

100 Campfires: Towards a Personal Canoeing Philosophy

By David Bain

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I guess that in my 17 years of novice canoeing, I have racked up a little over 100 “tent” nights. For me that’s 100 or so campfires, 100 chances to talk, surrounded by the silence. In fact, some of the best conversations I’ve ever had have been around a campfire. A little Scotch, great friends, the vault of the sky. . . . Over time, and a lot of conversation, the great group of guys I trip with have sure chewed the fat—a lot. And we have slowly, over that time, arrived at a common understanding of why we do this thing, this ritual from other centuries passed: Canoeing. Because I’m not sure it fits very well into the 21st century. It’s an anachronism.

At first it seemed important, to me anyway, to have “an approach” to canoeing: when to trip, who to trip with, what to take. But I had an incredible lack of practical experience to draw on. So I started to read. I went to the library and used book stores, and I discovered eBay.

And over the next five years or so, I read every canoe book I could get my hands on. I read Grey Owl and canoe history. I read about contemporary canoe trips and Bill Mason, and I even enjoyed some canoeing fiction. After reading Jerry Dennis’ *From a Wooden Canoe*, I caught the bug and collected antique paddles, axes, packs and snowshoes. I bought a wood and canvas canoe that weighed about 115 lbs, and later sold it when I realized that I couldn’t get 115 lbs of canoe on top of my Honda Civic.

I even found time for canoeing. After five years I had been on a total of five canoe trips of five days each. And by then I owned and had read over 300 books on canoeing. I think you can imagine where this is going . . .

I remember being picked up at 2 am for one of those early trips to Killarney. I was at the end of the driveway with my own gear, plus all of the group gear (because, of course, I had read all of those books so I thought I knew exactly what we needed). I even had the mixed CD of Gordon Lightfoot music that we would listen to—exclusively—all the way to Killarney. When we arrived, I started to give advice. I quoted Sig Olson and Bill Mason and Edward Abbey. I set up the tarp, I consulted on the placement of everyone’s tents. I had brought canoeing books on the trip with me, and encouraged my companions to read them. My first trip had a total of three adults and two 11 year olds. By my fourth trip there were only two of us left. Message received: I had become a royal pain in the ass.

The four of us who canoe together now have been at it as a group for seven years. One of them is my buddy Mike. He was on my first trip, and has been on every trip with me since. This summer will be our 17th trip together. But I still buy and read books about the wilderness and canoeing, even if I’ve tried to stop being in charge of every aspect of the trip. In all that reading, 17 annual one-week trips, and all those campfire conversations, had an approach to canoeing worth sharing actually emerged? Had we as a group developed any sort of useful canoeing philosophy? Is there such a thing?

I teach Canadian history and English to Grade 7 and 8 students. I guess as the “history guy,” my contribution was context. So naturally, between teaching about the native people and the Voyageurs for the past 21 years, I began to develop an understanding of where canoeing in Canada has come from.

If I was an IT guy, I might break canoeing in Canada into distinct software versions:

