

# The River: A Fable for Diabetes Educators

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*Editor's note: This article is adapted from the address Dr. Anderson delivered as the recipient of the American Diabetes Association Outstanding Educator in Diabetes award for 2000. He delivered the address in June 2000 at the Association's 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting and Scientific Sessions in San Antonio, Tex.*

A long, long, time ago, in a far away place we now call the Amazon Rain Forest, lived the River People. The River People had lived in small villages extending for almost 500 miles along the Amazon River for as long as anyone could remember. As their name suggests, the river was the center of their lives. It provided most of their food and was a means of travel between the villages. The river also formed the core of their cultural and spiritual lives.

The River People were peaceful and industrious. Each year during the first full moon following the rainy season, they gathered at the festival grounds for 10 days to celebrate the new year. Young and old alike, they came from all of the villages to be a part of the festival. During the festival, they traded, played games, and fell in love. It was a time of singing, romance, story telling, and contests.

The highlight of the event was the boat races held at the end of the festival. The River People built a variety of boats, including fast slender canoes and larger blunt-ended dugouts. The dugouts were used primarily for transporting trading goods up and down the river and, unlike the canoes, were propelled with two oars. During the races, young men and women from different villages demonstrated their strength and agility, while the boat builders compared their work. All of the villages built canoes and dugouts with varying designs. Some were longer, wider, or deeper, and some used different-shaped paddles or oars.

Each village took great pride in its boating and boat-building skills.

This year's festival was especially important for Sara. She was a young woman who lived in one of the larger villages, near the headwaters of the river. Unlike most of her friends and family, Sara was not interested in building or racing boats or even in fishing. Her lifelong dream was to be a healer. Among the River People, healers were always women and were held in great esteem. Because the River People had not yet embraced Western taxonomies, they did not separate physical healing from emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing. Healers cared for and about the entire person.

Becoming a healer required many years of apprenticeship under an elder healer. To be accepted as an apprentice, a young girl had to demonstrate both a vocation and a gift for healing. Sara clearly had both. From the time she was 10 years old, she had trailed after the village healer and observed everything she did.

Her mentor's name, which is unpronounceable when translated, means "wizened old woman, filled with compassion, wisdom, and knowledge, but who occasionally gets cranky and smacks people upside the head." Sara had been studying with her teacher for more than 12 years and felt ready for her final test. During the festival, she would learn whether her mentor also felt that she was ready. Sara had worked hard for the past 12 years, learning about the hundreds of herbs, roots, and plants that had medicinal properties. She learned their application to illnesses of the body, heart, and mind.

Sara was a gifted and compassionate young woman. Her mentor believed that someday she would be a great healer. At the close of the annual festival, at the age of 22, Sara was told she was ready to complete the

final phase of her training. It was, in effect, her final exam, her solo flight.

This rite of passage required Sara to travel on the river alone, by boat, beginning at the headwaters and ending at the last village of the River People. Sara was allowed to visit each village along the river for only a day or two. During the day, all of the villagers who were sick, troubled, or sad would be brought to see Sara, and she would do her best to heal them. When, and if, she reached the last village almost 500 miles downriver, her initiation would be complete.

This rite of passage was not only a measure of her abilities as a healer, but also a test of her commitment and perseverance. There were many villages, some quite distant from each other. Furthermore, Sara had to row one of the larger dugouts to accommodate her full complement of medicinal plants and other medicines. It was to be an arduous journey.

Sara began her journey filled with great joy and enthusiasm, for as long as she could remember she had known that healing was to be her life's work. Her first day's travel on the river was a strenuous one. Her arms and back ached from rowing the dugout to the first village on her trip. However, the warm welcome of the villagers soon made her forget her aches and pains.

Young and old came to her with a variety of problems. And, although Sara felt compassion for each of them, she had a special feeling for the old ones. She saw wisdom in their eyes and the history of her people etched in their faces. Instinctively, she would reach out to touch their faces.

After visiting with the ill villagers, Sara was filled with a sense of joy and contentment. Each visit reinforced her certainty that healing was her life's calling. Sara's experiences as a healer in each village she visited were singularly successfully. Her ability and

compassion were evident, and the villagers trusted her instinctively.

