

Mind, Body, and the Boundary Waters

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AS I EASED MYSELF BEHIND THE WHEEL of my car in early spring 1994, I was exhausted. I had been on campus all day teaching and consulting with students and had just finished teaching a three-hour night class. I reached with my left arm to close the car door, but my arm would not move. Both my arm and shoulder were numb and rigid. I twisted in my seat, closed the door with my right arm, and set out on the hour-long drive home in a suburb of Minneapolis.

The neurologists' diagnosis was fibromyalgia, or myofascial pain syndrome, a rheumatic disorder involving inflammation of the sheath surrounding the muscles. My condition was brought on by stress; I was in my first year of a teaching career, my oldest son was unhappy with our move from Chicago, and I was a single parent because my husband was working weekdays in Chicago. My body's response was pain. Proper medication helped somewhat, but more important to my recovery were three months of twice-weekly deep muscle massage. As I lay face down on the table, the therapist worked to free my frozen muscles. After months of massage, I decided that it was time for me to try to move my own muscles. I enrolled in a low-impact aerobics class and slowly, with exercise, the pain decreased, and I began to feel more like myself. I had never been a true athlete, but had been a casual runner, having run 5K races in my thirties. I started to think about running again now that I was flexible enough to lift my arm over my head.

After aerobics one day, I noticed brochures advertising a canoeing camp for women in Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness region (BWCAW). This would give me a goal to work for, a reward for becoming fit. I called a friend in Chicago, and she and I signed up for a week in August. We joined a group of fifty women and were divided into groups by age and ability. After a day of orientation, including learning how to rescue a swamped canoe and how to pack light, we set off with our leader and a group of strangers on a four-day canoe trip.

It was unbelievably tough and incredibly satisfying at the same time. We traveled a circuit of lakes, paddling through each and then portaging our belongings to the next one. Portaging meant carrying my gear in a green canvas Duluth pack or balancing my aluminum canoe on my shoulders. I failed at my first attempt at carrying the 60-pound canoe, tossing it off to the side when I slipped on a wet boulder. Eventually I got the guts to try it again and managed to carry it a few short portages. The worst was what we called our "jungle portage," carrying our stuff on a swampy trail, jumping from rock to rock to avoid ending up knee-deep in mud. The mushrooms and ferns were bright orange and yellow in the green undergrowth, and the mosquitoes buzzed around my ears. When we stopped for lunch, we took a picture of our bruised legs and muddy boots. The scene was decidedly unfeminine, but I felt empowered by my body's newfound abilities to lift and carry and move packs and canoes from one place to another. I even discovered the pleasures of swimming naked, the water flowing over my whole body, albeit with boots on to protect my feet from rocky shores.

That first trip began my long love affair with canoeing in the Boundary Waters. The next year I found an outfitter and over the next three years I persuaded friends to go with me, each time on a different route. In 1997 I moved to Utah to take a faculty position at BYU, but was determined to get back to the Boundary Waters every summer. I've missed only one year since. Various friends and friends of friends have joined me, and last year I took the women in my book group. The year before I took two women in their seventies and had a ball. They could navigate, cook, and paddle as well as the rest of us, so we did not mind carrying the canoes for them. They were great conversationalists and tickled to be "wilderness women."

The prospect of four days in the wilderness carrying canoes has been an incentive to keep exercising all year. I took a swim class one spring, so I could feel more comfortable swimming in the lakes. As a child I was afraid of the water, and I felt most secure swimming within reach of the pool's edge. Now I worked hard in the class to overcome my sense of panic. Eventually I was able to control my fears and work up to a half-hour continuous swim.

That skill proved important in my 1999 summer trip, which remains a highlight in my memory. Joining me were my old friend from Chicago (who had gone on my first Boundary Waters trip) and her 21-year old daughter, a college student in Oregon. Anne, a Utah friend, brought her 17-year old daughter, Lydia. Anne's sister—Eileen, a high school teacher—also came, thinking the trip would give her time to decide between the two men who wanted to marry her. Rounding out the group were my older sister, Christine, an artist and excellent cook; her 20-year old daughter, Alice, also an artist and a strong swimmer; and Amy, my sister's niece, who turned out to have the best organizational skills of the

group. Nine people made it a large group, and because of the family ties, I really wanted it to be a fun trip.

Ten days before our arrival, the Boundary Waters were struck by a sudden violent storm, and great swaths of trees were blown down like matchsticks by the force of the wind. The day we arrived, they had finished clearing our access road, and electricity had just been restored to our outfitter. Our timing was good, or so we thought.

Late in our first afternoon out, Lydia began to run a high fever and became delirious. We contemplated turning back, but no one wanted to interrupt our long-planned trip, so we continued. Near sundown we came across a doctor and his son at a nearby camp. He looked her over and assured us it was probably flu and she would be fine. Against her protests, we dunked her in the cool lake waters and plied her with aspirin to lower her fever.