Canoeing 1.0 – Aboriginal canoeing

Canoeing 2.0 – The fur trade years: The canoe as a truck

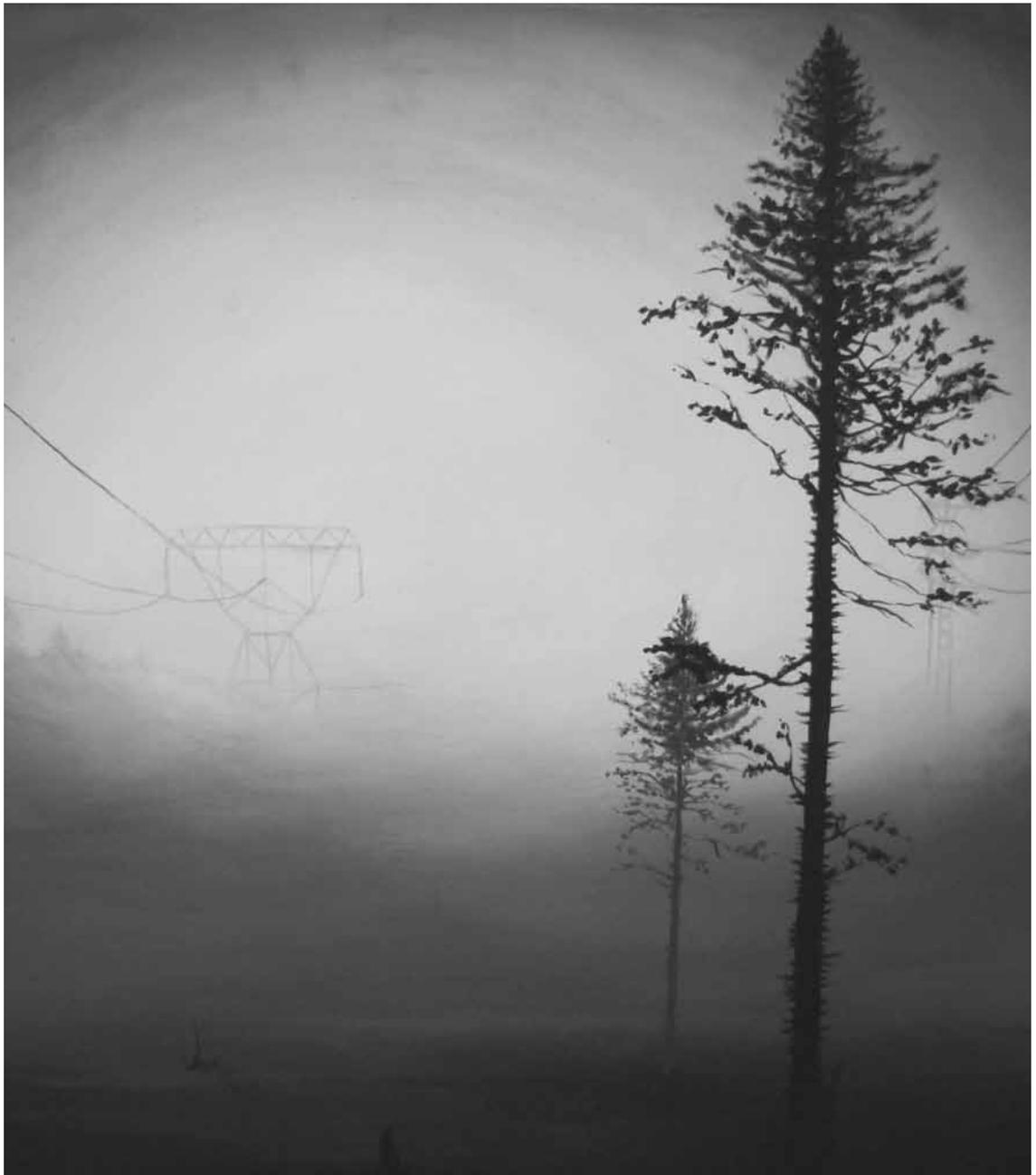
Canoeing 3.0 – The recreation years (the afternoon paddle, linen and parasol crowd)

Canoeing 4.0 – The early trippers: The wood/canvas–balsam bed crowd

Canoeing 5.0 – The fibreglass / Kevlar / Royalex / Thermarest crowd

Canoeing 6.0 – is here now....

I call it Canoeing 6.0. You can call it anything you want, but I believe that if you look critically at the last ten years, you will see that inevitable change has come to the canoeing community. The average length of a canoe trip has been steadily dropping for years. The rise



of sea kayaking and white-water playboating has made canoeing, for many, an activity for a few hours in an afternoon, like a round of golf. And I think that it is fairly easy to see that one of the biggest changes for wilderness canoeing is the exponential growth in communications technology.

A case in point: In Ted Kerasote's *Out There: In the Wild in a Wired Age*, he addresses one of the key issues we face in the early 21st century: the effect that our use of communication technology has on our relationships with others, and on the existing social fabric, or, in this case, on the fabric of a canoe trip. In 2003, when Kerasote's partner takes a Sat phone on a trip down the Horton, Kerasote finds the nature of his experience changing. The two of them do not have it for emergency only. They are expected by those back home to "stay in touch," and Kerasote finds that, in his experience, this changes the entire nature of the trip.

