

Canoeing

I have to admit, I am not much of an athlete. I am not a klutz, but I wasn't the first person picked when sides were chosen for stickball. I held my own in most sports, but not much more. As I review all the sports I tried—softball, basketball, handball, tennis, ping pong, pool, I realize they all require good hand-eye coordination. That may be the problem. There is one sport that doesn't: canoeing. All it requires is a canoe, paddles and a companion, though it can be done without a companion.

I was introduced to canoeing at camp. We first had to pass the swimming test; then we could go out in a canoe. The counselor explained the rudiments: how to get into the canoe without tipping it over, and how to paddle. Once we learned that, and the two canoeists were comfortably seated, we were ready to canoe. The canoeist in the front paddled on one side, and the canoeist in the back, paddled on the other side. We quickly learned that if we both paddled on the same side, we would be going around in circles. Then we learned different strokes: the J stroke was the most useful for the rear canoeist, because it helped you adjust the direction in which you were going. And it was essential if you were going to canoe by yourself. I learned additional strokes by trial and error. Years later, I even learned that different strokes had different names. And I learned the meaning of the expression: "Different strokes for different folks."

Canoeing was the high point of my camp experience. When we were learning, we practiced tipping the canoe over (making sure we held on to our paddles) and then righting it and bringing it in to shore. We learned the meaning of another expression: "Up the creek without a paddle." We had to wear life jackets so we weren't in danger of drowning. When I was permitted to take a canoe out alone, I loved getting out in the middle of the lake, lying in the bottom of the canoe, looking up at the sky, and drifting.

To me, the canoe was the perfect vessel. Its shape was beautiful and streamlined. It was light and efficient. It was the mode of water transportation of the Native Americans, so how much more "back to nature" can you get. The canoes I had were not made of birch bark, but even the aluminum ones were fine by me. I canoed as much as possible as a camper, and then as counselor. When I was a counselor, and I was able to get away for an evening with a female counselor, it made for a romantic setting.

When two people are in a canoe, one is in the front, the bow, paddling, and the other is in the back, the stern, paddling and steering. (In a rowboat you can sit side-by-side and row together, or one can row—usually the male-- and the other—usually the female—is the passenger, facing the rower.) There is a similar hierarchy in canoeing. The person in the front, usually the female, provides the muscle, and the person in the back, usually the male, the brains. Usually, the man gallantly helps the woman into the bow, and when she is seated, he pushes off and gets in and determines the direction. Usually, they paddle on opposite sides, and when one gets tired, they switch sides. They can also switch positions returning, making the trip more egalitarian. However, the person in the back is looking at the back of the person in front, which makes conversation awkward.

I believe it was the summer of 1953, when Sylvia and I rented a campsite on an island in Lake George in the Adirondacks. We took a bus to Bolton Landing, picked up supplies and a canoe, and canoed to our site on Uncas. It was a wonderful adventure. The only concern of canoeists

was a large tour boat that made enormous waves. The motor boats weren't too much of a problem. We learned to turn our canoe into the waves so it wouldn't hit us on the side, and rock the boat. (Another expression which has broader applicability.)

For several years in the late '50s and early '60s, we rented a cottage on Bantam Lake in Connecticut, and also rented a canoe. We would go canoeing almost every day, with or without the kids. What I really loved most was going out on the lake by myself, as I had done a few times as a camper. I would paddle to the center of the lake, take a book, sit in the bottom of the canoe and read and drift. If there was no wind, I would sit in the stern, using a J stroke; if there was a wind, it would get scary and I would sit or kneel in the center of the canoe and paddle like crazy. Despite its name, Bantam Lake was a large lake, and on a few occasions, I paddled and drifted a mile or two from our dock. When the weather was calm, it was easy to paddle from the rear using a J stroke. But when the wind came up, it got scary. I would sit or kneel in the middle and paddle like crazy. It was fighting the elements, and I remember getting nervous when I found myself making very little progress. But eventually, I made it back, feeling that I had triumphed over nature.

When we moved to Washington, I discovered a canoe rental outfit in Georgetown. The Potomac was a great river for canoeing. It was such a pleasure to spend a day on the water. We would paddle down to the Tidal Basin and look up at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, and across to the Washington Monument and the Mall. Then we might head further south to East Potomac Park and to Hains Point. Or we would dock on Theodore Roosevelt Island and picnic, or head north alongside the C and O Canal, toward Great Falls. I did this dozens of times with my kids, with friends, and alone.

In 1979, when I moved to Boston, I had other things on my mind besides canoeing. A new city, a new job, a new apartment and new friends. I met Fran, and through Fran, I met her friends Avi and Joann Ivry. And I learned that they liked to canoe too. After Fran and I married, Avi and I came up with the idea of buying a canoe together. We decided to get a canoe that could accommodate four adults. Avi learned that Charles River Canoe Rental sold used canoes after the season, and in the fall of 1982 or 1983, we each became half owners of a 15 foot Old Town Canoe, along with paddles and life jackets. I don't know if it was fiberglass or polyethelene. I know it wasn't birch bark or wood and canvas. It weighted about 80 pounds. Two people could manage lifting it up and taking it down from the car. We bought a car rack, and we alternated storing the canoe in our respective basements. Neither of us knew the finer points of canoe construction, but if it was good enough for Charles River Canoe Rental, it was good enough for us.

For the next few years, we did a bit of canoeing, but not enough to have saved money by owning our own canoe. A few times, we went out together, but four adults in the canoe were rather cramped. When Fran and I went out for the first time with David, he was very small and had no opinion. As he got older, he didn't find it pleasurable. After a while, it got harder for Fran and me to lift up and take down the canoe. When the Ivry's bought a summer home in Connecticut, we were delighted that they took the canoe with them. Visiting them over the next few years, Avi and I would do some canoeing on the lake, but then, because of my arthritis, I was having trouble getting in and out of the canoe.

My last canoeing experience was in my late 70s when Fran and I stayed at our friend Natalie Goodman's cottage on Jenkins Pond in Falmouth. She had a small aluminum canoe, which was just right for the surroundings. We left it on the beach, turned over, and I managed to persuade every visitor to come canoeing with me. When David had friends visiting, they would take out the canoe, as well. It was a sad day when Natalie sold the cottage.

Canoeing, like almost every other sport, has become a thing of the past for me. But I have my memories.

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