

# PILOTING A CANOE INSTEAD OF A BIG FREIGHTER OR: THE CONSEQUENCES OF GROWING UP COLOR- BLIND

Reinhard Zollitsch  
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I adored my paternal grandfather, Capt. Willi Zollitsch, who retired to the same small town in northern Germany where I grew up. While in high school, I visited him about every weekend, when I wasn't away with our gymnastics team competing or just having fun bike camping. We talked real stuff, boating that is. He was a great story-teller.

He had left school at age 15, because he felt he had learned everything he needed to know to become a sailor. And that's what he did. He shipped out on big windjammers like the Minna Helene (1892-1894) in the saltpeter trade around Cape Horn to Chile, or around Africa in the wool trade to Australia. At age 19 he passed his skipper's exam. His last assignment (1944-45, World War II) was piloting freighters through the mine fields in the approaches to the Kiel Canal and the port of Kiel, where, as he told me sheepishly, he first learned real accurate navigation.

So you can see how little boy Reinhard (me) wanted to follow in his footsteps and become a sailor also and see the world and all the oceans, especially since that little boy had spent much of the first 6 years of his life in air-raid shelters and basements in the submarine harbor of Kiel, Germany, during the war years (1939-1945). He wanted to get out of there. Who can blame him?

But schooling started with a problem, which I had not paid much attention to. "He may not be ready for school. He does not even know his colors," I heard teachers say. Nonsense! I saw colors fine, I just did not always know what they were called, especially red and green and all colors in between, like brown, orange, pink, purple, etc. It was suggested that I might be color-blind. Ridiculous! I did not live in a black-and-white world. I did see the world in "living color", only some colors did not speak to me. Big deal!

In those days, practically nobody, not even the medical profession, knew much about that "problem" or what to do about it. They had much bigger problems to deal with, after World War II. So I ignored it also and charted my life around those two colors. I felt safe in blues and grays. Let others wear those garish colors, like red, orange, pink, purple as well as "giftgrün" (poison green), as it was known around our neck of the woods in northern Germany. (I now think there must have been numerous people like me who were uncomfortable around

green, i.e. who were color-blind without knowing or admitting it.)

And when it came to art classes in school, I made sure my Mom would buy me crayon and paint sets with color names on them. I did fine “painting by numbers/labels”. I never really told my family or friends about my color issue, and to this day, most of them do not know, understand, or believe that I am color-blind.

In my later advanced chemistry classes, however, I did very poorly in my lab tests that relied on color identifications. I still did not say anything to the teachers, because the post-war German world was not ready for it. So I took my penalty (grade-wise) and made up for my poor lab performance with the theoretical part of the tests.

After high school graduation in 1959 I also failed the test for the newly formed German Army/Navy, a test we all had to take. I did not care much about why I failed, but failure there meant that I was not fit to be drafted and could commence my University of Kiel studies in English and American literature, plus philosophy and physical education as my two minor subjects. I liked that. But after rupturing my Achilles tendon, I was off the University gymnastics team and dropped the sport altogether, replacing it with more sedentary sports, like rowing and sailing.

I was rudely reminded of my color issue, when I secured a well-paying weekend job with the “Holiday on Ice” show in Kiel. I helped with the set-up, but when I was asked to man one of the big color lights to highlight the star skaters during the evening show, I broke out in cold sweat. That could have been a disaster, or a comedy, or both. I quickly looked around at what other jobs needed to be done and suggested that I help hang the curtain from the high scaffolding – no problem, being a former gymnast.

At about that point of my studies, my career decision became very pressing. I decided to see one more time whether a maritime career was doable after all. The lure of becoming a captain on a freighter was still there. So I got a summer job on a 1,000-ton freighter, mostly hauling raw pulp sheets from northern Sweden (in the Baltic Sea) to the paper mills in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Antwerp (along the North Sea). I worked 8 hours on deck and had the night watch at the helm from midnight to 4:00 a.m. I did fine most of the time, but got real sweaty in tight situations, like steering through the Kiel Canal or up the Schelde River to Antwerp with all its lights - white, red and green. But since most of them were either solid lights or blinked a certain pattern, I had my own way of identifying them. It did not help, though, that the Schelde pilot only spoke Flemish - no German, and very poor English. Still, nobody noticed that I was color-blind.

I was bathed in cold sweat, though, and decided then and there that I was never going to be able to command a big freighter safely and with confidence, across the oceans and into distant ports as a captain. That dream was over. So

were all other jobs that relied on color identification, like an airplane pilot, chemist and most other engineering professions and lab jobs - well, almost any other good job, except for maybe a TEACHER, not in the sciences, but in a more esoteric field, like a foreign language and literature. (Please don't tell me the old adage about "those who can, do; those who can't, teach." However, in my specific case that would be true.)

OK, that was it! Teaching is an honorable profession, wouldn't you say? And foreign languages would require travel, wouldn't it? And how about upgrading it to "college professor", and a Dr. in front of the name? How does that sound? Nobody in my family had ever done that before. My always much smarter older sister had become a grade school teacher, and my equally much smarter younger brother a high school teacher. (Am I suffering from "middle-child-syndrome"? Naah...They were just better with colors.) And now I was going to top them all as a university professor with a Ph.D. Why not? It was definitely going to be a challenge. I had to have a plan, buckle up and knuckle down.

