

Prayers for White Water

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TEN RULES FOR WHITE WATER RAFTING (AND CONGREGATIONAL LIFE)

1. It's what you came for. Enjoy it.
2. Rest in the calm places. There will be more white water soon.
3. Never stop paddling, even when it seems hopeless.
4. When you're in trouble, don't panic.
5. When you fall in, hang on to your life jacket and let go of everything else.
6. Don't be surprised if the raft doesn't go where you want it to go.
7. Everyone paddles furiously, but it's still the current that takes you.
8. The more activity on the right, the more the raft goes left, and vice versa.
9. Decide who is going to steer, the person in the bow or the person in the stern.
10. Balance, Balance, Balance.

-Anonymous

If there is one common physical feeling I dislike more than any, it is being too cold.
And so, I very wisely decided to live in New England
And work in a church that was built in 1830.

But that is all beside the point.

The real story is: the first time I went white water rafting
Was in 10th grade, in October, on an overnight school retreat.

And I felt generally neutral to good about this upcoming trip
Unsure if I'd like white water rafting
Unenthusiastic about the idea of getting in to a river in October
But excited about trying something I'd never done before
Unsure but hopeful about who I had picked to be my roommates
Wondering whether I'd have anyone to sit with on the bus,
Generally filled with that common mix of anticipation, curiosity,
a little anxiety,
and the fresh excitement that comes with marking a new school year.

And so,
The day finally came on the trip that we were doing the white water rafting,
And I pulled on a mildewy wetsuit
That countless other teenagers had surely worn before me
And got on the big yellow school bus,

Which we rode for an hour or so upriver.
It was sprinkling, which made everything feel colder, or course
In what would have already been a crisp October New England week.

So we got on the inflatable rafts
8 or 10 of us in a boat,
and started down the river.
Water splashing in to our boats
Our guides yelling directions at us
Us being jostled and tossed up and down a little as we went over the rapids—
One girl in our group fell in and lost her ring in the river
And she—decidedly not enjoying the whole thing—swore that the river Gods took
her ring in exchange for sparing her life.
A few others “fell” into the water too—some tossed unwillingly, others taking the
leap on purpose—
Though by the time all that happened, we were all soaked through anyway,
From water coming in to the boats.

And here’s what I remember about this experience:
I don’t remember exactly who was in my raft
But I do remember that I felt closer to them after we finally pulled our raft on to the
shore.
And I don’t remember if I actually got in the water willingly, or if the water just came
into the raft
But I do remember being soaked, protesting that this “wetsuit” was not doing it’s job
very well, and being *extremely* cold.

And, if you’ll remember
I *really* don’t like being cold.
And I also don’t remember whether I had forgotten my sweatshirt
Or had brought it and it still wasn’t enough
But I do remember people lending one another sweatshirts
And sharing blankets on the bus ride back.

And in all this, here’s what I remember the most:
This rafting trip was a combination of cold, uncomfortable, and fun,
But it was also an incredibly meaningful experience.
Because, the thing I actually remember most about that trip,
More than being cold,
More than being uncomfortable,
Is that I have marked it in my mind
As a moment when I became closer with the friends I would have all through the
rest of high school and beyond
Friends who, to this day, I am still close with.
Because we did, in the end, do the work we had come to do:
To support one another through falling in, and being too cold,

To lend one another blankets and sweatshirts,
To find comfort in one another in times of need.

Friends, we must navigate a lot of white water in this world.
Some, like this rafting trip, we signed up for.
Thrilling, exciting, adrenaline-rush aliveness—if uncomfortable and cold,
But some white water, like all water, and like life itself
Can also be dangerous, scary, overwhelming, not at all what we expected
Some people get tossed into rapids that they did not ask for
And cannot easily swim to shore.

And there are rapids all around us—are there not?
We've seen a lot this summer, in the news, at home:
We've experienced loss and heartbreak and despair
And also moments of beauty, of stillness, of connection.
We sometimes get tossed in to the cold water, and scraped up on the rocks,
And I come in to church, to this community—
because I pray that when white water comes
And have no doubt, it has and it will again—
My prayer is that, when it comes, there are people who are ready to pull us back in
to the boat.
To lend sweatshirts and blankets
To turn on the heat, lend dry clothes, make tea once we get inside,
And my prayer is that we may be those people for one another.

Friends,
We don't come into community to be comfortable.
But to grow as people,
We are here as a church not to stay warm and dry, but to help each other when we
get cold.
And this beautiful, old, drafty sanctuary does nothing to help us to avoid white
water
But we are instead here to learn to navigate it as best we can
To help pull one another back into the boat
And to rest in the calm places together.
We say that this sanctuary is not a sanctuary *from* the world
But a place to practice what it means to be fully human
A place to grow strong so we can better *engage* in the world around us.

Today, as we in this congregation share waters from places or experiences that have
held meaning for us,
I often think about the beauty of using this water, collected from our many separate
journeys since we were last together coming together,
Using it to bless babies and children in our congregation.
In it I see us blessing them, and blessing all of us, with the fullness of human
experience.

Because I remember: not all water is healing—
Literal flood waters covered Baton Rouge this summer
The Standing Rock Sioux Nation is fighting hard to protect their water—
But so much of it is.
And I pray that in using this water
That we are blessing them, and one another in our coming together, with the total
sum of the love, and the joy, and the community, the heartbreak, the struggle, the
learning, and the companions that this water represents.

And so, we are about to share our water with one another.
When the ushers come to your pew,
we invite you to come forward to pour some of your water into the common bowl.
We invite you to share into the microphone, in a word or two,
what experience, or feeling, or meaning this water represents for you,
remembering that it matters less where we've been or what we've done than what
meaning we've made of it—and isn't that so true of life as well?
There are pitchers of water on the altar at the front
If you did not bring water, or forgot, or if the church's tap water is the water you
wish to use.
I invite you to come forward now for the sharing of the waters, as we mix the many
streams of our lives into one common bowl.