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Lessons From the River

Late in the evening in early July 2020, we arrived at Thirtymile, our drop off point for a week-long canoe expedition on the wild John Day river in northern Oregon. The smell of the high desert, dry and sweet, floated in the wind. The chirp of grasshoppers hidden in sagebrush lulled us to sleep, where we camped by the river's edge. Scott, my husband, and I had been preparing for this canoe trip for months by paddling near our Seattle area home with Colin, our eight-year-old son.

The next morning, we balanced gear and our bodies into the canoe. Colin sat low in the center amidst 18 gallons of potable water, six drybags, three backpacks, two buckets, tent, sunshade, spare paddle, emergency kit, and camp stove. We were on a five-night expedition headed downriver for 46 sinuous miles of Class II and III rapids where our car would be waiting at Cottonwood Bridge.

We pushed our loaded canoe into the river. Scott offered guidance while steering, as I paddled furiously from the bow, with a barrel containing a weeks' worth of food crammed at my feet.

"You have to follow the flow and read the water," he said. "Let the nose of the canoe lead you."

Then, I panicked as the canoe plunged through a series of breaking waves. Scott moved the canoe confidently through the water, while I kept a poker face, thinking, *What have we gotten ourselves into?*

I nodded to Scott as juniper trees hung from ledges and stubby sagebrush clung to lava-made basalt. Before us were churning pools of water and boulders bigger than bears jutting out conspicuously.

"Read the river, don't fight it," Scott called out over the roar of churning water.

I got to my knees to anchor myself, gripping the paddle hard. I plunged it deep into the bubbling water. Scott, a seasoned expedition canoeist, with muscles the size of steelhead, was at ease in the river. He didn't seek to plow through the water like I was, muscles shaking. Instead, he guided quietly and danced with the river using few paddle strokes. Colin was thrilled by the adventure, oblivious to danger. I needed to find the flow.

I began to gradually understand the river the way Scott did. Mid-rapid, he'd nose the canoe's bow into the eddy, let the current swing the stern, move his paddle forward, and then align us for the next big rapid with just the right force. He led the canoe between the canyon's steep pillared walls, preparing us for our next position downriver.

That day we swamped the canoe twice. We paddled through some turbulent rapids and the water filled the canoe like a bathtub. I bailed while Scott pulled us to the nearest gravel bar to reset. I was grateful the water was warm. As we got acclimated to paddling together, we pulled to the shore early to scope out any complicated rapids before we were in the middle of them. When it was too difficult to paddle, ropes were tied

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to the bow and stern for Scott to line the canoe, while Colin and I walked along the cobbled floodplain. We loaded ourselves back in after passing the perilous section. After several miles of paddling our confidence began to grow. I got more skilled, and Scott grew more patient. We learned how to paddle together through the tricky rapids. We made it to Cottonwood Bridge with sore muscles and stories to share with friends.



It was only later that I understood that I learned more on this river than how to paddle safely on whitewater. Understanding how to read the river is like learning how to write. Three months earlier just before the COVID pandemic hit, I began an online Creative Nonfiction MFA program at Bay Path University. I had dreamed of writing creatively, but this was the first step toward my goal. Challenges arose, but something burned inside me. If I wanted to be a writer, I had to persevere.

I have worked fulltime as a biologist for a consortium of tribal nations in the northwest for years, but after the pandemic began, I unexpectedly worked from home and navigated project deadlines over a kitchen table serving as a desk. School buildings closed, so Colin learned his second-grade lessons from a booming voice over a virtual platform next to me. Scott worked from the spare bedroom. This was all new for us. I helped Colin with math problems, while leading online conferences for work and finding ways to write seriously for the first time. At times I did not know if I could do it all. I had to learn how to be a student again. I had to guide myself where I needed to go. My heart drove me forward, while my brain kept wondering where it would take me.



Scott taught me how to read the river's currents. When I sit down to write and am overcome with emotion or frustration, and life threatens to swamp me with more that I can fathom, now I inhale deeply. Before, when I would come across the boils and eddies and surprise turns, I wanted to hold my pen tighter. My son needed me to teach him, and grandma needed my attention as the pandemic continued. I am now more than halfway through the MFA program and writing has become a daily routine. Sometimes the way to find the current is by fully surrendering to the certainty of the labor, gentle and persistent movements, sensing the inexhaustible force which can silently drift deep within me. The river spoke and I listened. I was ready to hear her lessons.