

## THE HELMSMAN ARISES

### WHO AM I?

I am the Helmsman, the steady hand on the rudder of your life, your guide, your pilot over the most dangerous environments, the forces of the unknown, of potentials dwelling in the sea of your life. I am that self-image you have created who is so confident, self-assured, in control. When asked, “Can you...?” the Helmsman answers, “Of course,” even though you know you’re double-booked. But, somehow, your Helmsman guides you through the crashes, the bumps, the hurt feelings or late nights. Your Helmsman does not want anyone to think ill of you.

We Americans love the Helmsman archetype; it is one of the most dominant and revered in our culture. It surfaces in all popular action-adventure shows as a detective, surgeon, soldier, crime scene investigator, the risk-taking reality show cast member, Hell’s Kitchen chef, and so on. The steady hand on the tiller, the master of the craft. “We got this.”

We Americans love those who are in control of their technology, any and all technology. We believe our technology is our destiny. In former years the Helmsman was the cowboy, and the technology he controlled was horses and guns. Even Shane said, “A gun is just a tool.”<sup>1</sup>

Technology brings the Helmsman into advertising. The Marlboro cowboy was the quintessential Helmsman. The cool-eyed lady behind the wheel in many car commercials is a Helmsman; pushing buttons, shifting, speaking commands, handling groceries and children and arriving early. Even diseases and addictions are easily handled. Erectile dysfunction? No problem: call the pharmaceutical Helmsmen. Depression? No problem. Advertising shows us how to be the master of our fate, the captains of our souls; the sales event ends soon.

### WHAT DO I WANT?

Many of us don’t want to be a Helmsman; we want to follow one. We want to ride on that craft and have someone else’s steady hand on the tiller. Is your Helmsman a technician? Are you betting your mortal soul on their technology? Will you, like Dante, choose to follow a poet? Or, like Lewis and Clark, do you follow a Lemhi Shoshone woman like Sacagawea? Do you follow a star? A theology or a priest, a mother, a goddess? Does an affirmation guide you? (“Every day in every way I’m getting better and better!”)

What will you pay your Helmsman? There is always a cost, whichever path you take. Even if you pay with increased stress levels, hypertension and weight gain, you pay. In the Greek myths, Charon, who took the souls of the dead from life into the underworld across the river Styx, had to be paid, otherwise a soul wandered the shore for a 100 years. In Goethe’s fairytale “The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily,” the ferryman wanted no gold but only fruits of the earth like artichokes and onions. Even Willie Loman’s wife commanded that the stars pay attention. What will you owe your Helmsman if you give him immense power over you?

## WHY AM I HERE?

The Helmsman arises because we as a culture are afraid. Most Helmsmen stories are simple stories that deal with fears. Media want the simple stories. Young people want results. They grow impatient waiting for answers. Simple stories get produced on TV and film; complex stories don't.

Young people are satisfied with the Helmsman. My Helmsman has gotten me into and out of many scrapes when I was young, too. But now, I feel as if my Helmsman is morphing into the Ancient Mariner, and passengers like you and me roll the dice with death.

I'm a Baby Boomer, and the simplistic Helmsman stories fit less and less each year. Many of the classic images of my generation were Helmsmen, but they are old now and tatty around the edges. Perhaps I've seen too many of them.

My generation's lives were once blown offshore to outer adventures. Now the winds of age for many of us have come about and now blow inward. Sometimes there is a double direction, outward and inward. Now many of us are on an inward journey toward death. This is very new to us, and we are apprehensive how this will pan out. Life has gotten complex. The inner journey is fearful.

In actuality we are up against anonymous, faceless and extremely complex realities that will kill us. We long to imagine bad guys getting what they deserve, as in most classic Helmsman stories.

We want Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry atop our killer, waving his pistol and saying, "C'mon Cancer, make my day!"

Or Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab, with his harpoon lashed to our White Whale, saying, "Alzheimer's! You die!"

Or James Bond confronting our arch enemy, hypertension, who, in the style of Auric Goldfinger, says, "No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die!" just before Bond shoots out the plane's window, which depressurizes the cabin and sucks the villainous clogged arteries into the sky.

Simple Helmsmen may not handle the dynamics.

Perhaps it is not too late for us to take on an ancient, richer archetype like Odysseus; who followed, or invented, multiple Helmsmen, some true, some false (lies), some himself, some others, at different times in his journey. Sounds like just another Boomer self-delusion, eh?

<sup>1</sup> SHANE, Jack Schaefer, 1949 en.wikiquote/wiki/Shane