

## Magazine

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## In good company

### She took a leap of faith into her first sober rafting trip and her HP supplied the extra paddles

It was Memorial Day weekend 1991. I was 38 years old at the time, two years sober, and quite happy about it all. The initial fog had started to lift, and it seemed like God had given me the world wrapped in a red bow and said, "Go. Enjoy. Just don't drink."



One thing I had always wanted to do was whitewater rafting, even though I knew not one thing about it. But that's what a phone is for, right? I picked out a rafting place at random from the phone book and called for information. It sounded easy enough. I would dress comfortably, show up at the river and be put in a group of other rafters.

But I ran into a problem. Despite my carpe diem sweatshirt and easy smile, I could not find one solitary soul, in the program or out of it, to go with me on my Memorial Day rafting adventure. So the trip would be my first adventure alone and sober. I was scared. But sobriety is all about new experiences, isn't it? So I decided to go anyway, with only my Higher Power to accompany me.

In my short time in AA, I had been given many examples of how a Higher Power worked in my life. And I listened when people in the program said, "Nothing, absolutely nothing, in God's world happens by mistake."

So with joy in my heart, gas in my car and an empty passenger seat at my

side, I set off for Ohiopyle, a trip of about two hours, to do what I had dreamed of doing for 20 years. I turned to the empty seat and said, "This is great." The seat said nothing.

Showing up at Ohiopyle, I pulled into the large unpaved parking lot surrounded on all sides by various kiosk-type huts selling rafting trips. While looking for a spot to park, I noticed several cars with bumper stickers that said, "Higher Powered," "One Day At A Time" and "Friend Of Bill." What were the chances?

So I set out to find the hut with the most alcoholic-looking people I could find. At that point in my recovery I figured I could probably tell by looking. I settled on a hut and was assigned to a rafting group. Were any of these the AA bumper sticker people?

Our guide from the hut outfitted us with helmets and lifejackets and gave us our six-person raft. We were assigned seats on the raft, with me sitting in the front-right spot. Instructions were given, rafting skills explained, and once we were in our raft and practicing in the river, lots of inadvertent paddling in circles and raucous laughter followed. Imagine that, I thought. I can actually have fun with "earth people" too. Since most of my time until that point in recovery had been spent with people from the program, this was a new experience in more ways than one.

Off we went to begin our trek down the river.

The first set of rapids approached. When we got to it, one person fell out of the raft. It was not me. We regrouped. The second set of rapids approached, and one person dropped their oar in the water. It was not me. Again, we regrouped. The third set of rapids approached, and we got stuck on the rock. And, yes, it was me who got stuck. But we regrouped.

By the time we approached the fourth set of rapids, we were laughing together like the seasoned rafting veterans we felt ourselves to be. I had long since given up my efforts to figure out who among our rafting crew, if any, was a drunk like me—although my money would have been on Mr. Back Left.

The fourth set of rapids was challenging. It had lots of obstacles, lots of whitewater and lots of big rocks. But none of us fell out. No one lost an oar. We steered clear through. But we went over backwards. Laughing. And Miss Middle Left said, "Well, you know what they say, 'It's progress, not perfection.'"

Time stopped. Could it be? Was she the drunk I had been seeking? And if so, how would I go about letting her know I was one too? I couldn't just ask, "Are you a drunk like me?" What if she wasn't? And then there was the anonymity thing. I thought about dropping a hint, like saying, "One paddle at a time." Better to just be silent and wait till lunch, I decided, at which point I cornered Miss Middle Left where I could not be overheard.

"Hey, I liked what you said back there, that 'progress, not perfection' thing." I said. "Where did you ever get that from?" I thought I was being pretty smooth. "Well," she answered, "I just heard it around." Wow, I thought, earth people used terms like that too. But then, after a short pause, she added, "... around the rooms."

I was stunned and started excitedly talking. "Oh my gosh," I said, "I'm also in the program and I saw all those bumper stickers in the parking lot. I thought there might be a drunk out here somewhere. But I never would have guessed that you ..." Babbling at its finest. She stopped me and said, "Yes, I am in the program. As a matter of fact, everyone in our raft is in the program. Except for that newlywed couple over there, all 60 of us in this group are in the program."

My mouth fell open and she excitedly walked back toward the group yelling, "Hey everyone! Holly here is a friend of Bill's too!" And in true AA fashion, I was welcomed with open arms into the group of drunks who had traveled up that day from Maryland. I spent the rest of the trip with my new friends, laughing and paddling and enjoying the special fellowship that is found in AA. At the end of the trip down the river they invited me back to their campsite, where we shared a wonderful dinner outdoors and an AA meeting around the campfire.

Just like they say in the Big Book, I was right where I needed to be. What were the chances of me going on a rafting trip by myself and ending up on that day, at that particular time, at that kiosk, so that I got to raft with that group?

There was no doubt in my mind that day that my Higher Power was looking after me. It was almost as if there was writing in the sky, saying something like, "Don't worry Holly, I've got it under control."

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