

A Paddler's Journey

Adventures on the water
and wisdom gained
along the way

Bryant Burkhardt

 Bryant Burkhardt
Kayaking

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To all the people who've shared the water with me: those who taught me when I was a beginner and those who still teach me as my students. To my friends and casual acquaintances, my readers and my role models. And to the best paddling partner I've ever found: my wife Lindsay – our journey is filled with far greater wonders than the physical world can produce.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Foreword	i
1 The Joy of Paddling	1
2 The Pacific	5
3 North to Alaska	15
4 Into the Surf	27
5 Those Who Can, Teach	35
6 Kayak Polo	41
7 Whitewater	47
8 The Channel Islands	57
9 Hiking Out	67
10 Hiking Out Again and Again	77
11 Ecuador	97
12 Creeking in Los Angeles	107
13 Kayak Polo World Championships	115
14 High Water	123
15 Darkness and Light	129
16 A Long Day Out	135
17 Haida Gwaii	141
18 Expedition in the Back Yard	153
19 Descending the Rubicon	161
20 Off the Couch	169
21 Perfection	177



Foreword

My kayak flipped and darkness swallowed me. I reached my paddle to the surface to roll but hit something solid. I pulled my sprayskirt and kicked free of the kayak, the current shoving me against the back of an underwater cave. Rock surrounded me as I groped for a way out, or at least a pocket of air. Nothing. Lungs burning, I worked through my options. Several mistakes led me there: overconfidence in my abilities; underestimating the water; bad timing on my roll attempt. Knowledge, experience, and a little luck got me out.

How I arrived in that cave is the story of my paddling career. To understand how I stayed calm, you have to know my history. To appreciate my thoughts and emotions, you have to know who I am as a person. This book is about life lessons taught by the water, wisdom gained alongside paddling skills. My progression through kayaking and life. We'll get back to the cave, but we have to start at the beginning.

Bryant Burkhardt, June 2015



The author guiding a raft on vacation

Chapter 1

THE JOY OF PADDLING

My earliest recollections of paddling involve sitting on the floor of an aluminum canoe in Minnesota, the metal cool against my legs as the summer sun bleached my pale blond hair. My dad steered from the stern and my brother manned the bow as we crossed quiet lakes to fish or floated down mellow rivers for the fun of it. I was as likely to jump from the gunwale and swim to shore as our golden retriever, Thor. The boat and the experience tied together in memory, a child's idealism connecting the two, I still feel the ease of summer every time I paddle a boat.

When I grew older, I received a paddle of my own and a plastic cooler to sit on. I struggled to match my brother's rhythm while my dad patiently let us sort things out. As the baby of the family and used to getting my way, it wasn't long before I usurped my brother's position in the bow. I wanted to be out front, the first one to reach any destination.

Together the Burkhardt boys were quite the formidable team. We glided across the water and paddled all day without rest, never getting wet—unless we stopped to swim. I'm sure my dad deserves the credit for our accomplishments, but I always felt like the captain since I sat in front.

One of my favorite trips was the annual church paddle, a social float, with a big picnic at the end. I considered it a race. Seven or eight years old at the time, I remembered the previous

year when we were one of the first canoes to finish. This year, I wanted to be *the* first. I wanted to win.

The day of the trip I woke early, much to the surprise of my brother in the bottom bunk. My normal summer schedule involved sleeping in until the day grew warm and the community pool opened for sunbathing. But not that day. I wanted to make sure we got to the river ahead of the others. Start first, finish first—irrefutable logic to a child. I jumped down, nearly stepping on his head, and rushed to the dresser. He assured me that no one would start without us. Besides, we had to wait for our dad to pick us up. I pulled on some clothes, ate a quick bowl of cereal, and waited by the curb.

I squirmed in the back of the station wagon, straining to see the water as we dropped off our boat at the start and shuttled other vehicles to the take-out. River logistics didn't make sense to me. Why did we have to do so much driving? Why couldn't the car just be there when we finished? That was for the adults to figure out.

