

Cruising Blues and Their Cure  
By Robert Pirsig  
(originally published in Esquire, May 1977)

Their case was typical. After four years of hard labor their ocean-size trimaran was launched in Minneapolis at the head of Mississippi navigation. Six and one half months later they had brought it down the river and across the gulf to Florida to finish up final details. Then at last they were off to sail the Bahamas, the Lesser Antilles and South America.

Only it didn't work out that way. Within six weeks they were through. The boat was back in Florida up for sale.

"Our feelings were mixed," they wrote their hometown paper. "Each of us had a favorite dream unfulfilled, a place he or she wanted to visit, a thing to do. And most of us felt sheepish that our 'year's escape' shrunk to eight months. Stated that way, it doesn't sound as if we got our money's worth for our four years' labor."

"But most of us had had just about all the escape we could stand; we're overdosed on vacation. Maybe we aren't quite as free spirits as we believed; each new island to visit had just a bit less than its predecessor."

"And thoughts were turning to home."

Change the point of origin to Sacramento or Cincinnati or any of thousands of places where the hope of sailing the world fills landlocked, job-locked dreamers; add thousands of couples who have saved for years to extend their weekends on the water to a retirement at sea, then sell their boats after six months; change the style and size of the boat, or the ages and backgrounds of the participants, and you have a story that is heard over and over again in cruising areas - romantic dreams of a lifetime destroyed by a psychological affliction that has probably ended the careers of more cruising sailors than all other causes together: cruising depression.

"I don't know what it was we thought we were looking for," one wife said in a St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, harbor after she and her husband had decided to put their boat up for sale and go home. "But whatever it was, we certainly haven't discovered it in sailing. It seemed that it was going to be such a dream life, but now, looking back on it, it just seems . . . oh, there have been beautiful times, of course, but mostly it's just been hard work and misery. More than we would have had if we had stayed home."

A husband said, "We find ourselves getting on each other's nerves, being cooped up like this with each other day after day. We never realized that in order to enjoy being with someone you have to have periods of separation from that person too. We sailed on weekends and short vacations for years. But living aboard isn't the same."

Statements symptomatic of cruising depression vary from person to person, but common to most are long periods of silence in a person who is normally talkative, followed by a feeling of overwhelming sadness that at first seems to have no specific cause, then, on reflection, seems to have many causes, such as:

Everything is breaking down on this boat. Everything is going to hell. Considering the number of things that could break down, the attrition is actually quite normal, but now there isn't the time or tools to make major repairs, and the costs of boatyard labor and overhead are out of sight. So now every part failure - a pump that won't work, a loose propeller shaft, a windlass that sticks - looms up as a catastrophe, and during the long hours at the helm while the problem remains unfixed, it grows larger and larger in the mind.

Money is running short. Most of the big supermarkets are too far from the boat to walk to. Marine stores seem to overcharge on everything. Money is always running short, but now that fact, which was once a challenge, is a source of despair. A serious cruising person always seems to find the money one way or another, usually by taking short-term waterfront jobs, and taking them without much resentment. His boat gives him something to work for. But now the boat itself is resented and there is nothing to work for.

The people are unfriendlier here than back home. Back home people seemed friendlier, but now cruising depression has put a scowl and a worried look on the sailor's face that makes people keep their distance.

All this is just running away from reality. You never realize how good that friendly old nine-to-five office job can be. Just little things - like everyone saying hello each morning or the supervisor stopping by to get your opinion because he really needs it. And seeing old friends and familiar neighbors and streets you've lived near all your life. Who wants to escape all that? Perhaps what cruising teaches more than anything else is an appreciation of the real world you might otherwise think of as oppressive.

This last symptom - the desire to "get back to reality" - is one I've found in almost every case of cruising depression and may be the key to the whole affliction. If one bears down on this point a little it begins to open up and reveal deeper sources of trouble.

One first has to ask where those who are depressed got the idea that cruise sailing was an escape from reality. Who ever taught them that? What exactly do they mean? Scientists and philosophers spend their entire working lives puzzling over the nature of reality, but now the depressed ones use the term freely, as though everyone should know and agree with what they mean by it.

