

Letters for the Woods

Michael C. Hurley

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Life can quickly spin out of balance. The author, a Raleigh, North Carolina lawyer, was well aware of that possibility as he found himself torn between career demands and a desire to maintain a careful, manageable balance of life. Could he juggle a career, live a simple life, and be a good father?

He found a good way to do it by spending as much as possible of his free time with his family on wilderness canoe trips. These frequent trips gave him time to ruminate and instill an appreciation for nature in his children. And he shared those thoughts, gathered over the years, with readers in a journal, *Paddle & Portage*, which he published himself for eight years. Eventually that journal would gain a following of 10,000 readers and be managed by a freelance staff. At the request of faithful readers, journal entries have been collected in this volume of thirty-two essays that represent a personal narrative with some pearls of wisdom.

"It is said that no one on his deathbed ever wished for more time at the office," he writes in "While Ye May." The knowledge that time flies, gained early in Hurley's life, made him realize that procrastinating and merely dreaming about paddling the nation's waterways would never amount to anything more than reverie.

Hurley has been able to raise a family, have a law practice, and still thrive in the wilderness. He explains in some detail how he does it in "Traveling Light," which focuses on materialism and the desire to "surround ourselves with a superabundance of material comforts." By stepping away from the crowd, "we will often find we have wandered into the wilderness." Following the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Hurley has found that his urgings of simplicity and minimalism and his intellectual rebellion during that era have been guideposts for him, as he reflects in "Law and Wilderness."

The book's photos are notable in that they convey scenes of nature and images of the author's children enjoying nature. His sketches demonstrate that Hurley enjoys that relationship, too. One illustration, "Caroline at Cabbage Key," depicts his daughter in sandals, climbing a palm tree. An uplifting photo, presumably taken by the author, shows his smiling wife hugging their two young children as they pose in front of their well-traveled but faithful Jeep with their canoe on the roof, as if to say, "Yes, you, too, can have it all if you work at it."

This book may not increase the sales of canoes, but it could very well motivate young fathers to take their kids on more wilderness outings and prompt others to step back and rethink ways to bring more balance into their lives.

KARL KUNKEL (August 18, 2009)

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