

# By Water and the Spirit

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— Susan Hanson

The light this time of day is thin as glass, thin as the clear, fragile film of ice that covers the birdbath on a freezing day in winter. But it isn't winter today. It is late summer, and I am here on the river alone.

To launch a canoe on a cloudless morning like this is to penetrate the light, to imagine oneself inside the luminosity that rests at the center of things. Cypress and pecan trees, oaks, and even the invasive elephant ears —they all appear in bas-relief, their edges etched with shadows.

Here on the river, in the light, moving soundlessly through the morning — I am where I know I should be.

Eight months ago — eight *weeks* ago — I would have found that statement absurd. Granted, I went canoeing as a child, but that was different. It's one thing for a 12-year-old to get up early at her big sister's place on the lake, drag the 15-foot aluminum canoe to the water, add a weight or two in the bow to keep the boat's nose down, and then spend half the day meandering through a copse of drowned trees, imagining she is lost in a wilderness only she can see. It is quite another for a 56-year-old woman to wake up one morning and decide she needs a canoe.

But that's exactly the way it was.

By this point in my life I'd been teaching English at our local university for close to 30 years. Simultaneously, I'd been actively involved in the Episcopal campus ministry there, first as a volunteer and then later as lay chaplain for a dozen years. It was the latter position I was losing.

In reality, my identity as chaplain had begun unraveling nine months before. My Lutheran colleague, a clergyman and friend with whom I'd worked in a joint ministry for quite some time, had decided to retire at the end of the following summer. For years he had been dreaming of riding his motorcycle through South America with a couple of his buddies, and he was tired of putting that off. Plus, our work had become exhausting, thanks primarily to a project the two of us had conceived. First there had been the task of simply *selling* the idea to those who had the power to approve it. Then came meetings and the creation of a board, followed by more meetings, "differences of opinion," and – for my associate – the burden of fundraising. For two part-time chaplains, the load was significant.

So, with my Lutheran colleague on his way out, the board determined that the time was right to "bump things up a notch" and call a full-time chaplain. At first I was assured that nothing would change for me, but as the months passed and my partner's retirement date grew closer, less and less was said about my place in the new scheme of things. A couple of months into the spring semester,

I finally realized what for me was a most unwelcome truth: I would be “retiring” too.

I could have been stoic, responding to people’s questions with platitudes such as “Oh, it’s for the best,” or “God must have a plan that we can’t see.” But I wasn’t. Instead, I seethed in silent bitterness. Denial. Anger. A sense of loss and helplessness. Cycling repeatedly through the stages of grief, I couldn’t imagine my life beyond September, beyond the boundaries of the self I knew.

The unlikely entrance of a canoe into this story begins with a writing award I received in June at the national Episcopal campus chaplains’ meeting in Seattle. To be honored by my colleagues like this, at this time, was a balm indeed. And to be given that cash prize, to hold it in my hand, was to hold my ticket out.

Years ago I made a vow not to squander windfalls on anything so tedious as bills. Wrought iron deck chairs, books, a new desk chair for my study – I’d purchased them all with unexpected prize money or payments for articles I never thought I’d sell. This money, too, would have to be spent on some unnecessary pleasure. But what?

The answer came to me at a nature writing conference in South Carolina a little later in the month. A friend was talking about the two-week canoe trip she had been on with a group of students from her college. She had just returned,

she said, and I could tell from her voice and demeanor that she was beat. At the same time, though, I could also tell that she was truly satisfied with what the experience had given her: It had reaffirmed the person that she was.

I can't say when the epiphany happened, but at some point during the next five days, I reached an important conclusion: I *needed* to buy a canoe.

Ordinarily more restrained about such things, I nonetheless became fanatical in my research. I visited canoe shops, read brochures, and scoured the Internet for hours. On my friend's advice, I was looking for a lightweight boat that I could handle by myself – a solo canoe, in short. What I wanted, to be specific, was a 12 to 14-foot boat that weighed as close to 30 pounds as possible.

I found plenty of boats to consider. The Mohawk Solo 13, the canoe owned by my friend, sounded perfect, but at the time, it wasn't available; it would be six months, the Website said, before production would resume. Clearly, I was just beginning my search. Without intending to, I started learning a whole new vocabulary – words like *rocker* and *tracking*, *tumblehome* and *yoke*, *freeboard* and *painter*. I learned the difference between Royalex and Royalite, the qualities of Polyethylene and Kevlar. And I also learned an important fact about price: Lightweight doesn't come cheap.

