

Motion of the ocean is the lotion for what ails you



Richard and Joanie on the boat, anchored off Great Dog Island, an uninhabited islet of the British Virgin Islands.

Richard P. Holm, MD, MACP

Dr. Holm (AQA, Emory University School of Medicine, 1975) is a semi-retired physician-internist-geriatrician in Brookings, SD.

Dr. Holm grew up sailing a 20 foot C-class [M-Scow] on prairie Lake Poinsett in South Dakota. He has taught sailing at the University of Wisconsin's Hooper's Club, and has been chartering sailboats in the British Virgin Islands, and Lake Superior since the late 1980s. He is a member of the Lake Poinsett Sailing Academy, a group of lake sailors who sponsor an open-class Regatta on Lake Poinsett every spring, and meets Wednesday afternoons in summer, to sail Hobie Cats, grill and to enjoy the camaraderie.

People are drawn to sail in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) for different reasons. Some go there to prove to themselves (or to someone else) that they have the moxie, sailing knowledge, and finesse to sail on the ocean. Others go to find excitement, beauty, peace, or just to escape the cold of a northern winter. When I started traveling down to the British Virgin Islands in the late 80s, I did so for a number of those purposes. My last visit was for different reasons.

In October 2016, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, had chemotherapy, radiation, and the Whipple surgery (also known as pancreatic duodenectomy, a complex operation to remove the head of the pancreas, the first part of the small intestine (duodenum), the gall bladder, and the

bile duct. About a year later they found the cancer had reoccurred on my liver. After another five months of chemotherapy, the cancer surgeon cut out the spot on my liver with the outside chance that he might “get it all.”

After 40 years of practicing internal medicine, caring for the elderly, and being director of a hospice, I knew I had better not put off doing my favorite things. This time, I went sailing for the love of family and friends, and for the sense of eternity that the sea provides. I also went to heal, hoping that the warm, salty sea, nurturing nature of wind, fun of the islands, and spiritual connectedness would provide a mending milieu.

My wife, Joanie, and I first scheduled a week over New Year’s with our four children followed by a week with three other couples. Although dear friends, the other couples barely knew each other, hailing from Rhode Island, California, and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Observing new friendships develop was charming and gratifying.

The trip had been planned for six months, and despite good trip insurance, it took some courage for all involved to agree to the trip when my cancer prognosis was so tentative. However, I knew my condition would make the time together more poignant and precious.

I was fearful that my progressive frailty would limit the quality of the experience, but I was wrong. The experience provided needed healing, comfort, strength, and a more contented soul.

In September 2017, Category 5 hurricane, Irma, struck the British Virgin Islands wreaking unprecedented damage. A second hurricane, Maria, pounded the islands two weeks later. One native relayed that with Irma wind gusts were up to 250 miles per hour. Our boat, Luffing Out Loud, was totaled in Paraquita Bay.

The areas of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, and Jost Van Dyke,

still have areas that look as though they were hit by a massive bomb, and it’s been more than two years since the hurricanes. However, most of the natural green has returned, and homes have been rebuilt.

The people living and working on the British Virgin Islands are a positive and resilient populace, moving on with courage. Services, bars, restaurants, and most of the mooring balls are back in action. These are again fabulous cruising waters, and the aftermath from the 2017 hurricanes should no longer discourage anyone planning to sail in the British Virgin Islands.

Irma and Maria hit not long after the time I learned of my diagnosis. Hearing the words “pancreatic cancer” was like a bomb going off. As the medical director of the local hospice, I was familiar with the emotional and physical damage of such a diagnosis. Those surviving with cancer—like those enduring an island hurricane—must realize that recovery demands avoidance of panic and fear; savoring each other during this holy time; swinging with the ups and downs of the condition; and showing courage even with the eventuality of death.

In life, there will always be rough spots. We need to expect change and challenge, let go of fear of the unknown, and not squander our remaining time agonizing over what we have lost. It is better when we confront the hurricanes of life with grace.

