

## **Stop Treading Water**

I heard a parable a few weeks ago and it has stuck with me since. It is called the parable of the drowning man - there is a man stuck at sea, let's call him Alex. Treading water Alex never loses faith. He is confident that God will save him. A lifeboat comes to his aid and asks if he needs help, but Alex responds not to worry that God will save him. Shortly after, another boat passes by, but again Alex retorts not to worry that God will save him. A third time a boat comes to his rescue, but Alex dismisses the boat saying not to worry that God will save him. Not long after that, Alex drowned. When he arrives in Heaven he goes straight up to God and asks "God, why am I here? I was waiting for you to save me." God responds, "I sent you three boats."

What was Alex thinking? What lessons can we derive from this parable? The one that matters most to me lies in understanding the depths of uncertainty. In the course of life, we are frequently confronted with these proverbial ships – those vessels that promise to lead us somewhere beyond, but we can never know precisely where. We can hold out hope for certainty, or total deliverance from all distress and despair, but this is impossible. We can never be completely sure of a particular path that we take, but this does not mean that we should not take it. Alex, whether because of fear of the uncertain or because of unreasonable expectations of total deliverance did not take the leap of faith that life demands, and ultimately drowned.

We have all taken many different paths here. Few of us can say that getting to Harvard was inevitable. Heck, coming from an inner city in New Jersey where college is but a distant unattainable dream for most of the residents, I didn't even know what Harvard was growing up. So we have all boarded some random ships in pursuit of safe passage, and taken some risks that

have paid off. But how many boats have we let just float on by? How many times have we let our apathy, stubbornness, or fear get in the way of climbing into the boat?

As blessed as I have been, I have still let far too many boats sail on by. My greatest regret at Harvard is that I let my personal endeavors get in the way of what makes this place special – the people that attend it. I am in my final semester and I wish I could have eight more. Not because I enjoyed the late nights of work, but because I have missed chances that would have let me cross paths with more of you. I passed on so many opportunities to know people because of schoolwork and fear that my grades would suffer had I gone out.

And in our most important relationships, with people we love, the stakes are even higher. The biggest boat I have let sail on by is never addressing my mother's alcohol abuse when I had the chance. I always waited for the perfect opportunity to act, but this ended up distracting me from the *only* opportunities I ended up ever having. There were many times when I could and should have sucked up my fear and confronted her, but instead I recoiled, waiting for total deliverance, and let the boat sail on by.

Now listen, not every boat we get on is going to turn out okay. My ancestors from Africa and my parents know a thing or two about getting on the wrong boat. We all do. But we need to trust in ourselves and in our abilities that once we get on this metaphoric boat that we can steer it in the direction of our choosing and make the best of it. Our automatic assumption should be that we can do something and we should not be burdened by our own self-doubts or self-imposed limitations. Let us finally free ourselves from the shackles of our timidity and take control of the trajectory of our lives rather than waiting passively as time runs out.

Drowning is not an option. In pursuit of a considered good, such as friendship, professional aims, love, or justice, if you have seriously considered a thought, stop considering it

and begin to act. Let us overcome inertia and fear and stop living in perpetual procrastination, which will only end with regret. I always thought to focus on myself first and that the time for everything else will come. I was thinking like that drowning man. We need to stop treading water and start to open our eyes and be aware of the opportunities that are being thrown at us everyday. We only have a few years on this planet. Let's get better at climbing into the boat.