

Kayaking: Inuit Tradition/Wild Journeying/Mindfulness

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I live in Canada. Although I travel widely across the globe, my home is on Southern Vancouver Island, and it is here that I kayak in a sheltered stretch of water called the Gorge. The Gorge is a long narrow inlet running several miles inland from the sea. It was created during the last ice age 15,000 years ago and glacial striations can still be seen on the surface of the rocks scattered along the shallow inlet. One of these rocks is Halkett Island, an ancient burial site of the Salish people who settled in the area as hunters and gatherers several millennia before the arrival of the White Man. The picturesque waters of the Gorge are rich in Indian legends.

The first Europeans to visit the coast of British Columbia were maritime explorers in search of the Northwest Passage. By the middle of the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company had established a fur trading post in Victoria and its natural harbour became an important base for the Royal Navy. As well as agriculture, lumbering and shipbuilding soon became important activities along the Gorge. Some of these industries still thrive along the Gorge today, but farther up the inlet, the waters are more peaceful: here, the city morphs into rural ambience, creating a kind of wilderness retreat. It is in this 'Urban Wilderness' that I like to kayak.

The boathouse is a rather damp, funereal place and the rental kayaks are stacked like ancient Roman sarcophagi on metal racks. I don a life vest, select a paddle and then haul one of the heavy kayaks onto the dock with the help of an attendant. After lowering myself cautiously into the narrow cockpit, I paddle away gently and soon find myself alone on the water.

It is a world quite familiar to the Inuit. The word 'kayak' in Inuktitut means a skin covered canoe propelled by a double-bladed paddle. In Greenland the Inuit still use kayaks for hunting, but in the West the craft has been adopted primarily for sport. Whitewater kayaking, ocean kayaking, and recreational kayaking are common practices; however, kayaks have also been used in military operations. I am a recreational kayaker.

The kayak is a remarkably awkward piece of equipment on dry land, yet it moves effortlessly once it is placed in the water, illustrating how beautifully form follows function. The Inuit are undoubtedly aware of this characteristic, but probably don't dwell too much upon the physics of kayaking.

At first you feel cramped and awkward in the tiny cockpit, and you are painfully aware that despite its buoyancy the kayak has a tipping point beyond which it is inherently unstable. It is wise not to test this limit, although some do in what is known as the Eskimo roll. Despite a fear

of falling into the water, it is amazing how quickly a beginner adapts to her new environment and as you start to paddle a rhythm begins that soon becomes quite effortless. You enter the realm of Wild Journeying.

Getting out and about in nature is called 'friluftsliv' by the Norse. The term means 'free air life', and although it is usually applied to the feeling of being in places far from human activity, it does have something in common with the sense of freedom I experience while kayaking in the Urban Wilderness along the Gorge. No two journeys I make here are the same; sometimes I journey with a companion and neither of us has an identical experience, even though we travel in close proximity to one another.

Our perception of the environment is influenced by experience, memory, and imagination. As a historical geographer, for example, I tend to dwell upon the dialectic between the natural landscape and the cultural landscape. I imagine the Gorge as a palimpsest, a palette shaped for countless millennia by the flow of wind, water, and ice; this period was followed by the arrival of native people, perhaps as long as 10,000 years ago; finally, I envisage the intrusion of modern civilization in the 19th century, dramatically transforming the landscape into the world we see today. It is important to appreciate that these two cultures have very different mindsets: the First Nations are steeped in mythology; the West, by contrast, is grounded in religion and molded by science. Different perceptions of time have a lot to do with the creation of these mindsets.

