

It seems to me that I heard the words (once upon a time) that finding spirituality inside a building, in “bricks and mortar,” is not where you find it. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but if you’re like me and see His Spirit all around you, in the trees, the grass, or the springtime flowers, then you might want to follow me on this small journey of self-discovery.

About 6 years ago, (having completed the *Mary Jean* overhaul), the sheer heat of summer and my advancing years hit like a brick, all but sapping the enthusiasm out of me to do anything but stay indoors. I was stuck

I know that to many “old salts,” this experience is “old hat,” that they would scoff at anyone finding this “exciting.” Not to us! Not on my own boat, not alone and responsible – this wasn’t a cruise ship, this was my ship! That, my friends, makes all the difference in the world.

So it was, that about 45 minutes after leaving Little Creek Naval Base and about 2 miles east of Smith Island, we had “arrived.” Where? Nowhere in particular, but one thing for sure, I felt an enormous satisfaction that all was well with the world, that this was the beginning of an expansion of my boating horizons’ that few people ever even try. Slowing down

We didn’t, couldn’t, say a word. An overwhelming feeling of smallness took hold as we realized what this sight was: we were looking at Heaven. How do you find the right words to express appreciation for being privileged enough to witness something so relatively few people can ever see? We had been blessed with our boat and in my heart, I said, looking up still, “Thank You.” So help me God, that’s what I said.

It may not seem like such a big deal to anyone, matter of fact, I think the humility that hits some of us lies in how one sees the world around you. If you never stop to “smell the

The Canopy of Heaven

By Peter Paul

between lethargy and yearning to head to sea, but I don’t do well in 99 degrees and 99% humidity. I tend to wilt. But there sat my boat, clean and sparkling, telling me to do something!

What to do? The old Neil Diamond song, “Thank the Lord for the Nighttime” came to mind! Go out at night? Mmmm, just maybe I could! I sat and mulled this over and one fine July night, the temperature having dropped to the seventies, I decided that the time was right.

The impact of what I was about to do struck me as I passed under the CBBT at about 10:00 P.M. and headed NNE, planning to round Smith Island Shoals for the barrier island beach shallows, away from the ripping tides of the inlet itself. That sweet sea smell made it natural to breathe deeply, as only those who have experienced it know. Slowly, cautiously, running under radar, we made our way around the eastern edge of the shoal area and changed course, heading NNW, toward the beach.

As the lights of the bridge faded astern, a level of darkness enveloped us that brought home the fact that we were alone, at night, on the “high seas”, trusting my plotter, radar and the depth finder. It was black as black can be, a darkness that we had long since forgotten existed. The glare of my instrumentation and my running lights were all there was. This was high adventure, barely an hour from Little Creek and civilization! This was exciting!

to idle (with my friend at the helm), I inched forward, thanking Grady-White for the extra beam on my old *Sailfish* and lowered the anchor, paying out maximum rode length. I tied her off and set the hook, swinging the bow around with the flowing tide: so far, so good!

The blackness that enveloped us was almost intimidating; you couldn’t see five feet – and that’s when I shut off the running lights and instrumentation, leaving only the anchor light. Wow, dark! We pulled out the lawn chairs (think “deck chairs”) and just sat there, listening to the waves slapping the hull. The winds were around 5-10, providing a refreshingly cool breeze and a gentle rocking and shrinking “our world” to the size of the boat. That’s what happens at sea in the nighttime. Adding to the totality of the darkness was the quiet, which meant no radio, no commercials, no traffic noise, no sirens, no dogs barking, no kids screaming: nothing. Heaven on earth comes to mind.

Still, I have to admit, there was a bit of tension in me, given the newness of it all. It was past my bedtime and a yawn hit me, so when, stretching like a tired old dog, I chanced to look up.

I hadn’t seen this jaw dropping sight in a very, very, long time. Stars, countless thousands of them, clear as a bell, seemingly within reach, stretching all around us, from horizon to horizon, as in some outdoor version of the planetarium—except this was real, there were no projectors, no audience, no soundtrack, this was God’s own handiwork.

roses”, then looking at the night sky wouldn’t affect you necessarily the same way it affected me: with a deep sense of wonder and gratitude.

The sight was awesome, (to use the current vernacular) and the memory of it is why I wanted to tell you about this one small evening in the course of my life. I thought to myself as I stared up, if I can’t find God now, here, at this place and time, I really ought to give up trying, because I never will. If this, His starry, canopy of heaven can’t bring someone to feel His Grace, and make a person feel humbled by the magnitude of it all, well, maybe you should give it a chance. They say astronauts come back from space as “believers.” Now I know why.

That night opened up a new world for me and my boat. Subsequent trips out in the dark involved more of my normal activities (fishing of course!) and with time, became part of the norm. But I will never forget that first time, which, like a first love, stays with you for life. Nowadays, years later, I still look up; it seems I can’t help doing it. In reality, it’s such a small, small thing to do, but that experience provides a link to your soul and your reason for being. I no longer pray for God to do something for me. I now pray to say “Thank You,” period, no matter what happens in the course of my life.

That’s the power of the night sky. Each of you can find this for yourselves. Take your boat out this summer for a night trip offshore, and breathe the deep air of replenishment.