

- PROMOTE LANGUAGE ARTS SKILLS •
- RAISE DISABILITY AWARENESS •
- STIMULATE DIALOGUE •

Excerpted and adapted from  
*The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*  
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by Kenny Fries

### **Aqua Booties, Size Six**

Ian enters the fitting room carrying a tower of shoeboxes in his arms. In less than a week I am scheduled for a fifteen-day whitewater rafting trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. We've already found the right wetsuit in the local sporting goods store. Now we're trying to find the wetsuit booties that will fit my feet.

I have visited the canyon twice before. Crowds poured out of their RVs to watch the picture-postcard sunset from folding chairs, families screaming at one another in the heat. I couldn't walk all the way down from the canyon rim to the Colorado. Grand Canyon National Park was not one of my favorite places. But now, here was the chance to experience the canyon the way I had always wanted to, by being right in the middle of it.

When I received the flier announcing the trip, it stayed on my desk. When I woke up in the middle of the night, I would go into my office and see it staring back at me. The trip was for the disabled and their friends. I wouldn't be the only disabled person going. But Ian had to work and couldn't go with me. Who would set up my tent, carry my gear, help me get to the places I wanted to go? I would need to wear my shoes on land, but needed them to be kept safe and dry when on the river. The kayaking I did in Thailand was in calm water. How would I keep my shoes dry, safe from the rapids of the Colorado? If they were lost or damaged how would I get home? How would I survive without them?

Finally, I called. On the phone, Mary McDonald, the trip organizer, assured me that my shoes could be kept safe and dry. Dry bags and sturdy metal boxes would be on board the boats. A volunteer guide would help me with all the physical tasks that I couldn't do. "That's what they're there for," she assured me.

Mary also told me the Colorado has very cold water, no more than fifty degrees. When I told her I have difficulty immersing myself in the water of a heated pool, she suggested I bring a wetsuit and booties.

Because of my short legs and my leg length discrepancy, since I was a child all the pants I buy need to be altered. Until I was a teenager, my mother conscientiously cut and hemmed. Then, a local dungaree store that did alterations on site kept my measurements—19 inches for the left pant leg, 17 1/4 inches for the right—on their alteration room wall. Now, I take my pants to a local tailor called Sew Good. But a wetsuit made of neoprene, a cross between spandex and rubber, cannot be altered. How would I find a wetsuit that fits me?

Mary, used to dealing with all sorts of bodies, suggested I look for a type of wetsuit called the Little John. This wetsuit has a full-size top connected to wetsuit pants that are like shorts. As for the booties, she suggested one size for one foot and another size for the other.

It was good to talk with someone who understood my dilemma, but I still never thought I'd find the proper gear. I felt despondent. Hopeless. But to Ian, who has neither my fear, nor my legs, finding the gear for my trip was an adventure.

Looking through the wetsuits in the sporting goods store, we found the Little John. Gradually my fear and embarrassment abated. The Little John was, as Mary had suggested, the answer. Now, here was Ian with his tower of boxes, bringing me every wetsuit bootie in the store that he thought might fit my feet.

"I've got all kinds and all sizes," Ian tells me.

Ian begins to open the boxes. A new wave of hopelessness rises from my stomach to my chest. How could someone with my body even think about rafting down the Grand Canyon? Fear, long entrenched, does not dissipate easily. I feel like a fraud.

Ian bends down to put a bootie on my foot and I cannot help imagining I am Cinderella, still embarrassed at fleeing the ball. No slippers, glass or otherwise, will slip easily onto my feet.

“Let’s try the ones with zippers down the side first,” Ian says. “One with a rubber sole for support. Let’s fit your left foot first. And let’s start with the smaller sizes.”

It is as if we are back in the Bali jungle, Ian deftly spying the black monkeys, leading me through the dense trees. Miraculously, the first one we try—an Aqua Bootie, size six—fits my left foot.

“Stand up. How does that feel?” he asks.

Standing up, I am sure that the bootie on my left foot will cause my foot to hurt. But to my surprise, I am able to hold my weight. “Amazing,” is all I’m able to say.

“Now, maybe we should try a smaller size for the right, but let’s see if the right one will fit, as well,” Ian says looking up at me with his smile.

He hands me the other bootie. I cannot believe it, but it fits, too. Standing up and walking around, I know, will be the true test. I do not want to injure myself. I keep expecting my right foot, without the support of my shoe, to roll over on its side.

