

The Bond of the River

By Doug Ammons

People normally don't talk about their kayaking in terms of ethics. However, in my experience kayaking is deeply ethical. One of the most powerful examples of this might be called the bond of the river.

Ethics and kayaking seem an odd couple because kayaking is a recreation. Typically, people are in it to have fun, do their own thing, and escape from the normal workaday world. Almost by definition ethics is serious. For most rebellious kayaker types, it evokes the things that they try to get away from when they are recreating - like virtues, judgment, and duties. This odd couple may even seem like two opposites - self-focused fun versus altruism.

Ethics enters because even when we kayak easy rivers there is an element of seriousness. Although the water is nearly always forgiving, there are possible dangerous consequences that can't be ignored. The danger and seriousness, and the commitment necessary to deal with them, transform the recreation into something greater.

You'll see this immediately if you answer the question of who you'd like to have as partners. What qualities do you think of? A few off the top of my head would be funny, thoughtful, honest, competent, concerned about others, loyal, committed, and willing to endure hardship. We could make a long list and it would vary from person to person, but in general those are the kinds of things that would be on it. Nearly every one of them is an aspect of ethical behavior. Some might be called virtues, but all of them also have to do with how the person treats others. In a word, we're describing the ethics of our ideal partner.

If we would like those things from our partner, then we'd better be ready to give them ourselves. That actually is one of the fundamentals of ethics. You could be fancy and call it "reciprocity", or just note that it's the old golden rule. The fact is, if you want a good partner, then you'd better be one yourself.

The simplest ethical acts are things you learned as a kid, for instance taking turns. It doesn't matter whether it's a turn on the swing or surfing a wave. These are respect and care for others. They include going after a swimmer, helping with shuttles, getting lost gear back to its owner, or making room for somebody in an eddy. The most important one that underpins the others is helping those in need. This feeling, more than any other, forms the bond of the river.

I always took for granted that such things were bedrock attitudes in kayaking. Nobody ever told me. It seemed obvious they were needed out there, particularly when things got tough. It was also the attitude I saw in the older paddlers I started with, and it fit my view of the world. However, over the past few years I've seen some disturbing situations that suggest there are a lot of paddlers who don't think that way. Consider two examples.

At the popular artificial playspot in Missoula, Brennan's wave, last year a novice swam and none of the ten or twelve excellent paddlers in the eddy went after him. This wasn't a benign swim - the water was high and fast, there are trees in the current directly

below, and the bank downstream is rip-rapped and covered with dense brush with the current running through it. There are only a few places where it's possible to get out without struggling through thick willows in swift water. It would certainly be possible to get killed there, or at least have a really bad time. The one person who went after the swimmer was just putting on the river in a C-1. He chased him down, gathered his gear, and helped him out. I arrived just after it happened and came upon the C-1 paddler, who shook his head at the selfishness and lack of camaraderie he had witnessed. Nodding toward the eddy, he said "I just hope I never have to rely on any of those guys".

The second example is even more troublesome. A few years ago a friend of mine was surfing a big wave on a different river with a group that included professional paddlers from sponsored teams. Several paddlers were out on the wave together when one of them did a fast cutback, shot over and speared my friend hard. He flipped and was immediately swept downstream, struggling to roll and in such severe pain he nearly blacked out. He struggled for several minutes until he made it upright and got to the bank a good half mile down from the wave. As many as eight kayakers witnessed the incident. Nobody helped. The sponsored dude who speared him just pulled back into the eddy and kept surfing as if nothing had happened.

It took my friend a long time to pull his boat back upstream, and then he lay in his truck in a lot of pain for several hours; meanwhile, the dudes kept surfing and nobody paid any attention to the missing paddler. He drove to the emergency room after he noticed he was peeing blood. The doctors found he had cracked ribs, a partially ruptured spleen, and internal bleeding. He was freaking out when he called me for advice, because he had no medical insurance and the doctors were talking about having to remove his spleen. I tried to calm and reassure him. Over the next few weeks they backed off the surgery while he racked up large medical bills from the exams.