Everyone gathered for the safety talk at the put-in. Another thing for adults. I already knew how to canoe. I was a Burkhardt. So what if the river had some rapids on it, they were the funnest part. Of course I always wore my life vest, everyone knows that. Let's get on the water already.

But not everyone did know that. In fact, it was the first time canoeing for a lot of people. Even more had never been on a river. They paddled flat water and were understandably nervous about the current. And there were lots of kids. Someone needed to sort out who sat where in which boat, make sure kids had their life vests securely fastened, and carry the plastic rental canoes to the water.

My dad did those things because he could. He wasn't there to race. He had skills and experience which he used to help others; being strong and capable, he stepped in to do the heavy lifting. My brother assisted, most likely because it was the right thing to do. I did what I could, but only to hurry things along so we could get on the water. The incompetence of these people frustrated me as we cast them off, watching them slide down the river with an unfair head start. We launched dead

last, me pouting, dry in the bow as my dad got his sneakers wet pushing us away. We would never win.

On the water I was the captain again. No more pussyfooting around—we got to paddling. I set the stroke rate and called when to switch sides. One, two, three, switch; one, two, three, switch. We moved that hunk of metal like a precision machine, gracefully avoiding slack currents and slower neighbors. We flew down the river.

In the distorted memory of childhood, I see a giant flotilla of canoes stretching endlessly down the grand waterway. An honest reckoning would be more like twenty canoes scattered along several miles of a peaceful stream. Whatever the count, we passed many and found ourselves near the front of the pack. The odd thing is, by that time I no longer worried about winning. The joy of paddling had taken over.

The splash of the water, the rhythm of the strokes, the cool breeze bringing scents of milkweed and wild sage, all combined to soothe my spirit and erase any thoughts of competition. It wasn't merely the happiness of being out on the water with friends and family but also a delight in the proficiency, the sense of knowing how to do something and doing it well. Making a connection with the water and using its power instead of fighting it. My family worked as a team in a way the other boaters did not. We possessed something special and had earned it through our experience. I didn't have the maturity to understand and express such thoughts, but they existed within me. That's what made me happy.

At the top of the biggest rapid, my dad pulled us into an eddy to wait for the trailing boats. I didn't complain. The race was over—we had already won. It wasn't about coming in first but about being paddlers, and paddlers watch out for each other. We sat there and enjoyed the moment. I waved to the kids going past while my dad gave advice to the adults. Hot dogs and potato salad waited downstream, but they could wait.

When the last stragglers approached the rapid, we started down with them. It was a shallow, rocky affair, with swift current that pushed boats toward the outside of the bend. As any good waterman knows, you need to keep the nose pointed

downstream and stay to the deepest water. Even such a simple plan was beyond the capabilities of these greenhorns, and in short order one of the other canoes broached sideways, bouncing unevenly over the river's bed and doomed to be pinned on the rocks ahead.

My dad called forward paddle and I dug in with all the strength my slight frame possessed. Water flew from my blade as we rocketed forward, quickly catching up to the renegade vessel. My brother reached from his seat to grab their bow. I turned to watch with a mixture of understanding and awe as my dad leaned all his weight onto his paddle to keep us straight, wooden shaft flexing under the strain, and our momentum swung the other boat into line. Side by side we floated until I sliced my blade in and let the water pull us gently apart. With room to navigate, we both avoided the rocks and made it safely to the bottom of the rapid.

Instead of savoring our heroics, my dad steered us toward an empty canoe floating down the river with a father and daughter swimming nearby. They must have flipped with no one around to save them. Once again, we charged in with deft strokes to reach the pair quickly. My brother heaved the girl into our boat while my dad and I maneuvered. The man in the water hung on to our stern as we chased down their wayward craft and bulldozed it to shore. I leapt to the grassy bank and grabbed the bow while the swimmer caught his breath. My dad smiled at me and I glowed with pride.

