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Of Portages and Pedagogy

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Of Portages and Pedagogy

In Memory of Bob Black.

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WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer;

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;

When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the
lecture-room,

How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;

Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

—*Walt Whitman*

Waves washed over the canoes' gunwales, winds howling 25 to 30 mph as a cold front roared in. Mid-40s at that point, but forecast to dip into the mid-20s overnight. We had just rounded the bend into our first real open waters, dotted with islands, and the sun slunk between cloud banks, intermittently promising a little light then disappearing again. A light rain stung our faces like sand.

Not a promising start to our Boundary Waters adventure. Daunting that the students I was leading into this harsh early fall reality were greenhorns. And more importantly, I was still

green myself as a leader. I'd been to the Boundary Waters many times, but this was only the second time I'd led a group. Canoes zigged and zagged in the headwinds, and I spent most of my time turned around to keep an eye on everyone, make sure no one got lost in the maze of islands or to see if—or more likely *when*—I would have to pull someone from the dangerously cold waters.

After we struggled in the open wind for a bit, I led the group into a calmer cove to try to catch our breath and get our bearings. Allie pulled her canoe up beside me; she'd been handling the stern well, but her eyes were wide with fatigue. "I need help," she whispered. "I'm doing it all." Amanda, the student in the bow, was far more inexperienced than we had figured. She was actually using her paddle sideways, merely slicing the water with the thin edge of the blade while Allie steered and pulled them through the treacherous waters.

This is when I heard the Whitman poem through the howling wind, Whitman the prophet of experience, priest of the physical, fundamentalist of the sensual. I am a teacher by profession, but I don't always know what this means. I tend, like Whitman, to think that experience is more important than structured or predetermined learning. I have no delusions about knowing what I'm really doing, but I also try not to take it too seriously. American civilization does not live or die on what I do in my classroom, no matter what many of my colleagues might think. This is not to say I take it lightly. Of course higher education is essential for individual students and for society at large. But I see far too much angst over teaching text A or not, as if our very culture depended on it. It does not. And text A will not make or break a student's education. What we do is put students in a position to have meaningful experiences that will help them discover who they are and what they value. We help them pose the big questions they will spend their lives trying to answer. And hopefully we give them a few tangible

tools along the way. A thoughtful, diverse, and supportive curriculum can achieve all of these things without the self-important angst that far too often defines our profession. Going into the woods is simply a way to do all of these things: give my students experience, confidence, questions, a foundation, and have some fun along the way.

But when the experience becomes dangerous it's harder for me to define my goals. At that point, what I really want is for my students to live. My own experiences over the years in the wilderness have generally been of the peanut-butter and whiskey variety rather than carefully planned trips with others in my care. The people I grew up going into the wild with are not the most prepared (and me, perhaps, least of all) but we've known each other well enough to know that we can trust each other's survival instincts and skills. When the chips are down, we'll do just fine. If worse comes to worst, we'll all at least end up with some good stories. How different it felt now with others in my care, students I had only known for days, certainly not long enough to know or trust their instincts if things go bad. At the moment, I was fearful they were going to go bad.

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I teach Literature and Creative Writing at a small liberal arts college. "Creative writing", like any subject in a liberal arts setting, is really a vehicle to teach a way of thinking, of seeing, experiencing, and responding to the world. I am not necessarily training writers but helping students to write and think in ways that will inform their world wherever they go. I am helping them develop relationships with their world.

Every September, several classes travel to a field station outside of Ely, MN, for two weeks. Classes then take trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for different durations, depending on the class. Generally, groups travel in for 6 or 7 days. The Boundary

Waters restricts travel to foot or canoe; entry is by permit, groups can be no larger than 9 people, and groups must camp at designated campsites—first come, first served. This year I was teaching nature writing, and my student writers were at the station with an Ecology class. We had enough students and faculty to split into three travel groups, so in the spirit of interdisciplinarity, we pooled both classes and split into equal groups. My students would help the ecology students gather data to test Island Biogeography theory, taking a census of tree species on islands in the area. Each group would cover a different area of the Lakes One through Four chain (my students were not particularly happy to be traveling through the least imaginatively named lakes in the whole Quetico-Superior region) and then each taking a section of Lake Insula, a stunningly beautiful, island-dotted lake in the southwest Boundary Waters. The groups would roughly follow a similar route, taking a census on the way to Insula, spending time in Insula, then returning, covering as many of the islands as possible. But we would have no contact until we returned.

