Steering Out of the Haven

Robert K. Wallace

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I was thrilled to be one of the 38th Voyagers on the June 25 transit of the whaleship Charles W. Morgan from Martha’s Vineyard into New Bedford. During a period in which the tugboat Sirius was towing us from Vineyard Haven out toward Vineyard Sound, we Voyagers were given an opportunity to steer the ship. I volunteered immediately. From reading a book about the Morgan, I knew that its archaic steering mechanism was notorious for being a “shin-cracker.” But on this beautiful morning, at the end of the Sirius’s tow line, I never had to worry for my shins.

“Steer the ship?” you ask. “What is there to steering a ship when it is being towed by a tug that determines its course?”

Much more than you might think, as I soon learned from “Skip” Wood, our steersman.

I thought I would only have a turn or two, literally, at the wheel. But Skip saw how much I was enjoying it and he let me keep steering the ship for at least ten minutes, which turned out to be good exercise. The reason I had to work so hard, he soon explained, is that the Sirius was “all over the place.” Our task was to keep her directly in front of us, visible through a convenient gap in the railing just to the left of the bowsprit. The Sirius was bobbing up and down like an apple at a teenage apple-bobbing party. Worse for us, it was continually bobbing to the right or the left. My task was to keep it centered in that target hole up by the bow.

The steering mechanism on the Morgan is very direct. If the Sirius veers left and disappears from view, you pull hard to the left and try to catch it. I learned this soon, but I could not always apply it. Sometimes the tug would slip off this way or that and I would pull the wrong way. Skip would respond by saying quietly, “You must go left, now.”

The steering mechanism on the Morgan “answers” the wheel very quickly. I was amazed, given the size of our ship, how quickly the Sirius bobbed back into sight after I had turned hard to the left or right. I particularly liked trying to anticipate when I had to turn back the other way to hold her steady once she got into sight again. I enjoyed asking Skip all sorts of questions during what I had expected to be my brief turn at the wheel—until he, after one of my wrong turns, observed, “Usually, a sailor is quiet at the wheel.”

What a great experience to be able to steer this ship, albeit in a second-hand way, given that the Sirius was out before us.
Very few of my fellow passengers, unless they too had taken the wheel, would have had any idea what drama and sport there was in trying to follow the tug. The *Sirius* had me turning so often and so hard that I was glad I’d done some light upper-body lifting in addition to cardiovascular conditioning in advance of this voyage. I don’t shoot guns, but the way my target kept bobbing up and down and from side to side made me think of a moving target in a shooting gallery. Here, however, you are not trying to shoot or to hit it, but simply to co-exist.

Thinking back now on my ten minutes at the wheel, I was like Ishmael at the other end of the “monkey-rope” in chapter 72 of *Moby-Dick*. Anything the *Sirius* did, I had to be ready to respond to at my end of the line. We, too, were a “joint stock company” whose existence and fate were interdependent. With our monkey-rope, as with Ishmael’s, “do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it” (NN *Moby-Dick* 320).

In the most obvious sense, the *Sirius* and the *Morgan* were “fast-fish,” literally tied to each other. But the *Sirius* was a “loose-fish, too,” in terms of the distinction Melville makes in chapter 89, and I had to remain alert in the endless attempt to make fast to her looseness. I later learned from one of our
deckhands that the *Sirius* was experiencing a similar challenge. Previously, she had towed only barges, which passively followed her lead. But we had a wheel, a rudder, and a certain amount of agency. This apparently made it as hard for her to lead us as it was for us to follow. This made both ends of the monkey-rope at once fast and loose.

We were fortunate to be sailing through gentle seas to a steady light breeze. Had we been in a gale off a lee-shore, our “Siamese ligature” could have been a matter of life and death, and we would have had no sub-sub-greenhorn at the wheel.

—Robert K. Wallace
Northern Kentucky University