But, again to my surprise, the zipper, the Velcro strap, and the rubber sole keep my foot upright. The neoprene bootie has the right combination of flexibility and support. My knee does not buckle. I do not fall. In the small fitting room, I walk from wall to wall.

“How did you know these would work?” I ask Ian.

“I guessed. I know your feet pretty well by now,” he says, still kneeling on the floor. “You’re a size six. How does it feel having your own shoe size?”

I have no idea how to answer.

### **Foaming Over It**

The night before departing for the Grand Canyon, I watch a PBS documentary on John Wesley Powell’s exploration of the Colorado. If that’s what the rapids look like on a fifteen-inch television, I know I’m in trouble.

On April 4, 1862, Powell was fighting in the Civil War battle at Shiloh. His right arm was smashed by a cannonball. Three days later in Savannah, his right arm was removed above the elbow. The PBS narrator reads from *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, Wallace Stegner's biography of Powell: "Losing one's right arm is a misfortune; to some it would be a disaster, to others an excuse. It affected Wes Powell's life about as much as a stone fallen into a swift stream affects the course of the river. With a velocity like his, he simply foamed over it."

Later, I try to fall asleep. Fear and anticipation keep me awake. I keep telling myself that Powell made his trip through the canyon with one arm. Images of rapids, more like surf, become larger and larger throughout the night. Even if I wasn't disabled I'd still be afraid.

In my late teens and early twenties, I was not afraid to travel. As a college junior I lived and studied in London and at Cambridge. That year, during school holidays, I traveled through Europe, carrying just a backpack. In 1984, I went to Israel. I've spent weeks searching for ruins in the Southwest desert, traveled with Ian to Bali. I traveled alone in Thailand.

As I get older, it seems fear rises more quickly, more forcefully. I become anxious as I get closer to leaving home. "If there are people born without the capacity for fear, you might well look for them in the emergency room or the morgue," say Drs. Nesse and Williams in *Why We Get Sick*. "Fear is the signal that a situation may be dangerous, that some kind of loss or damage is likely, that escape is desirable." So, why is fear showing up now that I'm older?

I've inherited from my parents perseverance, as well as the fear of imminent danger. As I get older, these competing instincts to strive and retreat cancel each other out, and I become more conflicted the closer I get to the time of departure.

Still awake, I think about Eli Clare, a writer with cerebral palsy who loves climbing mountains. Clare writes about confronting the image many people have of the disabled: the "supercrip." This image has saturated the world with stories about "gimps" who participate in activities ranging from the grand to the mundane: a boy without hands bats .486 on his Little League team, a blind man who hikes the entire Appalachian Trail,

an adolescent girl with Down syndrome who learns to drive and has a boyfriend. These stories focus on disabled people “overcoming” their disabilities, reinforcing the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. The writer Joan Tollifson, writing about her life with one arm—“People tell me with tears in their eyes how amazingly well I do things, such as tie my shoes”—shows how these stories turn disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration, from individuals into abstractions.

Like Eli Clare who loves the mountains with a “deep down rumble” in his bones, I love to travel. And like Eli Clare and many other disabled people I, too, carry the myth of the supercrip. It is often too difficult for me to separate what I want to do from what I cannot do. I am confused by the commingling of my fear with my desire.

*With a velocity like his, he simply foamed over it.* I think about John Wesley Powell, one-armed, running the Colorado River in a wooden dory no bigger than a rowboat; how Powell climbed up the rocky side of a canyon only to find himself alone on a ledge, unable to get down. I think about how once I walked up the Mountain of the Lion and the Lamb in the Lake District in England; how I finally made it to the top. With my legs and back aching, I barely had the energy to get down. I think about my fourteen-mile descent from Glacier Point down into Yosemite Valley. Not realizing it would take me so long, I had to navigate the final three miles of the trail limping in the dark.

Still not sleeping, I don’t want to go.

I get out of bed to read Stegner’s words about Powell, the words I heard on the video: *Losing one’s right arm is a misfortune; to some it would be a disaster, to others an excuse.* Looking up, I see my bags ready to go by the front door. I know at the bottom of the duffle bag is my wetsuit and my Aqua Booties. Next to my backpack is my only pair of shoes.

I remember Ian walking into the fitting room balancing, barely, the tower of boxes of wetsuit booties.

I look out the window and realize I have not slept all night. It is already dawn.

