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GETTING TO
KNOW MONTANA'S
FREEFLOW INSTITUTE

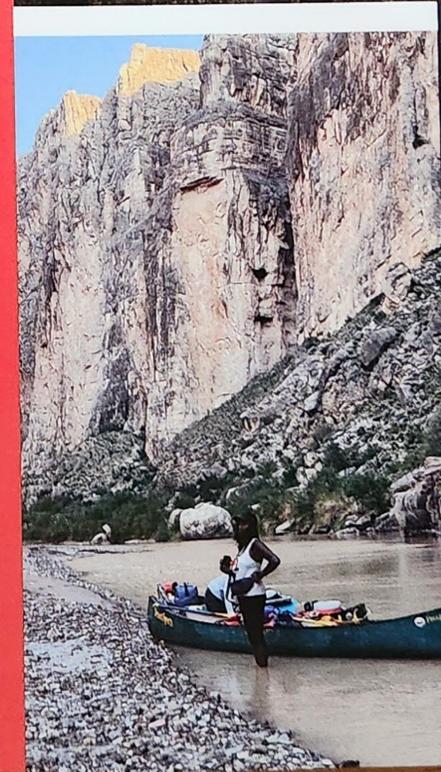
BY CHANDRA BROWN

I'm perched on the cooler in the center of my raft with books on either side of me, scribbling dates and numbers by the red glow of a headlamp. Even as the descending darkness of night steadily absorbs the heat of the day, sunshine still radiates from the rocks.

Here, in the space between day and dark, there's a tension between physical forces, a transfer of power between celestial bodies, sun yielding to stars and moon. I'm recalling quotes and anecdotes that bring the full narrative of this place into focus, the relatable bits that serve to tell the stories of dams and cattle, power and people—stories of the complex dualities that define the modern Colorado River. Tomorrow, downstream, when we visit the proposed Marble Canyon Dam site, I'll share these stories with my clients. This is the part of my job that feels most compelling: That these people on their rafting vacation, as they stare up a dizzying wall of limestone and imagine the dam that was once slated to be built here, might feel something unique. Something like nostalgia for what never was, and gratitude for what has been spared—something that might transform the way they look at the world. The 1950s-era test tunnels bored into those canyon walls are physical links between what could have been and what is, now. When put in proper context, I believe they are portals for the imagination.

Throughout my adult life, I've worked seasonally as a river guide. 2020 was the year that a lot of river work, along with everything else, was canceled or delayed. I was on sabbatical from my high school teaching job in Missoula, and that February, one month before the pandemic turned everything upside down, I notified my administrator that I would not be coming back in the fall. I'd found myself stuck in between two important projects: becoming the best Spanish teacher I could, and making something entirely new in the world. The latter is a small outdoor education outfit called Freeflow Institute, an organization that fosters creative connection between people through shared multi-day adventures.

Participants in Freeflow Institute courses help grow their creative chops while adventuring in the Great Outdoors with professional artists.
Courtesy Freeflow Institute



I had to choose one—teaching or growing Freeflow—as it had become impossible to do both things with full commitment. I chose Freeflow, and spent that pre-COVID winter building new field courses and nurturing the business. The mainstays at Freeflow are college-level writing workshops that take place on weeklong river trips or other backcountry adventures—recreational luxuries jeopardized by the pandemic in those early months. By the spring of 2020, it was clear that I would have to cancel most of what I'd planned for Freeflow that year. Of all the times to commit to one thing—opting for streamlined continuity over diversified income streams—this one seemed especially bad.

Like so many, I also started gardening in the spring of 2020. Working with dirt became a balm to mounting anxiety, and, while we all waited to see what would become of our choices and of our lives in this new era, I planted seeds. Now, after three years of cultivating my garden and slowly settling deeper into my home, gradually retreating from my habit of systematic seasonal leaving, I've begun noticing the feral habits of wildflowers. With more milkweed and coneflowers and calendula, we have more pollinators in