So what about the dude who speared him? Although confronted, the dude never apologized until a pointed discussion with his sponsor laid down the law: he could apologize and help pay the medical expenses, or he would be cut from sponsorship. That would probably have been the end of him as a professional kayaker, because what other company would ever want to be associated with that behavior? So with that ultimatum, he complied. However, he never did apologize to my friend's face. It took an additional ultimatum over the next several months for him to fax what can only be described as a pseudo-apology. My friend showed it to me. The main line was "I'm sorry you got hurt" - as if some outside force had done it without the dude's knowledge or participation, like Zeus throwing a lightning bolt from Mt. Olympus or a comet hitting the earth. It took the threat of losing his sponsorship and the damning effect that would have on his résumé even to say that. Just so we're clear about it, an ethical person would have said, "I'm sorry I speared you and sorry I didn't help afterwards. It was bad judgment. I hope you forgive me, and I'll never do it again." Actually, an ethical person would have taken off after the other guy, regardless of whose fault it was.

Only a little of the money ever made it. The dude had the funds to travel, party, and paddle all around the country, but couldn't cough up anything to pay for the injuries he had inflicted.

So what about ethics? I'm not picking on sponsored paddlers in general, because there are plenty of solid guys out there. I'm just pointing out that in this situation where

all the paddlers should have been looking out for each other, there was nothing but selfishness. There was no loyalty, no commitment, and no help for others. It was the negation of the bond of the river – and all for a few minutes of surfing.

It's one thing to have an attitude like that on a less difficult river, but it's quite another on a hard river. As the consequences become more serious the ethical principles become sharper. At the upper end of the sport where one is dealing with hard Class V and VI in uncompromising surroundings, it is possible to reach a kind of absolute purity of ethics. Typically, the attitudes reflect that. The partners are closer friends, and have a deep, even fierce sense of loyalty to each other.

I can say without hesitation that I have and always will put my life on the line to help partners - and I've found that true of nearly every serious paddler. It was seen last summer when Conrad Fourney's partners jumped into a class V rapid to try and pry him off the obstruction he was pinned on underwater. Conrad died, but his partners gave him everything they had short of their own lives, and that's the way it has to be. The same is true of Dugal Bremner some years ago, trapped in a siphon, which two of his partners actually got sucked through underwater while trying to free him. Or Pablo Perez, who was wedged under an unseen log in the middle of a drop, with two partners jumping in to grab him and try to pull him loose. Or Tim Gavin, where even after he had died the rescue team risked their lives to recover his body. That is the bond of the river. It binds us together even in death.

In my own career, while I loved the fun of freestyle and the challenge of whitewater, these other aspects are what most drew me to harder runs, and especially expeditions. There, I found the purity of friendship and commitment. I found a precious diamond. There was courage, honesty, and self-sacrifice for partners, while working toward a shared goal. I looked right in their eyes and knew exactly what they were thinking. There was no doubt, no hesitation, and no bullshit. I have never been to war and never been a soldier, but friends of mine did multiple tours in the Special Forces. They each told me they appreciated kayaking because of intensity of whitewater, and the sense of loyalty and camaraderie that their teams gave them. I understand that.

Kayaking is a sport. It is recreation and fun, but it can be much more. Class V is essentially synonymous with the likelihood of injury or death if a substantial mistake is made, and an arena like that can pull us to the greatest heights of moral behavior and the very best things we are capable of.

It may be that the ethics are clearest in serious whitewater, but it is in the easiest whitewater, and particularly with beginners, that our ethics may have even greater consequences. What we show those beginners defines what the sport is and what it will become in the future. It shouldn't require a desperate life and death situation to understand the importance of treating other people with the care and respect each of them deserve. I would hope it is self-evident that when you understand the bond of the river, you will also understand the place of ethics in kayaking.



Making Sense of Death

A number of years ago more than ten excellent paddlers died within a season, stunning many in the sport and putting a damper on the enthusiasm for pushing hard whitewater. The names included people at the top of the sport like Chuck Kern, Rich Weiss, Doug Gordon, and others who were less well known but extremely experienced, like Dugal Bremner, Tim Gavin, John Foss, and Joel Hathorne.

Here at the end of the 2007 season, we've had another shock, as three excellent paddlers died in less than a month: Americans Conrad Fourney and Max Lentz, and German Tim Weinmann, each in a situation that can only be considered bizarre. None of the cases had a clear cause, and all of them lead to a sinking feeling about the sport. More than once after the loss of a friend, I have asked myself whether it is worth it.

