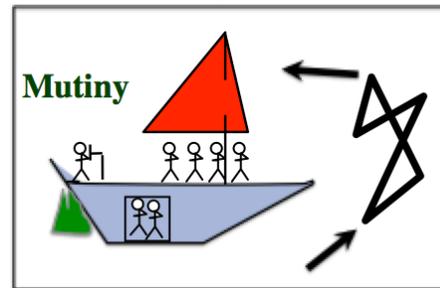


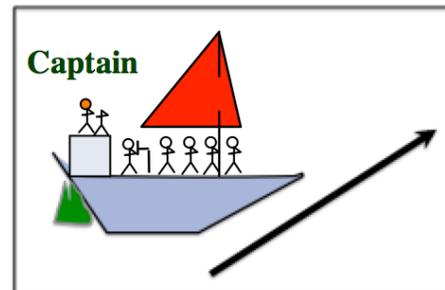
Sailors On A Ship

In describing the complexity of the mind, the most useful metaphor that I have encountered in my years as a therapist (and participant) has been that of *Sailors On A Ship*¹.

The human mind is very much like a ship where the sailors have mutinied and have locked the captain and the navigator in the cabin. Each sailor believes himself free to steer the ship as he pleases. First one sailor and then another takes over the helm, while the ship travels on a random and erratic course ... these sailors cannot agree on a goal and, even if they could, they do not know how to navigate the ship to reach it.



The task of the individual is to quell this mutiny, and release the captain and the navigator. Only then is he free to choose a goal and steer a direct course to reach it.



For me, the metaphor indicates that our difficulties frequently reside in the many double messages that we give to ourselves (and to others), these being our internal conflicts regarding what life offers. We need clarity and integration; we need to be in charge of ourselves. We need a captain for action, a navigator for wisdom.

The example that I usually give of this process is that of the story I call my “Potato Chip Kid.” Imagine that it is the end of my day, and I am wandering around the kitchen wondering what I will have for supper. I open a cupboard door, and before I am even conscious of what is in the cupboard, I am reaching for the big bag of potato chips (this is Potato Chip Kid in action).

¹ The two quotations of this metaphor come from Lori Gordon’s *Passage To Intimacy* (2000); as presented by Gordon, they appear to be a loose translation of a concept from Plato’s *The Republic*.

Just before I grab the bag, my Critic Voice comes in: “You idiot, you know what you are going to do — you’re going to eat the whole damned bag.”

Then Dr. Dave enters: “No, no, no. We know that this is a problem, and we have already decided what to do about it. We’ll just fill a small bowl, and leave the rest for the weekend.”

Potato Chip Kid again: “Yah. Mmmhhh,” with a sly smile.

Critic Voice: “I don’t trust you two!”

Dr. Dave: “It’s OK. It’s OK. We know what to do.”

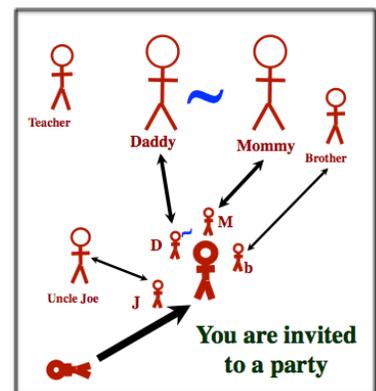
So I go to another cupboard, get a desert bowl, stuff it full (I mean full!) of potato chips, close the potato chip bag, put it back in the cupboard, and go sit in the living room, intending to think about supper! But twenty minutes later, I’m sitting there with an empty potato chip bag on my lap. And by the last few chips, I’m saying to myself: “And I don’t even like potato chips this much!”

Does this sound familiar to you? I am sure that every human being encounters difficulties like this, where we give ourselves one message, and then do something quite different.

How The Sailors Arise

This metaphor *Sailors On A Ship* is 2500 years old — Plato recognized our complexity and tendency to have subpersonalities (parts, functional identities, ...), and to be in internal conflict with ourselves. These parts likely arise in early infancy as we copy our parents and other significant others in our attempt to assimilate the world — but we do not know how to handle the complexity at this early age (if ever!). We do not know how to integrate the sailors — as well, frequently our parents have never learned to integrate the sailors, and we experience and copy the confusion within our parents as they struggle with their own sailors.