As best I can make out, reality for them is the mode of daily living they followed before taking to the water; unlike cruise sailing, it is the one shared by the majority of the members of our culture. It usually means gainful employment in a stable economic network of some sort without too much variance from what are considered the norms and mores of society. In other words, back to the common herd.

The illogic is not hard to find. The house-car-job complex with its nine-to-five office routine is common only to a very small percentage of the earth's population and has only been common to this percentage for the last hundred years or so. If this is reality, have the millions of years that preceded our current century all been unreal?

An alternative - and better - definition of reality can be found by naming some of its components ...air...sunlight...wind...water...the motion of waves...the patterns of clouds before a coming storm. These elements, unlike twentieth-century office routines, have been here since before life appeared on this planet and they will continue long after office routines are gone. They are understood by everyone, not just a small segment of a highly advanced society. When considered on purely logical grounds, they are more real than the extremely transitory life-styles of the modern civilization the depressed ones want to return to.

If this is so, then it follows that those who see sailing as an escape from reality have got their understanding of both sailing and reality completely backwards. Sailing is not an escape but a return to and a confrontation of a reality from which modern civilization is itself an escape. For centuries, man suffered from the reality of an earth that was too dark or too hot or too cold for his comfort, and to escape this he invented complex systems of lighting, heating and air conditioning. Sailing rejects these and returns to the old realities of dark and heat and cold. Modern civilization has found radio, TV, movies, nightclubs and a huge variety of mechanized entertainment to titillate our senses and help us escape from the apparent boredom of the earth and the sun and wind and stars. Sailing returns to these ancient realities.

For many of the depressed ones, the real underlying source of cruising depression is that they have thought of sailing as one more civilized form of stimulation, just like movies or spectator sports, and somehow felt their boat had an obligation to keep them thrilled and entertained. But no boat can be an endless source of entertainment and should not be expected to be one.

A lot of their expectation may have come from weekend sailing, whose pleasures differ greatly from live-aboard cruising. In weekend sailing, depression seldom shows up, because the sailing is usually a relief from a monotonous workweek. The weekender gets just as depressed as the live-aboard cruiser, but he does it at home or on the job and thinks of these as the cause of the depression. When he retires to the life of cruising, he continues the mistake by thinking, Now life will be just like all those summer weekends strung end to end. And of course he is wrong.

There is no way to escape the mechanism of depression. It results from lack of a pleasant stimulus and is inevitable because the more pleasant stimuli you receive the less effective they become. If, for example, you receive an unexpected gift of money on Monday, you are elated. If the same gift is repeated on Tuesday, you are elated again but a little less so because it is a repetition of Monday's experience. On Wednesday the elation drops a little lower and on Thursday and Friday a little lower still. By Saturday you are rather accustomed to the daily gift and take it for granted. Sunday, if there is no gift, you are suddenly depressed. Your level of expectation has adjusted upward during the week and now must adjust downward.

The same is true of cruising. You can see just so many beautiful sunsets strung end on end, just so many coconut palms waving in the ocean breeze, just so many exotic moonlit tropical nights scented with oleander and frangipani, and you become adjusted. They no longer elate. The pleasant external stimulus has worn out its response and cruising depression takes over. This is the point at which boats get sold and cruising dreams are shattered forever. One can extend the high for a while by searching for new and more exciting pursuits, but sooner or later the depression mechanism must catch up with you and the longer it has been evaded the harder it hits.

It follows that the best way to defeat cruising depression is never to run from it. You must face into it, enter it when it comes, just be gloomy and enjoy the gloominess while it lasts. You can be sure that the same mechanism that makes depression unavoidable also makes future elation unavoidable. Each hour or day you remain depressed you become more and more adjusted to it until in time there is no possible way to avoid an upturn in feelings. The days you put in depressed are like money in the bank. They make the elated days possible by their contrast. You cannot have mountains without valleys and you cannot have elation without depression. Without their combined upswings and downswings, existence would be just one long tedious plateau.

When depression is seen as an unavoidable part of one's life, it becomes possible to study it with less aversion and discover that within it are all sorts of overlooked possibilities.