Despite all the publicity, the fact is there are not very many deaths in kayaking. Unfortunately, each year there seems to be another name to add, like that of Brennan Guth, a superb young paddler and friend of mine who drowned several years ago in a bizarre and heart-rending accident. Equally unfortunately, a great many of the deaths on rivers can be summed up as freak accidents or bizarre happenings. Those of us who feel the loss of friends try to gain some insight from their passing.

The desire to find a clear cause for death is powerful. Finding a reason gives us a salve for the wound, and the desire goes far beyond anything rational. It makes the death easier to handle, but also, knowing that cause, we can now hold it as a talisman to ward away the same thing from happening to us. I am as guilty of that as anybody. I feel the loss of my friends acutely and have spent many, many long nights staring into the darkness. I pour over accident reports and talk to people who seek resolution, but I have long realized there are many questions that will never be answered. The river never gives all the answers, and the hurt remains alive even after decades have passed.

The problem is, there are an infinite number of bizarre things that can happen on a river. Some things are more common, while others only ever happen once.

In that difficult season ten years ago, Paddler ran a number of articles on the theme of the accidents and the problem of "raising the ante", and asked to reprint one of my essays, "Why I paddle class V." There was a push to reevaluate the river rating scale, and to incorporate more safety training.

My German friends were deeply sympathetic to the problem. After a rash of members died in pins, broaches, entrapments in the 1980s, the German elite kayaking group AKC, the "Alpiner Kayak Club" instituted a serious program of safety training, developing most of the techniques that are standard today. Despite knowing a great deal more and people generally being more highly trained, the deaths still happen.

In many cases, the accidents largely look like an issue of being in the wrong spot at the wrong time. This is a truly unsatisfying answer because it hides the fact we can't tell head of time where the wrong spot might be. Most of the spots were only identifiable after something completely unexpected and desperate happened. In a number of cases, some of the very same lines had been paddled by another member of the group literally a few seconds before without any problem. It is the seeming arbitrariness of this that is so difficult to make peace with.

A brief history makes this apparent.

In the late 1990s, Rich Weiss was the best slalom racer in the US and one of the top two or three in the world. He was a phenomenally skilled paddler and river runner. He died when he did not clear a waterfall, became trapped in a small “room of doom” pocket and his partner was unable to reach him to help. To underscore the tragedy to the point of being unbearable, Rich’s pregnant wife was waiting downstream at the take out.

Rich died running a rapid well within his abilities. In fact, he’d run it the day before, and although class V, it was probably two grades easier than he could do technically. To those who knew him it was inconceivable he would have had any problem with that drop. That theme runs through many of the deaths. Some though, are even stranger.

Max Lentz, an excellent young paddler from Missoula, died on a class IV rapid on the upper Gauley last fall. He and others of his group had been running creek lines for several days, when Max drowned after his boat somehow got caught in a crack deep underwater. He and multiple members of his group had run that same line several times in the preceding days, and two other paddlers had run the same line just seconds before him. Somehow, as he came through, he became trapped in a crack that was completely underwater. Another paddler was right behind him and the very competent group immediately tried to extricate him, but all attempts failed. The question that was impossible to answer was, how did his boat get wedged in the crack in the first place? As best anybody could tell, the water level apparently suddenly decreased right as he went through the critical spot, allowing his boat to wedge down, then surged back to submerge Max completely underwater.

There probably is some reasonable physical explanation, but this was truly an “act of God.” How does such a strange thing get incorporated into our knowledge? Nobody could ever scout and paddle a line with this kind of assumption. The fact is, you can be an excellent paddler and yet die in what looks like a simple rapid for reasons you cannot see and cannot know.

Conrad Fournery, a veteran of the Stikine and tremendously experienced paddler, died in Nutcracker on the NF Payette in August, shocking the Idaho paddling community. It was a class V rapid on a well-known, difficult river, but also a rapid he’d run hundreds of times. Members of his group think he went through the hole to the left of the Nut and his sprayskirt blew. Whatever the reason, his water-filled boat broached against a fan rock just downstream and he was able to get out, but the current washed him into an underwater obstruction close to the left bank and flagged him around it. Conrad had an air pocket over his head from the fast current, could move and gesture for several minutes, but numerous attempts to rescue him failed and he drowned.