One of the most important components of our sensory perception is our eyesight. Paddling so close to the water you are constantly aware of the dark shimmering surface, broken only by the rhythm of the paddle. On a calm sunny day the light reflects off the water in myriads of tiny bright flashes, but leaning over very gently you can see the murky bottom, and you are reminded of the schools of aquatic creatures that thrive in the benthic zone. Sometimes you notice the reflection of your own face in the object you are observing. Sweeping your eyes across the water you see the shoreline, a gently sloping surface interlaced with rocks, grass, and trees interrupted occasionally by a wooden boat dock that snakes lazily up the steep embankment towards a house in the woods. In summer, the foliage reaches out into the Gorge, giving the landscape a richness that is lacking during the winter months. As you lift your gaze even higher, however, you become aware of the sky, and on a summer's day, the clouds float effortlessly above, supported by the very same law of physics that provides buoyancy for your kayak.

Two aspects of the scenery strike me as quite significant during my Wild Journeying along the Gorge. One is its colour. In contrast to the city, with its drab concrete architecture, nature evokes rich variegated tones that change with the seasons. The other aspect of the scenery that attracts my attention is the shape of natural objects. Unlike the city, where nearly everything

assumes an orthogonal pattern, nature creates a fractal geometry: waves, trees, and clouds evoke chaotic shapes, but on closer inspection they simply replicate a subtle geometry that is not as tidy as the human world, yet much more satisfying to observe. Perhaps it conforms to the fractal geometry inside our brain, or the patterns on the retina of our eyes, eliciting a primordial resonance deep down inside us. Nature does not need paint, nor does it conform to tidy angles. Nature simply IS.

Wildlife thrives along the Gorge. As well as sea creatures lurking below the surface, birds perch on rocks and chatter in the trees; ducks, seagulls, and cormorants are a common sight, and on a very calm day you can hear the sound of their wings beating softly as they swoop down to greet you. Occasionally, a sea otter pokes its nose above the surface and stares at you curiously, before diving back to the murky bottom with a gentle splash. As you paddle farther up the Gorge, and the noise of the city melts into the background, you begin to recognize other sounds. The movement of the paddle is quite inaudible most of the time, but you can hear the gentle tap of waves slapping the hull of the kayak, especially in a strong wind. On these occasions you can feel the gusts pressing against your body, and sometimes the spray runs down the paddle and you experience a cold tingling sensation in your fingers. Because the Gorge is a tidal estuary, it's possible to smell the salt water. On a warm day, your mouth turns dry.

These are a few of the bodily sensations I experience in my Wild Journeying along the Gorge. Yet there are other forces that operate about me which are much more subtle. The inlet, as I have noted, is a tidal estuary. Most of the time, you are unaware of the ebb and flow of the sea, but occasionally you feel yourself paddling harder than normal and you know you are battling the unseen force of the current. In Spring and Autumn, there is an astonishing tidal range along the Gorge and mud flats appear out of nowhere. When paddling against the current, it's best to hug the shoreline, as you would if there was a headwind. Other forces, however, are not quite so obvious. The earth's magnetism, for example, might cause the needle in a mariner's compass to pivot gently in alcohol, but the human body is completely unaware of this invisible force. Similarly, when the moon uses its immense gravity to move the tides, our body feels nothing, yet perhaps the blood in our veins is pulled ever so gently without us knowing it. These invisible forces have been operating before we were born and will continue to operate long after we are gone. Perhaps they are coded into our DNA.

As I paddle ever farther up the Gorge, observing, thinking, and feeling occupy much of my time, but there comes a moment at which I become quite attuned to my new surroundings, and my thoughts give way to a more intuitive mental process. I begin to sense that the kayak is part of my body: the paddle becomes an extension of my hands, and the rudder feels like an extension of my feet; mind, body, and environment become much more interconnected, and posture,

paddling, and breathing combine to create a rhythm that reinforces my feeling of tranquility. BEING in nature provides a perfect setting for this new mindset to expand within my consciousness.

