

Canoeing to work, with a bicycle
Root Gorelick

November has descended upon Ottawa. My friends and neighbours feel the cold air blowing through their hair. But I feel the cold waters flowing past my toes. Not complaining, though. For the warmer half of the year, I have the world's best commute, canoeing to work.

This year, the Rideau River is particularly low. Some days I can canoe upstream through the first set of riffles. Most days this fall, I cannot. I take off my sandals and socks, roll up my pants, and walk ten meters through the river, carefully placing my feet as I traipse ankle- to knee-deep amongst the algae-covered rocks that form this lovely little rapid. By contrast, heading downstream on the commute home is a pleasure, especially if I hit the chute right. It is a fast undulating ride, with dry feet. Occasionally I miss, bouncing off the rocks and once went through backwards. But upstream in November, first thing in the morning, it can be chilly walking that small stretch of river. Air temperatures hover a few degrees above or below freezing, with the waters a bit warmer. I have started carrying a pack towel to dry my legs and feet after stepping back into the canoe, quickly getting socks on for the remainder of the paddle. But that seems too high tech, akin to buying a kevlar canoe or (god forbid) an electric motor. I prefer to feel the river. On 21 November, the air was -8°C during the morning commute, so I relented and wore neoprene boots for the first time. But my bare lower legs still felt the waters. It was fun breaking through the ice at the margins of the river, but hard stepping out of the boat at work because I had not thought about all the water I drip into the canoe freezing up.

I love this lovely urban river. Halloween morning was cloudless and windless, with the surface like a sheet of glass, much more like lake conditions with wisps of mist rising off the surface. Even in early November, the geese and ducks are as active as ever. But many other creatures have disappeared for the year. In spring, the river is swollen. The fish are impressive. By early summer, the turtles have emerged. Snapping turtles are huge and very noticeable both in and out of the water. In June, the females amble several dozen meters to dig nests. In August, their leathery little hatchlings wander the banks and adjacent bike paths. Painted turtles bask all summer on floating trees and snags by the river's edges, until early October. Minks and foxes are elusive, yet truly elegant, although I feel bad startling them. Last fall, a stretch of the river was filled with enormous bullfrog tadpoles. This year, a young beaver has taken up residence along part of the 3.5 km stretch of river that I paddle.

For years I knew I had the perfect job, but only two years ago realized that I could also have the perfect commute. I attach the canoe to the back of my bicycle. At first, drivers would turn left or right just after my bicycle passed, without expecting the extra cargo. But now most of the regulars along my route have learned to expect an extra five meters of canoe trailing behind. The bike ride home in afternoon is challenging, going up a steep hill out of a river valley with an extra 33 kg in tow. Although paddling takes longer than bicycling, it is contemplative, even in the riffles and under the bridges, where the flow is much faster. It is oddly like the zen of washing dishes. I arrive at work relaxed and arrive home at the end of the day even more so.

Occasionally the weather changes, sometimes drastically. This usually happens when I am running late to teach on a seemingly gorgeous morning. But a quarter- or half-hour from home,

the heavens open with deluges of rain and high winds, while I invariably am without rain gear. Nothing like walking into class looking like my long-haired cat after she has fallen into the tub. The good news is that I do not have to search nor pay for parking.

But November is upon us. On 23 November we had our first snow of the season, 3-4 cm deep. After a slippery bike ride, I set my canoe on the sloped ground 8-10 meters from the river's edge, jumped in, and tobogganed into the river! Ten minutes later, I watched a pair of muskrats take turns pushing each other off a rock in the middle of the river. What fun canoeing through the snow. But soon I will have to stow the canoe for winter. While my family goes downhill skiing, I prefer going uphill, in snowshoes. Then starting in late February or early March, my days become filled with tapping our sugar maples and boiling the sap on a propane barbeque. While not as traditional as a wood fire, propane is allowed in the city and produces far smoother syrup. It is difficult once the maple trees stop running in April: not much snow, but cold tenuous flows in the rivers. At least the plants are starting to grow, especially mosses. Tree buds are getting slightly fatter each day, with a barely perceptible change each day in opacity through the veneer of urban woods. A few plants, like elms, are even in flower, with red maples not far behind them. Then, come May, the river will again become my highway and place of peace, a return to sanity, with my trusty canoe and beat-up old paddle in hand.

(The above paragraphs were drafted on 23 November 2011)

Epilogue: My last day commuting via canoe this year was 23 December 2011. Paddling in December was fabulous, but tenuous. Because of the proximity of the winter solstice, night fell early, sometimes entailing paddling home after dark. This in turn once meant missing the chutes through the riffles and having to go through backwards. It meant really cold hands and feet. On my final day out, ice extended 5-10 meters out from the river banks. Getting into the river wasn't that bad. The canoe depressed the ice just enough that I could slide into the moving parts of the river without the boat tipping over. After that, in the open waters, occasionally floating blocks of ice would hit my paddle. Yet this was still a contemplative paddle. Exiting from the river was the most dubious part. Earlier I had scoped out a Manitoba maple arching low over the river near my bicycle. When all else failed, I headed for the tree. While sitting in the canoe, I grabbed branches and hauled myself and canoe out, hand-over-hand, until my feet could reach land. Exhilarating.

(The epilogue was drafted a month later, on December 2011)