



Facing the Deep

"All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean and therefore we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. So when we go back to the sea—whether it is to sail or to watch it—we are going back from whence we came."

THERE IS A TOUCH OF MYSTICISM about these words which fell from the lips of that most seafaring of U.S. presidents, John F. Kennedy. According to his biographer, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., JFK had gleaned the biological facts about the percentages of salt in blood and seawater from random reading. With no help from any of his speechwriters he "converted them into poetry," claimed Schlesinger, delivering them during an impromptu address he gave in Newport, Rhode Island, on the eve of the America's Cup races of 1962.

On the whole JFK was not one to romanticize the sea. As a Navy man and yachtsman he had perhaps seen too much of it in all its moods. A gushing reporter once asked him: "How did you become a war hero, Mr. President?" "It was involuntary—they sank my boat," came the laconic reply. Somewhere in his nautical activities that ranged from Cape Cod to the South Pacific, Kennedy may have gained the instinctive understanding, shared by many, that close proximity to the sea can bring about an experience of personal and spiritual renewal.

I recently glimpsed something of this experience as a result of spending two weeks on board a cruise liner that was conveying its passengers between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the Panama Canal. Mercifully the ship was large enough to allow plenty of bolt-holes far removed from the relentless routines and razzmatazz of contemporary cruising. So having located my equivalent of a crow's nest, from its seclu-

sion I found it possible to become thoughtfully engaged in the spirituality of the sea.

A good starting point for my theological travels was the Book of Genesis (1:2), which declares that "in the beginning darkness covered the face of the deep." The Hebrew word for deep is *tehom*, which some scholars say is an echo of Tiamat, the evil dragon, slain by the good Marduk in the Babylonian creation myth. After the slaying, Tiamat's corpse was consigned to the waves, thus making the sea a place of threat, the place where evil dwells. Whether the linguistic connection is there or not, this ancient legend, which somehow the people of the Old Testament took on board and reinvented in the light of God's continued revelation to them, reverberates throughout the Old Testament. For God's authority over the sea became symbolic of the way the Israelites talked not only of God's power but also of His defeat of evil.

God's prophets often reflected suspicion of occult oceanic forces. "The wicked are like the tossing sea which cannot rest," declared Isaiah (57:20). Various Biblical monsters of the deep like Rahab, Leviathan, and Jonah's whale may be seen as different images of the same primeval force that God's power either vanquishes or controls and ultimately bends to his own purposes.

In the New Testament the divine power of Jesus is clearly exercised around the Sea of Galilee in episodes like the calling of Peter from his fishing boat, the walking on the water, and the calming of the storm. "What kind of man is this that even the winds and the waves obey him?" asked the awed disciples. A 20th-century American example that reflects some of the same awe and wonder may be found in the reactions of the 20-year-old (and then Godless) Lt. Charles Colson USMC. In June 1954 he was on board the USS *Mellette* prepar-

ing to lead his platoon ashore in what was expected to be an opposed landing on the beaches of guerrilla-controlled Guatemala. Gazing up from the deck of his warship at the luminous night sky of Central America, Colson was suddenly stirred by the powerful religious impulses that were eventually to convert him to a life of Christian service: "That night," he wrote two decades later in his best-selling memoir *Born Again*, "I suddenly became as certain as I had ever been about anything in my life that out there in that great starlit beyond was God. I was convinced that He ruled over the universe, that to Him there were no mysteries, that He somehow kept it all miraculously in order. In my own fumbling way I prayed, knowing that He was there."

Reflections on prayer and spirituality are often encouraged by the silent splendor of a shipboard environment. The majesty of the clear night skies, the limitless daytime horizons, and the magnificent raw power of the rolling billows are sights that dwarf the highest city skyscrapers, the largest rural ranches, the tallest terrestrial totem poles. Glimpsing God in the greatness of his marine world is a far from uncommon experience. The psalmist caught it when he wrote of "All those that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters. These men see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep" (Psalm 107:23-24).

THINKING ABOUT THOSE WONDERS of the deep while sailing on it sometimes made me feel uneasy. When I shared my unease with our excellent cruise ship's chaplain, the Rev. Nigel Collinson, he responded with the thought: "Yes, there is something elemental, disturbing, and menacing about the way the Bible talks about the sea that corresponds to writers like Iris Murdoch, William Golding, and Herman Melville."

The chaplain's literary allusions were timely because I was pondering on the choice of a biographical subject for my next book. One of the themes that ran through my previous biographies of Richard Nixon and Charles Colson was the moral tension in their lives. In their worst moments these tensions



became struggles between the forces of goodness and wickedness. Such struggles show up sooner or later in almost every life. Perhaps there is an analogy to be drawn here between the changes in our human hearts and the changing moods of the sea. Both include, as JFK seemed to be saying in his 1962 Newport speech, the power to renew and restore.

With such thoughts in mind I ended up choosing John Newton (1725-1807) as the subject of my next biography. His seafaring career included being press-ganged into the Royal Navy; deserting from it; getting flogged on the quarterdeck; and eventually becoming captain of various slave ships. After committing many crimes, blasphemies, and atrocities in the slave trade, he had a powerful spiritual experience in 1748 when his ship came close to being wrecked in the North Atlantic. It was no phony "foxhole conversion," because for the last five decades of his life the Rev. John Newton was a powerful Christian leader. Although best known as the author of many great hymns including "Amazing Grace," he played a key role as William Wilberforce's friend and counselor in securing the abolition of the slave trade. It makes a great life story in which both the devilry and the spirituality of the sea loom large in Newton's moral struggles. ❧

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