

In this selection from Rowing Against the Current: On Learning to Scull at Forty (New York: Scribner, 1999), I describe a practice row in a single scull one June morning.

THE PRACTICE

Reach for it, and you'll miss;

let it loose, and it'll follow.

--Zen proverb

At six o'clock on a June morning I push off from the dock. Three short strokes with the lefthand oar, a quick turn of the head to check over my shoulder, and the way is clear all along the jetty to the lighthouse. The world and the water are full of promise.

That first moment is always fresh. It eclipses the prosaic reality ahead, five-and-a-half miles of hard work, of sweat and lactic acid and blisters. As you set out, you don't think about how, at a raw hour of the not-quite-day, you are sitting alone in a small racing boat -- a scull to be precise -- with seemingly no more solidity than one of those balsa-wood airplanes you used to fly as a kid. You could topple the boat simply by letting go of one of the oars you are holding in either hand. You don't think about the absurdity of traveling for an hour seated backward, continually twisting your head over your shoulder for a look ahead on the water, trying not to notice scenery except as a fixed point for navigation. You don't think about the primitiveness of the scull's motive technology: the oars pivot on twin outriggers, a tiny seat mounted on rollers slides from bow to stern, where the feet sit in running shoes affixed to two rectangular pieces of

wood dignified with the name of footstretchers. You don't think about the mathematics: how five-and-a-half miles at, on average, an easy pace -- that is, a pace of short bursts of speed interspersed with easy paddling and with technique drills -- comes to about eight-hundred strokes. On each of these eight-hundred-odd strokes what happens is this.

First the sculler creeps up on the sliding seat into the stern of the boat, then he drives back rapidly into the bow. First the sculler coils the body up and then he uncoils it. It is, says Burnell, like contracting and releasing a spring. The point is to propel the boat, which the sculler accomplishes on the drive by hanging his weight from two five-pound fiberglass oars, thereby transferring muscle-power from body to oar. The legs lead, the big muscles of the thigh powering the drive at first. Then the back swings toward the bow, contributing the momentum of its muscles. Finally the arms too are drawn back into the bow. As the blades of the oar accelerate toward the stern, the bow of the boat drives forward. The boat glides and the sculler relaxes, if that is what you can call it as he compresses his body and readies his oars for the next drive.

It is a movement at once simple and yet as complicated as any ballet, at once natural and yet to be cultivated only through study and sweat. It has its own grammar and language. We speak of "pulling an oar" but rowing (whether sculling or sweep rowing) is as much if not more a matter of pushing. Most of the work is done by the legs and the upper back; the arms do not so much pull as let themselves be "reeled in" by the shoulders, as Cunningham says. The back must be kept straight from the shoulders all the way down not merely to the waist but to the hips, which requires both powerful concentration and strong hip and abdominal muscles. Bending at the hips leverages greater power than does bending at the waist, and that power is transferred to

the oars; it protects, moreover, the lower back from injury. Slouching is to be avoided at all costs; the sculler should sit up regally at the finish like a prince on a throne.

Everything must be executed with precision in a constant cycle of repetition: recovery and drive, beginning and finish, arms-back-legs-catch-legs-back-arm-release. Every motion aims for grace, for power under control. Blades are to fall and rise from the water with only the merest splashing. They are, moreover, to be alternated expertly between the vertical or "squared" position, in which they catch or clear the water, and the horizontal or "feathered" position, in which they avoid the wind. The torso is to pivot at the hips over the keel (center) of the boat back and forth in an even line. The hands are to hold the oars gently rather than grip them tightly, even though every instinct screams that anything less than a deathgrip will send you flying into the water. The drive must be explosive yet controlled. The stroke begins with the legs but the back and arms must move along with them. The rower must let the seat slide freely but never independently of the back and shoulders; they must all drive together back into the bow.

Finally, this complex set of motions has to be put together into a simple whole. Good rowing has to be smooth and continuous. Beginners have been driven to distraction by the admonition that, however daunting the intricacy of the stroke, they should somehow relax. Coaching careers have been made by the ability to get rowers to do just that in spite of themselves.

It all takes place on a boat with the proportions of a pencil, a wood or fiberglass hull some 25 feet long and only about a foot wide. It all takes place--to risk stating the obvious--on water. A sculler must not only have a complex athletic motion under her belt, therefore, but she must also know how to maneuver a boat. She has to acquire a feel for the blades of the oar and their behavior. She must, in short, master the skills of watermanship.