## Reciprocal Altruism

“We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown. Our boats, tied to a common stake, are chafing each other, as they are tossed by the fretful river,” John Wesley Powell wrote as he began his first trip down the Colorado River.

I look around at the diverse bunch we are: Mark, Daniel and Hanna use wheelchairs. Ben and I use canes; Sally and I have orthopedic shoes. Six of the eleven participants have disabilities ranging from quadriplegia to multiple sclerosis; our ages range from midtwenties to midseventies. “Although it might sound corny, we’re going to be living as a family for the next fifteen days,” Bert, our trip leader, tells us before we put in on the river.

Among us are seven guides from Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC) who will assist those who need assistance. There are also six guides from the commercial companies, one in charge of each of four yellow rubber boats, and two who run the larger motor rig that will carry our gear, the food, as well as the wheelchairs, downriver.

Day 1. We take it slow, rock layer by rock layer descending into the canyon. Quickly, I adapt to life on the river: the difficult mobility on sandy beaches; going to sleep and waking up early; al fresco toilets. I learn how best to sit in the boat, using a padded backrest that not only lessens the strain on my back but, when tied to the boat’s rigging, gives me something extra to hold onto.

Most important, I develop a preboarding routine. I pass my shoes and cane, wrapped tightly in a black trash bag, to Matt and Tim who run the “big rig,” where they keep them in a long, rectangular metal box. When we stop for lunch, I see the black bag waiting for me by a white plastic chair. When we stop to camp for the night and I again see the black bag waiting for me by the chair, the fear of losing my shoes begins to lessen.

The morning of Day 2. In Marble Canyon, we make our way through the Roaring Twenties, a series of fierce rapids, getting our first hit of the forceful waves. The water is

colder than I imagined. Since this part of the canyon runs north–south, we are not exposed to much sun.

Rafting through the Roaring Twenties, Bob, my boatman, trains us to lean to one side of the boat, when he says to do so. “High side,” he shouts, and those who can, lean toward the right front side of the boat. I watch Bob’s developed upper body maneuver the oars through the spiraling water, allowing us to make it safely through the first set of rapids. I begin to trust him and want to be assigned to his boat each morning.

By the afternoon I am able to relax, absorb the geological information of the stained dark red walls of this part of the canyon. I lose myself in the sheer immensity of a place where a sense of scale and distance easily disappears.

Day 3, late morning, we reach Vasey’s Paradise, an oasis of greenery fed by a narrow waterfall high on the river right canyon wall, named by Powell after a botanist. Here, everyone gets out of the boat. Guides Ray and Steve carry Hanna, a woman with multiple sclerosis who needs assistance to move, into the flow below the waterfall. The flow, coming from a side canyon, is cold but not as cold as the water in the Colorado.

After much hesitation, and much exhortation from my river companions, I decide to venture forth onto the slippery rocks. This will be my first experience walking with my wetsuit booties on land. Looking at the rocks, I try to gauge how much assistance I might need: someone to help me get out of the boat; someone on each side to steady me on land. I ask Ray and Steve for assistance, and with their help I make it to shore.

I am not used to walking without my thick-soled, heavy leather shoes. The wetsuit clings to my body. It is difficult to focus on walking when I am surrounded by blossoming trees—a surprise in the desert—the green seemingly darker by contrast to the red canyon walls.

I watch the water flow down the walls into the clear side canyon stream, then into the muddy Colorado. After my first few steps out of the boat, I no longer need Ray and Steve’s assistance. Now it is as if I am walking weightless on the moon.

That night, after dinner I sit with Mary and the guides by the campfire. I thank Ray and Steve for their help in getting me out of the boat into Vasey's Paradise. I ask Ray, "Why do you do this?"

"I have a cousin with cerebral palsy. And I love being on the river."

William D. Hamilton, a British biologist, was the first to link Darwin's assertion that natural selection may be applied to the extended family. Since members of a family share the greatest amount of genes, altruistic behavior toward family is in the gene's replicative self-interest. A gene that repaid kindness could spread through the extended family, and then, by interbreeding, to other families.

"I find most guides have experiences with a family member or a close friend who is disabled," Mary tells me.

### **The Schist**

Day 6. After Bob guides the boat through Hance, a technical feat due to the large rock that must be avoided to run the rapid, we enter the schist, and it is as if we have landed inside the earth's core.

