

Water in the Canyon...and the Quandary of the African Queen

Wells Shoemaker MD, May, 2009

Men searching for insight and wisdom have historically turned to the wilderness for answers. Paradoxically, the more austere the environment, the greater the chances of finding them, but all of these searchers need to find water.

On January 1, 2000, I entered the new millennium unemployed for the first time since age 14...so I left for Death Valley with a truck, my backpack, and some unresolved bitterness.

For a few days I tested my legs and rock scrambling skills with increasingly abrasive day hikes, and then, with some trepidation, I shouldered my back for a trek up what I thought was Phinney Wash into the Grapevine Mountains. In contrast to the popular image of Death Valley as a shimmering frying pan swept by gritty winds, this national park is more accurately a museum of naked geology and a garden of seasonal splendor in a steep walled V between two rough hewn mountain ranges. The Panamint escarpment juts 11,000 feet above the desert to form the Western wall of the V, and the Grapevines vault 8000 feet from the Pleistocene lake bed on the Eastern side. The unmarked Phinney Wash tracks through a billion year library of cataclysmic upheavals, buckling plates, exploding volcanoes, biblical floods...and a display of some of the most determined life forms on Earth. Almost anything you touch carelessly will make you bleed.

The first two miles climbed through scattered creosote bushes and ground-hugging *opuntia* cacti up the packed gravel of an alluvial fan probably a mile deep at the upper end. The wide open vistas of the valley floor eventually were hidden as the wash began to burrow into the terrain. Since a canyon hiker obligatorily ascends channels cut by water, every step takes him higher...and no path is straight. In fact, any object with a straight edge, or a perfect circular contour for that matter, becomes suspicious for manmade provenance.

At the end of the first day, perhaps 7 miles away and 4500 feet above the truck, I finally reached a narrow slot between massive striped cliffs—the shadowy gate to the brooding canyon above. Above this point, there are no more deep piles of alluvial cobbles and gravel. A hiker finally gets to put his feet directly upon the native crust of the Earth...sometimes sensuously sanded like the skin of a mystical lover...but other times so rough that a man can feel his soles shredding. Dry waterfalls, scoured slick as steel, can appear around a corner and stop him cold...or entice him to break a femur. Somewhere high above, I knew there would be pinyon pines and supposedly a spring...or, with luck, some pockets of snow in North-facing gullies. But that was for the next day. Physically spent, I dropped my pack in time to watch the veiled sun drift into the teeth of the

Panamints. The swatches of pale playa on the Valley floor turned lavender, then purply grey, and then disappeared into pooling ink. At this altitude in January, the sun disappears not long after 4 PM, and the temperature plummets from the 50's to the 20's before the light fades. By midnight, the desert air would shed another 10 degrees...but it's a dry cold, right?

For a while, I sat on a mica flecked boulder as the sky changed colors, marveling at what first impressed me as utter silence. Soon, however, I realized that sound was everywhere. Creosote branches rubbed subtly against each other in an imperceptible breeze, some invisible little creature rustled a dry leaf, and a distant bird call teased my ears. A muffled whistling wafted out of the stone portal to my right, growing louder until a flock of robin-sized, slate gray birds exploded into the light and tore down the wash, synchronously skimming the stony contours like pelicans over the waves...only much faster. I admit that my imagery at the time was rebel fighters attacking the thermal vent of the Death Star. Then the music started. I heard a tinkling sound echoing down the convoluted canyon. The sounds were pure but disorganized, reminding me at first of a toddler exploring a piano. The music added richer dimensions for a while, more like an orchestra tuning up, and then stopped as quickly as it began. Eventually I figured that this was the sound of adjacent rock strata scraping against each other as they shrank differentially with the rapid temperature change...the thermostat phenomenon for the engineers among us. For the rest of the trip, I enjoyed slapping crystallized metamorphic rocks together to make musical clinks of different pitch, but there was a big difference between my clumsy percussion and a private philharmonia of prehistoric stones.

