

Rowing A 5K—A Metaphor
By: Patrick C. Crowell

Yesterday was strange ... even tragic.

It started off great. Normally a rowing and work day, I was compelled to beg out—the surf was up thanks to a tropical wave over the Bahamas. My rowing buddy, Jimmy, had to cover Lake Conway without me while I set off to the beach for a beautiful morning of clear sky and fun waves with my surfing buddy. My clients' problems would have to wait. Hooky players everywhere were celebrating with me through some cosmic connection.

Later over the cell phone, Jimmy insisted that I make up the missed row. “I did a 5K piece!” Jimmy announced. “*You’d* better make it up tomorrow ... and I want a *fast* time, no slouching!” He enjoyed egging me on—it’s part of the competitive thing between us. A five kilometer piece (roughly three miles) is the standard “distance race” for competitive rowers. It can be grueling even for those in impeccable shape. It’s like all things in life—it depends on how hard you work it.

“All right,” I replied to Jimmy in plaintiff tone. “I won’t ‘slouch,’” I add. “I promise I’ll have good posture.” It’s a habit; I’ve always enjoyed making fun of Jimmy’s speech patterns. On a different level, I knew he would expect me to live up to his challenge. However, my words rang hollow—they were easy to say, but now my day was changing for the worse and I knew it.

My next event was to attend a wake for a six-year-old little girl.

How she died doesn’t really seem to matter. It was very sad; the wake rendered zillions of people and even more tears. Her parents are my neighbors from around a nearby bend in Lake Conway’s various contours. Though twenty-five years younger, my wife and I had befriended them through their little girl—or rather, she forced the relationship on all of us. Angelica was her name. Blond hair, brown eyes and tanned skin. She had an infectious smile and a contagious zest about her.

It started one day when she chased her yelping dog onto my property. It wasn’t long before I became her weekend “Mr. Wilson,” and she became my “Dennis-the-Menace” and young friend at the same time. Her parents were in their early thirties, but were quite wealthy—old Orlando money stemming from *her* family, which hailed from Costa Rican banana money converted to Orange County oranges, and then land development. They were a little spoiled in a “yuppyish” kind of way, but very good hearted and they *loved* their little girl.

“Whatcha doin’, Mr. Crowell?” Angelica would ask after sneaking up on me in my dimly lit workshop.

I would drop my screwdriver and feel my heart pound.

“Oh, hello little girl,” I’d say. “I’m working on my boat.”

“Why?” she’d ask.

“Well, because it’s leaking there, Angeleaky!”

“Hey! My name’s not Ange ... Ange ... *leaky!*” She’d giggle. “Mr. Crowell, is this the boat you rr ...row?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Do you row fast?” she asks with extra zeal on the word “fast.”

“Fair to middlin’,” I respond.

“Oh. ... Hey! What’s that mean?”

Angelica learned to swim in my pool this past summer; her daddy gently coaxing every improvement while her mommy and my wife watched and chatted, and I prepared hamburgers or other delicacies on the barbeque. We saw her laugh and cry. She often aggravated me, but when she smiled and giggled as I chased her about while playing hide-an-go-seek, I knew the world was all right.

I watched my young neighbors stand in front of Angelica’s casket, greeting well-wishers for better than five hours. How bizarre it was that I would see them there together, performing this heartbreaking task, just as I’d seen them side by side in so many happier settings. They were stoic for youngsters, albeit not without meltdowns. I can’t pretend to understand what they were feeling except for by amplifying my wife’s and my own grief a thousand-fold. Courage defined them and the young couple made me proud.

“Such a shame ... such a waste of potential,” Angelica’s grandmother said to me outside the church as the deep dark-bluish-gray of a massive storm system slowly advanced upon us from the eastern horizon. Heat lightening crackled and illuminated the sky. That was God’s only comment.

That was yesterday. This is today, a Friday.

So now I wake up remembering and reflecting, wondering *what in the hell* God is doing. *Why Angelica? What is He trying to tell us? Or, rather, what is He purposely not telling us?*

How does one cope with the loss of a child?

