

## **Ships, Relativity and Your Happiness**

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

A few months ago, I found myself sitting in a shipyard getting ready to look at a couple of ships. The particular ship I was going to look at next had originally been used to ferry crew back and forth to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. It had three huge diesel engines, an outdoor hot tub, could safely carry and sleep at least 50 people, and was over 150 feet long. You could have landed a fleet of helicopters on it if you so chose.

I was there because I meant business and wasn't going to be screwing around with my family's recreation.

The boat was so massive, in fact, the guy who was about to try and sell it to me thought I must be a professional boater. He started showing me all sorts of pictures of some giant boat he'd recently built that had cranes on it to pick up smaller, 50-foot boats.

"You can take the smaller boats out to fish for during the day then come back in the evening and spend time in the bigger boat with the nice bar, the huge galley, and the deluxe state rooms," he told me.

He started laying out all sorts of plans on his desk and going over them with me and pointing out various ship parts I knew nothing about. Then showed me a slideshow on his computer with all sorts of pictures of this ridiculous contraption. To be clear: the ship he was showing me looked as if it was half the size of a small cruise ship. It was gigantic. It was made to pick up smaller boats with a crane, take them out to fish-rich waters, and drop them in the water each day to go fishing.

The ship was totally ridiculous.

"How much did it cost to build this?" I asked. I was looking at a picture of a bunch of rich looking men standing in a giant and beautiful ballroom on this ship/crane with crystal chandeliers sipping giant glasses of beer at the end of a day of fishing.

"Oh, it was a lot ..." he told me.

"Ten million?" I asked.

"Try more than double ..." he said. He flipped the slideshow on his computer and suddenly I was treated to a scene of the ship being built in a Chinese shipyard. There appeared to be hundreds of people on the ship welding and doing various things as it was being built.

I want to be clear at the outset that I know nothing about boats. In fact, I sank my last boat (a little 15-foot boat) and barely survived. I'd purchased my last boat on eBay.

"Well, I guess we should get going before it gets dark," he finally said. I'd been looking at a slideshow for over an hour. His office was incredibly small. The walls and desks were all filled with maps, old calendars, and so forth. It had a musty sea type of smell mixed with grease.

"Do you have an engineer and captain on payroll?" he asked me.

"No," I told him. I was still trying to act like I knew what I was doing. This is the first time I'd ever looked at ships so I was feeling a little nervous. In fact, this guy looked like he could seriously kick my ass and had kicked many people's asses in his day. He looked like he probably saw fights on a regular basis and spent a lot of time in rough bars around the shipyard.

I actually felt a little pang in my stomach. *What was an engineer used for? A captain? I would not be able to drive this thing myself? What the heck was I doing getting ready to look at a giant ship?*

Around six months ago, I started looking at boats. I live on the water and people are cruising by me on boats all day. After some time watching all of these boats come and go, I decided I needed to get in on all the fun.

In addition, I live two doors down from a celebrity and for some strange reason there seems to be a tour company here in Los Angeles that fills a little boat up with tourists and comes and sits in front of my house each weekend looking for this celebrity a few doors down. The boat is so packed with star watchers that I'm often afraid it's going to tip over. I can see the people with binoculars looking at the movie star's house and out of curiosity they're always looking at our house as well. I have no idea what's wrong with people.

Since my bedroom and bathroom are right on the water, I wonder how many people have seen me naked. It must be thousands.

My interest in boats really got going when I went and visited a friend of mine who spends all his time on a boat. He has a couple of really nice multimillion dollar homes but he almost never uses them, preferring to be onboard his boat when possible.

"The boat has bad ventilation," he told me as he got ready to go on a hike to the bathroom later in the evening.

We went over there to spend the evening on his boat and he and his wife seemed to be having a pretty good time. They basically drank themselves to sleep each evening then went below to the deck to go to sleep. I'm not sure why he felt that he needed to spend so much time on this boat but he really swore by it. He did all of his work at a small dining room table on the boat and also liked to barbeque outside on the deck of the boat on a little tiny camping-type grill.

As he lectured me about the joys of boat ownership throughout the evening, he had planted a seed of interest about boats in my mind.

I started looking at boats online. I kept putting my sights on larger and larger boats. A small boat is nice, but a small boat is a small boat and by its nature, you can't do much on it. Even as you move up the boat food chain, the boats are exciting but still too small to really enjoy like you might a home. For example, in order to use the shower, you need to bend over. I am over six-feet tall and the beds are too small to really fit into properly. The closets are really tiny. Even a boat that costs

\$500,000 is still really limiting. Moreover, you cannot travel very far on these boats. Since I live in California, at a minimum I figured the boat I should be looking at would need to get to Hawaii.