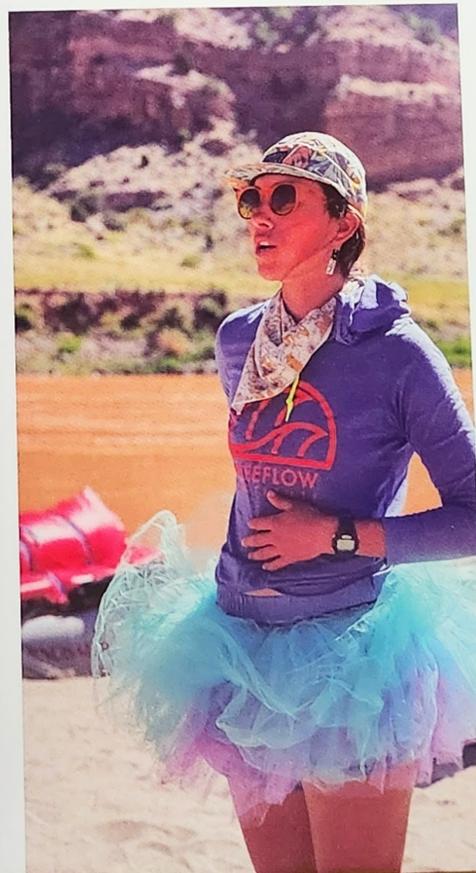
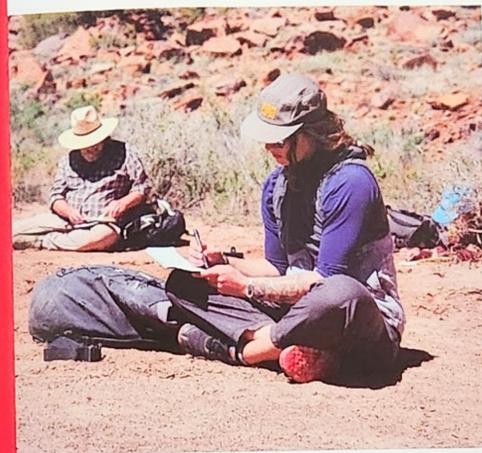
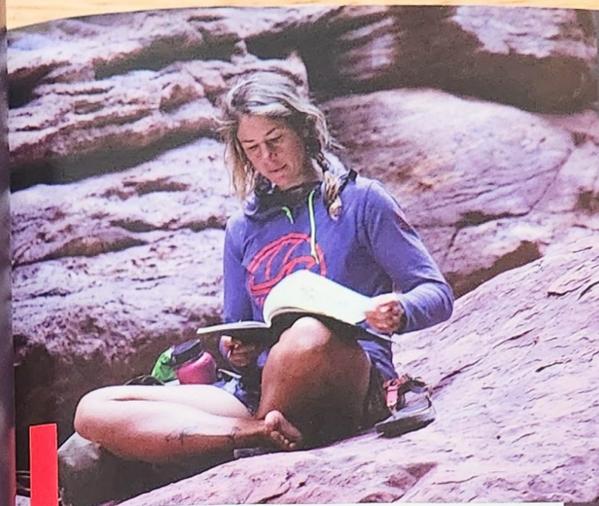
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THE EDGE IS WHERE RISKS ARE TAKEN AND REWARDED. IT'S WHERE CULTURES, ECOSYSTEMS, OR IDEOLOGIES COLLIDE, AND FROM THAT COLLISION COMES EVOLUTION, EMERGENCE, NOVELTY.

our yard. More bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies.

In August 2022, I attended a writing workshop in Montana's Paradise Valley. During a panel discussion on women's voices in the wilderness, poet and professor Camille Dungy described her own wild backyard, overgrown and chaotic. Wildflowers, she said, like milkweed, like sunflowers, cannot be contained by walls or fences.

Art gone wild. The Freeflow Institute, founded by Chandra Brown (top right) uses nature and camaraderie to enhance the work of writers, painters, poets, and aspiring artists of all ilk. Courtesy Freeflow Institute



They won't be compartmentalized into gardens. The borders we create around them mean little, she explained; by their nature, they will always expand beyond the boxes.

On the river, I used to always look for butterflies above every big rapid. I thought they meant good luck. Now, though, butterfly sightings are fewer and farther between. There are simply fewer butterflies in the warmer, drier West. Scouting the Hance Rapid on a high water Grand Canyon trip maybe seven years ago, a colleague told me that we all get butterflies in our stomachs; the trick, he said, was to train them to fly in formation.

Now, I look for milkweed. Not necessarily above rapids, but just in general: in unexpected places, in front yards, in ditches, in dirt patches between expanses of pavement. The monarch caterpillar eats only milkweed, and it's the plant on which the monarch population hinges: milkweed is the precursor to their survival. Without the wild hope of milkweed, we can't have the lacy-winged magic of monarchs.

I've also taken to planting perennial flowers along the edges of my gardens and then letting them go wild. Edge zones, we know from ecology, are where change happens. It's where we find the healthiest variety of species, resilience, and veracity. The edge is where risks are taken and rewarded. It's where cultures, ecosystems, or ideologies collide, and from that collision comes evolution, emergence, novelty. Growth happens in these edge zones, these transitional spaces that are often characterized by discomfort and uncertainty. Innovation comes from these spaces, too.

I like to think that Freeflow occupies the edge zones of our creative lives. When we take learning outside, we immediately defy the constructs and limits around traditional education. We move beyond the walled workplace and concrete classroom. The wild ideas that germinate inside us are encouraged to sprout; they become like wildflowers, spreading beyond the limits of our computer screens, beyond the limits of what we imagine might be possible. Those ideas are pollinated, as are the ideas that grow from those, and so on in a less mathematical iteration of the classic Butterfly Effect. We catalyze big change—be it as an individual or on the level of culture or society, watershed or landscape—by first recognizing and working with what's already here, within us, dormant and waiting for ignition.

