

THE CANOE TRIP: CONFLUENCE OF LEISURE EXPERIENCE AND THE SELF

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Constitutive reflexivity, stories, and personal narrative were used to interpret leisure experience and provide insights for understanding leisure identity. I present a personal narrative of an annual canoe camping trip on a forested backcountry river. Stories are told in first person by the author about his trip of twenty years on a river with a small group of men. The author illustrates how personal narrative allows opportunities for understanding and interpreting meanings and changing leisure identities. The confluence of narrative, identity, and leisure experience is illustrated and discussed. The purpose is to bring the writer/researcher into the qualitative project as a subject and actor in the story and show how leisure identity images are created and affirmed through time.

"Human beings continually engage in a self-affirmation process in which they strive to better understand themselves and to be better understood by others" (Haggard & Williams, 1992, p. 16).

"Typically, we tell ourselves about our own self and about other selves in the form of a story" (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998, p. 318).

The thoughts listed above indicate that identity involves process, story, relationships, and understanding. These are topics important to scholars of recreation and leisure. Many scholars have recommended that qualitative researchers use storytelling and reflexive approaches to investigate meanings of lived experience and identity in leisure and recreation. In an age of electronic information, storytelling can provide engaging and powerful alternatives for understanding lived experiences and meanings of the self and others in a number of contexts (Spaulding, 2004).

I enjoy river canoe camping and freshwater fishing. I started fishing when I was four years old, and I have been canoeing lakes and rivers and camping for over thirty years. As individual activities, canoeing, fishing, and camping are less meaningful for me than when I combine these pursuits into multi-day outings with special people in my life.

I present a personal account of an annual outing we collectively called "The Canoe Trip." I participated in The Canoe Trip with essentially the same group of men nearly every summer during 1987

through 2007. We floated canoes, fished, and camped in a backcountry river corridor. The river flows through public forestlands and rural private lands with cottages in the Northwoods of the upper Midwest in the United States. I write from years of participant observation, conversations, and experiences as an insider of our annual trip. I have reviewed video tapes, photographs, journals, letters, e-mails, and interviews about The Canoe Trip. I revisit the video tapes on occasion when the constant but distant flow of the river comes to mind. I cherish memories of this outdoor recreational experience, and I feel happy when I write and think about The Canoe Trip.

I no longer participate on a regular basis for a number of reasons, primarily because I live 2,500 miles from the river. However, most of my old canoeing buddies have continued the pilgrimage to the river each fall during prime fishing conditions. Motorized fishing boats have replaced canoes. When the guys are on the river, I receive cell phone calls from them as they enjoy the evening campfire. The fishing competition lives on, and the guys continue to pass around a fishing trophy each year. The stories continue to accrue, and I hear about some of these, but I no longer directly engage in creating storied meanings on the river in this leisure context. I do, however, tell and retell stories from The Canoe Trip.

UNDERPINNINGS

Using narratives of self is one way for

qualitative social scientists to represent their research (Sparkes, 2000). Scholars of narrative psychology have explained how the meaning of human life and experience are constructed through story (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Lee, 1994; Mair, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). Education researchers have demonstrated linkages between narrative inquiry and the study of how people learn about the world and their experiences in the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative accounts of experience have been used to interpret the identities that people claim in interviews (Brooks, Titre, & Wallace, 2004; Holyfield & Jonas, 2003; Mishler, 1986a; Patterson, Williams, & Scherl, 1993). Place and identity researchers have investigated how self-identity becomes a reflexive negotiation of dilemmas that must be resolved to maintain a desired and coherent self-narrative (Williams & Van Patten, 2006). Applied researchers have described the power of narrative and made a case that land managers should learn about peoples' stories of place as a tool to improve protected areas management and conservation (Brooks, Dvorak, Spindler, & Miller, 2015; Dvorak & Brooks, 2013).

Macbeth (2001) suggested that constitutive reflexivity can be used to enhance qualitative research on every-day social interactions. This type of reflexivity is not wed to a specific professional orientation or methodological discourse; it is used in everyday interactions by all sorts of practitioners and actors to make sense of social engagements such as teacher and students in a classroom. Constitutive reflexivity is public and can be witnessed by the parties engaged in social situations such as group recreation activities or leisure outings in which one's identity may be highly relevant to the occasion and the group. The participants in The Canoe Trip jointly constitute and assemble the order and structure of the occasion (Macbeth, 2001).

