

A Trip To Upper Dam

“There comes a time in a young man’s/lady’s life when...” E.B. White

In 1960 I was one of about ten campers that made the trip from Camp Bob White, which was located in Massachusetts, to Upper Dam, Maine. I was twelve and, like E.B. White, considered myself “...rather young to be so far north...”

We were in the charge of a man named Linwood White. Lin was a teacher from Maine, who in time would become the director of Bob White. But, in 1960, he was the trip leader and had brought us to Upper Dam where he and his wife owned a small camp (cottage).

There was no road to Upper Dam in 1960, so we had hiked the last four miles of our trip. The trail skirted the northern edge of Upper Richardson Lake and when we were about a mile from Upper Dam we began to hear its roar. As we walked, Lin told us how to use the noise coming from the dam as a navigational beacon. The forest we were hiking through was very dense, offering few reference points from which to find our position. We learned that our compasses only told us what direction *we were heading*; they told us nothing about what direction we *should be heading*. For that we needed a *fixed point of reference*, and in Upper Dam the noise of the dam was it.

Upper Dam separates Mooselookmeguntic and Lower Richardson Lakes. Lower Richardson is about 20 feet lower than Mooselookmeguntic, thus creating a set of rapids below the dam and a large area of deep, black water above. The white water below the dam was exciting to watch, and salmon could be seen lying in the pools and eddies. I really wanted to catch one of those salmon.

The area of water above the dam was enclosed by a boom made of large logs that had been chained end to end. Lin told us that its purpose was to keep boats out of the danger area that lay in front of the dam. It was also a barrier of last resort for a swimmer caught in the current that was created by the water rushing *under* the dam. Unlike many dams where the water flows over the top, this one had huge metal doors that were raised varying amounts to let water pass under them. On the upper side of the dam was a walkway that allowed people to cross from one side to the other. From the walkway one could look down into the black water and see small whirlpools and the greenish glow of light that was coming from under the doors.

We had been in Upper Dam only a few hours before we made our first trip across the dam. It took only one look at those doors, the greenish light, the black water, and the whirlpools, to make an indelible impression: this dam scared me to death!

Since the camp (cottage) we were staying at was on the opposite side of the dam from where we went fishing, swimming and visiting (to the home of Lin’s father and the cottage of author Louise Rich), we crossed the dam many times a day. I am certain that it was on one of those trips that Lin must have first noticed my fear. I said nothing, to do so would have been very un-cool and just plain dumb. But nonetheless, I was having a very big problem with this dam.

One morning, while we were getting ready to go fishing for Chubs (a catchall name for Sunnies, Blue Gills and other small fish), Lin approached me with a fly rod in his hand. Though I was a beginner he knew that my father had taught me to cast. Offering me the rod, he asked, “Would you like to catch a Salmon?” He might as well have asked me if I would like to go to a World Series game. I replied, “YES!”

Lin gathered a few flies, a net, and said, “Let’s go.” As we walked from camp I began to wonder where we were going to fish. But since we were walking toward the white water that flowed from the dam into Lower Richardson, I assumed we were heading to a pool that lay in the rapids. When we reached the river however, we turned and followed the trail that led to the dam.

Upon arriving at the dam, Lin led me to a catwalk that said, “No Admittance.” “Should we be going in here?” I asked.

“Do you want to catch a salmon or not?” he replied.

I made no answer and he waited for no reply. We kept walking. The catwalk led to the back side of the dam and crossed over the sluiceways in which the water that had passed under those horrible doors exploded into a roaring white foam. The air was filled with mist and everything was wet including the ladder.

The ladder was about ten feet long and led from the catwalk down to the stones that separated each of the wooden sluiceways that guided the water from the many doors. As we stood at the top of the ladder with the water roaring beneath us, Lin had to yell so I could hear him. He hollered, "Give me the rod." I nodded and handed him the rod. "Climb slowly and wrap your fingers around the rungs of the ladder." I made no reply other than to grab the ladder with both hands.

I can't remember climbing down that ladder. I was in no actual danger. If I had fallen I would have landed on the stones below and at worst been bruised and scraped. The actual danger was no greater than climbing any 10 foot ladder. The perceived risk, however, was lethal. I could see nothing except the rushing water in the sluiceways and could imagine nothing except being swept into that current. Yet in a few moments both Lin and I were at the bottom of the ladder and unscathed.

It was August, the low water time of the year, and all of the control doors were not open. Lin led me along the rocks until we came to the edge of a sluiceway which was not in use. Then I could see them: huge salmon, lots of them, laying in the calm water of the idle sluiceway.

For the next hour I cast and retrieved, changed flies and had the time of my life trying to catch a salmon. Despite my efforts and Lin's advice I did not catch a fish, but it didn't matter. I now knew why my father, Lin and others had, for decades, been coming to places like this to fish. Seeing these magnificent fish up close and matching wits with them was the most exciting thing I had done in the first 12 years of my life.