When his partner starts to call home daily, Kerasote puts it this way: "Even on the Horton, the blessing of uncluttered mental space is no longer a function of remoteness . . . but of desire . . ." This is important to him because, "What matters and what is of little consequence becomes much clearer to me out here. In less quiet places, the noise surrounding my life disguises the difference."

Kerasote goes on to say, "It is not that the Sat phone is innovative. We both use technology at home. It's that it crosses some boundary erected in my mind as to what is appropriate behaviour when you are 'out there.'"

That was 2003. Today the Sat phone, the SPOT, the GPS, the iPod, and the ability to text and blog and use solar chargers while in previously remote areas of Canada's wilderness, have all become second nature. And to some of us it is frightening the speed with which they have become as accepted on the trip as a new design of sleeping pad or tent. Because unlike a tent or a sleeping pad, the adoption of remote communications technology can fundamentally alter the tripping experience, if you choose to let it. I would never argue against safety; wireless

communication would have saved Hornby, and Hubbard, no question. But beyond safety, are there other effects—either positive or negative?

In my Grade 8 English class we often discuss social media and networking, which is natural since the parents of half of my students work for RIM. We recently read an article in USA Today that highlighted several books addressing the effects of communications technologies on human relationships. The article concludes that we are in the middle of an enormous shift, and while it is impossible to truly grasp the significance of events while they are occurring, the point that came through loud and clear to my students was that the connections that we now enjoy with those who are *elsewhere* are weakening that connections we have with the people *we are actually with*. We've confused continual connectivity with real connection. In the article, Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, is quoted as saying, "Technology is good at giving you more and more 'friended' people, more and more contacts all over the world, . . . It's not so good at giving you the contacts that count." With the right technology we can now blog from some remote arctic river, and we can Facebook from a campfire anywhere in the back of beyond. But at what cost to our wilderness experience?

The group I canoe with has so far adopted the approach that we will take technology (which is so far limited to cell phones) for emergency use only, on those more and more frequent occasions when we would have service. We want to focus our time together on the company of not only each other but also, and more importantly, the fifth member of our little group—the beautiful location we have spent all this energy getting to. Some of the places we visit, such as the eastern shoreline of Georgian Bay, are indeed unique. We try to give them our full, undivided attention for the always too short time we are there.

Are my fellow paddlers Luddites? Maybe, but I don't think so. We use technology freely at home. We choose not to use it when we canoe.

Again, this is not a rant against technology in and of itself; it is a cautionary stance against the effect that the use of technology can have on the nature of the canoe tripping experience. If one of us calls home the rest are in trouble for not doing the same. More than that, the authors whose writings I most admire contain passages that speak to the peace, the remoteness, the isolation of the canoeing experience. How would 21st century communications affect their experiences? I suspect the impact would be significant.

In the 1956 classic, *The Singing Wilderness*, Sigurd Olson created something quite different from the “land ethic” of earlier ecologists like Aldo Leopold; Olson created a land “aesthetic.” Olson observes that, “Looking for old pine knots to burn, picking berries, and paddling a canoe are not only fulfilling in themselves, they are an opportunity to participate in an act hallowed by forgotten generations.” He goes on to say that, “The movement of a canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is part of it . . . and wind in the trees. . . . When a man is part of his canoe, he is part of all that canoes have ever known.” For Olson, “peace is not to be mistaken for silence . . . rather it is a oneness with nature that is energizing and sustaining.”

Similarly, Paul Gruchow in *Travels in Canoe Country* writes that a wilderness journey appeals to that part of our being that is not dependent upon wisdom, but rather those activities that depend upon experience with the physical world . . . how to steer a canoe into the wind, how to make a fire in the rain, whether that sound in the night is sinister or benign . . . and to our capacity for delight and wonder . . . to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives . . . to our sense of beauty and pain the connection between the two forgotten, “until after we have all day battled a fierce wind and at last, with aching muscles, discover the bliss that descends with last light.” The perfect medicine, I think we would agree, for the nature deficit facing so many of our urban youth in Canada.