The learning of experience is known to be



state-dependent — the learning seems to occur in the follow fashion. When baby is interacting with mummy, and something significant occurs, baby is responsive to the emotional field of “mummy.” Baby seems create an internal energetic pattern corresponding to the external experience in the form of what I call a *mummy part*. Later, when baby is playing with daddy, baby develops a *daddy part*, in a different part of the mind, state-dependent. But daddy is different from mummy, and thus the daddy part and the mummy part differ in significant ways. Over time, with repeated exposure to mummy and daddy, the mummy and daddy parts becomes very much like mummy and daddy. Baby also recognizes that mummy and daddy fight with each other occasionally (or frequently), and thus the mummy part and the daddy part learn to fight with each other. Other internal characters also emerge as baby gains more and more emotional experience as part of his or her expanding repertoire. Gradually over time, this internal patterning comes to resemble the metaphor of *Sailors On A Ship*.

Identifying The Sailors²

A significant portion of the early work of therapy (as I practice it) is for the individual to identify who these sailors are, and learn how to manage the internal conflicts that they engender. With practice, most people can identify anywhere between six and twenty sailors. As this process evolves, it usually becomes obvious who the captain and navigator are, and what needs to happen for the individual to quell the mutinous patterns. Often I suggest that the identity of the Captain is an essential feature of maturity, and that much less effort be placed upon identifying the Navigator (see *A Ship At Sea* below).

It is very important to learn the characteristics of each of these sailors³. I suggest that each sailor be given a name, and that you list any characteristics which help to distinguish this sailor from all the others.

² Although I call it a metaphor, it is such a consistent feature of most of the people I have met, I am relatively convinced that it is more than just a metaphor. In any event, most people find it a very useful description.

³ Lori Gordon's *Passage To Intimacy* has many good suggestions; three chapters of the book are devoted to this process.

This includes physical description, beliefs, values, voice tone, location in your body, and anything that seems to be a consistent part of this character. For the sake of study, treat each sailor as if he or she were a real unique independent individual (any given sailor may be the same or a different gender from yourself).

Consider the following questions. Who are you when:

- nurturing a child or someone who is hurt?
- critical of someone who has made a stupid mistake?
- thoughtfully planning a project or fixing a machine?
- excited by a wonderful playful opportunity?
- needing to get your own way when others object?

I suggest that each of these “people” is a different person, all in the same body, and thus that they represent five of your sailors⁴.

On the anger weekend, I also lead participants through a guided meditation to identify another set of sailors (perhaps the same as above, or perhaps different). The participant is guided in their imagination to a house in the woods, where they meet and converse with three individuals who come out of the house, these being three of their sailors. As part of the meditation, the participant also encounters a wise person, perhaps their “higher power” or future captain. Again, the individuals encountered can be characterized with names, physical characteristics, beliefs, et cetera.

A third way of identifying sailors is to study examples of when you are in internal conflict with yourself, or anytime that you are “talking to yourself.” In these circumstances, who are the participants of these actions. Who are “you” in this circumstance? Who is the “yourself” with whom are you in conflict? Who is the “you” who is talking? Who is listening when you are talking to “yourself.” All of this points to different sailors being present.

⁴ A very good therapy — Transactional Analysis — identifies these “sailors” as the five primary subpersonalities which this particular therapy studies. They are named, respectively, *Nurturing Parent*, *Critical Parent*, *Adult*, *Natural Child*, and *Adapted Child*.

This entire process can be expanded within what is called *chair work*. Here, the individual picks a conflict and assigns chairs (or locations within the room) to all the participants of the specific conflict. The individual then acts out the conflict, shifting from chair to chair as any given sailor speaks in turn, having an actual conversation between the sailors, making the conversation as authentic as possible. As part of the process, you can place a piece of paper on each chair, and when you shift to that chair, take note of the characteristics of the representative sailor, as part of your developing study of the sailors.

In this particular process of chair work, it is very helpful to have an observer, perhaps a skilled therapist, to either guide the process, or deepen the process by identifying characteristics of which you are not conscious. For example, the observer might point out the voice tone or postural characteristic of the sailor, or note that the conversation is stilted, or that there might be sailors present who have not yet been identified. All of this helps to make the process more complete, and more likely to assist the participant in identifying and changing life patterns.

At this point, it is important to step back from the conversation and develop an overview of what is happening between these sailors. Are the individual sailors speaking their truths, or are they simply being manipulative or dominating. (You can also study the emotional triangles that exist amongst the sailors so as to defuse the interactions.) The goal is have clarity of your own personal truths, so as to move forward in your life.

Why study these sailors?

The study of sailors is the beginning of emotional maturity; it is the process of becoming aware of your internal complexity. Early in my own therapy, my mentor told me that there were two skills I had to learn:

1. what I was feeling, and
2. what to do about what I was feeling.

