

The Wide Open Spaces of Water, Poets, and Politics

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PART I. *Best Available Poetry*

In his **The Enlightenment Rift and Peacebuilding** paper, Dr. Wolf walks us back and forth, around, and then out beyond the *Enlightenment Rift*—tipping a hat to the rational approaches to water conflict resolution along the way. In the part of the world where I live, the Columbia River Basin in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, the major water-related issue of salmon and hydropower dams could be a great candidate for trialing some or all of the processes Dr. Wolf has discovered out beyond the Rift.

Former-Oregon State Governor John Kitzhaber states that our salmon/dam discussions have evolved beyond designing balanced solutions and have ascended into more grandiose symbolic debates where self-assumed titans seem destined to clash and forever lash at each other:

“The debate over dam removal, for example, has acquired a life of its own—and to some extent, has become a debate more about symbols than about solutions. On the environmental side, the dams are symbols of man’s subjugation of the mighty Columbia River and of the ecological degradation that has flowed from that subjugation. And thus, removal of the dams has become an end in itself—set apart from the effect on overall salmon recovery or watershed health.

On the other side, dams are symbols of the very real economic benefits which have flowed from the taming of the Columbia River. And thus, their removal threatens the economic interests because it legitimizes a discussion of the environmental cost with which these economic benefits have been purchased.”

Imagining a Different World Built With Different Tools, speech by John A. Kitzhaber, M.D., April 3, 2007

My favorite definition of “symbol” comes from Tom Howells, my undergraduate major professor: *a symbol is that which is charged with more meaning than can be rationally accounted for*. To navigate in a world laced with symbolism requires a special guidance system. Many wise people to whom I pay attention suggest the language of story and narrative to be a—if not the—compass of this complex and often turbulent realm. A realm where actions become deceptively stylized and infused with rituals that can be camouflaged by an apparent informality, with acts that lack the trappings of more costumed and choreographed ceremonial affairs. In this highly charged arena, *metaphor* may offer us processes to play out our more-than-rational passions in transformative ways.

In **The Practice of the Wild**, poet Gary Snyder heralds *metaphor* while he describes forays beyond a “rift,” as represented by straying off the path, away from the conventional:

“Metaphors of path and trail are from the days when journeys were on foot or by horse with packstock, when our whole human world was a network of paths...A path is something that can be followed, it takes you somewhere. ‘Linear.’ What would a path stand against? ‘No path.’ Off the path, off the trail. The relentless complexity of the world is off to the side of the trail. For hunters and herders trails weren’t always so useful. For a forager, the path is *not* where you walk for long. Wild herbs, camas bulbs, dye plants, are away from the path. The whole range of items that fulfill our needs is out there. We must wander through it to learn and memorize the field, holding the map in mind...For the forager, the beaten path shows nothing new, and one may come home empty-handed.”

The Practice of the Wild, Essays by Gary Snyder, p. 144-5

Metaphors must be trusted to work. The word metaphor comes from the Greek “*metapherein*”: meta- “over, across” + *pherein*- “to carry, bear.” One could then say that trustworthy poets pick us up and bear us over to the new territory—possibly off the path, out on a limb or thin ice, or even beyond the rift—and then bring us back, or leave us sufficient signs for a return on our own. But if it’s a good journey, we will likely come back a bit different, and if it was a stupendous trip, possibly transformed.

Some time ago I gave a presentation to a group of forest environmental activists entitled: ***Metaphorest Management—what might happen if your forest ranger was a poet.*** I described the possibility of their poet-ranger bearing them into visions of new forestry, over to far “ridges” that pictured complex forest ecosystems that, yes, could even manage—if not require—some timber extraction. To be compelling and trusted—requisites for a metaphorical journey—this narrative would have to be rich and vibrant, with a lively story-line able to match the intricacies (empirical and intuitive) of the landscape, with the surrounding vista a salve for a bumpy ride, or a distraction from an occasional precipice. Anything less and listeners would either refuse to hop on, or if on board, may jump off early. But if well done, the sojourners may have expanded their horizons, have “walked a mile in another’s shoes,” their point-of-view conceivably transformed.

But of late the mantra for resource managers and policy-makers is to rely upon “best available science” to inform and validate management decisions. A noble call, and more and more there is a positive, long-overdue influence from the integrative science of *systems ecology*, which has, in turn, generated an *ecosystem approach* to resource management:

“What is an ecosystem approach?”

