

My Water Ski Life

A SERIES OF SHORT REFLECTIONS ON
WATER SKIING, LEADERSHIP AND LIFE

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For several years, Lynn Carnes wrote annual letters paralleling her journey from learning to ski on slalom course to life, leadership and personal growth. Read a compilation of those letters here.

Lessons from a Sabbatical

12/31/2006

Someone once asked me when I feel at my best. My answer: “Every single time I get up on a slalom ski.” When I took a three-month sabbatical this summer, I decide to fully indulge myself and ski every time I felt like it. Even though I’ve been slalom skiing since I was a teenager, I declared myself a beginner, got professional coaching and skied significantly better as the summer went on.

I took the sabbatical to give myself some space and a chance to review where I was and where I wanted to go. Without the break, I simply couldn’t “find the time” to pause and reflect. And even when work dropped away, I still found it hard to stop being busy. Before the sabbatical started, I imagined slowing down, having full down at all. First lesson: “Busy-ness” is a habit. It seems everyone but me knew that I was “off”.

As time went on, I did slow down. I could actually spend time with friends without always rushing to the next thing. I learned what it is to just sit and be. People started asking why I looked so relaxed. (What did I look like before?) As I reflected, I learned the power of my thoughts and where they can lead-both productive and unproductive. I’ve noticed a distinct shift in my willingness to try new things, even when I’m not necessarily proficient at first. My mantra is “I can do better.” I have become a big believer in the power of practice. I continue to marvel at the power of belief.

I had no idea what to expect when I tried this grand experiment. The support from those in my life- husband, clients, friends-helped tremendously. I am so very grateful. Some decisions have been made; some will unfold over the next year. The sabbatical did everything I hoped for and more. I have grown; I’m still growing.

My wish for you in the coming year is that you give yourself the permission to pursue your passion. Who knows where it will lead!

Lessons from a Sabbatical II

*"I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious."
Albert Einstein*

12/31/2007 A couple of years ago, I uncovered a passion for water skiing, which led me to take a "ski-batical" the summer of 2006. Little did I know that my desire to keep getting better at slalom skiing would keep growing, or that skiing would teach me through so many parallels to learning, life and work.

This year, I had the good fortune to be coached by some of the best in the world. Perhaps my biggest lesson observing these true professionals is the distinction between doing something repetitiously and deliberately practicing for the sake of getting better. Given that professional skiers practice their craft in 16 second increments (the time it takes to get through a slalom course) every moment of practice must count and it takes extraordinary focus to be deliberate every single time. In order to get better at something, say stepping up to the hard conversations, I am learning to "deliberately practice."

My thoughts affect my business outcomes, my skiing and my health. My practice now includes choosing my thoughts much more deliberately (which occasionally leads to an interesting tug of war!)

"Busy-ness" is a habit which can be broken without sacrificing productivity. (At least that's my theory!) This year, I have practiced managing energy and focus. Sometimes, (not all the time) I get more done with less effort, which leaves time to be still. This will take practice for a lifetime.

Finally, I have discovered that I don't have to be in control of everything and sometimes, the easiest way to get the best outcome is to relax and let go.

My wish for you in the coming year is to find ways to "deliberately practice", even in 16 second increments, as you keep learning and growing!

Just Go Around the Buoys

12/31/2008

Over the last couple of years, I've chronicled lessons from a sabbatical in 2006, along with a new-found love of slalom waterskiing. This year brought new lessons, and even more parallels between life, work and skiing. Perhaps the most profound moment of the year came near the end of the ski season. I was at "ski camp" and once again found myself falling just short of the goal, which "simply" entails going around six buoys in the water. I've been at this a while, and frankly had perfected the art of skiing just inside the buoys. My coach, one of the top women skiers in world, has been giving me concise, on point coaching for the last two years. Yet I kept skiing just short of my goal. Early in the week she said "I've given you every tip I have; the only thing I can say at this point is just go around the buoys." Something must have clicked, because after that, I skied around the six buoys almost 30 times in the next three days.