Eventually Lin said, "We'd better be getting back to camp. The others will be returning." We gathered our equipment and climbed over the slippery rocks to another ladder that led to the catwalk. It wasn't until I was standing at the foot of the ladder that I saw it. The ladder was positioned so I was facing directly at the back side of one of the doors, and this one was open.

The water passing under it flowed smoothly for the first several feet after emerging, creating a flat black surface with just a hint of light coming from the other side, the side I had peered into from the walkway. Standing before it I was transfixed. It might as well have been a tiger, lion or some other beast that had cornered me. I was frozen.

I stood at the foot of the ladder for what seemed forever peering into what I was certain was death. Behind me, silent, knowing and calculating was Lin. He let me take a long careful look at the violence of the water, the blackness that emanated from the other side, and most of all he let me wrestle with the demons that were inside *me*. How long did he remain silent? I don't know. But whatever the length of time, it was the right amount. For before I could say or do something dumb, he put his hand on my shoulder and yelled over the roar, "It can't hurt you if don't let it." I nodded and began to climb. The blackness of the water that lay beyond the door pulled me as if it was magnetic. But that was not the case, and in a few moments I was on top of the ladder away from the maw of that horrible door. I was unscathed. I was safe. *But, I was not the same.*

After we had walked a while in silence, Lin looked at me in a way that I had not seen before. It was an expression that I would later see over and over again as I learned to observe him with other campers. This was my first glimpse at a man looking inside another. Neither he nor I spoke, but after a few moments he smiled in a way that I did not yet understand. I had taken one of those fledgling steps that lead from boyhood to manhood, a step that I was allowed to take only once, but for Lin it was yet one more time that he had facilitated the process. He saw it as his job; not a job he was paid to do, but rather a job he was expected to do, as a man, a guide and as a mentor. The smile was for both of us. We each had done well.

The world has changed a bit since I was 12 and I hear too often that our children's needs have changed along with it. I don't think so. Today's children are born with the same equipment as those born in 1948, 1648, or 2000 BC. Our intellects are no more developed, our passions are no greater or lesser, our instincts seem to be the same. Yet something is different and I think I know what it is: our children need the same things as always, but they need them in bigger quantities and sooner than ever before. Why?

My parents spent considerable time worrying about my education, it was just as important then as it is today; that is not different. They were also concerned about my physical well being. Parents of that time feared Polio and other childhood illnesses that did not yet have cures. The abduction and murder of Charles Lindberg's child, in the 1930's, made parents concerned for their child's safety. Most of the forms of physical harm we live with today also filled my parents with dread. When I was in college we even had a sniper. Remember the one who fired from the tower of a university building in Texas. Even that is not new. So what is?

My parents feared many things, but they did not fear the culture itself. They still felt secure in the belief that their views of right and wrong were commonly accepted. Today the very notions of right and wrong are themselves the issue of debate. While my

parents were concerned that some deranged individual might harm my body, it never occurred to them that the culture itself might abduct me.

We need to know what we believe and clearly teach it to our children as soon as they can understand us, for if we do not the culture will usurp our ability to do so. If our culture's new morality is not the one we wish our children to adopt, then we must give them more of our time, thoughts, discipline, love and faith than ever before. The culture has become a woefully skillful opponent in a competition for our children's hearts and minds. Anything less than an aggressive, preemptive approach appears to produce defeat by default.

Lin White was not my father, yet he felt it his duty to take proactive measures to help a boy learn to handle fear. He was performing a duty that came naturally to him; in this regard he was a man of his times. His intervention, however, did not begin with the ruse of catching a salmon. It began by careful observation followed by the deliberate construction of a plan to help. He had been a boy himself and had struggled with fears of his own; thus armed he crafted a response. By using experience to convey a lesson Lin was anticipating Experiential Education, which was still a decade away from common acceptance. In this regard, he was a man ahead of his times.

In sending me to camp, my parents were also crafting a response. They, better than anyone else, knew me. They had done the careful observation and knew it was time for me to grow in ways that were not possible within the nest they had so skillfully made.

At Camps Eagle Wing and Eagle Feather we still do what Lin did 48 years ago. Each of our camp activities provide fertile ground in which our campers can grow. The virtues that we speak of at campfire; honesty, courage, compassion, selflessness, humility, etc. are present, waiting to be discovered, in the simplest of activities. Yet, if they are to be "found", we must point them out, reward their implementation and lament when they are ignored. If we wait for them to be self-discovered, others will beat us to the point and supplant them with their counterparts.

All of us, both at home and at camp, need to give our kids more of everything that comes from the heart, for if we don't...

Chick BeVier
Exec. Dir. Camps Eagle Feather & Eagle Wing

P.S. Perhaps I wasn't as young as I thought, "...to be so far north..."

[Questions and Comments](#)