The enduring trace of engineer in me now needs to address the water issue. An extended hike in a waterless canyon this time of year requires a tent, a down parka, a substantial sleeping bag, food, fuel, a pot, and a pack sturdy enough to carry all that...plus 3 gallons of water. That adds up easily to 65 pounds, not exactly the "Ray Way," and it pushed my physical limits on an uphill grind. Water becomes precious for more than its fundamental biological role. The volume of water in one's pack defines the number of days one can stay "out"...unless there is another source uphill somewhere...which can be a matter of conjecture. Water translates to experience and, if lucky, enlightenment of some kind. I chose meals where I could ingest all the water I used to rehydrate food, and I drank the rinse water from my cup. I sucked the water back out of my toothbrush... and recaptured the icicles from my mustache. I titrated my consumption on the color of urine. Clear was wasteful, pale yellow just about right, solid yellow a little too stingy and dark yellow a definite warning.

When I returned to the truck 3 days later, after a number of revelations to be described in another place, I still had a liter of water for back-up. I held this one bottle aside in case I needed to spend an extra night with a broken ankle or lost bearings. I revered that bottle the way a climber respects his rope, and even after returning to a well-stocked truck, I hesitated to pop the cap.

Claiming no originality, upon return to a paved road, I craved a big, juicy hamburger and a cold beer...and I knew exactly where to find them. Thirty five miles south, the Furnace Creek Ranch diner could deliver both. While I cradled my sacred bubbly brew (dark yellow, thank you), a family of four sat down in an adjacent booth. The waitress dutifully poured four tall glasses of ice water for them. As I watched the froth dissipate at the bottom of my glass, I listened to the family's cheerful banter about the marvels they had seen, and I reflected on my first family trip to the desert. Alexa was just learning to stand when we saw the last rays of the day light up a crimson paintbrush in Skidoo and later watched the dusk creep across the salt pan from the Aguerberry promontory. Of course, there were the engineering triumphs of the Keane Wonder mine, the grapey fragrance of phacelia in the gaudy folds of Artist Palette, the polished marble in Mosaic Canyon, the prickle poppies fluttering in Titus Canyon, the bawdy beavertail blossoms, the pupfish, that poor rental car, the absurd castle, my girls in the sun.... I awakened from my reverie as the family stood up, dropped a tip on the table, and left...without ever touching those 4 glasses of precious water. I barely resisted the urge to bolt over the bench and gulp it all down.

I've ventured up quite a few desert canyons since that first one, including the real Phinney Wash another trip, eschewing orienteering devices other than compass and topo. Typically, I'll have read that somewhere 12 miles up some obscure drainage there's a spring that hardrock miners once tapped...and may still be used by descendants of their burros. I can see it in my imagination, maybe nestled in a cleft marked by out-of-place tall grasses or a few unusually bushy junipers. Maybe a legendary view of circus striped cliffs awaits, or perhaps a golden eagle soaring, a bighorn ram grazing, a full moon rising, or desert nymphs dancing. You just never know.

The trouble with canyons is that they twist and double back so often that, without my bifocals, the bunched lines on the topo start to look like a plate of spaghetti. The canyon walls may be hundreds of feet tall, unscalable by guys with backpacks. There is often no safe way to scramble to a high point to get one's proverbial bearings. Even knowing that the red barrel Enchinocacti start around 2500', Joshua trees at 4500', junipers around 5000', and the pinyons at 6000', it's still tricky to know how high you are.

Predictably, there comes a point when the water supply in the backpack dwindles below half, and I'm not "there" yet. I don't know how far away lies the spring, or whether it's bone dry this year, or if there is an impassable dry fall in the way...or if it even exists. Now what...?

Hold this thought and indulge me, please, in shifting continents and drifting back a hundred years.