I had off-handedly told Jimmy that I would row a 5K and hit a fast time. 5K races are known as “head races” and you have the Head of the Charles in Boston, the Head of the *this*, the Head of the *that*—perhaps because the race *messes with your head*. Walking my yard to the Lake Conway Rowing & Paddle Club boathouse as the sun peaks over the horizon, noticing

strewn-about branches from the evening's storm; I realize that I don't even really want to go out. It's unlike me. I wonder if my bereaved neighbors will even want to get up out of bed.

The water's flat and there are no fishing boats that I can see. The morning air on the lake is relatively cool for this time of year, better for rowing. The sky to the east is reddish-purple as sunlight reflects off lingering clouds that look like moguls on a ski run. The sun is rising as brown, mottled limpkins and white egrets silently hunt for water-snails and minnows or brim. A passing otter, swimming intently to somewhere, bobs up his head and checks me out. An osprey glides overhead. Cormorants and grebes dive under water. It's a quiet and gorgeous scene as nature wakes up and prepares for the day, and it's just right for rowing.

So what's wrong?

I grab my oars off the wall and walk them back to my seawall as I dwell upon the intense pain involved with an all-out 5K. It's the kind of ache that builds into something worse and worse until the final reality of your suffering absorbs all else and becomes your sole sensation. Wanting to quit swallows all other motivation ... except (hopefully) for at least one. I think again of my young neighbors. I wonder whether they'll be able to muster *any* motivation ever again.

My mind reaches for excuses as I survey the still lake. I shrug when I can't find one that's suitable. Angelica would want me to do this, I tell myself. Not really, but she had been exceptionally perceptive and compassionate for a six-year-old. So here it comes—the Head of the Lake Conway—racing for the “Angelica Cup.” I trudge back to the boathouse for my boat.

My boat—humph—I lift my wife's hot-pink twenty-seven foot boat called the “Passion” off of the racks and carefully navigate the exit from the boathouse. I carry it on my head to the water. It's very light at only twenty-nine pounds. But frankly, I'd rather be seen carrying a purse. The limpkin moves away as I head down steps to the lakeshore. I wonder whether it's the boat. I don't even have my own boat to row and I have to resort to *this* unmanly craft.

Mine—a twenty-three year old Owen racing shell (nearly an antique in some circles)—is in dry dock for repairs once again. Though old, made of wood and heavy by today's standards, there's *no* racing shell that rows as well, even after the decades of abuse it's taken from me—not unlike what I've visited upon my own creaky bones and joints. The Passion, made of carbon fiber, is much lighter and stiffer than my wooden Owen, though much more temperamental and tippy with its narrow, ten inch beam. It's a faster boat—I guess some people believe that's the point of competitive rowing—but I hate it. The pleasure of the stroke is so much harder to find than in my hand-crafted Owen, in which I had won championships. Now, I guess I'll have to be in touch with my feminine side in the pink Passion. The *shoes* don't even fit; I remember that my left foot is too large to even begin to cram it in—too much pain in my arthritic big toe.

I set the boat in nine inches of water along the shore. It's so stiff, I feel the pink hull bounce and displace water below it and I watch small, clear ripples run out from under the bottom, just like I've done a hundred thousand times. I spy the empty shell of an unlucky water-

snail that no doubt had been breakfast or dinner for some raptor-like bird. *Oh, the happenstance revolving around fate.*

I wonder what its like to be eaten alive as I quietly unscrew my oarlocks and place my oars in them, and then lock them down. I'm still searching for easy ways out as I sit on the sliding seat and tie-in my right foot into the shoe. I wonder if my neighbors are too. My larger left foot will ride on top of the other small shoe. I snap my electronic Speedcoach monitoring device into place on the receptacle between the shoes and shove off from the shore to where I can scull my wife's boat around.

Pointing the pink bow out toward the eastern corner of the dark, quiet lake, I begin to paddle out to the start dock a thousand meters away. It's then that I realize that my Speedcoach isn't working. *Shit!* Sometimes the connections are dirty or the computer chips inside just wear out. I stop to fix it, to no avail.