So what happened? It seems that my perception changed. Once I discovered the right path for my ski, the buoys suddenly didn't seem so far out there and more importantly, going around them was not only possible, but eventually probable. Thinking about it only got in the way; all I had to do was just go around the buoys.

How many places in our lives do we fall just short, not because of a lack of skill or desire, but because our perception simply distorts the view? The experience has called me to pay attention to my perceptions of everything. Instead of over thinking and analyzing, why not just start the project, get in the gym or ...fill in the blank? When something seems out of reach, why not try to see a new path, instead of doing the same thing over and over again? When a slight or wrongdoing is perceived, why not ask for clarification, rather than planning to respond accordingly?

This is hard work and my success rate is still low. The effort is worth it. Power resides in our perceptions. We really can make this world what we want it to be and these times call for us to be at our best. My hope for all of us in the coming year is that we interpret the world and choose our perceptions in the ways that serve our highest good. My very best to you in the coming year.

The Magic Zone

12/31/2009

Several years ago, I started writing about the lessons from my 2006 sabbatical, which accelerated a new-found love of slalom skiing and set me on a path of learning that has continued ever since. This may be surprising after four years, but this sport still feels like a new-found love. When deciding whether to write a letter this year, I also wrestled with whether to even mention slalom skiing. After all, what more could be said?

Well, a lot as it turns out. Early in the year, I mentioned to someone that I was headed off to "Ski School". She gave me a funny look and asked me "Don't you already know how to ski?" Since she sees me ski on the lake almost every morning, it was a valid question. My response was a quick one: "Yes, but I want to be better." That simple exchange highlighted the very reason this sport has brought so much insight.

There is a level of slalom skiing that involves simply getting up, banking turns and throwing a big spray. At the beginning, all I wanted was the wall of water behind me! Then there is the level that involves turning around buoys at ever faster speeds and with a shorter rope. In this game, "better" happens with deliberate practice, physical strength and a calm mind.

For me this year, improved performance was correlated with a certain very-hard-to-achieve space in my mind. I often joked that my biggest challenge was the "buoy between my ears." So far, I've identified three states of mind, one productive space bounded by two extremes. Being too determined causes me to think too much...and I miss the buoys. Being too fearful (of falling, of speed, of being on edge) causes me to ski too cautiously...and I miss the buoys. Finding the calm space in my mind between these two extremes is magical and going around the buoys comes easily-when I find that elusive zone. The simple practice of stopping, taking a breath and calming my mind at the end of each ski run improves my performance significantly. Success happens when I find "the zone" often written about in sports.

Of course, there are many parallels to life and work. What happens when we push too hard...ask too much...try without actually doing? What happens when we are afraid...to fail...to succeed...to take a stand...to change? What will it take for us to stop, take a breath and calm the mind? Perhaps along with being more productive we will be happier.

The world is moving faster and getting more complex. Easier is not in sight. My hope for you in the coming year is that as your world moves faster and room for error disappears, you find that calm space in the storm where wonderment never ceases and something new is always around the corner.

Change, Change, Change

12/31/2010 In 2010, my passion for water skiing continued to bring me lessons about life, particularly in how I trick myself to avoid being uncomfortable. When I fell in love with this sport a few years ago, I never dreamed it would provide so many positive benefits to my life. While the fitness and fun are unparalleled, what this sport keeps bringing me is insight into what it takes to change. Of course, if there is an overused word in the world today, whether business, politics, or any other domain, it is change. So why talk more about it? Because life is change. And if I'm going to have to change, darn it, I'm going to change doing a sport I love.

After a couple of years of learning to go around the 6 buoys in the course (who would have thought it would take so long?), this year I finally started to speed up the boat. In many ways, it was like starting over. For the sake of perspective, (and maybe to emphasize what a slow learner I am), my goal was to go from 27.5 mph to 32.3 mph through the course. That's a difference of 3 seconds, or about ½ second per buoy. Should be a snap, right? My best this year was to make 4 buoys at 32 mph. Getting from here to there required a level of discomfort that shocked me.