I applied insights from these and other scholars to examine a particular case of recreation and leisure; my intent is to make an unconventional contribution to the socially constructive practice of qualitative leisure research. I used personal narration and stories to represent the sociocultural context and lived experience of The Canoe Trip from an insider's perspective. I combined extensive participant observation and audio and

video recordings with constitutive reflexivity (Macbeth, 2001), narratives of self (Sparkes, 2000, 2002), and creative story writing as a form of inquiry (Parry, 2006, 2007; Richardson, 2000a, 2000b).

I wrote in the first person voice to directly speak to the reader from a concrete place. A voice from somewhere, rather than nowhere, allowed me to give meaningful voice to my experiences on The Canoe Trip (Diversi, 1998). Exposing researcher and writer in this way allows the reader to make judgments about the point of view, aesthetic merit, and believability of the story (Richardson, 2000a).

My general goal is to position the self in the descriptive qualitative project (Dupuis, 1999; Humphreys, 2005). My specific objectives are twofold: (a) present stories from The Canoe Trip to offer an insightful glimpse into the particularities of the experience and how it evolved through time (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998) and (b) illustrate, through storied events and actions, how the self (i.e., leisure identity image) is maintained and affirmed (Bruner, 1990; Haggard & Williams, 1992). I begin with background about The Canoe Trip, and I introduce the characters, using first person voice and descriptive language to present the sociocultural context of the story (Glover, 2003).

PRELUDE

Lars, an old friend from college, and I founded the trip in summer 1987. Since I can remember, we have referred to the event as The Canoe Trip. The maiden voyage included two women and three men in their twenties and early thirties. My canoeing partner, Anne, an old friend from grade school, still talks about the experience whenever we cross paths. Lars asked two college acquaintances, Greg and Julie, to join us on the trip. I had been river canoe camping before, but I had never canoed or camped with this group. I was quite adventurous, carefree, and socially uninhibited in my recreation and leisure habits and frequently prone to impetuosity. Haggard and Williams (1992) termed such qualities of the self leisure identity images, which are actively affirmed by people when they participate in or identify with certain recreation and leisure activities.

During a break in an all-day thunder shower, we set out midday from a private canoe livery in a small town destined for our pickup location three days down river. Before launching, I remember waiting under shelter in my spacious Pontiac at the livery for the rain to break. Anne

asked, "Are we going back home or are we going to wait the storm out?" Lars and I answered, "We'll be on the river in no time; let's have another beer." We had two canoes well stocked with food and beverages with minimal camping gear and clothing, including one two-person tent. We did not pack rain gear.

The weather that day was incompatible with enjoyable river canoeing to say the least. We were discouraged by the storm, some more than others, but after a couple of beers at the livery and a break in the clouds, it seemed like a good idea to launch the canoes despite the weather. Nearly twenty minutes downstream, the cold rain began to pour down in sheets once again. Our comrades, Greg and Julie wanted to quit the trip and leave the river, Lars and I responded, "That's alright, but the two of us are going to continue downstream to our first campsite, and Anne is welcomed to join us or leave with you." After a brief respite under some low hanging trees, we went on as a group. The sun came out that evening, and as planned, the five of us finished a most memorable trip in good spirits.

After the first trip, the actors in the story were all male, and each of us brought his own desirable identity images to The Canoe Trip. Members of the group shared some self-images, but others diverged; most of our identity images were in early processes of development, maintenance, and affirmation (Haggard & Williams, 1992).

THE CAST

The Canoe Trip had a core membership, consisting of me, my brother Ken, two of my high school buddies, and two friends from college. As the years passed and distances increased between us, I found myself interacting with these men once per year during our trip. The others live relatively near one another and get together to hunt and fish each year. Various family guests and acquaintances were invited to go on the trip over the years; some reappeared on occasion, and others did not. We developed relationships and respective roles, which, like the trip and the river, changed overtime.

Lars and I met during our undergraduate studies in biology at a small community college. We were old buddies and enjoyed going to rock concerts whenever I was in town. I normally saw Lars once a year during the annual pilgrimage to the river. Lars helped out with cooking on the trip and occasionally tried his hand at fishing until he broke or lost his fishing rod, which commonly occurred. Lars spent

quite a bit of time drying out gear and clothing due to mishaps on the river. He was the eldest member of the core group and found long paddles and portages undesirable.

Ken and I are brothers who grew up together about three hours south of the river. He is two years my junior. We love being outdoors. As kids, we explored woodlots, farm fields, and irrigation ditches near home, and the many plants and animals living there. We fished, hunted, and trapped together with our father and sometimes, our youngest brother, eight years my junior, would go with us. Ken and I spent many summers together outdoors physically interacting with our surroundings. We enjoy being in the outdoors together.

