Asgard, Middle-earth, and the Underworld

Ships are like Norse mythology. First there is Asgard (home of the gods); “the Romantic Image of man and nature in perfect harmony” (quothe the Rennaissance of the Baltimore Clipper), the cutlass blade hull in her blacks and golds, the raked masts, the great white wings of canvas (cue the Valkyrie choir).

(ok, tell the fat lady to stop singing now) Then there is Middle Earth (no, Tolkien did not invent the word, he commandeered it from the Vikings); the pfds, the immersion suits, the bikes on the bulkhead. The peppercorns accidently dumped in the cream sauce and onto the deck. Dings and dents of various expeditions. The mug of orange juice I spill anyway, after carefully choosing a travel mug that doesn’t drip because I don’t want to be the yahoo who spills coffee on the Pride’s hallowed deck. The head growling at 2AM, the organized chaos of crew quarters, the engine room (orderly enough for Engineer Scott of the USS Enterprise) with its guardian pink Jesus. (cue the 80s rock band).

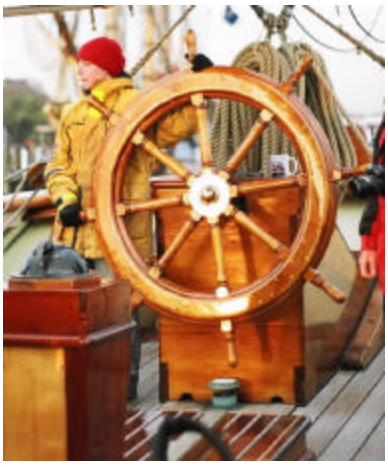
Then there is... the Underworld. (cue Tim Burton soundtrack). I follow Megan on Ship Check. This rather complex set of observations basically assures you that your boat is maintaining the proper relationship with the four directions and the surface of the sea. (ie: not sinking, and still headed in the right direction). There are a multitude of instruments in the engine room and the nav room (both smaller than most people’s bathrooms), which must be checked, and their numbers logged. I would need an instruction manual to keep track of it, Megan accomplishes this with appalling ease. Instruments track every ship’s system, as well as weather, position, heading, speed, etc. Then there are the somewhat less technical observations, most involving assuring ourselves that there is more water on the outside of the hull than on the inside. We peer into each of the three heads, making sure no one has left levers or valves open. We stop in each of the watertight sections (there are four watertight bulkheads), pry up a floor plate and peer into the Underworld.

Here there be gremlins.

There's no scientifically incremented dipstick, no markings below in the bilges. Just a flashlight and a practiced eye noting that the water level hasn't changed. For those unfamiliar with wooden boats, they leak. There is no way to make them not leak. It's just what they do. Hence, the bilge, and its cargo of water. Preferably not too much water. There were bilge pumps, even in 1812, though ours today require less muscle to use. Much of being a real sailor involves less science and more art; a sense, a feel for how anything should be; like how much water is allowable in the bilges. It's something gained through experience, something that can never be found in a book.

Take the Helm, Mr. Sulu

Guest crew do a bit of everything: heaving on lines, squeegeeing the gunnels, checking the bilges,



and yep...

...they let you drive the boat.

There's a picture my buddy took a few years ago when we saw Pride in Inner Harbor, of me standing in front of the wheel with a stupid grin, a Captain Jack wannabe.

So here I am, with the real helmsman stepping back and somebody saying "take the helm".

Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

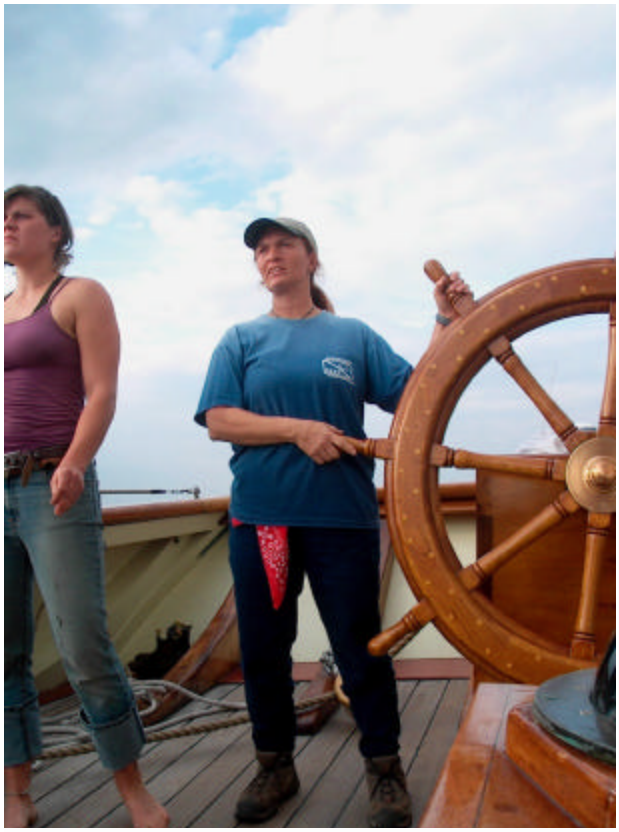
Mygawd, they're gonna let me steer this thing?