The turning point happened during a visit to "ski camp". The coach was very committed to getting me through a 30 mph pass. The key to achieving this was to change edges on the ski very quickly (there's that word change again). I kept doing the same thing that wasn't working, while telling myself I was changing edges really early. The result was microscopic change while I longed for a breakthrough. Finally the coach said "This time, change edges to the point of extreme discomfort." An argument ensued, mostly inside my head. "No way will this succeed! I'll miss the buoy." For the moment, I decided to set aside my doubts and go for it. Instead of thinking about getting around the buoy, I changed my goal to see how much discomfort I could tolerate.

And there was my breakthrough. The buoy was there, the turn was sharper and 30 mph went down. Then 31 mph went down and I started working on 32.

How often are we telling ourselves that we are changing, while in reality, just avoiding discomfort? This breakthrough reminded me of how often the underlying motivation for what we choose is dodging the distress while pretending to take productive action. Discomfort is still produced, probably because at some level, we know we are evading the effective course of action. To complicate matters, it is really hard to make the distinction. Sometimes discomfort is there to remind us that we are doing the wrong thing! It takes observation and practice to tell the difference.

My hope for you in the coming year is that you learn from the discomfort...it is going to be there anyway... a breakthrough awaits!

Intensity

12/31/2011 For the past several years, these letters have been about what I am learning about myself through my chosen sport of water skiing. The sport has so many layers-it just amazes me how much learning there is to do. For sure in water skiing, I will never be bored!

Reviewing my progress this year revealed a clear theme. Once again, I had access to the best professionals to help me improve. Across the many coaches I worked with, there was variation in the content of what they were showing me. However, regardless of coach, there was one theme noticed by all (reluctantly, including myself). Intensity. Or in my case, lack of sustained intensity. It would show up when the coach would say, "You started strong, but finished behind." Or "I could see you pick up the intensity about halfway through; that's the only reason you ran the pass." Or the most frustrating of all, "I could see you thought you had it at four ball. Remember, at that point you still have 1/3 of the course to go!" That was the consolation comment after I missed the pass. For the sake of perspective, in water skiing a pass involves going around 6 buoys and lasts roughly 20 seconds. Good grief, how hard can it be to sustain a high level of intensity for 20 seconds?

Well for me, evidently it's pretty hard and the same is reflected elsewhere in my life and leadership practice. Reflecting on this theme reveals many places where I start strong and finish slow. Or where I start easy and have to amp it up to get the results I'm looking for. On the ski course, it may be a fear that I'll run out of energy, even though I've gotten much stronger. This tendency seems to be related to a belief that I have to "save it for a rainy day." While that belief is useful in my financial life (I am a very good saver), it doesn't necessarily serve me in all domains. Becoming aware of the need to learn to sustain my intensity from beginning to end provided incremental improvement-even though I really wanted a breakthrough. This is clearly a deeply held belief.

Where in our lives are we using the same pattern or belief in all situations, even though it only serves us in a few? What are the ways we can create sustainable energy for ourselves to do the work that matters? How do we figure out where it makes sense to truly devote our passion, intensity and energy? And how do we consistently perform at high levels without running the tank dry?

I would love to hear from you on how you are answering these questions for yourself. My greatest hope is that you find worthy places for your passion, your energy and your creativity in the coming year. Dream big!

Struggle

12/31/2012 After years of writing about what I am learning from water skiing, it seems there is much more to learn. This water ski season was a struggle at times, and once again revealed a depth of learning that was not always pleasant, yet left me stronger and more resilient.

