

Take the “C” Train

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Communities change, either wholly or in part, as the current, measured at one time or water level, varies from place to place.

—*The Ecology of Running Waters*

Despite my best efforts to stay out of Teepee Hole, we're being sucked toward it like logs to a timber chute. My raft with its sole passenger is lined up perfectly for the brown, crashing current that's fast approaching and less than one hundred yards downstream. We're going to have to run the frothing mess, a reversal of flow that collapses back on itself in the middle of the rapid's main wave train. Accepting our fate, I'm pushing on the oars to move us into Teepee, building momentum. In fact, a spectator happening on the scene at this instant might guess that I'd intended to run the hole all along. Forget that it's a brisk morning when no one wants to get wet, half an hour before the sun will light the water and warm the canyon. Forget that a monster boulder lurks just beneath the hole. And never mind that for all the awake I feel, I should still be wrapped in my sleeping bag back in camp. We're committed.

From experience, I know that Teepee is a keeper, a watery trap to be avoided anytime. The river dances in it like droplets in a hot pan, shaken and imprisoned. Boats that enter the hole share the fate of the water, becoming one with it. How will my passenger react when we drop into it? Will his head spin and eyes pop? Will he register anger, joy, surprise? He has the bulk of two men—can his weight carry us through if we land dead center in it? What if we flip and he has to swim?

We charge over the brink of the hole and bump down with a jolt. For a moment we continue to track and it seems we'll continue downriver with no problem. Praying we won't be stopped, I keep working the oars to move us forward, dipping the blades quickly like the paddles of a windmill. A brief time passes in which I seem to be effective, until the boat gives a telltale shudder and abruptly halts. For one awful moment we hover, then we're drawn backward toward the heart of the hole. There's where the nasty business can occur—we may get sucked down, engage in endless spins, or overturn in a sudden, breathless flip.

My passenger remains relaxed and facing downstream, as motionless as a mannequin. He seems to be unaware of our upstream creep, or he may consider it just part of the show. Or he too is still waking up; or he's too petrified to move. I figure he'll be alarmed, though, when I climb over the gear and walk past him to the nose of the boat. But no—when I do, he doesn't react, as he doesn't react visibly when I grab the front D-ring and step off the bow into the water. Quickly I lower myself into the cauldron of churning cur-

rent. Submerged except for my head and forearms, I hold tight to the D-ring with both hands. No way I'm letting go of it. My body and legs catch a tendrill of current that's streaming downriver, and the boat with passenger intact follows me out of the hole.

I climb back into the raft, wet but feeling heroic, finally awake.

That evening in camp, my fellow guides congratulate me for the neat trick in Teepee. One guide especially is intrigued—Michael, an inquisitive person with an intense Van Gogh gaze. “Throwing out a human sea-anchor,” he says. “Where'd you learn to do that?”

I could reply, “At spring training, where the senior guides told me, ‘When you're stuck in a hole, take the “C” train.’” Because they did tell me that.

“Meaning?” I'd asked my trainers.

“The current! Get something—anything—into that downstream current. It'll pull you out.”

My answer to Michael has to be more complex than that—it wasn't enough for someone to simply instruct me. Rather, I had to give credit to a litany of killer holes that have claimed me or others before me: “Skull, Crystal, Phil's Folly, Clavey, Warm Springs, Lava Falls, Satan's Gut, Widowmaker—”

“Right,” Michael says. “Well, those places must've been in your nightmares. You looked asleep when you jumped off the front.”

“Maybe I was asleep.” My move to the bow may have been instinctive, an unplanned response contained within my cells, more destiny than decision. How else to explain a move smooth as a dream, slow as a waltz?

Practice, practice, practice. Al, my jazz ensemble teacher at the University of Utah, ended every improvisation session with that advice. I took in his words, my face burning at how poorly I played the guitar in my lap. Determined to do as he said, I still floundered each time my turn came to solo. His words reminded me that all the talent and teaching in the world come to nothing if not cultivated. Practice and intentional experience are key.

Every night I took home my instrument and played the standards Al had set before us—“So What,” “Autumn Leaves,” “Satin Doll.” Fingers to strings, I deconstructed chords and strung their notes together into chains of rudimentary improvisational melodies that I prayed would grow more sophisticated with time. Faithfully I mapped out each solo in my head and practiced, practiced, practiced. Starting slowly, I'd build a line of music, then set the metronome faster and faster to see how much speed I could handle. Often the flow of the metronome's ticking would sweep by me, leaving me behind.