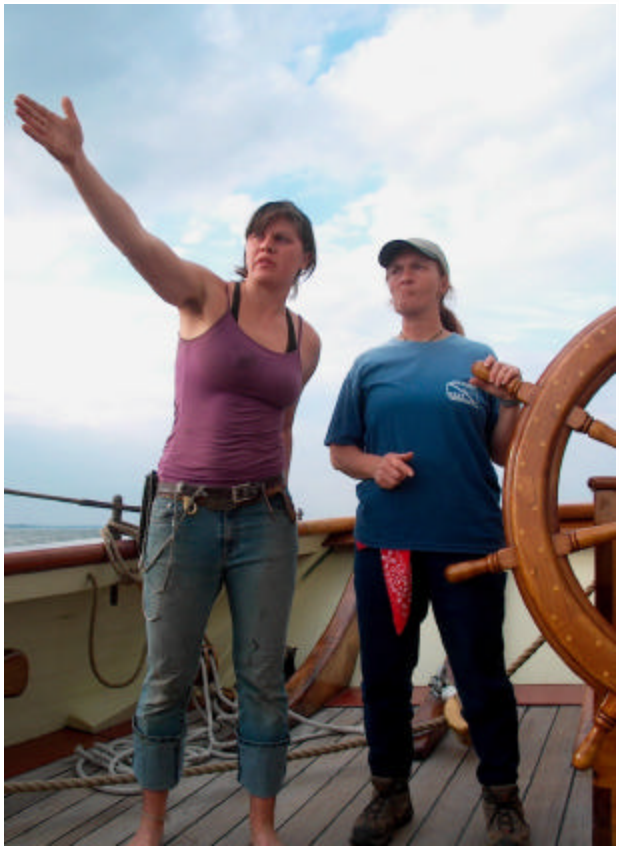
It's like having Captain Kirk tell you to replace Sulu.

Ok, they let me steer Sultana once. We didn't run aground. But then, they let twelve year olds steer Sultana...(ok, so the Captain is four feet away...).

I have steered horses (and tried to explain to newbies how to steer horses, it's harder than it looks, training the newbies, that is), I have steered sled dogs (my own small recreational team). I have steered kayaks, and three viking

top: Agliuk and Nikki, yep, that's carpet... middle: on Sultana's helm (the lines move the tiller)... bottom: Pride's wheel with a professional at the helm... next page: what channel marker?? (Megan instructs the newbie)





boats. I have steered myself underwater with no reference points other than a compass and a depth gauge. The horses respond to weight and rein. The sled dogs respond (at least some of the time) to voice, the sled has a driving bow to which you cling desperately, and the sled responds to shifts of weight and kicks of your foot against the ground. If there's no snow and you are running on a rig or bike, you have a sort of horizontal tiller (called handlebars) and your weight. The kayak responds to shifts of weight and paddle or the rudder, the viking boats have tillers, and if you forget which way to shove the tiller, you just peer over the side at the steerboard (steerboard-starboard, see a connection?). Sultana has a tiller with big whopping reins (a line and pulley arrangement that makes the tiller easier to manhandle); it was a familar feel, like having a very large horse on a lunge line. You could feel the water sliding past the rudder. I had heard people say they liked tillers for that reason; there is more feel there than with the gears and mechanical connections of a wheel. Some people find tillers counterintuitive: you shove one direction and the ship goes the other way. Somehow, in my slightly dyslexic brain, the tiller made sense.

Take the helm, Mr. Sulu.

Ahhhhhhhhhh! It has a wheeeeeeel!

There's a "king spoke", with a subtle brass star marking it. Vertical, it means the rudder is straight...or it could mean it's cocked all the way sideways if you've turned the

wheel more than one revolution (it makes about two and a half in either direction). It's a point of reference in an otherwise symetrical object. The wheel's easy to turn, perhaps not in a howling gale, but in a good wind, blowing off our quarter, piling up dark blue chop against a slatey blue sky, it's easy.

