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River Poetry: Reawakenings of A River Guide

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JOHN COLTON: Recently, I have come to use the term guide as a metaphor for my own experiences both near and far from the river. As a guide, I am a facilitator of a journey in which the final outcome depends on the direction others wish to go. Along the way, I try to provide encouragement, advice, and alternatives but I do not always point the way. Throughout a journey I realize that it is often I who have been guided.

My current research has taken me from the Tatshenshini river to the boreal forest of northern Alberta, where I am currently involved with a First nations People who are interested in developing ecotourism as a sustainable form of economic development on their traditional land.

River rafting can be an exploratory journey where understandings begin to emerge between self, others, and the natural environment. Although I have guided on northern rivers for close to ten years, I have just come to realize that for much of that time my eyes were closed. They were closed to the beauty and wonder of the landscape through which we passed, the changes in people as they began to feel at home in the wilderness environment, and the even more subtle feelings of interconnectedness between myself, other people on the trip, and the river environment.

In research for my Master's degree, I hoped to gain a better sense of how wilderness affects individuals. More specifically, I wanted to better understand the nature of extended day river travel and its affects on people. But rather than approaching my study inductively, I took the opportunity to fill a gap in the literature concerning recreation benefits. So, I became a positivistic researcher trying to quantitatively measure the river trip participant's experience through a benefits scale, which I administered prior to and following each trip. Although the data I collected could be useful to managers of recreation areas, and perhaps to commercial operators of wilderness tours, in the end I was unable to explain what I had learned. How did travelling by raft in such a unique pristine wilderness such as the Tatshenshini river affect the participants?

Two years later I had the opportunity to revisit my "data" as part of an assignment for a qualitative methods course. I explained my dissatisfaction with my Master's research to my instructor. During the course of the conversation I also mentioned that during the river trips we had what has come to be called "Poetry Night," in which all participants of the trip, guides included, write poems and prose which celebrate the river journey. The poems are later recorded in a journal and sent to the participants of the trip.

After hearing this, it was suggested that I examine some of the poetry and prose to determine how this form of "data" might explain the nature of river travel and its effects on the participants. After reading, then reflecting upon the

experiences of others as described in their poetry and prose, I began to realize that it was indeed me who needed to learn. What follows are excerpts from some of their poetry and how I was able to learn from these gifts.

River Poetry

In my interpretations of the poetry written while travelling down the Tatshenshini River (located in northwestern British Columbia), I became aware of how each individual uniquely expresses her or his experience in the poetry or prose that they write. While some may talk of the ice and mountains, others will consider the river and the affects this moving life-force of water has on them. Some find the combination of ice, water and natural forces a form of art. As one participant writes: ¡POEM¿Icebergs are smooth, sculpted by fierce forces of nature Calving off the glaciers with intensity of thunder Deep compressed blues, smoothed by water's solutions, A gentle pattern, a serene setting, Contrasts of nature brought together

As we climb into the sub-alpine, away from the river, we are reminded of where we came from, and where we are going next, the confluence of the Alsek and Tatshenshini Rivers. Again, there is an expectancy of what awaits. Someone relates: ¡POEM¿As the Tatshenshini flows, she knows her name will be no more She lays her breast to the loin of Alsek, and together they in passion roar

The river is becoming much more than just a moving volume of water. The river is becoming a life force of spirituality that begins to transcend much more than those who travel on it or along its banks. There is a sense of peace about the river that is representative of the peace many people strive for in their everyday lives, but all too often cannot attain. It was noted in the journal that:

The wildness of the Tatshenshini River is the purest reflection of the spirit that moves all Things that exist on our planet

Another participant expresses: ¡POEM¿Peace is paddling down this remote wilderness river Where every listening moment hears nothing but agreement Where the spirit is embraced solely by nature's solitude Where passing images of life bring heartfelt reflections To protect these areas is to protect Peace of mind and soul

Finally, one person's poem appeared to combine the forces of human nature and the greater natural world. In doing so, I was struck by the depth of the prose. How could this person, who has been on the river for such a short time, come to these extraordinary insights? She writes: ¡POEM¿If we could read the Tatshenshini journey as a living scripture We could see once again Mother

Nature and human nature walking hand in hand. This enlightenment would be a gift to be shared around the world.

Reawakenings

Guiding multi-day river trips throughout the summer is a fun but busy job. By the end of the day most guides, including myself, have spent from 4-6 hours rowing a raft, cooked breakfast, set up lunch, cooked dinner, done several interpretive walks, and relaxed around the campfire with the participants. Unfortunately in the process, it is not uncommon for some river guides to take for granted the wonderful landscape through which they are passing and the interacting human element. I have found myself to be a prime example of this phenomena.

However, in reviewing the poetry that was meant to help me understand others' experiences more fully, I actually became more aware of my own experiences on the river, or rather lack thereof. I was so busy, I never looked up, and when I managed to find the time, I forgot to look, to think, and to absorb the experiences unfolding before me. As I stated earlier, my eyes were closed.

Last summer while guiding river trips on the Tatshenshini River I began to reawaken to and feel the sense of peace that others had written about. I noticed the intricate designs amongst the glacial ice and the icebergs, the minute alpine flowers, and the sound and feel of the wind as it rushed down the mountain valleys over our campsite and into the river basin. The poetry I had read the previous spring had come alive; I was part of this lived experience, no longer just an observer.

I now realize that I have been on several journeys at once. From an academic perspective I have come to understand that the words, experiences, and the stories of others are a more meaningful way to convey the essence of wilderness experience. This realization has, in turn, helped me to establish my own philosophical foundation for research in which I am aware that the outcome is based on many elements from which I cannot be separated. In addition, my experience as a river guide has changed. The poetry that had lain dormant on my shelf has inspired me to experience the river and its people in a way that I had forgotten. I am grateful for their words and thank them for bringing me on their river journey.

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