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U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine paddled 348 miles on the James River as part of a three-year project that also included hiking the Appalachian Trail and biking along the crest of the Virginia Blue Ridge. He wrote about the experience in Walk Ride Paddle: A Life Outside. (Courtesy of HarpherCollins)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Pundits are already drawing comparisons between newly announced Democratic VP candidate Tim Walz and former VP candidate, now-Senator Tim Kaine. Both Tims served as governors, both practice their Christian faith and both are outdoorsmen. As Walz begins a grueling campaign with Kamala Harris, Kaine knows well that stress.

Two years after the 2016 election, Kaine turned 60, and a year later he reached 25 years in public service. He decided to mark those milestones with three of his favorite outdoor activities: walking, bike riding and canoe paddling.

The three-year project became something of a "triathlon," though completed on weekends and in Senate recess weeks. In the first year, he hiked the 599 miles of the Appalachian Trail that cross Virginia, from Harpers Ferry to the Tennessee border. Next, he biked 321 miles along the crest of the Virginia Blue Ridge. In the final year, he canoed the entire James River, 348 miles from its headwaters in the Allegheny Mountains to its entrance in the Chesapeake Bay.

Little did he know that those years would include two presidential impeachment trials, a global pandemic, a racial reckoning and the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. Kaine kept a journal during the 76 days of hiking, cycling and canoeing, and compiled his reflections into a book, *Walk Ride Paddle: A Life Outside*.



U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine celebrates after reaching the Tennessee border. He hiked the Appalachian Trail from Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to the Tennessee line. (Tim Kaine)

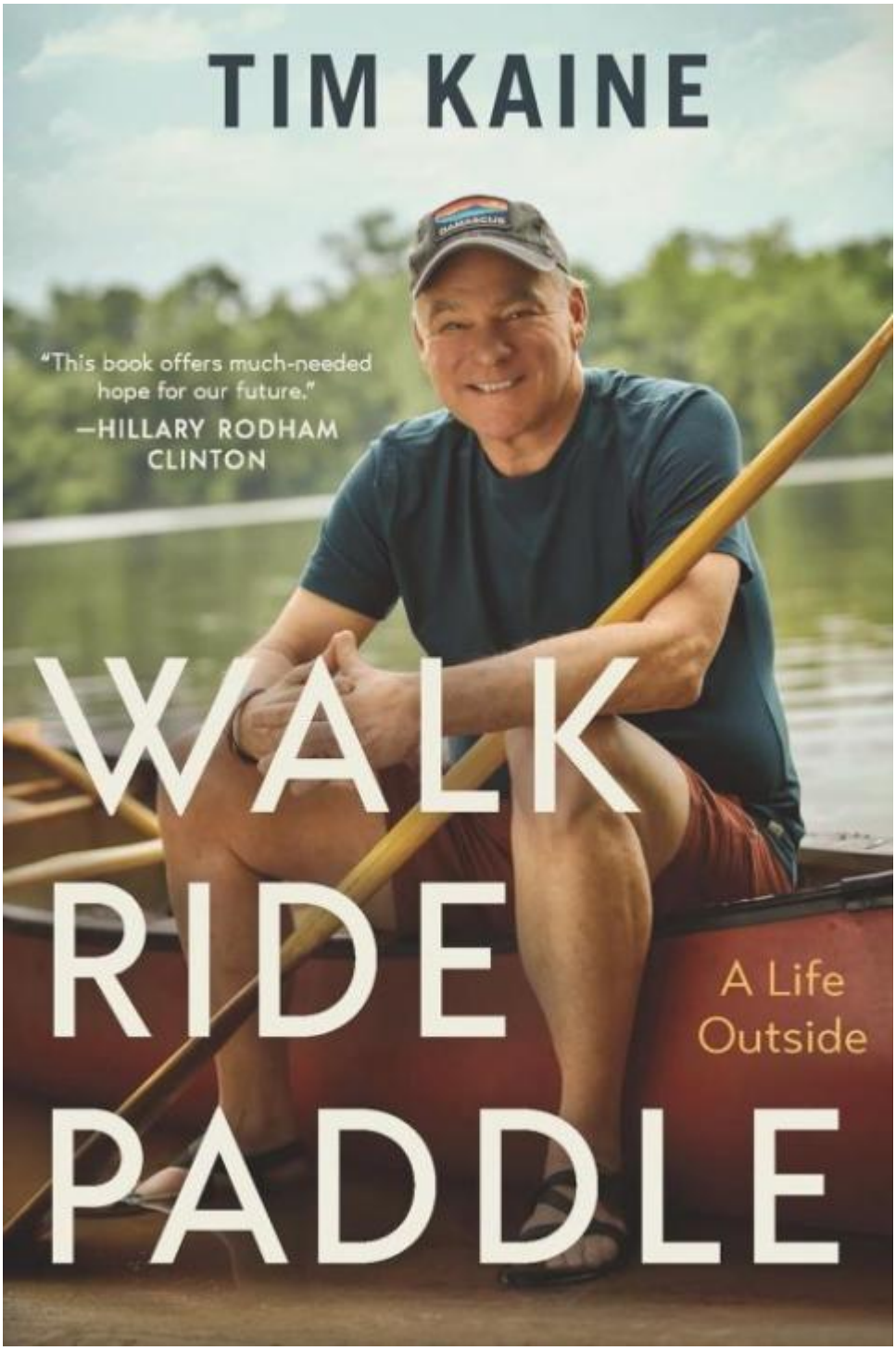
Kaine, who is Catholic, grew up in the Kansas City area, where he attended the Jesuit Rockhurst High School. Before graduating from Harvard Law School, he volunteered with the Jesuits in Honduras, where he became fluent in Spanish. After working in fair housing law, Kaine served as a city council member and mayor of Richmond and as lieutenant governor and governor of Virginia before representing the state in the Senate. He is up for reelection this year. He and his wife, Anne, are members of St. Elizabeth Catholic Church in Richmond and have three adult children.

