



Community

by Fred Sparling

All 400 passengers on this gilded ship come from different places and backgrounds but have elected to take a final great voyage together. The trip will be long, averaging around 10 years. Eventually, we will of necessity debark, entering a realm shrouded in mystery, fearful to some and joyous to others, the subject of repeated analysis in religion, novels, and poetry. The ship is well maintained, is led capably, and has superb chefs on board. First-class health care is available. The ship is firmly moored to the land in a bucolic setting. It is the passengers who are traveling; their final journeys are guided by their hopes and their fears, each ultimately alone but comforted by spouses, family, and friends. By community.

Staff members do a wonderful job in every conceivable way in helping us on our journeys. Activities and programs of many kinds, some led by staff and some by passengers, are arranged onboard or offshore in the community. We can seek personal help as we age and can move to a closely tethered smaller ship if we need more assistance before we reach our final destination. But the primary joys come from our fellow passengers who are a remarkably talented bunch.

There is a general but unspoken agreement we are especially interesting people. Of course, there is no external evaluation to confirm this judgment, but we are confident in our self-assessment. By design, none of us is young, each has lived a long life and has accumulated many experiences and a modicum of wisdom.

The population self-assembles into many different small groups. Some are quite separate in attitude and belief, especially those based on political views, but things always remain civil. The wider world, unfortunately, suffers terribly from this problem, probably stemming from our deep history as members of different tribes, once separated by space but brought together into a much smaller modern world.

There are groups of quilt makers, woodworkers, gamers, exercisers, eaters and drinkers, opera buffs, music fans, people who love theater and a symphony, movie addicts, book clubs, discussion groups, a long list. A new group is organized around the best of British television, with scones and tea. Participation in these events extends the circle of friends and greatly increases the quality of life on the ship. Writers contribute to an in-house journal published three times a year, writing with quality unequalled in analogous publications from similar places.

Some of my time is spent discussing religious and related thoughts, although little in my pre-shipboard experience suggested I would be so interested. It is an ecumenical group, with people of many faiths including retired ministers plus an equal number of skeptical seekers, always thoughtful and respectful, supportive, and friendly. Books for discussion are chosen by vote and oscillate between those about Christianity, the Jewish faith, and others including non-religious topics such as meditation. Attendance is rewarded with a sense of peace, a blessing. The readings and the discussions help me in a lifelong quest to escape the bigotries of my father, help me fully understand and love people whose backgrounds and views are different, deepening lessons learned repeatedly that we all are the same. I learn to accept ambiguities in not knowing answers to questions about where we go when we depart this world and understand rational science is not an answer to everything.

Formal courses are available, including one on the novel which has long attracted my interest, even though it is time-consuming. A very bright resident leader demands (and gets) careful preparation from her pupils. The learning experience depends in significant measure on insights and commentary from the students. I recently wrote my collegiate alma mater that I have encountered the best English professor of my life, which statement may have shocked the venerable Ivy league school that prides itself on its commitment to teaching.

Certain individuals with uncommon energy and personality have an outsize effect on shipboard life. Two stand out, in part because their voyages each ended recently, but also because their contributions were timeless. One was a university professor of communication with a deep interest in theater and poetry, an outstanding teacher, beloved by students, a doyen, a social catalyst, the widow of the man who helped launch this ship, a person with a big voice, a friend to many, a benefactor of the entire community. The other was a former classmate of mine in college whom I met for the first time after he and his husband boarded the ship. He was a lifelong contributor to the world of New York theater as an actor, organizer, and fundraiser, a passionate man, an inspired leader whose energy lifted a moribund play reading group to new heights including staging a production for the entire ship using fellow passengers as actors. Interests overlapped between these two electric personalities, occasionally resulting in sparks, but we loved each of them and their loss has left a void. Another, still onboard, came from life as director of a major museum of art. He quickly organized a group of art appreciators, and secured agreement from our captain to allow carefully selected original donated fine art to be placed throughout the corridors, transforming the place and delighting everyone.





“ In a memoir meant for my family, I compared this place to an adult college, one that specializes in the humanities. This is not an ordinary old folk's home.

Life at sea always carries the risk of stormy weather. The arrival of the covid-19 pandemic over two years ago interrupted a long period of enjoyable community life, ushering in fear of contagion and social restrictions designed to keep us safe but resulting in isolation. Interactions entailing face to face contact were replaced with meeting by Zoom over our computers. It is not the same. Each of us wear face masks and generally avoid going off ship. Finally, after arrival of miraculous new vaccines, after enduring successive waves of new more transmissible variants adapted to partially escape the vaccines: we are arriving at a new set point where we will be able to resume most of normal life. Our in-house restaurants open again at least a few days a week, and we can eat together, to renew friendships, to greet newcomers who have boarded since the long period of isolation began. We do not entirely escape the ravages of Covid but are safer than most, losing only a few.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has an enormous effect. In this country alone a million died, quite like the great influenza pandemic of 100 years earlier. The world is disrupted; global supply chains perturbed. Massive infusions of federal economic aid are resulting in the highest inflation in years. Hospitals were overwhelmed, many businesses suffered, and some went under, yet as the epidemic wanes, massive unemployment is replaced by a severe shortage of workers. Change is constant, adaptability is essential.

