



# Either kill me, or save me

Perhaps it is unwise to write such intimate thoughts about moments so personal. Yet the cathartic relief and therapeutic value that the written word provides me outweighs the societal scorn that may result from putting fingers to keys.

Two months ago, Jacquelyn and I were paddling on Pine Lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA). We were about 5 miles into the day, in the center of the lake when I stopped paddling and had to decide if I could continue or not. I don't mean continue the paddle, I mean continue life.

Sorry, that is the wrong place to start, I need to put down in writing the impedimenta that has built within me, to help explain my climactic mental conflagration. Each thing in isolation seems manageable and as I think about writing them down it makes me feel inadequate and small, unable to cope. Really? Am I weak, not strong enough to deal with the pressures of daily life? I am learning to break that thought cycle, so I will stop it, rewind and start describing some of the preamble.

My daughter, Emma, my love, is a deeply troubled soul. She is battling with her own demons and trauma, addiction, self-harm, bulimia, depression. She lives in Maryland with her mother. I see Emma at most major school breaks (she is at high school). Emma is gay, and struggling with being in an all-girl Catholic high school and the societal pressures that school environment places on her. The US presidential election empowered many to voice their inner biases and gave them the strength to vocalize their own bigotry. I don't know if that pushed Emma deeper into her mental anguish or not, but she needed more intensive help and so has been receiving that now for a couple of weeks.

Being physically apart from my daughter was a decision I needed to make for my career over a decade ago. I decided that I could not be geographically restricted by my ex-wife to remain in Maryland when my career took me to Connecticut and then eventually to Minnesota. It doesn't mean that on any day I don't regret and beat myself up when I am not there for an event in her life. But Jacquelyn and I have done a lot of things that have been firsts for Emma. She learned to swim with us, she learned to ride her bike with us, the summer schooling we put her through really turned her into the reader that loves to devour books. But despite all this, I have a constant nagging in my heart that I miss her every day.

In January this year it was clear that my income was dropping, and in February I was let go from my job at the advertising agency. I filed a civil suit to get child support reduced. In 2015 I was paying more than twice the US median household income in child support. It was unsustainable, even with severance I would be paying out

every cent that I was receiving, and it would not allow me to contribute anything to support my wife and step-daughter. It was simply ridiculous. You may think that it would merely be a matter of negotiating with my ex to get a new amount agreed to, but she had become addicted to spending the gravy train of my income and so has fought like a cornered animal at every opportunity to maintain that debilitating exodus of my income. To this day my ex-wife has continued to attempt to delay, counter sue and do anything in her power to increase the pain and cost of the lawsuit, I presume in the hope that I will give up and just keep paying. We are heading back to court in January, it has taken over a year to get in front of a judge.

My parents live in England; I live in Minnesota USA. It's about 12 hours of travel time to visit each other. We see each other about once a year maybe twice on a good year. Recently both mum and dad have been struggling with health issues, I guess I am reaching that age where caring for my parents occupies my consciousness. That tipping point is approaching where they change from being the caregivers to the care receivers. I am not sure how this will work with so many miles between us. My relationship with my parents has only deepened with age, we have grown emotionally closer as the years have gone by and the miles between us have not impeded our connection. I need to be there for them as they need my support.

A few months after losing my job I started working again. This time as the technology leader for a local Minnesota based logistics firm. My role involved restructuring the team and growing it. This inevitably required putting the right people in the right seats, a task that became highly challenging with long running relationships and loyalties being placed at odds with what was best for the team. Lawyers were involved, massive amounts of stress, and, at times, fear, uncertainty, and doubt in my mind that I was the right person for the job. These times have past, but the additional mental burden came at a time when I was most vulnerable.

If it wasn't obvious to you, the reader, let me state, or remind you, I am a kayaker. It is my identity. It is my *raison d'être*. Jacquelyn is a recreational paddler; it is not her passion in life. For many years my twisted mind was making me believe that Jacquelyn was resenting the time I was spending kayaking. When afloat my mind filled with guilt. I had convinced myself that the time I was spending on my self-indulgent recreation, kayaking, was something she did not support and that (incorrectly, as I subsequently discovered) she was harbouring a grudge. It reached a point where I was unable to enjoy kayaking at all. This mindset was built upon a fallacy. I was projecting my opinion on Jacquelyn, rather than understanding her truth.



