

Out of Nowhere

© Margaret Emerson 2007
Published in *Qi Journal* Autumn 2007

Easy, unhurried ripples fan out from the bow as my kayak glides across the surface of the lagoon. I've spent a good portion of my life in water and I'm impressed with what an efficient swimmer a kayak is. Surely this rhythmic paddling is an example of what the Chinese call *wu wei* or effortless effort. Above me the sky is a vast blue with occasional streaks of white that make it all look as if it's arcing toward the western horizon. There is almost no wind and I can hear the intermittent crash of waves beyond the spit. Following the scalloped shoreline in order to be close to the big firs and redwoods, I spook a great blue heron that takes off in front of me, pumping its wings in slow motion. I pass small flotillas of coots and ducks and the more cautious ones decide to leave. I laugh when I realize—for the first time—that the slapping noise is not the beating of their wings against the water but the rapid pushing of their webbed feet. For a few seconds they're sprinting on water. Eventually I pull up in a small, secluded inlet to eat a sandwich and drink hot peppermint tea from my thermos. Bliss. It's early February, yet northern California has given me the perfect day for kayaking. I do not want to go home.

Things are going well there, and that's because I've been intensely focused on my usual array of projects and pouring the hours into them. So much so that I'm not allowing enough space in my days, not enough of what I refer to as "lakes of time." I'm not sleeping well and some of my dreams qualify as full-blown nightmares. I'm losing touch with my interior and with nature. On its maiden voyage, this kayak is already bringing me back into balance. I know I'll sleep tonight, my yin replenished.

How did I come to spring for a kayak? I just barely support myself on my T'ai Chi teaching and writing. I deliberate over every dollar I spend at the food co-op; I buy most of my clothes in thrift shops (*when* I buy them); seeing a movie that's not a matinee or a DVD is a splurge; I get my books from the library or the used bookstore. I am, however, debt free and have savings. (And what are savings *for*, anyway?) But even absent these factors I hope I would have taken the leap. Money has been a loaves-and-fishes sort of thing for me. When push comes to shove, it mysteriously expands so that I can do what I have to do in order to harmonize my inner and outer selves. I've gotten away with making many financially imprudent decisions that were also the right ones.

Ever since I sold my fifteen-foot sailboat when I moved from Illinois to California, I've been wanting to get back on the water. That was twenty-two years ago. Here and there I've rented a canoe or sailboat, and once I did some heart-jolting white-water kayaking, but I couldn't decide what would be the right boat for me and there was always the money thing holding me back. A few weeks ago a friend who has two kayaks invited me to explore a lagoon with her. (Lakes, sheltered bays, smooth rivers, and lagoons—that's my speed.) As soon as I got in I thought, "Oh. This is my boat." It was a perfect fit; there was that sense of coming home; I felt wrapped in a layered embrace of kayak and water. At ten and a half feet and forty-four pounds, it's small enough for me to handle and big enough to be stable. I can lift it myself and slide it onto the roof of my car. Launching takes only a few minutes.

It was a logical choice. But why now? Why did all the usual impediments and arguments spontaneously evaporate? I was ambushed by the urgency and the sheer foregone-ness of this move. There was no anguishing over these dollars—that part of my brain seemed to have shut off. Having to also buy a roof rack and carrier for my car was no more than a gnat to be batted away. I like to keep my life as simple as possible, and acquiring a boat brings complications—choosing which one, purchasing the auxiliary paraphernalia, educating myself on safety and tides. No matter. My life stretched out and pulled in the kayak.

This isn't the first time this has happened. Critical mass is reached. It's a tectonic shift, a tidal wave, the angle of repose tipping into the angle of avalanche. There's a sense that the force is hitting me from the outside. There's no decision and no choice.

A kayak is a material thing. Most of my landslides have deposited me in nonmaterial destinations. This raises moral questions that have generated some internal debates—all after-the-fact rationalizations, really. How can I spend big money on a pleasure boat while the pledge requests from so many worthy organizations are piling up on my kitchen counter? Especially now when a dark cloud hangs over all Americans: our administration's catastrophic destructiveness abroad and attacks on democracy and humanity here. I do what I can to penetrate and disperse that cloud. At the same time I have a kayak, just as I have blue eyes and a left foot that's slightly shorter than my right.

The kayak may be a thing that costs money, but it takes me to a spiritual place. My molecules spread out and mingle with the water, sky, tree, and bird molecules. I'm in my element, relaxed, and *porous*. I absorb and release.

Why not just hike? Well, some of my favorite forests have signs at the trailheads warning people not to hike alone because of mountain lion sightings. A man was attacked from behind recently on a trail that I had hiked a few weeks

before. He would have been killed and eaten if his wife hadn't beaten the animal off. I'm told mountain lions can swim, but I'm willing to bet I can outpaddle them. The more prevalent threat, though, is men. Women have been stabbed and sexually assaulted in my town's community forest. I feel *safe* in my kayak.

I've been inundated with course-changing, course-correcting tsunamis several times in my life, usually with years in between. I had no choice but to launch into a career as a potter, write my books and essays, take up T'ai Chi and teach it, move from the Midwest to northern California, and fall in love with Crater Lake. Eventually I left my twenty-four-year-long career as a potter, and that one really surprised me. I thought I would die in my eighties, executing a face plant into spinning wet clay.

Where do these deluges come from? Ancient Chinese philosophers talk about *Wuji*—a state of nothingness, the uncarved block, the original source. Lao Zi called it *Dao*. It splits into the dynamic yin and yang forces and then manifests as “the ten thousand things,” meaning you and me, this pen and paper, the kayak, and everything else in the universe. From a Western perspective, *Wuji* may be the all-knowing, all-including collective unconscious—it contains us and we contain it. Sometimes I think it's what people mean when they use the words “fate” and “destiny.” For me, it's a path that follows the shape of my soul, and it seems there's something inside me *and* outside me that's directing me to adhere to it. It can feel as if I'm being *herded*.

I try to use my intelligence and intuition every day. I think about what has worked or not worked in the past; I consult my *dan tian*—the spiritual hub in the center of my abdomen. I try to make good choices. But this is way beyond rational thinking and ordinary intuition. It's a convergence, a direct connection between something boundless and something miniscule (me). It's something boundless *in* me. It skips over—transcends—all the steps, obstacles, and filters. It's a gigantically magnified form of intuition. The tidal waves that emanate from this nameless place seem to come out of nowhere. What I think is that they come from nowhere and from within me at the same time. If there's anything “foreign” about them, it's their intensity and my inability to do anything but be swept along by them. There's no separation between *Dao* and me when they happen. This powerful union is a rare and precious gift for which I am enormously grateful.

I can already see that the kayak that came out of nowhere to rescue me is placing me more directly in the path of “out of nowhere.” It takes me to quiet places and clears the way, just as T'ai Chi, meditation, writing, and dreams open the door to that immensity and to the deepest truth of who I am. Each wave widens the opening for the next wave. But I'm not sure that “out of nowhere” cares whether the door is open or not. I don't think anything can stop it.