

Ed Parsons
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Mountains and Rivers

The same way that the body is the ground for meditation, individual experience is the source of universal experience, or at least a starting point. So, this talk will be about certain points in my experience with mountains and rivers, and how they have fit into my spiritual life.

Where do I start talking about mountains and rivers in my own life and as a witness for others as a writer and photographer? Living in the north country, and being someone who often retreats to nature, I have found joy, solitude and camaraderie in both mountains and rivers.

As a child in Beverly Mass I lived on a dead end street, with Wenham Lake, the Beverly and Salem water supply, a short walk away. There I learned to value small patches of wild land and water surrounded by suburbia. I learned to wander in them, to notice and appreciate wildlife, to play with friends or take refuge there. I brought those values north.

I worked for the AMC Huts in 1966, '67 and '68, and '75 and '76. I was on the hut construction crew which meant I not only helped build additions and constructed leaching fields, but worked in every hut as a days-off hut boy, guided hikes, participated in rescues and much more.

Memories stand out. Once on a rescue in the early evening we flew up through Mahoosuc Notch in a Huey, with the doors flung wide, and set down on Mahoosuc Arm to help rescue a boy who had slipped on wet ledges and broken a leg. The Fish and Game were already there, having been dropped off earlier. We littered the boy up to Mahoosuc Arm, the helicopter took him away and we had to walk down using headlamps. The officers joked that while carrying him uphill, the agitated boy had some of the most colorful language they had ever heard.

I was thankful I was never on a carry-out of a fatality, except the time we carried an 80-year-old man from Lakes of the Clouds Hut to the summit of Mount Washington. He had been on his 100th ascent of the mountain, and it was a fitting place for him to drop his body and keep on hiking. Our litter carry to the summit was not tinged with sadness.

I learned to love the camaraderie of the mountains and the special humor that would permeate the evenings with laughter. I liked to often hike alone, yet was not lonely.

Back then I read *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. In the end the wandering Siddhartha, a spiritual seeker in India, meets Vasudeva, the enlightened ferryman on the shore of the river. He helps Siddhartha learn how to listen to the river's secrets, and carries him across to awakening.

Next to AMC Pinkham Notch Camp, the Ellis River flows down below the confluence of rivers from Tuckerman Ravine and the Gulf of Slides. I went out in the evenings sometime and sat listening to the river, bearing witness to its sweet murmuring music, which expressed infinite possibilities.

In the intervening years between my two stints with the AMC, for a while I lived and worked in Cambridge and reveled in city life and culture. Once I was browsing in the Boston Library. I found a book called *The Mountain Spirit* by Michael Tobias, an anthology of mountain related essays both spiritual and mountaineering.

There I discovered the Mountains and Rivers Sutra by Dogen, a 12th century Zen Buddhist priest, and founder of the Soto School of Zen. Something shifted in me. This writing was not understood in a logical way, it was more like the murmuring water of the Ellis River.

Some quotes:

“The Blue Mountains are constantly walking. The stone woman gives birth to a child in the night. The mountains lack none of their proper virtues, hence they are constantly at rest and constantly walking.”

“To be in the mountains is a flower opening within the world. Those outside the mountains do not sense this, do not know it.”

“The East Mountain moves over the water. All the waters are appearing at the foot of the East Mountain, and therefore the mountains mount the clouds and stride through the heavens. The mountains are the peaks of the waters, and in both ascending and descending, their walk is over the water. The tips of the mountains’ feet walk over the water, setting them dancing, therefore, walking extends freely in all directions.”

Words that express the oneness of apparently contradictory things can nudge us towards letting go of dualistic concepts. I find great beauty in such words. In Pinkham Notch my ears heard the whispers of a river that descended Mount Washington, cascading over rocks, swirling in eddies, dropping into pools and rejoining the current. It had so much to say about its endless journey

Anyway from the AMC I moved to the valley and got married, had two children. As they grew I would often carry one in a backpack. Yet I couldn’t get enough of the mountains and rivers, and often went alone.

What is the magic of climbing a mountain? The love of using your body the way it was meant to be used. The ascent changes you, opens up doors of perception that are nearly inactive in domestic life. You become the embodiment of aspiration. The view from the summit is the vision achieved, the descent the gradual return to the village, where you can be silent or speak of what you saw. Both are fitting. The entire theater of activity is the natural world. Every hike is different.

As for rivers, I continued an activity that I had acquired before getting married. After working at a camp in Canaan, I came north with another counselor. One day driving over a bridge in Glen we spied a big inner tube stuck on the shore of the Saco. We retrieved it, and would float down the river on it back to back.

After he left, I continued alone. On the shore of the river I would put the tube in the water, place a small 2X4 on one side of it and a piece of flat plywood on top that. I would climb on with

my feet holding down the other side of the tube. I carried a long sapling for a steering stick, and for support getting on and off the tube by the shore.

I floated down many a river section, starting in the cold water spring and ending in the cold water fall. I preferred to be out there alone because my craft always raised eyebrows and prompted exclamations. I don't need to describe the peace of floating down a river with the current, discovering someplace new around each bend and the added spice of being vigilant for snags that could capsize me and maneuvering with the flick of a wrist, using the sapling. Sometimes I went before work in the morning.

