

OPINION: The Titanic Submersible and ‘The Tempest’ Last week’s deadly implosion reminds me of Shakespeare.

By Gregg Opelka

The implosion of the OceanGate submersible Titan, which claimed the lives of its five passengers, reminded me of a passage from Shakespeare’s “The Tempest.” Ferdinand, a young Neapolitan prince, is shipwrecked on a remote island and believes his father perished at sea. Ariel, an invisible spirit who serves the magician Prospero on the island, purports to confirm Ferdinand’s fears, singing to him these famous verses:

“Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes: / Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.”

Ferdinand believes the news, although he later will be happily reunited with his father, Alonso, who, unknown to his son, merely washed up on another part of the island. While intentionally misinforming the young prince, Ariel’s cold, cruel purported statement of fact—that Ferdinand’s father lies 30 feet underwater—is ultimately a positive one. It is about finding hope in despair and renewal in death. Bones become coral; eyes become pearls.

The power of this simple ditty has so captivated us that the phrase “sea change,” succinct yet fraught with meaning, has become a universal term to describe any kind of tectonic societal shift in attitude or perspective. So ingrained has it become in our parlance that most people toss it around oblivious of its origin. (Alfred Hitchcock took the title of his 1931 mostly silent film “Rich and Strange” from this same passage. The movie, set aboard an ocean liner bound for the Orient, was released in the U.S. as “East of Shanghai.”)

More than three centuries after Shakespeare, the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter developed the concept of “creative destruction” to describe the inevitable cycle of economic innovation in which old businesses died and were replaced by better ones. The automobile replaced the horse and buggy, the computer replaced the typewriter, and so on.

The four mature passengers on the Titan—one brought his 19-year-old son—were adventurers by nature. They understood the risks of their voyage and accepted them. Like most explorers, they saw themselves as pioneers for whom the risk of danger was outweighed by the reward of the advancement of science and the expansion of human knowledge. Exploration of the ocean depths won’t cease with the Titan tragedy any more than space exploration ended after the fire consumed Apollo 1 in 1967 or the Challenger exploded in 1986. Lessons will be learned from the Titan event; improvements in the safety of deep-sea exploration will be made; and future submersibles will plumb the ocean’s floor. Of future bones and eyes, coral and pearls will again be made.

We mourn the victims of the Titan disaster, but at the same time we cheer on explorers who willingly accept the ultimate risk to advance our understanding of the earth a bit more with each push above, below or across its surface. In the memorable words of Miranda, another character from “The Tempest”: “O brave new world, that has such people in it.”

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