The hope was that the ecology students would learn their material in a different way if they were expected to teach my students the theory and to help them identify the tree species. Likewise, my students would learn their texts in a different way if they were expected to share what they were reading with the science students.

One flaw with the field station schedule is that, to get a trip in during our limited stay, we need to get into the wilderness early. We have little time at the station to assess skill levels before we need to head out. The field station has a long and storied history, students traveling each September for the last twenty years. It can get cold in September, but throughout its history the field station has generally had good weather. For me, it has always seemed the perfect time in northern Minnesota: the mornings gloriously crisp, the afternoons warm, the maples and birches

just beginning to turn, the lakes cold but still swimmable, and the tourists and mosquitoes gone for the year. But the change can be dramatic over those two weeks. When we arrive, everyone swims in Low Lake by the field station; by the time we're ready to head back to Iowa, only a few brave souls are still swimming.

As the weather turned fast this year, the schedule began to seem downright scary. We'd heard the forecasts—wind, wet, and freezing—and considered changing our plans, but something stubborn takes hold when you're that close to the wilderness. And certainly students don't see the dangers, only the adventure. In fact, many of them had not heeded our insistent warnings to be prepared: some came without hat or gloves, and we had to make a mad rush to town just to make sure everyone had reasonable gear. When we discussed our concerns, they didn't flinch: there would be a mutiny if we didn't proceed as planned.

Sure enough, they were fearless on the waves, not really considering what happens when a canoe goes over in those conditions. Late in the trip, one student asked "So what keeps our Duluth packs afloat if we go over." "Good luck or nothing at all," I responded. Sure, if you're in shallow water you can retrieve them, or the air trapped inside might keep the lighter ones afloat long enough to reach them, but when you go over in water that stunningly cold, you lose your breath; you're scrambling for shore, not your Duluth pack. Yes, I was the only one losing years from his life as the winds picked up and tossed the canoes around behind me. It was late afternoon and the few campsites we passed were already occupied. My group was already fatigued and I had no idea how they'd fare on their first real portage. I talked with a group we passed who was on their way out. They said that the campsites they passed were occupied, so we might be traveling some distance to find a place to stop for the night. I know the rules, but in my head I was beginning to consider emergency alternatives: there was a cove at the entrance to

Lake Two that I knew was not heavily wooded—if need be, I would make an emergency camp there rather than keep going into the wind.

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It always takes me awhile to get my bearings on the water, to translate shoreline on the map into the landscape's actual features. That first day, I spent so much time focused on the other two canoes that I easily got turned around in the island landmarks. As long as you follow along with the map, reading a shoreline is easy. Once you lose your bearings, though, every bit of shoreline starts to look the same, every island could be any island on the map. In the glare of the late afternoon sun, there were only miles of glittering waters, wind-whipped waves, and rocky shorelines. I pulled us into a protected cove to get our bearings, but the students were in no mood to hear I'd lost my bearings.

It was clear we were at one of two places on the map and not that far from our portage—no reason to be worried about being lost (of wind and cold yes, but being lost, no). But I had lost their confidence already. They didn't say it, but I could feel it in their eyes: *You didn't tell us you didn't know how to read a fucking map!* Allie and Amanda were particularly not happy since they were struggling so much in the wind. I pointed out the two places we were on the map and tried to explain how when we left the cove I would be able to tell which side of a small peninsula we were on and would then know precisely where we were, but they were having none of it. The group was quickly turning sullen in their fatigue. I tried to be light-hearted and pointed out that what makes wilderness actually wilderness is the ever-present and real possibility of getting lost. This is not a Disney ride. If you aren't at risk of getting lost, then you can't really say you're in wilderness. I realized quickly that I should keep my lessons to myself.

I'd started out with Dan, a bull-headed, strong but erratic paddler in the bow with me. We were managing OK, but he seemed to think that fast, energetic motion meant he was paddling hard, but the fact was he was barely dipping into the water in a less-than-efficient, jerky motion that kept us lurching into the waves, what some call "lily-dipping." He was a burly guy who was really just wasting energy. I'd tried to impart to him that consistency in bow paddling mattered over strength or speed: you need a rhythm that the stern paddler can anticipate, but it wasn't going well. It mattered very much on the open water what angle we hit the waves with, but he paddled without awareness, singing Johnny Cash tunes at full voice. I hesitated to put him in the canoe with Allie, but I knew that in a worst-case scenario I could handle the canoe on my own, so I was sure that Amanda should go with me until we got to camp.

