

The Beautiful Labor of Time

A Word of Thanks to Deschutes Land Trust Donors

May 11, 2012

It's a great pleasure to be here on the dry side of the hill—my favorite side, I'll confess—with the privilege of speaking to you for twenty minutes or so this evening. I have a sneaking suspicion that many of you here appreciate rivers, so maybe you won't mind if I open with a short poem about flowing water. If you are not used to hearing or reading contemporary poetry, don't panic. Mine are easy. Just relax and let it spray in your face...

Passages

To listen to the river's muted voice,
its licks and gurgles along the bank,
is to hear the soundless snow
come down in its multitudes
on heights of rock, to hear
that stillness grow dense and deep
in frozen fields, in rivers of ice
grinding bedrock inch by inch—
but quickening then in sheens
and gravelly trickles, joining
in rills down meadowed slopes
pouring themselves into chutes and falls,

pounding down the wooded ravines
with boulder song and rainbow spray,
settling then into rapids
and riffles and swirling pools,
and broadening on in a gliding flow
subdued and lively, deep
with a dreamer's speechful stirring,
lost in this old story that has no end.

Only a minuscule portion of the world's water—at any moment only one ten-thousandth of one percent—flows in rivers and streams. A negligible volume, but without that tiny portion of water in motion the face of our planet would be the face of a stranger. All of us have touched and been touched by flowing water. Our ancestors have eaten and loved and raised children by rivers for as long as we have been human, and longer. We have known the music of living water for the entire evolutionary saga of our coming of age on Earth. “It seems to flow through my very bones,” writes Henry Thoreau of a brook he knew. “What is it that I hear but the pure waterfalls within me, in the circulation of my blood, the streams that fall into my heart?”

We know that running water began its Earthly work nearly four billion years ago, when rains first fell and traveled the surface of the young volcanic planet; and if not for continual tectonic uplift, it would long ago have erased the continents into a global sea. Through that tireless attrition, that youthful primordial energy, flowing water carves out runnels, rivulets, clefts, ravines, arroyos, hollows, valleys, chasms, canyons. It ages the face of the land with the intricate inworn branching of watersheds, the very places we know as home. And in that lively

webwork of water, in and around and gathered together by its flexuous body, a labyrinthine ecology connects our human lives to the least and greatest of the lives around us, an ecology we are only beginning to fathom and are unlikely ever to comprehend in its wholeness.

And, of course, our own history has flowed with rivers. They led Euro-Americans into the continent and eventually across it, showing the way into the Oregon Country for Lewis and Clark, for trappers and missionaries, for the pioneers of the Oregon Trail. Listen to the names: Columbia, McKenzie, Illinois, John Day, Sprague, Deschutes, Powder, Malheur, Long Tom, Rogue—you hear the history, you catch glimpses of the stories we have spun around rivers. But listen to more: Klamath, Imnaha, Sycan, Umpqua, Elk, Salmon, Snake, Wenaha, Wallowa, Clackamas, Nestucca, Chewaucan. There are other and older human histories here, interwoven with the flowing of rivers for at least 15,000 years before Europeans set foot on North American land. And there are hints in those names of a more ancient time still, hints of a primeval vitality, echoes of original voices sounding in the land before any human was alive to hear or name them.

Stream ecologists are working out an idea they call the river continuum concept, which suggests that all rivers share a common ecological pattern along their lengths. The shaded headwaters, structured by stones and fallen wood, host invertebrate species known as shredders, who begin to break down the crucial leaf- and needle-fall that fuels the stream's economy. Particles of that matter are filtered from the current downstream, in the river's middle reaches, by collector species. The wider channel there receives more sunlight and produces more organic matter, which supports grazing invertebrates, and various plants take root in sediments the slower river deposits. Fish populations correspond in various ways to the available insects. Lower still, where the accomplished river travels its floodplain, its ecology grades into patterns less understood, that zone of the continuum having been less studied and usually more disturbed

by human activity.

The river continuum concept needs testing and refinement, but its essential premise makes sense: Rivers have something like a common genotype, a graded biological form associated with their graded fluvial form from source to mouth. The lives and systems of lives you find in a particular reach are not arbitrary; they are flourishing where they belong in the organism that is the river.

And where do we humans belong? How do we belong, and how should we belong? It is not arbitrary that we live as closely associated with rivers as we do. As far back as ancient Egypt and Babylonia, our civilizations have been built on the floodplains of rivers, on the ruins of continents slowly on their way to the sea. In the modern world our relationship with rivers extends from the high branchings of their headwaters down along each meander and valley to the rich mixed waters of their estuaries. For better or for worse, we are members of the river continuum. So far, it has been better for us, worse for the rivers and their other members.

Here's another poem. This one, you could say, is an alternative account of the passage in Genesis in which the animals are brought before Adam so that he can assign them names. I've always thought there might be other versions of that story, other points of view. This is one, and it is shaped after certain Native American stories:

Naming the New One

They came from mountains and plains
to see the new one, the smooth-skin,
who stood on shaking hind legs
and stared, his eyes struck with light.

“He’ll sleep cold,” Bear grunted,
and walked away. Bigfoot
was already gone, scared,
and Hummingbird had things to do.

As the others walked and crawled
and flew by, the new one pointed
and hurled a sound at each of them,
louder and louder in his harsh joy.

“Those paws are no good,” said Gopher.

