

Hooked On Recovery

August 18, 2006

Tanned and Tough

When we drive out to Race Point, we have a choice, park along the ocean or settle in along Hatches Harbor. The last couple years I have yielded to family pressure and have gone the Hatches Harbor route. I was reluctant at first, but this spot gradually wore on me and it is now probably one of my favorite places on earth. I was reluctant because I couldn't fish there; no fish reside in this massive tidal pool (at least during daylight hours). So I sacrificed my desire to fish for my family's many other desires.

Hatches Harbor is a kid's wonderland. At low tide, sand stretches for acres with streams, and pools, and walls of sculpted sand. The smallest of kids can wander long distances safely; little Mary is allowed a lot of wandering room, much to her delight. As the water comes in, the sand lends itself to building dams, fortresses and castles that are built to withstand, but never conquer, the incoming tidal surge. My kids have learned to paddle the kayak in the shallow waters of Hatches Harbor. Samantha is a natural. Boogie boards are used often. This year when the tide started to flow in forcefully, Matthew would walk way down the sand, jump in the "river" onto his board and drift all the way back to our camp. He, out of all the kids, played the hardest. Sometimes, he'd be so wrapped up in his beach friends, a new adventure or intriguing project that he'd forget to eat. In fact, most evenings as we drove off the beach he didn't last 5 minutes in the truck before he was sound asleep. Sometimes, he fell asleep in mid-sentence. Hatches Harbor is fun, really fun. The view is incredible too. Sandy and I spent a lot of time, sitting in our chairs that were specially dug in, looking over the "harbor" to the long line of dunes fronting the Atlantic, the Race Point lighthouse and Provincetown's Pilgrim Monument. We even had a few moments watching the kids where we choked up, both of us thinking that our world was exactly as it should be, thanks be to God.

The first day we backed up to Hatches Harbor and soon the kids were floating around on boogie boards looking at and yelling about all the green crabs scurrying along the bottom. I waded in, and using a kayak paddle I coaxed several up to land. Soon, there were many kids clamoring for a look at the crabs in the bucket. They had an idea to build a gladiator arena and see if the crabs would have the ultimate showdown. One big crab with an intimidating reddish tint to it emerged as their favorite. They wanted to know if they could fashion some kind of armor and helmets for their little warriors. However, leave it to crabs, they did not cooperate. Every time one crawled over another the kids would think a battle was about to break out, but no. They didn't fight each other; they just tried to get back in the water. So instead they played a game to see who could get their hand closest to the crab, before it would rear back and fiercely display its quarter inch claws. Some actually got to the point where they could pick one up, others just squealed in mock terror. All very amusing. After lunch one day, we had a couple burned hot dogs left over, so I broke one in half, took one of my surf rods and hooked the hot dog onto a 2 ounce Kastmaster. The tide was high and the water was maybe 5 or 6 feet deep. I dropped the Kastmaster to the bottom, crabs immediately grabbed on to the dog and I gently pulled the crabs to the top where kids on boogie boards armed with nets would scoop them up. Sounds silly now, but it was great fun. The kids were fascinated by the idea of a crab eating a hot dog. Crab catching was a Hatches Harbor staple. Matthew holds the Cape Cod record for most crabs caught in a one week period.

Even though we're parked on the Hatches side, the ocean is only thirty yards away, so you can still see whales spouting on occasion, or spot a bluefish blitz. We were sitting behind the truck, watching the kids play, admiring the view, reading a few pages now and then, when a woman next to us said a seal had come up on the beach. The family and I walked over and a small seal was out on the beach sunning and warming itself on the hot sand. A small crowd had gathered, children enthralled as the seal posed for pictures. An overweight very white guy, with perfectly groomed gelled hair, wearing flowery swim shorts and driving a brand new Hummer, decided that the seal needed to stay moist and poured a Frisbee full of water over it. That was the only time the seal got annoyed. Others were chatting about picking it up and putting it back in the water. When one person started to move to do just that, a woman stepped in and forcefully stopped that notion. Most of the oversand crew knew that if a seal decided to come out of the water, it would go back in when it wanted to. Besides, picking up a wild animal is never a good idea. Soon, the novelty wore off; people left it alone and watched from a distance. Another seal (maybe its mom) kept breaking the surface, keeping an eye on its crazy companion that beached itself with all those humans.

Such are some of the sights and activities on Race Point. However, there is a price to be paid. Piping plovers can close the beach completely, so access is not guaranteed. Yet, my family knows (and friends that experienced Race Point), that the first few days can be really hard, almost brutal, on your feet. The sand is very coarse. After a few hours of walking on it, your feet really start to feel raw. You're wondering if there might be any actual skin left on them. However, by day three, your skin has thickened and the stones start to feel good. The scratch and pressure reaches deep into your soles. I believe my feet heal by walking in Race Point sand. I try to do it as often as possible. The first couple days the kids pick their way across the sand on tiptoes. Soon, they're running across pure stone with no thought or hesitation. We return to Connecticut and we can easily walk across burning hot pavement barefoot. My recovery went through a similar pattern. The shoes came off (my walls came down), I had to endure walking across the stones (first several weeks in recovery), then my feet toughened up (I worked the Steps). Since my feet are now fairly tough, I can walk through just about anything. And by walking in the sunlight my feet became tanned. So now, not only are my feet tough, they're pretty. Well as pretty as my feet could get.

Today, the tops of my feet are dark brown and the bottoms are very tough. Recently they handled the toughest test for anyone's feet, the sharp bluestone gravel in my dad's Rhode Island driveway. When my feet are tanned and tough, it's a reminder to me that life is awesome. It's a reminder that recovery has brought me incredible gifts and amazing opportunities. Most importantly, when my family and I are settled in around the dinner table or TV, and we are all barefoot, and all of our feet are tanned and tough, I'm reminded of recovery's greatest gift – the ability to completely engage in deep loving relationships.

Barefoot? Yes, I am.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.