What started out as a simple exercise in family recreation quickly took me to something that was far different. The only way to really avoid the sorts of concerns I had with "boats" was to begin looking at "ships" instead.

While it may sound a little bit difficult to believe, you can actually purchase a ship fairly inexpensively because not a lot of people want them. An old ship from the 1950s that is massive might be purchased for around \$125,000 if you look hard enough (I looked at boats online from the former Soviet Navy, for example). You can bring 100+ friends on board and take it from Los Angeles to Japan with \$75,000 worth of diesel fuel on board if you choose. Forget about small showers. The boat will house large sized tubs, giant ovens in the kitchen (if you need to feed a lot of people), and you can throw a king-sized mattress in a bedroom the size of an average American bedroom right on the ship.

The more I looked at boats, the more I realized that if I was going to be comfortable I was going to need a ship. I have been taking a sauna every day for years. I needed to have a place to put my sauna. I work in front of several giant computer monitors at a time. I needed a place for my computer monitors. I need to have an exercise room for my transpacific journeys. I would only be able to fit an exercise room on a ship. As I analyzed the situation, everything seemed to be pointing towards a ship.

The ship guy who was trying to sell me a ship was just going too far with all of this stuff about a captain, engineer, and so forth. In fact, I had no idea what he was talking about and felt like I needed to speak up. I was going to have to let him know that I had no idea what the heck he was talking about. He was asking me if I was planning on taking people on overnight scuba charters with another one of the ships he was about to show me.

"The last guy that owned this boat had the hull reinforced because he was going to be taking it to look for shipwrecks in French Polynesia. There is a lot of bad coral there that could destroy the bottom of the ship. To say this guy was eccentric would be an understatement. He's now a professional big game hunter in Africa."

In order to prevent the guy getting ready to show me the ship from kicking my ass, I had to broach the topic very lightly that I had no idea what I was doing looking at a ship or what an engineer did. To my absolute astonishment, the guy started telling me that I reminded him of his friend the reality television star, Brody Jenner, and that he had helped "Brody" buy a boat too. In fact, he told me he was good friends with Brody now and that Brody even kept his boat at his house.

This was way too weird. That would be like hearing that Mike Tyson was good friends with Dick Cheney. It just didn't add up. From what I learned, the ship I was about to look at was so large that it required "at least one engineer" on board to operate it because if stuff went wrong with the equipment, someone would need to be there to fix it. There were engines, pumps, and all sorts of other stuff that needed to be operated and carefully maintained on an ongoing basis while at sea. Someone needed to be there to operate it.

In addition, the ship was so large that it also needed a captain. It would "take months" of training for someone to be able to steer and navigate this ship just out of the harbor and into the sea. If someone who was driving it didn't know what they were doing, they could do incredible damage to "bridges," other boats, and various obstructions that might get in their way. At that moment, I got it. This boat was really something and needed a super professional crew to operate it.

"You can get a good engineer for around \$60,000 a year," the salesman told me. "I'll hook you up."

"Do you really think I'll need a full-time engineer just for recreational *shipping* with my family," I asked.

"Absolutely," he said. "Someone needs to keep it lubed up, start the engines weekly, and keep it ready to go. The boat is steel and you need to paint it constantly."

The more I started thinking about this ship business the more uncomfortable I got. We went and looked at the ships and the entire thing took a few hours. One thing I hadn't even thought about was the cost of keeping the boat docked. Just a dock slip for a boat this size was around \$3,000 a month—if you can afford the boat then you better be sure you can afford the dock as well. Then there's the fact that you need to paint the boat all the time and other massive maintenance costs. The more I thought about this boat, the more crazy I thought it seemed.

I realized I was creating comparisons. I started out looking at a small boat and realized it wasn't as good as a larger boat. So I looked at larger boats then even larger boats. Then I realized that a boat wasn't as good as a ship, so I started looking at ships.

An article in the *The New York Times* not too long ago quoted James Hong, the founder of a website HotOrNot. Hong is surrounded by people who are incredibly successful, and counts among his friends one of the founders of PayPal. Hong had recently sold his Porsche Boxter and bought a Toyota Prius. Hong was quoted by *The New York Times* as saying: "I don't want to live the life of a Boxter. Because when you get a Boxter you wish you had a 911, and you know what people who have 911s wish they had? They wish they had a Ferrari."

