

Watching A Man Drown: How Everything Turns Away

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It was the Fourth of July, and hot, when my brother and I watched the man drown. I was home for a vacation, and Ted and I decided to go bike-riding in Riverdale State Park along the banks of the Spokane River just outside the city. It had been 100 degrees for a week and the ponderosa woods by the river were brittle and dry. Blasts of pine-smelling woods hit us as we rode.

We had gone farther than we intended and were soon at the Bowl and Pitcher, a bend in the river where a large cylindrical rock and a squatter, flatter rock sit side by side among the eddies and rapids. The water is very swift there. We left our bikes in the brown grass and stood on the footbridge, dipping and swaying as we talked, the sound of the rapids swallowing half our words. About two hundred yards downstream I saw a group of five or six people partying on a small strip of beach and then, out of the corner of my eye—I was turning back towards Ted—I glimpsed a man slip into the calmer water along the beach, floating and splashing on his back.

We grew up in Spokane and knew the reputation of the river. People drown right at that spot, at the Bowl and Pitcher, every year, and I said something like that to Ted. Gradually, as we talked, I began to realize that the man was in trouble. He had drifted from the calm water by the shore into the swift current and had started to struggle, waving his arms and apparently fighting against the pull of the rapids. His friends on the beach hadn't seemed to notice, or weren't reacting. There may have been one or two people standing there watching. The roaring of the water kept us from hearing the shouts, and the group was far enough away to make faces unreadable. Looking back now the moment seems frozen, a split-second freeze frame: the beach, the friends standing, the man suddenly in the current, his arms upraised.

We kept reminiscing. The scene in the corner of my eye was at first simply an irritant, hardly impinging on the flow of conversation. On the periphery like that it was hard to interpret exactly what was happening. Even when we stopped talking and started watching the event unfold, we were still uncertain what to make of it. From that distance, and in the enveloping sound of the river, we couldn't separate out the elements of the scene, isolate the details. There was an air of unreality about the man struggling, then panicking, then going under and back up. The rituals of death are clichéd to us now: the villainous cowboy clutches his breast and spirals down to the street. I thought for a moment that the drowning man was pretending to drown. His gestures seemed exaggerated for effect. He flailed his arms and gasped and sputtered like a cartoon character.

A friend tried to swim out to help but got caught in the current and had to cling to a rock several yards downstream. A few minutes later a girl in the group on her way up the trail told us that they were trying to get the drowning man to give in to the current and float to the rock, but apparently he couldn't hear them or was too terrified to surrender himself.

Several seconds after we finally accepted the reality of what was happening, the drowning man went under for the last time. It wasn't dramatic. He just didn't come up again. His friend on the rock seemed to be shouting: the rest of the group was by now standing on the edge of the shore. Only the sudden movement of the girl as she bolted up the bank towards the ranger station signaled his death.

What strikes me now is how little the drowning affected me at the moment. My brother was white-faced, shocked, but somehow the event was already an abstraction for me. Perhaps it simply hadn't registered. Perhaps it was the literal distance between us and the drowning man that led to the kind of aesthetic distance I was able to maintain. Perhaps all the stylized images of death I have seen on television had made me immune to the real physical fact of someone drowning. Already I was interposing a layer of words and analysis between the event and my inner life.

And this is partly why I didn't act, why I continued to stand there on the bridge doing nothing even after I realized the man was in trouble. There were simple, practical reasons for our paralysis, as we realized in conversations with friends and family later. As amateurs we couldn't diagnose the event soon enough to act. We failed to respond because we lacked experience and training in emergency situations. As it turned out, the river was so swift that even when the fire department arrived, it couldn't immediately rescue the man still stranded on the rock, and had to ask a kayaker to take out the lifeline. It took the rescue squad over an hour using a helicopter to find the body of the drowned man, which had been swept a mile downstream. We couldn't have done anything to help even if we had managed to cover those two hundred yards or so over rocks and down the bank before the man went under for the last time.

But we should have started running towards the shore as soon as we realized something was wrong. At the time we didn't know that there was nothing to be done, and that shouldn't have mattered. What counts—or would have counted—is our instinctive willingness to try to help.

Underneath the sense of abstractness I felt, underneath the simple fear—and there was fear, a fear of drowning myself—is something far more disturbing for me. My real fear was fear of embarrassment. I didn't run from the bridge and try to help the drowning man because I was afraid of making a fool of myself. In the intensity of that moment the situation resembled in my mind nothing more than a party I was afraid of crashing or a group of strangers to whom I was shy of introducing myself. What if we sprinted over there in a great show of concern and competence and found that nothing was wrong? My dread was of those strange faces looking up at me as I intruded. As I looked at the scene from a distance, the group seemed closed unto itself, self-sufficient. My instinct was to stay away from it. My sense was that I didn't belong. Even the fact of a man drowning didn't, in the split second of it happening, break through the barrier of exclusivity or privacy that I felt existed between us and establish a sense of our common humanity.

In an odd way, I felt that the drowning man had intruded in my life. My brother and I were involved in an intimate conversation. There was a flow to my words that I instinctively wanted to protect as soon as I glimpsed the struggling of the man in the river. Somehow in the first few seconds of his drowning the momentum of that thought was stronger than the momentum of the river sweeping him away.

We stopped at a Circle K on the way back for something to drink. The air conditioning made us shiver as we walked in sweating from the heat. We heard an ambulance go by as we paid the cashier, who laughed when we told her we had just seen a man drown. I guess the phrase sounded odd to her, like the beginning of a joke, or perhaps she, too, was lost in private thought and instinctively resented being interrupted.

I wonder if the drowning man felt interrupted in the midst of his terror, or embarrassed suddenly to be intruding on the lives of others. I wonder if his thoughts in the act of dying were as mundane and oddly abstracted as mine in the act of watching him.

Chris Anderson is professor of English and comp at OSU—see his writing text, *Free/Style*, which will be reissued in a revised edition soon and a green reader, *Forest of Voices*, along with his collection of essays, *Edge Effects*. The author has generously given permission to use this essay as a CIM reading task in Oregon schools, Oct '98—SR Jones, Sprague High.