

## Essay

# TO BE ONE WITH THE RIVER

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I sit entranced in a small orange rubber raft, floating slowly down a dark swirling river. A line of bubbles marks the narrow curve of current. Eddies suck backwards from either side. Every so often a whirlpool forms somewhere, anywhere, and just as quickly disappears.

Dark vertical cliff walls rise 500 feet on either side. Water meets rock with no intermediate zone. No soft sand. No opportunity for gradual acclimatization. This is March, 1990, and I am on the Colorado River of the Grand Canyon, Day One of a projected nineteen day journey into the mystery of eonic time.

If you need help, the ranger told us, use mirrors to signal a passing commercial airplane. “Believe it or not, they do see the flashing, even at 20,000 feet.”

I am sitting in one of five small rubber rafts, surrounded by three women and twelve men, all of them strangers. By the end we will know each other better than we know our friends back home. “Personalities” will prove useless in this world of primal instinctive response. What will emerge is character — including our shadow side. Our flotilla is the Ship of Fools, and our journey to become a struggle for dominance. Who will assume the honor? Who is Lord of the Flies?

In the midst of a vast labyrinthian sweep of impregnable chasms, massive jutting edges, yawning caverns, high mystic tablelands, side canyons leading to miniature paradises of succulent spring green and falling waters, the changing light playing extravagantly with form, texture, color — amidst all of this, we will tend to become preoccupied with what goes on in our tiny human world. Our psychological and political games. Our petty little grievances. Our jockeying for position.

On the way down in our chartered bus we had all signed a quasi-legal piece of paper entitled “Common Adventures.” The document stated that this is to be a leaderless expedition, that all of us are responsible for the outcome, that each is to offer whatever he or she has to give to the group.

The infinitely changing textures of dark cliff walls move, they undulate with patterns, the faces and bodies of gods, African, Egyptian, Greek, Mayan, Anasazi. Squat fat mesopotamian mother goddesses from ancient matriarchal times emerge, fade — into Quetzalcoatl, or Kali. There marches an army of Chinese soldiers, exactly repeated, yet no two the same. Pluto, god of the underworld watches, malevolent.

Tiny spiny plants stand solo, defiant in tufts of soil clinging to rocks. There is the Utah Century Plant, blooming! Above, a sundog circles the sun, its halo wider than the arc of sky allowed by cliff walls. Canyon wrens greet us with simple song, notes trilling down the scale in perfect pitch.

We are entering the upper inner granite gorge of the Grand Canyon, we are to travel 300 miles down a gradient of 2,200 feet into the Mother, this river her cleft; the gorge which holds it and above us, the eerie tawny pink folds and crevasses of canyonlands her secret inner anatomy.

I am here as one member of an expedition which I knew beforehand, would be an amazing experiment in the dynamics of human community. And I sensed it would be difficult, skewed in some way, due to the extreme imbalance between men and women.

I am here to contact the Mother, she who resides deep within my female nature. I am here, I will find as we go on, to experience the interaction between that deep swirling river within me pushing inexorably down, and the deep fear which many men have of precisely this feeling which they too, cannot help but contact inside.

I am here to experience a wide spectrum of male energy, from the most sexist and controlling — who seek to dominate this river through technique and sheer muscular power — to those men whose energy protects the female, and who surrender to her river, allowing her to wear away the judgments freezing us all into polarized categories, “male and female,” “sexist and protective”. . .

I am here to see/feel that same spectrum of male energy within me, as it seeks to merge and blend with the female in her various guises.

Much of the time the river rolls along placidly, content, her undulations rolling within us to dissolve the patina of our so-called “civilized” identities in that other world beyond the canyon. She washes us of our self-conscious views of ourselves, and our points of view. She induces that trance-like state wherein time flies . . . away, and we are vulnerable, fully present within the infinitely expanding space of this one moment now.

And she can be wild and destructive, her hysteria arousing us to attention long before meeting it. Each rapid signals its presence beforehand through what first sounds like a faint hiss and grows, to sometimes include a deep bass thundering from below.

Her energy goes out of control — or, I should say, out of our control, as she certainly seems to know what she is doing. Lashing gigantic frothing wave upon wave of sheer power, she fills our rafts, she knocks us out of them, she even overturns them, she sucks us up and takes over.

We are one with the river, I tell myself, as our boat enters a rapid such as this, my faith and trust in such unity clashing with my fear, fueled by adrenaline, mouth dry, a terrible sinking in the solar plexus . . .

We are one with the river, I remind myself, as later, by the campfire, the men who fear deep female energy polarize against me, project upon me as scapegoat . . .

I feel the wound in my deep female nature. It resounds in my womb like a gong, centuries upon untold centuries of this wounding of the female . . . Yet, at the same time, I am, paradoxically, healed.

We are healed.

For we are one with the river, there is no separation. The Mother's pain is the measure of her power. The deeper her wound, the more profound her embrace as she opens to receive us, once again, in her watery arms.

Once we enter the rapid we have no choice but surrender. We surrender to this rapid shift in consciousness, its energy so powerful that it overwhelms and annihilates fear. We are released — into this light bright white majesty, miraculous meeting with the divine.

We are one with the river, one in our experience of her, one in our joy, our exhilaration, it leaves us shaken, open, exposed.

Three weeks have passed since we left the river. I feel split in two, I feel haunted. The old routines are in place, yet the me who performs them has changed. The wound opened there has not closed but opened wider, deeper. It is sore, it bleeds.

The healing we all went through is present too, as an aura that surrounds and interpenetrates being. As a radiant glowing from within the heart of things. A dimly sensed ancient memory of unity, community, acutely poignant, a longing . . .

Both are there, both are true. Both pain and love. This cross of being human in this anguished age. The Mother haunts us. She is a whispering. She will not let us go.