

Center Line of Gravity White Water Rafting

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“A continuous line runs through the center of every solid and void. In a river, this line is where the water flows fastest, with the least amount of resistance—fewer rocks. This is the center line of gravity. If you stay on the line you will remain dry,” the guide told us.

We were standing on a wide ledge thirty feet above the first rapids, on the Green River in Utah. Two hours earlier, we had entered the river on rafts and kayaks, beginning a seven-day trip down a deep, narrow canyon carved out by the river. The amount and velocity of water flow was sufficient for rapid down-cutting, creating gorges that varied between 1,000 and 1,500 feet. The river flow alternated between an even, laminar flow that allowed us to see the unusual beauty of the canyon, and turbulent flow, which demanded the highest degree of concentration possible. If your mind wandered, even for a second, you would be out of the flow, literally. It was a fast-paced relationship. You and the river, mediated by a kayak and a long two-sided paddle. As we looked down from the ledge into the turbulent, white water I noticed a tree branch turning over on itself as it was carried downstream. Suddenly it snapped in half and disappeared. I immediately lost my courage and was overcome with fear, yet determined to take this ride. It would be the only way to learn whatever the river was going to teach us. This was the first lesson: the river owns you—you do not own the river. This would be a trip of great humility. To make it through, I would have to strip away any behaviors that might inhibit the spontaneous and sublime play of awareness. Every moment on the water would require my full attention and open-mindedness.

The guide took us back down the path to the river’s edge about 200 yards upstream where we had left our boats. The water was glassy and calm there; a great contrast from what we had just witnessed from the overlook. Before I got in the kayak, I looked to the middle of the river and noticed where the sheet of water was beginning to fold in on itself. There was a visible double curling that produced a line, THE LINE. The line is where every thing else is condensed; the eye of the storm. All the power is in the line but the paradox is that this is where there is nothingness and stillness. Then it disappeared in the mild turbulence that was a threshold to the white water. The river was revealing its mysteries to us. I thought of it as an act of generosity, of friendship. The river wanted to play—or was it deceiving us, drawing us in so it could swallow us whole? What an absurd thought.

Leave it all behind. Looking up I saw the gates of Ladore where two 800-foot buttresses mark the beginning of a series of canyons formed by a 71-mile stretch of river. There were no references to scale and the dimensions were massive. The entire region was a part of Dinosaur National Monument; they were the appropriate scale for these volumes. The small thoughts I came with began to evaporate as my courage returned. I looked over at my son, B-Man. We smiled, climbed into our kayaks and moved toward the line. The line would keep us dry.

Each morning the guides would describe in detail the stretch of river we would be on for the day and the best way to maneuver through the rapids. On the morning of the last day, they explained the most difficult stretch. The river was difficult to read because of its changing widths and depths. The surface flow in some areas where it widened was almost flat and appeared slow but below the surface the current was fast and spreading toward a part of the canyon that opened into an immense grotto. In front of it was a whirlpool that was invisible until you were directly on its horizon. This whirlpool was called the black hole. We all knew the story of black holes. If you go in, you don’t come out. If you should happen to come out, there is a seven-foot fall to still water. “If you survive it would be a great story,” the guide said, as he and the others laughed. The guides insisted we stay clear. B-Man and I requested the only two-person kayak thinking it would be the most memorable way to finish this trip together.

“You take the back, dad. I’ll navigate and you can steer,” he said as we walked to the kayak.

“Stay on the line,” I said. “Remember, use your entire body as one sense to find it.”

“May the force be with us,” he answered in his usual playful way.

It actually felt a little like going into the unknown, where the most useful tool to get through this would be simple, direct, concentration. Bare Attention.

We were the last ones to enter the water. As we paddled away from the shoreline, heading toward the middle of the river, I reminded B-Man to stay focused, do what he had to do—I would watch him and follow suit. I would respond to him as he responded to the river. We didn't need to speak except in silence. We were practiced at this after so many years.

“We have to be alert and relaxed. We aren't looking for any experience in particular. We simply have to be wide awake to whatever presents itself,” I told him. Something he already knew, but I felt it bore repeating.

“Dad, yesterday it seemed that we were old friends, the river and I,” he said as he extended his arms and the paddle directly over his head. “It was as if the river remembered me from the day before. It was easy to stay on the line, and enjoy the ride. I was in fifth gear most of the afternoon,” he said.

The guide was right; the river's current could not be read with our eyes. We drifted toward the grotto and the black hole. Our paddles were too short to go deep enough to change direction. It would have made little difference—the river “owned us” at this point so we stopped resisting and went with the flow, paying attention to the river. Its shifting surface patterns formed a tense top layer moving in several directions at once. The overlay of patterns read like a moiré. We assumed that the currents below were moving in several directions as well; we could feel them through the bottom of the kayak. It is always a surprise to rediscover how sensitive the human body is in detecting subtleties the eyes are unable to see. For a moment, we were able to feel the layered crosscurrents and make slight adjustments in our direction and speed.

A year prior, we were in Hawaii visiting with Native Hawaiians who had constructed a replica of the canoe that carried the first Polynesians 3,000 nautical miles to the island without maps or instruments. This section of the South Pacific Ocean encompasses the intersection of currents moving at different depths and in different directions. We were told that the navigators had special insights, similar to those of medicine men and priests. They were able to “read” the water's surface patterns and color to determine the depth. They could feel the crosscurrents moving at various depths by lying on the bottom of the canoe and using the stars for positioning. These memories came and went in an instant but were reassuring.

We drifted nearer to the cave while searching for the line in the current that was moving in the opposite direction. Without a word, we put our oars in the water at the same time on the same side, pushed once and the cave was behind us. A moment later, we were pulled forward and suddenly our kayak was spun around 180 degrees and sucked into a vortex of water. It felt like we were going down an immense drain. We had just entered the black hole and were deep in a funnel-shaped volume, a void. Our kayak spanned the space like a beam, perfectly level, suspended, silent, and timeless. We had the extraordinary sense of being in a gateway to another universe. The silence was uncanny. We could see the spiraling current, the smooth texture of the water, the perfect form of the volume that had momentarily seemed like a solid. We were weightless.

As quickly as we entered, we exited. The kayak shot up and out of the hole and spun 360 degrees as we ascended. I noticed the other members of our expedition standing on the river's edge watching in anticipation and disbelief as we landed flat in the still waters on the downside of the falls. We were awestruck as we sat there speechless. We each knew what the other was thinking. I could see from behind that B-Man was smiling as contentedly as I was. We had just been somewhere unexpected and indescribable. We had just made friends with the river. It had revealed some of its mysteries to us. The experience would remain our secret for some time.

With our backs to the shore, I whispered to B-Man “let's paddle in backwards, in synchrony. It seemed like the right thing to do. We slowly moved transversely across the river until we felt the bottom of the kayak meet the sand. What a wonderful sound it was. We were both quiet the remainder of the evening, periodically looking at each other, speaking in silence.