During jogging breaks in the neighborhoods at the base of the Wasatch Mountains, I tried again to find a rhythm I could catch. Humming the chord changes to “Green Dolphin Street” and “All the Things You Are,” I pounded the sidewalks and streets of Salt Lake City to forty-year-old melodic progressions. Today the music is still linked in my mind to the mountains'

snowy couloirs flushed with alpenglow, brick houses with white shutters and in-law basements, and old, barren lake terraces rimming the mountains.

But in the harsh fluorescent light of the practice room the next day, my little melodies would crumble under the unyielding beat of the ensemble's momentum. Al would stroll among us and listen without showing emotion as we struggled with our instruments. A suave man in polo shirt and slacks, he stood with arms folded over his chest, his concentration a spotlight on each soloist in turn. As I hammered out mush, day after day, his expression never changed. I gave him credit for not cringing, at least not within my sight. And I pledged myself to even greater amounts of practice time, as my face still burned.

At the end of a day of boating on the Yampa River, I sit near the water, contemplating reversals. Otherwise known as holes, reversals are places in the river—like Teepee Hole—where the current stalls on the downstream side of a barely submerged boulder or rock ledge. The water hovers in the hole, crashing back and upstream. In the clear California streams where I learned to boat, the boulders gleamed underwater like submerged faces—the shining white of granite, the dusky red of chert. On the dun-brown Yampa, though, which brims with silt and fine sand, the holes show up only as mounds at the river's surface. They look a lot like the smooth, rolling shoulders of water marking the tops of innocent wave trains.

A raven crosses from our camp to the far shore, and my eye is drawn to the opposite bank. Shadow chases sunlight up the buff-colored sandstone cliff while the pink glow of sunset grows in the canyon. After the direct light leaves the rock walls, colors still shine off the river's surface in a lustrous rainbow. Then the many colors on the water give way to reflected salmon pink, then crimson. Soon night settles over the river, and the midstream holes become only dim humps. I strain to study them anyway, until I believe I could find them in the dark.

Practice, practice, practice. Al continued to end every ensemble rehearsal with those words. My fingertips developed thick, impenetrable pads of callous that allowed longer and longer practice time at home. In the evenings I jogged through the neighborhoods to the rhythms and melodies flowing through my mind and heart. At night I played my guitar until I fell asleep with it in my arms. Then every morning under fire in the ensemble room, I'd painfully trip through an improvised solo, unable to get into the stream of music rushing past me.

Practice, practice, practice. I'm sure the words apply to other artistic endeavors as well. To meet the muse, we must show up for it on blind faith, as Romeo showed up in Juliet's garden. But unlike Romeo, we must be there time after time to see what will happen. We have to be ready to be swept away, or the courtship is doomed to fail. Why shouldn't it? If we stumble

upon the great treasure we seek, without experience and readiness we may not even recognize it. It will pass us by.

My favorite rivers are full of holes that have stopped me or my friends abruptly in our paths—Clavey Hole on the Tuolumne, Crystal Hole and Satan’s Gut on the Colorado, Warm Springs Hole on the Yampa. We’ve watched each other go awash in these holes—recirculating in Clavey, flipping in Crystal, dropping backwards into the Gut. We’ve skirted Warm Springs Hole with no room to spare, in fact dangling our bows over the gaping maw of churning water while praying we wouldn’t get sucked in.

Then there’s Lava Falls in the Grand Canyon. Lava finishes its frothy, thirty-seven-foot drop with two monumental tail waves that sometimes collapse back upstream as rough reversals. My colleagues and I have run those, too, countless times—a boater just has to punch through them as straight as possible and hang on for the ride. Sometimes they break on you; sometimes they don’t.

One time, as an assistant boatman, I hit Lava’s tail waves just as they decided to crash. They stopped our seven-person, two-ton snout boat midstream. We surfed as if we weighed nothing. The river screamed on downstream all around us, eager to reach the bottom of the falls. Snatching the oars from my hands, the current pinned them to the sides of the boat. There was nothing to do but ride it out.

We hung for many moments in the reversal, water mounding and towering past the nose of the boat. Although I didn’t appreciate it at the time, it was first-class river surfing: a seven-person excursion on the Banzai Pipeline of the Desert Southwest. The sun brightened the water purling over our heads. The boat skimmed in place, weightless as a beach ball.

Just when it seemed we’d stay in the wave-hole forever, we twisted a notch sideways. The boatman riding behind me yelled, “Hang on! We’re going over!” as the snout tipped up on a back tube. Rubber hovered over us, blacking out the view we’d had of wave and sky.

