

“We Are Not Afraid to Die” by Gordon Cook and Alan East -summary with questions and answers

This is a story of extreme courage and skill exhibited by a family of four. A little more nervousness would throw off balance and the inevitable-death would swallow everyone up. Along with the adults, the two children too are worth mentioning as they showed exemplary courage and understanding even in the face of death. Fear and fear factors are associated with death. The idea of losing one's life can throw even the mightiest out of gear. Hence, natural calamities like Earthquake, tsunamis and floods strike us with fear. These are the things that cause immeasurable loss of life and property.

The author with his wife Mary and their two children-Jonathan and Suzanne-was the family of four. They tried to duplicate the round the world voyage in their professionally ship-The WAVEWALKER. They also picked up two crew men-American Vigil and Swiss Herb to tackle of the world's roughest seas-The Southern Indian Ocean. The initial period of their voyage wasn't worrying as strong gales and winds were conspicuous by their absence. The weather turned bad, yet they had a wonderful Christmas 3500 kilometers east of Cape Town. However, the following days were one of the worst faced by Mary's family. High waves roared and lashed the ship on both sides of the ship. The WAVEWALKER shook and the author was thrown overboard. The ship was about to capsize when another gigantic wave hit it making it right side up again. The author was thrown back onto the deck, his head and ribs smashed against the walls and blood began to appear. The author didn't lose his temper. He tried to repair the leakage in the ships' control of the wheel. No immediate help was available as they were in one of the remotest corner of the world. Suzanne too suffered a head injury, black eyes and a deep cut on her arms. She was extremely brave not to speak of her injury. She simply didn't want to bother her parents when they were trying to save everybody on board. The family had survived for more than fifteen hours and was desperately looking for rescue. The ship was in a bad condition and would not last to reach Australia. The nearest would be to reach Ile Amsterdam, a French Scientific base. However, their respite was short-lived when the dark clouds began to appear again. It was commendable that John opined that they were not afraid to die if all of them stuck together. It was an example of unity and oneness. It also spoke of the trust and belief that the children had in each other. The children, even in the face of death, had the patience to gift a 'thank-you' card to their parents. It was a symbol of trust. The author and his wife checked and rechecked their calculations. The westerly currents were calculated and they turned their ship by 185 degrees. They sailed on and found Amsterdam by evening. Their joy knew no bounds when they spotted the island. It was in fact, Suzanne, who spotted the island and announcing it to her father. They anchored off-shore for the night and struggled on to reach the island with the help of the inhabitants of the island. Finally, they had landed on their feet again. It was both the grace of God and their courage and patience, which actually helped them. The family lived on to tell their nightmarish story. In short, it is a story which brightly highlighted the fact that a small six year old boy was not afraid to die, if he was given the option to die with his family. In other words, we learn about courage, love and faith of a family of four.

A Synopsis

The narrator, a thirty seven year old businessman and his wife Mary had been sailing near Britain for sixteen years and wanted to travel around the world, the way Captain James Cook did. They left England in July with their two children, six year old Jonathan and seven years old Suzanne on a boat called 'Wavewalker'.

The Sequence of Events:

- They picked up two crewmen from Cape Town: American Larry Vigil and Swiss Herb Seiger
- Dec 25 – encountered atrocious weather yet celebrated the wonderful holiday on their boat.
- January 2 – speed eight knots – screaming wind – attempted to slow down the jib – life raft drill, oilskins and life jackets donned in preparation of a worst case scenario
- January 2, 6 pm – Ominous silence (a silence that seemed to predict the oncoming of catastrophe)