As I began my search anew, I saw that the Lincoln Hideaway in Kevlar, at 12' 3" and 32 pounds, could be mine for only \$1550. Somewhat larger at 14' 9" and 33 pounds, the Hemlock Kestral was even pricier at \$2195. I grew morose.

It was at this point that I resorted to an online catalogue store. Wading through Footwear and Luggage, New Arrivals and a feature called Rain or Shine, I finally found what I was looking for. There, under Outdoor Gear & Apparel, was the listing for Canoes. My eyes went right to the Old Town Pack, a forest green beauty that was 12-feet long and weighed a manageable 33 pounds. Better yet, I could even afford to buy it.

Roughly a week later, a large truck was pulling up to the end of my drive and a man was unloading a boat. Wrapped in multiple layers of plastic and foam, it looked more like a cocoon than a canoe. "They do good work," the driver said, commenting on the care the company had taken to prepare the boat for shipping. "I've seen some of these things beaten to pieces."

For days I simply looked at the boat in my driveway, occasionally running my hand along its sleek and glossy hull. In time I mustered the nerve to ask my husband to help me actually put it on the car, but before we could do that, we had to learn just what to do with the array of belts and pads and hooks that comprised the car top "roof rack system." Both of us had read stories of canoes flying off car roofs at 65 miles an hour, and neither of us had a desire to duplicate

such a feat. Multiple attempts and one trip to the local canoe store later, the boat was finally secured.

“In the beginner’s mind are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few,” Shunryu Suzuki writes in the modern classic *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*. I was ready to begin.

Getting in is the tricky part. “Have someone hold the boat steady,” one of my sources tells me. Another suggests pointing the canoe toward the beach and climbing in while my partner steadies the bow. The problem? There is no partner; there is no beach.

No, I have chosen to go solo down a river whose banks are too high, too rocky, too slick, too private to serve as easy launching spots for a novice canoeist like me. And so I enter my boat with a singular absence of grace. One foot on an algae-covered rock, the other edging toward the midship thwart, I reconsider my position vis-à-vis the pictures in the how-to book I recently purchased online. The comparison isn’t good.

But I am in, adjusting myself on the narrow web seat. My new red Camelbak water bottle is securely fastened to the thwart in front of me. My keys are safely stored in a red plastic case I’ve tied to the grab handle on the boat’s rear deck. What I lack in skill, I make up for in preparation.

The San Marcos River isn't big, as Texas rivers go. Only 75 miles in length—compared to the Brazos at 840 and the Rio Grande at 1,250—the San Marcos is nonetheless a study in perfection. Its pristine water, a constant 72 degrees, emerges from the earth through three large fissures and more than 200 smaller springs along the Balcones Escarpment. These springs, which lie at the heart of the city, are thought to be one of the oldest continuously occupied sites in North America. From Paleo-Indians 12,000 years ago, to the Tonkawa, to the Spanish, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo settlers, to me — for all of us, the San Marcos River has been a source of nourishment, of life.

“It's a neutral place,” a friend says when I struggle to describe the effect of the river on me. “It's a place where you can just *be*.”

I think of her words as my paddle cuts the water's surface. Green and seemingly still, the river accepts my canoe like a lover. Stroke and glide, stroke and glide. We are all of a piece in this moment — this river, this boat, this light diffused around us.

For people of faith, water has long been a symbol of cleansing and renewal, of birth and *rebirth*. “We made from water every living thing,” the *Qur'an* tells us. “I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground and streams upon the dry land,” writes the prophet Isaiah. And, as my own Book of Common

Prayer explains, it is “by water and the Holy Spirit” that we humans are transformed.

Sliding over “meadows” of eel grass and cabomba, my boat moves languidly ahead toward deeper water. Here, on my favorite stretch of the river, I am likely to encounter great blue herons posing on the bank or gliding low across the water, squawking their displeasure at having been disturbed. If I am lucky, I will see the solitary belted kingfisher dipping down to the river’s surface, then shooting back up to the trees with a raspy rattle of a call. And I will always be watching for turtles, the Texas river cooters that sun themselves by piling up on logs or their kin that swim so effortlessly in the clear water under my boat.

*“In the beginner’s mind are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”*

A beginner again, I have come to the river to learn, not about what is coming next or what I’m supposed to do, but only about the way it feels to be out in a canoe, on a summer morning, in the airy light, in the graceful presence of birds.