After a great winter training season, I took a couple of falls early in the spring that had me spooked for months. Just imagine superman flying through air...and no, I did not land with the greatest of ease! After one of the falls, it became almost impossible for me to make the turn to the gate and lean against the boat. Fear had me in its grips full force, and for the first time in years, I was finding it hard to love my sport.

After the second fall, I happened to be working with a coach who saw me hesitate at the beginning of the ski course, where both commitment and intensity are critical, because it sets up the rhythm for the remainder of the pass. When I got back in the boat, he skipped the technical talk and simply asked me "What would you tell one of your clients who was struggling?" While his question amped up my fear in the near term, it motivated me to practice with the intention to rebuild my confidence. By the end of that set, I was able to ski the pass, and by the end of the season, I was skiing the best I have ever skied. The real payoff from the struggle was newfound resilience, strength, and confidence.

For most of us, when invited to struggle we tend to pass unless it is unavoidable. And yet, struggle is what takes us to another level. Just ask any personal trainer. I recently read a story about learning in Japan, where struggle is considered a part of the normal learning process, and persistence through challenges is believed to be what makes someone smart. As a result, children are allowed to fail as a path to learning, and in the end, they feel much stronger and more willing to tackle difficult problems in the future.

Where in our lives could we use struggle as a teacher of strength and resilience? What difficult problems are we avoiding because we lack the perseverance or confidence to tackle them? What advantages could we gain from seeing struggle as a gift rather than a burden?

The world is providing more and more opportunities to practice struggle. As always, I would love to hear how you are answering these questions in your own life. May you find joy in your opportunities to practice in the coming year!

Recovery

At the heart of it, mastery is practice. Mastery is staying on the path.
George Leonard

12/31/2013 Water skiing continues to be a profound passion and more importantly, a way to learn about myself. So I write on!

Early in the year I was fortunate to ski with one of the best in the world, who in his 60's is still improving and skiing at levels higher than in his youth. (Did I say skiing is the fountain of youth?) He noticed a tendency for me to stop skiing when something went wrong in a pass. Overhearing our conversation, another skier pointed out that my coach would smile when he made a mistake in a tournament, because that's when he would then shift into his best skiing mode. Exactly the opposite of what I was doing.

What I recognized from that conversation was a predisposition to quit (I called it starting over) instead of "skiing through mistakes". This pattern is not confined to my skiing. When throwing clay on the wheel, I tend to "start over" at the first sign of a wobble. When playing the piano, I start over with a missed note. This awareness reminded me that one time a piano teacher told me the difference between a professional musician and an amateur. "We make mistakes in every performance. The audience doesn't notice because we play right through them."

So this year I decided to practice recovery. I developed a couple of rituals in the water that helped me regain my calm and prepare to ski the next pass. After a particularly frustrating day during our annual Women's Week at Coble Ski School, I spent some time in meditation specifically to shake it off. With that deliberate practice, I have begun to recover more quickly. A bad pass does not mean I will have a bad set, and a bad set does not mean I will have a bad day. More times than not, I was able to keep skiing through a pass even when something went wrong or shook me up. I considered it a huge victory when I ran all six buoys after running through lily pads at beginning of a late season pass.

Practicing recovery has had the surprising side effect of a more peaceful mind. Instead of being stuck on the mistake, my mind now turns to regaining balance, quite literally, on the ski. And balance just feels better. Instead of remaining tripped up -and then beating myself up-recovery brings about a way to move forward.

Where in our lives do we allow our "trip-ups" to keep us stuck? How many ways do we beat ourselves up instead of moving forward? What would happen if we treated recovery as a practice instead of insisting on perfection?

I would love to hear your practices for creating recovery in your life. Let me know how you resolve mistakes and regain balance. May this year bring you every opportunity to live with passion and purpose!

Lynn Carnes accelerates change and unleashes leadership performance in organizations, especially in context of challenges without easy answers. She loves to hear about how the experiments with these ideas turn out. To contact her or share your experiences, go to www.carnesassociates.com or email lcarnes@carnesassociates.com.