Time spent draining the boat and sorting out its passengers allowed everyone to pass us by. We started last and finished last. No one else noticed; nor did they say who came in first, or even talk as if a race took place. Yet I still felt like a winner as I ran around the park, slurping sodas and devouring watermelon. To this day I feel compelled to help everyone get ready before we launch. I lift the boats for those who might have difficulty on their own. I work out the shuttle logistics, just so we get on the water a little faster. I learned more than the joy of paddling from my dad that day. Much more.

Chapter 2

THE PACIFIC

As I grew up, I canoed less and less and became more interested in competitive sports: basketball, baseball, tennis. Like many teenagers, hanging out with my friends seemed more important than spending time with my dad. The occasional ski trip or a week of backpacking in Colorado, where he moved when I started college, brought us together, but the canoe was nowhere in sight. I spent a summer biking in the Rockies as I drove out to California to start graduate school at UCLA but never touched a blade to the water.

In Los Angeles the outdoors seemed far away. After two years at UCLA, I left with a master's degree in physics but stayed in the area for work. My roommate, Aaron, was still in the Ph.D. program, and I often joined him and the guys in his lab for adventures. RV trips up the coast of California, houseboat rentals on Lake Mead, or a weekend of camping in the desert. Stuff in the outdoors, but the days entailed little effort and ended with drinking beer and telling stories around a campfire. Adventure in a light sense of the word.

But one of the undergrads in the lab, Pedro, pushed for something more. He grew up in Cuba before immigrating to the suburbs of L.A., an easy smile on his face whether building an electron gun or grinding his mountain bike up a steep hill. He knew real adventure.

One of his favorite hobbies was sea kayaking, paddling the local coastline and nearby islands, most often by himself. He tried to share his passion with the rest of us. We always passed. Waves crashing on the shore, the sand littered with tourists and water quality warnings—who would want to get in that?

But Pedro suggested we go to Catalina, an island off the southern California coast, where the water is clean and crowds nonexistent, he assured us. A kayak rental shop sits where the ferry lands, and you can paddle right to the beach of a campground. The rangers will even truck your camping gear over so you don't have to worry about getting it wet on the trip. Nothing to it, he promised. No more excuses, we planned a weekend of kayaking and camping.

A short ferry ride from the metropolis brings visitors to an island with no cars and lots of open space. Most head to the city of Avalon, where nice hotels and fancy seafood restaurants await, but we took the longer ride to Two Harbors, where a small campground and single burger shack mark the jumping off point to explore the wilderness.

Our rental boats waited for us as we disembarked—all according to plan. The first indication Pedro's idea of easy differed from ours was that the ferry stops on the north side of the island, but the campground sits on the south. A skilled paddler can make the trip around the west end of the island in half a day. We had no skills and no intention of paddling that far. Luckily, the island is rather narrow—the landing area is called Two Harbors because it practically straddles both sides, each containing a well-protected cove. Pedro said we could carry our kayaks from one side to the other. No problem.

Carrying kayaks isn't hard if you double up: one person in front, one in back, carrying a pair of boats between you. It's nicely balanced and works well to move the kayaks, say, across the parking lot or down the beach. Walking a quarter mile over a gravel road is a different matter. Especially with our wide, heavy, sit-on-top rental kayaks. The hike bruised thighs, strained fingers, and covered us in sweat from the summer heat.

Pedro didn't carry a rental kayak with the rest of us—he brought his own sit-inside sea kayak, complete with a cart to easily roll it along. He stopped repeatedly to let us catch up.

“That’s it guys,” he said. “You’re almost there.”

His encouragement was met with resentment. Steve, a grad student more accustomed to snack runs to the fridge than hikes across an island, expressed a sentiment shared by most of the group: this wasn't the easy jaunt we expected from Pedro's descriptions. It came out more like, ‘You sonofabitch, Pedro’. It was the first time we cursed him and his superior equipment, but it wouldn't be the last.

