

# For the Love of the Lake

by Henry Mintzberg

It's just a depression really, deserted long ago by its maker. In the grand scheme of things, it is hardly more than a puddle.

But this puddle shrank down rather than filled up. As the great glacier receded, a vast sea appeared, and as that sea ran off, our little lake got left behind. Grasses grew up around it, and then trees; birds and animals came, and then us. We built a few houses around one end of the lake, leaving the rest as it has been for millennia.

Our's may not be the most beautiful lake in the world, not even in the neighborhood. But we love it. Like we love our kids, who love it too.

We don't crowd each other around our end of the lake, so we live happily together. All except one family that built its place near the other end, in the swampy bay. They're in construction—dams and lodges. They have that whole bay to themselves, yet they are terribly territorial. Paddle your canoe near their place at dusk and “Bang!” comes the welcome, like a rifle shot. You see a nose gliding by and then a tail smashes the water. “Bang!” it says, “Stay away” it means. “Hey, it's my lake too,” I reply.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the night this family gathers its building materials from our land. One year they took twenty-five trees from a neighbor of mine. The law is quite clear on this: the land belongs to each of us, the lake belongs to all of us. Not so for them. We are not supposed to paddle near *their* house, even though it was built with *our* trees!

There's another family on the lake—really *on* the lake—where they spend most of the summer, vacationing and fishing. Territorial too they are, but in a lot nicer way. They're in entertainment, this family, sometimes all night long. One is serenading me right now, just off our dock, as I write this. Occasionally, when we paddle near them, they put on a real show, flapping across the water like mad. Same message: "Stay away!" but much more pleasant.

There's a book by a man named Raphael, called *Edges*. He claims that the most interesting things happen on the edges, for example between the forest and the field, the water and the land. Well, not on our little lake. On the edges are the houses; on the lake is the action.

We do everything on the lake we love. We walk on it (not recommended in summer), we paddle in it (not recommended in winter), we peddle on it (not recommended on a bicycle). In warm weather we swim in it and dive into it and sail on it and surf on it; in cold weather we ski on it and skate on it and snowshoe on it. All told, in every season, we glide on it and stride on it and just plain ride on it (but not in a serious motorboat—only tiny electric motors allowed).

Our little lake has one little island, near the far end, beside the swampy bay, about a kilometer from our place. Sometimes I swim to it, dragging my pet inner tube—my umbilical cord—behind. Without motorboats, that's very pleasant, although last week on my way out I did count two canoes and a rowboat—a regular flotilla. When I swim in early morning or late evening, with the wind down, the water sometimes feels like velvet. Imagine being enveloped in three-dimensional velvet!

I don't get that feeling when I skate on the lake, believe me. No velvet at twenty below (C or F, it hardly makes much difference). Enveloping nonetheless, in its own particular way. In fact, skating is what I love best on the lake I love. Our little lake becomes a HUGE skating rink! Picture pure glee, whizzing around nature, free to go anywhere. No rifle shots, no concerts, just me and my lake.

The trouble is that, like most treats—maybe that's why they're treats—I get to do it only rarely, maybe once every five years or so. This takes special conditions up our way. (Very far north we are, an hour beyond Montreal. That's about the level of Lyon, France, four hours south of Paris.) First it has to be mid winter, with the lake fully frozen. (We wouldn't want that enveloping velvet, would we?) But that's rarely a problem—in winter they drive trucks across the lake next door. Then we need a warm spell (defined in our neck of the woods as a couple of degrees above freezing), with really heavy rains to saturate all that snow on top of all that ice. Now here comes the tricky part. It all has to freeze fast, and solidly (down to  $-20^{\circ}$  again), but without much wind. Otherwise my teeth will chatter for more reasons than one. All set to skate, right? Just until the next snowstorm, which usually comes momentarily.

So picture me basking in Timbuktu, when an urgent message appears on the screen: "The lake is skateable!" I fling off my shorts; grab the next sequence of planes, drive up to the lake I love, whip on my skates, and race on to pure glee! There I glide joyfully amidst the falling snow, whizzing every which way, oblivious to the fact that I can no longer see my blades... my skates... my ankles. It can be a long walk home, especially in the knowledge that I may have to wait another five years.

What makes for no skating of course makes for great skiing. I'm not a big fan of cross-country skiing on this lake we love because it is boringly flat. I'd rather bushwhack in the woods behind. But I do love the winter colors. Summer it's just greens and blues, with the white lines of the birch trees. But in winter, wow: white, gray, fuchsia, mauve, yellow, dusty rose, you name it—all but the first two on some cross-country ski outfit (mostly the boots).

Next to skating, I love canoeing best, and not only because I get to do it all year round. Spring is interesting, summer is lovely, fall is great, and winter—well winter is special for canoeing.

The ice gets so thick, even on our little lake that it lasts well into spring. But I get a head start by using my canoe as an icebreaker. Just before the ice disappears—which it does all at once—it becomes like a pack of thin vertical crystals. (Imagine a bunch of packed pencils sitting upright in the water.) So I take out the HMS Titanic (HM is me, not Her) and cut nosily through them.