How can I time a 5K without my Speedcoach? I nearly give up before I even start. *Maybe I'll just row easy,* I think. The thought of a lazy, easy row is so attractive—there's no pain; there's only balance and effortless movement and, of course, nature's scenery. My neighbors—will they give up?

Suck it up, I think. *I can do this the old-fashioned way.* No feedback on meters-per-second, split times or stroke rate; just me and the lovely pink boat, racing from Point A to Point B five thousand meters away from the start dock. The stopwatch on my Casio will tell me the time.

I don't know why, but my mind flashes to my wife's roots—she was the great granddaughter of a Portuguese immigrant who helped settle Hawaii in the 1800s, and he and his wife lost their first four children on the way. Did they give up? He ended up a baker on Oahu who made what is now very famous Hawaiian bread. They had eleven more children. In the grand scheme of things perhaps that was nothing fantastic, depending on your point of view. Perhaps it was. They were lucky to have been able to conceive and bear more children. But to lose the first four ... how did they cope?

It's strange how my mind is wandering this morning.

I still don't really want to do this row, but I had told Jimmy that I would. *You are what you do.* I reluctantly allow the thought to slip into my head. Sometimes I hate it, especially right now. It had been my mantra that I had preached to my rowers when I was coaching. It has always been a straightforward message that is so obvious to me. You are what you do. If you do good things, you're good. If you do bad things, you're bad. If you do steady things, you're steady. If you do erratic things, you're erratic. If you're actions are ambiguous, who are you really? If you do nothing, you *are* nothing. Some people never get it. Others, when you state this simple sentence to them, it's like they've heard the greatest of secrets and they rejoice in the revelation. You are what you do. And if you say you'll do something, you *do* what you say. "Never wonder about '*who*' you are," I had always told my rowers—they, like so many young people had seemed confused. "Define yourselves by your actions."

But now it's my turn. Maybe it's my neighbors' also. Even though no one is watching, I tell myself, *lead by example*.

One problem with rowing is that you go backwards and see only where you've been, not where you are going. Yet, your focal point is ahead of you, as it necessarily must be. If you dwell too long on where you've been in a boat, you lose focus on where you are going. Like in life, you cannot dwell in the past; instead, thrive in the present.

I paddle another two-hundred and fifty meters and then check the mirror attached to my baseball cap for stationary fishing boats behind me. I've hit too many over the years and some crazy fishermen won't even warn you off with a yell. They will just watch you run over their fishing line or even right into their boat, and then curse you out! Talk about defining themselves. Fridays are the worst—there's always an early-morning fishing tournament, and before dawn the boats race out to their favorite spots and no one or thing will move them unless it's they themselves for the simple reason that the fish aren't biting.

I check the mirror because I'm ready to perform my first of several "up tens"—raising the stroking rate and power for ten strokes, and hence the speed of the boat, in order to warm up my rusty body for my impending feat. I suddenly realize that my mirror is pointed wrong—all I can see is my ear and messy hair sticking out from under my cap—so I stop to adjust it, but I twist too hard.

Crack! The old, brittle mirror-arm breaks off and falls into the cockpit of the Passion.

Great, I think. Now I won't be able to tell when there are fishing boats behind me. No Speedcoach, no mirror, only one foot in the shoes, and not even my own favorite boat. Can anything else go wrong? How can I do an all-out piece?

The same way they used to do it, I answer, thinking of my college coach. Tough old bird; gruff. Who the hell cares if your review mirror is broken? Pantywaist! Check before you start off, I think, and occasionally look around at strategic points. Suck it up! It can be done.

I somehow complete my warm up and paddle on to the start dock. At the dock, after drinking-in oxygen, I set my watch and start the timer running, and then I set my body in starting position to begin precisely five seconds later. I know there's no use thinking about it—I'm going to do this. So I'm off. I run through my unique starting sequence of six strokes—from three quarter slide of the sliding seat on the first to barely any slide on the second, then four strokes with increasing slide to the full stroke length on the sixth. It's like a one hundred-yard-dash sprinter building the length of his running stride after the start gun—it's not mechanical; it's gradual and natural.