It is a departure from traditional, strictly economic, ways of valuing the earth. Rather an inclusive array of values are admitted into the cultural conversation...The science involved in an ecosystem approach is not narrowly reductive, focusing on

technological solutions, but broadly holistic...an ecosystem approach challenges us to reframe managerial strategies and policies as learning processes rather than as the mechanical application of universal rules, like putting the land to its so-called highest and best use...An ecosystem approach affirms the dynamic, open-ended relations between culture and nature, highlighting the crucial importance of learning from experience and adjusting our behavior accordingly...(and) an ecosystem approach entails democratic, collaborative decision making processes that incorporate inclusive scales of issue analysis and policy judgment...And different kinds of scientists and land managers are becoming involved in this process, not as the experts who make the final decision, but as practitioners of civic science." **The Way Ahead: Building Grounded Communities, Max Oelschlaeger**

This approach, though, has made our world significantly more complex. The integration of scientific fields is generating more data to analyze, many times prolonging the decision-making process—sometimes interminably so, which has inspired the phrase, “paralysis by analysis.” Understanding is then further complicated by the need to comprehend the “open-ended relations between culture and nature.”

“The systems ecologist Frank Golley, concluding his remarkable study of the history of the ecosystem concept, observes that we can no longer be clear where ecology ends and the study of the ethics of nature begins...These divisions become less and less useful. Clearly, the ecosystem, for some at least, has provided a basis for moving beyond strictly scientific questions to deeper questions of how humans should live with each other and the environment.” **The Way Ahead: Building Grounded Communities, Max Oelschlaeger**

Possibly, with the ecosystem approach (as described) gaining more and more traction, the rational side of Wolf’s *Enlightenment Rift* may begin to implode or expand. And as this structure bends, blurs, fuses, stretches and blends, we may hear a new call for the “best available poetry” to join science to inform, guide and validate resource management decisions.

Poets could help us learn how to welcome in and understand the passion that storms around water allocations, to accompany the “disinterested curiosity” and objectivity that is a hallmark of Western science, enabling it to coolly examine and separate this from that. The poets could stage passions as edifying theater, played out as vicarious blood-chilling drama, instead of actual blood-spilling trauma. Dueling truths, deeply troubling taboos, confusions, contradictions, the clash of symbols—bring them on, bring them all on. When collectively observed, a common experience may be born.

But the space for the poetic narrative within resource management needs be created and then boldly held open. Instead of being subjected to endless, deadening hours of public hearing monologues, could managers have a required reading list of novels, poems, and plays? Instead of requiring Native Americans to cram a millennium of stories and lore into a three minute testimony, could managers attend a multiple day tribal festival?

I was able to participate in one of the *Readings of the River* hosted by the Columbia River Basin Catholic Bishops as they asked the community to help them develop their Pastoral Letter on their home River. The session was opened and overseen by the Pastoral Letter Steering Committee, with Bishop Skylstad presiding. It was the most respectful atmosphere I have experienced for a sharing by resource stakeholders. I believe everybody there felt they must behave when before the Bishops, similar to feeling like one shouldn't cuss in front of your grandmother.

My reading was entitled, "*Hearts and Chartres Cathedral*," in which I attempted to match up the restoration of salmon runs, the *heart* of the River, with the building of a cathedral—trying to make a metaphor work with a marriage of symbols: both take centuries to complete; those who set the first stones know they will not live to see it completed; with Chartres, the entire community participated, with at least one symbolic stone; with salmon, the symbolic same will be invited and required. Then my personal story as a commercial fisherman, with the many salmon I've killed having stained my hands with blood-guilt—and then striving to see them as though they are stained-glass windows high up in the cathedrals, as a bejeweled connection with spirit. And that I carry the belief that honoring salmon is essential to engendering this spirit.

Among that day's other *Readers of the River*, there was a tribal fisherman and an agricultural economist. After the readings, Bishop Skylstad opened the space for an interactive dialogue. In one series of exchanges, the economist repeated tried to convince the tribal fisherman that a cost-benefit analysis would persuasively demonstrate that withdrawing water for crops would provide much more economic benefit than keeping water in the river for salmon, and that the financial proceeds would be more than ample to provide a livelihood for the tribal member. Where-as the fisherman replied, "My religion is not for sale."

After this went around twice, to the same effect, I was given the floor to simply say, "If the decision to build the Chartres Cathedral had been made solely on a cost-benefit analysis, I doubt if it would have been built, and what a sad day that would have been." Now, I don't know if this metaphorical inference transformed anybody's thinking that day, but it did give me a glimmer of how the "logic" of poetry could change how a discussion is framed.