- Suddenly dark sky due to a huge, perfectly vertical wave with a frightful breaking crest that crashed on the deck of the boat
- Explosion of water on deck – narrator’s head smashed against the wheel – loses consciousness
- Narrator is thrown overboard - regains consciousness – is thrown back on board but injured badly
- Mary takes the wheel – Larry and Herb pump water out – Narrator checks on the children
- Bump on Sue’s head – but narrator is unable to tend to it right away
- Narrator waterproofs the gaping holes – hand pumps get blocked due to the debris – electric pump short circuits – water level rises inside the boat
- Narrator recalls the second electric pump and it is effective – no response to mayday calls
- More injuries of Sue discovered. Sue says she did not wish to worry her parents when they were already stressed - bravery of the daughter in times of adversity.
- January 3 – water level relatively controlled – the members of the boat rest in rotation
- Two small islands towards the east - only hope but difficult to locate since most navigation instruments have been damaged
- Unable to hoist sail due to the strong wind – crew eats their first meal in almost two days on Jan 4
- Weather continues to deteriorate – Children claim they are not afraid to die if they are all together - nobility and courage in the face of adversity
- Narrator seems to lose hope but can only share it with his wife - calculations do not reveal anything significant to the narrator
- Sue draws caricatures of her parents – love, hope, gratitude
- Narrator tries to sound confident as he directs his crewman towards the island they hope to reach - a good captain
- Narrator sleeps – wakes up with the realization that they must have missed the island since by his calculations, had they been heading in the right direction, they would have reached long ago
- Sue and Jonathan come to the narrator asking for a hug and claim that the narrator is the best dad in the world - narrator is surprised by the gesture since he believes he has been unable to locate the island
- It is seen that they have indeed reached the island. The narrator had not calculated the magnetic variation and hence, the delay in reaching land.

This is a story of human endurance, selflessness and courage in the face of adversity. Traditionally, the captain of the ship must go down with it and attempt only to save the passengers. However, in this story, we see other traits in the narrator which make him a good captain. The narrator as a captain:

The narrator was able to think rationally, prioritize and recall important information under duress. He was able to recall the backup electric pump, waterproofed the ship and performed repairs as required, identified nearest land/port and performed intense calculations despite the lack of proper equipment, did not convey his fears to his crew and presented a confident face throughout enhancing the morale of his team.

The family and crew as support:

The narrator's family and crew showed unconditional team spirit during adversity. His wife helped with the navigation of the ship while his children offered moral support. The crew members Larry and Herb worked tirelessly and did not abandon ship.

Despite their young years, Jonathan and Suzanne showed courage and optimistic fervour. Suzanne did not bother her parents with her injuries no matter how extensive they were. She also made a card for her parents to show her love and gratitude. Jonathan claimed he was not afraid even to die if he were with his family.

Question Bank

- Q.1. What was the narrator’s purpose of making the voyage from Plymouth in 1976?
- Q.2. Describe the weather conditions on January 2
- Q.3. Describe how the narrator coped when the disaster struck the ship.
- Q.4. How did Sue suffer when the wave struck the ship?

- Q.5. How did the children's presence and behaviour during the crisis affect the narrator?
 Q.6. How big was Ile Amsterdam? How did the narrator find it?
 Q.7. Describe the weather and sea conditions leading to the wave hitting the 'Wavewalker'. What was the effect of it?
 Q.8. Why was their respite short lived?
 Q.9. Why did the narrator feel that it was the most beautiful island?
 Q.10. How does this story suggest that optimism helps to endure 'the direst stress'?

Question 1:

Notice these expressions in the text. Infer their meaning from the context.

honing our seafaring skills

ominous silence

Mayday calls

pinpricks in the vast ocean

a tousled head

Answer : honing our seafaring skills: this refers to the efforts made by the author and his wife, to perfect or sharpen their seafaring skills.

ominous silence: the silence here refers to an impending danger.

Mayday calls: Mayday calls are radio-telephonic words which signal aircrafts or ships stuck in a disastrous situation.

pinpricks in the vast ocean: this phrase expresses the search for two small islands in the vast ocean.

a tousled head: this refers to hair in disarray or the disarranged hair of the author's son, Jonathan

understanding the text

Question 2:

How does the story suggest that optimism helps to endure "the direst stress"?

Answer : Optimism is a determination to overcome difficulties. It raises one's spirits and helps one overcome stress and difficulty with ease. The story displays courage and optimism throughout.

