

The Best Life in the World-It's a Hard Act to Follow

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Winter 1996-96

Volume 10 # 1

What is the path to becoming a river guide? I think it is safe to say that few of us have followed in anybody's footsteps or in anybody else's wake. I dare say there is no routine path to becoming a boatman, or a boatwoman. A few of us may have started out with a waterborne goal, but I think just the planting of that hydroponic seed is a serendipitous act. I hope that all of us feel that just for us to find a suitable fecund pool in which that seed can take root is truly a blessing.

Wherever we go with rivers, there are more up times, emotionally, than down for quite a while. And while the rivers we are running may be metaphorically matched by the wild runs in our lives, life on the river is for the most part an emotional high. Adrenaline is the common drug, and it's a natural high.

Many of us find a kind of home on the river, especially those of us fortunate enough to end up on a river like the Colorado through the Grand Canyon, where there is sufficient time and variety of experience and terrain to keep it always new and fresh. The trips are long enough so that the bonds that develop within the crew and passengers can be sufficient to provide ample reward. It's great! It's always different and it is usually good, plenty damned good. In fact, there ain't much better, a steady diet of adventure, excitement, rewards, and acknowledgment. Even the routine is rarely mundane.

So how long can one remain a river guide? Well, you aren't going to get rich unless you are particularly clever or exceptionally lucky. In fact if you keep at it you are going to have to improvise some unconventional methods just to get ahead, meaning into the nebulous median of middle-class society. So what at first seems like the best of all rides might eventually become a sort of rut, but a pretty fine rut at that.

Depending on how we have looked ahead downstream we may be able to break out of this rut. We may just resign ourselves to this adventuresome path and see where it takes us. Chances are that once we realize that the financial earnings are not sufficient to keep our life styles up to the level of our fantasies, we have to start looking for new paths to find a reasonable alternative or supplement.

But some of us don't make that transition very well, plus the adventures of old don't provide us with as much adrenaline anymore and it takes much more energy to generate the thrills and excitement. This is a sad state to reach without a plan for new alternatives. When our diet has consisted of considerable adrenaline-generating adventures and then we cut that out without providing a healthy substitute, it is going to throw us into an imbalance of spirit. In addition to the excitement of the river, we have had an appreciative audience of people, our river customers, who tend to be successful in their own walks of life. When we get cut off from this audience our self image can deteriorate. These are the elements of

the erosion of self-esteem. If we are not able to find some viable alternatives then our own sense of how we fit into the world becomes very precarious.

Now I'm not saying that we can't be successful river guides late into our lives, but we need to develop some new approaches that still provide for our identity as river guides from a level of energy output that we can sustain, so that our enthusiasm doesn't wane to imperceptible when our passengers need a shot of energy from us. In the short run we can cover for each other when energies are flagging. But what do you do when one of your pards is consistently running on low, when his spark doesn't have the energy in it necessary to keep things running? What can you do? Well, you have to cover for them, but it is going to be apparent pretty quick, if to no one else, then to them. Then their self-esteem erodes.

In my case I was abruptly cut off from the river. This is a tough situation. My brain injury, sustained in an auto accident last winter, has thus far left me sufficiently disabled that I probably will not be able to work again as a river guide. After 25 years of being a boatman this is a pretty harsh severance.

Living a life composed mostly of adrenaline producing experiences where little is contrived, it is difficult to adjust to living our lives where we generate our own emotions that are not the direct result of the experience at hand, particularly excitement. As we move away from a life based on thrills and adulation it may become more difficult to experience happiness and joy. We are suddenly responsible for creating our own experience rather than just immersing ourselves into it, into the life of a river guide. Eventually it can become our perception that there is less joy in the world and it becomes a more dreary place. This has a particularly deadening effect on a spirit that once knew joy and danced spontaneously. This deadening of the spirit can be emotionally debilitating and eventually can erode the desire to live. Held in comparison to an earlier spirit of enthusiasm and joy, the lack of understanding of the impending transition and the loss of the innate ability to return to the state of bliss can cause one to lose sight of the purpose of living and even anticipate an end: death. Pursued to it's logical conclusion, with no deviation, this is the path to suicide.

Many of us may be strangers to the thought of suicide, but the path is more available when there is a suggestion in place. In my case I have a family history of suicide: my maternal grandfather, long before I was born; my older brother when I was 37; and a maternal uncle a year later. Suicide hasn't been a major issue for me, although it has occasionally appeared as an abrupt and easy, but cowardly, escape. Now recently, partially disabled, and cut off from the life of adventure and acknowledgment, my life has looked pretty dreary and I didn't see that I had that much to contribute. So I began to let thoughts of suicide drift in and float around. Of course it depressed me a lot, but like a persistent fly it just wouldn't go away. I finally told my wife about this thought and despite my wild imaginings that my removal would be some sort of relief to her, she convinced me of quite the contrary. She would be devastated. So I decided I had to assure her that I wouldn't

resort to this escape.

The one thing that I was still confident in was my capability of giving my word of honor to something. So I promised her that I would not commit suicide. Once I had given her my word to not take this exit then it was no longer a readily available alternative for me.

Now I am making a pointed attempt to expose myself to sources of joy: experiences that are available to me that I remember having given me happiness or a sense of accomplishment. I am careful not to bite off more than I can chew and to put myself in the company of people with whom I am confident I will know success and happiness. I expose myself to chances when I am confident of success or achievement and work myself up to greater and greater challenges. It is important for me to remember the sources of my greatest joys: the natural out-of-doors, and friends.

A long career as a river guide does not lend itself to an easy transition to life's next stages. One possible path leads to depression and even suicide. I don't pretend to have any solutions or even suggestions of how to avoid this terminal path, but I think this is an issue which the guiding community would do well to understand better. The specter of a devastating, potentially terminal, transition may present itself to someone near and dear to us all.