
DAY ONE

IT IS OVER THE SOFTLY SPOKEN OBJECTION OF LISA, my wife, that I head to northern Minnesota for another solo canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW).

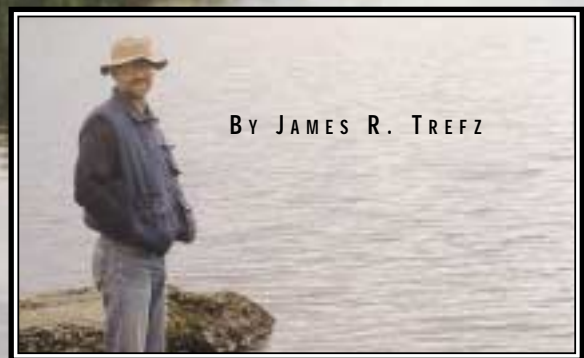
Lisa worries about me. I tell her that my finely tuned actuarial risk/return analysis skills will serve me well. She responds with a comment about “tail events” and she says that my risk tolerance is bit higher than it should be. But she knows how important these trips are to me, so I am off.

After the long drive to northern Minnesota from my home in Iowa I spend the night in my tent at a public campground on my first lake. I am up with the sun, as is my habit, and after a quick breakfast I load my three packs into my canoe and shove off. It has been a year since I have steered a canoe, and it takes me a few minutes to find my paddling rhythm. I realize that I don't have the packs set quite

right so that the weighting of the canoe is a bit off, making it harder to steer. My muscles are already complaining.

Before long I have found my paddling stroke, and the bow of my canoe is cutting smoothly through the water. I fleetingly think of the work projects that troubled me on the drive up. I think about my family, knowing that they worry about me being alone in the wilderness for five days. But I can already sense these thoughts fading, replaced by ones more immediate. I look around. I am alone on the lake, the sun is just peeking between the thick spruce on the shore, the water is like glass. The only sounds I hear are the water as it slides by the canoe, the occasional small splash of my paddle, and the birds chattering in the woods.

The BWCAW is a million acres of lakes, rocks, and trees. The granite that dominates the area was formed long ago as the crust of the young earth cooled. Twelve thousand years ago the last glacier receded, leaving behind craters and depressions that became the lakes of today, lakes that the last few generations have given names from the mundane to the magical: Long; Knife; Little Saganaga; Gabimichigami. The hardy Ojibway Indians claim this area as their ancestral home. In the mid-seventeenth century rugged European traders, known as Voyageurs, at-



BY JAMES R. TREFZ

REFLECTIONS

tacked its lakes and portages with legendary glee, claiming its rich treasure of furs. In modern times there have been protracted fights over its use between those who would open it to development and those who would permanently preserve it as wilderness. In 1958 it was set aside as a roadless, motorless area, and christened the BWCAW.

For reasons I do not fully understand, the particular beauty of this wilderness touches me in a deep place and I keep coming back. This trip is my ninth, and my fourth alone.

Over the years portages have been cut between the lakes, many of them by the Voyageurs. The detailed maps of the area mark these portages with dotted lines. The lines tell you direction, distance, and altitude; they don't mark the mud holes, the fallen trees, the slippery rocks. Most canoeists portage as little as possible. I rather like the break from paddling, and the chance to hike for a while. And I like the smell of the woods.

I find the trail head of my first portage. I carefully pull my kevlar canoe alongside the shore, step out into the water, and lift my

Your power comes
from the first step.
What a lot of people
can't accept is that
there is no control.
You can't see the
entire journey.

— Ed Gillette,
sea kayaker who
paddled alone from
California to Hawaii

packs onto dry land. I load up with the lightest pack, hoist my 42-pound canoe onto my shoulders, and move across the portage. The trail is well-used and smooth. I know they won't all be this easy. After surveying the lake at the other end — a relatively small one that I will quickly traverse — I head back, pick up the remaining two packs, and walk the trail for the final time. I properly distribute the pack weight in the canoe, and shove off.

Five lakes and four portages later it is mid-afternoon and I select a campsite. There is a fine art to this: The site must be easily accessible from the water, have a great view, and offer a smooth place to pitch the tent. Most of all it must face the wind, as this is the only hope for an evening

relatively free of mosquitoes. My site is a good one, and I set about making camp. Supper consists of freeze-dried beef stew added to boiling water, along with hot chocolate and a granola bar. I hang the food pack from a tree back in the woods, then sit by my campfire and watch the sun settle beyond the far shore.

There is a peculiar quietness to the north woods at night. The

Even in the solitary wilderness of northern Minnesota,
it's hard for an actuary to leave thoughts of work behind.

But those thoughts can sound very different
when they're surrounded by silence.

IN STILL WATER

air settles in thick and fragrant. Though there is usually a gentle breeze moving through the branches of the overhanging trees, this soft rustling is more suggestive of silence than of sound. Because I love the feel of the night up here, even when I am bone tired I rarely fall asleep easily. Of course this also has something to do with the dark isolation; my imagination toys with sinister possibilities when I first lie down, and it takes a concentrated effort to calm it. As I fall asleep, thoughts of work and home flow through my mind. I let them be, and they pass on.

