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Teaching by the River

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Earthrise, Thora, New South Wales, Australia

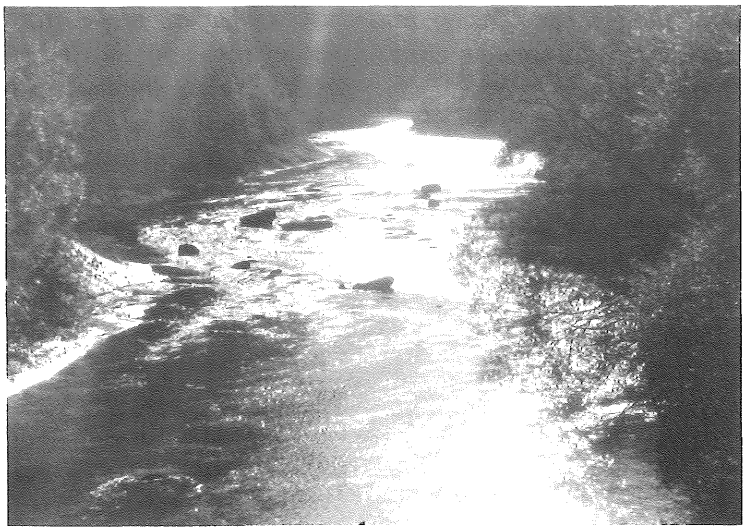


Photo by Philippe L. Gross

But that there can be teaching without words,
Value in action which is actionless
Few indeed can understand.

— Lao Tzu
5th Century BC
(In Brower, 1974, p. 9)

WHEN I sit here and watch the river I am fascinated by its movements, its flowingness; so much so that my particular state of consciousness seems to change from "watching" to "enraptured" or "being captured" (— and when I think about it later it seems as though I may have been hypnotized, to some extent, by what I have been watching). All that I am doing, it seems, is sitting and watching, sitting and looking, sitting and seeing...Yet there has to be more to it than that. To begin with, I have to make a choice to sit and watch. If I'm to do that properly then I need to put everything — almost everything — out of my mind so that I can attend properly. If I don't attend properly, my attention wanders, and while I will still see the river, it will merely serve as a nice visual and dynamic backdrop to my unruly attention. My attention wanders most of the time, anyway, and this, of course, is the stream of consciousness, so-called, by William James (1890/1950).[1] Having made the choice to pay attention to the river, I have necessarily to leave James' abstracted stream — the one in which my attention may wander like a fallen leaf on the torrent — and focus on the real and enticing river in front of me. That should be easy. It is not. If it were easy then many more of us would use much more time to sit and watch, fascinated, perhaps, by the passage of the running water and the changeability of the universe. What is easy is the sweet surrender to the costly chatter of the stream of consciousness. There is but one fixed demand of the Stream: that we behave as if bemused by the unexamined and even unnoticed passage of its everchanging contents. The reality of the river, if we commit to paying it attention and actually seeing it, is that we will readily perceive the river itself — its form and movement, its downward flowing, its continual changing.

To be categorical: what is it about a river such that we abstract it so readily from the environment? We do this in a manner which reminds me now of our pinning a collection of dead butterflies to a board. Remarkably, we tend to see the river in special isolation, rather than as a very dramatic aspect of the environment — it is, after all, in the environment, yet it is as if the river stands out almost theatrically from everything else that contains it.

> Quietening the mind,
> Deep in the forest
> Water drips down.
>
> — Hosha
> Date unknown
> (In Blyth, 1981, p. 337)

The river, as we see it, has not come to be quite in this form: it was a creek or stream, and before that a small brook or a spring; or perhaps we may say that it almost began as water dripping down in the forest. Before that it was rain, and before that it was the ocean. — Or perhaps it was even the same river that we see before us.

The quality of the thing "river" has something to do with its relative permanence in the landscape — in a way which is similar to the relative permanence of a mountain, or of a single tree. Yet neither the mountain nor the tree are good examples of permanence and the notion of apparent permanence may be closer to reality. While trees are somewhat ephemeral, many of them live for very long periods (in our terms), and so they appear as relatively fixed in a landscape. Yet, because of change, all landscapes are changeable. I'm reminded of two things here: the giant sequoia I once saw in California, a huge living tree which started to grow more than two thousand years ago; and bare hillsides on Vancouver Island which had been densely forested when I was a child sixty years ago. Not only does everything change constantly — the rate of change itself continues to change, and now does so faster than any of us can remember.

We fix a river in our minds when we perceive one. Although we may be fully aware of the river being sometimes high and destructive, and sometimes low and diminished, the river as a thing-in-itself is established psychologically and in so fixed a fashion that it is as if the quality of the river is a matter of undoubted permanence — almost like a mountain. It is astonishing that despite the obvious evidence before us — evidence of non-stop change, continual rising and falling, flooding and dwindling, and everlasting movement — we see the river as a permanence. Although we sometimes speak of a dry riverbed, particularly in Australia, we continue to refer to "the river" even when it has been painfully reduced to a series of stagnant pools, apparently disconnected and showing no sign of flow.