“Call him *Wildmouth*,” said Deer.

“Does he have ears?”

“He’ll learn a song, maybe,” said Owl.

Long after the new one stumbled away
they heard him crashing the brush,
still trailing his strange calls.

“Doesn’t see where he’s going,”

Cougar said.

“Well,” said Coyote,

“we’ll always know when he’s *coming*.”

Coyote acted brave, but he was nervous.

“Let’s watch him for a while,” he said.

“There’s plenty of room. When he finds his place, then we’ll name him.”

I think they’re still waiting, don’t you? We’re still crashing the brush, still not so sure where we’re going. We have been fruitful, we have multiplied, we have settled down some, and in doing so we have not been terribly wise or kind toward the watersheds we call home. For that there is blame enough to go around. All of us have taken rivers for granted. All of us have participated in their exploitation. The light I write by, the paper I write on, the studs and rafters in the house around me, the food on my table—these and much more come to me at some cost to rivers, including rivers I regularly notice and admire without thinking about how my way of life might burden them.

A river is a gatherer, a collector by habit. It accepts everything within its reach. It takes particles of Cascade basalt, every twig or leaf that falls or washes into it, downed tree trunks that form pools where fish can spawn; and it takes fecal coliform bacteria, industrial toxins,

agricultural runoff, old cars and bedsprings, and whatever else we humans send its way. Dam its flow? It takes that unsubtle hint and above the dam it becomes a lake, with hard passage or no passage for migratory fish. Divert too much of its water in summer? It takes that hint too and dwindles to a warm trickle. The river does not lie. It doesn't know *how* to lie. It always gives a true reflection.

If everything we have done to our rivers in the course of two hundred years had occurred overnight, we would be horrified, stricken with grief. But the changes have come gradually, incrementally, hardly perceptible from year to year, from decade to decade, and we adjust. We take as normal the rivers that flow through our lives, hardly aware that the river any child grows up with is likely to be muddier, more engineered, more polluted, and less rich in life than the river her father or grandmother knew.

But for all our thoughtless blundering, none of us ever set out deliberately to harm a river, and neither did those who came before us. They and we set out only to live our lives, and, despite all we have done to them, we love our rivers. In the Northwest we are never far from the lilt and swirl of living water. Whether to fish or swim or paddle, or only to stand and gaze, to glance as we cross a bridge, all of us are drawn to rivers, all of us happily submit to their spell. We need their familiar mystery. We need their fluent lives mingling with our own.

A river is everything it touches as it goes its way, doing the blind and beautiful labor of time. A river is the peaks and glaciers of the High Cascades. It is flowered alpine meadows, forests of fir and Douglas fir and ponderosa pine, beaver and bears and osprey and trout, basalt canyons, lonesome junipers, rabbitbrush and sage and the brief-blooming flowers of spring. The river touches it all and gathers it into its flow, and it gathers us too—hikers, fishers, farmers, ranchers, businessmen, poets, teachers, bankers, store clerks, workers in the fields. Liberals?

Conservatives? The river is colorblind to red and blue, it gathers us all. A hundred and some years ago, it gathered a community that would call itself Bend. In the last quarter-century, the river has gathered into being the Deschutes Land Trust and the peer organizations with which the Land Trust collaborates. And this evening the river has gathered us together right here.

I salute you for your generous donations. In giving to the Land Trust you express your love for this great Deschutes watershed. You affirm that you don't simply live here but want to belong here, to be responsible members of this river continuum. You are taking a stand for a way of being that honors legitimate human uses of the rivered land and knows the wisdom of carefully limiting those uses. The river is as old as time and always young, the river is past, present, and future in one, and so is the work of this Land Trust, which learns from what history has done and looks beyond the brief scope of a human lifetime toward a future in which history can do better.

A future, perhaps, in which salmon and steelhead return to their rightful places, pioneered far back in the Pleistocene, in the streams of the upper Deschutes. We have built much on this land, but those long voyagers helped build the land itself. Their spawned-out bodies, made of nutrients from the far North Pacific, fertilized the barren volcanic gravels and dispersed themselves through raccoons and bears and eagles deep into woods and mountains. Old-growth forests and mountain meadows are transmutations of the bones and flesh of countless salmon. This river can never be whole without them, and for them to thrive in the upper Deschutes the lower Deschutes must also thrive. The river above and the river below are nothing different. The river is a creature of continuity. The river is always one.

The work of this Land Trust to which you so crucially contribute is only beginning. It will take time and patience. Good work always does. Just ask the Metolius River, which was

flowing along its present course in the Pleistocene when a cinder cone erupted in its path to a height of 3,000 feet above the plateau. The river took notice but wasn't impressed. It seeped its way through the cinders under the volcano, which today is known as Black Butte, and emerged in three springs to the north. Or ask the great Deschutes itself, which has been working Columbia Plateau basalts for five million years, downcutting through that obdurate stone two to three thousand feet in that time. More recent lavas, from the Newberry vents, filled its canyon—and those of the Crooked and Metolius—eight hundred feet deep. The rivers reclaimed their canyons in a mere one million years, melting the cold stone, reducing it to lava islands and high streamside cliffs.

Thank you for joining your vision and generosity to the river's beautiful labor of time.

John Daniel

(The poems in this talk are from *Of Earth: New and Selected Poems*, by John Daniel. Many thanks to Lost Horse Press for permission to reprint them there.)