In the same vein, in *Outside of Straight Lines*, Robert Perkins, writing of a trip to the Torngat

Mountains, mused after several weeks of solo tripping about his inability to look at “the whole of things . . . not just through some system’s eye or preconceived notion” but “how to hold the whole picture, not just a fragment of it. . . . How to keep it outside of straight lines.”

I also think Pierre Trudeau was right when in 1944 he wrote the words that we all know so well:

What sets a canoeing expedition apart is that it purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other. Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe and you are already a child of nature.

Now, in a canoe, where these premises are based on nature in its original state the mind conforms to that higher wisdom which we call natural philosophy; later, that healthy methodology and acquired humility will be useful in confronting mystical and spiritual questions.

His quote is an observation not only on the benefits of a specific location to travel, but more importantly on the *mode* of travel. I would like to suggest that another great Canadian thinker, Marshall McLuhan, would have agreed with Trudeau. I don’t know if McLuhan ever canoed, but his famous observation that the medium of delivery of any message has at least as much impact as the message itself, if not more, is equally applicable to canoeing as it is to media.

I think that the way you canoe sends a deep, unconscious message to your brain, and it defines the canoeing experience for you and those with you. Chew up the map and bag lakes in an all-day race to cover territory, and you are not going to be a fan of Sig Olson’s assertion that “without stillness there can be no knowing.” I imagine that if you take the leash of 21st century communication with you on your journey, you would not embrace

his dictum that “without divorcement from outside influences, man cannot know what spirit means.”

Some of us may in fact have sensed this detachment from the wilderness experience from something as common as a camera. When you are too focused on getting the picture, you can miss the forest for the trees.

Here is a case in point: I once struggled to get a photo of a bear swimming in Temagami with a cheap point and shoot digital camera. I knew that I couldn't get a great shot with that camera, but somehow the importance of getting that shot so that I could “remember the experience” became more important than actually looking at the bear with my eyes, using my ears, really “taking in” the experience as it happened, rather than settling for a less than perfect two-dimensional reminder to look at later. I suspect that we all have stories like this that we could share.

I have seen my companions simply put the camera down, and try to live in the now, in the present, and take the “mental” picture home, which is a more complete one since it includes sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. If a camera can detach us from the experience in that way, how much more interference can we expect from a communication device that invites all of the interruptions, separation anxieties and “noise” of the world we left behind to join us?

The eagerness of writers like Olson and others to embrace the isolation of the Canadian wilderness, and leave behind the noise of the modern world has shaped the philosophy of those I canoe with. Your philosophy will differ, and of course the challenge is to find those to trip with whose approach is compatible with your own.

Outside forces threaten. In 2008, potential changes to the Navigational Water Protection Act proposed at the federal level raised the spectre of a time when the historic right to paddle our streams and rivers will be challenged. This issue is ongoing, and may again raise its ugly head. In 2011, registration regulations for canoes, instructors and trip

leaders were proposed by Transport Canada with little or no input from the recreational canoeing community. A recent news story that quoted an Ontario government official as saying that certain areas of Crown Land in the province would be set aside for “fly-in” outfitters certainly set off alarm bells for many in the paddling community.

The comfortable days when canoe tripping was an accepted mainstream Canadian cultural activity may be behind us. Canoeing 6.0, and all the changes that it entails, beckons. Whether W.L. Morton's contention that “the alternative penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life” holds true in future, remains to be seen. In fact, canoeing may come to be viewed as a “subversive” activity, outside of the new mainstream of Canadian culture, a voice in the wilderness, as it were.

My group of trippers, certainly, are content to apply the brakes. We will remain, for now, paddlers in Canoeing Version 5.0—the Pandora's box of “technical improvements to paddle sports” is one that we are content to leave to the early adopters among our recreational canoeing community. As Roy MacGregor begins his book, *Escape: In Search of the Natural Soul of Canada*, with a quote from Melville: “It is not down on any map . . . true places never are.” I suspect that you won't find them on a GPS, either.

So what is in your canoeing future? Are you eager to embrace Canoeing 6.0? Are you content to stay firmly in Version 5.0? Or do you have visions of returning to the “good old days” of wood and canvas? Regardless, I would love to sit around a fire sometime and talk about it. I'll bring the Scotch. And I promise, when that time comes, I'll be the one doing the listening.

See you on the water.

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