

Women in Whitewater

Anna feeling good on the Cascades of the Nantahala

Photo by Paul Villecourt



Teachings from the River

By Anna Levesque

Kayaking has directed and influenced the course of my life for many years because I love the way kayaking makes me feel: happy, exhilarated, and passionate. In the beginning my happiness lay in learning new moves and being challenged by bigger rapids and better paddlers. Getting good and being sponsored were my goals. I was focused on spending as much time on the water as possible. I never imagined the lessons that rivers and kayaking had in store for me and how much they would impact my path through life and my personal growth.

I love the physicality of kayaking. The adrenaline rush, being outside and being active is really fun, but it wasn't the physicality that really hooked me to the sport. It was, and is, an intense feeling of happiness and fulfillment that comes with focusing on and enjoying the present moment. I remember one of the first times that I experienced this feeling and it wasn't on a hard run, or doing a cool move, or anything like that.

It was late afternoon and I wanted to go kayaking, but couldn't find anyone to go with me. I was so fanatical about getting

to the river that I paid a friend to drive me to the put-in of the New River Gorge, drop me off and then pick me up at the take-out. At that time Ender Waves was a popular surfing spot and I knew there would be others out there. I paddled down to Ender Waves, surfed for a while and then headed down the river behind another group. I lingered just far enough behind so that it felt as though I was the only one on the river.

The sun was low and the whole Gorge was bathed in beautiful golden light that brought out the pink hues in the cliff walls. It was a gorgeous evening and as I approached Double Z and looked up at Ramshead cliff a feeling of deep gratitude and beauty swept over me. I felt a joyful connection with the river, the gorge, the trees, the stones. It was a feeling of oneness, a merging with the natural world around me. I felt in that moment I had everything I needed in life and that I didn't want to be anywhere else but right here, right now.

Yeah, I know that may sound cheesy to some of you, but what I've come to know for myself is that living in the present moment and feeling that sense of connection and happiness is what life is all about. That's why I didn't follow the path of 'responsibility' after college and instead became a raft guide so I could paddle all

the time. Kayaking has been a significant teacher in helping me understand how to create a happy, fun, successful and adventurous life for myself no matter what others think or what society tries to dictate that I should do instead. I decided to let the river and kayaking be my guides and I have learned a lot of amazing things!

The river is a teacher with many faces: Soft, easy, playful, and gentle, as well as scary, pushy, powerful, and intimidating. We as kayakers have the unique opportunity to receive the rivers' teachings in a way that few others can because we have a deeper understanding of how current works. We learn the subtleties of the currents in order to do the dance of successful maneuvering. What's really cool is that we can use the lessons that we learn on the river to assist us in navigating our lives off the river too.

It's worked for me and I know it can work for anyone who takes the time to practice. I'd like to share with you my favorite five teachings from kayaking and the river that have had a positive influence in my life. You already practice these when you're paddling so why not try them in other parts of your life too?

Pay Attention

On the river the number one rule is pay attention! It's easy to pay attention when we're paddling because, when we don't, we usually end up getting trashed. I've heard many paddlers tell me that they love kayaking because it forces them to focus on the present moment and everything else fades away. That feeling of focusing on what's in front of you and what you need to do to make it through the rapid is very freeing. In that moment there is nothing but you, the river, and your goal.

If you misjudge the timing, read the water wrong or make a bad move, the river will



Women facing their fears while scouting on the Antiqua River, Mexico

Photo by Esprit Rafting

Women in Whitewater

let you know immediately. When we get trashed on the river, or miss a wave or mess up a move it's not because the river is out to get us. We can't blame the river for our mistakes, lack of focus or bad timing. We have to take responsibility for our actions and our thoughts that may have caused us to mess up. I've heard paddlers try to blame the river before. It makes them feel better, but it doesn't fool anyone else!

