Rowing

Mary Bowlby

When I was five-years-old, my mother taught me how to row a boat. We were spending a few days with her aunt and uncle on Anderson Island, where they had an old house and some beachfront property. The house stood on the edge of a lagoon, protected from Puget Sound's swift currents by a long sand spit. A dock extended out from the low, grassy bank in front of the house. An old rowboat, affectionately called "The Freckie," floated patiently next to the dock, waiting for an opportunity to cast off. After showing me the basic mechanics of rowing, my mother tied the boat to the dock with a long rope and left me alone to practice.

My mother's demonstrations made it look so easy, but rowing effectively is an art in itself. The rower must sit in the middle of the boat, facing the stern, a conscious effort must be made to keep the blades of the oars at a proper angle as they dip into the water. Pressure must be evenly applied to both oars as the handles are pulled back. Upon reaching the end of the stroke, the rower must lift the oars out of the water and push the handles, returning to the start of the next stroke. The rower is now ready to repeat the actions described above, which will result in moving the boat from point A to point B…if you're lucky, because, of course, you can't see point B when you are facing the stern.

When the rower is five-years-old, a lot of luck is needed simply to comprehend the intricate instructions and their respective actions, let alone to insure any amount of success. So many difficulties can conspire to frustrate the rower. The oarlocks might come out of their brackets. Seaweed can get wrapped around the oar blade. Sometimes, an oar seems to have a mind of its own, turning in your hand and becoming totally useless.

When you're five and it's summer, you have all the time in the world. I spent hours during that visit tied to the dock, attempting to master that mysterious art. I would push off with my hands then try to row back. Sometimes, I would get the oars in the water just right. "The Freckie" would glide along, accompanied by the sound of water lapping at the bow. More often, one oar would turn in my little hand or one arm would pull harder, causing me to go in circles—my frustrated efforts resulting in more tears than smiles. Somehow, though, I never gave up; spurred on by my mother's occasional encouragement and my will to learn the skill, I managed to gain confidence each time I achieved an effective stroke. In spite of the frustration and occasional setbacks, I repeatedly practiced the strokes and waited with a mix of fear and excitement for the day of emancipation.

The lagoon was beautiful, but it was a wild and sometimes scary place to a young girl of five. Since I couldn't watch where I was going, I worried that I might run into something though my tether protected me from such ominous possibilities. The water was deep in places, and I didn't swim well. The bottom was soft and silty, and there were dark, foreboding spots along its banks, where trees and shrubs jutted out over muddy shallows. I imagined something might reach out from the branches or up from the shallows and grab me. Such dark

thoughts heightened the excitement of my accomplishments. One more stroke to show I could do it...one more stroke would keep me a safe distance from the shore.

Before our visit was over the time came to untie the rope. The first time out, my older sister went with me. We took turns as pilot and navigator, making the circuit of the interior of the lagoon and returning to the dock. After this, I was deemed fully qualified to row unaided and unfettered around the lagoon. I recall quite clearly how proud I felt at this triumph. For the remainder of our stay, I spent my time in the boat rowing short distances from the dock, but staying away from the wooded shoreline. I still had to fight my fears, but I had overcome my lack of skill, and found an activity that I would come to love.

As I grew up, we returned yearly to the island. I always spent some time renewing my acquaintance with the oars and the waves, enjoying the protected solitude of the lagoon. Sometimes, I shared the secrets of rowing with younger cousins and friends who had never learned. Always, I felt a mixture of elation and fear as I pushed off from the dock.

In rowing, as in life, it is easier to see where you have been than where you are going. As I ramble through these memories, I realize what a wonderful gift my mother gave me so many years ago. I now have daughters of my own. When they were young, I wanted them to learn how to row, but I didn't have a long rope. Instead, their dad and I would take turns rowing in the boat with them, teaching the mechanics of the skill with a hands-on approach. Truthfully, Dad went out more than Mom did. For me, the foreboding of long ago seemed to whisper "danger" as my little girls pulled at the oars, drawing the boat close to the mud flats or into dark corners. These fears were mine. I chose not to give them to my children. As they mastered the oars, I came to understand how trusting my mother had been that summer so long ago. It must have been difficult to untie the rope.

Last summer, my children, who are now in middle school and high school, spent many hours in rowboats. They explored the same lagoon–including those dark, scary corners—and even rowed past the sand spit into the unprotected waves and currents of the Sound. Though we never used a long rope to teach them the joys of rowing, I found I had to untie a rope of my own—the rope that held fast my fears and worries. I had to let my children be adventurous so they, too, could find their own triumphs and satisfaction in the mastery of that art.