Tim Weinmann, one of Germany’s finest young paddlers, died on the Heiligenkreuz gorge of the Venter Ache last October. While showing several paddlers down the run, he was hammered in a rapid he had run dozens of times before, and swam. He signaled his companions, waving and pointing downstream, which they took to mean he was fine and would swim after his boat. He had at least 100 meters to the next whitewater. When they looked at him again, he was face down washing into the next rapid. There was a 24 hour search for the body, which was found in an eddy downstream. He was 26 years old and in tremendous physical condition. The bizarre possibility of a heart attack pends the outcome of an autopsy.

Strange problems are not the exception. They are the rule. The list of past deaths is filled with such stories.

Chuck Kern was one of the best river runners in the history of the sport, and died on a fairly simple move on the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Chuck attempted what appeared to be a boof, but which was actually a thin shelf bridging a sieve. Instead of skipping over the boof, his bow dropped into the sieve. All attempts to reach him failed and his body was not retrieved

until the dam upstream was turned off several days later. Dugal Bremner died in a crack exposed on a class IV rapid at lower water on the Silver fork of the American River. The team scouted the rapid, which was a longish slide. The main features looked like crossing waves, but actually were formed by a bedrock crack running in the direction of the current; the boat settled into this siphon. He was stable for some time, but unable to get his boat to release. Two other members waded to his boat and got ahold of it, but were actually sucked into and through the siphon, popping up downstream. Finally, Dugal and his boat were wedged underwater and he drowned. Brennan Guth swam out of a drop on the Rio Palquin in Chile, a rapid much easier than the extremely difficult rapids he'd just been running in the hours before. The swim washed Brennan into a cave, where he held himself spread eagled across the sides against the current for more than an hour until he succumbed to exhaustion and was swept underwater. His partner, an equally experienced paddler and a long time safety instructor - who to my knowledge and experience has always been one of the most safety conscious paddlers in existence and *never* without adequate safety gear - didn't have a throw rope this one time.

Joel Hathorne missed a small eddy at the top of a cascade on the first descent of Warren Creek, probably due to the same kind of misreading as Chuck. His body was never found. John Foss literally disappeared right in the middle of a Class IV+ rapid on a first descent in Peru, to the stunned bewilderment of his partners who had run the same line 30 seconds before. His body was found two weeks later far downstream. Pablo was stuffed under and pinned by a log in a chute, invisible in the backwash of a hole. The first paddler of his group had plunged into the hole, bounced off the log, and immediately eddied out to warn the others. Before he could, Pablo was already in the middle of the rapid, hit the hole and went under the log. Within a few seconds his hand groped above the surface and his partners desperately did everything they could, jumping in, grabbing it, hitting it with a throw rope, trying to shinny out on the log - all to no avail. Tim Gavin, who probably knew the Upper Blackwater River better than anybody else, died there getting sucked into an undercut on a rapid he'd named years before, gruesomely and ironically, "Just a matter of time".

And there are the dozens or even hundreds of times other people have come ever so close to being in the above group. I'm one of them. Among other things, I've been pinned several times underwater in desperate situations, each one of them completely bizarre. One of them involved being wedged between the bottom and a submerged log in what appeared to be a simple, straightforward rapid. It was a silent, desperate struggle underwater, and then a swim downstream and a pummeling on some rocks before I reached safety. After retrieving my boat and returning to the rapid to figure out what happened, it took several minutes of careful and very puzzled looking before I saw the log, buried deep underwater in a wave and essentially invisible. It was just another drop out of dozens of class IV drops on a class V run, as well as being at least two grades easier than several other drops I'd already run, and a drop nobody ever would have scouted. Even if they had, they couldn't have seen the fatal hazard lurking there. To add to all these, I've rescued other paddlers who found themselves in unpredictable and nearly fatal situations. I've been told by friends, or heard through the grapevine, about dozens of other situations where the person was stuffed through a cave, a sieve or siphon, trapped under a log, hung up on rebar sticking out of a submerged cement block, tangled with underwater debris, and popped out somewhere downstream safely.

These more striking situations grade into the mishaps that virtually every paddler has, things that end up being personal fears, or even the punch line to a local joke. However, the horror stories capture the imagination, particularly when you're among the ghosts who can

relate. All of them underscore the complexity of what may happen, as well as the limits of what we really know out there. We can be extraordinarily experienced and skilled, take care of everything we see, and still not take care of the one unseen key that determines whether we live or die.

A few general lessons:

Lesson 1: Virtually no deaths happen on cutting edge whitewater. Essentially all of them occurred on rapids that were well within the abilities of the kayakers.