Ken joined The Canoe Trip in its third year and introduced fishing shortly thereafter, and he is serious about fishing. Ken shared his knowledge with us about catching, cleaning, and cooking fish in this place, fueled by years of experience with freshwater angling. We consider Ken to be an expert angler and hunter. Lars nicknamed Ken "Nature Boy" because he continually pulled creatures from the river and climbed into the tops of trees in search of dry firewood. During the trip planning phase each year, Ken signed group emails "Pike Slayer." It was several years into the fishing competition before Ken took the fishing trophy home.

On The Canoe Trip, I was the lead camp cook. Although we shared in the preparation of meals and cleanup duties, I was primarily in charge of food and cooking-related matters. I enjoy outdoor and indoor cooking as a hobby in my life, and the others enjoyed it when I cooked on the trip. We fried and ate a lot of fish together in the dark and sometimes in the rain. I especially remember entertaining the guys late one night, after a cutthroat euchre tournament, when I caught the white gas stove on fire trying to make popped corn. We would let our hair down from time to time, which, in part, enabled a constant flow of stories. I won the fishing trophy a couple times, but I never fully engaged in the competition.

Bill, Tonio, Ken, and I went to high school together, and we started hanging out on a regular basis when Bill was in college. The four of us are sons of retired blue-collar automotive workers. Bill and I worked together at a fast food joint for two years about the time that we finished high school and started college. Ken and Bill interacted some on the high school wrestling team, and I played football with Bill and Tonio my first year of high school. I think that Ken and Bill are somewhat

more competitive in nature than the rest of us.

Tonio and Bill are long-time friends. Tonio joined the trip in 1991, and despite sporadic participation early on, he became a core member. Well before the days of the fishing trophy ritual, I remember Tonio catching a twenty five inch brown trout while leisurely trolling a crappie jig behind the canoe. We were surprised, and agreed none of us had seen a larger or more colorful trout taken from the river. It looked great in the cooler next to a stick of butter and a couple of ears of sweet corn.

Over the years, Bill developed fishing skills. Today he competes in long-range outdoor adventure races and hunts and fishes with the guys outside their annual trip. Ken and I showed Bill how to tie lures onto his line while fishing on the river. I coached Bill as the two of us landed his first keeper bass on the trip. Finding ourselves once again with no landing net, I thrust my hand into the water, clenched the bass around the midsection, and lifted it into the canoe. For years, Bill wore a t-shirt with a photo of him holding that fish. I believe Bill introduced the fishing trophy around 2001. He has won it on occasion, and when he has it, he signs his emails "Trophy Holder." In these email exchanges, Ken has joked, "Yeah, Bill, you should let me keep the trophy part of the year for tying the lures onto your line!"

Johnny, a co-worker of Lars' at the time, joined the group in 1994. He is the most practical and prepared camper and canoeist in the group, appearing each year with a new gadget, tool, or boat he claimed would make the trip run smoother. One year he showed up with a home-made, garage-engineered kayak. Johnny is a vital member of the group with a good sense of humor and mechanical handyman skills. He enjoys competing for trophy fish on the river and hunts deer with Ken, Bill, and Tonio.

DAY IN THE LIFE

The primary purpose of The Canoe Trip, as I saw it then and now, was casually socializing in a relaxed, scenic backcountry setting. During the day, pairs of individuals floated three to four canoes, loaded with gear, down river in near proximity to one another. We casually fished and occasionally paddled while floating and steering downstream. We stopped along the sandy river banks at favorite swimming holes during warm sunny spells to swim and quaff our thirst, often plunging into the cold clear water from a high bank swinging by a tree rope left behind by earlier visitors or locals. We

communally prepared and ate all meals, including shore lunches of grilled sausages, cuts of venison, and fish, either the catch of the day or something snatched from one of several brightly colored ice chests. In the early days, lunch was not a common occurrence unless one considers pretzel rods and beer lunch.

Upon arriving at the evening destination, usually just about sunset, we set camp, cooked, ate, and drank. We listened to classic rock and blues with a portable cassette- and eventually, CD-player, and ribbed each other while friskily telling the top stories of the day. The scene unfolded each night around a blazing campfire and a small, wobbly-legged card table under a screen house or tarp shelter; our revelry continued until two or three each damp cool morning. Boasts of who would catch the trophy fish or which pair would win the next euchre hand could be heard. The background chatter each evening was dominated by retelling memorable events from past trips invoking loud group laughter, usually at someone's expense. Popular stories included: the time Ken lost his trophy pike from the stringer while showing it off to passing canoeists, or when Johnny, having retired early one night, fell out of his tree hammock, revealing his tightie whities in the glow of the campfire.