Kaine told EarthBeat that his triathlon project gave him the time and space to reflect on the next phase of his life. "Now, even when I'm in the middle of elections and campaigns, I'm looking through a more spiritual, contemplative lens," he said.

An edited version of the interview follows.

***EarthBeat*: You've done a lot with conservation throughout your political career, in the face of global warming, extreme weather and other environmental issues. Were those things you thought about during your triathlon?**

Kaine: I'm proud of what we've done, but we have so much more to do. My mantra about the energy economy is that we just want to be cleaner tomorrow than today. We can't just shut off all fossil fuels and dislocate the entire economy. But if we get a little cleaner tomorrow than today, then we can really make headway.



Walk Ride Paddle: A Life Outside by Tim Kaine

When I came into the Senate, Virginia was deep into the bottom half of the nation in solar deployment. Now, by most measures, we're in the top 10. We also are now a real center of offshore wind energy production. If we can do it, other states can do it, other nations could do it, the world can do it.

When I got done with the paddle on the James River, the last leg of the journey, I saw the effects of the Clean Water Act. CNN just named Richmond the No. 1 best town to visit in the United States. Richmond was on nobody's list 30 years ago, because pollution on the James River was so bad that the lowest 100 miles of the river, down into the Chesapeake Bay, were declared unsafe for fishing and swimming. The bald eagle population, which had been the most numerous in the United States other than Alaska, had been wiped out.

Now we have bald eagles in downtown. We swim in the river. And that's because of the Clean Water Act and a few other laws. Had they not been put in place, the James River would still be the sewer of the city instead of its front yard.



Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine is seen in his canoe on the first day of his 348-mile trip paddling the entire James River. (Tim Kaine)

So while we see examples where things are getting worse, we also have recent examples of things getting better. In the 1980s, acid rain was a problem, but we've dramatically reduced that. If we take the right steps, things can get better. That makes me optimistic.

Is your commitment to environmental justice connected to your faith?

I believe so. I think of the psalm that says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." It really expresses that this is a divine creation that we are temporary stewards of, and that we want to have our kids and grandkids experience its beauty too.

I didn't realize when I started this trip that it would be such a divisive moment in American life. I had no idea in May of 2019 what was going to be around the bend before I finished in October of 2021. We are politically polarized, and that can't be sugarcoated.

But my time outdoors reminded me that we're not polarized about everything. I ran across all kinds of people: people who care about politics, people who don't like my point of view, people who don't care about politics at all. But we were all out in nature really enjoying it. Virginians — and I think all Americans — have an instinctive appreciation for the beauty of God's creation. Even if other things divide us, an appreciation for nature can unite us. That was comforting to realize during the course of this journey.

It struck me that your triathlon project was both an opportunity for connection with other people but also for contemplation, a time for going inward. Was that what you were hoping for?

When I had the idea of creating this Virginia nature triathlon, I was probably thinking of it as contemplation and connection with nature primarily. After I had been on a national ticket, I thought, "I don't need to go higher, I need to go deeper."



James River, Virginia's longest river, begins where the Cowpasture and Jackson rivers converge in Iron Gate, Virginia. U.S. Tim Kaine canoed the entire James River in the final year of his "triathlon." He said his time outdoors "reminded me that we're not polarized about everything." (Tim Kaine)

But you're right, the trip also became this connection with my family and different friend groups who joined me for parts of it, but also the random passersby I would interact with during the trip. And there was even connection with the broader outdoor community throughout history. That wasn't exactly what I was thinking about when I designed it, but it became maybe the most important part of the journey.