No, you don't think of any of this at that regenerative moment when you push off from the dock and steer toward the open water. You are happy to have left behind, finally, all the details of launching, from turning off the alarm clock, to remembering to shut the garage door, to carefully lifting the boat off the rack, to securing the oars in the oarlocks, to tying your feet into the shoes on the footstretchers. Mind you, I like the details. They add up to a ritual, and ritual is comforting, and sometimes exhilarating, like the preparations of a knight arming for battle. What I like best is carrying a single shell from the boathouse to the dock while balancing it upside down on my head. This feat is much less difficult than it sounds. Racing shells are light, and everyone gets the knack of carrying them, sooner or later. The sculler lifts the boat from its rack, where it has been stored upside down, and rests on his head the footplate in the boat's center, grabbing handholds fore and aft of the balancing spot. He carries it thus to the dock, at whose edge he plants his feet and then gently lowers the boat, right side up, setting it in the water.

So it is easy to carry a single shell on your head. The fine points do take practice, though. You have to figure out just what part of the skull to perch the boat on, and just what spot on the footplate best approximates the boat's center of gravity. You have to learn how to keep the boat steady while switching your hands, fore and aft -- a necessary maneuver if, for instance, the bow faces south in the boathouse but the sculler wants to set it into the water to face north. Admittedly, a person looks foolish wearing a 25-foot-long hat, but the feeling of balancing a racing shell on your head is sublime. It provides wonderful food for thought, moreover, when having to deal with some blowhard at work. Just imagine what he would look like with a boat balanced on his head. Better yet, just think what he is missing because he will probably never get to try.

As you push off, Beethoven or Handel or Sweet Honey in the Rock is playing in your head and you have forgotten about all work. You think instead of the Japanese print that the landscape to your stern momentarily becomes before receding rapidly in the boat's wake. You think of the scene's geometric charm, of its alternation of tall and short, round and straight, like the regular variation of syllables in haiku. You think of its three towering willows, their branches cascading over two rectangular docks, and behind them the romanesque arches of the twin bays of the boathouse, all that is left of grace in that squat Victorian structure long since shorn of its cupola and bric-a-brac. You think of the heron that takes off upon your approach, its inky-blue wings spread out like an architect's rendition of the spine of a suspension bridge.

You think of the dawn colors, the red of the rising sun or the grey of the clouds. I like cloudy mornings the best. On an overcast day, with the rain clouds of last night's storm still threatening, the colors of the inlet are muted: the steel-blue of the water, the olive green of the willows, the mottled brown of the ducks. If it is dark enough out, the red lights on the long jetty separating the mouth of the inlet from the lake will still be flashing on and off, as they do at night. Often, on such a morning, the lake is a dream, the water still as a grave. Even the birds, invisible in the gloom, seem silent. Some mornings you are alone; other mornings you are part of a flotilla. Lined abreast and following you, riggers extending out and down from the shell like jointed legs from an insect's trunk, the sculls look like giant water bugs skimming the surface.

A few more strokes bring my boat out of the inlet and into the lake. The music and the daydream stop. I begin warmup drills to loosen the limbs, to practice technique, and to punctuate the individual parts of the stroke. The process of sculling is complex and exact. The single sculler is constantly engaged in a dialogue with himself; he is both pilot and co-pilot. Is the drive quick and powerful, accelerating from catch to finish? Check. Is the recovery slow,

lasting nearly twice as long as the drive, which allows the shell to glide and the sculler to recuperate? Check. Is the body erect but not rigid? Are the oarblades neither too high nor too low in the water? Check and check again. Nor is the checklist complete if the sculler merely goes over (and over and over and over) the things under his control within the shell. As I row northwards, for example, all the while I cast a watchful eye on the boat's trajectory.

The boathouse out of which I row is favored in its scenery but, from the rower's point of view, not its situation. The Cascadilla Boat Club sits in a hundred-year-old boathouse in a park at the mouth of Fall Creek, which flows into the southern end of Cayuga Lake, one of the Finger Lakes of upstate New York. Gentle, deep, and bordered by green lawns, the English-looking creek would be the perfect place to row, but it is navigable only for a few hundred yards upstream. Unless they want to practice turns, therefore, the club members must row out of Fall Creek into the lake to the north. Yet windy Cayuga Lake is no place for a racing single, especially not when motorboat traffic is heavy. Much preferable is the sheltered Cayuga Inlet, another channel just across a spit of land to the west of Fall Creek. About an eighth of a mile wide at its mouth where it flows into the lake, the inlet stretches southward, providing a two-and-one-half-mile-long rowing course. In its southernmost navigable part, the channel narrows to a width of about seventy-five yards. Sights along the shoreline are varied: parks, a bird sanctuary, a golf course, boatdocks, several channels leading into marinas, a coastguard station, small industrial establishments, a path for bikers and joggers, many trees. College crews have their boathouses and conduct races on the inlet, and distances have been conveniently marked on much of the course.

