

Judgment and Experience *By David Meeker*

Words of Wisdom: Good judgment comes from experience, but, unfortunately, most experience comes from bad judgment.

This is a story in which my “good judgment” got a dramatic boost.

Returning from a late summer cruise to Provincetown we anchored in Loblolly Cove on the eastern side of Cape Ann. We had left Long Point opposite P-Town early in the morning and it had been a long day crossing Massachusetts Bay at our usual 3 or 4 knots. But, as often happened, the whales around Stellwagon Bank put on a good show for us that livened up the mid-part of the journey. In those days there was no fleet of “whale watchers” chasing every hint of a whale and we could watch them blowing, breaching, tail slapping, waving their pectoral fins, and, apparently, having a grand old time as we sailed along. Finally, late in the afternoon, we reached Cape Ann and pulled into the anchorage.

Loblolly Cove is small and rockbound but for *Maya*, our small keel/centerboard Sailmaster 22, it was very comfortable under westerly or southerly conditions. The Cove is open to the northeast and a shift to easterly winds was forecast for the next morning but, when considering the obvious alternative – a night in Gloucester Harbor – Loblolly Cove was much to be preferred. At that time, when there was still fish for fishermen, there was no sleeping in Gloucester Harbor after 2 AM when the fishing fleet started its daily exit. In our little boat it was hard to even stay in a bunk when the wakes of the fishing flotilla began to arrive at our mooring. Clearly, if the easterly shift held off until after 2:00 AM, we would get more sleep at our anchorage in the Cove.

Nevertheless, with the wind shift forecast and the small cove limiting anchor scope, I set our two anchors so we could at least sleep well until the “maybe” shift occurred. Sharon fixed a good one-pot dinner using her favorite Swedish Army alcohol stove on the bridge deck. Then, with the sun going down and the boat sitting easily in a light west wind we went below to our snug bunks and soon were asleep. But, the forecast wind shift did occur, and about 3:30 AM Sharon woke me up to point out that there were rocks uncomfortably near our dinghy laying off our stern. The two anchors were holding well and things weren’t serious but, with the east

wind increasing, that was not a comfortable place for a leisurely breakfast. We pulled on some clothes, started the 6 HP Evinrude, and began to pull in the anchors. First, I brought in the big storm anchor and stowed it below. Now the wind was really picking up and building a sea. But, by the time I had the working anchor aboard and stowed on deck, Sharon had worked our way to windward out of the rock-bound cove. We then raised the jib and sailed down along the coast and around into Gloucester Harbor where we anchored in the lee of East Point. As the fishing fleet had long gone by this time, we were able to go below and finish our night's sleep plus add a little morning nap.

By noon we had finished our "brunch" and, being eager to get home, decided the wind had gone down enough to give us a good sail up the coast to our mooring in Pepperrell Cove at the mouth of the Piscataqua River. Accordingly, I brought in and stowed the anchor and we motored north up the harbor to enter the Blynman Canal that connects to the Annisquam River and provides an alternative to the long trip around Cape Ann.

The canal and river beyond are narrow and congested with boats on their moorings, boats in their slips, marinas, fuel docks, and other accoutrements of a nautical culture. It is not a path that one would choose to sail through. In addition, the river flows almost directly east at its mouth, which that day would be right into the remaining 10 to 15 knots of wind. Given this situation it seemed that our sails would be of little use and, if flogging in a head wind, could be nuisance. Accordingly, good judgment would recommend our leaving the sails furled and motoring through the congestion and out the river mouth until we had enough water to drop the centerboard, raise the sails, fall-off the wind, and sail happily home. That would be "good judgment" if all factors have been considered. However, if all factors have NOT been considered, the situation might be one of judgment-building "experience".

With relief we passed safely through the drawbridge at the mouth of the canal. That is not much of an accomplishment but, from our experience with engines on boats, we never went through a drawbridge, especially with the wind or current behind us, with any kind of confidence. We were always thinking "what if the darn thing stops"! That was not really fair to our

little Evinrude Fisherman. So long as it had gasoline and good sparkplugs it would reliably start and run. The only problem was that it was the one deciding when the sparkplugs were “not good”. Occasionally, it would come to that decision when it was very difficult and awkward for me to provide the attention it was demanding.