At the water's edge we dropped our loads and collapsed in exhaustion. Exposed arms and legs turned crimson to match our flushed faces. Pedro promised the hard part was over, right at home in his element. Our glares did nothing to diminish his zeal. It's hard to stay mad at someone who's so damn positive all the time.

We recovered from the death march and eyed the clear water. Everyone was anxious to take a dip, but first we had to sit through Pedro's safety talk. Being an adult, I felt compelled to listen this time. He talked about staying together and following his lead, about the swells we'd encounter when we left the sheltered cove, about climbing back on the kayak in case it flipped over. He would make the decision to hug the shoreline or cut across the bay to the campground once he saw the conditions on the open sea. Everyone agreed with the same enthusiasm reserved for clicking an agreement to the terms of service on a website. We just wanted to cool off.

We got our wish when we hit the water. The Pacific Ocean is nowhere near the giant bath tub many people imagine. The water is refreshing, if not downright cold; summer temperatures peaking in the mid-sixties. On the sit-on-top kayaks, not only were we exposed to any water that splashed over the side, but the boats have scupper holes to allow water to drain out the bottom. The holes also let the ocean trickle up from below, leaving us sitting in a pool of water that quickly went from cool relief to shrinking the family jewels. But not Pedro. His sit-inside kayak separated him from

the water, and his sprayskirt, a piece of nylon around his waist stretched over the cockpit to seal water out, kept him warm and dry. You sonofabitch, Pedro.

With our wet bottoms, we trailed Pedro through moored sailboats and out toward open water. Another difference in equipment became immediately clear: his touring kayak was much more efficient than our boats. We could barely go straight, much less keep up with his effortless paddling. Like a kindergarten teacher taking his class on a field trip, he stopped every few strokes while we bumped into each other and flailed our paddles. He tried to give advice, but we were too busy cursing his superior skills to listen.

I focused on figuring out how to use a paddle with two blades instead of one. That's really the difference between kayaking and canoeing, and it's a lot more significant than it might appear. The body mechanics are completely different: the muscles used, how you hold the darn things, everything is different. With a kayak paddle you naturally stroke on alternating sides, and don't have to switch your hands around like with a canoe paddle. In theory, it's easier to go straight and more comfortable to do while sitting down (vs. kneeling in a canoe). In practice, it was strange and consumed all my attention.

It surprised me when I looked up and noticed that our simple plan had gone to hell in fifteen minutes. We weren't together and Pedro wasn't in the lead. He paddled frantically between everyone, trying to get the faster newbies to slow up for those having trouble. All spread out and each headed in slightly different directions, it was chaos. That's when we hit the swells—or rather, they hit us.

As a child, I spent some time in small power boats on the Great Lakes and experienced significant storm waves—overhead, crashing waves that send a little boat careening wildly. But ocean swell is something different. The sheer volume of water staggers the imagination, rising and falling on a grander scale, like a slow motion roller coaster. Sitting at the bottom of a trough, a hill of water perched above me, I feared the inevitable crash. But nothing happened. The wave would

simply slide underneath, and I'd magically be at the top of the hill looking down at the ocean stretched before me.

Bobbing like corks, my companions appeared and disappeared from view. From the top I spotted whoever was out front and headed toward them. I hoped they knew where they were going. Then I would drop down and be alone for a moment, nothing for company but my sense of awe.

I would have been happy to continue like this for the whole trip, unconcerned about reaching any specific destination, but Pedro appeared at my side to update me, easily navigating the large seas. Boris, a Russian grad student and one of the guys out front, was seasick and wasn't slowing down for anyone. Giovanni, an Italian exchange student, went with him. That left me, Steve, and Aaron in the back. Pedro needed to chase down the frontrunners and guide them to the camp site.

"Stay together," Pedro told me, his words crisp. "Don't lose sight of anyone. Keep paddling."