I made the decision I want nothing to do with boats or ships and am not going to participate in this sort of recreation. I was just finding too many problems with it and whatever I settled on wasn't enough. This is how it works for most of us because we compare what we have, what we've done, and more to something or someone else. This is how it works for most people and we do this continuously and without fail.

This is what everyone does.

- *Do you like your job? Someone probably has a better one.*
- *Do you like your spouse? Someone has a better one.*
- *Do you like your house? Someone has a better one.*
- *Are you happy? Someone is happier.*
- *Are you successful? Someone is more successful.*

This sort of thought process goes on and on and it's addictive. In fact, most people are incredibly addicted to this sort of thought pattern. There's always something better out there and when you start to feel good about whatever you have and whatever you might have achieved, you compare one thing to another.

In order for us to understand reality, most of us evaluate the things around us relative to other things. We do this for boats, cars, houses, and so forth and we also do this for jobs, people, friends, and more. We compare and contrast and it's a vicious cycle that doesn't let up. The second you feel good about something in your life, there will always be someone who

comes along and contrasts how you feel with someone who has it better. That someone could be you or it could be someone who comes along and pretends they are a friend.

In my life, there have always been people around who are happy to contrast what I have done in a negative light. This is upsetting because I let these contrasts get to me. I am sure there are people like this in your life as well. There are people around you who will point out contrasts in what you do that aren't as positive as you might like. This will never make you feel good.

Several years ago, I was at some sort of self-improvement seminar. There was a girl there who'd gone to some Ivy League school and was an extremely successful banker who had married an equally successful banker. The woman had poise, self confidence, and you could tell she was extremely competent and confident in whatever she did. She was perfectly groomed and even her clothing and appearance looked immaculate.

We were all sitting in a circle at this retreat and the woman had lost her composure and was crying hysterically. She was having a complete meltdown and practically shaking. The person leading this group didn't know what was wrong and asked her several questions before it finally came out that she didn't feel her father loved her. The reason? She felt she was never good enough. Despite the fact that she got almost perfect grades all through high school, he never complimented her. If she got one "A-" he would ask her what happened and why she didn't get a better grade. He would go on and on about the "A-" and tell her to do better next time.

The idea I got from this was that the girl felt she could never do well enough because the comparison her father had set up for her was perfection.

There is no such thing as perfection.

In order to be happy in your life and career, one of the most important things you can do is realize some of the contrasts you set up aren't healthy or productive. You can choose contrasts that make you feel nice (such as where you were before you improved) or contrasts that will make you miserable (contrasts of people, places, and things that are better than where you are right now).

The more I thought about this stupid ship, the more I realized I'd fallen into the trap of contrasts. We all do this and it affects all of our lives. Many, many people spend their entire lives chasing a barometer of happiness that can't be met because it contrasts with something unobtainable.

I hear about illnesses, lost jobs, failures, tragedies, and so forth on an ongoing basis. Many times, I hear about these things when I'm in a large group of people. You can tell a lot about people when they hear bad news in a group of people. I love looking around the room at the group when bad news is being delivered because I frequently will see the majority of people in the room smile—even if the smile is just a quick tick of the face upward.

Why do so many people relish bad news about other people?

The answer to this is simple: they are caught in the game of contrasts and they believe that if someone else they know is having problems, then their lives are somehow better in contrast.

I also like watching people in groups when good news is delivered about someone in the group. Just as certain people will smile when bad news is delivered, the same people will frown—even if imperceptibly—when good news is delivered.

You can tell so much about people from these reactions. What you can tell is that they are caught in the game of contrasts and that these contrasts drive their feelings about themselves.

People whose opinions about themselves are formed based on how others are doing are in a bad trap. They have put their happiness in life in the hands of others. If your own happiness is dependent on how others are fairing, you are making a giant mistake. You should compare yourself to how you are doing and not how others are doing. Compare yourself to where you were in the past to measure your growth and happiness—not to where others are.

## **THE LESSON**

People who form their opinions of themselves based on how others are doing fall into a dangerous trap. Do not base your own happiness on how others are fairing. Compare yourself to your own past performance rather than that of others to measure your growth and happiness. The process of comparing oneself to others is addictive, and you must free yourself from such unhealthy contrasts in order to find true happiness.