DAY TWO

IF YOU WANT SOLITUDE in the Boundary Waters, long portages are your friend. They separate the casual from the serious canoeist, and quickly isolate you. Solitude is one of my goals, so I have selected a tough portage to start out the day. By the time I have walked its hilly mile-and-a-half length for the final time I am beaded in sweat and surrounded by hungry mosquitoes. I re-apply repellent, and shove off.

I am now on a meandering river, which I will paddle a good part of the day. I like these rivers; the pace is slow and the paddling is easy. I find myself reflecting on my experience of “busyness.” At work my mind is busy, of course, usually with thoughts that take me out of the present moment to things that are more long term, more distant, more intricate. As I paddle, I am busy attending to very direct and immediate things – the angle of the canoe, the character of the waves and current, the type of stroke to take next. Everything I deal with in my canoe concerns the present moment. It has a distilling power that refreshes me.

As I turn a bend in the river, I lock eyes with a deer that has been drinking along the shore. After considering the threat I might pose, it bolts into the woods.

Beavers are plentiful, and make their presence known. I often see tree stumps along portages that bear their unmistakable teeth marks. They fell trees to build dams, thus to create deeper pools of water in which to build their homes. These dams are marvels of engineering; although built of only logs, branches, and mud, they do hold back water. I come upon one. I step out onto it, which holds my weight easily, and slide my canoe to the other side. It is the first of several I will cross today.

I am pleased when I finally exit the river. Unlike most lakes,



It is not that
birds speak, but that
men learn silence.

—Kathleen Raine

the murky river water isn't fit to drink, and my supply is dwindling. I refill my water bottles from the next lake and drink deeply, savoring the crisp taste.

As I paddle by two men fishing in a canoe, I ask them how many fish they have caught. The answer comes in a disgusted tone. “One. Yesterday.” My boss, an avid angler, can't understand that I just like to paddle and hike.

I reach the small lake on which I have planned to camp, and am pleased to see that its only campsite is unoccupied. I will have the lake to myself. The site is an unusually good one, with a small rocky cliff on one side, a flat, soft, pine-needle bed for the tent, and a westerly view. I will spend tomorrow here.

DAY THREE

IT IS COMMON FOR CANOEISTS to build a “duff day” into their trip. You will find them fishing,

exploring, drying out their clothes, and just plain relaxing. I have a specific purpose in mind for my duff day: I intend to sit on a rock, alone and silent. I have no particular list of things to think about; I simply want to spend some time being present in this place. After breakfast I take my poncho, water bottle, and a few granola bars to the rocky cliff and try to get comfortable.

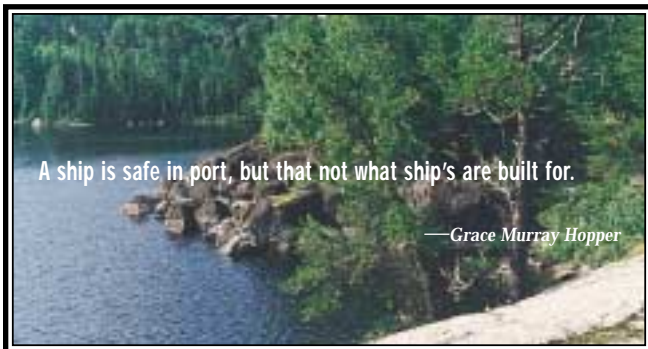
I check my watch frequently at first. What am I doing here? I fight the urge to pack the canoe and move on. The unfinished work projects I left behind crowd into my mind. I should have finished them before I left. I push these thoughts aside. A group of canoeists paddle by. I wonder what they think about the guy sitting on a rock. I slowly relax and look around. I pick out a partially submerged rock and an old jack pine that leans out over it. They each have a history. Is their history any less real, any less compelling, because there is no one to tell it? I ponder my own history, and the legacy I hope to leave behind. It spits rain off and on; I don't move. I look at my watch and am startled to realize that three hours have passed since I last checked.

It is with regret that I finally acknowledge that the sun is starting to set and that my day is done.

DAY FOUR

THE SKY IS CLEAR WHEN I BREAK CAMP, but soon thick clouds pile up and the wind stiffens. As the rain starts to pelt down, I shelter the canoe in the lee of an island and hunker beneath my poncho. The storm passes quickly, leaving a sky of thick, mountainous, fast-moving clouds. When I hoist my canoe at the next portage I am drenched by the rainwater that has collected in it.

I have reached the most dangerous point of my trip. I am the greatest distance I will be from my car—although not more than one day's hard paddle away—and I am in a very remote area. I take great care on the portages. It is clear that they haven't been crossed recently; should I slip on a rock and damage a leg, I could sit unfound for days.