Lesson 2: While we believe we have an acceptable level of control on the river, in virtually every case there was something additional that occurred which the paddler couldn't have prepared for.

Lesson 3: You can die in a simple rapid. The flip side of this is, you also can get away with the most astonishing misjudgments and errors. There is no accounting for this, but a prudent person would choose good judgment and fewer errors as the way to go.

Lesson 4: Error cascades: When one thing goes wrong, it often leads to another and another in what I call an error cascade. The water magnifies each error and carries it into the future in a powerful way. The key in kayaking is to stay in control, and when that isn't completely possible, to quickly bring any mistake back into control. In a sense, a major part of kayaking includes the skills of constant and creative correction to keep from falling into an error cascade with a bad ending. You should assume that any error cascade may have a bad ending.

Lesson 5: Very infrequently, in the wrong spot, even one simple decision can lead to an error that is not retrievable. Most unfortunately, those are almost always spots that you cannot see ahead of time: a thumb-sized stick that catches your life jacket, an underwater obstruction, a rock with a crack just wide enough for your paddle blade if it comes in at just a particular angle, or another that just fits your foot if you happen to be swimming and kick at that particular instant at a certain water level. Accidents are always somewhere in the details.

Lesson 6: no matter how well conditioned you are, your body may fail you. There are limits to what it can do or survive. Extreme alpinist and tough guy Marc Twight got a lot of mileage out of saying he trained like a maniac in order to make it harder for mountains to kill him. Well, that was Marc's acumen for publicity more than an accurate reflection of reality, as I'm sure he knows. Mountains and rivers are not out to kill us, and they most certainly are not adversaries. They are beautiful physical wonders completely unconcerned about our existence. If we are going to live with them for a while – whether that is a few minutes, days or weeks – mountains and rivers simply have certain hazards that we must learn to deal with, physically and mentally. Our skill at adventure sports proves it's possible to do that to an amazing and inspiring degree, but only when we are prepared and in excellent condition.

Lesson 7: It is our own decision to be in those places, so it is likewise our responsibility to have the skills and conditioning to do it as safely as we can. The adventure sports are challenging precisely because those environments are only partially predictable. The unpredictability is a major element of what draws us there; so learn your skills well and always be open to learning more. Rivers have been practicing what they do a lot longer than any of us have been kayaking. Perhaps the greatest lesson they can teach is that we should never stop learning.

Lesson 8: If you are worried about getting injured or dying while kayaking, that is a useful concern that should be channeled into positive action. Get better conditioned, work on your roll as well as all your other paddling and rescue skills. A paddler can narrow the range of problems by a healthy safe attitude, having good gear and partners, choosing runs carefully. If

worry or fear cripples your fun, then seek solutions. If that doesn't work, back off or find another sport.

Lesson 9: The numbers don't lie – overall, kayaking is a safe sport. You can paddle and enjoy rivers safely for decades. But it is equally true that a single ugly experience can weigh heavily on our enjoyment and attitude, and in extremely unfortunate situations - just like in having a drunk driver hit you or tripping and falling down the stairs at home - it is possible to get injured or killed. Nobody has a sure and certain path. And revealingly, those who do have sure and certain paths often eagerly give them up to find something more interesting.

The beauty of rivers is in large part the same kind of beauty that good music has. It has patterns that delight us and evoke our deepest feelings of excitement, awe, and mystery. Even the simplest surf wave is changing and surging, and even the simplest eddyline is a wonder of complexity. Add up a river full of such things and you have the treasures of the planet spread before you. The river is the essence of creativity and change, creating rapids and features of boundless variety. But among those changes and slight unpredictabilities - the very things that create our pleasure - lie features that can injure and kill us.

The river doesn't care. It is a force of nature, following the laws of physics and showing us continually that flowing water contains all the beauty and magic of the world. Learning to engage that magic is what creates our sport. Challenge and fun, as well as danger and death, all come from the same place. It is up to you to decide what that means.

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A story and a half: Controlling the Lightswitch // A line worth drawing

My kids have taught me some things about kayaking. One is, there's no escaping the strange thoughts we fall into. One might call them our private derangements. Amusingly, they lead to life's beauties and absurdities; they create our insights and delusions.