The Vishnu Schist, exposed in the Inner Granite Gorge is metamorphic rock, which forms the oldest, deepest layer in the Grand Canyon. This black rock comes from lavas, sandstones, and siltstones that accumulated on the floor of a Precambrian sea over 1.7 billion years ago. The schist is some of the oldest exposed rock known to man. The pink and red Zoroaster granite provides relief as it veins its way through the dark schist.

It is believed that life has been present on earth for at least 3.4 billion years. But until about 2 billion years ago, this life was anaerobic and unicellular. Just before the metamorphosis of the Vishnu Schist, living organisms with chlorophyll created a new free-oxygen atmosphere. This atmospheric change caused wide-scale extinction of anaerobic forms and made it possible for multicellular evolution.

This morning, floating through the schist, I once again think of Darwin after the Concepción earthquake, before he reached the Galápagos, making the connection

between Lyell's piecemeal geological elevation and what he saw before him. And like Darwin during his expedition in the Andes, I am awed not only by what I see, but silenced by the realization that here—floating on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon—I am transported back through unfathomable time to the moment before everything we now know as life happened.

The boatmen pull up their oars. All of us are silent. The only sound is the current of the river, the sound of being taken wherever the river will take us.

### **A Port-a-floor and Yellow Boats**

John Wesley Powell is the first person with a disability recorded to make his way down the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon. The six of us with disabilities on this trip are not the first disabled people to make the trip since Powell.

In the early 1970s, the National Park Service (NPS) implemented a system to control river access, issuing a certain number of user days to commercial companies plying the river. The NPS was petitioned by a group of Arizona outdoors enthusiasts with physical impairments. In 1972, these activists demanded user days for the disabled and started a group, called Jumping Mouse Camp, to go downriver.

Day 7. Another hot day. "Take a look at this," calls John, the owner of Outdoors Unlimited, one of the commercial companies leading our group down the river.

I move closer to an ashen green, thick stub of a flowering plant close to the ground. With his index finger John touches the pistils in the center of its bright pink flower. When he gently moves his finger the petals of the flower begin to close. "The prickly pear cactus thinks my finger is an insect large enough to pollinate it. So, the flower wants to capture me long enough to make sure I will spread its pollen to another flower. Quite an adaptation for desert survival."

At lunch, I talk with John, who has come on the trip to learn more about the kinds of adaptations people with disabilities need on the river. "Besides a close friend of mine, there haven't been too many disabled people on our trips," he tells me.

“I wouldn’t want to be the only disabled person on a trip,” I say. “I’d feel as if I’d be holding up the group if I took extra time. And I’d feel a bit sad that I couldn’t do everything everybody else was doing.”

We walk back to the boats on the modular plastic strips arranged on the sand in various configurations so wheelchair users can maneuver more easily on the uneven ground. “I was at a wedding, one of those backyard affairs in a tent,” John says, “and I saw them using these Port-a-floors to even out the ground in the tent and provide paths outside on the lawn. My friend in a wheelchair wanted to make a trip down the river with us, and I thought these would be the perfect thing to make it easier for him on the sand.” So, the Port-a-floor is not made by ETC, as I’d assumed, but an existing invention John adapted for their use.

Day 9. Late on a clear star-filled night. I sit by the river. With no mirror, with only a flashlight and a small bucket of cold water, I shave for the first time since we launched above Marble Canyon.

As I shave, I think about how on this trip the rule is: if everyone can’t do it, nobody does it. So far, despite our impairments, and because of adaptive uses of such items as the Port-a-floor and the help of the guides, we have been able to do almost everything done by a group without disabled rafters.

Almost everything on the shore is an adaptation: not only the portable flooring but also the makeshift kitchen, the pump system with which we purify our drinking water, the outdoor toilets, the bucket I’m using for cold water outdoor shaving, even the tents, the light I see moving inside Sally’s tent, and surely the yellow rubber boats. All are adaptations that allow as many people as possible to run the river as safely and comfortably as possible.

Here I am, sitting and shaving on the banks of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. Outside the tents, the three wheelchairs reflect the moonlight. Inside their tents, Daniel, Mark, and Hanna are probably asleep. Sally is still moving around her tent, organizing her gear.

I walk to my tent. Before I go to sleep, I polish my shoes.

## Crossing the River

There are different ways to cross the water.

Day 10, and we have reached Havasu Canyon. Today, my aim is to make it only half a mile up the canyon to sit amid the pink rock and clear aquamarine water of Havasu Creek.

