

Whaler Lives

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I was interested to read the article on the Whale Foundation in the bqr. The evolution of river-running from the early days to its current manifestation (the industry) has required a lot of adjustments on the part of everyone involved. A lot of folks have devoted time to getting degrees and consulting positions while keeping their hand in on the river guiding business. For others, 25 year veterans or newcomers, the river is their life.

Whale was old school: after a tough season, run some winter trips, drive a snow machine at the ski resort till spring, and the re-birth of another river season. The river was it for him. Home.

The Grand Canyon River Guides effort to support members in need in a changing world is positive and indicates a maturing of viewpoint. I'd suggest you cultivate a relationship with people in mental health who have a creative approach and if possible pad them in on a canyon trip so they have a sense of who you are and what you're up against, toward the time some of you are willing to reach out for some constructive feedback or help.

Many occupations suffer from "job burnout", or changes in viability due to age. River guiding is in some respects unique in that it is mostly driven by love and commitment to sharing the experience. Despite economic improvements in recent years, I don't think there are too many folks, outfitters or guides, who are in it strictly for the money. If you are, you should probably give it up. I assume you're running a lousy trip.

The stresses of continuing to devote yourselves to river guiding are not what they were 20 years ago. The new regulations, and environmental/social/bureaucratic aspects increase yearly. As noted, some of you, like Whaler, have grown a bit gray around the muzzle following a way of life that started out pretty simple, and isn't anymore. Whale was a support to a lot of friends and associates; you all do this for each other. River people are a close knit fraternity, a family. They care about each other, and their way of life. It is to be commended.

However, there is a time when you don't need the love and support of your peer group and family so much as you need a guide. Whether you're straddling the uncertain border between "Dog Days of Late Summer/Seasonal Burnout" syndrome or real depression, or feeling stuck and need some input to expand your horizons beyond the seductive (but limiting) career choice of river guiding, help can be had. You may just need to turn the angle of your mind, and have somebody with some dispassionate knowledge and insight teach you a few

navigation techniques to help you keep your oars in the water while you explore your options.

I found out about Whaler's departure when a reunion of some folks from the old days turned into a wake because a few days before the party, the Whale decided not to show up. Maybe he was making a statement. Maybe he was just following his own vision as he did in his life. A lot of folks would like to find something positive out of it. The Whale Foundation is a good start. Even "Bronze River Gods (and Goddesses)" have feet of clay, and there's no such thing as too much mental health.

If you'll permit me: after I became a retired (but not ex) river guide, I struggled to integrate my life into the "real world" (!!!) I continued to run rivers and mess about in boats; one of the loves of my life. But I moved on to explore and develop other aspects of my life. I had a lot of values and culture shock. It was a tough trip at times, still is. My ideals took a beating.

I did some work with a psychologist, a very creative one involved in N.L.P, an approach to psychology inspired by Milton Ericson, the Godfather of "brief therapy." I didn't do much work with him as a patient; he suggested I just take some classes and seminars. A lot of this had to do with communication skills, but I also learned some new strategies and developed options that gave me new alternatives in the way I dealt with life. Such as it is. I use these tools every day. As I continued to study psychology, I realized I'd never met anyone in my life who wouldn't benefit from a little "tune-up", and that the ones who thought they didn't need it were the ones to worry about.

I think it's important that GCRG wants to encourage support for members in need. It's also possible that expanding communications skills, personal strategies and coping skills through creative psychology could be as important as wilderness medical training and complying with the numerous certification requirements and new regulations. Let's face it; the stress level isn't going to go down in the "industry" any time soon, brothers and sisters. And nobody's getting any younger.

I don't think most of us are much into Monday morning quarterbacking. The what ifs and if onlys. A number of heroes and pals have departed our midst over the years. I have a little too much love and respect for the Whaler I knew twenty years ago to second guess his vision. Like a lot of people and adventures, Whale will always be a part of the Canyon for me. I got to pull him out of the river a few times after some pretty bad runs, but I've had some bad runs myself over the years. I've also been caught short in the darkness at a fork in the trail, far from camp. On my hands and knees, by God's grace, I found a path. Whale chose the other one.

I can't help but wish that when he took his hike, instead of being alone, he'd been with somebody with some local knowledge and interpretive skills, and a (relevant) first aid kit. Someone who took him on a trip, and guided him out of the forest with

a slightly different vision to follow on the next leg of his journey.

Whaler shared a lot of gifts with many people. When he headed off, alone, he left us one last gift: a wake-up call about some things we may not have taken a look at because we're all busy dealing with our own stresses, and jostling to keep our place in line to keep living one river season at a time.

Thank you, Whale. We heard you. It was pretty blunt, amigo. You left a little tattoo on our hearts that's always gonna sting a little, brother. But we got the message. We're indebted to you...

To Whaler, I say: Aloha. No regrets, brother coyote. We all get off just up a ways. Just a bunch of Koshare Clowns we are, dancing by the river. You were one of the best; a joker with a sacred smile and ancient eyes, a disguise worn by a gentle warrior spirit as old as the Canyon. We will miss you, you old coyote, but we mourn for ourselves. Now you know that which we long to know. You know what lies beyond the thunder. When I make that last river crossing, I will see you. We'll stay up all night around the fire, telling the old stories over and over again. Make sure the beer is cold. Till then, cool running my friend. No more grueling take-outs, no more journeys end. River runs forever.

UA – MAU – KE – EA – O – KA – WAI – PUNA – I – KA - PONO
(The life of the river is preserved in righteousness)