In one of the most memorable scenes on film, Humphrey Bogart's Charlie trudges through a fetid swamp, dragging the battered *African Queen* through a cloying tangle of papyrus and muck. The tropical sun glares above, and the rushes collapse upon the boat like the sticky hairs of a Venus flytrap. Charlie plucks leeches from his body...but conquers his revulsion, slips back into the black water, and grabs the tow rope again. Katharine Hepburn's Rosie sinks slowly toward exhaustion, her faith and her vengeful will riven against the implacable anvil of fate. Finally, his human reserves spent, wracked with fever, unable to see beyond the impenetrable curtain of reeds, his keel mired in bottomless mud, Charlie crawls up onto the deck, expecting to die in the arms of his improbable lover. As they descend through delirium toward terminal torpor, the clouds gather upstream, and it starts to rain. The *African Queen* floats again and drifts into the open waters of Lake Tanganyika...a mere 100 yards away. (They wake up, reaffirm their love in the darkest of times, cleverly torpedo the vile German warship, and presumably live happily ever after.)

I actually don't need the "closure" of the ending, although the residual engineer in me positively loves the torpedo improvisation. What I really wonder is whether Charlie would have somehow found the strength to forge ahead instead of surrendering if he had known how tantalizingly close he was to his goal...or whether he would have chosen regardless to spend his last sentient moments tenderly touching another person.

What would I have done? It's hard to know.

Back in the unfamiliar desert canyon, the importance of water is not what floats your boat, but what perfuses your kidneys.

There is a vaguely defined point in almost every trip where I can stop, point back downhill, and make it back to the truck with a bladder full of pale yellow urine. That option avoids the embarrassment of becoming the focus of a search and retrieval mission by rangers annoyed by the folly of yet another middle aged dilettante.... It avoids the clucking of wilderness insiders who would pontificate about all the judgment errors I made, and then thread in condescending shibboleths about overconfident doctors. OK, admittedly, that's a pride thing, but I also have overdue apologies to make, a few secret treasures I want to share, and my amazing family to see one more time. Nobody would ever criticize the decision to turn around, and I'd not likely be accused of wimpiness. Nobody would have to know that I caved. However, while I truly respect buzzards, admire ants, and tolerate mice, I have no desire to feed my fingers to them.

On the other hand, as it were, I'd hate to turn back when just around the very next bend there might lie Charlie's Lake...that bubbling desert spring draped with wild grapes and maidenhair ferns...or toads reveling in joyful amplexus in a crucible of watercress...or Edward Abbey holding out a beer...or a wild white stallion pawing the earth...or a vermilion parrot speaking Spanish *.

When it is impossible to know where you are with precision (yeah, I'm aware that a GPS beeper dismantles this whole allegory), a smart solo hiker winds up setting up a series of check points in advance, each one with an algorithm of sorts regarding next steps. The challenge is the discipline not to renegotiate.

The recurring canyon water test has shaped my approach to personal challenges as I try to balance ambition, principle, and practicality. I've chosen work which has demanded that I seek new teachers, learn new disciplines, listen to foreign and contrary opinions, absorb fresh rebuffs, and test new strategies at a stage of life when lots of doctors have started their glide toward a respectable retirement. In healthcare reform and large scale Quality Improvement, there are no trail markers and no reliable maps. I harbor a vision of an apocryphal verdant spring of social justice and enlightened care...some unknown distance uphill in harsh and unforgiving surroundings. I get tired more easily now, and I struggle with the constant confrontations of disappointments and failures...allegorical dry falls, if you will. I also see my years of mental agility and physical strength perceptibly dribbling away, just like the precious liters of lukewarm water on my back in the desert. I could turn around and face downhill, enjoy shorter days, dodge the daily reminders of my shortcomings, take more wilderness pictures, make better wine, run longer races, turn more bowls...or...cinch up, take a 30 ml sip, and forge ahead with sketchy resources to see if that spring is really there.

It's hard to know.

There is no end to this story. I'll even resist the temptation to drag out the hackneyed line about the primacy of the "journey" over the destination in Zen philosophy. However, in my career just like the desert canyon, anybody you meet "up there" is going to be a person with both humility and confidence, a self-deprecated set of survival skills, a tolerance for risk without recklessness, and some secret knowledge. I have a lot of interesting friends, and we share our water.

Peace,

Wells

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