One evening in early May, shortly after the ice broke up, the lake looked especially lovely, with the soft green of the unfolding leaves behind the heavier green of the cedars ringing the shore. I put in HMS Titanic and headed for the island. What a sight! The weather had been warm—26°C or so, which does make a difference (that's about 80° F)—and over the still cold water a fog sat behind the little island, framing it in magical white.

I was not alone on that day without people. A duck flew past, quacking, and a neighbor in that swampy bay banged his warning, while a member of that other family, having arrived early for summer vacation, looked at me casually before diving. On my

way home, just after sunset, the sky was a stunning pink-rose behind blue-gray clouds. Almost as colorful as that ski outfit. All this over our little lake.

Dawn and dusk are great for canoeing, especially in summer. There's rarely wind then, and it's a special treat to canoe on a mirror. Not a metaphor, a mirror. I paddle across this magical mirror, through the velvet, savoring every moment.

My great joy is to head for the end of the lake, past the island. There's a dam there, built by another branch of the family from the swampy bay. I climb it—just a few steps up—dragging my canoe behind, to get on the back lake. And what a lake that is! Not a depression. Not left behind so much as filled in, thanks to that dam. A thin wedge of water, a stream, was blocked to create what may be the most beautiful lake in the neighborhood.

That dam has made a heck of a mess, I must tell you, drowning many trees. But what a majestic mess it is. I should feel guilty about marveling at the beauty of those dead trees standing so stately in the water that killed them. But I don't—I take majesty as it comes.

One other neighbor didn't—a predator of a different kind. He tore that dam apart. Maybe he thought this would save his trees. "Hey buddy, they don't drag trees from one lake to another, certainly not a mile away." After years of adoring that back lake, one day I paddled up to find it gone, the dam destroyed by this nasty mammal, the lake behind reverted back to a stream.

The family out there refused to give up. They rebuilt the dam. So he destroyed it again. So they rebuilt it again. So he destroyed it again. This went on for a year or two, until they got the message, for another year or two. They abandoned their construction

program, so he abandoned his deconstruction program. Then *he* got the message. It came in his mailbox—in all our mailboxes. People don't have the right to destroy dams, it said, with the authority of the local government.

After that, a couple of years ago, the dam got started again—that other family must have received the letter too. First there was just a foot or so, more the next year. That predator left it alone—maybe went on to bigger game. This year, lo and behold, every time I have gone to the dam it was higher, and now it's back to its original height. The little guys won!

And I'm back on this newfoundland lake now, like old times, in and around the old dead trees, still there, stately as ever, me marveling as ever. What looked like a gray stick upright on a rock became a great blue heron taking off in its lazy way.

Fall is special for canoeing. The sun is less high, so the colors are more vivid, especially when the overnight temperatures drop below freezing, and the leaves of the maple trees die—spectacularly. The more sugar they contain, the deeper the color, from yellow to all shades of orange—burnt orange is my favorite—to burgundy and bright red. What a wonderful sight from a canoe. On a lovely autumn day, the air is as crisp as the leaves. They may be dying, and the cold may be coming, but many of us love this time best.

One day late in the Fall, I awoke early, took one look at the lake I love, dressed fast, and headed out. The air was cold but the water was still warm, so there were wisps of mist all over the mirror I love. That put me in a kind of trance. I paddled very slowly, savoring every stroke as I looked around, as mystified as those wisps. The absolute

intrigue of the water. Nothing moved but me and my canoe, not even the clouds, thinly spread out.

I headed for the swampy bay. Swamps are great—that's where the interesting things happen: the bugs, the fish, the birds. But this day, all was quiet. Not even rifle shots. Mesmerizing.

And then, suddenly, there came this honking. Not *that* honking. (A traffic jam out our way is somebody ahead of you at the stop sign.) The racket off in the distance was getting closer. I looked up to what I had seen many times from the house, but never like this, never so close. As fifty or so geese flew directly overhead in a sloppy V formation, my mouth dropped open in awe—until I realized the possible consequences, and shut it up quickly!

Come the ice and snow, canoeing ends. Unless you have two kids like mine.

One cold winter day, Susie and Lisa decided we should all go canoeing. I tried to dissuade them, but a couple of decades taught me that no matter how weird the idea, never get in the way of these “kids” when they have made up their collective mind. So we bundled up, including huge fuzzy hats brought by Uncle Bill from Mongolia, and dragged the canoe to the lake.

Canoeing in winter has its advantages. The HMS Titanic is a rather tippy canoe, fast and sleek. You have to be careful. But not in winter, we discovered. It sat perfectly stable on the snow (not that it mattered). Two of us climbed aboard, dipped in our paddles, and then out came the camera. Photo-op time! I have always known that serious canoes are supposed to be red, just as serious Lamborghinis are supposed to

be yellow. But I never knew why. That day I found out: to contrast with the snow at photo-op time! So there we sat as the event was duly recorded.



As you can now appreciate, we do just about everything imaginable on the lake we love, and other things that are less imaginable. Who would ever have thought that we could get so much exhilaration from a depression.

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