Survival happens only because of the optimistic struggle that the family carries on with.

The level of perseverance in the author rises when Jonathan says, "we're not afraid of dying if we can all be together. Besides, the caricatures of him and Mary, drawn by Sue, helps his determination and optimism to grow many folds. The positive outlook of the children infuses positivity in the narrator. He rigorously calculates their position and finally asks Larry to steer a course of 185 degrees. Though he had lost all hope by then, he did not show it and optimistically told Larry that they would spot the island by about 5 P.M. Fortunately, their struggle and optimism pays off and they manage to find Ile Amsterdam by evening.

Question 1:

List the steps taken by the captain

(i) to protect the ship when rough weather began.

(ii) to check the flooding of the water in the ship.

Answer : (i) When the rough weather began, the captain slowed down the boat by dropping the storm jib. He lashed heavy mooring rope in a loop across the stern. They prepared themselves for the worst case scenario by double lashing everything, going through life-raft drill, attaching lifelines and donning life jackets and oilskins. Later, the narrator managed to stretch canvas and secure waterproof hatch covers across the gaping holes.

(ii) To check the flooding of water in the ship, he put waterproof hatch covers across the gaping holes which diverted the water to the side. When the hand pump got blocked, he connected a spare electric pump to an out-pipe in order to drain out the water. After 36 hours of continuous pumping, they reached the last few centimetres of water.

Question 2:

Describe the mental condition of the voyagers on 4 and 5 January.

Answer : On January 4 and 5, the voyagers were completely tired after rigorous practice of continuous pumping. It was on the January 4 that they ate their first meal in almost two days. After a short respite, they continued to face bad weather conditions and by the morning of January 5, the situation grew desperate.

The narrator tried to comfort the children. But it is worth noting that in spite of so many difficulties, the children displayed immense fearlessness. Jonathan confessed that they are not afraid to die as long as they all are together. Though this inspired the narrator to fight the sea, by that evening he was sure that their end was fast approaching. It was only because of the moral support of his children that he continued to make efforts.

Question 3:

Describe the shifts in the narration of the events as indicated in the three sections of the text. Give a subtitle to each section.

Answer : The first section: The first section opens on a cheerful note. The narrator and his family are all set for their ultimate dream- to take up an around-the-world voyage like Captain James Cook did. They have perfected their seafaring skills. They begin the voyage and despite of the bad weather, they celebrate Christmas on the 'Wavewalker'.

The second section: This part of narration covers the hazards faced by the voyagers. There is a shift in the narration from cheerful to intense. They find themselves in an extremely fatal and disastrous situation. A huge wave hits their boat and the narrator is thrown overboard. Despite getting injured, he maintains his composure and applies every possible way to tackle the critical situation. They manage to pump out maximum amount of water out of the boat in about 36 hours. But as they continue to face bad weather conditions the narrator loses hope. The children remain fearless, courageous and optimistic throughout.

The third section: The children provide moral support to the narrator and he continues with his efforts. Under the captaincy of the narrator, they manage to reach Ile Amsterdam. The narrator proves his seamanship and receives the title of "the best daddy" and "the best captain" from his children.

The above three sections can be titled as follows:

- a) The first section: Round-the-world voyage begins
- b) The second section: The attack of the big wave
- c) The third section: Ultimate victory

talking about the text

Question 1:

What difference did you notice between the reaction of the adults and the children when faced with danger?

Answer : The adults exhibit immense courage. The narrator acts as the true captain of the ship and works out every possible way to handle the sudden crisis. It's mainly because of his undeterred efforts that they survive. Mary supports her husband in the navigation of the ship. Larry and Herb too work endlessly to pump out the water.

However, when things still do not seem to work out, the adults lose hope and wait for their end with a heavy heart. At this point, they are motivated by the children. The children offer moral support to the adults. They display maturity and tolerance. Jonathan expresses his fearlessness and courage when he says that they are not afraid of dying if they all can be together. Sue expresses her love and gratitude for her parents by making a greeting card. She is strong enough to not let her parents know about her serious injuries. She did not want to bother her parents in the times of crisis.