To get to Cayuga Inlet from the Cascadilla Boat Club you row north into the lake, following the line of a concrete jetty for about three hundred yards until it ends at a lighthouse, at

which you make two sharp turns -- first west, then south -- into the inlet. I know that lighthouse, and I respect it. I know that you have to give it a wide berth as you turn, in order to avoid the eddying currents around it. I know that on windy days it can feel as if you are threading a needle between the lighthouse and the breakwater northwest of it, the waves unsteadying your hand.

Now and then I have found myself in trouble trying to get round the lighthouse. Once, for example, I went out in a double scull, foolhardy on a day when my partner and I should have turned back. As we left Fall Creek the north wind was blowing down the lake at about five miles an hour; the waves were beginning to roll as we turned the lighthouse. It was a beautiful day, though, crisp and blue-skied, and I pooh-poohed my partner's concern about the wind picking up. He was right. On our return trip we could tell right away, two miles up the channel, that we would be facing a powerful wind by the time we got down to the mouth. The wind must have been up to 15 miles an hour when we reached the lighthouse on our way home. I was nervous at first, and I could feel in his tense strokes that my partner was too. Rowing together truly must encourage thinking together, though, because a mile down the channel, I could feel him relaxing at just the time I was. Call it intuition, call it a subtle change in the still-blowing wind, or call it confidence born of a strong performance over a tough mile of rowing. Whatever, we both knew at once, suddenly and firmly, that we would make it, no sweat. Of course we did end up sweating and tensing up too, when faced with rolling waves as we turned the point and a with fierce wind beyond it. For a moment it seemed as if the wind was going to blow us into the jetty, but we rowed out of it. The reward, in the safe harbor of Fall Creek, was smooth water and 25 strokes of synchronized, confident rowing.

It makes a difference for a man to know that he can negotiate a fragile boat around a headland against fierce winds and churning water.

When my boat is fully turned and pointed southward in the inlet, I generally pause again. I need to check my course, but I linger to enjoy the view. The wide open water of Cayuga Lake stretches northward: a smile on a calm and sunny day, an abyss when the wind blows and the clouds are dark. The lake is a question mark when the fog is just lifting, as often is the case on autumn mornings. As I turn south into the inlet on one such morning I glide through wisps of mist rising from the water. To the north the mist spouts in geysers stretching above the lake from shore to shore. I am heading southward into the inlet, where the fog is still thick. Here and there a light breeze parts the curtain of haze but it closes as soon as the breeze passes. I turn and see a pair of rowers and when I turn again they are gone, a pair of ghosts. The sun rises and the fog quickly dissipates.

There are traffic rules on the water, the same as on the road: keep to the right, that is, to the starboard side of the boat. I gauge my course by picking a point 50 yards astern of the boat, an imaginary spot on the breakwater across the mouth of the inlet. As I begin rowing southward, I follow the western shoreline of the waterway, turning my head to the bow every fifth stroke to doublecheck the boat's path, watching for other boats or stray logs. A heavy rain often brings tree limbs into the channel. Boat traffic is usually light at six in the morning, but there are two large marinas as well as two college boathouses on the inlet, and one can take nothing for granted. As the shoreline turns westward, I adjust my stern-side steering point, mentally crossing from breakwater to lighthouse to jetty, then continuing along a line of telephone poles on the eastern shore. My eyes jump from pole to pole, as if running a finger across the tines of a fork.

To turn the boat you have first to be able to row it in a straight line. Small mistakes can make this more difficult than it might seem. Both blades have to enter the water at the same time, and on the drive both blades have to be pulled through the water at the same depth. Neither foot can exert more pressure on the footstretcher than the other; neither arm can pull harder than the other. The body must stay centered over the keel. Violate these rules and the boat will tend to drift to port or starboard, an error I have spent many a practice correcting.