Each year, we had memorable encounters with wildlife, which played an important role in our canoe camping experience. We found the plants and animals of the river interesting. I think this was the case due to our early formative experiences hunting and fishing, plus Lars, Ken, and I have worked as biologists. Our shared wildlife encounters on the trip included catching and cooking messes of fresh crayfish appetizers, removing a rabid muskrat from camp, watching ducks feed in the river, and plucking blood-filled leaches from between one another's toes. On one humorous occasion, an oversized raccoon was interrupted by shouts and flashlight beams as it carried off, by the handle, a large plastic tub of chocolate chip cookies. Arriving at camp one afternoon, we were surprised and warned by the buzzing of two small rattlesnakes, basking on a bank near the river's edge. The presence of the snakes prompted us to quickly dig out our jeans and boots. Fortunately, after persistent prodding by Ken with a tree branch, the venomous snakes retreated to the swamp not to be seen again.

CAMARADERIE, RAINSTORMS, AND CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

It was August, middle of the afternoon, a warm breeze blowing off the river, and Bill and I were each sitting on an ice chest in the shade under a stand of white pines at South Bend, one of our favorite camps. We rested a small distance from where the others played cards.

"So Bill, I'm thinking about doing a little research on this canoe trip of ours, you know write something up, so I want to maybe do some interviewing ... may I have your permission to tape record?" Bill answered, "You bet." We had discussed the trip many times before, but this was the first time I had taped a conversation, and I felt somewhat silly doing it at the time.

I asked Bill, "How did you get involved in all this?" Bill answered, "How I got involved with this is while I was still at college, you invited me to come on this canoe camping trip, and I said, 'Sure, sounds like fun.' So, I went on it, and after the first year, I was hooked. I haven't missed a year since. It is a nice getaway. It is very relaxing, and we are out of our usual element. That's what I like about it."

With a nod of agreement, I asked, "How many years have you been doing this?" Bill responded, "I believe it's my seventeenth year, seventeen years straight."

"Do the same people go?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty much, we have a core group of people. There are six of us who never miss a year." Bill paused before continuing, "It grew to six of us. It started out actually with yourself and Lars, then me, and then we invited Ken, so the four of us, and slowly but surely we invited some more, at this point, we have a core of people who never fail to make it every year."

I asked Bill, "How do you feel about those people?" He quickly responded, "Oh great, great! Good friends. I consider them lifelong friends, actually."

"Well, Bill, what do you think makes for a good canoe trip?" I asked. Bill mimicked my question before replying, "First and foremost, I'd say the camaraderie between the guys, good people, good friends, having a good time putting up with each other, making fun of each other. That's first and foremost, and beyond that the weather plays a part ... nice to have good weather, sunny and hot ... but we've always weathered through the rain storms. Sometimes that makes for a good time. At the time, you don't think so, but afterwards when you look back on it, you say, 'Wow that was really fun!'"

Bill went on to describe a plethora of activities that we do on the river such as fishing, cooking ... relaxing around the campfire ... Half listening, I found myself

lingering on what Bill had said about the weather. Wondering if Bill would retell the rain story that I had in mind, I intentionally probed, "You mentioned the weather. Could you tell me a story about when the weather was not so hot?"

"Yeah, I sure can," Bill said. "... One year in particular, I can't remember what year it was, probably around 1990. The trip was me, yourself, Lars, and your brother Ken." Bill continued, "We were canoeing, and it was a steady rain all day, all of our stuff was getting wet ... So, we decide, 'Let's pull over and wait for this to subside and then continue on.' So, we pulled over and huddled under a couple of trees with a big piece of plastic ... each had a beer and a cigar, shivering, waiting for it to subside, and *it did not*."

I told Bill, "I can remember the four of us huddled under that plastic, laughing at the situation as if we were children playing in a backyard sprinkler. Eventually one of us had the bright idea to have a look at the canoes." Bill jumped in, "Oh yeah, we went down and checked out our canoes, and there must have been eight inches of water in each canoe, rock and roll cassette tapes floating in the stern of one boat, and the rain wasn't letting up."

Bill continued, "Now remember, this was in the middle of the forest. It wasn't like we were near a campsite. So, we just made an executive decision, 'Let's camp here for the night.' We pulled the canoes up, got everything out of them, ended up turning the canoes over and lodging them up in a tree for shelter and spreading an old faded nylon tent over the two canoes because we did not have poles for the tent! I'm not sure why we brought it! ... We all camped under that. It was too wet to get a fire going, but we did get the stove going. I can't remember if we had potatoes or not, but I know we grilled some deer meat, and we sat there all night. We all had our own little space right there under these trees in the middle of the woods, listening to music, had a cooler right next to us, a little padding behind us to lean back. We sat there all night. At the time you think, 'Man, this weather is terrible!' but when you look back on it now, that was one of the most fun nights we've ever had!"