That day the outboard moved us through the canal and river like the “jewel” it truly was. I write that from the perspective of years with “modern” outboards that have been forced into extra “strokes” and an alcohol diet. Clearly, they are cleaner and quieter, but, when they stop or won’t start, what is it they want? I never know!

That day everything continued to go well – as good judgment would expect -- until we rounded the last dogleg to the north, moved out of the lee of the trees and buildings, and turned east into the wind to exit the river. I realized that we should have waited a little longer – or, at least, kept a sail up. The hours of strong east wind had built up seas that became big rollers when they hit the shallows of the river mouth. Fortunately, there wasn’t enough wind to cause the seas to break. Nevertheless, the rollers were immense, and we were headed directly into them. Now there was a possibility for real trouble. Should our engine die we would be unable to turn quick enough to get our stern to those monsters coming toward us. While they could not capsize us, they could certainly make it uncomfortable, and, if they hit us broadside, dangerous. We needed a sail up – and fast -- so I gave the helm to Sharon and crept up to the bow to free the jib I’d left lashed to the pulpit. Sharon, masterfully, kept the boat moving to windward diagonally up and down over the waves that seemed to get bigger by the moment.

We weren’t the only ones concerned with the size of those rollers. While I was on the foredeck, a big 40-foot powerboat came charging into the river surfing before the waves and wind. Its white-knuckled helmsman in the flying bridge was staring dead ahead as he struggled to keep his stern to the waves. I’m not sure he even saw us – he, certainly, did not spare me a glance as he swept by. In a moment his boat passed us heading for the shelter of the river proper. As he passed, I raised the jib and crawled back to the cockpit. I was ready to bring in the flogging sail should we need it or,

hopefully, when we were far enough out to lower the centerboard, fall off, and sail north toward home.

Eventually, Sharon worked the boat out of the river mouth where I lowered the centerboard and brought in the jib. When we were far enough out I raised the main, stopped the outboard, and headed home at a good 5 knots with the potential disaster behind us and, upon reflection, ready to be converted from “experience” into “good judgment”.

It was a great sail off the New Hampshire coast on a beam reach. As the sun descended, the sky to the west assumed a purple hue – a truly beautiful evening. But it was a long way to go and it was getting quite dark when we decided to stop and anchor for the night in Little Harbor just to the south of the Piscataqua River. At that time, before the big marina at The Wentworth By-The-Sea was built, there were only a few moorings in Little Harbor and we anchored on the north side in view of the houses of Newcastle, the “Great Island” of New Hampshire’s seventeenth century history. After a quick “dinner” by Sharon we went below to sleep after a long and eventful day.

In the morning we were awakened by a “tap, tap, tap” on the hull beside my head. In such a situation what does a sailor think? What are we hitting, has the wind come up, has the anchor drag? In a New England anchorage, the most hopeful explanation is a bobbing lobster buoy bumping the hull. That wasn’t a possibility this time. The last time I awoke like that was when we were anchored on the shelf off Long Point on another cruise to Provincetown. That time it had been the dinghy bumping the hull because the wind had shifted, the tide had gone out, and we were aground. That had been a stressful day. When you think about it, there are few pleasant explanations that come to mind when waking up in a boat with such a “tap, tap, tap”.

Quickly sticking my head out of the cabin, I see two smiling faces from a couple in a rowing dinghy. The faces belonged to our friends, Harold and Phyllis Crosby, who lived in a house overlooking the harbor. They, having been owners of a sister Sailmaster 22, had recognized our boat at anchor, and brought us our breakfast. They provided a big thermos of hot coffee and a freshly baked and still warm coffee cake to start our day. After a good visit and a very thoughtful and enjoyable breakfast, we pulled up our

anchor, sailed out of Little Harbor and around “Great Island” to our mooring in Pepperrell Cove.

That put a very good ending to a summer cruise – and, upon reflection, provided the raw material for “good judgment” in the future.