

Guide is a Verb
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Fall 2004
Volume 17 # 3

Former river guide and current financial analyst shares his story of transition between those occupations, offering us all “a hand up over the rim.”

When I stopped being a guide, long enough ago to have some higher altitude perspective on the matter, it felt like the biggest part of me no longer existed. I was very identified with the hero mold guide image, able to leap tall boulders, laugh at the face of death, and charm the pants off of just about anybody. Although I planned to give it all up and do different things with my life (which different things I hadn't come close to figuring out), when the time came to pull the trigger on the change it felt sudden. Immediately I was alone, without the guiding infrastructure I had become so identified with. At that time, I thought guide was a noun, and I was that noun.

Nowadays I am a guide again, of sorts, serving clients (passengers, guests) as a financial advisor. This is a long way from the river in many ways and quite a different venue, but in a full circle analysis of it all I am most struck by the similarities. When I was a guide, I knew how to run the hardest route on the biggest rapids, but it wasn't my trip, it was theirs (the ones paying the passage). It was my job to give them the best trip I could, and sometimes that meant suggesting they photograph the rapid from the shore instead of pushing themselves to ride in the boat. People have different tolerances for risk, different perceptions of beauty, and the great guides know how to deliver just the right experience tailored to their customers.

Guide is a verb, and verbs are action words. Nouns are passive, at the effect of something else. The best guides are defined by their actions, their methods, and their skills, not by where they apply their talents or what uniform they wear. I wish I'd known that during my transition as it would have made it easier. I think about Whale, and the mission of the foundation that honors and survives him, and I'm hoping that my experience will help make whatever changes people face a bit easier.

My decision to stop guiding was voluntary, in a way. That is, I wasn't forced to retire due to a damaged body. Some who know me think I was influenced by a series of accidents on faraway rivers, but those actually occurred after the fact, as if to reinforce a decision already made. My retirement from guiding happened in a rickshaw in India, in a moment of insight. Putting together a month long, multi-sport trip in less than a week in a place I'd never been might seem like challenge enough, but I realized that it all felt just too familiar. No matter what the currency, the language, the foods available, the thought simply imposed itself on my brain that I could do this, there was no doubt of the outcome and I was finished with the learning in this line of work. If I didn't change, I would stop growing and that was a much bigger risk than not knowing the next step.

It actually isn't hard to stop guiding, not right away. At first it's just the same feeling as the first days of fall, after a long summer, when not being on the river feels pretty good. A little time to let the cuts heal, catch up on paperwork and people. But as the days get shorter and possibilities get fewer, it's understandable to miss the adoring crowds at the end of the day.

But there comes a time for the noun type of guide, when you suddenly find yourself alone, not very important or visible, not feeling very skilled and not knowing what the hell to do next. This doesn't make any sense, but that doesn't make it less real. I was 29, with a college education, an amazing resume of skills and experiences, but I couldn't see the value of any of it.

Eventually what worked for me was to take action, get moving, even though I took a few strange directions along the way. I found it was often hard to know exactly what I wanted, but it was usually much easier to identify what I didn't like, and I think this is true for most people. So moving in some

direction was better than wallowing in self-pity. Through some river passengers I was routed to the insurance industry. That was a uniquely bad fit for me, but what was not right about it was so obvious that the experiences there really helped me to focus on what I did want. An evolutionary path led me to doing something today that I feel uniquely good at and get a lot of satisfaction from. Now, as a financial guide, I have as much energy and psychic payback from work as ever. And yes, the pay is a lot better.

If I may offer some guidelines for those facing career transitions, it would be these.

Distinguish between the skills and talents you have and those you have to learn. It is unrealistic to successfully transition to a rewarding career without doing some training and paying some new dues. Being a great river guide doesn't make you a top skiing instructor just because you want to—you have to learn to ski. But the leadership instincts of the river actually help quite a bit in the boardroom, when you get there.

Always maintain a sense of fun. Seek out team environments whose chemistry rivals the best river crews you were ever on.

Remember how to see from other's perspectives. This will help you to get what you need from people in a way that makes them feel good about giving it.

Be a leader. At times this means knowing when to push back. Like the time you talked that guest into a hike they didn't think they could do, and it turned out to be the highlight of their trip.

Like many, I was moved by how alone and desperate Whale got as he faced his transition. So what can you do to help? Whether you are facing a transition yourself or not, you can be supportive of whoever you know that is going through one. Whether they are trying to stop drinking, transition from guiding or anything else, be a pal and be supportive. It matters.

One thing I have noticed about guides who stop (and I feel I did this myself) is that they go incommunicado for a while. It makes sense when you think about it. A good storyteller finds him/herself without an entertaining yarn to spin. They just don't think they'll get the laugh they need telling their friends about their struggle to learn sales skills or get through law school. Don't demand high drama from friends in transition.

You don't have to understand what they are doing, where they're living or how they are going about the changes. You can be sure they are doing the best they can, given the information they have at the time. Remind them you are still friends and do your best to connect again in the outdoors at every opportunity. The guiding experience is a valuable treasure you will always have and the friendships we make doing it are the best part of all. And who knows, you may need a hand up over the rim yourself someday.

Dave Shore