"Yes, once we were dry, that was an excellent night," I agreed. ... I asked, "Well, Bill, why do you continue to go on this trip? Did you ever think that you would be doing it seventeen years later?"

Bill responded, "No, no, no, not at all." He paused and continued, "The people I tell about it can't believe it. They say, 'You're going on a canoe trip? What do you mean canoeing and camping?' Well, I explain a little bit about it to people, and

say, 'Yeah, I'm doing it with the same group of guys and this is our seventeenth year in a row' ... most people's jaws usually drop, 'What are you talking about? You guys kept that up for seventeen years?' I say, 'Yeah, this group of guys that we have, they all appreciate it so much and have such a good time that we keep it up.'"

Bill and I found ourselves getting thirsty and curious about what the others were doing, so I asked him if he thought we should wrap it up. "Of course, we could talk about the trip forever," I said.

Bill replied, "Yes we could, and we usually do. We talk about the trip all year." After pausing for a moment, Bill added, "I could say that this whole trip has definitely, for the lack of a better way to put it, had an impact on my life just because I do it every year. My whole family knows I do it. The people at work know I do it. I mean I've got pictures of me at various spots on this canoe trip displayed on my cubicle at work. A few of the pictures are in plain sight, and people ask me about it. Even my wife, she knows that this trip is a priority to me, and it's just a given that I'm going, so it's good with her, and she makes us cookies every year ..."

"Yeah, good ones too," I interrupted.

Laughing, Bill elaborated, "Yes, good chocolate chip cookies. We eat them in the morning with our coffee."

"A lot of times we leave them out in the sun, though, and they melt," I joked.

"Yeah, we let that happen from time to time," Joking about this year's batch of home baked cookies, Bill asked, "In fact, where are they right now?"

Bill continued, "But no seriously, this trip is definitely a part of my life I can honestly say. I mean I imagine there will eventually come a time when we are going to stop doing this. I can't imagine when. The only time I can imagine is if I am physically unable to. That is really the only time I can ever think that I'm not going to do this or something similar. This trip is literally a portion of my life."

"Alright, I guess for now, we should go play some cards," I concluded.

"Thanks for your time, man!"

Smiling, Bill said, "You're welcome."

REFLECTIONS ON CHANGE

During the first sixteen years of the trip, my companions and I were mobile, paddling and floating the river, making portages at hydroelectric dams and reservoirs, and casually fishing for trout and small-mouthed bass in fast waters along the way. We made frequent stops to swim and relax and camped at different places each night. We traveled light and

carefree. The Canoe Trip had an air of adventure and lots of fun-loving sociability. This was the state of affairs for years, and I really enjoyed it because it fit my personality and lifestyle, especially at the time. I continued to select this particular leisure outing because it affirmed desirable images of my leisure identity (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Schlenker, 1984).

This way of experiencing the river and being with my companions was in jeopardy of disappearing. We got older and our interests shifted. Practically speaking, we grew up. With each passing year, we brought more camping, cooking, and fishing gear, gadgets, clothing, and comfort items. I believe I counted up to 15 fishing rods at one time and one to two fully loaded tackle boxes per man. With four fully loaded canoes, and a middle-aged waistline or two, some of us found portages too laborious and paddling across reservoirs in strong head winds burdensome. Setting and breaking camp once or twice during the week began to sound better than doing it every day. We did much less paddling and floating as years passed, but for a few transitional years, despite having fishing boats with motors, we still hauled canoes to the river for shorter day trips from base camp, and perhaps as a token of times passed.

By group consensus or inertia, we slowly changed our format to include more fishing in the reservoirs using larger boats and outboard motors. Since 2001, the group has held what I consider to be a formal fishing competition, in an informal atmosphere, where the guys exchange a small trophy at the end of each trip. The original trophy was topped with a plastic chromed statuette of a bass. Inches count now, and the guy who catches the most inches of fish over legal length for any game fish wins the trophy and gets to keep it at his home or workplace for the following year. The trophy is engraved with the winner's name, year, and description of his winning fish.

Although I too love to catch and eat freshly fried pike and bass, cooking the fish myself in the outdoors, I miss our shared experiences canoeing and camping on the river before the advent of boat and motor fishing. My preferred image of The Canoe Trip was replaced by fishing in the mornings and evenings and relaxing each day and night, when the fish won't bite, at essentially the same campsite, albeit a most favorite forested place. I now see my brother, Ken, reflected in the new leisure context more so than I see myself. To some extent, I feel at distance from the social solidarity and community that I had created through the experience of The

Canoe Trip. I felt more aware of my individual desires and personal autonomy during the transition between trip formats because my leisure identity in this context was threatened by a dilemma of change (Freeman, 1998).

