

## Chapter 6 – Oar Over-Easy

“While I don’t begin to have a ‘grasp’ of boating—and have not always been a team player—the association is that the *oar must be in the water*—if we’re going to be effective; without it, we either stop, go in circle, or drift aimlessly wherever...

The thought occurred to me of boating, rafting and the like. On the few times or excursions, a paddle or oar ends-up in the water and, whether actually needed or not, the “crew” usually has to stop, turn and retrieve it. One of the most challenging of these experiences was white-water rafting – where the turbulence can carry the oar down-stream keeping the crew on the chase. It is good that the oar floats, otherwise....

But in the case of a couple or family, the likely association might be a boat where the adults are doing most of the paddling (or should be) and the children are passively riding along. One oar might act as the rudder as well, and the other as a second for power or for a somewhat counter force to keep the boat moving in the intended direction—like a canoe, for example. What is important is ultimately having teamwork or a concerted effort.

Certainly, a team does not want to work in opposition, but I’ll get to that later; for the moment and in relation to the title above, the occurrence or practice of “Oar Over-Easy” is **not** working at all, or is casting the oar into the water and walking away—if that were possible considering the analogy of a boat.

In the last chapter, I talked about the wind and its properties of varying intensity and change; that these winds of change are not ours to always decide or control, but yet we have some influence over the effect by how we react (or accept) the changes. When change is upon us and we attempt to resist or to avoid it, the consequences can be entirely different than if we understand that such a reaction is futile; and instead, accept the change with some grace, even gratitude.

Even before consideration of such changes is the relatively steady streams of life that we travel daily or routinely. Yes, there may be a turn, narrow pass, or even rapids up ahead, but it is nothing like a fury or tempest; no, with some teamwork and mutual decision, we can make it—and may even keep ourselves dry. Along the way of these trips, we may have to consider another

crew member (such as a child), but that again is all due to the wind in the first place and not the relatively routine and mild boating excursion.

If a rowboat loses one of the oars, than it's possible you can go around in circles; and how frustrating it is to cover the same ground again and again—seemingly making little progress. If a canoe loses an oar, it either loses direction (as with the back oar or rudder) or additional power.

Losing an oar in actuality is not usually intended or, in other words, is an accident...and just happens. In my few white-water experiences, an oar can be given-up because the raft rolls or someone falls overboard. Whatever the incident or encumbrance, the oar is seldom if ever purposely thrown in the water or given-up. It just wouldn't be reasonable or wise to let go of your oar.

In the routine of marriage and its challenges is the association of losing or giving-up the oar; it is saying that I (whichever person that is) do not want to go down this water-way anymore; "I am tired, disgusted, bored" or a combination....but "I am through" (for the day or routine). There may be some justification or due-cause for these feelings or conditions, but the decision of divorce is not really as simple as tossing the oar and walking way. No, there remains some semblance of the boat complete with the crew and passengers, and the routine of the waters wherever or whatever. Divorce is the culmination of all this "tossing"; it is a mutiny or insurrection.

Even before the final mutiny or insurrection come the signs of discontent and disgust. Whether struggling through a storm or sitting idle in the doldrums, this discontent and disgust can be born; and if not addressed and attended, can and will continue to grow and heighten with occasional or periodic casting of the oar or some other show of temper. This action (or reaction) may be relatively subtle in a sort of passive-aggressive behavior: the oar is not actually thrown or tossed but is held motionless, drawn from the water or is worked without good intention. The action may be words only, or it may be a combination of words and actions. What dominates the mind of the developing mutineer is what drives him to do such a thing of tossing the oar—with all the risk and potential reward.

