

Wind Power

April 22nd, 2007

One of the curiosities of my New York childhood was that my Bronx-bred father's dream was of one day owning a sailboat. *Nobody* we knew owned a sailboat. Nobody we knew had even *sailed* in a sailboat. True, my dad and his dear friend Mo Kranz had been transported by sea to the Philippines during World War II. (This trip was notable, in family lore, for several things: (1) Dad claimed that he was the only one on the boat who never got seasick. (2) Dad's suggestion to a shipful of nauseated sailors was that they try bending their knees, as he was doing. (3) In response, many sailors apparently threatened to pummel him if they ever stopped puking long enough to do so. (4) Dad converted Mo to Marxism on this trip. (5) When the sailors, nervous and stir-crazy after a long time at sea, got into a massive fistfight, Mo clambered onto a table and said: "Comrades, let's all look at this problem dialectically!" (6) In response, several sailors threatened to pummel Mo, who was fortunately whisked away by my dad.) But clearly, that vessel had not been a sailboat — so how to explain Dad's obsession with sailing, which (as far as I could tell) was anyhow a sport for those of a much higher income bracket than ours?

Anthony Sandberg recently gave me some clues. The founder and president of [OCSC Sailing](#) in Berkeley, he's a big bear of a man — and he's bursting with an infectious evangelism for sailing. A friend of his had read my account, in this blog, of [Project Quixote](#), my family's project to bring wind turbines to the Berkeley Pier (among other forms of renewable energy) — and he'd emailed me to suggest that Anthony might be able to take us out on the Bay and give us another perspective on the Pier and on wind power. A short time later, Anthony and I were in direct email contact, and he had — with a generosity that turns out to be typical for him — offered to take me, my wife and son out on one of OCSC's 50 sailboats.



Question: How do you turn down an amazing offer like that? Answer: You don't.

It was a magical experience! Anthony is just a wonderful guy — a visionary and a mensch. As soon as he started showing us around, I knew that we were in great hands. And what a story he told! As we gazed from an office balcony onto the beautiful shipyard around us, he explained that back in the '70s the whole place had been — literally — a garbage dump. Back then, showing great foresight and fortitude, he squatted amidst all the garbage — and was eventually rewarded with the land that he and others cleared and transformed into OCSC. They're now the top-rated sailing school in the country, which is pretty cool. But the thing that most impressed me was Anthony's passion for doing good. Nonprofit groups meet regularly for free at OCSC's offices, and there's all kinds of interesting stuff going on there. But above all, what really gets Anthony going is the prospect of people — especially kids — getting massively involved in sailing the Bay. And, as he explained to me, sailing can be surprisingly affordable; it's not, as I'd assumed, only a sport for the Thurston Howells of the world.

My wife and son and I gingerly boarded a beautiful sloop, accompanied by Anthony and two pals of his. (Based on this experience, my assumption is that like him, all of his friends are insanely accomplished — these two guys had come up with, like, 50 world-class inventions between them. I felt like such a slacker!) It was a perfect day, weather-wise: crisp and clear. Anthony expertly directed his friends as they dealt with the sails and such. (Yep, you won't be getting any correct terminology from me here — I was way too preoccupied by this novel experience to even think of taking notes.) We motored out to the open water, and from then on in we were powered entirely by wind. Wind power! It's hard to describe how cool it feels to be propelled entirely by this most fickle-seeming of elements. It keeps changing direction! and strength! And the sailors continually adapted. Success at sailing — as in jazz and democracy — seems to depend on a combination of expertise and improvisation.

May I brag on my nine-year-old son for a bit? (Thanks.) Soon after we started our sail, Anthony and his pals encouraged him to take the wheel. And — admittedly, with a bit of help now and then — he ended up steering for almost our entire two-hour trip! He really seemed to have a feel for it! I had a happy premonition that not only might my son end up getting his driver's license before I do, but he might also be the first to get a sailing license (if that's what it's called) as well! No one was more thrilled than Anthony. He pointed out that on this spectacular day, in this Bay that offers some of best sailing conditions in the whole world, there were only two sailboats out on the water — ours and another from OCSC. (Though I should note that there is, apparently, a thriving sailing community in the Bay Area, made up of many fine schools, clubs, and other organizations.) His dream, he said, was for the Bay to be filled with sailboats helmed by kids; he wants sailing to take its place with bicycling, skateboarding, etc., as a common recreational option for urban youths.

That's not a vision that I would have understood before this afternoon. But now, as we headed back toward the Berkeley Pier — where, in my quixotic dreams, there might one day be a wind farm to supply perhaps a third of my city's peak-time electricity needs — it made a lot of sense. Sailing calls on its practitioners to master a whole set of crucial life-skills: leadership, organization, adaptability, and a respectful intimacy with the power and whims of nature. Thanks to Anthony Sandberg's generosity, my interest in wind power had spread from the land to encompass the waves as well.

To be sure, Sandberg is a sailing zealot. Count me now among the converted.

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