

By now the flowers have wilted, and perhaps, floated away—downstream—mingling with the rocks and sand of the high Rockies. They were temporary, not meant to last. We put them there to remember Justin.

We had walked up river, from Radium, not twenty-four hours after Justin had been there. Not twenty-four hours after Justin had left that place, and the world. The three of us walked in silence, not knowing the words that fit with our thoughts. We went to the Colorado looking for answers, and, at least for me, hoping for some semblance of meaning from this tragedy.

The construction of the railroad, years before, had left the river right shore littered with sharp granite. At the rapid called Eye of the Needle, the river is constricted between the railroad slag and a cliff on the left bank. At the top of the rapid is a rock—in the middle of the river. For a boat, there are two choices—go left or go right. The rapid is sandwiched by large flatwater pools. By anyone's standards, Eye of the Needle on the Upper Colorado is a straight forward rapid.

Justin was in an inflatable kayak on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008. He had his dog and a weekend's supply of gear. With him, was a group of thirty, celebrating the end of the spring semester at CU Boulder. Justin had more to celebrate. He had just turned thirty, was engaged and had his wedding invitations in the mail. Justin had also finished three years of school and now had his MBA. Everything was ahead of him.

I try to imagine how he felt. The excitement of a new river and new friends. The scenery spectacular. High mountains in the distance, aspen fringed meadows descending rapidly to the river, the deepening gorge of Lower Gore Canyon. The smell of earth in the gurgling waters. The birthplace of the Colorado just a few miles to the north. I can see him smiling. A river trip!

The river was busy that day. Boat after boat came through Eye of the Needle. As Justin approached, I am certain he felt the quickening awareness of a rapid unrun.

That would be Justin's last rapid. We know that he flipped his ducky. We know, too, that he made it to shore. What we don't know is how he ended up back in the water. No one saw. The group he was with, thinking, perhaps, that this was an easy float trip, continued past Justin. In his last moments, Justin was alone.

Somehow Justin drowned. Perhaps he slipped, hit his head, and rolled into the river. Maybe he had hit his head when his boat flipped, and slowly went unresponsive. We will never know. What we do know is that he is gone.

Justin's story is a tragedy. Everything was working against him that day. With hindsight, it seems so simple to fix. If his group had stayed together, and helped him, we might be laughing about it today. But that is not the case. So we must do the only option left to us—learn and prevent this from ever happening again.

The river is a sacred place. But it is also dangerous. If we have learned anything from Justin's story, it is that we must always maintain a heightened level of awareness. One mistake in the river can snowball into another, and another, until the worst happens.

So for Justin, let us always look out for one another and maintain respect for the power of the river. Let us look downstream and see the obstacles and potential hazards before they cause us harm. And finally, for Justin, let us go out and explore the rivers of the world safely.