He waited for me to nod that I understood. This wasn't happy-go-lucky Pedro, but a man concerned with a serious situation. It knocked me from my contented place. We were onto plan B, and he was counting on me. I nodded, ready to help.

Pedro pointed out a peak on the ridge ahead, a target that always stayed in view whether we were up or down on the roller coaster of water. "Head that way," he said before speeding away. I watched with jealousy as he effortlessly sliced through the waves. I wanted to paddle like that.

Instead, I slogged along with my companions, both out of their depth in the waves. Steve weaved across the ocean like a drunk driver while Aaron went straight and fast for ten yards, then spun out and had to reset. I knew enough about handling a boat to go in a straight line, but it took all my attention. Whether because of focus or fear, we paddled in silence.

Lost once more in my head, I didn't notice I had pulled away from my slower companions until a strangled yelp grabbed my attention. I turned in time to see Steve precariously balanced on his steeply angled kayak, holding the high end like

he could pull himself back to level. He couldn't, and with a squeal turned into a gurgle, he flipped.

He popped up sputtering next to his overturned boat, grasping at the smooth bottom like a penguin trying to climb out on an ice sheet. The wind had increased and waves slid across the kayak and dunked Steve despite the flotation of his life jacket.

"I'm okay," he claimed when Aaron and I approached. "But I lost my paddle."

Aaron went after the paddle as I struggled to recall what Pedro had said about getting back into our kayaks. Something about climbing on and kicking your feet. Maybe I should have paid more attention to that safety talk.

Steve didn't seem to remember any more details, and every time he pulled himself up the bright orange boat flipped over on top of him. It spun in the water with Steve no closer to getting on top and quickly losing energy. He floated with his arms hooked over the side of the boat, too tired to speak, but I knew what he wanted to say. You sonofabitch, Pedro.

With no real plan, I pulled alongside and held his boat steady. He gathered himself for one more try, and I leaned across to pull on his life jacket.

"Kick your feet," I said. It must be important since Pedro said it.

With a grunt and a heave, he came out of the water surprisingly fast and landed across both our boats. Together our two kayaks offered a stable platform, and Steve took his time sorting out his seat and getting situated. Aaron brought the recovered paddle over and Steve said he was fine, even if his wide eyes and shaking hands didn't agree. Best to keep moving.

This time I stayed vigilant and close to the others. Steve went in once more, but both of us remained calm and repeated the earlier procedure. Piece of cake this time. Knowing he could easily get back in with some help, and concluding the water was brisk but not so bad, Steve relaxed a bit. That was all it took for him to stay on the boat and even paddle in a straight

line. Amazing how often our fear of an outcome actually manufactures it.

The three of us found our rhythm and enjoyed the rest of the paddle. Not far from the beach, Pedro showed up to guide us in, his easy smile back in place with the others already safely ashore. We scanned the water ahead and noticed the offshore rocks and breaking waves between us and our sandy destination, a minefield of white explosions and potential disasters. Thankful for the guidance, we followed Pedro on a circuitous route to within spitting distance of shore.

Before Pedro could give any advice about landing a kayak through the surf, Steve and Aaron headed in—they wanted off the roller coaster. Steve got tossed from his boat one last time before he could make land but simply stood in the shallow water and walked his boat the rest of the way. When a small wave picked up Aaron, he jumped off his boat and let the wave push his kayak to shore. Pedro rewarded my patience by telling me the secret: follow behind the wave, don't get in front of it. I did exactly that and beached my kayak gently on the sand, barely getting my feet wet as I exited.

