

Dear Family,

May 28, 2018

For years now, long before we knew we'd be living in this "land of 10,000 lakes", Jonathan had talked about taking me canoeing in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) someday. At last, he has fulfilled that dream and we already are looking forward to the next time. It was truly an adventure and a rewarding challenge in so many ways.

As you know, with every good canoe trip, there is the initial planning part which in this case was mostly done by Jonathan. He began way back in January, researching the whole thing including getting the permit from the State Park to go into the Boundary Waters (access is regulated to better preserve this wildlife area) and then finding an outfitting company to supply the canoes and Duluth bags, plus the transportation for the shuttle. Jonathan spent ample time on the outfitting company's website to take advantage of all their resources, planning tips, maps, photos, and videos. As the time came closer for our trip, I joined in on the planning and preparing. We made several trips to REI to add to and update our camping gear. I even carved a plastic milk jug for a scoop and tied it to a sponge, just like Father did.

With all our camping trips, there is always the question: do we take our Border collie, Layla? However, for this trip, Jonathan had long since decided there was no question. Of course we'd take Layla – she'll keep away the bears and raccoons at night. I hadn't quite thought that far. I was trying to picture us paddling with a dog. She'd been camping with us many times, but we weren't sure how she'd do in a canoe. We figured it was time for her to learn.

Our trip began a week ago, Sunday, May 20th. Jonathan had wrapped up his semester with commencement services at UNW the day before, and I had worked enough extra hours to cover a week off. We headed out at 6:45 am and drove the four to five hours north to Ely, Minnesota – the "end of the road" they call it, as the road literally stops on the edge of the wilderness. We stopped in at the outfitting company where a very friendly staff, including the owner, got us all set with our canoe and paddling gear, went over the canoe route portages on a wall-size map, and thoroughly reviewed checklists of the most important equipment, including map, compasses, sunscreen, hats, mosquito repellent, ropes, food & water, and water purifier. We stayed overnight in their bunkhouse room and then we started out on our trip in the morning (Monday).

So, we canoed and camped for the next five days and four nights, in an area of forest, wetland, streams, and lakes of more than 1,090,000 acres. Our cell phone automatically went out of service and into "emergency calls only" mode. No surprise there. By the time we were shuttled to our put in, it really did feel like we worlds away from civilization. If we had forgotten to bring anything by then we would just have to make do.

My years of canoeing experience with Father definitely came in handy, but one thing I hadn't realized when first anticipating this trip was the differences between all my past canoe trips on rivers and this one in the Boundary Waters. We were using a Kevlar canoe which is much lighter than the Grumman canoes with which I was much more familiar. The light weight is a great advantage when portaging from lake to lake. However, because it is made of a more fragile material, it cannot be taken on rapids, which is mostly what we were portaging around

actually. It almost felt like cheating to be bypassing rapids that I could easily imagine navigating through with my brothers. But to be fair, we didn't get to see all the rapids we were bypassing because sometimes the portage would be around the bend from the rapids and there was no way to view it except to get dangerously close to it. Furthermore, there was one rapid we saw from the downstream side that, after viewing from different angles, I quickly decided it was too dangerous even for a Grumman canoe. With a rocky landscape narrowing so much that the water from one lake is spilling into another with a certain drop in elevation, I'm sure you can imagine an impressive speed of water, not to mention the number of rocks and boulders present, qualifying it for at least a class V rapid. We were especially glad for our light canoe, or I should say, Jonathan was especially glad, as he was the sole carrier for nearly all the portages.

We simply could have not asked for better weather. The forecast was clear all the way through Thursday morning. Jonathan had chosen our travel route to give us a pleasing variety of waters to navigate – small winding streams, larger rivers, and lakes of all sizes, some with narrow passes in between. The vegetation went from marshy grass to deeply wooded and rocky shorelines of conifers and birch trees. The lakes were mostly quite deep with boulder-size rocks both on the shore and scattered throughout the waters. Whenever we came within 50 yards or so of a rocky shoreline, we tried to keep an eye out for submerged rocks lurking in the waters below. The largest lakes we paddled through, Bald Eagle Lake and Gabbro Lake, were about a mile wide and at least a couple miles long.