Poets may also help us with a troubling, growing symptom: the arthritis-like stiffening of the manys' imagination, and its hardening of the heart effect. "Literal" approaches and interpretations litter our planet, breeding various forms of fundamentalism that freeze select narratives—which are ironically stippled with metaphors themselves—and become fearful of the "other," too often violently so. This severely limits the capacity to live according to the "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" principle found within every religion.

Part II. *The spirit of Democracy—always more, never less!*

Dr. Wolf writes, “Every spiritual tradition in the world is devoted to a very similar process, that is to guide individuals from thinking about their needs as individuals to addressing more of their obligations to society, humanity, and other issues.” In the United States, I see *democracy* as a tradition whose spirit strives for the same—especially if we keep alive the character and aspirations of its *creation story*, an origin that did not depend upon a *Rift*, but did require a *Revolution*.

“Many Revolutionary Americans imagined a new and better world emerging, a world, according to some clergymen, of ‘greater perfection and happiness than mankind has yet see.’”

Empire of Liberty, A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815, Gordon Wood, p. 13

“Liberals everywhere in the Western world were anxiously watching to see what would happen to the new American republics. If the expectations of 1776 should prove illusionary, if republican self-government could not survive, then, as the English radical Richard Price told Americans in 1785, ‘the consequence will be, that the fairest experiment ever tried in human affairs will miscarry; and that a REVOLUTION which had revived the hopes of good men and promised an opening to better times, will become a discouragement to all future efforts in favour of liberty, and prove only an opening to a new scene of human degeneracy and misery.’”

Empire of Liberty, A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815, Gordon Wood, p. 20

In *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Fareed Zakaria notes that in the early 21st Century there are 119 democratic governments, comprising 62% of all countries of the world. He goes on to describe some of these “experiments,” comparing and contrasting them to the American model.

With water management in my home Walla Walla River Basin, we have been conducting our own experiment of democracy, of a direct, participatory manner. We have been granted legislative authority to manage our water in partnership with the State of Washington’s regulatory agency, the Department of Ecology (Ecology). This is a ten year experiment to see if substantial devolution of governance to a local level can manage water more effectively through community-based planning than a State agency whose only tool is individual water right regulation.

Former (and the first) USA Environmental Protection Agency Director William (Bill) Ruckelhaus has described this Walla Walla experiment as a “quiet revolution in the (Thomas) Jeffersonian manner.” Bill Ruckelhaus is a strong proponent of participatory democracy for guiding effective resource management.

“I think in our country today, we are seeing a resurgence of Jeffersonian democracy, spawned in part by mistrust in our government but also by a belief in our people and their ability to solve their own problems if given a chance. I believe this is the real genius of American democracy anyway. I also believe the best way to encourage others to adopt our democratic system is to show it works. To show not by military force or economic bullying but by example that ours is the system to which all should repair.

In general in a free society, if people are given reasonable governmental goals and then government leaves it up to the affected public to choose how to achieve them, that same public will go well beyond any restraints the government could effectively mandate. The reason is it's their choice. The choices are owned by the people affected not imposed on them by a higher power.

If the trend represented by people led salmon recovery continues instead of a steady erosion of trust, we may one day observe an upward virtuous spiral, where trust engenders success and satisfaction with government actions, which in turn creates higher levels of trust and makes government actions either less necessary or easier to accomplish. Here it's important to recall that democracy is not just a way of electing the personnel of government. If that was all it was, Iraq would be home free. Instead, the real virtue of democracy is that it is a school. In it we learn how to manage the public aspects of our lives, and thus, unlike any other system of government, it is progressive—we can actually get better at it as time goes on. And it is a hard school. When we doze off, as we will inevitably do from time to time, we get a sharp rap on the knuckles. When we pay attention, we earn the gold stars, one of which is the restoration of trust between government and people.

Thomas Jefferson once pointed out that if the people appeared not enlightened enough to exercise their control of government, the solution was not to take away the control but to “inform their discretion by education.” The cooperative processes that are springing up around the country are doing just that, giving to large numbers of citizens a new comprehension of the complexity involved in government decisions, out of which has got to come a heightened appreciation of, and tolerance for, the necessary work of government. If these processes work, if they spread, if they become an indispensable part of government at all levels, we may take it as a sign that we, as a people, have moved up a grade in democracy's school. It holds out the hope that, eventually, America will once again, and justifiably, be the envy of the World.”

