

# *Shared Heart Column*

*New Dimensions of Relationship*



*October 2010*

with Joyce and Barry Vissell

## *"From Survival to Gratitude"*

***Recently I had the experience of how gratitude in difficult times can dramatically improve a situation. I have often read that gratitude in times of extreme stress or fear can change your attitude, give you more physical strength to continue, and help to even restore a level of happiness. Several weeks ago I had the opportunity to practice this.***

Barry and I have different ideas about the ideal vacation. He loves adventure in the wilderness; I prefer something more relaxing like camping by a mountain lake. Each summer we try to each go on the other's ideal vacation. Barry has taken me on some amazing adventures and usually we go to my favorite isolated High Sierra lake. This year, however, what was supposed to be his dream adventure turned into a harrowing experience of survival.

For the past six years, Barry has wanted to raft the Green River in the Desolation and Gray Canyons of Utah, described as the most remote location in the lower 48 states. This trip has never called to me and so I kept putting him off. Finally I thought to myself, "What if something happened to Barry and he never got to go on this trip? How would I feel?" I decided to go. For six days we would raft 85 miles down the wilderness area alone.

The first day was delightful. I still had to get over the fact that the river was brown, unlike the crystal clear rivers I am used to. But I was determined to enjoy myself and therefore allow Barry to really enjoy this particular dream. I was so glad that we had that peaceful day, for the rest of the trip got worse, then bad, and then scary bad. Neither we, nor the ranger who checked us in at the put-in, knew that a really intense wind, rain and thunder storm was coming from down-river. This nearly nonstop storm lasted four days and nights, making our progress down-river painstakingly slow. The up-river wind was so intense that we needed to row and paddle with all our strength to even go through a normally fast flowing rapid. We didn't have the luxury of waiting out the storm in our tent because we planned just enough time to get down the river and make it home for some important scheduled work. Besides, the guidebooks all said that six days would allow a leisurely trip, allowing time for side canyon hikes.

During the four days that we struggled down the river, we never saw another person. Did we not get the “memo?” The winds were so strong that if we stopped to get a drink of water for a minute, we would rapidly go backwards losing valuable distance that we had fought to obtain.



At the end of the third day we saw a BLM river ranger, his raft behind a huge boulder and tied to it. Surely this ranger would lend some support and boost our spirits with his assurance, yet his words were anything but comforting. “I’ve been a ranger on this river for over twenty years and I’ve never seen winds like this. I’m not sure I can make it out.”

He was visibly shaken and, over the roar of the winds, we tried to comfort him. Finally, from sheer exhaustion, we set up camp across the river from him and he got up the courage to continue struggling down the river. After he left we looked at each other curiously and said, “Aren’t the river rangers supposed to be comforting us?”

That night we ate our dinner in the tent which was staked down securely and covered by the rain fly. Still sand managed to come in and cover our meager meal. While we tried to sleep, the wind howled and our tent shook so much that we thought we might just become airborne.

I woke in the morning with sand completely covering my face, eyes, lips and every inch of the tent. And this was not the coarse sand we are used to in California, but rather a fine powdery sand from clay that fills every (and I mean every) opening. I looked at Barry and realized that even he, the great outdoors man, was unsure of what we should do. We tried going for a little walk, but each step was difficult against the strength of the wind. I felt my happiness beginning to drain away. The screaming, powerful wind and the sting of the sand as it blasted my body was totally dominating my attention.



Just when it seemed like my very happiness was being blown away by this wind, a small voice spoke inside of me, “Joyce, isn’t there something you could be grateful for? Find this and you will feel different.”

I stood as still as I could with the wind beating me this way and that. What could I be grateful for? Finally I felt I could be grateful that two 64 year old people had the endurance and strength in their bodies to continue down the river. We have been blessed with bodies that can row

and paddle all day long against these gale-force winds. (We heard later that they were clocked at 60mph.) Rather than putting my attention upon the wind, I shifted it to thankfulness.

Gratitude filled my being and, with it, the courage to continue. As I focused on our strength and endurance, other blessings quickly came to mind. I felt grateful for the love and harmony between Barry and me, and how well we were working together in this difficult situation. I felt grateful for an inner knowing that we were being protected by an invisible presence.

Five minutes later an icy hail that hurt our skin came out of the sky for about a half hour. Yes, this hail threatened to take my attention like the wind had, but I urged myself to focus on gratitude for the many blessings in my life. This feeling of gratitude saw me through that day of cold pouring rains and thunder and another day of even stronger winds.

The sixth and last day was gentle. The storm was gone. As we easily floated down the river I reflected on my experience. Yes, this was not exactly my “dream vacation,” but I had received a valuable lesson. Gratitude in times of stress, pain and fear can truly lift the spirit and give us the courage to go on. This can also apply to all areas of our life.

People often come to us in times of great relationship stress. In these times all they can think about is their pain. Perhaps their partner has had an affair, or is leaving them, or has an incurable disease, or maybe they have just found out that their child is on drugs. These are very difficult situations for a human being and some feel like just giving up. But perhaps even in these extremely challenging times, finding a sense of gratitude about anything can bring the courage and strength to continue. It just takes the willingness to be grateful for one thing, and other meaningful thoughts of gratitude will surely follow.



**Joyce & Barry Vissell**, a nurse/therapist and psychiatrist couple since 1964, are counselors near Santa Cruz, CA, who are widely regarded as among the world's top experts on conscious relationship and personal growth. They are the authors of ***The Shared Heart, Models of Love, Risk To Be Healed, The Heart's Wisdom*** and ***Meant To Be***. Even one session with either or both of them (over the phone or in person) can shift your life or relationship. Call 831-684-2130.

Call **Toll-Free** 1-800-766-0629 (locally 831-684-2299) or write to the Shared Heart Foundation, P.O. Box 2140, Aptos, CA 95001, for free newsletter from Barry and Joyce, further information on counseling sessions by phone or in person, their books, recordings or their schedule of talks and workshops. Visit their web site at [www.sharedheart.org/](http://www.sharedheart.org/) for their free monthly e-heartletter, their updated schedule, and inspiring past articles on many topics about relationship and living from the heart.