

ESSAY

A captain finds a new crew

MY HUSBAND HEARD A NEW CAREER BECKON
– WITH A BUZZING NOISE.

My husband is outside our office, splitting wood. In between the rhythmic *thwack!* of the splitting maul, he's singing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Except, he's not singing words. He's buzzing the melody. *Buzz buzz buzz buzz (whack) buzz buzz buzz buzz (whack) buzz buzz buzz buzz buuuuzzzz bz bz.* It must have something to do with the bees.

After 40-plus years as captain of oceangoing tug and barge units, Gary retired last summer – and took up beekeeping.

He's an energetic soul. In addition to piloting the ship-sized rig he captained for decades, he'd buzz around all nine stories of the vessel, perpetually checking on everyone from the engineer to the tankermen, the deckhands to the cook.

Keeping a ship running smoothly requires teamwork, but he was responsible for the overall well-being and operation of the crew.

Most who know him – including me – weren't sure he'd actually retire. For the last year or so, whenever he'd mention retirement, someone would ask, "But what will you do?!"

"I've got plenty to keep me busy," he'd invariably reply.

We have two acres, a big vegetable garden, a workshop, and a greenhouse. We live in an old house that demands perpetual attention. For years Gary had said that just keeping everything going here would be a full-time job for him once he retired.

But while he enjoys chores (it's very satisfying to be able to see what you've accomplished in a given day), maintenance rarely challenges a person and doesn't offer the sense of connection that being part of a team does. Plus, he'd spent 40 years managing his crew (who were paid to jump at his every command, I'd always point out) for weeks at a time. Whenever I asked what he planned to do when he retired, he'd respond: "Come home and manage you!"

He'd grin mischievously when he said it, but I worried that there was a kernel of truth in his reply.

I don't need managing. Gary's weeks-at-sea schedule meant that I've managed kids, work, household, and various crises mostly without his help. During much of our marriage – before cellphones – I couldn't even have gotten in contact with him to solicit his input. The time apart reinforced my native independence, but also kept us from taking the relationship for granted. The time together (once we'd gotten through the inevitable reentry scuffle about who was in charge of what) is something we've always enjoyed.

But contemplating full-time togetherness was different – particularly for me. I'm a writer. I need big chunks of uninterrupted time. When it began to look as though Gary was really going to retire I began to worry about how much my life would change, and how intense things would be once he was down to only one

person – me – in his crew.

He set the date, I threw a party, and he was home. Buzzing around. Then a friend asked him what he planned to do now.

"I'm going to keep bees," he said. "I've always wanted to keep bees."

Huh? Who knew?

In the fall, Gary joined the Upper Eastern Shore Beekeeping Association, which has about 35 members. In addition to delving into the secret life of bees, they share tools, experiences, ideas, and frame-building, and, when honey needs to be extracted, willing hands and muscles to help lift those honey-heavy boxes, which can weigh as much as 60 pounds each. It's the teamwork of old-fashioned barn-raising and harvest time – but with bees.

Early last spring, along with the other new beekeepers, he ordered bees. The bees come in a screened box with a separate little screened box for the queen, who sports a blue dot on her back to identify her once she's been released from her cage and is roaming the hive.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/STAFF

When the bees arrived, Gary and his bee-buddy, Dick, suited up and literally poured his two colonies into two sets of waiting hive boxes – one by our vegetable/flower/herb garden and one on a friend's farm. Several weeks later, our farmer friend asked Gary to take the side off his barn to extract a feral hive of about 100,000 bees that had been in residence for five years – a big and rather exciting two-day challenge, especially for a novice. Gary succeeded with the help of several bee friends and relocated the colony to another stack of boxes on the farm.

So now, instead of studying equipment specs, charts, and maritime licensing regulations, Gary spends his time learning as much as he can about the lives and needs of honeybees. He helps Dick with his hives, and checks on his own regularly, cataloging every aspect of their progress – much as he did with every part of the workings on the tug. He's in charge, the responsible party. It's his job to make sure he does what he can so those in his care thrive at the job. He has more to manage than just me. Once again, he's part of a team.

– Nancy Taylor Robson

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