The next day we passed the doctor's camp again on our way north up the Granite River. Unbeknownst to me, he advised some of our group to run the next set of rapids, something our outfitter had expressly told us not to do. While I was carrying the first canoe down the portage trail, the twenty-something daughters at the top of the trail decided to try to run the rapids. From below I watched aghast as the canoe headed down the rapids, hit a large boulder, split its seam and crumpled like aluminum foil. Fortunately, the girls swam free. Unfortunately, the canoe was pinned against the rock by the force of the rushing river.

We trudged up the trail and climbed into the water to get a closer look. We had to grab onto a submerged tree trunk to steady ourselves. We wondered what to do. If we did not remove the canoe, our three remaining canoes would each have to hold three persons and three packs. So fully loaded, they would move very slowly in the water and it would mean harder and longer paddling. Our other choice was to free the canoe, a doubtful proposition given the force of the water and its damaged condition. Weighing in favor of freeing it was the prospect of its remaining there as a monument to our stupidity. Besides, we had been told by the Forest Service video to "Leave No Trace," and, as my sister wisely noted, it was a rather large trace.

We climbed over rocks into the river rapids, and positioned ourselves, feet on the lower gunwale and hands on the upper gunwale. It took us over an hour of concerted effort, wedging and bracing our weight against the canoe, before we dislodged it from the rock and it floated free. (We later learned that the outfitter usually had to send a block and tackle to extract canoes from that spot.) Anne turned the canoe upside down against a rock, jumped up and down on it until it assumed some semblance of its former shape, then patched the seam with duct tape. We sentenced the girls to paddle that canoe, armed with a cook pot for bailing, and it held together as we paddled north.

Rescuing the canoe had eaten up a large chunk of time, so we did not reach our destination until early evening. We rejected several campsites as too risky because of leaning and damaged trees, but we finally settled for one that had few such hazards. My sister began cooking dinner on the camp stove while others of us set up tents. I went down to the shore to swim and suddenly a microburst struck us. The winds caught the canoes on shore and tossed them into the water. My Chicago friend and I dived in to rescue them, all too aware that common sense dictates that we should avoid metal canoes in water in thunderstorms. As I was approaching shore, canoe in tow, I heard a loud crack and saw a 100-foot tree falling toward my sister. Time froze as I watched, horrified, from the water. I prepared for her death, wondering what I would tell my mother. Amazingly my sister ducked the tree, picked up the full pots, and jumped into a tent. I rushed up the shore, and we huddled together inside, laughing and crying, waiting to be killed by the next falling tree as the storm raged around us.

The storm quickly blew over and all was quiet as we emerged from the tents to a colorful sunset-streaked sky. A loon pirouetted across the lake, and all was peaceful. At dinner someone remarked that Heavenly Father must really love us to have saved us from all these disasters. I retorted that I had been thinking that God must be trying to kill us. The next day Lydia recovered from the flu, and we found a fantastic campsite where we swam, talked, and relaxed during our last evening together.

This year was my eighth trip, and at age fifty-one, I no longer felt as strong or as ambitious. Six of us set out, four of us history professors along with an English teacher and an artist. In five days we traversed over 30 miles of terrain, paddled through 22 lakes, and made 21 portages. On our first day, we tackled two brutally long and difficult portages with swamps, boulders, and steep hills. I was paired with Julie, a short and slight woman better suited to library work than hefting canoes. I helped her put the canoe on her shoulders, and she set out with a determined look. At the bottom of the first steep hill, she faltered, dropped the canoe to one side, and burst into tears. An accomplished scholar, she was unaccustomed to failure. I knew from experience that canoe-carrying is more a matter of balance than strength, but in her mind, it was just too hard.

At her moment of crisis, I sympathized. I remembered a recent trip mountain biking with Anne, the one who had repaired the damaged canoe with duct tape. She was a more experienced mountain biker, and that day we ended up on a trail beyond my ability. I tried to be game, but I was very discouraged. As we coasted downhill to an overlook, my pedal struck a rock and down I went. I was not badly hurt, but I burst into tears. It was not the pain, but my inability to measure up that frustrated me. I wanted to be able to mountain bike, but my fear of falling

was making me too cautious and thus accident-prone. I knew I had to make a choice: either bike more or give it up.

During my long hours of paddling on Minnesota's glassy lakes, I have wrestled with that and other questions: What should I ask of my body? What can I expect of myself? How do I deal with my fears? I had overcome my fears of falling to capably carry a canoe. I had overcome my fears of drowning to become a competent swimmer. In the end, I decided that was enough for me. Mountain-biking is not important enough to me to push myself beyond fear to mastery. Call it lack of guts, but I think my decision is the wisdom of age. No longer do I feel I have to carry the canoe the full portage. No longer do I have to be the first canoe to shore, nor do I have to be the one to navigate. Now I get pleasure from watching others discover what they can do.

My frozen shoulder in a deserted parking lot late one night ironically led me to an adventurous life I lead now. My visits to the Boundary Waters helped me develop my physical strength and discipline my mind to overcome my fears. As age imposes its limits, I savor what I still can do.