TALE OF AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

The boys and I were settling into one of our favorite campsites on the river at twilight in knee-high soft grass and a cloud of buzzing mosquitoes. We almost always arrived at South Bend just after dark, which was our longest stretch of paddling and portaging. After dinner, Ken and I were chatting at the river's edge while checking on a stringer of live fish we had tied to a canoe to maintain freshness. In Ken's flashlight beam, we caught a glimpse of a large dark circle slowly creeping along the sandy river bottom toward our catch. It was a snapping turtle. In our excitement, we somehow startled the beast, and it quickly swam out of sight into the depths. As the turtle disappeared I wondered how many times in the past eighteen years had we floated over such marvelous creatures. I remembered stringers of fish that had been partially eaten and wondered if this had been the culprit.

As if startled ourselves, Ken and I departed the scene, leaving our fish in the river and scurrying back to the yellow warmth of a blazing campfire where we informed the others of what we had seen, and more importantly, to wait for the turtle's return.

Probably thirty minutes passed before Ken and I returned to find the turtle had reappeared in the shallows near the beached canoes to dine on our fresh bass. Ken, realizing the turtle's vision was obstructed by the canoes, rolled up his sleeves and pants legs and instructed me, "Hold the flashlight, I'm going to wade out in the river behind the canoe and try to catch him." Curiously amazed at his daring, I held the guiding light from the bank above as I numbly watched Ken do exactly what he had said. Cloaked in darkness amid sounds of exhilaration and splashing, Ken grabbed the reptile by the tail and hoisted a beast of a turtle onto the bank.

Most of the boys had by now gathered around to see the incredible reptile, which appeared to be quite aged, sharing the top of the food chain with bald eagles and northern pike in this backcountry river setting. We gathered around Ken who was holding the turtle by its tail as it clawed the ground struggling to escape. Ken gave us

the play-by-play of how he had hand-plucked this remarkable creature from its watery lair.

Turning on his trusty video camera to capture the unfolding scene, Bill provided one of his patented and familiar introductions as he rolled tape, "Alright, here we are still at South Bend, and Ken was checking on his bass that he caught today and look what he pulled out of the river!"

Ken gasped as he lifted the turtle into the air by the tail for the camera man, "Yeah, look at it!" he exclaimed.

"Look at that bad boy!" Bill shouted.

"What do you think he is, about forty pounds?" I calmly asked.

Ken stoically replied, "Oh, he's a *good* forty pounds."

With excitement, Bill continued to narrate the scene as he taped, "It's the *turtle snapping*. Oh, hang on. Pick him up like that again!"

Slowly elevating the animal by its tail, Ken asked, "Like this?"

Bill said, "Let me get the back side of him again, *oh* my goodness."

Ken quietly announced, "It stinks, real bad," referring to the powerful stench of river muck and algae that had impregnated the turtle's shell during decades of aquatic life.

Half-jokingly, Bill interrupted, "Well, we are going to debate whether to keep him for a pet or have turtle soup."

I approached the turtle carrying a large branch saying, "Here let him snap on this."

"Yeah, the fire-stick," agreed Ken.

"Ooh!" shouted Bill, as the turtle struck violently at the branch two or three times.

"He knows he can't get a hold of that," I said.

"He tried though, didn't he?" Bill proclaimed.

Expending no further energy on the branch that was obviously too large for it to seize despite its powerful jaws, the creature remained still for an instant as if it was more concerned with its captors.

"Yeah, he doesn't want it now," Johnny added while cautiously entering the scene.

Refocusing the scene on his amazing and daring stunt, Ken told the bystanders, "Hey, I tell you what. He got my adrenalin running when I grabbed him right by the tail. Look at him. He wants me."

"*He wants something*," Bill warned. Awestruck, Bill repeated his previous order, "Give him something he can bite. I want to see him bite into something." Bill continued, "His neck is quick! You're right!"

Ken told us, "This turtle has been around for a while."

"How old do you think he is?" Ron (invited guest) asked Ken as he entered the conversation.

Ken replied, "If I had to guess, I guess I would probably say at least 75 years old."

Bill, turning the camera from the turtle to Ken, interjected, "Here is the man of the hour, the born hunter!"

Addressing the question of the animal's age almost as if we were in a laboratory or a classroom, I said next, "If you could get a scute, one of those bony scales, from its shell, you could age him."

Someone tossed a corn cob left from our dinner near the turtle's jaws for it to bite. Ignoring the bait, the exhausted animal did not give a performance. In response to the turtle's apathy, Ken said, "No, he wants me. He didn't like me catching his" Ken flipped the turtle over by the tail saying, "Look, oh, he hates being on his back too."