We were in a beaver bog with no good places to pull to shore and rearrange canoe assignments, but we needed to make this change before we headed back out into the wind. Normally this would be a good (and fun) logic problem: how to get paddler A into the stern of canoe B and paddler B into canoe A without tipping either. The challenge was only turning the crowd against me, though. I didn't sense good things for our portage. With persistence and some good luck, we managed to make the switch, and we headed out toward the portage, which the group was happy to learn was actually where I had surmised during our brief respite. I told them that sometimes you just need to stop and look around and you can figure out where you are on the map, but not until I found the portage would they believe me.

As I pulled up to the rocky landing, I saw Allie and Dan still out in the middle of the lake battling it out, first forward, then backward, bouncing on the waves. I knew this combination wouldn't work either with a stronger but more stubborn paddler now in the bow. The voices in my head asked what it was this "experience" was meant to teach. Survival skills? Teamwork? If

so, it didn't seem a particularly productive learning situation. But why not? Was the real problem just the dire nature of the situation? Would I have worried about it on a calmer day? Would they have been more inclined to have found a rhythm to work together? I worried about such questions only briefly. What mattered was camp, and no matter how beaten we felt when we found one, we made it.

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The question is one of “content” over “experience.” Was it more important that they “get” the Thoreau they were reading or have some sort of comparable experience with Thoreau? Is the content of Thoreau most important or is literature some means to more important “subject matter”? We read the particularly amazing passage in which Thoreau describes the miniscule rivulets of ice melting in the spring and the grains of sand tumbling in the threads of water, grain by grain like blood cells, until he starts to see his own body as thawing earth. We discussed the passage many times to the continued confusion of many students. Yet when we simply talked or when they were writing in their journals, I could see that they were actually getting similar ideas, were awakening themselves to the metaphors that nature provides, a new way of seeing themselves.

We read Kathleen Dean Moore's wonderful passages about silence in *The Pine Island Paradox*. Our conversations at the passages always ended up at dead ends; the students weren't really willing to follow Moore's thinking about the importance of silence. But when I tried one of Moore's own experiments, and asked them to sit with their eyes closed and just listen, an idea that made them generally uncomfortable, the results were wonderful. I had gotten up and left them without saying anything. They later came to me wide-eyed about the experience. They hadn't known how to react: how long should they sit there? Was I coming back? Something

about the uncertainty made them *listen* more, made them more attuned to their surroundings. In a climate of academic rigor, it's difficult to say that "learning to listen" or sensory awareness is some inherently worthwhile pursuit (and impossible to grade), but I can't imagine more important experiences for students to have.

§

I vividly remember one afternoon on the first trip I'd led into the Boundary Waters the year before. We'd just finished a brutal 328-rod, hilly, rocky portage, all of us understandably sore, tired, and just a bit grumpy. One of my canoe groups had lost a paddle at the last portage, leaving them without a back-up, and I was steaming. Things were tense as we settled in for a quiet dinner of macaroni and cheese by a smoky fire as the sun set through puffy clouds on the horizon. One student, a young man from Chicago who had never been in the woods and who complained loudly about taking metal canoes because they were impossible to carry, had looked unhappy from the beginning. During the long portage, I didn't see if he ended up carrying one of the canoes or not, but no matter what he carried I knew he wouldn't be too happy. It's a challenge to read facial expressions or gestures in students you're only getting to know (and getting to know in a radically unfamiliar context for them). Who needs help? Who needs to be left alone? Who's just naturally mopey?

I thought I'd test the waters and sat down on a log beside him. "How you feeling?" He sat hunched over his mac and cheese, shoveling in large mouthfuls, the scrape of metal spoon on metal plate. "I feel whole," he said, without turning toward me or stopping his feeding frenzy and certainly not realizing what an inspiring answer he'd just given me.

Truth is, in hindsight, he might have actually said "I feel full." It makes more sense for the context, really, but I've retold the story the other way so many times that I can't let it go. It's

what I want to believe we do: make people whole. But if that's what I believe, do I imply that people without an education aren't whole? What I hear more often is that we make better people. But the same problem applies. Are college-educated people really better people? Of course not. But they might be a better version of themselves. Or maybe better to say they have the tools to be better versions of themselves (we all know too many people who don't avail themselves of that opportunity and remain jerks).

