

## *The Sailing Boat Metaphor*

The function of this metaphor is in setting a context and a direction for the work. It contains elements of workability and creative hopelessness, values, acceptance and committed action. I have found I use it in the place where I might use the 'man in the hole' metaphor, though for me personally I find that this sailing boat metaphor works better than the man in the hole.

"Imagine that life were like sailing a small sailing boat. During your life, you have picked up the skills necessary to sail your boat and you have a sense of where you are taking this boat. At some point in your learning to sail, you have learned that from time to time, waves may wash over the bow and you will find yourself with wet feet. The usual response that people have learned is as follows: When you've water around your feet, use this bailer to bail out the water.

So you've learned about the bailer, but when its not been needed it has been put away in locker, ready to be used if needed. And at some point along your journey you have had waves come over your boat and there is now water in the bottom of your boat. So you have started to do the thing that is sensible and logic to do: get rid of the water. You have been using that bailer a lot, sometimes bailing quickly, sometimes bailing carefully, sometimes baling wildly, sometimes baling desperately and: in your experience, have you managed to get rid of the water yet? And all this time that you have been bailing, what has been happening to the direction and progress your boat has been making? Is it fair to say that you have been bailing more than you have been sailing this boat?

Now; what if you were to one day really look at the bailer and to see that it was full of holes? What if it was a sieve? What would you have to do first?

[Most folks will recognize that a sieve is not a good bailer and so will suggest using a different tool; a bucket or their hands]

Well; it may be that part of the work that we do together may be about investigating which tools are really useful to you, and some of those may well be more effective tools for bailing.

Even more that that, the implicit promise of bailing is this: once you get rid of the water – then we'll get this boat back on track and start sailing it where you want it to go. What if our work could really be about that? About working together to let go of needing to get rid of the water, to begin to look up from the bailing and looking out in front of the boat and actually choosing a direction that you want to take this boat. What if our work could be about helping you to put a hand on the tiller and to choose to pull in the sails and getting the boat moving in whatever direction you choose? This could be very slowly at first, there is no speedometer in this work. Once we get the boat moving, then we might be able to investigate some other ways of bailing; if they prove to be useful strategies in helping you to take this boat where you want it to go.

The question to ask yourself might be something like this; if you could have this boat with only a little water in the bottom, but the boat is drifting, you are not choosing the direction you sail *or* the boat has water in the bottom, maybe sometimes so much water that you wonder how it is still afloat, but you are taking this boat, however slowly, in the direction that you would most want to take it....which would you choose?"

There are lots of moments within the delivery and exploration of this metaphor to stop, ask questions, ask the client to notice what their mind gives them about the scenario etc. You can use this to develop the creative hopelessness, to illustrate the 'how the mind works' the dominance of verbal problem solving etc.

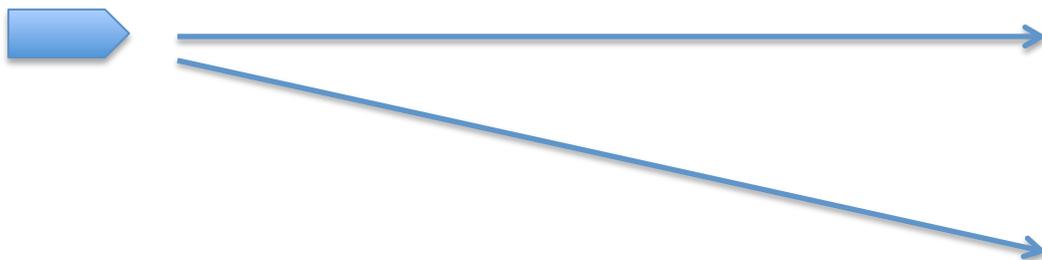
I have had clients take the metaphor and suggest that their problem is not that there is water in the boat, but that the boat is being dragged or slowed down by an anchor (which is essentially a description of their problem). You can still use these elements, as they are functionally equivalent. So for instance, you can say what have you been trying to get rid of the anchor, etc?

Care needs to be taken regarding the 'more effective ways of bailing' part. I like to include this however, because in the pain clinic where I work it is the case that some pain control strategies are sometimes effective and can sometimes be helpful. The metaphor is broad enough to allow these experiences and still remain consistent with an ACT model, because it focuses on workability, flexibility and behavior being in the service of growing a life, rather than eliminating or controlling experiences.

### *Developing the metaphor*

I have found that if this metaphor is useful, it can be built on with different parts of the work. In particular, the idea of how a small course change on the ocean can develop over time:

"Imagine that you were able to make a course change just five degrees closer to the direction in life that you would most chose to take this boat. Now, such a change of course may be unnoticeable at the very beginning, but if you were able to stick to that small course change, over the course of 1000 miles your boat would be very far from where it would have been." I will often draw a diagram a bit like this to support the idea:



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