"Hold on, let me get a shot of this; ...!" proclaimed Bill with excitement.

As we witnessed, Ken began instructing us on how to clean, or field dress, such a turtle. To demonstrate, Ken used two fingers to simulate the shape of a knife blade saying, "When you cut around ... right here in the seam between the top and bottom half shells ... you cut them right there." Ron asked, "What does that do? You mean where the shell is thin?" Showing us once more, Ken repeated, "You cut them open there and there."

Encouraged by Ken's demonstration, Bill reiterated, "Well, we might be having some turtle soup." Johnny, in a soft voice, confidently disagreed, "No, we'll let him go." I was relieved to hear Johnny say that, and I hoped Ken was relieved as well.

We all fell silent, and at that instant, Ken heaved his prize in the direction of the night-blackened river. With a crisp slap, the turtle splashed loudly into the water.

EFFECTS OF CHANGE

During the transitional years of the trip and as the context changed, the motor boat fishing and base camping felt incomplete and less meaningful for me than floating long stretches of river and camping at multiple sites along the forested corridor. I did enjoy these fishing trips, and the socializing and partying essentially stayed the same and just as important, but the essence of the experience subtly changed for me. I believe my companions sensed I was aware the trip was evolving beyond my initial meaning

and purpose. As represented in *Tale of an Unexpected Visitor*, the identity images of my companions, particularly Ken's, grew more central to the trip.

For me, the outing was not as carefree and adventurous. Catching fish requires one to be on somewhat of a schedule closely tied to feeding behaviors of the targeted species. The motorized boats, base camping, and competitive nature of the fishing added something to the trip that was not part of my leisure identity in this context. I did not desire an experience that created and affirmed a competitive leisure identity, despite my fondness for fishing.

My leisure identity image was threatened. I uncharacteristically began to miss portions of trips due to limited vacation time, making cameo appearances on weekends. It seemed that I had rational and legitimate reasons for not making it as big of a priority as I once had. I did not seem to mind showing up for only a night or two, perhaps because this demonstrated a carefree and adventurous self, and I enjoy getting together with this group of friends. I married and relocated to start a new job and a family. The realities of my life demanded substantial commitment and resources, which were no longer available for engaging with the guys on the river.

DISCUSSION

My companions and I were active in a community known to us as The Canoe Trip. For any man on the trip, the others were almost always present. Our group was constantly engaged in some form of dialog or interaction while on the river. Bruner and Kalmar (1998) have argued that it is when we see evidence of the self in other people that we recognize our own self concept. We can clearly see who we think we are when we see the other as different. We affirm who we are by finding and seeking out relationships, opportunities, and activities that allow us to express ourselves (e.g., Haggard & Williams, 1992). We self-identify and make judgments about the identities of those with whom we have relationships (Schlenker, 1984).

Bruner and Kalmar (1998) explained how various indicators of the self, such as commitment to an activity and looking to one's companions to legitimize experience, are recognizable features of well-formed narratives. My canoeing companions and I were embedded in a leisure social world, consisting of our relationships with one another, the setting, and our individual desires. We ritualistically made ourselves intelligible to one another

in those relationships through the stories we acted out and later told and retold (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Gergen & Gergen, 1988). When Bill explained to me (and the reader) that his commitment to The Canoe Trip is a major part of his life, he communicated a larger self-concept, indicating that this leisure outing cohered with his life as a whole (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998). When I prompted Bill to retell how we were stranded in a rain storm and how we made the best of it despite the situation, I communicated the legitimacy of a carefree and adventurous experience. When Ken and I pontificated about the snapping turtle's age and size, we expressed personal knowledge of wildlife and an interest in animals for the audience to witness.

The act of catching the snapping turtle unequivocally defined Ken's leisure identity and role for The Canoe Trip. Ken created a situation for himself that served to affirm a desired identity image of highly skilled hunter and angler (Schlenker, 1984). Bill pronounced, "Here is the man of the hour, the born hunter!" His attempt to catch that turtle was successful and with outright self-affirmation, Ken quietly released the turtle to perhaps be caught another day.

I purposely chose the *Tale of An Unexpected Visitor* from countless memories, experiences, and events because it exemplifies a well-formed narrative. There is an actor, an act, a goal, and skills and knowledge for accomplishing the act; it occurred in a setting "that presupposes the legitimacy of some state of affairs whose violation has [perhaps] placed things in jeopardy" (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998, p. 319). As the story unfolded, Ken's self-image was evident to me, Bill, and the others. Moreover, it was clear to me how Ken and I differed. Ken secured and was awarded a symbolic trophy the night he caught the snapping turtle while at the same time, he affirmed a desired persona. A focus on fishing for our annual trip was legitimized. With time, the guys improved their fishing skills, because we practiced fishing. Ken no longer was the only skilled angler in the group. The others were legitimized to catch fish and became better at it during the trip, which fueled competition for the trophy.