Just as we are reaching equilibrium again, a new conflagration in Europe ignites, threatening the global peace in ways not experienced since World War II. For years we were forewarned yet chose to ignore Putin's threats and invasions of territories once within the former USSR. Huge Russian armies assemble on the Ukraine border as we watch. Eventually they invade, starting a land war with artillery and rocket bombardment, leading to large scale destruction, civilian deaths, and massive emigration to surrounding NATO countries. A diminutive Ukrainian comic actor who once played the role of an accidentally elected president, amazingly now the real president, becomes a heroic figure of defiance, compared favorably to Winston Churchill. Ukrainian resistance is fierce. All watch TV coverage of the entire disaster and weep with the people of Ukraine, identifying with beautiful children singing the national anthem in bomb shelters. Russia threatens nuclear retaliation against any country that actively defends Ukraine.

The United States avoids sending troops but does send lethal weapons, walking a fine line. Fears of a nuclear disaster increase when the Russian forces shell a huge Ukrainian nuclear plant and set it on fire. NATO countries impose severe financial sanctions on Russia but avoid direct military intervention. The invasion stalls, destruction increases, pleas for help are ignored, the suffering is painful to watch. Ukraine, a non-NATO country, is being sacrificed in a cruel game of power politics.

Angst, already widespread throughout this country, surges because of war-related large increases in cost of oil, gas, and other goods, and by fears of Armageddon. Unchecked, Putin might attack other bordering NATO countries, triggering a new nuclear World War III. He lies and seems unpredictable. I recall how I felt as a young physician at the Center for Disease Control at the height of the Cold War. My training in the intricacies of sexually transmitted diseases included how to teach the construction of nuclear bomb shelters. Talk about absurdity! The perils of the Covid pandemic pale by comparison. Stock markets around the world collapse. Pundits caution that at best we are entering a new and worse Cold War.

What can one do? It is disabling to be impotent in the face of a bully. Donations of money for relief provide little sense of gratification, too little to make a difference. However, we take some comfort from seeing that many politicians in this country who once applauded Putin for his apparent defense of Christian values now say they hold him in disdain. The entire Western alliance is united in the face of these threats. We are humbled and inspired by the generosity of Polish and other eastern European people as they encounter a migration of refugees, over a million into Poland alone in less than two weeks and rising rapidly. Strangers are welcomed and taken into modest homes. "I don't know any other way" says a Moldovan woman to a television cameraman. Their actions confirm that most people are genuinely good and give us hope.

We lived through similar times for decades from the end of WWII to the collapse of the former USSR in 1989. We survived the emotional stress then partly because of the help of comedy; remember the movie Dr. Strangelove? This crisis has yet to seem even a bit funny. A recent guru on the morning television advises that now is the time to invest heavily in the stock market again because the risk of nuclear war is only 10%. Dr Strangelove again in new clothing.

There is power in community, a healing effect of friends and laughter. We moved here before health made it necessary, hoping to make new friends who would support us when we needed help.



We need help now. An impromptu dinner party for six is arranged, two women and two men guests in our apartment; we will cook. At the dinner table we have a short silence to honor the people of Ukraine. Someone says thanks, I appreciate that. Joyce's salad and dessert are big hits, my vegetarian mushroom bourguignon less so, but it makes no difference. The conversation spreads around the table easily, each of us focused on the speaker of the moment, energy levels are high, and peals of laughter break out frequently. It lasts for hours, ending with pledges to repeat the event. One of the guests writes that evenings like this convince her she made the right decision when she boarded this ship, no one could be happier. The effects linger with me. Friendship and sharing brighten space made dark by clouds of war.

If that is not enough to prevent midnight awakenings, get outside. Spring is here, redbuds are bursting with buds, mallard pairs are in the ponds, oblivious to worry about climate change. The grounds are embroidered by colorful daffodils planted by a fellow passenger's labor, and his wildflowers planted in the nature paths are beginning to emerge. His blackberry patch is going to bear a lot of fruit. Birdsongs are peaceful, soothing, restorative.

“ Muddle on, one day at a time, meet with others, breathe deeply, try to laugh, it helps. Embrace our special community.