Paying attention and taking responsibility for our words, actions and thoughts isn't always easy because it means that we have to look at ourselves and admit that we make mistakes. In our daily lives there may not be an immediate physical trashing when we don't pay attention like there is in kayaking, but there are consequences to careless actions and words that can include drama, anger and unhappiness.

On the river, if we make a wrong move once and get trashed we're going to do it differently the next time. I haven't met very many paddlers who continue to mess up because they like getting their butts kicked, but I have experienced people who get addicted to drama and laying blame in their lives.

Being truthful with yourself about your behavior is an opportunity to change

course. It's also an opportunity to practice compassion and forgiveness toward yourself and others. Remember that no one is perfect and that we all make mistakes. Even the best paddlers in the world mess up and swim.

At first you may only become aware of a pattern after it's happened and you feel bad. The next time you may have more awareness and you'll notice that you're doing it in the moment. Eventually you'll notice your pattern before you even speak and you'll be able to choose to act differently. It's just like learning to read water and anticipate on the river. It may not feel like it at the time, in the heat of the moment, but we always have a choice between reacting and responding to a situation.

Look at where you want to go

Once you become aware of that point of choice, how do you choose what route to take? You can start by looking at where you want to go. Most paddlers have experienced what happens when they stare at that big rock that they're trying to avoid. It never fails that every time you stare at a rock you paddle right into it. On the other

hand, if you focus on the current that leads you beside the rock you'll probably make it around the obstacle. In kayaking, looking where you want to go is key to making it down a rapid successfully. The same technique can be used in everyday life, especially when setting goals.

It doesn't matter where you are now, that doesn't have to define where you'll be one week, two months or three years from now. It's just like when you're on the river and you're in an eddy. You know where you are and by looking to where you want to go you find out what moves you need to make to get there. You don't sit in the eddy all day feeling sorry for yourself because you're not at the bottom of the rapid already. You take action to get out of the eddy and head down the rapid. You don't always know if your moves will work out exactly how you thought, but one way or the other you'll make it to the bottom of the rapid and learn something along the way.

If you're feeling like you're in a rut in your life, think of it as though you're caught in an eddy. You have the skills to get out and you have the vision to see where you want to go. Keep your eyes on your goal as you make that first move of peeling out. To help with building up the courage to break out you can practice using affirmations. Affirmations are positive statements that assert our goal (even if we haven't met it yet) or assert how we want to feel. They are statements that we use to replace the negative voices and feelings that come up when we're challenging ourselves.

Affirmations are useful in those times when you're looking to where you want to go and your mind starts going wild with stories about why and how you're not good enough, too scared and so on... An example would be "I feel relaxed, confident and focused." When we repeat



The joy of kayaking! Women on the Girls at Play Beginner trip in Mexico celebrate the end of their adventure on the Actopan River

Photo by Esprit Rafting

affirmations to ourselves we feel good and that helps to overpower the negative voices and thoughts.

This takes practice. The affirmations we use need to be believable for us or have the possibility of being believable. It's important to repeat them to yourself often and over and over again. When you wake up, before you go to bed and when you feel calm and quiet. Writing them in a journal 10 to 20 times is also a good practice. It's like practicing those hard moves in easy water first. The more you repeat them to yourself when you're calm, the more natural it will become to call on them in situations when you're challenged and really need them to help you keep your eyes on where you want to go.

Be Grateful to overpower your fears. Another tool I use to work through fear and intimidation on the river and to keep

good things flowing in my life is gratitude. It's impossible to feel badly when you express gratitude for something and the more you express gratitude the more you'll have to be grateful for. Just try it and see what happens.

When I'm paddling a tough river I take the time at the beginning of the run to express gratitude for the river, for my paddling friends, for my skills, for the sunshine and for whatever else comes to mind. Doing this gets me into a positive mindset, immediately replaces any negativity, and takes power away from my fears. Off the water I continue this gratitude work by thinking of five things that I'm grateful for when I wake up in the morning and five things I'm grateful for when I got to bed at night. I start with simple things like how grateful I am for my comfy bed. From there more and more things pop-up. Being grateful for what we have is the first step in

creating more happiness in our lives. Just like in kayaking when you practice the good basic skills that you know you build a strong foundation upon which you can easily and quickly progress.