Our dog Layla was truly a trooper. Our trip on the water began in a small, very meandering, stream, the Little Isabella, through a marshy area.¹ The first time we put Layla in the canoe, she jumped out and plunged into the shallow water. We threw her back in the canoe and she looked like a sopping wet muskrat. There were numerous beaver dams along the way, more than expected, so our portaging around them got to be quite the ordeal. Layla anticipated our portaging a bit too soon, jumped out and scrambled to shore again. But after that, she got the idea and stayed put. Some of the portages were so short we wondered if it was worth it. We even managed to portage over one beaver dam, precariously balancing our luggage on the debris while somehow pushing the canoe through the dam. Anyway, by the end of the first day, Layla had the routine down pat. And so did we! Each time we portaged, we had four large items to take out and put in – a Duluth bag (upright duffle bag), a waterproof backpack, a bear-proof barrel, and...Layla, our 30-lb canine. The rest of the trip, she never again jumped out, but waited for Jonathan to carry her out. She really had it easy. Once in the canoe, all she had to do was float along in the middle of beautiful scenery, beautiful weather, while her owners did all the paddling and navigating. Often times, we caught her sleeping ever so peacefully. Her only job was to guard us while we slept at night. As much as she hates when we leave the house without her, I was surprised she never once whined or whimpered when we got settled in our tents and left her outside. She seemed to be in her element in the outdoors, keeping watch. Who knows if she deterred any bears, but Jonathan did hear her one

¹ Google map: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Little+Isabella+River/@47.8090626,-91.5810192,12z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1slittle+isabella!3m4!1s0x52a5dd0468f21179:0xee134caf9703be01!8m2!3d47.7864173!4d-91.471417>

night combatting a hissing noise that probably came from a raccoon. So we give her full credit.

The wildlife in the Boundary Waters can be rather elusive, so we considered ourselves very fortunate to have seen what we did. Just after we got through the Little Isabella and came to a clearing at the end of a portage,² Jonathan suddenly stopped and made some strange motion to me. Then I spotted what he had spotted – there in the middle of the river, knee-deep, stood a moose. I was so excited my jaw dropped! I could hardly believe it. Jonathan was snapping photos, but already worrying about how in the world we were going to get past this creature. There would be no way past the moose except on the river, and moose can swim! Fortunately, we had some time as Jonathan finished the portaging while I kept waiting with our stuff and Layla. Layla was quiet, and before I realized it, the moose had moved to the water's edge and into the grassy bank. Jonathan returned and assessed the situation. Should we risk passing by a watching moose in our little canoe? What if Layla were to bark? Would the moose charge? We decided to risk it. As we started out again, the coast was clear, sort of. The moose lingered at the far side and watched us the entire time as we quietly drifted past it in our canoe, paddling ever so quietly, letting the current take us downstream. We were so glad to have seen a moose, and glad that Layla - and the moose - behaved!

Other wildlife we saw included a garter snake, beavers, bald eagles, and lots of merganser ducks in mating pairs. Jonathan even got some leeches on his pants when portaging the canoe. We heard plenty of songbirds, and of course, the most exciting was the loon's call. At night, the forest resounded with the frogs' chorus (spring peepers?). And then early one morning, we heard the haunting sound of a pack of wolves howling in the near distance! Good thing we were on our way out from that campsite.

Every campsite we stayed at had its own charm, with rock outcrops to sit comfortably on and gaze at the most picturesque views. Jonathan had brought plenty of food, including enough protein bars and snacks to keep our energy up the entire trip. Every campsite also had a campfire grill, and with the warm dry weather, we had plenty of wood to build a fire. The mosquitos, overall, were nowhere near as bad as I had feared. For one thing, it was still early spring, and in addition, the dry weather and usually a good breeze probably kept them at bay, so we only used our insect repellent occasionally. We felt pretty well prepared with everything we brought with us, and used most everything. Jonathan had planned well. The only thing that began to concern us around the second day was our water purifier. It was not pumping as efficiently as it should, so it took a lot of energy to get our water bottles filled. Jonathan had even spent the money to replace his old water purifier with a brand new one. Sometime after we got to our second campsite, after Jonathan had tried everything, we came to the dreaded conclusion that our water purifier was not going to serve us well enough for the rest of the trip. We still had Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday morning to go. So, we went to plan B which was to boil our water. Fortunately, Jonathan had his mini-cooking stove and enough fuel to boil several pot-fulls of water. We decided water was more important than

