



Floating Out to Sea: *A Modern Parable* (1974)

Ted Ward

There are times when you are really glad that someone took the trouble to let you in on the rules of the game! Not knowing what will make the difference between success and failure, or life and death, places you at a severe disadvantage!

I'll not easily forget one balmy day in Rio de Janeiro! I had arrived shortly after dawn on the Pan Am overnight non-stop from New York. It's not a hard trip, especially if there's a little extra room on the plane, as there was that night. Not exactly the best sort of sleeping, but no real hardship.

It was the weekend. My Brazilian friends were waiting to meet me at the airport and they suggested a welcome plan: First to the hotel for a few more hours of sleep and then they would pick me up for lunch and an afternoon at the beach. Great!

It wasn't long before we were rolling in the surf at Ipanema. I love to swim and especially in a good stiff surf—and at any of Rio's thrilling beaches it really pounds in! To do a little calm swimming and floating on your back you have to go out about twenty or thirty yards from shore to get beyond the breakers. So after a quarter hour of bouncing and being tumbled by the surf, my friends went to the beach for some sun and I headed out beyond the steep waves. I lazily rolled over on my back and, paralleling the shoreline, I paddled easily along, separated from the shore by the twenty or so yards of turbulence. I have no idea how many minutes passed when three thoughts hit me at about the same time. First, I realized that tiredness was more a problem than I had expected—the loss of sleep the night before was beginning to tell on me, and I hadn't even thought of that problem when I started out to swim.

In fact, swimming seemed like floating along in a dream. Where was I? What was I doing in this salt water? Oh, yes, Ipanema beach at Rio; my first day on a two-week consultation assignment for the U.S. Agency for International Development. As I shook off the dreaminess I became aware of a change in my surroundings. As I had started the lazy drifting, floating swim the pounding of the surf had kept me cued to my approximate distance from shore. But now it was strangely calm and almost mysteriously quiet. It was as if someone had suddenly turned off the fifteen-foot rolling waves pounding the shore. My half-shut eyes had been dimly following the billowy white clouds in the blue, blue sky. And just then I realized what had jolted me out of the dreamy semi-consciousness. Someone was softly calling my name "Ted! Ted!" No, not softly calling—screaming! But from so very far away. How could it be? Who? Where? In far less time than it takes to tell about it all of this flooded in and I rolled over and put a startled head well above the surface and surveyed the circumstances. No one had turned off the surf—it was still there, but almost a quarter-mile away. The screams were my sunbathing friends who had suddenly realized how far out to sea I had drifted and had begun a frantic effort to get me to realize that I was in trouble. They were successful, but what now? In the distance I could barely make out an energetic arm-wave that seemed to signal that I should swim toward the beach at a leftward diagonal.

I'm no beginner at ocean swimming, so I had no one to blame but myself, and I knew exactly what had happened: I had foolishly chosen to do my lazy floating swim squarely in the middle of an outbound current. I was further out than I could have swum in the same amount of time even if I had wanted to. A helpless feeling swept over me like a chilly flash of ice water. No matter how strongly I might swim toward shore, the current is moving out even faster. There is a way out of this jam—if you can swim parallel to the shore toward the nearest way out of the outbound sweep of current or swim on a diagonal toward shore, to find the edge of the current pattern, then head for shore! But when you've moved off-shore so far it's almost impossible to keep your bearings—almost impossible to know whether you're in or out of the current. You aren't able to do anything with much confidence. When you realize that you can't predictably save yourself, you tend to panic. That's the moment you pour all the adrenalin into an energetic splash to nowhere. But they teach you in the Red Cross courses and in the Boy Scouts (bless 'em!) how to fight off the panic.

I decided to trust the only signal available. (Was it really a signal?) I started firmly but not feverishly on the leftward diagonal. Keeping my head down to get more power from each stroke was difficult. An almost overpowering urge to check on the “progress” of these efforts forced me upright at each breath. There was nothing to see except the same distant shore. Nothing to reassure except the same signal—my friend's arm swinging toward my left. So finally

I fought off the urge to check and the absurd waste of time it caused. I plowed steadily ahead. And then the problem was tiredness. Thank God, no cramps! Forward, ever forward, but was I still in the mass of water rushing out into the deep South Atlantic?