Try to be smooth in this pink monstrosity, I think. It's an educated guess without my Speedcoach, but I'm stroking maybe 28 to 30 strokes per minute after my racing start. Already, there's the familiar and annoying dip to the starboard side of the boat on the recovery phase of each stroke. Balance is so important in rowing, like it is in life.

What is it about the balance of these modern boats and my body? God, I hate them. Give me my old wooden shell where the set is flawless; where there is no unseemly skimming of oar blades on the water—only silent ripping of the water at the catch and propelling the boat forward through the drive phase of my strokes. There is only the noiseless slicing of the flat water by the narrow and pointed hull, like a warm knife through soft butter.

After ten strokes I carry my right hand slightly too high on the pull-through and a fingernail from my crossing left hand scrapes off a perpetual scab on my right hand. *Ouch!* After a hip replacement and two pulmonary embolisms in recent years, I know the Coumadin will cause my thinned blood to seep over the oar handle before it finally clots. *Man, will nothing go well?*

Put the pain and bloody mess out of your mind, I think. Clear your head and focus on rhythm and balance. Keep your knees down until your hands cross your knees! Don't pull too hard, or you'll tire, give up and die. I don't want that. I told Jimmy I'll do it; I want to make it.

The thousand meter mark goes by and, surprisingly, I'm feeling good. Instinct tells me the stroke rate is higher than my usual of late, but perhaps I can make it all the way at this pace because I'm pulling smoothly and not too hard. I wonder what the split is, but my old eyes can't see the flying numbers on my watch. On gut feel, I change course with the contour of the lake to avoid a protruding dock behind me. Having nearly hit this dock in the past, I just know.

At the fifteen hundred mark, my stroke is still smooth, and the light and stiff *Passion* is cutting through the water with miniscule check at the catch. My breathing has subconsciously changed from one breath per stroke to two, as my body goes into concentrated aerobic exertion. Rhythm—it helps; my timing is like a metronome. The boat rocks forward from the simultaneous levers—my oars—grabbing hold of lake water and leveraging the hull forward. Thirty-five hundred meters to go. There's no pain to speak of yet, but I know its coming. That's the thing about rowing—you deliberately place yourself in a position to experience emergent throbbing that ratchets itself up as though you are increasing electrical voltage through your body by the slow turn of a knob. You know it's coming—gradually increasing with each stroke. It's suffering—again, like life. It's like walking through a gauntlet of people, each of them slapping your face one at a time; over and over again, each of them harder. You wonder how you can keep taking the increasingly severe blows.

At about the two-thousand meter mark, muscular soreness is increasing in my thighs as lactic acid begins to accumulate. It hurts and I long to quit. How nice it would be to stop the pain now. How nice to enjoy that lazy, easy row, like sleeping for an eternity. But then, what would I have done? Who would I be? What example would I have set?

I power through the halfway mark and think, *Man, what I've just done, I've got to do all over again! I'm not sure I can make it!* The pain is building but somehow I remain resolute in my rate and power. *Smoothness and length, I think. Lay back and finish off each stroke. That's it.*

But then I hear a distinctive “Varoom!” It’s the roar of an outboard motor firing-up behind me. A fisherman had become dissatisfied with his spot on the lake and was going to move. I’ve heard the noise all too often. It’s not far off, over my left shoulder. *Surely, he sees me coming*, I think. *Surely he can see and understand how delicate the balance is in one of these boats—not unlike the delicate balance in my mind between continuing on and giving up.*

The shrill engine dies down, but I know all too well what comes next. Satisfied that the motor is idling properly, the fisherman guns it, and the bow of his boat lurches upward while the stern digs deep until the heavy craft finally planes out and zooms off. The transitional mushiness creates a monster wash that rolls out over the otherwise still water. The fishing boat rushes across my bow, its wakes separating into a perfect “V” with one of the V-arms heading right for me. *Brace yourself*, I think. *Length through the water!*

I feel the wave slap my bow and bump the Passion, and then my port oar-blade hits the water-mound causing my hands to again be off-kilter. My fingernail stabs my bloody hand again and more thinned blood gushes out of my cut like before. *Damn!* “Asshole!” I yell.

