

Snow in June

Dip, dip and swing them back
Flashing like silver
Swift as the wild goose flies
Dip, dip and swing.

From the Boy Scout song, "Our Paddles"

There are times in a boy's life when the need to pull away from family overwhelms the need to pull toward something else. It's as if a boy, meeting his own adolescence, must define himself by the act of keeping his distance, even if he has no idea why.

My son began this at age 12 when he turned firmly to men to find his place in the world. It has always been this way, but as a mother, I wasn't prepared for the anguish it would cause me.

Still, there are moments when I connect solidly with my boy – times that usually happen after a major blowout. Recently, I have the Scouts to thank for one such time.

The troop was planning to camp in a local park and canoe 12 miles on the Erie Canal. The boys all slept soundly the night before but few of the adults did. Just a few feet from our camp was a bullfrog family reunion that kept going all night long.

But the next morning, it was just Cameron and me and a wedge of aluminum gliding out into the morning air. At first we were bunched together with the other canoers, sometimes colliding gently until we found our groove and spread out over a few hundred yards. The day was young and we were invigorated by the effort.

Our longest stretch was after lunch, when we paddled non-stop for three hours. It was then that we began, in that classic mother-son dance, to get on each other's nerves. Although I was the more experienced canoer, I let him sit in the back so he could better learn how to steer.

Anyone who has canoed knows the challenge of finding a straight course. A common mistake is to constantly overcompensate – manhandle – the canoe into position. Through experience, one learns that the most efficient way to direct a canoe is by the gentlest of touches, making very slight adjustments to the path to keep the forward momentum going.

But this was lost on my son as I admonished him to keep us from zigzagging. "Keep us out of the reeds!" I'd holler as we sailed in at a perpendicular angle. "We're headed for the bank!" After an hour of such exchanges and sunburn smarting my neck, I began to steer from the front, furiously back paddling in an attempt to straighten us out. It only slowed us more.

This, of course, infuriated my son. "I know how to steer, Mom!" he insisted, and then he continued to wiggle us back and forth across the canal. After hours of paddling, my patience was wearing thin and my muscles were beginning to complain.

But then something changed. We were passing by a series of squatter shacks at a wide part of the canal. The water was perfectly still and blanketed with the fuzzy, soft fluff of cottonwoods. I looked up to see the sky filled with the quiet, falling snow of June – cottonwood down – as lovely as a snowfall catching the winter sun.

"Look, Cameron," I said. "It's snowing in June!" We both paused in our paddling, taking in a moment of profound peace.

Suddenly it became too much work to tell him every five minutes what to do. I simply could no longer direct him from my vantage point in the front. I kept my mouth shut and let him take the lead.

It was then that he found a course for us – a straight and true path right up the center of the canal. He learned on his own what I had been struggling in vain to teach – to use the paddle as a rudder, but to use it sparingly. We left behind our overcompensating ways and glided like pros.

We found our common ground again, at least for the moment. For once, I trusted that he would find his own way if I were willing to give him the chance. That hot June day, he learned to handle a canoe, but I learned the greater lesson – that the way to steer canoes, and boys, is with the gentlest of corrections.

Published in Welcome Home, 2004