Without ever explaining it in so many words, the kids have shown me that the mindsets build naturally as we live, tracking our experience, making each of us an oddity of his personal history. By exploring we learn what's what, from the first burn on the stove to each time we crash headlong into reality, we learn consequences and control. And we learn fun. Watch the intensity of a toddler as he investigates flicking the lightswitch on the wall, and you will see our fate. The control of light and dark bewitches him. He is compulsive and delighted. Later nuances, like controlling the flow of movement climbing a rock wall or paddling down a river, are only natural evolutions in the Art of the Lightswitch.

Throughout each foray into control our inner world tries to accommodate the lessons of the outer. This turns out to be an impossible job. Inevitably we get painfully smacked because it's hard to guess the answers before we know the rules. The bad experiences become papered over by elaborate stories. None of them are really true, but they make us feel better. Often portions of the patchwork are drafty, and uneasiness or even fear swirl through. The fact of the matter is that life's edges jab at us for mistakes and we mend the wounds as best we can. Though tell-tale signs of panic sometimes appear when we near the repairs, this is just part of being human.

Arising from our imperfect control of life's lightswitches, neuroses dwell in the patchwork - but so does understanding and health. Insight, awareness, judgment - these are built in haphazardly. Our only prayer is to be cautious and not to blunder into oblivion before we correct mistakes, and afterward not to wear the scars too lightly or heavily, but just right.

The diciest problem in all this exploration might be best expressed in a paradox: *sometimes danger lies in safety*. I have yet to fully understand the implications of this, but I know it's true. The problem is when we make the right decisions, do the right things in the right way, we never find out how close to disaster we actually are. When you think about it, this amounts to successful rationalization and should be cheered. Yet, sometimes we are carried into a feeling of security and our guard is lowered - then we get a glimpse of the reality beyond the patchwork. That is when we realize how well we *really* control the lightswitch.

A Line Worth Drawing

It had been a great weekend. Monty and I couldn't have been happier. Weather and water levels were right, the back roads were open, and together with Paul we'd managed to find another major drainage with an outrageous kayaking run. For the past two days our quarry had been a river-sized stream cascading down steep granite bedrock. Boundary Creek was the third of our first descents this spring, and it had been everything we hoped for.

We were after fluid gems whose facets no one had seen, whose waters no one had touched. Sparkling and rushing in hidden canyons, we knew they were out there. On successive weekends we'd found one, another, then another. Hard but possible, with sweeping waterslides, waterfalls, chutes, boulders... And there were more waiting for us. In them we found life in a nutshell. Friendship became clear flowing water. It was our search and our bliss alone, because nobody else knew about the streams or cared - and that suited us just fine. Tonight as we drove toward Northwestern Montana with another four hours 'till home, we were happy.

As usual, Monty drove very fast. Across the deep canyon at Moyie Falls we swerved around on the empty bridge, screeching to a stop, then looked into the chasm at the violent falls 400 feet below. For a few thoughtful moments we watched its ferocious beauty, eyes caught by the thick sheets of water falling... and we were off again.

Thick forest cloaked the road on either side and we worried about deer in the flattening light. The last of the sun's rays siphoned over the horizon as we sped past the junction with Highway 508 up the Yaak River valley. It was 8pm.

I waved a hand at the road splitting off to the left. "Let's head up to look at the Falls." Monty hit the brakes and we bounced off the road, turned and headed north on 508. "If it looks good, I might run it."

In his easy-going manner, Monty looked over at me and smiled. "Ok, Doug," he said as he shifted gears and accelerated up the steep grade, "I'll watch."

I was on a roll and not about to stop. I had paddled a lot that spring doing all the hardest runs in the region, and felt solid - very solid. Our first descents had included hundreds of hard class five and six rapids. I had run without a single problem all sorts of convoluted drops no one else wanted to touch, drawing the line only at a few. I didn't think I was cocky, but I was confident of my control, my strength, and my judgment. I had done too many things right to believe I could make a mistake.

Yaak Falls is the exclamation point of the Yaak River. After lazily meandering through meadows and gentle forest, the river abruptly attacks upturned bedrock. Starting at the Falls is a canyon broken open by fault lines and hewn by rushing water. The walls squeeze the current into channels, zigzagging through the rock like the serrations of a saw. But despite its churning, the water hasn't had time to smooth many edges. Paddlers put on the river below the falls with the feeling that they're putting the Big Guy behind them, but still have to duck a roundhouse that's coming. They paddle downstream anyway because it's a great run. You just have to be in the mood.

