

The Authority of Water & Wisdom of the Body

I watched my arm shaking uncontrollably. My feet paced. My breath pushed out in pants. My body's reaction to the cold and wet held me rapt. I pulled my attention away to study my maps.

Two things impressed me on Sections D & E of the GDT: the authority of water and the ability of the human body to take care of itself— independent of the mind.

As I had lain in my tent the night before, planning my strategy for the multiple creek crossings in the morning, I heard the first tick, tick of a developing storm.

I was spending the night beside the Cataract tributary on a small patch of level ground. On my last pee of the evening I had walked down to the confluence and studied possible crossing points. The storm was building. The creek was swelling.

Back inside my blue Duplex, I could hear boulders tumbling in the creek. Thunder and lightning exploded simultaneously. Each incredible crack of thunder grumbled on and on and on. The next strike flooded the inside of my tent orange and I smelled fire. I peeked out. I saw nothing but a translucent curtain of rain and a raging creek opaque with rock flour and debris.

By 6 a.m. it hadn't let up. I started to execute my plan. I dressed warmly above the waist, but below I only wore shorts and Xero sandals. I stashed my socks and boots in a dry bag. After a warm breakfast, I headed for my first crossing.

The flow was terrific. At 4'11", 94 pounds, and solo, I was extremely cautious. I carefully

placed each step, steadying myself with my one carbon fibre pole. Miraculously I was across! Unscathed. Paralleling the turbulent stream, I edged over rocks along the narrow slippery trail. With each crossing I could feel my warmth withdrawing. As the trail finally pulled away from the creek heading up to the pass, I was shivering and weirdly puffing. I stopped to boot up in the rain. Pulling my dry socks and tights over my damp skin was a Herculean effort. That's when I realized I could be in trouble.

I wasn't sure where the trail went exactly. I sighted my objective: Cataract Pass. But what hidden cliffs, marshes, or raging creeks lay between? I exposed my hands to compare my little annotated waterproof maps to my downloaded ones on Far Out. Perhaps others had made their way along the drainage below but now it was a swamp. I picked my way over the rocks toward the pass. I made out a lighter line of rocks swinging up to a dip in the mountainscape and soon I was on a legit route.

I also made out a couple of men ahead in the mist. One looked spry and confident. The other followed as best he could, stopping to rest often. I greeted them at the crest, 'Hey boys, helluva day!' They complimented me on my ascent as they chugged water. It reminded me to do the same. Then I started my shaky descent into the White Goat Wilderness.

These guys had come up the Nigel trail, camped at Cline Pass, and were on their way out. We leapfrogged a bit and then I tagged along as they retraced their route through magnificent russet coloured boulders. Some of their previous options were now under water. As the rain continued, the men became

increasingly concerned about recrossing the Brazeau to take Nigel down to their vehicle.

As the trail rose, we watched torrents crashing against the canyon walls below. Then our trail descended to the Brazeau floodplains. I could see no intersection; the Nigel trail terminus was on the other side!

The rushing Brazeau's main channel was about 30 metres wide at this point with a second narrower channel before the opposite bank. I had seen the younger man's emergency device, and as he hopped strongly and fluidly from boulder to boulder, I knew his hesitant trail mate could do no such thing. I said I would wait with my InReach until they were safe. Hiker number two mostly waded and that's when I realized the opaque and engorged Brazeau, although unrelentingly forceful, was not very deep. The men waved when they were safe and I continued.

Now out of the White Goat Wilderness and in Jasper Park, the trail was easier and the first campsite, Boulder, very civilized. A camp sign! Bear lockers! Toilet! Level tent pads! Tables! However I had booked the remote and decommissioned Cline 3k ahead plus 3.5 additional kilometres off route from the junction. Four Point was at that junction, a very popular campground, outfitted like Boulder, supposedly full but I found it deserted. I had come 16k already—cold, wet, heavy, and stiff. I decided to call it a day.

First priority was to put up my shelter. I staggered to the highest pad for the best chance of drainage. Thank goodness the Duplex is a simple set up—my hands were icy and clumsy.

It started to snow. Throwing in my pack and myself, I started unpacking my kitchen. 'Must have hot food.' Then the authority of the water hit me. The water gives and it takes, and we

can't do without it. All around was dripping and my gear was sodden but that didn't quench the body. Damn! I had to leave my sanctuary to gather water. I checked the camp sign map to locate the water source. Just the river. I hurried to the banks. They were overflowing. My deep chill made me so uncoordinated I feared I would fall in. In addition to rock flour, the swirling, raging Brazeau was laden with mud. It's all I had.

Back in my shelter I dropped a half packet of Ichiban and a dollop of olive oil into my pot. As soon as I lit my PocketRocket, I was enveloped in a warm moist cloud.

I recalled my mountain climbing brother, Ted, telling me about a taxing climb made much more difficult by weather. He was very close to the summit but reminded himself that he didn't have to do this. When it stops being fun, go home. I was still lacking 3 out of 5 campsite bookings ahead anyway. So at 70, exhausted and hypothermic, I decided discretion is the better part of valour.

I gobbled the noodles and drank the broth, feeling the heat move into my extremities. My toes were still little wooden blocks but my fingers soaked up the saturated warmth as they encircled the titanium pot. Through my OnReach I managed to text 'I might be in trouble' and asked Dale to meet me on the Poboktan Trail two days hence.

Between bouts of deep shivering, I puffed up my mattress, pulled on my dry Unightie, and wriggled into my damp -12 down bag.