

Lynn Rasmussen
November, 2004

Happily Everglades After

When two people paddle a tandem canoe, the person in front usually navigates. In a canoe 14 to 18 feet long, the person in the front has a more immediate view of what's coming up, while the person in the back, the heavier, stronger of the two, steers.

It's a recipe for marriage hell.

Paddling together is how I learned that talking out problems, expressing feelings, and pointing out flaws are not the routes to a happy marriage. Over the years paddling has become a gauge of our evolution as a couple.

It is also how I found myself in the middle of a swamp, in the middle of the night, naked, dripping wet, too scared to cry, with an alligator hissing at my feet.

A few months earlier, my husband, Rick, and I had planned a visit to our son at the University of Miami. Rick proposed that we extend the trip to Everglades National Park. We could paddle 100 miles of the Wilderness Waterway in six days and five nights.

I said, "No way."

A few days later, he countered with 50 miles in six days and five nights.

Anticipating this, I read online about the tides that empty the swamp twice a day, 20 MPH crosswinds, and alligators that eat three Floridian children a year. Again I said, "No way."

The next day he proposed six days, five nights, 100 miles in a flat-back canoe with a motor. We could make reservations to camp on "chickees," 16 x 16 foot wooden platforms above the water. Besides, he challenged, it's a national park, not the Amazon jungle.

I told him that it was a go.

Twenty years ago planning a trip was a big deal. When Rick came up with plans more fit for professional mountain climbers than weekend hikers, saying no made me feel guilty, upset, and defensive. But I wasn't a wimp! I got involved in the planning. I tried so hard to tell him how I felt. I expressed my needs but he tried to solve problems without listening to me. Soon "you never listen to me" spiraled down to a vicious "f--- you." Looking back, I'm amazed that we went on trips at all.

Now, married almost thirty years, I let him know what I'm willing to do and what I'm not willing to do. Then I follow the advice of my husband's former surgical chief, "Never pass up an opportunity to keep your mouth shut."

I followed that mantra on our first day out, when Rick steered us toward the shore to see the alligators. I warned him that my watch, tide charts, and map indicated that it was a bad idea and that murky water obscured the depth. He blew me off. He didn't come all this way to motor across a lake whose shores from this distance could have been Ohio. He wasn't listening to me and I wasn't going to scream over the engine. Then, as I predicted, scrunch. He ran our fully loaded canoe, complete with water, gasoline, food, and camp chairs, up on oyster shoals.

I used to let him know exactly how I felt, with "I told you so" as the gist of the message. Now I know better. I didn't have to get out into that water, only a few yards from the mangrove that was seething with alligators and poisonous snakes, on to the jagged piercing oyster shells. The best revenge was making a few comments about the overpopulation of alligators and the murkiness of the water as he pushed us off.

Over the next few days, out of the range of weekend fishermen, we saw two boats and one other canoe. We paddled past an Outward Bound group. We spotted cormorants, herons, egrets, storks, pelicans, and osprey.

Then, one morning, I lost our way. We paddled out from our beach campsite toward the buoys, and found that we were looking at miles of unbroken coastline, inlets blending into beaches, the small ones looking the same as the large ones. The map had GPS markings and we had a GPS locator, but, despite Rick's suggestion, I hadn't studied how to use it. This challenge was just beyond my skill with a compass. By choosing the wrong inlet we risked being caught in The Nightmare, the route good only during high tide, and the tide was going out. Sandbars were appearing and would soon block our way

to any route, stranding us from our next night's campsite and destroying our carefully planned chickee reservations.

I made a definitive choice. That inlet. We took a valuable hour and found that it was the wrong route. We tried the next inlet. We found ourselves in The Nightmare. We decided to go for it. On a route hacked through the mangrove, circuitous, barely space for a canoe to turn, with no space to turn around, we paddled.

Rick never complained. He kept his mouth shut. I knew how wrong I was and he gave me the opportunity to fully experience the sweat rolling down my back. We made it to our chickee by dusk, feeling the particular kind of joy felt only after the adrenaline rush of adventure.

On the fifth and last evening, we arrived at our camp early. While we ate our favorite freeze-dried lasagna, the sunset on gathering thunderclouds provided a dinner show. Later, in the dark, we tied the cooking pot to a rope, opened up our bath kits, got naked, and sat on the side of the chickee with feet dangling a few inches above the water. Rick brushed his teeth while I dumped pots of water over my head and lathered up with camp suds. As I was rinsing my hair, I commented on how the white suds were making a funny pattern in the black water. Rick shined a flashlight down at our feet.

An alligator head the size of a tree log hissed at us.

I still don't know how we leaped from sitting to inside the tent.

We huddled, dripping wet, towels and clothes outside. Rick reminded me, toothpaste on his mouth, how years ago, at an alligator farm in Costa Rica, a skinny teenager with pimples prodded a scrawny, farmed gator to run 40 mph and leap eight feet in the air to get its prey.

What was a millimeter of tent nylon to that seething Jurassic reptile?

I wasn't going out there. Pee? Forget it. I suffered. Once during the night, hours later, I unzipped the door and looked out. The fiend was there, barely glistening in the dark. He hissed at me.

The next morning we ventured out, the effects of a nearly sleepless night forgotten in the terror of moving out of our illusion of a comfort zone. He was still there. Staring. Circling. Hissing. He had one nostril torn off, replaced with a white infected mass. He looked like a thug.

While I was packing at record speed, I noticed that Rick was pulling stuff out of the bags. I paused while he found his tiny Italian espresso maker, gourmet coffee, and the camp burner.

I said, "Are you nuts? It smells. Let's get out of here."

He said, "Alligators don't drink coffee."

It was in that moment that I fully realized that I live with an addict. He braved his death, and mine, for his morning java.

Again, I let it go. I decided instead to keep him between the alligator and me. If he's going to be so stupid, he could suffer the consequences.

We piled everything into the center of the chickee and then Rick got into the canoe. I threw the gear bags to him while the alligator was two feet from his feet, hissing. I thought of what I'd do if something happened to Rick...paddling him out of there, severely wounded, (I tied the tourniquet) comatose, dying...relieved that I hadn't said the wrong thing before his tragic death...

We paddled away with the alligator still hissing at us.

Quite a few hours later, sitting in the pouring rain, slapping mosquitoes, I guarded the equipment while Rick hitchhiked to our rendezvous for a ride to our car. I was so proud of us. We stayed in the moment of the trip. We had no silly fights. In the words of the Beatles, we let it be.

I reflected on how the experts have it wrong: Marriage isn't hard work and communication is not the key. I don't work at it any more. I play around with our conversations and our life. Because I'm not trying to talk it all out, my perspective is clearer and my sense of humor is more honed. I let my husband suffer his own consequences and he lets me suffer mine. He stretches me and I stretch him. Life is good.

We're both game for the next adventure. Maybe the Australian outback. Maybe the Peruvian Amazon. Maybe even the strange world of retirement.