Whether one is a good person or not has nothing to do with his or her education. And despite my insistence on the importance of experiences like this in the wilderness, it may have nothing to do with particular experiences either. So what do I believe then? Out here in the wilderness it all seems clear enough: to give my students and myself experiences that are worthwhile on their own terms. That sounds reasonable enough even in the classroom, but it gets harder and harder to defend. Especially when the world wants *skills* or *critical thinkers*. What makes something "worthwhile"? Why read one book and not another? What are you getting out of that book?

My problem is that academic rigor has begun to be synonymous with learning. But sometimes it's the quiet, the emptying of the mind, the play and laughter of hanging out, in which we learn the most. Thinking that's predetermined isn't really thinking, it's buying into the program. Out here in the wilderness, it's hard to even imagine the program. Everything is reduced to how to most painlessly get this canoe and all of our gear into that next lake 300 rods away, everything reduced to the rhythm and sound of a paddle slicing clear water.

But the world wants to quantify our learning. Without quantifying it gets hard to justify. And how can I quantify what happens in the wild? I have trouble figuring out whether the questions raised by teaching in the wilderness differ from the classroom in kind or merely in degrees, but I tend to believe the latter.

An advisee was debating whether to take my course, and I was stunned when she asked, “But *why* is this course in that setting? It sounds nice, but what’s the educational purpose?” I really had no good answer for her: “Because it’s the subject?” I was shaken by how easily she seemed to buy wholesale into an outcome-based view of education, a pedagogical purpose behind everything. I don’t want to discount her earnestness and a desire for depth of learning, but when did we end up teaching students that the goal is more important than the experience itself?

§

We woke the day after our windy traverse of Lake One to a fog- and snow-shrouded lake. The stinging winds whipped ice and snow in long tendrils across the black water. The winds were howling just as they had the day before, and I knew we were going nowhere. I would not risk what we had risked the day before. But a long day in a cold, wind-whipped camp didn’t seem all that enticing either. We spent the morning as a fairly surly group in tents or huddled around a weak fire, but by afternoon we had rallied. We kept our camp set up where it was and, as the wind lessened, went out in small expeditions to explore a few nearby islands. By evening we were sharing stories around the fire as the skies cleared, the winds calmed, and we became confident that the weather was going to change.

And indeed it did. The next day, after a frosty morning, we headed out toward Lake Insula in quintessentially perfect September weather, cloudless with a warm sun. The wind still howled out on the larger lakes, but otherwise it could not have been more perfect. I could sense the group also starting to get into the rhythm of canoeing. The portages were awkward, but we managed them with a degree of efficiency at least and, on the whole, people learned how to handle the stern when the winds rose.

By late afternoon, we arrived at Lake Insula with a red sun glowing through the tamaracks and cedar. We set up camp, ventured into the lake to wash away our stress and sweat in the frigid waters, and I again remembered why I come on such adventures. I explained to my students that at some point I usually feel uncertain why I have come to the wilderness (like my advisee, I guess, I sometimes question intentions), but even in the midst of my doubts I start imagining and planning the next adventure. This is where I feel at home, and no doubt I will keep coming back, part of my genetic code I guess. Uncertainty and pain are part of the beauty of the journey, a fact I have to relearn along the way, again and again.

By the end of our journey a few days later, the weather had shifted 180 degrees—such are the vagaries of weather in the northwoods. The air was hot and sweaty and severe thunderstorms were rolling in. We were on our way out and had decided to get back as close to Lake One as we could for our last night, allow ourselves an easy out the next morning. I kept my canoe behind them, and took great pleasure in watching their movements now, canoes cruising fairly straight through the waves. Allie and Amanda led the way, swiftly getting far ahead, their canoe now straight as an arrow. Their growth was truly a marvel: they could read the map as well or better than I can, often serving as a counterpoint to my too often *laissez-faire* methods of map reading; they now canoed with efficiency and grace, and they had become portage machines, unpacking and moving forward with a startling precision, a finely-tuned canoe team that was a joy to watch. I would often see them a half mile ahead, packed up and crossing over, while the rest of us slowly made our way to shore, stretching and relaxing before even thinking of our Duluth packs. There is no way I question this as a type of learning: they understood the ways of the canoe, they understood the joy of silence on the water, they understood the teamwork it takes to efficiently cross the vast stretches of canoe country we crossed.