At some point this year I stopped talking to Jacquelyn. I attempted to compartmentalize everything and isolate myself. I read books that suggested to me I needed to remove the things from my life that made me unhappy. I thought that running away from my troubles would resolve everything. It didn't, instead my heart filled with additional guilt, remorse kept flooding my consciousness and I found myself more often with tears in my eyes than with a clear mind.

There are many nuances to the mental journey of angst and anguish that brought me to the middle of Pine Lake that I cannot or will not share, they would hurt too much to think about, and seeing them in writing would cause so much more pain than the personal cathartic release they may create.

Return now, if you would, to Pine Lake. The sky was clear and the air was warm. The water was cold, clear, with a ruddy red tint from the iron ore prevalent in the Iron Range of Minnesota. As we paddled its length we saw bald eagles sitting in the trees, watching silently as our kayaks cut their course along its northern shoreline. There was not enough daylight left for us to traverse the entire lake so we eventually turned in the lee of a promontory. Jacquelyn was near me and we sat for a moment, together, peacefully watching the forest and resting. I pointed out where we needed to head, the inlet between Pine and McFarland Lakes. Jacquelyn started paddling towards it, but I didn't. I sat, and my thoughts turned dark. How long does it take to drown? If I rolled and decided not to recover how long would I have before I blacked out? If I let her keep getting further away, how quick could she get back. There was no way she would know how to give me CPR in the kayak; so if I made sure to drown I couldn't be recovered. There was no cell service. No way she could call for help. This was a beautiful day to be my last. I watched her paddling away though my tear drenched eyes. She was far enough away now. I could choose to do this. I have a choice to make. I lay back on the aft deck of my kayak and slid into the water, I relaxed and submerged.

When I give myself to the water, when I truly give myself to it, I can feel its loving support, it brings such peace and clarity to my mind that thoughts slip away and leave behind Shanti, an inner peace. The water envelopes me in its supporting caress and carries me. If I arch back, and trust, I gently rise, invisible hands pushing me upwards. As I floated on the surface each wave that washed my face wiped the tears from my eyes. I felt the comfort of the lake supporting me. I found my peace. I arched my back and rose up. Dipping my paddle into the lake, I started paddling, there was no choice to make.

I found myself paddling a rapid ab crunch stroke, closing the

distance between Jacquelyn and I at an unsustainable pace. I was chasing my prey. The Inuit hunter's stroke shot me across the lake, my kayak hitting that maximum speed where it rose up on its own bow wave. I pulled up next to Jacquelyn, my muscles burning and my lungs screaming. She smiled, we drifted alongside and sipped some water. She was unaware that had I not dipped my blade into the lake we would never have sipped water together again.

Many days have passed since that paddle on Pine Lake. More moments of darkness have come, but I have continued through each one. I am learning to talk to Jacquelyn again. Jacquelyn is helping to show me the fallacy of my thoughts, the erroneous path my unconscious and conscious mind had wandered down and has brought me back to the compassion of her love. My mental health is receiving help from many sources, helping me understand how to express my needs and how we can mutually fulfill each other's needs. I am surrounded by the loving care of friends and family who are helping me put things into perspective.

Through this experience I have come to understand how deeply I am connected to the water. Jacquelyn and I went for a paddle this weekend. As I sat in my qajaq I felt the water move past me, each wave bending the qajaq skin, touching me, lifting me, lowering me. My body moving in unison with the supporting water. It was a cold day, the water was freezing, a skin of ice forming in the shallows. As I rolled in the frigid boundary between solidity and motion I felt the water raising me up, warm, supporting, caring. In that brief solitary moment there was just me and the water, my trust in it met with a natural certainty that I was loved and cared for.

The water is my friend. 🐾

#### About the author

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit living in Minnesota USA, is slightly obsessed with Greenland kayaking. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a not-for-profit that promotes the traditional art of Greenland-style kayak (qajaq) rolling.

Christopher has developed videos, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls, and promotes them through his blog <http://QajaqRolls.com>

In 2015 Christopher partnered with his father Nick to form another not-for-profit venture and created the Shrike Kayak as a means to share their love of the Greenland style kayak designs. Their customizable designs are available for free at <http://CNCKayaks.com>