



**WOMEN WRITING NATURE**

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## **Kayak Communication**

My two daughters and I hugged the shores of the Bay of Fundy off Alma, New Brunswick, in a three-person kayak. The water was flat as an open bottle of root beer, the day bright, sunny, and warm — a rare springtime day for this part of the bay. I saw the trip as an easy paddle, us three girls enjoying a delightful afternoon exploring the coast. We were on vacation and adventurous, open to what the trip offered.

I steered from the stern while teenage Lyda sat at the bow and four-year-old Ava sat in the middle, her head barely poking from the life-preserver. We traveled south, paddles slicing through still waters, past Hummer-sized granite boulders heavy with a lush crop of grape-sized knotrack bladders. The plant grew halfway up the cliff face, testimony to the fifty-foot daily tidal fluctuations.

Lyda broke the silence with relentless complaining. I wasn't steering correctly, she said. I pointed the kayak in the wrong direction. We should be headed more out to sea. Over there, she signaled with her dripping paddle. Not here. Would I correct our position?

I told her we were headed towards Mathews Head, a large, rocky outcrop jutting from the forest. She nodded in agreement, the wind ripping further words from her mouth and flinging her long auburn hair helter-skelter. Good, I thought, now that we were united in our destination, let's enjoy both the scenery and the ride—in harmonious silence. A puffin bobbed to the water's surface. Its distinctive white head and orange beak contrasted with the greenish-gray bay. A crow, its jet-black body iridescent in the sun, flew parallel to us and the shoreline. It cawed, the only other sound except for the water dripping from our paddles. And my eldest daughter.

Lyda continued with her barrage of complaints. Her whining blotted out the crow's song; the puffin fishing; the beautiful warm day I was spending with my two daughters. My steering was wrong, she said. Where was I headed? Mathews Head was over there. We're too



close to the shore. We should be out farther. It's too shallow here. We'll run into rocks. The tides coming in. We'll be washed ashore. Why, she asked herself, hadn't she sat in the back of the kayak when given the chance and taken charge? We would have been there by now, she said.

Why indeed? This is a question we often ask ourselves, particularly in hindsight: why didn't we take command of a situation? Why did we follow our spouse's direction, our parents', our friends', our bosses', or our leaders'? If we had steered life's boat, we would be there by now. We would have solved our country's problems, won the war, finished the project under budget, earned higher marks in school, balanced the checkbook, be in a happier marriage. We would have crossed the road without getting side-swiped by another's poor leadership skills.

After a heated discussion, where at one point Ava screamed we were spilling the kayak and she couldn't swim to shore, I realized that while Lyda and I agreed on our destination—Mathews Head—our routes differed. I followed the coastline, a scenic but ponderous course through shallow water. I enjoyed discovering the area's details—barnacle covered rocks, spruce trees, crows calling, and the water lapping against the beach. She thought we should make for the head in a straight line, paddling through deep, unchanging water. Lyda focused on the destination while I reveled in the journey. She looked at the bigger picture, the metaphorical forest, while I concentrated on the seaweed growing on the boulder.

Both paths led to the same place, but the course differed—one scenic but longer, the other quicker with a monotonous landscape. From my daughter's view point, I steered erroneously. And I would have said the same of her efforts, if she had sat in the back and commanded our craft.

We compromised after Lyda refused to paddle further. We split the trip, I would steer the kayak on the outward journey and she would command the craft on the return. On our leisurely trip to Mathews Head, I commented on the shapes of the rocks, the puffin fishing, the spruce trees high on the bluffs. Lyda acknowledged my finds with a flick of her hair, bidding her time for speed. On our

return we paddled hell bent for leather towards the marina. I worked hard to stay up with the swiftness of her strokes and was pleased with our synchronization.

Our craft remained steady after we agreed upon our plan. In the end we each achieved our objectives. And little Ava didn't have to swim to shore.

**Lisa K. Harris** lives in blazing hot Tucson, Arizona, with two daughters, three dogs, seven cats, one persnickety saltwater fish tank, and nine desert tortoises. She writes to maintain her sanity. Sometimes it works. Her essays on nature, travel, health, and raising out-spoken daughters have appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Boston Globe*, *SLAB*, *Motherwords*, *Passages North*, *Stone's Throw Magazine*, and several anthologies. She writes regularly for the *Desert Leaf* on hiking and outdoor adventure. A trained wildlife biologist, when she's not writing or tending to her menagerie, she runs an environmental consulting firm.