² Google map: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Isabella+River/@47.7888177,-91.4901572,12z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1sisabella+river!3m4!1s0x52a5c32f7a8dcf01:0xa50bbdbe3374ed8b!8m2!3d47.8002993!4d-91.5173578>

the rest of the hot meals we had planned. So, Jonathan boiled enough water to fill our water bottles again, and we set out paddling, with the stark reminder of the preciousness of water!

We paddled westward towards the main lake outlet, keeping to the northern shore (or trying to). The view quickly got confusing with islands and curvy shorelines all blending together. We were looking for two campsites on opposite shores of an inlet where we would find another inlet to the west that would be our way out of the lake and onto another set of lakes, known as Kawishiwi River. Jonathan spotted two campsites and tried to figure out which pair of campsites it was on the map. It seemed right, but when we went in the inlet to try to find the way out, it seemed like a dead-end. We spent the next hour or so wandering around that inlet and then back out to the lake and around another island, and then back to the inlet, but to no avail. Needless to say, this involved a lot of paddling. Jonathan even tried getting out on land to scout out the waters from above, but that didn't work out either. For the first time on the trip, I had the awful feeling that we were lost. The fact that our water was limited made it even scarier. But we had a map and we had compasses, and the weather was still clear, so there had to be hope that we'd find our way. Thankfully, by what seemed a miracle, we did finally stumble on the outlet. Jonathan spotted a canoe heading into a hidden pass and after following it as fast as we could, the canoe disappeared on us. But, we figured this was a good sign because that meant there was probably a way out. There was, and we finally portaged through to the next set of lakes that headed northeast – which matched perfectly with our compass and our map. Jonathan found out later that the reason the landscape was not quite matching up with the map was because he had the map folded such that it was covering a third campsite, which was actually one of our landmarks. We had to laugh at ourselves, which was much easier now that we knew where we were. Suddenly the scenery around us changed from a horrifying maze of foliage and water, to an amazingly beautiful and peaceful wilderness. Nevertheless, with that frightening experience behind us, we pulled out our compass a little more frequently, just to be sure we were on track for the rest of the trip.

It felt good to be in a canoe, despite the times when my arms were feeling the soreness from paddling. I thought of the family many times, and in particular, I thought of Father. After all, we had decided to come out this year, to celebrate Father's life and birthday with our traditional canoe trip, just like in the old days. I'd like to be able to say he would have been proud of me for the whole trip through, but there was clearly one incident that I am not proud of and Jonathan will not soon let me live down. It happened just before we got to our second campsite (the day before we got lost) when we were paddling out on one of the larger lakes and scanning the horizon for our landing spot on the shore. Jonathan asked what I could see ahead of me and since I had the binoculars, I decided to use them to get a closer look. This was a common occurrence and, of course, I had to put my paddle down to do this. In the back of my mind, I knew without a doubt that it is far better to put the paddle all the way in the canoe before freeing up both hands for some other task. Admittedly, I did this correctly, some of the time, but obviously, not all the time. It only takes one time, and it only takes a second. This was the time and boy, did I pick the wrong time. Not only were we out in the middle of a big lake, but the wind had picked up, making the water choppy and any quick maneuvering a challenge. To make matters worse, our paddles were the bent-shaft kind. About the only

thing we had going for us at that point was a clear sunny day and lots of daylight remaining. So, I placed my paddle in front of me, balanced (or so I thought) on the sides of the canoe, and looked through my binoculars. Before I knew it, the paddle slipped out from underneath me and into the lapping water. It quickly floated towards the stern and although Jonathan tried his best to reach for it, the distance between it and our canoe had already widened. As Jonathan later recounted, I just froze, so horrified at what I had done. I couldn't believe I had committed the worst canoeing sin!! And now without a paddle, I felt helpless in trying to help Jonathan steer the canoe. He paddled and paddled with all his strength, but it seemed even with all his draw strokes, our circling seemed to somehow never get to the paddle which by now was a moving target. I remember yelling, "I'm so sorry", to which Jonathan responded, "Sorry is not enough!" He was right. When I thought about it again that night, I realized what a terrible, completely avoidable, situation I had put us in. I don't know how, but somehow, Jonathan managed to finally get the paddle within reach and retrieved it for me. I was ever so grateful to him! When all was calm again, we wondered what Father would say. "Well, I think you can figure out that that was not a good idea" or something like that, would likely be his response.