I applied for a graduate assistantship at three American universities in 1962. My only credentials were my university grades and being on a national scholarship, since my English professor refused to write me a letter of recommendation. He wanted me to help him with the index of his new book, rather than go to the US. I told him I would get the assistantship without his help and send him a postcard – which I did. The Hamburg harbormaster, on the other hand, was more helpful, getting me on a coal freighter from Rotterdam to Norfolk, Virginia, which cost me the grand total of \$25, just right for a penniless graduate student.

I even had a choice as to where I wanted to study, and did fine as a graduate student in English and American literature at the University of Maine. I was invited to join the graduate degree program, and eventually got my Master's degree, after only two years, being a part-time student. I had to earn my living teaching German part-time in the Foreign Language Department. During that time I also got to know an incredibly smart, sweet and beautiful young girl/woman...We got engaged and married when I received my MA diploma, in 1964. When Nancy finished her studies, I went back to Graduate School in Massachusetts and got another MA and a Ph.D. But this time it was in German, my new foreign language, since I had decided to stay in the US. The University of Maine wanted me back, and I was delighted to do so.

My color problems, however, did not go away. Nancy was surprised that I always wore the same colors, dark blue and gray. She also avoided reds and greens, in order to please me, and began to wear more blue and gray too, but admitted to me later that she felt cast back into the American Civil War color scheme. (Don't worry; as soon as she understood the problem, she returned to wearing more cheerful colors.) I, on the other hand, did not fully appreciate her sexy pink nightgowns. (To me they always looked "dirty white" or like a gray sweatshirt; I'm afraid I even told her that --- sorry, sorry, oh so sorry!)

It took me quite some time to admit my color problem to my lovely young

bride. She was understandably shocked about what I thought about her alluring pink nighties, but we eventually could laugh it off and talk about my “problem”. Bottom line: we decided to have me see an American eye doctor.

I failed the red/green color test miserably, and for the first time ever was officially diagnosed with red-green color-blindness. We also found out that nothing could be done about it. It was an inherited trait or shortcoming. And then I remembered: my mother, as well as her father and one of my cousins on that side of the family, had similar problems with colors, even though none of them ever fully admitted it.

So now I quietly live with my “problem” and make the best of it. And as far as the colors red and green are concerned, Nancy cheerfully helps me out to see the world in full color. And it is strange, that I sometimes see those troublesome colors close up after she points them out, but never on my own.

It is fall in Maine right now, and I need (and get) a lot of help enjoying the stunning foliage. As far as navigating on the ocean is concerned, you MAIB readers of my sea-faring stories might wonder, I have become a very accurate chart reader and know (and remember) where a marker should be in relation to the obstruction (ledge, rock, etc.). I never rely on them being red or green, but rather look for their shapes: red buoys are pointed and have even numbers, while the green buoys are square-topped and have odd numbers.

I have a similar code for red/green traffic lights: the top light is red - TOP is STOP!. The bottom light is green – LOW is GO!. I do have some trouble with blinking red or yellow/amber lights, though. When I drive alone in my car, I assume it is red and proceed very cautiously. Wouldn't you? Our Canadian neighbors (in some provinces) are ahead of us in recognizing the problem for red/green color-blind drivers. They add shapes to the normal color scheme: red lights are often square or double lights, while green lights are diamond-shaped.

Another color issue involves electronic chargers for my VHF marine radio and my camera, for example, which supposedly change from orangey-red to yellowish-green when charge is complete. You must be kidding! I greatly prefer my old satellite phone (aka my “shoe-phone”), which clearly speaks to me with the welcome words “Charge complete”. Why can't they all do that?!

So you see, all's more or less under control in my life, and I have learned to compensate for my shortcoming. I am now content, happy and greatly relieved piloting my 17 foot canoe instead of a 17,000 ton freighter. The sweat on my forehead now is a direct result of how hard I paddle and not from tension, confusion and stress about colors. Cold sweat is such a nasty feeling! Whew! Yes, I feel greatly relieved having finally accepted my hereditary shortcoming. But believe me, color-blindness is still a serious life-changing condition, as I see it.

I feel pretty smug, though, knowing that in 76 years nobody has been able

to call me on my color problem; I only told Nancy about it. So this might come as a big surprise to a lot of people, including other members of my family and even close friends. Ah, well, it was time to make the world more aware of color-blindness, me thinks. It is more prevalent than you might think. And if science ever figures out a way to medically correct this genetic flaw, or technology comes up with special corrective contact lenses or glasses that really work, please let me know.

I just googled color-blindness on the web and found out that apparently there are special glasses available, to offset color-blindness, but not all user opinions are favorable. So I think I'll just stick with what I've got and have another Sam Adams Octoberfest beer to wash down my grief – cheers!

Be safe, have fun and accept any personal shortcomings you cannot change.

Reinhard Zollitsch  
[www.zollitschcanoeadventures.com](http://www.zollitschcanoeadventures.com)

See my article “My Turn at the Helm” on my website about my grandfather and my limited freighter days.