To begin with, depression makes you far more aware of subtleties of your surroundings. Out on a remote anchorage, the call of a wild duck during an elated period is just the call of a wild duck. But if you are depressed and your mind is empty from the down-scaling of depression, then that strange lonely sound can suddenly bring down a whole wave of awareness of empty spaces and water and sky. It sounds strange, but some of my happiest memories are of days when I was very depressed. Slow monotonous grey days at the helm, beating into a wet freezing wind. Or a three-day dead calm that left me in agonies of heat and boredom and frustration. Days when nothing seemed to go right. Nights when impending disaster was all I could think of. I think of those as "virtuous days," a strange term for them that has a meaning all its own.

Virtue here comes from childhood reading about the old days of sailing ships when young men were sent to sea to learn manliness and virtue. I remember being skeptical about this. "How could a monotonous passage across a pile of water produce virtue?" I wondered. I figured that maybe a few bad storms would scare hell out of the young men and this would make them humble and manly and virtuous and appreciative of life ever afterward, but it seemed like a dubious curriculum. There were cheaper and quicker ways to scare people than that.

Now, however, with a boat of my own and some time at sea, I begin to see the learning of virtue another way. It has something to do with the way the sea and sun and wind and sky go on and on day after day, week after week, and the boat and you have to go on with it. You must take the helm and change the sails and take sights of the stars and work out their reductions and sleep and cook and eat and repair things as they break and do most of these things in stormy weather as well as fair, depressed as well as elated, because there's no choice. You get used to it; it becomes habit-forming and produces a certain change in values. Old gear that has been through a storm or two without failure becomes more precious than it was when you bought it because you know you can trust it. The same becomes true of fellow crewmen and ultimately becomes true of things about yourself. Good first appearances count for less than they ever did, and real virtue - which comes from an ability to separate what merely looks good from what lasts and the acquisition of those characteristics in one's self - is strengthened.

But beyond this there seems to be an even deeper teaching of virtue that rises out of a slow process of self-discovery after one has gone through a number of waves of danger and depression and is no longer overwhelmingly concerned about them.

Self-discovery is as much a philosopher's imponderable as reality, but when one takes away the external stimuli of civilization during long ocean hours at the helm far from any land, and particularly on overcast nights, every cruising sailor knows that what occurs is not an evening of complete blankness. Instead comes a flow of thought drawn forth by the emptiness of the night. Occurrences of the previous day, meager as they may have been, rise and are thought about for a while, and then die away to return again later, a little less compelling, and perhaps another time even weaker, until they die away completely and are not thought of again. Then older memories appear, of a week past, a month past, of years past, and these are thought about and sometimes interrelated with new insights. A problem that has been baffling in the past is now understood quickly. New ideas for things seem to pop up from nowhere because the rigid patterns of thought that inhibited them are now weakened by emptiness and depression. Then in time these new thoughts wear down too, and the empty night dredges deeper into the subconscious to tug at, loosen and dislodge old forgotten thoughts that were repressed years ago. Old injustices that one has had to absorb, old faces now gone, ancient feelings of personal doubt, remorse, hatred and fear, are suddenly loose and at you. You must face them again and again until they die away like the thoughts preceding them. This self that one discovers is in many ways a person one would not like one's friends to know about; a person one may have been avoiding for years, full of vanity, cowardice, boredom, self-pity, laziness, blaminess, weak when he should be strong, aggressive when he should be gentle, a person who will do anything not to know these things about himself - the very same fellow who has been having problems with cruising depression all this time. I think it's in the day-after-day, week-after-week confrontation of this person that the most valuable learning of virtue takes place.

But if one will allow it time enough, the ocean itself can be one's greatest ally in dealing with this person. As one lives on the surface of the empty ocean day after day after day after day and sees it sometimes huge and dangerous, sometimes relaxed and dull, but always, in each day and week, endless in every direction, a certain understanding of one's self begins slowly to break through, reflected from the sea, or perhaps derived from it.

This is the understanding that whether you are bored or excited, depressed or elated, successful or unsuccessful, even whether you are alive or dead, all this is of absolutely no consequence whatsoever. The sea keeps telling you this with every sweep of every wave. And when you accept this understanding of yourself and agree with it and continue on anyway, then a real fullness of virtue and self-understanding arrives. And sometimes the moment of arrival is accompanied by hilarious laughter. The old reality of the sea has put cruising depression in its proper perspective at last.