Question 2:

How does the story suggest that optimism helps to endure "the direst stress"?

Answer : Optimism is a determination to overcome difficulties. It raises one's spirits and helps one overcome stress and difficulty with ease. The story displays courage and optimism throughout. Survival happens only because of the optimistic struggle that the family carries on with. The level of perseverance in the author rises when Jonathan says, "we're not afraid of dying if we can all be together. Besides, the caricatures of him and Mary, drawn by Sue, helps his determination and optimism to grow many folds. The positive outlook of the children infuses positivity in the narrator. He rigorously calculates their position and finally asks Larry to steer a course of 185 degrees. Though he had lost all hope by then, he did not show it and optimistically told Larry that they would spot the island by about 5 P.M. Fortunately, their struggle and optimism pays off and they manage to find Ile Amsterdam by evening.

Question 3:

What lessons do we learn from such hazardous experiences when we are face-to-face with death?

Answer : Such experiences teach us the potential that courage, perseverance and tolerance hold. It explains how one must react in the direst of the situations. It teaches us that one must never lose hope and try to find reasons to stay positive in the face of adversity. In such situations one must try his/her best to remain calm and composed and understand the power of unity and team work.

Moreover, the importance of common sense, putting continuous efforts to overcome the catastrophe and the significance of being extra cautious and careful are learnt from such hazardous experiences.

Question 4:

Why do you think people undertake such adventurous expeditions in spite of the risk involved?

Answer : The spirit to experience unique elements of nature, undaunted passion and willingness to accept challenges drive people to take up adventurous expeditions. The people who involve themselves in such activities are very well aware of the risk involved in them. But due to their passion and enthusiasm to do something unique and great, they willingly accept such challenges. Also, their desire to be in the lap of nature and experience its beauty pushes them to such expeditions.

things to do

Question 1:

Given on the next page is a picture of a yacht. Label the parts of the yacht using the terms given in the box

Bow	cabin	rudder	cockpit
stern	boom	mainsail	mast

Answer :

- a) mast
- b) mainsail
- c) boom
- d) cockpit
- e) stern
- f) rudder
- g) cabin
- h) bow

working with words

Question 1:

The following words used in the text as ship terminology are also commonly used in another sense. In what contexts would you use the other meaning?

Knot	stern	boom	hatch	anchor
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Answer :

Knot: a) interlacing, twining, looping, etc.

b) a group of persons.

Stern: firm, strict, uncompromising, harsh, hard etc.

Boom: a) deep, prolonged, resonant sound

b) to progress or flourish

c) to hit hard

Hatch: a) to bring forth, produce.

b) derive, concoct

c) to draw, cut, or engrave lines

Anchor: a) a person or thing that can be relied upon for support

b) host of an event.

Question 2:

The following three compound words end in-ship. What does each of them mean?

airship flagship lightship

Answer :

Airship: It is a self-propelled lighter-than-air aircraft with the means of controlling the direction of the flight.

Flagship: It is a ship carrying the flag officer or the commander of a fleet, squadron. It displays the officer's flag.

Lightship: It refers to a ship anchored in a specific location flashing a very bright light for the guidance of ships, as in avoiding dangerous areas.

Question 3:

The following are the meaning listed in the dictionary against the phrase 'take on'. In which meaning is it used in the third paragraph of the account:

Take on sth:

to begin to have a particular quality or appearance; to assume sth

take sb on:

to employ sb; to engage sb

to accept sb as one's opponent in a game, contest or conflict

Take sb/sth on:

to decide to do sth; to allow sth/sb to enter e.g. a bus, plane or ship; to take sth/sb on board

Answer :

In the third paragraph, in lines: "... we took on two crewman to help us tackle ... roughest seas...", the word "took on" suggests to take somebody on i.e., to employ or engage somebody.