

A Lesson from the Sea

I met a man years ago who said he was a “Harbor Pilot.” In New York City the law requires that any ship entering the harbor must have on board a pilot who takes command and has the responsibility of steering the ship safely into port. He told me that the sea has many lessons that can apply to our lives. He said there are three things necessary to safely bring a ship into a harbor: the pilot, a rudder, and an anchor. Two are unseen, the rudder and anchor, but the pilot who is seen sets the direction, and knows when the anchor and rudder are doing their job. He also knows how to avoid danger and set a safe course.

People serving time in prison can benefit from all three. Years ago David Spencer told me about learning the importance of “standing still.” He was in Clinton Prison in the 1930’s and explained that at times it was critical to “stand still,” especially when you were in a dangerous situation and you didn’t know what was taking place. Standing still is that experience of putting down your anchor when you are trying to come to terms with the human struggle. It may take place in a prison cell, mess hall, yard, or some special place in the outside world. Larry White found such a place where he could “stand still.” He writes:

But once I returned to New York City, where I found myself going most often was to a park bench. I would sit there gazing at the Hudson River and wondering how I would ever make it in society.

.... In those early months after coming home, I had only two dependable companions. One was loneliness. It sets in quietly in prison, and you accept it.... The other companion was fear. I was scared to death of life on the outside.

Standing still can help us find a new sense of direction and point the way to new possibilities. When you add a reliable rudder, and are clear about the direction of your life, it

will keep you on course. Many of us are like Alice in Wonderland when she came to a fork in the road and asked the Cheshire Cat, "Which road should I take?" The cat asked, "Where are you going?" Alice replied, "I don't know." Then the cat said, "It doesn't make any difference which road you take if you don't know where you are going." It's important to be clear about where we are headed and to make sure it is a life-giving path.