



NOAA Teacher at Sea
Christopher Harvey
Onboard NOAA Ship OSCAR ELTON SETTE
June 5 – July 4, 2006

Date: June 27, 2006

Time: 10:00 PM Hawaii

Location: Cruising around Maro Reef

Entry

“It is only when we become conscious of our part in life, however modest, that we shall be happy.”

-Wind, Sand and Stars, Antoine de Saint-Exupery

I’ve just returned from outside, after spending the evening playing guitar and watching the twilight sky fade into a charcoal background. Of course the sunset was spectacular. Nobody was really paying attention to it. But I pointed out a waterfall of clouds to Carole, who stopped drawing for a moment and gasped at the view. A ring of cumulus clouds in the shape of a flattened oval enclosed a portion of the red sky. In the middle of the oval, a vertical stream of wispy clouds seemed to fall down into the sea. Carole ran to get her camera to take a picture. But I knew that images like this don’t turn out the way we want them to on film. So I just watched the waterfall of clouds until darkness seeped in from all directions and swallowed us.

I am starting to get peculiar emotional twinges inside of me that leave me somewhat sad. It always happens to me at this point in any journey, when the end is of closer proximity than the beginning. We will be at sea for another week- three days of work and another four in transit back to Honolulu- and yet one week does not carry such excitement as it did three weeks ago when the adventure was first begun. Granted, I have not enjoyed every moment of the cruise. But I have become used to waking up and walking outside and having the sea in all directions. I know that there will be a dozen albatross following behind the ship, searching for their breakfast in our wake as I eat my own. And that the swells will be gentle in the morning until the wind picks up later in the afternoon. I know when the crew will change shifts and who I can expect to see working in various locations throughout the day. I can tell you what job I did yesterday, what I will be doing today, as well as what my job tomorrow will be. Everything has become so comfortable. Everything has become so familiar. Everything has become Reality- one that will change again in another week.

As I reflect back on my journal entries from my expedition across the United States immediately before this cruise, I can see how my perspective changes in this moment. Things begin to make more sense. All of the ideas that I have been tossing around in my head for the last three weeks begin to tie together. The good experiences and the bad experiences synthesize to create a whole experience. Even the things that I once disagreed to now seem to have their place in my mind as necessary at the time.

There is no doubt in my mind that I have become more mature in this experience. Although the purpose of this cruise was for me to gain exposure to science in action (which I have in abundance), I feel as though a side purpose has been to stretch me in ways I have not been stretched before. Old ideas, once tested, have been brought back to be tested again. New ideas, rich in energy and perspective, displace old ideas that have failed the test of mind. I have become a collection of ideas that has changed me into the man that I am today- so much different from three weeks ago, and much more different from what I will be when I return home in three more weeks time.

And have you ever seen a thunderstorm so far out to sea? For some reason I never thought lightning possible out over open water before- though I remember last summer I sat on the upstairs porch of a hotel in La Ceiba, Honduras looking out over a Caribbean storm that seemed to be displacing large amounts of electrical energy on the sea. The air was warm and humid, and I recall looking down onto the street corner at a man, our security guard, pacing back and forth with a cigarette in his mouth and machete in hand, completely unaware from where he was that the sky was opening up in the distance. Tonight was no different for me as I sat up outside the bridge and watched the lightning tear apart the night sky. The sun had long since set, and black appeared black across the horizon until the lightning lit up the night. Miles and miles away, the faint lights outlined layer upon layer of clouds between me and the obscure infinite beyond- defining the night in terms of different shades of black and gray. It was remarkable to see. As most things out here seem to be.

As for the science today, we caught more lobster today than we have on any other day. I was in the lab processing the lobsters. Usually being in the lab is great because there are not too many lobsters to measure, so you get a lot of free time to read or talk or sit or whatever you want to do. Bob is still in the lab entering the data for today, so I do not know the exact numbers. But what I do know is that the only break we had today was for lunch. Every other minute of the day, between 8:10 when the first trap was hauled over the side and 2:15 when we measured the last lobster, was filled with measuring lobster. Offhand, I would have to say that we probably averaged about 6 or 7 lobsters per trap. Adding all of the traps together, that's between 960 – 1120 lobsters, all of which I had to hold in my hands and measure! Talk about a productive day.

Tomorrow I am back in the pit cracking traps. This does not thrill me very much. In fact, it does not thrill me at all. But one of the things that I have learned from reading Antoine de Saint-Exupery is that fulfilling one's duty in life provides all of the satisfaction that one should require from it. Maybe this will make the mundane things in life more meaningful to me. I have particular duties and responsibilities in life that I have committed myself to fulfilling. In serving these obligations, not only am I demonstrating myself as a man of character, but also I am contributing to the satisfaction of my soul in ways I may not understand until the entire task is complete.

Bob thanked me tonight for my work in the lab today. As I mentioned, it was rather stressful work for all of us involved. Yet we each did our duties to the best of our abilities

and the task was completed successfully. Bob knows that I have particular reservations against my work, and his gratitude for my hard work today dismissed my reservations- however necessary and/or proper they seem to be to me- and demonstrated the greater purpose of my time out here. He is dependent upon me working hard on this cruise, as I agreed to in the beginning, and if I give anything less than my best -solely because I feel that I should not work as hard because I do not agree with all of it- then I am not living up to my duties. There are ways to be happy, even when you feel unhappy about what you are doing. If you can somehow seek the sense of duty of it all, the importance of your work to the big picture- whatever that might be- then perhaps work will provide that sensation of “happiness” that seems altogether elusive to most people in the world. Just some thoughts.