Once I have rounded the inlet's first bend and reached a place where the channel goes for several hundred yards without turning, I begin picking up the pressure and the pace: that is, I row harder and faster, working by increments to reach full power and speed. After slowing down for another turn, I often build up again until reaching the bridge that crosses the inlet. If I have pointed the boat well, I hardly have to slow down at all to get the boat between bridgepost and shoreline with room to spare for the oars. The bridge resounds with the sound of passing traffic. Beyond, all is quiet. The waterway narrows into a tree-lined flood control channel that extends about 1500 meters. After passing under the bridge I give my lungs a rest over the next 500 yards by going back to drills, practicing bladework or rehearsing proper body position to keep the boat balanced at each point of the stroke.

Other days I do drills before the bridge and build up the power and cadence afterwards. In either case I usually row hard again over the final 500 yards before the navigable part of the inlet ends with finality at the blank wall of a concrete embankment. There the channel veers eastward, flows under a railroad trestle and over a low dam. I take a rest. I deserve it. I drink from my water bottle. I stretch out on my back, my head towards the bow, holding on to the oars to keep the boat balanced, and I look lazily at the sky. I am invigorated and exhausted in mind as much as body.

The colors of upstate New York are rich but they lack grandeur. The brown is the deep color of mud in a barnyard, the green would content the hungriest cow, the grey is the snow-and-pebble outflow gushing from a plow on a winter highway. The rising sun, however, works miracles. In its light I catch sight of a blue heron on the shoreline. The bird's uneven gait and mannered stance -- neck elongated, beak protruding -- call to mind some figure in an Egyptian tomb painting. Dawn paints the Cayuga Inlet in the bright and royal colors of the Nile.

There is a place where cerebral and corporeal meet: they call it rowing. A sculler pays meticulous attention to every bodily motion in order to attain an effortless style. To get rowing that flows you have to know where every motion goes. Rowing is the paradoxical combination of mechanical engineering and of the romance of the sea. The rower needs the body of an ironman and of a yogi.

One of the great things about sculling is its mechanical regularity. You can systematically isolate individual elements in the cycle of stroke and recovery and try to improve them, working over and over, day after day. It's a Roman sport, recalling the regular thump-thump-thump of the legions marching on Italy's paved roads, or like the conjugation of a Latin verb: amo, amas, amat, amamus, amate, amanti. Yet it's also the quintessential Greek sport: harmonious, competitive, agonizing, nautical and, above all, intelligent. It combines Odysseus's brains and brawn and love of the sea with the tactical precision of Julius Caesar.

In odd ways sculling is reminiscent of the martial arts. Not that the differences aren't great. The sculler has to think in order to achieve thoughtless effort. The effect is the opposite of Zen, whose practitioner must be thoughtless in order to think. And yet the two -- rowing and

Zen meditation -- share a common dedication, a common escape from the workaday world. Perhaps they share a common language too.

The martial arts masters speak about the slowness with which the body learns, and they are surely right. The intellectual wants to learn to row the way he learns to philosophize, by reading and talking and thinking. The body knows differently. A karate instructor once told me that he was struck by the huge discrepancy between my capacity to think logically and my kinesthetic sense. I took it as an insult, but I took it wrong.

I finally figured that out on the water, in my own stubborn good time. I was trying to conquer my inability to extract my blades from the water squared-up at the finish of the stroke. No matter how hard I tried, I kept feathering the blades before extracting them. The error increased water resistance, slowed the boat, and upset my balance and my concentration for the rest of the stroke. I understood the problem. I thought about it, talked it over with the coach, tried to visualize proper technique. Nothing worked.

Salvation came one morning when I arrived at the boathouse and discovered that the club racing boat I usually rowed in was temporarily out of commission. That day I rowed instead in a training boat. That training boat has heavy oars with oddly shaped handles: each fashioned like a bicycle pedal instead of a broom handle. Uncomfortable as they were, the pedal-like handles always let me know the precise location of the blade. When the long side of the "pedal" was up, the blade was squared; when the short side was up, it was feathered. The key to finishing the stroke was simply not to turn the "pedal" until the blade had popped out of the water. The experience of feeling in the handles what the finish was supposed to be -- down, feather, away, instead of feather, down, away -- allowed me to repeat the motion with normal oars (i.e., with

cylindrical handles). In order to go from intellect to action, I needed to speak to the body in its own language.

Plato long ago knew all about body language. In his ideal republic, the aspirant to wisdom studied gymnastics as well as dialectic. Plato knew that until the body apprehended harmony, the mind could not apprehend the nature of the good. Somehow that lesson had eluded me before I decided to subject a scull to my hyper-intellectual clumsiness. As a student of sculling I am, I suppose, no Westerner trying to come to grips with Eastern pedagogy. I am a lost lamb trying to find its way back to its own flock. I think I am making progress.