In 1991 my son Jedidiah drowned in the Saco at a campground in Brownfield where his mother, my ex-wife, was camping. The day after, I swam alone at the same spot. A week later with some writer and poet friends, we gathered in a circle on the beach around a campfire and went around reading our own or others' works. An internationally known haiku writer from Fryeburg read a haiku by a 16th century poet Mazuta Masahide, a student to Basho: "Now that my shack has burned down, I can see the full moon better." A friend who has spent a semester in Japan made some small Japanese funeral boats with candles. We lit the candles and put them in the river. They all went down river, except one that hesitated and came back upstream in an eddy. We fancied it was Jedediah, hesitant to leave.

My ex-wife and I took the ashes up Mount Sabattus in Lovell, Maine and placed them in a crack in a giant quartz boulder at the start of the descent loop. An odd thing happened: we were told that a palm reader at the Fryeburg Fair said there was a spirit lingering in the valley that hesitated to leave. I went alone back to Mount Sabattus and called out to Jed. I told him we loved him and he could leave. We would meet him again later.

Soon after that I took a hiking trip to Newfoundland and spent two solitary weeks in the Long Range Mountains. One evening, amid caribou and snowfields, I called out to Jed again.

My relationship with my son's death has been ongoing, and part of my spiritual path. It changed everything, yanking open a door of compassion also experienced by the countless people who have lost a child. Yet their lives continue afterwards. I continued hiking and floating down the rivers.

I stopped tubing and later switched to a kayak, much more relaxing and conforming. My favorite river section now is the Bearcamp from Bryant Road near the Brett School to West Ossipee. Sharon Nothnagle has been a kayaker's bodhisattva, on short notice picking me up at the terminus and bringing me back to my kayak on Bryant Road, in exchange for a tall coffee.

That section of river can be challenging when even one blowdown obstructs the channel. I have portaged around old pines that have finally fallen in, walking through patches of trout lily in the spring. Now there is one centennial pine on that section that leans a little more every year. Climate change and frequent high water is shortening its life. Impermanence and entropy are spiritual lessons from nature that apply to us.

The subject of risk is applicable to both mountains and rivers. I consider myself very cautious

though others sometimes don't. I remember when I lived in Jackson and got back from a long winter hike through the Great Gulf and up the steep and icy Six Husbands Trail on Mount Jefferson. My landlord Nancy Freeman, a veteran hiker from the last generation, asked if it had been dangerous. I said yes. But my interpretation of that was to go and be careful and safe in the face of it. Hers was to not go. Nowadays many follow my version. But experience and knowing your limits makes the difference to safely coming through.

I started writing a hiking column in the late 1980s after taking an evening writing course with Morgan Llewellyn, a novelist who moved to the valley. My first column was about Jockey Cap in Fryeburg. I went there with her husband, a retired pilot. First there was the Northern Light newspaper, then the Irregular, then the Reporter Press, then the Conway Daily Sun.

I have kept it up as a weekly practice. After all these years, the mountains have become another part of life, barely distinguishable from any other. Life is spirit.

In recent years I have tended to hike with friends more than alone. Every fall if possible I volunteer at the AMC Cold River Camp in Evans Notch. In relationships, hiking has been an important part. Hiking small mountains with my grandson Ridley, like Mount Sabattus in Lovell, where we went when he was only 4, has been a joy. On another time I went there with Ridley and my ex's 20-year-old son Isaac. We paused at the giant quartz boulder where Jed's ashes were stashed in a crack. Ridley followed Isaac's urging, and they both climbed on top of it to pray for Jed.

People may describe me as a hiking columnist. But like everyone else, I am floating down the river of life, with my eyes open.

Years ago I led a camp group in canoes across Maine's Flagstaff Lake. We camped on the shore beneath Bigelow Mountain, climbed it the next day, and canoed back across the lake. On the lake we crossed the old river course that Benedict Arnold and his ragged troops had taken north to attack Quebec City in 1775. There is no beginning or end to this river of precious moments.

Dogen said:

“From time immemorial, the mountains have been the dwelling place of the great sages; wise men and sages have all made the mountains their own chambers, their own body and mind. And through these wise men and sages the mountains have been actualized. However many great sages and wise we suppose have assembled in the mountains, ever since they entered the mountains, no one has met a single one of them. There is only the actualization of the life of the mountains; not a single trace of their having entered remains.”

When you do something long enough, you disappear into it. When you treat the mountains well, they treat you well.

The Beeline Trail is my favorite way up Chocorua from the south, leaving the Paugus Mill Road parking lot in the dark, crossing stones over Paugus Brook, strolling up the Bolles Trail, your

headlamp catching the trail sign for the Beeline up ahead. Starting up the long gradual trail as the world changes from black and white to color. Banging a left on the Brook trail you greet the granite pitches that will continue above the trees. The first great view west, winding through stunted trees and the final pitch to the top, the granite crest. You have done something profound, danced with the earth, and now feel grounded on this peak in the sky. You can see everywhere at a mere glance. A snack and rest and your headed down. Later the long flat walk on the Bolles Trail is relaxing. You're back at your car at 10:45.