It’s again time to adjust my course anyway to match the contour of the lakeshore, so I pull harder on starboard and tuck the path of my boat into the middle of the separating wakes. Smooth water again. *Get the stroke back*, I tell myself. *Pace! Get the pace back!*

When the Passion settles back into its former speed, I wonder how fast I’m going. I feel I’m moving well, but there’s no Speedcoach to tell me. And now comes on the real pain. My legs are beginning to scream at me. I pass the thirty-five hundred meter mark; fifteen hundred to go. I remember a half marathon I once ran—seven-minute-miles all the way to the eleven and a half mile mark. A runner blurted out that it got really tough from there on out. He was right. I’m in that place again now.

This is the part that really measures who you are. You’re legs are wailing, your lungs are heaving, your overall misery is intense. Your hands are a bloody, sweaty, slippery mess and you wonder how you’re hanging on. Your biceps and forearms are hardening from gripping the slick handles too tightly. You just want to quit! You want to give up and crawl into a protective womb. You want the pain to be over. You know that if you don’t stop its going to get even worse!

Can I do this? I wonder. I’ve done it so many times before, but each time is different. Each new blow to the face through the gauntlet is unique; each new problem seems insurmountable. Each occasion brings the question, why do I put myself through this. Why do I care? How can I continue on? When will it all end?

I pass the four thousand meter mark. Mere survival is now the key during the last thousand meters—such a short distance, but it might as well be ten miles. *Maintain the rate*, I think. *Don’t let the boat’s “run” slow down; yet save something for the final push at the end.*

Instinctively, I let the rate sneak a little higher. In truth, I begin the cardinal sin of rushing my slide because I subconsciously want each painful stroke to be over quicker. No

matter, at this point I'm trying my very hardest under the circumstances. *Do what I told Jimmy I'd do*, is what I'm suddenly thinking. *Good time! You are what you do.*

I sense that I've got a good one working; if I can just avoid giving up.

Don't give in! Hands now, I think. Knees down. Follow your hands! Let them lead, push with the legs, finish with level hands to the chest for length, let the hands lead again. Fluid rhythm into the last five hundred! Do I dare? Can I turn up the pain knob? Can I take the rate up more and move the boat even faster?

"Varoom!" Another motor boat fires-up. It's closer than the last.

Shit! I panic and rush to look around, but I look over the wrong shoulder and can't see it. I continue stroking.

Stay calm! Finish this out!

The fisherman sees me just as he's about to throttle down. Something tells him to wait as I stream by him, huffing and puffing like a steam-engine locomotive pulling a freight train. Only my eyes avert to notice him standing in his idling boat, just watching me. Everything else must remain balanced, smooth and fast. He has a strange smile on his face; he can see how hard I'm working and the agony that I'm putting myself through. He's been in the place where I am. He's proud, as I go by; proud of me, a complete stranger performing something he's never tried. But he knows.

Suddenly his face changes as, unbeknownst to me, he sees something in the water just off my bow. "Watch out!" he yells. "Watch out!"

But I'm telling myself to take it up for my final sprint. My jaw is set; my mind is determined, and I've blocked out everything but motion and force. I overcame much to get to where I am, and I'm *going* to finish it strong.

"Watch out!" he yells again, louder than before.

I snap out of the zone I'm in as I'm pulling through and finishing a stroke. The thought that I'd better look around again flashes into my head. "What the ..."

"Crack!"

I feel the instant loss of speed and the pink bow of the *Passion* jumping from the water upward instead of forward, as though rising over something hard and stationary. The boat's narrow beam tilts quickly to the starboard side—the *Passion* wasn't built to sit flatly on a hard object—while I'm suddenly struggling to get my starboard oar out of the water. My body rushes forward on the sliding seat from the rhythm I had established. At once, I feel my starboard oar handle jabbing against my ribcage, and I know all balance is gone and I'm going over. It seems like an eternity as I helplessly fall into the water and the *Passion* begins to turn turtle. I grab a

last breath as the revolving Passion goes upside down. Under water, I yank my right foot from the shoe and pull myself to the surface.

