

The Tempest

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

After he had produced his great tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*—William Shakespeare at the close of his career wrote a little masterpiece, *The Tempest*, in which everything comes out all right in the end. Scholars conclude that this play about travelers shipwrecked on an exotic island was prompted by a then-current event, widely reported at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This incident was the 1609 wreck of the ship *Sea Venture*, which, battered by a storm and taking on water, was run aground on one of the reefs surrounding Bermuda while on its way from England to the infant colony at Jamestown. The ship's company made it to shore without the loss of a single life and eventually constructed two small ships in which they successfully completed the voyage to Virginia.

It was difficult not to think about the *Sea Venture* two weeks ago, while my wife and I were lurching from wall to passageway wall as our cruise ship was buffeted by gale-force winds and fifteen-foot seas on its way to Bermuda. Lounge chairs were flying about on the pool deck. A passenger fell and struck his head, opening a gash that required stitches. Even one of the seasoned performers on the ship, a singer, was driven off the stage by seasickness. As the Bermudan pilot boat, bobbing like an orange cork in the foaming sea, approached to bring us safely within the reef, I had a deeper appreciation for the passengers on the doomed *Sea Venture*.

My maternal ancestors, sturdy Long Island fishermen, must have bequeathed to me the genes for a strong stomach, which allowed me to ride out the gale on the creaking and tossing ship. I can't say that I've always been as successful in coping with what Frederick Buechner calls "the great storm of the world." This is the storm that rains on our most carefully orchestrated parades, that howls inside our heads during the darkest hours of the night, and beats its powerful waves against our vulnerable shores. No radar anticipates such a storm, which often breaks upon us without warning. Even those who may have been spared the destruction wrought by recent tsunamis and tornadoes are unprotected from the great storm of the world.

Aboard a storm-tossed vessel or assailed by the tempests of trouble or tragedy we might be eager to offer "a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground." Yet when the winds have died and the waves abated, we may discover that the experience has caused us to "suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange." As St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character...." Character is the mark, both rich and strange, impressed upon those who have weathered the great storm of the world.

Today's "helicopter parents" might be dismayed to realize that children cannot be protected from every tempest. Although we must do our best to defend them from predators and the dangers we can teach them to avoid, life still is full of disappointments and difficulties for which no one can prepare. By helping youngsters come to terms with that truth, by allowing them to

fail, by standing with them as they experience heartbreak and loss, we provide them with the building blocks of character that prepare them to successfully navigate the rough seas of life. As in Shakespeare's play, even the tempest may prove to be a blessing in disguise, a character-building experience that, in the end, will help to make all things right.

William A. Palmer, Jr. is the Interim Executive Director of the Parent–Child Development Corporation. He may be reached at 804-843-2289 or wpalmer@pcdcva.org.