Seasick Boris had fully recovered once on solid ground and shared his vodka with everyone. Steve warmed up in the afternoon sunshine, turning an ever brighter shade of red. Someone broke out chocolate from a pack, and we celebrated our survival sitting on the beach, looking out over the vast Pacific, the horizon a meeting of light blue and dark. Whitecaps glistened in the sun, and the breeze carried the taste of salt to our lips. Little waves lapped at the shore while rollers slammed into the rocks further out, sending spray high into the air. The combination of adventure and relaxation, excitement and contentment, remoteness and accessibility—that's what kayaking meant to me at that moment and what drew me to the sport. I wanted more and it didn't take long to get it.

The day was still young and Pedro eager to take his kayak back out for a little surfing. I had no idea you could surf a kayak. It wasn't something you did in Minnesota, and I had the vaguest notion of how it worked. No one else was interested, but I quickly donned my life jacket and snatched my paddle.

The waves on the beach were too small to ride, so Pedro took me farther out, to one of the reef breaks. Here the bigger sets broke as they passed over submerged rocks, the white foam spilling forward into deep water and safety—the perfect learning environment.

At first I watched Pedro position himself just behind the reef, pointed toward shore and looking over his shoulder. When a big wave came—all of four feet high—he slashed quickly with his paddle to accelerate and get in front of the reef where the wave picked up his stern, shooting him forward. He'd ride it out, gliding in his sleek kayak until the wave died, then circle back to set up again. It wasn't the North Shore of Hawaii, it wasn't even the small beach break of Santa Monica, but the energy of the wave gave him a ride and that's surfing.

My turn. I lined up like he had, watching over my shoulder. A wave came, not really big but big enough for me, and I paddled as hard as I could. The wave bulged up slightly and rolled under me, leaving me behind it, paddling uphill. Maybe I needed a bigger wave.

I lined up again. When the big one came I repeated my attempt. This wave did break, ever so slightly. It quickly turned my kayak sideways and nearly knocked me from my seat. I dropped my paddle and clung to the boat until the wave released me. Pedro caught the next one and smiled as he effortlessly flew past. You sonofabitch, Pedro.

The third time wasn't the charm. I didn't even manage to keep my seat as the wave broke on top of me, spinning me around and over. The cold water wasn't a shock at this point, but a salty nose-full made me snort. Having learned a thing or two from watching Steve, I kicked my legs behind me and threw myself across my boat. I landed on my belly and twisted into my seat on the wide kayak. It was kind of easy once you figured it out.

I spent the next half hour trying to catch a wave, any wave. Pedro raced passed me time and again, yelling encouragement. Maybe it was my equipment, maybe it was my lack of skill, but I never caught a ride that day. It didn't matter.

Once again, there was no race, no competition. Being out there was the victory.

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, Pedro and I headed back in to help the others pitch camp. We spent the evening around a fire, roasting our dinner on sticks, reliving stories from the day. The curses for Pedro grew more colorful and good-natured. As the sun set, the sky matched the orange flames and more vodka warmed our spirits and swelled our imaginations. The waves in our recollections had already grown to giant tsunamis, flinging us about the angry sea. We had been bold and fearless and conquered the mighty ocean. And tomorrow waited for us to do it all again.

I stayed outside after everyone else had turned in. Stars spilled across the cloudless sky, a far richer tapestry than the city provided, combining with the gentle slap of the waves to lull me into a drug-like stupor. As I lay on my back, I still felt the up and down of the water, the sway of the ocean a part of me now. That sense of being on the water after you return to land is an after-effect of fluid sloshing in the semicircular canals of your ear. But it's also something more, not at all connected to the physical body. A feeling I wanted to keep.

The next day we returned the way we came. The waves were smaller but the wind was stronger. Pedro didn't bother with a complex plan to keep us together. We started with plan B: Boris and Giovanni sprinted ahead to avoid seasickness; Steve, Aaron, and I stayed together; Pedro paddled between the groups to make sure everyone was all right. This time we started with a high landmark on shore we could aim for. It worked all too well and the trip was uneventful. I still enjoyed it, but part of me missed the adventure, the sense of wilderness the ocean provided. I was addicted and needed a fix. You sonofabitch, Pedro.