

notes on return

coming home from a long canoe trip

You return amidst fanfare, as the entire camp gathers to see you in. They search your faces for that glow—of accomplishment, of intimacy, of strength and confidence, of distances paddled and horizons reached. For those who have been on a long canoe trip before, it is an emotional experience. They see you and they remember their own returns, feel as you do excitement and sorrow at completing an experience you will never be able to explain, in concluding a journey you will remember for the rest of your life. For those who have never been out longer than an overnight, for those who felt their seven-day park trip was a lifetime, you are heroes, maybe. You are so dirty, you all laugh so loudly, and you walk as though you own this earth, you walk with the sure satisfaction of those who have passed through adversity and triumphed. You look beautiful, but not in a conventional way—no, you stink, and your clothes hang from you, and when you scratch your neck it leaves flakes of dirt hanging off. But none of that matters, because today no one can touch you.

You hug and you kiss, maybe cry a little bit, you pose for pictures and hold onto one another and then get down to business: you pull up the boats, unpack the packs, empty out the wannigan, sort through your mail, share stale cookies and shout out the news from home...and then head for the flushies. Small steps; small tasks. You are loud in the showers, you marvel at the dirt that clogs the drains, you flex your arms in the mirror and are amazed by what you see. You spend the rest of the evening answering questions: Yes, it was an amazing trip. The time of your life. Awesome. Maybe even life-changing. You laugh and you smile and you wolf down food because you haven't tasted salad in weeks and though your heart may be beating a mile a minute, you still feel like you're walking on air.

The dining hall is loud and your friends are all around you, but at some point, you find yourself alone, outside of it all, with the immensity of the heavens over your head and a quiet breeze on the waters.

Tomorrow, you will not pack your personal. You will wake in a cabin, not a tent. You will not have to force down wet granola. You will not get the food packs from the woods. You will not go through any of the motions that have come to define your life these past weeks. You may not even hold a paddle.

And maybe it is at this point that the questions begin: What did this trip mean? What did we just do? How did it end so quickly? How can I go home? When will I ever return? How can I ever tell this to anyone, how can I share this experience?

You have photographs, probably, and when you get them developed next week you will be amazed at the things you never noticed: just how dirty you really were, how strong everyone was, how much of the time you spent laughing. And you may have a journal, which you will read and re-read, discovering in your handwriting how exhausted you were each night, finding new inflection in your reports on what dinner was (k.d., again), searching for the word or phrase that will transport you back to trip.

You will go out on canoe trip again. Maybe not with the same group of people, maybe not in the same areas—but the seven or eight others who have shared every laugh, every slip, every portage, every mud fight, every rainstorm and every lonely night will be with you on every trip you take out. If you return to camp as staff, you will find yourself boring your campers with stories of your cabinmates—who learned to pee with a canoe on her head, who asked the most ridiculous questions, who made the worst dinners into

feasts, who sang louder every time there was a headwind. Even if you do not return to camp, you will never forget canoe tripping and you will find yourself returning to Algonquin Park or Temagami of your own accord, drawn back by a passion you do not quite understand. You may not find yourself bushwhacking with a canoe for a few years, but you will find challenges you never expected, and now you will have the confidence to meet them.

But what about when you go home, to a house that feels huge compared to your tent, to a family eager to hear about your trip but unable to really “get it,” to sit in classes that don’t seem to matter as much, somehow? How do you reconcile the experience you have just had with your life at home? How can you bring the two worlds together? How can you fit back in when you feel as though you have changed and grown in ways you will never be able to demonstrate at home?

You are fortunate in that this was a group experience. Now the same group that got you through the rainy days, up the steepest hills, and across the windiest lakes can help you through this next segment of your journey.

Long canoe trips enable us to step outside our worlds, so that when we return home, we notice details we usually take for granted. We notice the way our houses smell, we pick up on habits of our family members for the first time, we are shocked by how much we own when we have just spent the summer living out of a 20 liter dry bag. Use this period of unfamiliarity: few people ever get to step outside their lives. But remember not to judge those around you too harshly; they have not been where you’ve been, they have not returned from far away. They continue on as usual, and they may not want to know how much you have changed. After all, it is deeply unsettling to question everything, better just to move ahead one step at a time.

Throw yourself into school, activities, life. A canoe trip is magic because you are conscious of each moment, you treasure every second and celebrate the smallest accomplishments. Each day is momentous. Remember this mindset when you go home, remember just how much you can accomplish each day. You are strong now, you carry the land you paddled within you, you are full of stories and laughter—use it, allow yourself to bring the leadership you discovered in the woods home to the city. Don’t just count down until the next canoe trip, ten months away: rather, carry the momentum from the trip into your classes, sports, your friendships, your family.

So enjoy your last few days of trip or of camp. Sad as it is to end a trip, it can also be a time of celebration—you did it, you’ve returned, and just think of the stories you’ve brought back with you! You may not know how much the trip has impacted you for years to come, may never fully understand how you’ve changed or grown, which is okay. Hold on to each moment, as you have been doing all summer. But remember that the adventure doesn’t have to end when you board the bus back home: it’s really only just begun.

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