I have mentioned before that marriage offers a mutual authority and, since both share some authority, the best possible course is to respect that authority and to work together in a common cause. There are times, I believe, when the husband (and possible father) is “the captain” and the wife (and possible mother) is the first mate; but there are also times, when the wife has command of the deck and has been appointed or commissioned to do so. She is very experienced or suited for this role and may very well prefer to do it for all good intention and purpose (for the crew and passengers). But without going into the specifics or even detailed possibilities, the point is that sometimes one has to steer and the other has to power or help; and when one is not helping the other and, worse yet, is intentionally resisting the other, than the trip is less than effective and quite ill-fated for a day’s journey or a mission at length.

There were times in my marriage where I wondered what my wife was doing; or more specifically, why she was angry and, in her anger, tossed the figurative oar over the side and literally walked away. A trip to visit in Alabama was one of such occasions where, for reasons I have never understood, she left the house and walked with intention toward the bus station to buy a ticket back to Florida. It was on a morning that this occurred and, not knowing what prompted or motivated her action, I and the kids left the park (where we were playing) and returned back to the house to shore things up. Admittedly, there were not many of these extreme experiences of open insurrection; but there were many times that her anger—well pronounced and projected—was without any understanding (to include an explanation of the cause). She seldom if ever explained her reason for anger; I’m not sure that she knew herself—but it was as though she had the right and privilege without any accountability or responsibility.

I was not the only one who recognized or experienced this circumstance. In a somewhat ironic example (to the title and analogy), she and I had taken an evening cruise aboard a river boat with other members of our church. One of the other couples

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apparently commented (to each other) on my wife's described behavior while on board. Being on a boat, she could not walk-away very far; but, as a show of her attitude, she did keep her distance and, for that reason, was apparently noticed by others. The possibility of such action could be that one or the other can be insensitive or intolerant of the other's feelings; where the wants (and needs) of the one is ignored or de-valued by the other. But such a problem or cause for her anger (or reaction) is not, I believe, what was at cause or involved in these occurrences. If anything, the attention and awareness was more intense—in response to the magnitude of her behavior in the first place. I could not always predict—much less explain—these occurrences of her temper; but if I could begin to understand the cause of anger (or what initiated her actions), maybe I could be more sensitive and understanding.

*What was most important was just getting away from the...recurring behavior – without a rhyme or reason.*

By the time my oldest child was six, this behavior had *become like clockwork*; and almost every weekend, her behavior would predictably rise to the occasion and carry-over to the following Monday. At or about the same time, we were visiting with our first of two marriage counselors. I remember distinctly the session where she had told the counselor that I never got angry and, in attempt to get me angry, she smashed a guitar of mine. It was true that she did smash the guitar, but it was not true (or accurate) that I did not get angry.

The continued occurrence of this behavior had become more than I could deal with through patience or passiveness. We were both tired with three and then four children at our feet and, working two jobs and going to school, I stayed on the go all the time. As I've mentioned before, the weekends were a time to take the children and offer her some repose; but as I think about it, taking the children and leaving the house was also a bit of an escape. By leaving the house, the behavior could be left behind and we could (and did) have great times venturing off to a park, the museum, or some other local attraction or festivity. During these days, I would rise Saturday morning, pack up the kids, and go to

one or more of these places—and I could list at least a dozen places that we went. What was most important was just getting away from the rumblings and rises of this now recurring behavior.

Those days were a blur as the evening spilled over to the morning and the morning usually came too early. Thank the Lord for coffee and the energy of youth and young parents. Yes, God knew what he was doing when he established the relatively young for raising children—as it takes a lot of energy and endurance.

As mentioned before, I have wondered from time to time if we were prepared for the challenges of being parents of several children. Considering our backgrounds—or the way that we were raised—I don't believe that one or both of us shared a similar will or understanding of marriage and family. Maybe I was (or am) being too idealistic of my own parent's relationship and with that, too high an expectation of our own; but I don't think the kind of behavior and relationship that we had formed (or were forming) was true of my own parents. Someone had to work (away) and someone had to work (at home); someone had to make the meal and someone had to clean-up afterward; and so on and so forth. Above all these *oars in the water* (or out of the water) was the necessary conditioning to manage the winds of change.