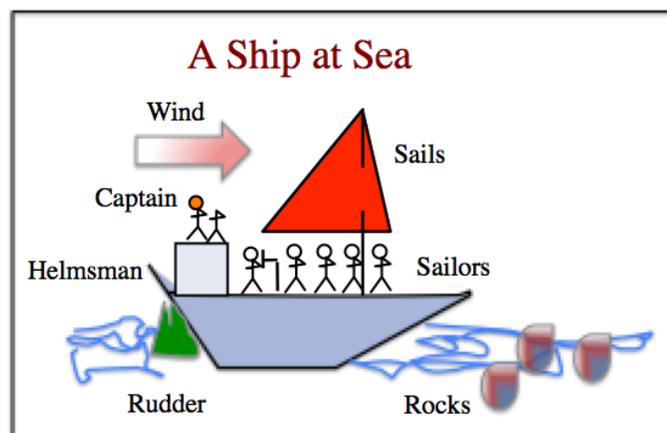
Although knowing my sailors is not what I am feeling, it is my sailors who carry what I am feeling. This knowledge allows me to think about

what I am feeling, and thus to have some choice about what I am feeling. The second skill, what to do about what I am feeling, requires that I develop awareness of the relationships between sailors (and other relationships) — understanding the nature of emotional triangles (the subject of another monograph).

I suggest that the appropriate goal for any human being is to live well, to function in a way that ineffective patterns of living are reduced, and effective patterns are optimized. This requires that I know myself; for me, the identification of my sailors is an important way to do this.

From my perspective, there are three principal difficulties that human beings experience.

- acedia — any combination of laziness, fearfulness, and self-righteousness that interferes with living. Usually this means that the individual has an inaccurate map of life, and an unwillingness to update the map. An inappropriate sailor is in charge of the ship.
- conflict with self — usually due to some kind of ineffective internal emotional triangle, without a Captain in charge.
- conflict with others — external emotional triangles, perhaps appropriate or not. Inappropriate conflict is usually some kind of coercion, perhaps mine (and if so, an inappropriate sailor in charge).



The sorting of these issues generally requires identification of sailors; management of these issues requires the presence of a mature Captain. Working with emotional triangles augments this process, eventually leading resolution of many difficulties. (Furthermore, an experienced therapist may be able to assist

you in integrating sailors, or even removing some sailors from the ship.)

A Ship At Sea

In the past few years, I have expanded the metaphor *Sailors On A Ship* to what I call *A Ship At Sea*. Consider the many components of a sailing ship: sails to catch the wind, a helmsman who controls the rudder, potentially a captain and a navigator. The ship must navigate over the seas, avoiding rocks and other obstacles. What happens to a ship without a rudder? What happens to a ship without sails?

To what do these features correspond? I have come to believe that the rudder and helmsman represent the conscious mind (that part of us which can direct our life journey), and that the sails represent the other-than-conscious mind (deeply aware of emotional issues, but relatively unavailable to the conscious mind). Integration of conscious and other-than-conscious is a life-long task, and a major part of the maturing of an individual. Finally, given that I am deeply spiritual, the wind (for me) is my way of naming the underlying intelligence of the Universe: God, Creator, or any name of your choice (or it could simply be whatever energizes the individual).

So who here is the Captain? Who is the Navigator? At this point, I am not completely clear. I used to think the Captain was or needed to be the conscious mind, but I am no longer of this opinion. Norretranders (1998) in *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* says:

The role of the *I* [the conscious mind] in learning is precisely to force the nonconscious, the *Me*, to practice, rehearse, or just attend. The *I* is a kind of boss who tells the *Me* what it must practice. The *I* is the *Me*'s secretary. (p. 303)

He later adds:

Consciousness [the conscious mind] and the *I* are useful because they can perceive a context and see a purpose in things one does not feel like doing . . . The *I* affords discipline, even though it can hold very few bits per second.

But the real strength of the *I* appears only when it displays humility toward the *Me*, which is capable of so much more because the bandwidth is so much higher. The consciousness is a wonderful entity when it knows its own limitations.

As a rule, it does so. (p. 304)

Except for this last statement, I agree overall with the ideas of Norretranders. There needs to be a strong bond between conscious and unconscious process. Yet I interpret arrogance in the manner suggested by which the conscious mind, however humbly, is to rule over the unconscious mind. I do agree that consciousness (the conscious mind) is a wonderful entity when it knows its own limitations, but in my experience as therapist that this is not a common state.

I also believe that a major, perhaps the major, difficulty we have had in Western culture is the denial of our acedia, thus putting a lid on the other-than-conscious. Yet that allows the unconscious to be in mutiny, usually in a devious fashion. It is integration that is essential to maturity.

In reading this monograph, I hope that you can agree that the exploration of sailors and the nature of the ship provide a powerful means to know the strengths and limitations of being human.

Bibliography

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