On Sultana, I had paid a lot of attention to the topsail; we were "full and by", the river bank to starboard, the wind to port. If you went too far to port, the sail luffed and ran out of wind, if you went too far starboard, you ran out of river. On a kayak, or horse, you look forward, letting your body feel the motion, the direction, fixing your eyes ahead, not down (rider who look at ground likely to end up there). I can, without thinking, send a kayak straight through the water to a distant object, or a horse straight across a dressage arena.

Helming a hundred foot ship is the same.

It's remarkably hard to explain to a newbie how to ride a horse straight. "Pull more on the left rein, no the right, no no, now on the right, no left, no, more left leg, more right leg, shift your weight, correct him NOW!" I can see the bobbles in the horse's course ten seconds before he makes them. I can see him downshift from Working Walk to Lazy Crawl ten strides before he does it. I can not tell a student how to see this. They have to learn it from experience.

I'm standing just to the right of the wheel, a little behind it. I watched Cameron (who's a real sailor, though he's used to a slightly smaller craft). Megan stands by me, trying to do what I've done with a zillion new riders.

"More to the left, no, your other left..." We are navigating around some channel markers. I think I gotta get glasses... "what tiny blit am I looking for?" The tiny blits hove into view, one by one. I am instructed to basically do what one does on a horse: keep a

either the Bay is tilted....(note the horizon line) or the deck is...

particular bit of landscape between the horse's ears. In this case, it's the pointy bit of the anchor (the blade) slung over the gunnel, and the not-quite-so-pointy bit (crossbar) of the anchor. The channel marker drifts maddeningly left...then right. Pride's black unicorn nose swings in slow motion, like a recalcitrant, but patient, school horse. I adjust, I re-adjust. It is not like the movies, no sudden spinning of the wheel, (no spray blowing in my face) only small half turns, quarter turns.

Pride noses starboard.

"Did you feel the wind shift? She's going to weather." With every gust of wind she turns her nose up into it. I correct, then the wind dies back and the big black unicorn horn swings

away from the wind again. Wind has a shape, and it's lumpy. Helming isn't a matter of staring at a compass, or the sails, or even a blit on the horizon. It's a feel, it's art, it's a long set of experience that allows you to almost see the wind, to fly this 170' wild black mare with your eyes closed.

Channel Surfing

We jibe on a new course and Captain Mark takes over. He's quiet-spoken, but when he says something, he's heard. We catch the wind, heading out into the open Bay, and Pride opens up.

Hulls with sails heel. I knew that. Or maybe I didn't, because the long-ships fly flat. I've experienced heel in my kayak, on fast horses scrambling around a barrel, on a dog-sled careening around a tight turn in the trail.

A hundred foot deck leaning over till the cannons are nearly in the water is something else again.

In "Sailing With Pride" Captain Jan Miles speaks of Pride II..." a hull that laughs as it goes to weather and roars on reaches while the deck is

nearly dry..."

Nearly dry, eh? Good thing I packed my sea boots.

Only a little water is leaking in around the lower deckwall edges and the cannon ports, though. I take a picture of the simple brass instrument (inclinometer?) that shows the incline of the ship. I ask how far the Captain has seen her heeled over. I've seen the cannon muzzles in the water...

Somewhere there's

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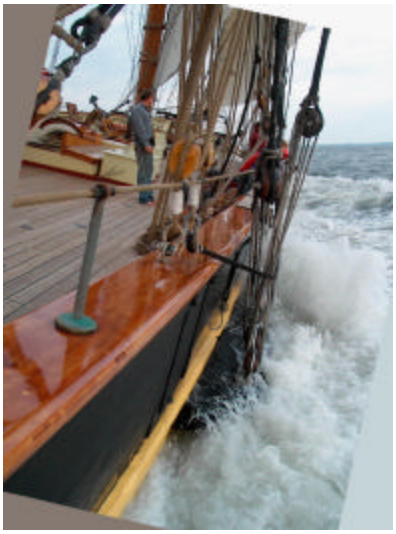
the binnacle with compass and instrument showing angle of heel (the weighted bob hangs straight)



an instrument that shows our speed, I neglect to look. I'm too busy running from one side of the deck; peering over the clifflike edge at hull that was underwater an hour ago...to the other, wondering when the cannons were going to go under. The shrouds that hold up the masts run through "channels" black boards that hold the shrouds away from the hull, increasing their spread. If you view Pride from abeam (say, on a boat running alongside) you notice her hull colors are divided in approximate thirds: top third black, big gold stripe in the middle, black bottom third. The channels sit at the top of the big yellow stripe. (The cannons are above those.)

She is heeled over far enough so the channels are surfing along the waves.

Various crew take up postures that are only possible on a big boat in a good wind. With the photos cropped to make the deck look level, the crew appears to be doing impossible, gravity defying stunts.