Around this same time period, my work began to require some travel; not far and not for long, but travel just the same. It seems at times that this business travel was viewed as more a mini-vacation. When I returned home, my wife would suggest or express that it was time to get to work...and that the trip was over. As infrequent as the travel was, I could expect to get home on Friday and take the kids on the following morning.

I felt unjustifiably guilty at times for the travel and, as possible, made an effort to stay in the home port; but there were unavoidable conditions of work that superceded this effort and then, however infrequent it was, I would make the voyage. Some of my associates traveled a great deal more while the exception traveled less; basically, it came down to a managerial decision.

The expressed frustration (and resentment) of my travel was not the first of this kind; for there was other criticism in some aspect of my employment. As one of our close friends (at the time) put it, my wife was concerned that the health insurance was not enough, or concerned that I didn't make enough income, or concerned about the stability of the business, etc. The basic and common cause of each and all of these work conditions was that control was not within her grasp.

I practiced several ways of responding to her anger. As I've described, one way was just to go somewhere with the kids—but this was not always an option or convenience. Another was to go to counseling on the prospect that I could better understand my part (or cause) for her frequent and sometimes predictable behavior; and in retrospect, I believe that counseling was good and beneficial for both of us. Another was to seek ways that I might reduce or relieve her workload or responsibilities. I thought the effort and right intention was applied in this attempt—although sometimes too much. Lastly was to *fight fire with fire* and, if she got angry, I would get angrier and, before you know it, we had a fight on our hands.

To address the later, I begin with my regret that my children were exposed to and experienced some of this conflict or confrontation. It hurts me to know that they had to endure the arguments or fights with all the consequences of confusion and even shame. Some of what they witnessed was shared with my parents on more than one occasion. The children, and particularly my oldest two, had to be aware (and concerned) to the degree that they expressed their concerns to their grandparents, my parents.

As a child or young person, I don't recall arguments between the parents; maybe I didn't notice or didn't care, but to my recollection, they did not argue or fight in our presence. Whether this discretion was purposed or just consequential, I don't know; but again, I don't recall anything like my wife and I "put-on" for my children. It was wrong to expose my children to this conflict and, should I ever get the opportunity with my children, will be more than ready to admit it—to apologize for it.

I have read a few accounts of children (now adults) who describe such experiences with loathing; but as to whether the fights (or conflict) are worse than divorce will probably remain an open issue given all the possibilities and recollections. Did my children fare better by divorce—rather than conflict and contention? I did not think so when divorce was a legitimate threat nor do I think so now; but then I am attempting to answer this question without the children's input.

As a parent and authority in our children's lives, we make decisions for them; and ideally, we make decisions with their best interest in mind—though they may not think so at the time. The decision not to divorce (or to consider divorce) was as much for their benefit as in my firm belief that justification for divorce did not exist. I have never once thought differently...and I don't foresee that I ever will. Children prefer a home where both parents love each other and love them; but if they have the later and accept the former as unlikely, they will do so. It is unfortunate that parents cannot be more effective or efficient in getting along; and it is obviously problematic to the marriage (and family) when they cannot or will not try to love each other, if just themselves.

The parent's relationship cannot be overstated in terms of its value or influence to the child or children; and when that relationship models more adversity (and even hatred) than the preferable love, the children bear the costs on their own relationships and understanding of what marriage and love is all about. Healthy marriages help children hunger for the learning and practice of love; conversely, unhealthy marriages undo or undermine the basic legacy of love as central to marriage and family.

I must continue to be careful about how much I elaborate on the experience of marriage and divorce; of a relationship where the vows and promises were broken expressively for the pursuit of personal happiness. But if experience can teach us (or at it should teach us), happiness cannot be truly

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achieved when it is dependent on other persons or relationships. I hold to the belief that happiness must begin inside and not from the outside—which is why some people can experience happiness (or more accurately, joy) in the midst of difficulty and hardship. Oh yes, our “needs” are important, but without getting into the subjective views of needs and wants, joy comes from within.

