



River

TALK

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Julie Nardone

I read somewhere that we remember just five minutes of what we learn in high school. My memorable five minutes took place during an 11th grade English class when we discussed the symbolism of the river in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

"The river looked at him with a thousand eyes—green, white, crystal, sky blue. How he loved this river, how it enchanted him, how grateful he was to it! In his heart, he heard the newly awakened voice speak, and it said to him, 'Love this river. Stay by it. Learn from it.'"

Why did I recall that rivers symbolize rebirth, the flow of life and unity? Perhaps it's because I've been drawn to rivers and streams since early childhood, starting with the skinny Snake Brook that ran behind my first home. In summer, I'd take off my Keds and wander up and down the hard, sandy bed marveling at how the sun glinted off the water as it parted around my feet. I don't believe I ever left that stream without intentionally falling in.

I lost touch with the power of rivers after shelving *Siddhartha*. No time to splash around rivers with my life dedicated to a résumé. A résumé with gaps does not go over well in the American workforce, so I followed the advice of guidance counselors. Go to college, pick a career, go to graduate school, get a first job, climb the career ladder rungs. I stayed on that rigid career path until June 2002, when I lost my Marketing & PR position. On that rainy day, my much-younger new boss of three months called me into his office. I'd been downsized, made redundant, chosen to walk the corporate plank. Angry and hurt, I cried me a river of self-pity on the drive home. Eight years of making impossible deadlines. Eight years of eating rubbery cafeteria food. Eight years of jumping to attention when the company president walked by. And all I had to show for it was 13 weeks of severance pay and a cardboard box filled with a map of the world, a "teamwork" glass paperweight award and a pair of old running sneakers.

Luckily, my severance package entitled me to four visits with an outplacement firm. Tom, the counselor assigned to me, turned out to be a good guy. Funny and compassionate, he helped me revamp my résumé and boosted my confidence enough to land several interviews at solid companies. I soon discovered, though, that employment times had changed: the workday longer, the interview questions harsher, the job descriptions drier. One expressionless man I interviewed with stated, "Every Monday we'll sit down and map out your goals for the week. On Friday we'll meet again to ensure you've met them." This vision of my future left me gasping for creative breath as I fled the beige office with harsh fluorescent lighting, plastic plants and dead air.

When I'd just about reached my interviewing wit's end, Nadine, a friend who'd also been downsized, asked if I wanted to try kayaking on the nearby

Charles River. I'd always wanted to kayak but could never find the time during the 48 hours I had off from work on the weekends. I met her at the boathouse at 10am on a weekday and got a quick kayaking lesson from an instructor. It seemed intuitive enough, so I got into the kayak and paddled off into the wild, wet yonder.

Reconnecting with a river felt good. I'd forgotten how calm the water made me feel, how relaxing the summer sun felt on my back, how communing with nature returned me to center. Immediately hooked on kayaking, Nadine and I dipped our paddles in the reinvigorating current of the Charles River several mornings a week. We engaged in lively "river talk" during these peaceful sojourns.

"I can't believe I've spent most of my adult life penned in a cubicle. This is nirvana," I repeated to Nadine several times that first week. And one morning after witnessing a solitary sculler glide effortlessly across the shimmering surface, Nadine turned to me and said, "You know, even though I can barely pay my bills this is the richest I've ever felt."

I agreed.

Before long, the gently meandering river became a metaphor for my new life. Flowing. Bending. Changing. Floating through my days, unanchored by the responsibility of a 9-to-5 job, I realized time didn't matter. Deadlines didn't matter. Pre-charted courses didn't matter. This unexpected taste of adult freedom both liberated me from and ruined me for the unnatural confines of an office park. Surrounded by the beauty of driftwood, purple loosestrife, swans and lily pads, I came to see that a piece of paper—my résumé—had artificially altered the natural rhythms of my life. Continuity on the résumé meant discontinuity in the life. Rivers, too, have destinations, but each one finds its own unique way to get there. Perhaps the way to my success didn't have to be résumé-driven and linear. Perhaps it could be more like a river, twisting and turning to meet whatever catches my "thousand eyes."

I made a decision to stop interviewing for jobs. I needed to find work that allowed me meandering time. The Charles River, master of its own destination, gave me the idea. After writing up a business plan that winter, I launched my own branding and graphic design firm. It took me a bit longer to become profitable than anticipated, but once I did, I swore on the kayak I bought to celebrate my own brand of success that I'd never work for anyone else again.

I love being self-employed because it lets me stay close to rivers and the wisdom they impart. If I want to kayak, I close my home-office door, hoist my kayak onto the roof of my car, and hightail it to a gentle bend in a nearby section of the Charles River. I resume my creative work refreshed and resilient.

Maybe I was only meant to remember five minutes of what I learned in high school—the five that would set me free.

Julie Nardone is a freelance writer and branding strategist from Ashland, Massachusetts. She inspires business confidence in smaller business owners and nonprofits through her monthly e-inspire, "Dare to be Different."