The falls had remained unrun for good reason. It has two sections, each with its own bizarre and fatal hazards. The upper part is a series of broken bedrock steps and when peak runoff pumps down the riverbed, deep abrupt holes form with the water furiously slamming back on itself. Several span large parts of the river, snorting like monsters, linked by sharp waves angling back and forth and spewing into violently folding piles of water. Teeth of broken rock gape in the current. But as impressive as this is, the lower half of the falls is what captures the imagination, and once viewed, no one ever sees anything else in their mind's eye at the thought of Yaak Falls.

After the gauntlet above empties into a turbulent straightaway the river rushes down a long and steep ramp into a blank rock wall. There is no pillow action, no mounding up of pressure, no momentary hesitation of force, the water simply explodes off the wall like the jet from a huge fire hose and gushes into a wildly geysering runout, then into another rapid. Of course, any paddler can see the key to the line is to miss the snorting holes above and the wall below. But like many things in life, this is easier said than done.

The first time I had been to the Yaak a few years before, several friends and I explored the possibilities of running the falls. Or more accurately, we tried to understand a spectacle of raw power, because what we saw frightened us.

The water was high, and five of us were there to run the river. The deafening roar of the falls filled the air with energy. We were moths drawn to a candle flame by an inexplicable urge. Clambering excitedly around on the rock walls above the torrent, each view only enticed us further. We *had* to see what it would do, like kids at the railroad tracks when they put rocks and pennies down on the rails, then jump to safety just before the train rounds the bend and bears down on them. They cringe, feeling the earth shake as the steel behemoth drums by, seemingly close enough to touch. Holding their hands back, they fight the feeling of being snatched away. An immense presence rises, power filling space down into the pit of their stomachs. A sigh of thanks when it's past and rumbling away confined to its dual ribbons of steel. Tension released, they scramble to find the pulverized rock and mashed foil remnants of the pennies.

Standing next to the falls was like being near the tracks as those locomotives charged past, but the water never stopped, it never ended. The bank was safe enough but there was a funny feeling in the air that we all noticed - like gazing into the hypnotic stare of a wild animal, eager to be near it but fearing it as well. As if standing there too long would allow the river to mesmerize us, reach up, and drag us in.

The five of us had rustled about finding sticks to throw in and gauge the current, standard procedure for plumbing an unknown rapid. After 8 or 10 big sticks we were stymied. Every one of them disappeared without a trace. We dragged ever-bigger pieces of debris to the edge and heaved them into the torrent to satisfy our curiosity. Still, they disappeared. Our frustration increased until we finally found a piece that seemed worthy of the powers we were dealing with - something large enough to indicate exactly what was going on down there.

It took all five of us to work the 30-foot log into a position above the lower falls. Ah! Now we'd see what was what! "One, two, three, push!" Splash! Seized and roughly yanked downstream by the water's hands, the log accelerated toward the edge. It hesitated, then was whisked down the ramp. Like a battering ram it smashed straight into the wall with a sharp THWACK - and disappeared. We waited, waited - and waited. We hung on each second, puzzlement grew, "Where is it?" Ten seconds later it erupted out of the huge geysers below the falls, its end in splinters. Breaching completely out of the water, it fell like a skinny whale with rigor mortis, slammed against the far rock wall, and was swallowed by the rapid downstream. We were quiet, looked at each other for a moment, then said together in a low voice, "Damn." That was enough for us.

Despite such clear warnings, time and experience have a way of changing your perspective. Psychic patches grow over the fears you had, and you come to feel like the toddler who flicks the lightswitch again and again - convinced of how well you control light and dark. No doubt this is why hope springs eternal, and probably why stupidity does too. All in all, one of life's stranger phenomena is that a flexible mind can come to see the harsh negatives and sure impossibilities of the world as quite fluid. So it was between me and Yaak Falls. I considered it unfinished business. It had been on my mind like a promise I hadn't even realized I had made to myself. "Someday...", I had thought, "someday I'll run this thing." And with a wave of my hand, the time had come. In ten minutes we pulled off at a deserted overlook directly above its cascades.