We live in a world that is fragmented. Not only is space compartmentalized, but time is also broken down into tiny increments. Movement through space cannot be separated from time, I tell myself as I paddle my kayak, and stillness is eternity. Even the words I AM span a duration in time. To separate the 'I' from thinking requires the dissolution of ordinary consciousness because all thoughts, like words, are a fuzzy logic that can never fully articulate exactly what we mean. If we try to detach ourselves from our Egos, however, we can begin to see ourselves differently. It is like the amphidromic point in the ocean, a place of absolute stillness, where all the world's currents cease and every force is cancelled out by an opposite force. I...THOU...WE...part of us longs to make this journey--it is the Wild Way Home.

I have discovered that Eastern traditions offer a useful guide to help me on this journey. Typically, Eastern practices place far less emphasis on a formal religious service; instead, each participant is invited to encounter the world on their own by abandoning the SELF and allowing the mind to be absorbed into a higher state of consciousness. An important component of Eastern tradition is based upon the premise that our true self (Atman) is identical with the all-pervading spirit of the universe (Brahman); when the former is absorbed into the latter, we have no awareness of the material world at all and we experience a profound sense of tranquility. Tantrism, Buddhism, and Taoism all emerged from this tradition, and unlike Western belief systems that see God as quite distinct from creation, Eastern traditions make us much more aware of our own divinity. I would like to discuss one particular technique that offers some useful insights into this phenomenon.

I have already described how during the course of my Wild Journeying along the Gorge there comes a point at which I begin to feel intuitively that the kayak is part of my body. Overcoming the body-machine duality is the first step to entering the ZONE I am trying to describe; however, the feeling of UNITY goes much deeper than this. By maintaining a constant body posture, paddling rhythmically, and breathing deeply in a NATURAL setting, the sense of unity can be extended to encompass the mind, the body, and the environment. An important key I use to help unlock the door to this mindset is a technique I practice to still my mind. The method is derived from the teachings of Krishnamurti. I call it 'disembodied equilibrium': I imagine myself kayaking as if I were looking at myself from outside my own body. Focusing on this image helps to still my thoughts and freeze time, diverting my mind from its constant tendency to wander. It's an exercise familiar to the yogi and is encapsulated vocally in the Hindu sound OM, an absolute unity of being--AUB.

It is important to understand that unlike human beings, who must apply this technique consciously, nature experiences this state automatically. There is no distinction in nature, for example, between the mind, the body, and the environment: animals do not carry wristwatches; the wind doesn't know how fast it is blowing; and the current is not aware it is flowing to the sea. These are abstractions the human mind imposes upon the world so that the world makes sense to us. But nature inverts our world. It invites us to see ourselves differently by experiencing a sense of unity: by practicing 'disembodied equilibrium', space and time cease to be fragmented units and merge into ONE like the sound of a pure musical note (OM). In my view, it is easier for us to experience this heightened level of consciousness in the natural world because nature helps us to recognize intuitively an alternative mindset to the dominant paradigm of Western belief systems, systems which have tended to sacrifice individual, subjective experience in their pursuit of power, authority, and control.

In this discussion I have tried to illustrate how I practice mindfulness through kayaking. While much of my time on the water is spent experiencing the natural world by observing its scenery, listening to the sounds, and touching, smelling and sometimes even tasting its stimulating landscape, there are those moments when I step out of my normal mindset and locate that amphidromic point, a place where time seems to stand still and I enjoy a unique experience – a transcendent reality.

At the end of my journey, I turn around and slowly paddle my kayak back to the dock. As I slide carefully from the cockpit, and step back onto the wooden jetty, I gradually rediscover my old place in the universe. Yet I feel quite different. Lifting the cumbersome kayak from the water and carrying my equipment back to the boathouse, I am tired, but my spirit is rejuvenated; I have abandoned my kayak, yet this feeling of mindfulness has not abandoned me. Engagement with nature teaches us about a different kind of mindset; it shows us that we can experience a unity of being in quite ordinary activities. I have discovered that kayaking in the Urban Wilderness, and making a conscious attempt to practice mindfulness, allows me to experience a deeper sense of being. Cultivating this technique while kayaking is an activity that I find very fulfilling. For me, it is the Wild Way Home.