Salmon, Recovery & Democracy, speech by William D. Ruckelhaus, Oct. 26, 2005

To embark an entire nation—if not merely one individual river basin—into the unknown of a governmental *experiment* requires highly developed and supple powers of imagination. And to select democracy as the vehicle requires a belief in the “higher nature” of the citizenry who be given the reigns. In the United States, this belief runs deep and might match the sacred fervor of spiritual traditions—and share the difficulties of its adherents living according to its principles.

Higher natures, within everyone? Acting on this requires a leap of faith that is constantly being tested. *Demos*, the people, with a collective “conscience” called the *Constitution*. As compared to millennial spiritual traditions, the customs and rituals of democracy are still emerging, evolving, adapting. And being an experiment, there are creative tensions. One trend is Jeffersonian (Ruckelhausian!), with its confidence in distributed deliberation; another is (Alexander) Hamiltonian, with an inherent distrust of the crowd.

One view was represented by Thomas Jefferson, who espoused what has been called the “politics of engagement,” a model in which people work together in a spirit of cooperation to find common ground and solve problems for their mutual benefit. In this model, people relied on one another rather than on a centralized government. Jefferson's view was opposed by the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, who espoused a “politics of disengagement,” wherein social stability is achieved not by cooperation among individuals, but by a strong central government which carefully balanced private interests, one against the other. In this model—and *this is very important*—the common good is not the result of cooperation among individuals but rather the result of external, top-down management.

Imagining a Different World Built With Different Tools, speech by John A. Kitzhaber, M.D., April 3, 2007

Zen Buddhism may have some resonance with decentralized democracy. In a workshop session, Zen Buddhist/poet Snyder related an audience he once had with the Dalai Lama, during which they compared Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. According to Snyder, the Tibetan form posits a hierarchy of beings, where-as Zen holds that all things have Buddha Nature, even stones. Hence, Tibetan Buddhists tend to be vegetarians, as they view animals to have Buddha Nature and to eat them would violate the primary Buddhist precept: *to do no harm*. Not so lucky the lowly celery.

Zen does not offer this path, and in **Practice of the Wild**, Snyder answers this *koan* of how to do no harm when one must live by preying upon other beings with Buddha Nature by saying *grace*.

"There is a verse chanted by Zen Buddhists called the 'Four Great Vows.' The first line goes: 'Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.'...This vow stalked me for several years and finally pounced: I realized that I had vowed to let the sentient beings save *me*. In a similar way, the precept against taking life, against causing harm, doesn't stop in the negative. It is urging us to *give* life, to *undo* harm...Everyone who ever lived took the lives of other animals, pulled plants, plucked fruit, and ate. Primary people have had their own ways of trying to understand the precept of nonharming. They knew that taking life required gratitude and care. There is no death that is not somebody's food, no life that is not somebody's death...

The archaic religion is to kill god and eat him. Or her. The shimmering food-chain, the food-web, is the scary, beautiful condition of the biosphere. Subsistence people live without excuses. The blood is on your own hands as you divide the liver from the gallbladder...A subsistence economy is a sacramental economy because it has face up to one of the critical problems of life and death: the taking of life for food...

Eating is a sacrament. The grace we say clears our hearts and guides the children and welcomes the guest, all at the same time:

'We venerate the Three Treasures [teachers, the wild, and friends]
And are thankful for this meal
The work of many people
And the sharing of other forms of life.'

Anyone can use a grace from their own tradition (and really give it meaning)—or make up their own. Saying some sort of grace is never appropriate, and speeches and announcements can be tacked onto it. It is a plain, ordinary, old-fashioned little thing to do that connects us with all our ancestors."

The Practice of the Wild, Gary Snyder, pp. 182-5

I believe American democracy is at its best when it creates open spaces that beckon responsible passion to share itself with others, and which will then, in turn, vow to keep the space open for the next passionate sharing soul. It is likely we will take from others, but just as likely we will give. To sustain this, it will help for those in the US to be graceful, to tend well those spaces between us that we call relationships, and maybe to chant the Constitution every summer between fireworks on the Fourth of July.

And finally, to remind us of the value of story, here's a passage from the third-century BC Zhaung-zi book that Snyder recites in **Practice**:

The Cook Ting cut up an ox for Lord Wenhui with dance-like grace and ease. "I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint...I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've gut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room...That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone." "Excellent!" said Lord Wenhui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life."