
Kayaking

Kiffaney likes to walk. I find that walking takes too much time. You don't go fast enough walking. The scenery changes much too slowly. In a life where I've put too much emphasis on putting the most into every moment, it's not surprise that I tried kayaking. Actually whitewater rafting moves at about the same speed. The difference is that in a raft I would have to deal with other people. Whitewater rafting is a social event, of which I have limited skills. Kayaking was for me, or so I thought. I took some classes to prepare me for a river experience. I started with pool lessons at a local recreation center. Then I took my kayak to Chatfield Reservoir to try it in real, though still, water. Here is how I felt about kayaking after practicing in the lake.

Date: Tue, 23 May 89 10:23:05 MDT

From: rfrank (Roger Frank)

To: jlockwood@Sun.COM

Kayaking in a lake is a lot different. Last night as I sat in my boat, preparing to intentionally roll it over and do an underwater escape, several differences came to mind. In a pool, I know there is nothing but 6 feet of warm, clear water between me and the bottom of the pool. In a lake, if I go down, I go down and down and down.

The pool water is clear: I can see what's happening. Yet I sat there contemplating rolling blindly into opaque lake water - darkness. What waited just below the surface? A submerged log? An unexpected boulder? And the pool was warm. One quick touch of the lake water, filled from melting snow, made me ask "Do I really want to trade this upright position - breathing air, seeing sunlight, warm and safe - for the imminent alternative - under cold, dark water, struggling to free myself from my boat?"

The more I thought about it, the tougher it got to go through with it. But I did roll it over, and time and time again found a way to get out and back to the surface.

Let's hope that I learn to do a full roll, back upright, quickly and reliably. If I don't get it this week in the pool class, I'm starting another class this weekend: all day for three days. It's with a locally well-respected organization (the Boulder Outdoor Center). The first day will be on a lake and the next two will be up on a river near Glenwood Springs. I think I'm excited about it, though I don't know for sure that I'm ready for a river.

There were other things that made me nervous about kayaking. One was my swimming ability. Though I did some swimming in Rachael Creek as a boy of 10 in Arkansas, that was mostly just to get out of the creek after jumping into it at the swimming hole. My real swimming was done in the Atlantic Ocean, where we lived only two miles from the coast. I would go out with my snorkel and mask and a raft and spend hours diving to the bottom

to look for interesting things, such as horseshoe crabs. I was fairly comfortable swimming in the ocean. Swimming in the ocean seemed much easier to me than swimming in fresh water, such as in a lake or river. In fresh water, I seem to spend much of my energy just trying to keep from sinking, let alone getting anywhere. I am much more comfortable in the ocean than on any inland water. The thought of having to swim for my life if it came to that in a river made me nervous.

I believe everyone has a fear of drowning. In safety training for kayaking, we watched films of mistakes people made that led to drowning. Watching it on someone's home VCR tape was bad enough. Then there was a scene in the movie, *Abyss*, which was especially powerful. Here is the description of the scene from the movie that I wrote in 1989:

The movie takes place almost entirely under water. At one point, the leading man and lady, who are husband and wife in the movie, are in a small submarine thousands of feet down, near their "home base," an environmental diving platform. The diving platform is like a small house, safe and warm and full of air. But the tiny submarine the two are in has just been damaged and they are a hundred yards or so from the safety of the platform. The sub cannot move and the hull has been ruptured. Water is flowing into the craft at an increasingly alarming rate. They can swim to safety but wait - there is only one diving suit! Who gets it? He doesn't hesitate: he hands it to her. He wants her to live even though it's certain death for him.

Throughout the movie viewers have learned that he "thinks" with his heart. She, on the other hand, thinks with her head. As the small air pocket in the cabin is filling with water, she is thinking there must be another way. But what? Then she has an idea. He is a better swimmer than she is, so he should put the diving suit on. She will allow herself to simply drown. At that depth, the water is so cold that her unprotected body will be thermally shocked and maybe, just maybe, if he swims with her as fast as he can to the main diving platform, they will be able to revive her with the medical equipment there. It will take several minutes but it's the only chance that they have.

She gives up taking the diving suit and oxygen that he has offered and surviving for sure for the very slim chance that he will be able to revive her and that they will both live. He rejects her idea immediately, knowing there is almost no chance she will come out of it alive. But she insists that there is no other way. He puts the suit on just as the water, still rising in the cabin, reaches their necks. Now she is pressing her face as close to the top of the compartment as she can. Only a few inches of air remain trapped, and that's going fast. In terror she screams that Oh No she's not so sure this is a good idea but it's too late. The last of the air in the submarine is gone.

He is now underwater, with his diving suit secure and the oxygen from his tanks on. Through the plexiglas faceplate he watches her terror mount as his frustration and anger rise. Then she grabs his shoulders and pulls herself down into the water, placing her face right in front of his. She wants to see his face, to hold his image

fixed in her mind to the last moment. That last moment comes quickly as the water rushes into her lungs and as she chillingly dies.