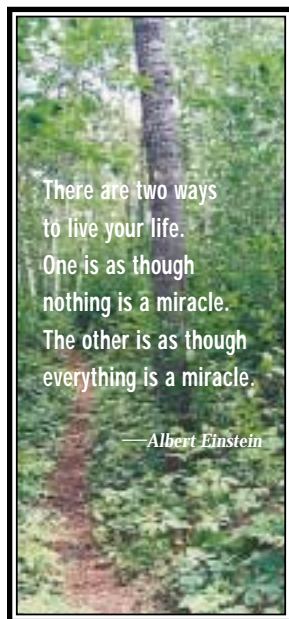
A ship is safe in port, but that not what ship's are built for.

—Grace Murray Hopper

I struggle across a long portage into a very small lake. The map tells me that at the other end is a short 10-rod portage. I finally spy the trail head—on the other side of a hundred feet of impassable mud. The lake's water level has dropped, and there is no way to reach the portage. My stubbornness emerges, and I refuse to backtrack. I select the best spot I can find and land the canoe. Using my compass, I scout ahead to the next lake, looking for a reasonable path to carry a canoe. There isn't one. I choose the least unreasonable path. I can only manage one pack at a time, as the treacherous footing and low branches conspire to keep me from passing, so I end up making nine arduous trips through that unforgiving woods. It has taken me two hours to move my gear 165 feet.

The next lake has a large expanse of open water that I must cross. I usually avoid this if possible; wind can come up fast, and I do not like to fight whitecaps. The water is choppy as I set out toward my chosen campsite, on an island near the far shore. I cinch up the chin strap on my boonie hat.

Steering a canoe in rough water can be tricky, especially when solo. As I reach the middle of the lake, the wind picks up and begins to change direction. I am paddling hard to keep my heading. As I lean into a stroke, my weight shifts just as an unexpectedly strong wave hits my bow. The gunwale of the canoe dips down and touches the water, and the canoe totters on the brink of capsizing. I right it and paddle furiously to regain control. I pull hard the rest of the way to my campsite. My heart is still pounding when I reach it.



There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

—Albert Einstein

As I am preparing supper, I sneeze. I am startled to hear a “Bless you” from behind me. Two people are paddling close by my site. I am gratified by their simple gesture. I face the water the rest of the evening.

Black bears live in the north woods. These bears are excellent swimmers, so island campsites are no protection. They climb trees extremely well. They have a keen sense of smell, and are particularly fond of human food. They are relatively shy, unless they are very hungry or have be-

come accustomed to people. (One sees them much more frequently in well-traveled areas.) And if treated with respect and common sense, black bears, unlike some of their cousins, are relatively harmless.

So I take certain precautions. I keep no food in my tent. A friend once unwillingly shared his tent and a candy bar with a large black bear. And I don't leave any food in the campsite. Instead I hang the food pack from a tree, high enough that it can't be reached from the ground and far enough from the trunk that a climbing bear can't reach it.

The wind dies down as the sun sets. Although it has been a fine trip, I am ready to be done.



Life comes without warning.

—Lieh Tzu

DAY FIVE

I WAKE UP IN THE NIGHT. The water jug I had placed outside my tent door has moved. I'm sure of it.

When I wake again it is five o'clock. I hear unmistakable noises. I struggle with the zipper on the tent flap, then look outside. In the near darkness I see a bear pawing through my traveling pants, which I had placed over the canoe to dry. Another is up a tree, straining to reach the food pack. I take a deep breath and exit the tent. I shout at them, and begin to throw rocks. My aim is poor. The treed bear startles and slips to the ground. Slightly dazed, he just sits there. The other ambles into the woods, finally joined by his partner. I can no longer see them, but I know they haven't gone far.

I briefly consider going back to bed, but doubt that I could sleep. Then I look out over the lake. A fine mist is hanging over the water. The trees of a neighboring island poke faintly through the fog. I hear the melancholy cry of a loon. I stand and stare, the bears forgotten.

An hour later I am making my way toward my remaining three lakes and my car. I paddle near several occupied campsites; no one is stirring. The weather is good, and I feel strong. As I navigate the last lake I pull beside another canoe and chat for a while, then move ahead and paddle for the take-out point, where my car awaits, ready to transport me back to my family and my work.

Lisa is probably right to worry: I am a poor candidate for solo canoe trips. I have dealt with insulin-dependent diabetes for over 20 years. This disease requires constant attention, and can place a person in danger at almost any time. My doctor cringes when I tell her I am again heading north. Diabetes has a way of controlling one's life, usually in the guise of doing only “sensible things.” I have undertaken these trips in part to take control, to do something that is not so sensible.

I end this trip with a feeling of completeness. Each of my trips has brought a new richness to my life, but for the first time I do not feel a need to come back. I am a bit surprised by this, but not saddened. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to the people who fought to preserve this wilderness beauty so that I might experience it. Now it is time for something new.

And more sensible?

I'm not sure about that.

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