I gasp as I begin to tread water.

“Are you all right?” I hear the fisherman yell.

I spit lake water from my mouth and think, *Shit!* I know I’ve hit something, but I don’t know what. Still gasping, I look around. There is a large portion of an old, slimy dock floating there next to the breached Passion. It looks to have broken away in the night’s tempest, and it had been suspended there at water-level like an invisible trap just waiting for me to happen along.

I tread water more, absorbing the situation. The water’s cool from the rain.

“Hey, you okay?” the fisherman yells as he’s putting his boat in gear.

I involuntarily shake my head, still coming to grips with the collision. “I’m okay,” I yell back. *Shit*, I think. *My time!* I notice I’m not that far from the finish. If I had thought about it, I could have punched-off my stop watch and had some idea of what I’d done. Too late.

The fisherman taxis over. “I’m really sorry,” he says. “I wish I had seen that dock earlier so I could have warned you.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault.” I hear this coming out of my mouth as I continue to tread water. I’m stunned now. I’ve been dumped many times, but none quite like this. It’s surreal.

“Wow,” he says. “Look at your boat. *It’s dead.*”

I breaststroke along side the Passion, checking her as I go. All seems well until I get to the bow. There’s a six inch gap now in the hull, making the bow resemble the upside-down open mouth of a shark. Water has infiltrated the boat’s hull. The Passion is unrowable.

The Passion’s dead, I think. *That’s what he said.*

“Want me to tow you in?” the fisherman asks.

At first I don’t hear him or, at least, I wasn’t listening. How strange that I was suddenly thinking of Angelica and my young neighbors once again. I snap out of it and look around and see that I’m just over a thousand meters from my house. I can swim it easily, even pulling a scuttled racing shell. I’m tempted to decline but think that would be unreasonable of me. “Yes, that would be great,” I say, realizing that he *wants* to help and that I should let him.

People need to help and to be helped.

On the way in, with me sitting on the transom and holding up the broken bow of the Passion and the stern trailing on the water behind us, we talk about rowing, though my mind keeps returning to my neighbors and their loss of little Angelica. He wants to know about racing shells and I tell him the differences between the Passion and my old, wooden Owen. He's filled with questions.

After a while the fisherman asks, "What will you do now?"

"Well," I say, drawing it out, "you are what you do, you know."

This brings a quizzical look. He intuitively knows it, but he's never heard it said.

"I'm a rower," I continue. "So I've got to row. If not this, then it would be something else. So I guess I've got to fix my old boat." I think of my neighbors and their relationship with one another. They too have to fix up the old.

"Tomorrow's a new day," I continue. "I'll be back out tomorrow and do it all over again."

The fisherman smiles.

"While I'm at it," I add, "I'll fix the Passion."

About the Author

Patrick Crowell has practiced law for more than 28 years and has authored the novel, *Hostile Environment*, about a rower/lawyer who tackles sexual harassment at a fictional theme park in Orlando. He rowed in college at Rollins where his college crew won the state and the southeast and placed third at the Dad Vail Regatta in 1976, and then went on to compete in the Royal Henley Regatta in England. Patrick and his double partner won the World Masters B double in 1991, and were in an eight of local Orlando rowers who beat the 1980 Olympic gold medalist eight from Russia. In 1992, he won his first gold medal in the single at Masters Nationals in his wooden Owen. Patrick was president of the Orlando Rowing Club from 1991 through 1993. In addition to rowing, Patrick enjoys his family, surfing and guitar. One of his favorite memories is of when he and his daughter won the parent-child double at the Southeastern Regional Masters Regatta, and hearing his daughter exclaim, "They're dying, Daddy!" as they pulled away to victory. Patrick still rows on Lake Conway.