However, after several days, Sara became increasingly aware that all was not right. She was not fully recovering from the physical exhaustion brought about by the arduous rowing from village to village. Although her visits with the villagers energized and nurtured her, the strenuous rowing was draining her. She was not completely restored even after a good night's rest in the village. After each day of rowing, Sara was more exhausted than the previous day. Her muscles ached, and her energy continually diminished.

Sara, unlike most of her family and friends, had not developed the strength and endurance to row for hours on end because she had devoted all of her time to becoming a healer. When they learned of her problem, the people in each village were certain they had a solution. In one village, they said, "You must use our oars; they are the best oars on the river." And Sara was given a new pair of oars that were slightly longer and had a different-shaped paddle than those she had been using. With minor variations, this scenario was repeated at each village. In some villages, they suggested new oars, in others a change in rowing technique, and in still others they told her that her boat had the wrong shape, and they would trade it for one of their own dugouts.

Each of these innovations seemed to work for a short time, but the effect soon wore off. No matter what kind of boat or what kind of oars or even what kind of rowing technique she tried, she became increasingly exhausted and dispirited each day. Her exhaustion was beginning to affect her healing. She found it difficult to devote her full attention to the ill villagers. She noticed that her mind was beginning to wander while she was listening to them. This problem only added to her growing sense of despair. She began to see her lifelong dream fade before her eyes.

One morning, on her journey downriver, Sara reached the breaking point—her muscles, heart, and spirit gave out. She felt defeated. Her dream had died. She buried her face in her hands and began to sob. Her crying

lasted for hours. Finally, Sara's tears exhausted themselves. Looking up for the first time since she began crying, she noticed a large leaf floating next to her boat. On this leaf was an Amazon version of a cricket. The cricket was lying back on the leaf, sunning himself, floating along without a care in the world. Sara stared at this happy creature for a few minutes, and then looked at the shore. Her eyes widened, and suddenly her misery and despair evaporated like a drop of water in a bonfire. She realized that the river had carried her several miles, even though she had rowed not a stroke.

Now the fact that the river flowed had always been there, just as the sunlight and the wind had always been there, but Sara's tribe prided themselves on their mastery of the river, and they were especially proud of their boats and rowing skills. Their annual contests focused on how fast they could row or how long they could row. Growing up in the midst of this culture, Sara had never thought about the fact that the river would carry her downstream even if she didn't row at all. Her hopelessness turned to joy as her dream was restored.

After drying her eyes, Sara sat up and put her oars in the water in order to guide her boat on its journey. Occasionally, she would row for awhile, just to move things along a little faster, but mostly she let the river carry her while she enjoyed the beauty of the birds and the passing rain forest, all of which had escaped her notice until now.

Later that evening, as she approached the next village, Sara was finally at peace, for now she knew her initiation would be successful. She noticed how the last remnants of light had turned the sky a beautiful cobalt blue accented by the silhouettes of a few tardy birds hurrying home. Sara dipped her oars and gently turned her boat toward the shore of the village. And, as she approached the shore, she thought to herself,

*"How strange, . . . .  
my struggle with rowing  
kept me from knowing  
that the river was flowing  
the way I was going."*

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

For the address I gave as recipient of the American Diabetes Association's Outstanding Educator in Diabetes award, I chose to tell a fable because stories and fables can help us explore and reveal meaning in very personal and unique ways. The meaning of a fable results from the interaction of the reader and the fable.

Since no two of us are exactly alike, it is unlikely that this fable will have exactly the same meaning for any two of us. What this fable means to you (if it means anything at all) is true and valid for you even if it means something else for another person. However, because we are all diabetes educators, I hope that the fable speaks to some of our shared values and concerns. Below are some questions to help you reflect on and discuss the meaning that "The River" has for you as a diabetes educator.

1. Could you relate to this story? Why or why not?
2. Did you identify with Sara? Why or why not?
3. Different boat builders were convinced that their boats, paddles, or rowing techniques were the best. Is this pertinent to your work as a diabetes educator? How and why?
4. Sara's realization that the river flowed all by itself transformed her vision of being a healer. Does Sara's experience speak to any aspect of your work or life?
5. The fable also touches on a variety of other issues, such as becoming a healer; teaching; learning and knowing; insight, discovery, and self-awareness; service to others; and journeys of all kinds. Are any of these elements of the fable relevant to your life and work?
6. Did other parts of the story resonate with you? If so, in what way?

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