I overcame my fears and signed up for a weekend kayaking trip on the Colorado River in up the mountains west on Denver. Kiffaney and I put the kayak on the roof of the Acura on a roof rack, threw the wet suit and all the other gear in the trunk, and headed up to the whitewater. We spent Friday night in a rustic cabin. I slept fitfully in anticipation of the coming river run. After the next day's events, I wrote this email.

Date: Wed, 31 May 89 12:34:10 MDT
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Kayaking is a sport of extremes. The excitement on racing inches away from very large boulders on only the thinnest cushion of frothing whitewater is an incredible rush. It was more exciting than I had imagined. But the danger is there, too, and very real.

Physically, kayaking is not fun. Humans have developed an appreciation of being stable. That's why we have two legs. That's why there are more cars than motorcycles on the road, and more bicycles than unicycles. It's also why people sleep lying down better than sitting up.

In a kayak, even in the stillest water, I had a definite feeling that being right side up was a temporary luxury. Being upside down was an inevitable orientation – it was just a matter of when it would happen. When I did capsize in the river, even when it was intentional for practice rescues, the feeling of being sucked down into the dark, cold water was scary. Strong currents owned the boat at times like that, and the human passenger went wherever the river wished. The river does not care for human life or safety.

A kayak is not all that comfortable. It is meant to be a tight fit. Closed-cell padding is placed over the knees and on either side of the hip to assure a snug fit. That's for control, which is good when the kayaker is in control, but it also tends to make getting out of the boat difficult when the kayaker is out of control, upside down, and screaming down a narrow run of rapids and rocks.

It is also difficult to get to really good whitewater. This trip for a whitewater river run was to a site up on the Colorado near Glenwood Springs. That's a 3 1/2 hour drive each way. I don't like to spend that much time driving anywhere. Especially after the experience, I was in no shape to drive home. The sport is physically demanding as well as requiring high degrees of confidence and control.

I will give the highest marks to the people from the Boulder Outdoor Center (BOC). They were professional and knowledgeable and courteous. The guides on the trip, who were all versed in river rescue, were in the ratio of about 4 students per guide. This turned out to be a good number except for one occasion when

in one group four people capsized all within ten seconds of each other. I was one of the four and immediately did an underwater exit from my kayak. This exit, like all my exits and rescues on the trip, were in relatively calm water. A spill in one of the several fast runs would have been terrifying for me, especially while trying to pry myself from the kayak and then to try to avoid getting pinned by it as the larger kayak and the smaller human both careened among the boulders and currents.

The people from the BOC who do this regularly remain one of the big reasons to get into this sport. They are neat people – healthy, fun loving, treasuring each minute. They know it takes a clear mind and a strong body to be good at this sport, and they've made the commitment. I find them fascinating and considerably different from many of the people I meet in my usual job function. I'm not sure what the tie-in is, but I also noticed that being single was the standard for serious kayakers.

I really enjoyed whitewater kayaking – the thrill in the rapids, the really neat people, the scenery on the Colorado River. But there were many things which I couldn't ignore that are against continuing this sport. Perhaps the biggest negative is that it is more dangerous than I thought. It's a sport where a relatively fragile boat and an even more fragile human are put in an environment of tons of icy river water and large, unyielding rocks. A skilled kayaker can usually keep these two sets of things apart. I have no doubt that for the experienced river kayakers on our trip, the water we went through was quite safe. At least, though there was an "assumed risk", they understood it and felt comfortable with it.

But that "assumed risk" includes a long list of dangers that must be recognized, with names like "keepers" and "stoppers" and "hydraulics" and painfully descriptive situations like "foot entrapment" and "vertical pinning" and "broaching". I studied a book titled *River Rescue* for a few days before the first whitewater trip. I don't know when in my life I have actually had nightmares directly relating to the things that could go wrong in something I was anticipating. But I did, based on what I read in the book that could go wrong, some of which even the most experienced kayaker could not avoid.

Kayaking started for me with several sessions in the pool gaining some rudimentary experience. I spent time on the Chatfield and Boulder reservoirs learning more. Finally, I went on real whitewater with the Boulder Outdoor Center. It's an experience I'll never forget.

I've done it now. Do I want to do this again? Is the risk worth it? I think of all the years Kiff and I have spent together as a family and getting our sons off to college. We are now to the point where we can enjoy each other, and do the things that we want to do together. It seems selfish to chance giving up those coming years by taking what is a real risk in kayaking. I must ask myself if the benefits I get from kayaking are significantly more than the danger and the effort and the expense associated with continuing the sport. I've run the whitewater. I feel that for now, at this point in my life, this one experience is enough. I will spend more time in Colorado's beautiful mountains, and perhaps even on the rivers in rafts. Or on paths along the banks, as I am lured by the mountain streams and rivers. I'm glad I did it, and I'm glad it's done.