Wondering why I’d want to hang on if we were going over, I fell off the rowing seat into the roiling water below us. I had to swim the rest of the tail waves, Himalayas of water when you’re down in the belly of them. Only after I’d been pulled back in the boat farther downstream did I learn I was the only one who’d gone swimming. The river wanted just me that day. Having exacted its human sacrifice, it righted the raft and finally let it go into the downstream current.

Skull Rapids in Westwater Canyon, Colorado, has a hole to be reckoned with as well. I had the honor of plunging into that one, too, my first run through. A boatman’s plan entering Skull usually involves skirting the hole to the left before running into it near bottom of the rapids. Despite my following the traditional strategy of starting midstream and cranking left, I crabbed an oar at the entrance and tracked directly into the hole’s open

mouth. My passengers and I dropped into it so fast it felt like we'd tripped at a dead run. I was mortified—an army of boatmen watched from shore. I knew I'd be the talk of the town that night when we all got off the river. *If* we got off the river.

We stayed in that bad reversal for entire minutes, not the usual three seconds exaggerated by disaster, but two or three full minutes, as the raft twirled, filled with water, spun, and pitched like a demon in the hole. My passengers screamed and staggered around the lurching boat, characters stuck in a B-movie nightmare. Advising them all to jump, I resisted my own powerful urge to abandon ship. But no one did. Instead we all sloshed around interminably, holding dearly to something—a D-ring, a line, each other—until one of the passengers finally fell into the river. He grabbed onto the downstream side of the raft, pulling on it as the river tugged him downstream, and the raft popped up and out of the reversal like a beast set free.

I made a note of it. *That* was how to break out of a reversal.

Weeks at the University of Utah turned to months. Months grew to semesters. Classes ended, summer passed on the river, and the school year began again. I showed up again for ensemble despite my discouragement, not sure I could stay committed much longer. This Romeo was looking like a no-show. Once again leading our jazz ensemble, Al continued to watch without expression as he strolled among us. Sometimes he applauded those for whom things seemed to be working; the rest of us he listened to closely but tight lipped. And he always sent us home with the advice, “Practice, practice, practice.”

Then one morning in the middle of “Green Dolphin Street,” Al spoke to me over the music. “Try this,” he said, as my solo approached. “Play just one note per beat for sixteen bars. Keep it really simple, really sharp.”

I closed my eyes. The music that had grown so familiar flowed on. I waited for my cue, then plunged in, playing as Al had told me, one note per beat. I didn't so much sound the notes as place them on the stream moving past me, a quick four-beat of musical waves carrying the pieces of the song's chords. It wasn't easy, letting my fingers hammer out this unheard, unplanned tune, but I forced myself to stay with it. Allowing the rapid key changes to pull the melody from within me felt like a plunge down a very steep slope. But I'd already leapt, so I fell, finding somewhere in my soul the lost advice that said *get something—anything—into that downstream current*.

Sixteen bars passed in a moment that not only lasted forever but also ended too soon. I opened my eyes. The ensemble had frozen in place, instruments still poised at fingers and lips, but with the music silenced. Coming out of my sleepwalk, I was surprised to see Al standing before me, a huge grin on his face.

“Congratulations, kid,” he said. “You pulled it off.”

Finally awake, I looked around for confirmation. It was true. The other musicians set down their instruments and applauded.

A few weeks following my early morning encounter with Teepee Hole, I'm back at the boathouse, writing out food orders for an upcoming trip. Michael of the Van Gogh eyes is just returning from a trip on the Yampa. He pulls a trailerload of muddy river gear into our boatyard and parks near the warehouse, where he can offload equipment. Before he moves a single item, though, he crosses the yard to say hello. I'm resting on an old bus seat under a tamarisk verandah in front of our boatman's trailer. Many miles distant, thunderheads shift above the mountains, and the sunlight goes dark on bare rock.

Michael stands before me, the shadows dancing far behind him. He focuses his blue-eyed stare on me. "I landed in Teepee Hole this time," he says. He quickly adds, "actually it was intentional."

"Why do a thing like that?" I ask.

"To try the human sea-anchor trick."

"What? You're nuts."

"Maybe. But it worked like a charm." He appraises me as if he's a rookie pilot reporting in to Chuck Yeager.

I'm not sure how to react. After all, I'm a pretty conservative boater, not one to drop into reversals for thrills. "Wouldn't it be better to just stay out of the darn thing altogether?"

"What?" Michael looks scornful.

"Row around it."

"I could've, I suppose." In a rare break in intensity, a grin crosses his face like a light. "But it was fun," he adds. "And I needed the practice." Then he turns to unload the gear from one more river trip.