Build a supportive team

The paddlers you surround yourself with are an integral part of how comfortable, confident and happy you feel on the river. In my experience as a paddling instructor, women thrive and progress much faster when they feel supported and trust those around them. I'm picky about who I paddle with, especially when I'm paddling a river that challenges me. I like to feel safe with and supported by my fellow paddlers. I don't like to paddle with people who are overly aggressive, who put their needs before the

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group or who get frustrated if the group isn't moving at their pace. I don't have fun in this type of environment and the point of paddling is to have fun.

The same is true for me in my life in general. I surround myself with friends and family who accept and love me for who I am and who support my endeavors in a good way. That doesn't mean that they always tell me what I want to hear. I count on my good friends to call me out on behavior that isn't productive. The key is to not take things personally.

My students like to joke about my 'tough love' method of teaching. I definitely make them do things that they don't want to do like run a rapid without a paddle, practice their roll or practice back ferries. I don't do it to make them suffer I do it because I know it will help them get better. They know me so they recognize my intention and they don't take it personally. In this way they feel good about pushing their limits because they know they are supported.

Another requirement of a good paddling buddy is that they're willing to fish your gear out of the river and give you words of encouragement when you swim. Same goes for your friends off the river. It's easy to feel good, to have fun and to let yourself shine when you're surrounded by people who support, encourage and inspire you.

Surrounding yourself with a supportive team on and off the river helps you flourish as a paddler and as a person.

If you flip over roll up and keep going

Imagine giving up kayaking after your first swim. I'm sure it's happened to someone, but for most of us we didn't let a swim discourage us into giving up. It's important to learn from the swim, but not to internalize it as an indication of your self-worth.

This is a big one for women. In my own kayaking I have allowed myself to equate the results of a tough competition or a bad line or a swim with my self-worth. This wasn't productive at all because it led to me feeling sorry for myself and feeling like a bad person. This was especially true for me if I felt that others were judging me. Really, no one was judging me but myself. We are our own worst critics. Most people want to see us succeed at what we do.

Setbacks like swims can enhance our knowledge and experience. We stand to learn a lot when things don't work out the way we want. Sometimes it takes four or five times of flipping over on an eddy line because we had the wrong edge lifted before we understand what we're suppose to do. When we figure it out we don't

forget it.

I read recently in a small business magazine that venture capitalists like to invest in someone who has failed in business ventures before because it shows them that the entrepreneur isn't afraid to push the innovation envelope. The investors see this as a good quality. Playing it safe all the time keeps us comfortable, but doesn't help us progress. Facing challenges can be uncomfortable and rewarding at the same time. That's why most of us love kayaking so much! That rush of satisfaction, accomplishment and joy that we feel at the bottom of a scary rapid that we just ran is addicting. And if there were no chance of messing up it wouldn't be that exhilarating.

So don't let fear of failure or setbacks get you down or stop you. There is opportunity in every experience so when you flip over, roll up and keep paddling!

Learning these five lessons on the river and then applying them to my kayaking and to my life in general has helped me live a happy, successful life. They assist me in living in the moment. Just like there are infinite possibilities of paths that current can take down a river, there are also infinite possibilities of how our lives can look and feel. The next time you meet a challenge or come up on an obstacle in your life just imagine what you would do on the river and you'll discover that you already have all that you need to get through it!

Anna Levesque is an accomplished world-class kayaker who offers diverse growth and learning opportunities for women including women's kayaking retreats, classes, paddling trips in Mexico and instructional DVDs and books. For more information please visit www.watergirlsatplay.com



Jenn Dolch-Martin having fun on the Actopan Rier in Mexico

Photo by Esprit Rafting