The following day, I had an opportunity to use my skills in reading rapids and thereby, in some small way, redeemed myself. We had just finished another portage through a wooded area between smaller lakes and were getting ready to set out in the canoe again. This part of our trip was all upstream, which was not necessarily noticeable in the lakes, but only in the rapids between lakes. As we started off, we could see up ahead a line of large half-submerged rocks, forming a line across the river. There was no other portage for this spot in view or on the map, so we figured there must be a way through. As we paddled closer, going against the current, I scanned across the patterns of rocks and "v's" and ripples, just like I was taught, to make that imminent decision of which route to take. Then I spotted it – the smooth water flowing between rocks in a small "v" - right in the middle of the river. I knew this was possibly a good route, but...there were ripples just downstream from it that we'd have to go through first. I knew this could mean more rocks or it could be just standing waves. To add to the pressure, I also knew there was a canoe behind us (which was a rather unusual occurrence), waiting to go the same way. I really didn't want to mess up. By this time, we were close enough that I could catch a better view, but not for long. Some instinctive intuition assured me those were just waves, so I gave the go ahead and we went for it. We got the canoe angled just right and canoed up the rapid. Not a single scrape. It felt so good! And, as I was also trained, I kept my gaze forward and told Jonathan to keep paddling hard until we were well out of the current and safely upstream, all the while watching for any further lurking rocks below. Thankfully, we made it through. I'm not sure I can say it made up for nearly losing a paddle the day before, but I am sure Father would have exclaimed this time, "Bea-utiful!" As we left the rapids, we heard in the distance the canoe behind us grinding against those rocks!

The biggest challenge physically for the rest of the trip was getting across the longest portage that included some rocky steep terrain. It took us about four trips to get all our stuff across, and I should say that Jonathan did most of those trips alone while I watched our stuff and

Layla. The other more serious challenge was what to do about our water shortage. Jonathan had previously planned what campsites we would aim for, but not surprisingly that had to change. We decided to paddle for as long as we could reasonably do so that day and choose a campsite further along. Navigating was no longer much of a problem as these were narrow, more defined lakes. It was simply endurance at this point, and savoring every little sip of water we drank from our quickly emptying water bottles. We decided Layla would do fine on the water straight from the lakes. After managing to find the second to last campsite available about three miles from the take out, we set up camp again and Jonathan then gave me a choice: either leave for the take-out in the morning and find a nice hotel to stay in for our last night OR paddle to the take-out and he would drive our car to the nearest gas station for more water so we could paddle back to the same campsite for our last night in the Boundary Waters. I chose the latter, and I think we're both glad we did. After getting more water the next morning we enjoyed a relaxing day at our campsite, even waded our feet in the water (it was surprisingly warm enough), and waited out our first rain, napping in our tent– the best place to be in the rain.

That last morning, we sat down to eat our breakfast, and as we started to sing our blessing, suddenly Jonathan stopped singing and grabbed my arm. There, across the lake, was another moose! I looked just in time to see it clamber up out of the water, onto the shoreline and disappear into the woods. Jonathan had wished we hadn't sung our blessing that time for we would've had a nice view of wildlife while we ate. But we did both see it, even if only for a moment.

The next morning, we headed to the put in. By this time we had canoed that section twice (with its two short portages) and seen (the same?) two merganser ducks appear along our way, so it was a most relaxing ending to a wonderful canoe trip! Amidst all the challenges and difficulties, we were given the chance to experience the wonder and beauty of this place, like the rising mist on the lake in the stillness of the morning or paddling through waters so calm it was like moving through a mirror. We had a lot for which to be thankful – all that we saw, heard, learned and experienced together in God's creation. And we were grateful to God for His watching over us!

Much love,
Jonathan and Carol Sue