A kayak seems a pitiful twig to cast into such a world, particularly with someone in it. But it depends. Water is nature's magic. It is hard and soft, relentless and forgiving. Kayaking is all about sensing the balance between these opposites. Running class six rapids requires touching the heart of the river, knowing how far to go and when to back off. Despite the implied aggressiveness, delicate intuition is the key, for recklessness or a lack of attention to details will get you killed.

I hopped out of Monty's truck and began scouting. The light would be failing in a few more minutes, so if I was going to run the falls, I had to be quick. The water was high, even higher than before, the speed and power frightening - hard big water class six and very different from the steep creeks we had been doing. After a casual glance at the upper section, I carefully evaluated the ramp. It was clear what to do. The right three-quarters of the river was death, but I had no intention of following the path of our ill-fated log. A huge hole spanned the river adjacent to where the blank wall ended, but there was a small gap. If I went over the ramp with lots of speed, the right angle, and hit the bottom in just the right place, I'd punch through the main hole. Then I'd have to deal with the turbulent backwash, but I could see how to do that. Any loss of angle or speed and I'd be pulled back into the hole, something that was not an option. After looking carefully, I was satisfied I could make it.

I got my gear on and headed up to the top, looking as I went by the upper part and handwaving myself through it. "Ok, punch the first two ledge holes," I said to myself, "then head right past the big hole and through the diagonals at the bottom. Catch the eddy above the ramp." The line seemed clear, but I glided on a feeling, and the feeling was wrong. In my haste and certainty I didn't scout the upper half carefully. I forgot that the truth lives in the details.

I warmed up at the top for a few minutes, visualized the line, then headed down. I hit the first ledge hole at the wrong angle. It slapped me sideways and I instantly typewritered across into the center of the river. Spinning quickly back to the right I was in blank territory, lost in the rapid. Twisting out of a hole and over a big breaking wave, I stared down into the gut of two huge diagonals funneling together. And behind them - death. A monstrous and malevolent hole

I hadn't thought I'd be anywhere near. If I went in, I'd be lucky to flush out still conscious, but conscious or unconscious wouldn't matter - because I'd follow the log line directly into the rock wall at the bottom of the falls.

The world is a tunnel. GETRIGHT burned the wordless laserbeam in my head. Two quick strokes to angle sharply to the right as I flushed down the funnel, one more for speed into the bottom. Crushed downward by tons of water in the breaking diagonals. *Stay in control. GETRIGHT*. The boat reared and I felt it begin twisting and shooting upward in a towering backendo. *Can't land upside down. GETRIGHT is all that matters. The whole universe is nothing but GETRIGHT*. Reaching back with my paddle as I erupted into the air, I spun the boat into an airborne pirouette - and landed perfectly upright moving fast toward the right bank. Two sharp strokes and a quick turn back to the left and I was on line, whisked past the edge of the hole and into the rearing, bucking diagonals at the bottom. I sped into an eddy a short distance above the ramp, shouting at myself. *I botched that so bad. Jesus, I was off-line. Why didn't I scout carefully? Why didn't I look at those ledge holes more closely? I could have died in that hole or what was below. I was so ridiculously, stupidly, idiotically off-line.*

Not wanting to dwell on the looming implications of my near-miss, I peeled out of the eddy toward the lower falls, sure of the line. "No, No, NO!", I heard Monty screaming. Spooked by what had just happened, I jammed on the brakes, and just made it into a tiny eddy right at the edge of the ramp, thinking "What the *hell?*"

Then I heard Monty again. He was shouting, "Go, Go, GO!"

"I'm an idiot," I thought, and gathered myself together. I ran the second half, punching the hole and plunging through the lower runout, just as I had planned.

When I carried my boat back up to the truck it was almost dark. Monty said softly, "I was really worried about you for a second at the top."

All I could do was shake my head and say, "Me too." We left it at that and drove home.

Life is a treasure. It is an evolving mirror of experience and emotion. We strive to keep it full, not to squander it recklessly. Skill, intuition, and care equalize our bets with Nature, but if we don't use the few tools we have the game goes awry very quickly - and then we play a riskier game than we know. I've got a patch now for Yaak Falls, not a big one, but it still bothers me. Sometimes I look under it to remind myself how sharp reality might be in my game of angles and split seconds.

Where do we draw the line? How well do we really control the lightswitch? Those are unanswered questions, as always. The point is to keep our eyes open and learn from reality's answers. That one evening at Yaak Falls, I nearly found the one answer I didn't want to know. And that is a line worth drawing.

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