Sailing with Both Ears

On the sloops where I got my basic keelboat lessons, my neck developed a crick from constantly craning back to see what the Windex on top of the mast was doing. When I straightened out my neck, my eyes would fasten on the digital readouts of the knot meter and depth finder. It seemed as though sailing involved so much time monitoring different instruments and gauges that there was no time to appreciate the ride.

What did sailors do before the invention of onboard electronics and gadgets? One thing, I learned, was that they sailed with both ears. When the sensation of the wind was equal on both ears, you were directly facing the wind.

Sounds simple and obvious. But my senses were completely dulled to the clues the environment constantly provides about its condition. Without gauges, I had no way of knowing the speed and direction of the wind and the boat, or the depth of the water and the strength of the currents in it.

My catboat *Kirsten* doesn't have any gauges, not even a Windex, which wouldn't work anyway because of the turbulence created by the gaff-rigged sail.

As much as today's technology aids communication and knowledge, it also atrophies our abilities to learn directly from the physical world. One of the greatest appeals of sailing is that you are dealing with the elemental forces of nature, and your ability to sail well depends upon your ability to sense and respond to changing conditions in the wind and water.

When I was younger and worked outdoors at a marina, I knew, even if I couldn't express why I knew, what kind of weather to expect with a far greater accuracy than any forecast could give. To become a good sailor and to enjoy sailing to its fullest, I needed to wake up my senses and let them learn again how to read the world around me.

It isn't easy to do that. Weather forecasts can be addictive.
But forecasts are largely useless for the sheltered bays where I sail. If there's a small craft advisory for Long Island Sound, for example, I've found that doesn't necessarily mean conditions in the bays will be rough or even unpleasant. Forecasts are useful for very large areas, but not for the smaller area of the bays. To know what conditions are like in the bays, you have to be there.

But the complexity of the environment can trick you. One day, for example, the forecasts called for winds above 15 knots. Looking at the water from the dock, however, I didn't

see any whitecaps which a 15-knot wind usually kicks up. I judged the wind was probably 10 knots or less. But once I had poked the boat out from the protection of the marina, it was clear the winds were as strong, or stronger, than forecast. What I had failed to take into account was that the wind and the tide were moving in the same direction, so the water was flat.

I began to read the signs. That line of small breaking waves marks a shoal. The patch of glassy water ahead indicates a place where, for some unknown reason, there is no wind. A dark patch of ripples shows the path of a gust of wind. The tilt of a buoy tells the strength of the tide.

Basic observations, but the relationships between all these forces are ultimately too complex for words, and they change too quickly for reasoning out all the meanings. This is the great challenge of sailing. Even when the course is one that has been sailed hundreds of times, it is never the same. Experience can train your senses to know what is happening most of the time, but there will always be surprises, and the learning can never be complete.