The sky is a deep blue-grey, the color of falcon's wings, darker to the east. The Bay is a shade darker, wind whipping whitecaps off the chop. A break appears in the cloud cover (7/8, when logged earlier), white and silver sun glows through. Pride is in her habitat, roaring like a dragon down toward the Chester River and Eastern Neck Island.

Belowdecks, for lunch, the heel and motion make life slightly weird. Not disconcertingly so, not enough to hang onto the many handholds designed into the main salon.

I press my head against the wall of my cabin; now Pride's hull is talking, singing with water against the wooden strakes.

Outside, her lines hum with the power of wind. You can hear it, feel it.

Too soon we begin

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channel surfing: (looking forward) the shrouds holding up the mast run through "channels", the black snowboard sized object in the water

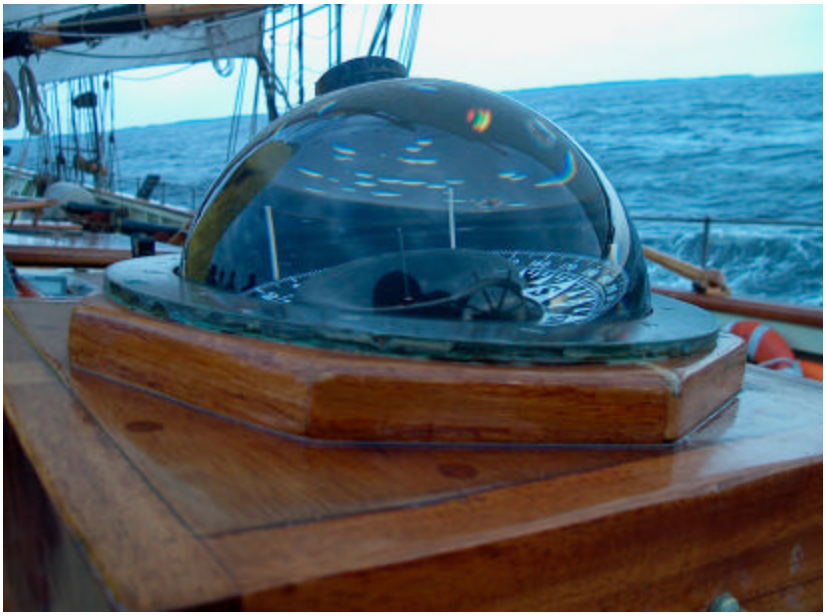
dropping sails, one by one, the crew working in a coordinated dance that a newbie finds hard to join. They've worked together long enough to have a kind of crew esp. It's like rider esp, or kayak esp: when I've taught people to ride, or to kayak, I often forget to explain certain things; things I do so instinctively I'm not aware they need explaining.

It's November, but Global Climate Change seems to have infested the Bay. As the weather warmed, shirts, shoes and other items find their way into odd crannies of the ship. There are a few particular nooks that are deemed stable enough, even in high seas, to stash stuff; the crevice on the starboard side of the main hatchway, a spot by the compass. I leave cameras there (drybagged and

boxed), others leave coffee mugs. Chassuer, the ship's period wooden boat, collects an odd assortment of items: socks, jackets, water bottles. The crew, in finest sailing tradition, has collected some most decorative tattoos. One of the twelve person crew of Sultana Projects' John Smith Shallop (8 oars, one sail, 1500 miles in the wake of Captain Smith, establishing the first National Historic Water Trail), Rebecca has perhaps the coolest one: a "waterline tattoo"; the depth of the draft of the Shallop (well-designed and visible in polite company).

For some hours we have been catching glimpses of Virginia in the distance. She's a replica of

Rebecca (who sailed and rowed on the John Smith Shallop) helms Pride II coming up to Eastern Neck. Below: even with a Nav room full of high tech, the compass in its binnacle still holds a place of honor.



the original pilot schooner who served the Virginia Pilot Association 1917-1926. I read a comment somewhere, from a year or two ago, about her performance in the Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race... she hadn't won, but she was showing great promise.

This year she won it.

She's a descendant of that same family tree that spawned ships like Pride. Her masts aren't raked, and she lacks a bowsprit (making her nose look odd to my eye) but she is fast and seaworthy, and the original Virginia "served long into an age where power vessels became the preferred platform for pilot station ships." (Virginia's page in the ASTA book, 2003). She's dark-hulled, with vast expanses of shining woodwork on deck. She's a gaff topsail schooner (rather than the square topsails of Pride and Sultana), a beautiful addition to the fleet of Chesapeake Bay tall ships.

on the water, the whole world is shifts of light and color... (sunset over Eastern Neck)