Unfortunately, this is not what we talk about when we talk about education: if this is what people should learn, well, just get a canoe and head out into the wilderness—you don't need college for that. It's the way I learned to live in the woods many years ago. College was, at one point, the furthest thing from my mind. It was this, this *experience*, this *life*, that mattered. And now I question whether I've lost that or if this brings me back to it. Those experiences in my youth made me who I am, so why shouldn't they be central to an education?

§

The last night, we camped in a small bay at the edge of Lake One, not far from the beaver bog where we'd taken stock of our situation that first afternoon. We planned to meet the other groups at the entry point in the morning, so I knew they'd also have to come by the bay at some point that night or the next morning. It was a beautiful night, cloud and fog all evening, then severe storms rolling in when we were comfortable in our tents.

But I was far from happy. Yes, I want to believe such experiences are all profundity and wonders, but the mundane realities are always there. I had had to scold a student for stealing the chocolate for our s'mores and for keeping food in her tent despite my repeated warnings that food in the tent meant bears; I had had to scramble far down the shoreline at twilight just to try to find some peace and quiet and get away from Dan's ongoing Sean Connery imitations (he had switched from Johnny Cash to Sean Connery, a joke that had been going on incessantly for days by that point); I had had to tell students not to cut down fresh wood although that had been emphasized from before our trip: *no cutting live trees for firewood*. This is not what I come to the wilderness for, I kept thinking. What, after all, had we learned?

The final morning, I had gone up the hill to poke around in the brush to see what I could find and enjoy a moment of silence only to hear one student hollering at full volume across the

lake because he thought he saw one of our other groups crossing the bay in the distance. I had utterly failed at conveying the quality of solitude (and the importance of preserving it for other travelers—actually a legal requirement in a national wilderness as well).

But is this really a failure? In hindsight I have to acknowledge that many years of experience in the woods have accustomed me to silence in ways that many students have yet to grasp. I have trouble knowing how I would have acted in similar situations at that age. On one hand, I could be pretty rowdy and obnoxious; on the other hand, I did actually appreciate the beauty of silence early on. But all of this is neither here nor there. The point is that my own experiences and expectations are an unfortunate lens placed over what my students were going through. For instance, do I focus on such frustrations, or do I focus on the previous afternoon when this same loud student had canoed with me two miles back into a severe wind to retrieve a daypack that one of his peers had left at a lunch stop?

We were tired and sore and really wanted just to get to our next campsite, but he quietly turned with me and headed back into the wind while the others went forward to scout campsites. There was an aesthetic pleasure to the silent rhythm we found, even if it was in spite of our anger that smoldered just below the surface at our companion who'd carelessly left the day pack. It felt as if we bonded over our disbelief at the situation, and crossed into the stiff waves at a straight and even keel, our muscles synched, our movements perfectly in tune, out to the far point where we'd had lunch an hour before, then back, the best canoeing we'd done on the whole trip. Does my sense of "getting it" or of "learning" set me up for failure? Who am I to say who gets what? My experience may have been frustrating, but that does not in any way reflect what my students learn or not.

§

I've always thought that we are not in a place, do not fully inhabit it, until we've worked our way to get there. But then am I now back to my "making better people" claim? I don't think so. We *all* work to get to the places we fully inhabit. We work in our own ways, our own times. And this applies to my own work as well: I am still working my way toward understanding what it is I do as a teacher, searching for some way to inhabit that space.

It's difficult for me to really understand what happened on that trip, what people learned, including me. The quantifying limits the experience—it's just buying into the program that experience always exceeds. There was no way that I wanted to deal with such trivialities as grading the experience. It was the last thing I wanted to do. In fact, the very crux of grading becomes evident in these experiences: do I grade their effort? Their actual learning? Their experience? If the latter is what is important, then my grade is meaningless at best and counterproductive at worst. The grade means I have predetermined what one should learn through their experience, but the very goal I have for such experiences is that everyone learns something that I can't predetermine. My goal is that they develop a personal relationship with the wild, and with their own wildness. We go to the woods for the unexpected, for the discovery of self and world. But such is the nature of my job; the gradebook was there on my desk when I returned, just like always. And just like always, I closed the book and stepped out back to look at the stars.