

FOR GROUP-LOCATION AND -FORMATION to begin a two-night retreat

PROCESS: 1. The reader reads the text on this page, only sparingly drawing from my commentary on p.2....2. The leader announces that after a second reading, small groups (maximum, four persons in each) will be formed & set to their task: "You are to present in plenum four separate sentences, each touching the reading at at least one point."....3. The reader rereads the text, this time without comment....4\*. The groups form their sentences, having first decided upon a reader to read them in plenum....5. The plenum hears the sentences without comment from anyone--everyone taking notes on anything that seems esp. worth commenting on....6. Open discussion.....7. Prayer. \* At this point, the reader distributes this sheet, cautioning all never to look at p.2 till after the closing prayer. Superscript numbers refer to p.2.

....being bereft of sympathy, he<sup>1</sup> leaned a little way to one side and swore softly into the sea. ¶ But the thing<sup>2</sup> did not then leave the vicinity of the boat. Ahead or astern<sup>3</sup>, on one side or the other, at intervals long or short, fled the long sparkling streak<sup>3</sup>, and there was to be heard the whirroo of the dark fin. The speed and power of the thing was greatly to be admired. It cut the water like a gigantic and keen projectile. ¶ The presence of this biding thing did not affect the man with the same horror that it would if he had been a picnicker. He simply looked at the sea dully and swore in an undertone. ¶ Nevertheless, it is true that he did not wish to be alone.<sup>4</sup> He wished one of his companions to awaken by chance and keep him company. But the [injured] captain hung motionless over the water-jar, and the oiler and the cook in the bottom of the boat were plunged in slumber.<sup>5</sup>

## §6

"If I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods<sup>6</sup> who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"<sup>7</sup>

During this dismal night, it may be remarked that a man would conclude that it was really the intention of the seven mad gods to drown him, despite the abominable injustice of it. For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural. Other people had drowned at sea since galleys swarmed with painted sails, but still--

When it occurs to a man that nature<sup>8</sup> does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple,<sup>9</sup> and [if he is at sea] he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelted with his jeers.....

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot, he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands suppliant, saying: "Yes, but I love myself." ¶ A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos<sup>10</sup> of his situation. ¶ The men in the dinghy had not discussed these matters, but each had, no doubt, reflected upon them in silence and according to his mind. There was seldom any expression upon their faces save the general one of complete weariness. Speech was devoted to the business of the boat. ¶ To chime the notes of his emotion, a verse mysteriously<sup>11</sup> entered the correspondent's head.... A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers,/There was a lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of woman's tears;/But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand,/And he said: "I shall never see my own, my native land."

In his childhood, the correspondent had been made acquainted with the fact that a soldier of a Legion lay dying in Algiers, but he had never regarded the fact as important.<sup>12</sup> Myriads of his school-fellows had informed him of the soldier's plight, but the dinning had naturally ended by making him perfectly indifferent.<sup>13</sup> He had never considered it his affair that a soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers, nor had it appeared to him as a matter for sorrow. It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil point. Now, however,...it was an actuality.<sup>14</sup>

1. Crane himself, who himself was shipwrecked (New Year's Day, 1897) when on his way to cover the Spanish-American war as a correspondent (which he calls himself twice in this reading). This famous story, "The Open Boat," was published the next year, and drew from H.G.Wells the accolade that it is "an imperishable gem." (The text here is on pp.276-8 in GREAT AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, Wallace & Mary Stegner, Dell-Laurel/57.)....Son of a Methodist minister, he lived at least the later of his only 28 years (d.1900) in a most unMethodist manner, including (the year of this story's publication) common-law marriage to the owner of a brothel....Many literati give him as the father of modern American literature. The psychological realism of his THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE (written at age 24!) has never been surpassed in fiction.
2. A shark that had long been circling the ten-foot dinghy.
3. Phosphorescence.
4. The storyteller has previously expressed astonishment at the intensity of the male-bonding in the small, bobbing boat. The common experience of shipwreck, & the necessary egalitarianism of peril in a vessel described as no bigger than a large bathtub, found them caring deeply about each other, though the community-formation was mainly wordless. Reminds me of Howard & Harriet's peace-ministry, based on the model of earth as one endangered aircraft: perils are now global, & we must train our imaginations to accomodate this great new fact of our time. While the Kurtzes have been concerned with our being nuclear perils to each other, the same concept applies to our being indirectly perils to each other by being bad news to the biosphere....Here, caring takes the form of unwillingness to wake anyone so the rower can have someone, other than the shark(!), to "keep him company." There's resonance of this in his remembering, & applying, the poem of the dying soldier (in §6 of the story).
5. The bonding theme is intensified by the motliness of the crew: beside the correspondent (Crane), a captain of some culture & savvy, a cook, & (the bottom-of-the-totempole sea job) an oiler (the only one who drowns).
6. "Seven," I suppose, for assonance with "sea": Crane invents his own pagan mythology so as to dehistoricize his tale--as one peels off variables so that the constant, in Crane's case psychospiritual realism, can be more clearly seen.
7. This ¶ has appeared a number of times before, as a refrain to the song of his anguish & anger....They sea shore, but the breakers make landing impossible.
8. Note that in Crane's mythology the masculine divine ("the seven mad gods who rule the sea") is malevolence. Here, the feminine divine (the goddess "Natura," nature) is merely indifferent: to nature, Crane-correspondent is not "important" (as, later in the reading, the dying soldier was not "important" to Crane-correspondent, who was "indifferent" to that tragedy). Human beings can be impersonal & a part of impersonal-indifferent "nature." The story, as is the case with many great shortstories, is about the birth of caring, the soul's awakening to sympathy through empathy, the emergence of compassionate community, resurrection out of cold death (the cold winter sea) into joy & peace. Underneath, it's profoundly Christian: the Methodist minister's son is unwittingly honoring his father.
9. Jobean rage! Better that the temple have bricks hurled at it than that it be overlooked....But then he's seized by the I-Thou desire to pray (the Thou seen as "a personfication"); he bows on (only? ambivalence?) one knee, & supplicatingly argues, "Yes [I accept Your indifference & even malevolence], but I love myself" [so give me that, & save me].....10. Crane's "pathos" theme is more appealing today than it was a century ago, though he was closer in time than we are to our national archetypal Mr. Pathos, Lincoln. As we mature culturally & personally, the tragic vision softens our personal & public moralism--or should.....11. Tragedy & mystery are mates.....12. See Note #8.....13. Dailiness tends to erode sensitivity, to reduce pain.....14. A mere rote memory, here at the birth of caring, becomes an open door to reality--I must say, to the heart of God.