My companions and I had ample time and opportunities to observe one another during these occasions. We consciously and unconsciously made social comparisons to better understand ourselves in relation to each other, our desires, our commitments to the trip, and the social order of the situation (Brooks, Wallace, & Williams, 2006; Macbeth, 2001). Constitutive reflexivity was publicly displayed as

we jointly produced and implicated one another in our understandings of the outing; as we shared interactions in ongoing engagements, we reflexively assembled the order and structure of The Canoe Trip (Macbeth, 2001). As we watched one another catching fish, teased one another about mistakes and bad luck, congratulated success, and passed the trophy back and forth between winners, we created a new leisure context and in a practical way, we adapted the trip format to fit leisure identity images.

CONCLUSION

I chose to tell my stories of The Canoe Trip framed in the confluence of narrative, experience, and leisure identity (e.g., Freeman, 1998; Haggard & Williams, 1992). I wrote this personal narrative to represent how changes in the experience of The Canoe Trip placed the original legitimacy I had constructed for the outing in jeopardy (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998).

In my opening story of the maiden voyage, I presented myself as carefree, confident, and determined to get on and down the river in the face of inclement weather and lack of preparation. I believe my leisure identity image in 1987 set the stage for The Canoe Trip that followed for the next sixteen years. In the backdrop story, the reader encounters aspects, or images, of fun-loving, carefree leisure and a go-with-the-flow approach to the activity, style, and party atmosphere. Many of the carefree aspects of the trip continued through the transitional years, but the experience changed as competitive fishing slowly displaced unstructured river canoe camping. We became more focused on fishing and the trophy and less determined to get down the river from one camping destination to the next. This affected the experience temporally, spatially, and to some extent, motivationally. Our movements in and through the river corridor dramatically changed, and I believe some of the reasons for going on the trip shifted for some.

As a result, a conflict in identity image arose for me, carefree versus competitive. Like Bill, this trip was and remains a part of my life and identity. I thought I would continue going until I was physically unable to do so. As a testament to past commitment, I was once terminated from a job for attending The Canoe Trip against a boss's will. This particular outing defined a legitimate part of my life and leisure identity for two decades, and the new focus challenged the self-image I had affirmed and maintained. I wanted to float the river during the days and relax at a

new camp each night, despite the tremendous amount of work required to do so. If we caught a couple of fish along the way, it would be great, but I did not want to keep score. I did not pursue The Canoe Trip because I enjoyed fishing. I went on fishing trips at other times and places to show I am a person who enjoys fishing. I did not engage with The Canoe Trip with a fishing mindset, nor did I consider a fishing trip a substitute for The Canoe Trip.

I have contributed to our understandings of how leisure identities are expressed during a recreational outing. I showed how meaning can be understood and communicated in story as a transaction between the teller and the told (Bruner 1990; Mishler, 1986b). The reader is witness to leisure identity images; he or she can see how the actors' self-images are expressed, affirmed, and sometimes threatened (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). The presentation helps the reader to understand the components of narrative and the practical every-day nature of constitutive reflexivity. I showed how an air of legitimacy in the narrative was jeopardized, which could otherwise be easily excluded or masked in writings that suppress personal narrative (Richardson, 2000b, p. 938). The writing allowed researcher and subject to fuse in ways that enhanced understanding (Childress, 2000). Instead of standing outside the story, I inserted myself into the qualitative project and spoke to the reader from somewhere believable and emotional (Diversi, 1998; Dupuis, 1999; Humphreys, 2005). The paper helps make sense of the muddled confluences of narrative, experience, and identity.

Work that relies on narratives of self is located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices, and its appropriateness for research may be questioned (Sparkes, 2000). Writing about my personal experiences for a peer-reviewed journal felt strange and invigorating at the same time. I felt somewhat indulgent, liberated, and highly aware of myself (Sparkes, 2002). The writing challenged me. Each time I thought I knew what I wanted to say, my courage or ability or both seemed to vanish, like the big fish that always gets away. These challenges forced me to reflect deeper than I had ever done before about what The Canoe Trip means to me, how and why the situation had changed, and how my feelings about those changes would guide my writing.

To be sure, the stories and identity processes are ongoing for Ken and his companions as they make their annual pilgrimage to fish and camp at the river.

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