Did your contemplation during the trip raise any specific spiritual or religious themes for you?

It definitely did. Nature makes you appreciate "the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. I thought of that line often.

On Day 39 of the hike, in October of 2019, I was climbing the tallest peak in Virginia, Mount Rogers, nearly 6,000 feet, on the Appalachian Trail. It was rainy and very foggy, and I had no one with me. It was right after the House started the first impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump. I realized that the House would likely vote yes on the impeachment articles, which meant that this case would come to the Senate, and in a few months, I would be dealing with it.

I was thinking about how to understand this, and I thought about the lessons from the Old Testament book of Job, and about why bad things happen. Job thinks maybe the universe is pointless, and his friends see suffering as punishment for doing something wrong. But the reader knows it's not pointless and it's not punishment. It's a test.



U.S. Sen Tim Kaine spent weekends and Senate recesses hiking, cycling and canoeing in Virginia, enjoying spots like Balcony Falls on the James River. "Now, even when I'm in the middle of elections and campaigns, I'm looking through a more

spiritual, contemplative lens," he said. (Tim Kaine)

I found myself thinking that this moment in our nation's history is a test. Job was being tested to see if in tough times he would still hold fast to his faith and the values of his faith. As a nation, we have values: Nobody's above the law. People should be treated equally. We have an independent judiciary. So I thought, well, maybe this is a test, and the challenge is, will we, like Job, remain true to our principles or not?

So often we're busy running from here to there and we don't give ourselves the time and space to think deeply. That day was kind of a walking meditation that helped illuminate this very confusing time.

You also write about a day when you thought about your connection to the institutional church, as a Catholic.

Yes, I was hiking all by myself, to a place called Pearisburg, Virginia. It was a Sunday, and for me, Sunday has always been about going to church. If I was back in Richmond, I'd be at my parish. So I wrote in that chapter about my own upbringing, as a Catholic in Kansas City, going to a Jesuit high school and being influenced by the Jesuits there, but drifting away a little bit from church as a college student.

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But then when I was in law school, I heard the still, small voice that suggested that I take time off and reconnect with the Jesuits of my youth, some of whom were working in Honduras. Working with missionaries in Honduras, a very poor country with a military dictatorship, was a real eye-opening experience. When I came back to the U.S., I found the worship experience I had loved in Honduras in African American congregations.

Spirituality can be an individual thing, but belonging to a church can bring tensions between your individual spirituality and the collective set of rules, and there's the extra dimension of being an elected official in a pluralistic society. Do I follow my church by living the way my church has said that I should? Or do I, in addition, try to pass laws mandating that Catholic Church doctrine is the doctrine for all? That's a really important dialogue to have, and it's not like you can answer it once in your life and that's going to be sufficient.

The issues of the death penalty and abortion have been very difficult. I've generally resolved them by living in accord with the teachings of my church, but not necessarily trying to mandate those teachings by law in a pluralistic society.

I'm probably one of the last Democrats in Congress who is a Hyde Amendment supporter. I've gone round and round with people about that. I've concluded that we should let people reach their own conclusion on this very difficult moral issue about the beginning of life and how to balance the life or prospective life of a fetus and the life of a mother. I very much want to respect people's ability to make that decision. But I hope you might respect that I've reached a conclusion and I would rather not have my tax dollars pay for abortions. So if I can respect your position by hopefully making sure that there's access, can you respect my position by not using my tax dollars in a way that would be contrary to the way I've resolved this tough issue?

These are hard issues. What's that quote [from Philippians] that you work out your faith with fear and trembling? It's never in the rearview mirror, that you've got it all figured out. It's always working it out with fear and trembling, and trying to gain greater insight every day.

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In the book, you express concern that some young people are not interested in spending time in nature. What advice would you give them?

Author Richard Louv coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder" in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, and I'm worried about that. I think about why I'm a nature steward today, and it was the Boy Scouts, Troop 395 at our parish in Overland Park, Kansas, and my shop teacher, Mr. DJ McKenzie, in seventh grade. If it hadn't been for those two pivotal influences, I might not have ever gone camping or canoeing. But as soon as I did, I was hooked. I think if young people get an experience in the outdoors — even a single overnight camping trip or a day on the river or going out bicycling — if you just do it once, you're going to want to do it again.

I used to take my own kids and some neighbor kids on all kinds of trips when they were growing up. My three kids are as different as night, day and leap year, but they will all drop everything to do an outdoor experience, because that was their life from the time they were babies.

And it's why open space preservation is so important. When you preserve open space, you not only help air and water quality, but you preserve the spaces that people need for recreation, health and spiritual refuge.