The four yellow oar boats are moored side by side just inside the mouth of the side canyon. To get from our boat to the shore, I have to cross over the other three anchored boats. From the boat closest to shore, I can see that big-riggers Matt and Tim have left the black bag containing my shoes and cane three hundred feet away on the rock ledge, my initial destination. Good thinking. When I reach the ledge, I sit down and change from my wetsuit booties into my shoes. Looking at the uneven path through the rocks, I'm glad I polished my shoes last night.

As I change into my shoes, another group of adventurers passes by.

"We're just so impressed," a frosted-haired woman stops to tell me.

"Don't be impressed," I hear myself say. "Read my books."

Boatman Dan and his wife Kate, who joined the trip two days ago at Phantom Ranch, will accompany me up the canyon in case I need assistance.

On the rocky trail, I am able to maneuver using only my cane. But as we continue up the canyon, the rocks become larger and larger until the path is almost impassable. A quarter-mile up the canyon, boulders block the way. There is no longer a path on this side of the creek.

"You'll have to cross the creek to get up the canyon," Dan tells me.

How do I cross the water? My choices: (1) I can change back into my wetsuit booties, which I've wrapped in the black trash bag and put in my backpack, and make the crossing myself; (2) I can change back into my wetsuit booties and ask for help across the water; (3) I can ask Dan to carry me across.

Darwin, in *The Descent of Man*, talks about how, as man's reasoning powers improved, each individual would soon learn that if he aided others he would receive aid

in return. From this “low motive” he might acquire the habit of helping others. In turn, this habit of performing benevolent actions would strengthen the feeling of sympathy, which then would become the initial impulse for more benevolent actions.

I decide to ask Dan to carry me across the water.

On the other side of the creek, the trail continues. A short hike up, I find a rock ledge to view lower Havasu Canyon.

“You go on ahead,” I tell Dan and Kate. “Pick me up on your way back down.”

Lying down on the rock, I use my backpack as a pillow. The midday sun blurs the boundaries of the water, the rocks, the sky. Aquamarine blends into pink into blue. Where have I seen something like this before?

All of a sudden I see Ian on the ledge of the Beehive on Mount Desert Island and I think how, in the great majority of situations in my daily life, I am the most disabled. But when I climbed the Beehive with Ian, and on this trip, I’ve been the most able.

I look up canyon and see Sally, maneuvering on her rocker-shoes. Sally has been far more active on the trip. She has asked for less help than I. But I have noticed Sally spends much of her free time organizing her gear, has not slept well at night, and is constantly tired.

Although I have missed Ian very much—his ADD-self would thrive out here hunting for a place to camp and gathering our gear—I have also been glad he is not with me. When we are together, especially when we travel, the physical labor usually falls to him. This trip has given me the opportunity to test my physical limits, as well as my emotional strength. I’ve been able to experience how I no longer push myself too much.

But I still feel uncomfortable not only needing help but also asking for it. Often the feelings of fear and shame are even worse after I get assistance. It seems easier somehow when I’m paying for someone to do something for me. Even though I paid for this trip, I know the guides are volunteers. I want to trust their assistance, as well as the mere offer of it, more than I do.

Darwin's journey toward the theory of evolution itself was an act of reciprocity. His social situation, his finances, his family and friends, led to his collecting success, as well as to the publication of his theory. He used his family members in his experiments, and was assisted by neighbors. To arrive at the ideas at the core of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin depended on the theories of others, such as Malthus, Lyell, and Wallace. Was Wallace's lack of social standing the reason he is not remembered today for cofounding evolutionary theory?

As man advanced in civilization, Darwin noted, small tribes became united into larger communities. Each individual began extending his social instincts toward all members of the tribe and eventually to members of the same nation, even though these people were personally unknown to him. Darwin concluded that once this point was reached, only artificial barriers prevented an individual's sympathies from extending to the members of all nations and races.

Is this what people with disabilities offer to society: an example of the importance of interdependence, of community? Is this how people with a physical difference help the human species survive?

*We're going to be living as a family for the next fifteen days.* Despite sounding corny, trip leader Bert's words have been borne out by our journey. We have reached this point not only as individuals but as a community of twenty-five rafting downriver.

Looking up the canyon, I see Dan and Kate. Soon, it will be time to cross back to the other side of the water. This time there will be no hesitation in how I get across.

Once again, Dan carries me and it is as if I am that four-week-old infant being carried out of the incubator. Needing and accepting assistance is leading me toward a great unknown, a journey as immense as the history of the layers of rock and the river that helps form all that surrounds me.



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