

The Float Trip: A Sneak Preview of Hell

“A float trip? Are you nuts?” That was the question that I wanted to pose, but dared not ask. It was August, in St. Louis. That translated into temperatures hovering somewhere near 817 degrees. And then, there was the humidity. It hadn't rained since May so there must have been three or four tablespoons of water in the entire river and the school wanted me to go on a float trip? With ninth graders? Where did they learn this? In the book, *Bonding Exercises for Advisors*, by the Marquis de Sade? I thought that they were kidding — this was some grand administrative prank.

I conferred with the other ninth grade advisors. The consensus seemed to be that the administration folks were serious about the benefits of a bonding experience and a float trip was their idea of the tie that binds. After a trip to the office of the ninth grade dean where my attitude was discussed, I agreed to go cheerfully on this adventure down the River Styx. It didn't matter that I had asthma or that I was allergic to anything that grows or that the sun gives me hives, we were going on this float trip and I was going to LOVE it.

I am bright enough to admit defeat, so I put on a happy face, not to mention a hat, four gallons of sunscreen and some calamine lotion for good measure. I arrived at school promptly at 6:58 a.m. The bus for hell left at 7:00 a.m. and I wouldn't want to be late. The big yellow buses to the netherworld were waiting as were 140 unhappy adolescents and several teachers who looked about as happy as I felt, but everyone just stood there, wondering why we didn't get the show on the road. Finally, someone in charge told us that we were waiting for one of the other ninth grade advisors. And waiting and waiting and waiting. Forty-five minutes later, she appeared, with no explanation, and we were ready to do our best imitations of Lewis and Clark.

The bus was crowded, its shock absorbers were older than I was, and the muffler had, to put it delicately, some issues. We rode for ninety minutes until we arrived at our destination. Dutifully, we all waited as members of the cast of *Deliverance* boarded each bus and spoke of river safety and etiquette. Then came the moment we had all been waiting for. We gathered as advisories (ten or so cranky kids and one crabbiest teacher) and found our rafts. With much artificial enthusiasm, we all jumped into the waiting raft and sat, quite literally, with our fannies on the river bottom. (Did I mention that it hadn't rained since May?) One of the more industrious members of my group realized that we had to get out of the raft and drag it to a deeper (marginally) part of the river so we could begin our journey. We did this, many of us protesting. Being the adult, I made what I thought to be a most adult decision: henceforth, I would keep my fat ass relatively dry and sitting in the raft and they could work as a group, bonding and solving such problems as how do we get a raft with his fat ass in it through the shallow parts of this beautiful river?

The view was awe-inspiring. Plastic six pack rings, floating styrofoam containers, plenty of dead things. Ahh, wilderness. It was everything I had imagined. My group of students seemed to be taking things in stride and were, in fact, doing everything asked of them. While other children were busily escaping from their advisory groups and frolicking in the muck (oh sorry, river), my kids were staying together and working to act like this wasn't worse than any visit to any orthodontist that they had ever experienced.

Other children were splashing and swearing and I was so grateful for a teachable moment, finally. As the amount of swearing and horseplay increased, I became increasingly insistent that there would be something of value that would take place here. "Hmmm", I said to

myself, "I think I have an idea. Ok, everybody, listen up. I want you to know how proud I am of all of you right now. I know it would be more fun to be splashing and saying naughty things to your buddies, but you are all being so wonderful and doing everything I ask you to do. I sure am a lucky man." The tremendous idea continued, "I know we all use naughty words sometimes, but we must be mature enough to realize that there is a time and a place for that. This, certainly, is neither the time nor the place." They all nodded dutifully: it was going to be a long four years, having the new, glasses wearing guy from Stanford (read — "geek") as your advisor. But they were young and strong, they could take it.

Mere seconds after the "naughty word talk", our raft, once again, settled on the bottom of this thing we politely called a river. Figuring that the kids were tired and had tolerated enough, I decided to help them get the raft off the bottom by extracting my lazy behind from it and helping drag it downstream a little. I was not in the water more than thirty seconds before I slipped on a dead, decaying fish and splashed face-first into the warm slimy river. This had quickly become another teachable moment. As I fell, I taught them all my favorite expression, by spontaneously yelling out "F*8e me!" All ten students stood there, transfixed, frozen. Suddenly, in the length of time it took to yell one word, I was transformed from geek to cool, perhaps even to legend and quickly discovered one more teachable moment. "There is the time and the place for such language", I told them, "and this is it. If you ever step on a dead fish, you may quote me. But please, don't tell your parents where you learned this most valuable lesson."