Navigating by an occasionally eyes-open glimpse of the cloud pattern, I crawled steadily on. Systematically slowing the rhythm of the stroke little by little in order to keep fatigue under control—there was no way to stop and rest. Only to work, pray, and trust that I had read the signal right. James says, “Faith without works is dead.” I knew that that verse rather well covered my present predicament. No other swimmer for almost half a mile; no boats in sight. Tired, bone tired. Why try. It's not going to work. Forget it. It's been a good life. But something down deep forces you to cling to life. No way to willingly give up. Keep working.

After what seemed like hours and hours of punishing effort, I could no longer hold off the urge to check my location. My weary head came dragging up and my screaming muscles gladly accepted a hang-loose treading-water position. It hit me slowly. I knew that my whole being wasn't quite functioning right—but I knew that it was a good sign: the surf-line was just ahead. I began to realize anew what a dreadful roar it makes—and how welcome that sound! Just another dozen yards and I'll be in the grip of the rolling breakers.

How relaxing that will be! And I swam again. As a cross-cultural consultant and an ardent traveller far and wide around this marvelous world, I've learned that there are occasionally unexpected tough moments. Coping with these stresses and strains, these incidents of anxiety, fear, and danger is so much easier if you have a plan of action ready. One of my “plans of action” for the tough spots is to think about how much fun it will be to tell about the incident! And in order to be able to tell about it you have to know what *it means*; so even while the moment of fear, anxiety, frustration or hardship is going on, I begin the process of trying to see the meaning in an experience. So with the welcome reassurance of the new closeness to shore came the mental freedom to think about the meaning of this close call.

I had done a foolish thing, but I had done it so innocently. I hadn't deliberately violated the swimmers' rule: don't venture alone too far from shore. No, it wasn't my fault, in the sense of guilt, but that surely didn't change anything. I had been a victim of the circumstances—I couldn't see the currents, I didn't realize where they were, I didn't even think about the problem as I had started out. But that didn't change the reality; the current was real, it was part of the whole situation in which I had been living the past hour, its reality did not depend on my perception. It was above me, beyond me, and independent of me. But I was not independent of it! Moving so "innocently" into its grip had begun a nightmare. No one had told me about the current.

Just before those refreshing moments of tumbling in the pounding surf separated me from the firm shore, I realized that I was resentful that no one had told me about the current! What kind of friends were these? A few moments later, the worried looks and weariness on each of our faces turned to happy smiles of relief and calm. It was over. We were together again in the warm Brazilian sand.

As I recall it, the first word spoken was an apology: "We should have told you about the currents here. They vary from day to day, but you always have to be on guard. I'm so sorry; I should have told you." I understood, of course, why they hadn't told me. One kindness, above a different kindness—the kindness of not treating the American visitor as if he were a child to be warned and protected. Cross-cultural sensitivities being as they are, giving a foreigner warning about anything is a borderline insult. So they had been "kind" to me—they left me to find out for myself. I'd found out, all right! Very nearly the last thing I would ever learn.

But how would I have reacted? Suppose that one of my friends had said earlier in the afternoon, "When the surf is like this we usually expect patterns of strong off-shore currents at various locations along the beach. This could be just such a location—better not go out beyond the surf." Who are they to tell me? Do they think I'm stupid? Do they doubt that I know how to swim? Do Brazilians think that Americans are children? Basic human pride is a great hindrance to certain kinds of important communication. Fear that the receiver of the communication will react proudly keeps us from saying things that should be said. Pride actually does cause us to reject and resent many well-meaning and generous offers of help and counsel. How often pride turns a person into his or her own worst enemy!

Even while the sense of weary relief was at its sweetest, the thought occurred to me— isn't this what the law of God does? It tells us about the currents of life—those realities that are there, apt to sweep us out to sea if we are unaware of them just as surely as when we deliberately swim into them. If there are some unchangeable realities about human behavior—if, for example, selfishness can sweep us into a bitter and lonely existence, it would be kind for someone to warn us. If disdain and hatred can pull us, beyond our power, into a stunted and shortened life, it would be kind for someone to warn us. If hating, cheating, lying, stealing, killing produces a society full of grief, and instability, it would be kind for someone to warn us. For sure, we can discover some of these things for ourselves, but must each person and each generation start over again—learning at such high cost?

Consider the Ten Commandments in this light and you can see this series of instructional warnings as a kind act of God. It is pride that transforms this kindness into a set of pious prohibitions. It is willful self-centeredness that causes rejection of such a gracious act. Our great friend on the shore wants to tell us where the currents are. His message deals with currents that are very real; the currents are a real part of the circumstances in which the human community exists. How much better off we are when we listen to the instructions about where the currents are!