I know for a fact that my ex-wife is **not** happy; having seen her on occasion—and not withstanding the purpose for the encounter—she continues to be angry or bitter. One might argue that it could my presence or the given predicament, but they would be wrong. She may attempt to blame others—and may even convince herself that someone else is responsible for her happiness—but she is gravely wrong in doing so. She has continued (and will continue) in this vein for as long as she believes others are at fault or responsible.

What troubles me most is that she has subordinated our children’s best interests for her spite. She chose to divorce on the expressed want for happiness; and while she may have thought that her decision would not hurt the children, she was wrong. Her decisions have adversely changed their lives, their relationships and the general views of marriage and family. She has chosen to go beyond divorce in terms of parental division by lodging a campaign of criticism and condemnation toward me that began at least as early as the divorce and, most certainly, since that time. She has violated much of the “code of conduct” suggested or advised for parental involvement and participation—all at the aim of hurting me and the children’s paternal family.

In short, she has endowed on our children a level of hurt that could easily qualify for abuse, yet carried-out under the guise of love and protection. On this matter of confusing and conflicting information (given to the children), Sommers writes in “Don’t Divorce Us”:

In the absence of clear information about the divorce, children will construct their own ideas about who wants the divorce, who doesn’t want the divorce, why their parents are divorcing and all of the other considerations. Usually, this will not be an accurate picture, and it will lack the balance and comfort that can be offered if parents are clear and honest with their children in sensitive, loving, and non-accusatory ways. Children do not want to feel responsible for their parent’s unhappiness. Furthermore, they do not want to live in a home filled with anger, sadness, bitterness, silence, or abuse. They want loving, stable parents.

He goes on to describe what children want if divorce occurs:

They want their parents to get along and behave respectfully to each other. From the perspective, it seems so little to ask. They don’t want to be treated like possessions, spies, messengers, or a means by which one parent can get even with the other parent. The hardest part to understand is that the children want to be allowed to make up their own minds about their parents. Even if one parent is far less involved, far less mature or caring, they still don’t want the better parent judging or speaking poorly of the other. They report feeling much happier if parents are neutral, or mildly supportive of even the less-than-ideal parents.

How much is personal happiness worth? In an attempt to answer that question, I will omit the actual dollar figure and stick to the more important intangible costs described as hurt to my children. Let me say as well that if my ex-wife did not know any better, than the conduct of her post-divorce behavior and actions might be understood; but she is without excuse because she knows—and has been told—that her motivations and actions are the worst possible legacy to leave to the children.

I’m not suggesting that the children’s lives are hopeless as I do not know what the future holds for each of them; but what I am saying is that the children (and any children) deserve better. Feeding them erroneous or misleading information about their father and grandparents is purposely deceptive and destructive; and as anyone in the appropriate profession will tell you, is more

about control and spite. Invoking fear in the children of one sort or another is likewise inexcusable—as fear only makes them more confused regarding what they experienced in the presence of the paternal family versus what they’re being told or programmed to believe. While the clear objective is to hurt the paternal family through such tactics, the outcome or result for the children is distrust and disgust—at one or both parents.

The limited instruction that we received as a post-divorce requirement and all subsequent coursework and material that I’ve gotten my hands-on confirms that such ill-conceived measures of control always have negative and destructive consequences. Like our countries’ foreign policies and “blowback”, the unintended consequences lead to a host of problems touched-on already and elaborated on in the chapters to come. Unlike such international policies, this diplomacy involves family relations and not foreign relations. Such an opportunity to love and give to these children has been subordinated and subjugated for one parent’s spite. What a sad commentary for one who has been given so much in the way of four children; as what began as an “Oar Over-Easy” has turned into a ill-conceived mission to the end of the earth; and what a misfortune for four children who had opportunity to realize the commitment(s) made to them by us. God forgive us.

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