New Year’s Eve included a glorious morning sail to Anegada; a bike ride to Cow Wreck Beach with a refreshing beverage; home for a cleansing swim and shower off the back of the boat; and a short nap before the celebrations began. The New Year’s Eve merriment continued with a happy hour “Resolutions” game (that we made-up) which was played around the deck table of our boat Paw Trax II. Some of the best resolutions included “a New



Sun setting on Anegada Harbor, British Virgin Islands.



A rainbow over Manchioneel Bay, East End, Jost Van Dyke, British Virgin Islands.

Year's kiss from a beautiful stranger," "start piano lessons again," "savor," "finish projects," "health," "excel in my profession," "a visit to Italy," and finally "comfort." This was followed by dancing barefoot on the sand and enjoying fireworks at the Anegada Reef Hotel. This magnificent introduction to the year suggested good things for the year. Hope springs eternal.

Of course, it wasn't all fair winds and following sea. Our son, Carter, had concerns about my illness, which brought him to write in his journal, "A strange mood hangs over the boat. I think there is some apprehension on how this year might turn out." The heightened awareness of the moment brought delight when we visited The Baths National Park. Our three sons and I found an echoic cave where we sang *Auld Lang Syne*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Down to the River to Pray* a cappella. Such harmonizing mysteriously transports me to a place where I can sense a magical connection to

our children, humanity, the living world, and God. As the sounds soared in this special place, our daughter's friend, Darin, said he heard another visitor exclaim, "Dude! Did you hear that?" They then turned on their GoPro to record our singing. Real concerns never go away, but sometimes musically inspired connections to our spirituality helps us handle our natural fears.

From family to friends

Treasuring friendship became more tangible and genuine through sailing, which, helped me handle regret or discomfort.

The second week began when our beloved friends arrived. "How are you doing?" they asked at the reunion, and I replied, as usual, "I'm doing great," which was the truth. When told, "You're facing this is an example for us all," I responded, "I am grateful for having had a wonderful life."

When they said, "Life is short for all of us," I said, "I learned long ago to savor every day."

I am grateful to have lived about two years past what was expected, but there are moments when I feel regret that my life will likely be shorter than I want. I regret that I could, or should, have done something differently, maybe with more compassion and honesty (as Jess Walter implies in his novel *Beautiful Ruins* which I read during the voyage). However, there are no regrets about planning and making this sailing adventure happen. It helped me cope, and gave me hope.

At the end of the second week, as we were saying our good-byes, there were deep tears. Each of us appreciated the importance of an extraordinary sailing adventure with friends in and around these lovely islands.

For a South Dakota boy, the ocean waves reassure me of the power of earth-water-sky, the resilience of all living things, and the eternity of the spirit.

I was feeling pretty frail in the weeks leading up to the journey, but remembered the oft-quoted wisdom, "The motion of the ocean is lotion" for curing what ails you. During the two weeks on the sailboat, I was always moving, clambering to tighten a line, drop a sail, lower the dinghy, or maneuver the boat to anchor. For two weeks, every vertebra, joint, ligament, and muscle danced with a shifting, rocking, repositioning boat. I didn't appreciate the extent of the motion until I sat still for an hour in the

airport as we headed home. After a short period of immobility, I felt "old man" stiff again.

Boat living was therapeutic, a lotion of motion, that provided a potent remedy and recuperation.

I believe embracing motion and change is important as we grow older. It keeps us from prematurely aging, from congealing. Author Gail Godwin, says a willingness to change helps us from turning into our "final (frozen) selves" too early. Again motion is the lotion.

During our journey home, we received an email from our son, Eric, who had been with us the first week. He wrote, "As you fly back to the snowy north, the puppy, the fireplace, the babies (Joanie is a pediatric nurse practitioner), and the TV show (I am the host for a medical TV show¹), know they will all be so happy to have your attention again! And, the islands are thankful that you stayed loyal, even after the storm."

I went on a two week voyage in the British Virgin Islands on a sailboat with family and friends, on a quest for a healing potion—a mending milieu. Indeed, I found it there!

References

1. Holm R. The Prairie Doc. <https://www.prairiedoc.org>.

The author's E-mail address is richardpholm@gmail.com.

