any boat we met. We could fill cavities, stitch up torn fingers, cure minor skin infections caused by the tropical climate.

By the time we were ready to leave I had become convinced that I was running greater risks every day on the freeway than sailing around the world. The major difference was that I had become anesthetized to the dangers of my "normal" city life while I kept leaping up with a pounding heart every time an unusual noise (there were so many of them!) would sound through the boat.

When we came back we were invited to speak about our journey to several groups. Every time the same question would come up: “Did you have any major accidents? Did you incur any major danger?” (People love vicarious thrills). “No,” was our disappointing answer. We had anticipated every accident, we had lived through every danger before we left. Thus we were prepared and prevented them from happening.

The only time we risked death was on the last leg of the trip, already along the California coast. We felt safe, among friends; we had relaxed our guard. One moonless night we were almost killed by a boatload of drunken fishermen who rammed into our small inflatable dinghy at full speed. As I was hurled out of the boat in what seemed a silent explosion in slow motion, a well-rehearsed, clear scenario unfolded in my mind like a movie. Mind and body became one. Without hesitation, I changed the trajectory of my fall, grabbed a woman who had been knocked unconscious in the collision, dove deep to escape the propeller blades rotating madly over our heads, and dragged us both to safety a few yards away. Meanwhile, the two men, following another well-rehearsed scenario, held on to the dinghy, climbed back on board in spite of their heavily soaked clothes and were able to turn off the engine before the propeller blades could turn this successful trip into a tragedy.

This is a lesson I keep learning every time I take a new risk. The motivation to go forward must be greater than the fear. The fear must be based on the worst-case scenario and the probability of its occurrence calculated realistically. That probability must be accepted as part of the game. Everything that can be done to reduce the risk must be done; then you move forward with courage and confidence to attain your goal. Having taken my great risk, succeeded and grown from it, I can use that experience to guide me in those heart-pounding moments when fear, for a moment, overwhelms the dream.