

River Metaphors for Grappling with Reality

Nicole Harty, April 2020

Rivers and river running are full of metaphors for life. I've known that since my first whitewater swim. The bigger the whitewater consequence and the longer the multiday trip, the more profound the metaphor. Case-in-point: self-supporting a winter Grand Canyon raft trip.

I was fortunate, and lucky, to win a Grand Canyon permit the first time I entered the lottery. This trip held a lot of meaning for me. It was a trip I was supposed to do with my dear, late aunt. The Grand Canyon has held a special place in my heart since my first visit in 2006. It is, and will always be, the most magical place I've ever been.

A winter trip is, in my opinion, extra special because there are fewer people on the river. We didn't encounter another person outside our group until our fourth day on the river. We saw at most 10 other groups on the whole trip and had our pick of the best camps along the river. This all meant we had the opportunity to experience more solitude and quiet than we would at other times of the year. It also meant we needed to prepare for not seeing other people with supplies we might have forgotten, additional hypothermia risk, and days short on daylight. It was a tradeoff. And one I'd take again in a heartbeat.

This trip was simultaneously the most challenging and most rewarding thing I've ever done. I felt that within the first few days returning back to "reality" in early March 2020. Before I had fully grasped this new reality of the world responding to a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

As I adjusted back to my non-river life, living in a city, taking a bus to work, typing emails, and interacting with new people every day, I began to process the month-long trip. What helped me most, and continues to carry me through the challenges of this pandemic, are the metaphors, the experiences from the Grand.

Here are a few of the moments that I continue to reflect upon.

Dubendorf Rapid

On Valentine's Day, Day 12, we woke up and slowly prepared for the day ahead, including breaking out the silly heart headbands and tutus. We had three rapids, all 6 out of 10 on the Grand Canyon scale. We scouted the first at lunch to get a sense of water levels. Shortly after, we scouted Bedrock to see how and when to pull with all our might to stay right of the massive boulder. We all celebrated our clean lines and decided not to scout Dubendorf because we had all been doing so well. After all, we ran a read-and-run 8 (no scout) the day before. The map had a good description, and our lead oarsmen knew this rapid well. So we went for it, first our safety kayaker, then our lead raft, followed by my raft and then the last four.

As we neared the rapid, I saw our kayaker flip and roll at least twice, then our lead boat get rocked in some big waves and passengers get bucked off. Kyle and I realized we did **not** want to go left, so Kyle pulled hard to the right only to hit *another* hole sideways. I was bucked into the water, still holding the strap I had in my left hand. I ended up under the front of the raft. While deciding how to get out, I kicked and my foot was caught. I had a moment of pure terror, remembered all the times I've flipped in my kayak, took a breath, kicked one more time, and was free. I surveyed the situation, decided to hold onto the front of the raft through the next two drops, and waited for Kyle to pull me in. The other rafts saw the chaos and correctly went right. All was good.

Just a couple miles later, we got to camp where we regrouped, laughed at the chaos, and discussed our lessons learned. It was then a friend asked where my tutu was. My guess? It wrapped on my foot.

The metaphors here are that experience dictates how prepared you feel. Adrenaline adds to that. And sometimes you don't know until after the fact that conditions made that supposed 6 into an 8 out

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of 10. So you rely on instinct. It's experience that gives you instinct. I knew to pause when I felt my foot catch. I knew I had to ride the rapid sitting in the water. I knew I could only make the best decision for the risk immediately in front of me. Again and again.

Lava Falls

The morning of Day 18, we woke up to chocolate brown water, an unwelcome surprise from a flash flood somewhere up canyon. Reading whitewater is made substantially more difficult in muddy water: the features look different and your perspective is thrown off. Lava Falls is the last major rapid of the canyon.

This moment in the world is intense. And yet, so was the moment we got to Lava. We had been thrown off in the morning by the muddy water. We rowed 15 miles of flat water before the rapid. It made the scout more intense. Things felt more consequential. But we did things the way we knew how: discussed our lines, encouraged each other, reviewed boat order, triple checked zippers and buckles on PFDs and dry suits, and pushed off. Sure, we didn't plan for this particular challenge. All we could do was continue down river.

Unlike other rapids on the Grand in which you fight like hell to avoid the chaos or rock or hole, Lava requires you to just go for it. River runner veterans tell stories of doing everything right and still getting flipped. The best line is to row right up to the right of the Ledge Hole, move past it to hit the V Wave straight on, keep your line and avoid getting pulled right into the Cheese Grater Rock by staying far enough left to "T up" the 10ft Big Kahuna Wave. You've spent the past two weeks avoiding the chaos in the big rapids only to get here and know that the right thing is to "lean into the chaos." If you do, chances are, everything will be great, but there's still a one in five chance the Kahuna Wave surges as you hit it and flips you. So, you take a breath, trust in your friends, and give it all you got.

As you cross the big drop at the top of the rapid, your fear takes over and you struggle to move as close to the Ledge Hole as you should. You suddenly lose perspective of where you are, struggling to find that V Wave and know all you can do as a rower is keep your hands on the oars and steer straight; as a passenger, hold on tight and stay in the boat. Breathe.

Our group of six rafts and one kayaker had no flips, no swims, and clean lines, even with a Kahuna surge.

You never know how things will work out. You see what's right in front of you and just keep rowing.

Perspective

As Colorado was about to go into shelter-at-home order, the New York Times published an opinion piece (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-news.html>) about a group of rafters who had just returned from a Grand Canyon trip. This article explains pretty well what I was feeling in the days and week or two after I got off the river. The first paragraph is true among many river runners: you set out in the wilderness, away from the Internet, the news, and connection to society in search of peace, grounding, adventure, and connection to the self. You feel so privileged to be in these wild places, experiencing the world as it's been for hundreds, thousands of years. You wonder what you'd do if you were in John Wesley Powell's shoes, rowing with a hook for an arm, rebuilding wooden boats when you hit a rock, yet oh-so-thankful for modern advances in boat design and clothing. You emerge from the trip, no matter its length, wishing it were longer, hoping to take the peace and simplicity into your daily life. You don't think it will be a once in a generation pandemic that will bring society to embrace the river life: constant hand washing, self-sufficiency, isolation, collectivism. But, life is a balance. Alongside the days of rowing into the sunshine, pushing across flat water along wide open canyon are the days of big water rapids in narrow black-walled canyon

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with downpouring rain. The former leads us to yearn for excitement while the latter reminds us that calm and quiet has its place.