A fascinating aspect of river watching is that all rivers, in my experience, change profoundly as we watch them. I am constantly puzzled by my own understanding of rivers, for it seems to me that we categorizing, reductionistic and rationalizing humans might have awarded a more creatively qualitative label to what we so easily call river. A river is an extraordinary, rather than an ordinary phenomenon. It generally will have rived or split the land which contains it; it may have emphasized a fault line in the landscape of a rift valley; it may, like the Colorado River, have created the Grand Canyon simply by being itself. There is a vast difference between the river at my doorstep — a mere twenty or so metres across — and the very wide Danube where it flows through Budapest. The comparisons become meaningless when we realize that the mouth of the Amazon is so wide that its opposite shores cannot be seen, and that out in the ocean, miles from land, the water is fresh rather than salt, because of the immense volume of river water entering the sea. A river, like the universe, is constantly changing, is visibly, aurally, and kinesthetically dynamic, yet we put a constraint on that flux (as we do upon our imaginations) by simply calling a river a river and anchoring it in both time and space. We are seldom inclined to think of a river as a living treasure or a moving work of art or an eloquent parable from which we may learn. Many who use the river think so little of it that they throw their refuse into it or use it to carry away sewage. In our ignore-ance we see the river, capture it briefly in the ways that we choose, and then let it go; it is always there when we want it.

Curiously, it is the changeability or instability of any river which gives it the deceptive quality of near-permanence, that apparent stability which makes it a thing-in-itself. The stability of any river fluctuates continually and in a lively fashion — like any other living system — and it is this compounded quality (fixedness in the landscape, relative permanence) which so readily enables us to know what a river is when we perceive one. Imagine how difficult it might be to describe a river to someone who has always been blind!

> Looking is a gift, but seeing is a power.
> — Jeff Berner (1975)

When we use our perception to identify a river we frequently delude ourselves. We do this, also, for example, when we psychologically control the sun or the moon as rising, moving across the sky, and setting. We choose to ignore the notion that Earth — our collective self — is producing much of the movement. Earth is compelled by the sun to orbit in a great path: it also wobbles as it spins, yet we pretend that the sun is the more actively moving body.

When we see a river we see only an aspect of it — usually in two dimensions — yet we magically transform that fragmented sensory information into a perception which we readily believe to be the whole, the whole-thing-in-itself. This is merely faulty perception and it is also an important means by which we learn to deceive ourselves. Were we to perceive all of the river, if we enabled ourselves to experience the wholeness of it, we would see something markedly different, including its obvious connections to some of the systems which contain it.[2]

When we look at the river what we see, mostly, is the near-flatness of its surface, and to a lesser extent we also become aware of another characteristic: it has depth. Some of us may selectively imagine more of the river by looking more closely into its depth and extending our knowledge — farmers, fishermen, swimmers and divers will do this for good reasons. The notion of depth must surely make it easy for all of us to imagine how a familiar whole river in a known place looks, how it appears to us. I suspect that very few people, when they remember a river, or when they think of one which they may never have seen, imagine it or visualize it as it truly is. It seems much more likely that most of us will visualize a river with a flat top which is more or less a permanent feature of a particular landscape — as if the river has no depth.

The river offers us information and teachings which become obvious when we allow them to be. We may learn some fundamental truths about the world in which we operate, and we may discover some striking realities about ourselves — about our varied behaviors, about our characteristic attitudes and beliefs. In this manner we may also become increasingly aware of how others may regard us.

The river can also be deceptive: an apparently dry riverbed contains moving water beneath the surface at some depth. There is much more to a riverbed than its visible top. We can discover this particular phenomenon by looking for visible indicators of water on the surface. Another way would be to use more of our senses. Our sense of smell, for instance, will allow us to smell the proximity of water, and of damp, and of wetness. Like most things, there is generally more than meets the eye.

How would a blind person perceive, know, and understand a river; how would a blind person experience a river?

We depend almost entirely on our vision in order to perceive. We depend a great deal upon light, the light which we see on the surface of the water which enables us to begin to perceive. At night we are compelled to use visualization in order to imagine how the partly visible river must look when more of it becomes available to our demanding eyes. This act of visualization is something which we use easily enough at night, yet we limit the further possibility by visualizing only what we might see in the daytime. This implies certain possibilities. One is for us to practice daytime visualization in such a way that we can enlarge or extend perception. The way to do this is to combine visualization and imagination. Another similar possibility is to practice extensions of our perception via visualization and the imagination — and to do this with our eyes closed. This notion contains an interesting

paradox, whether we be concerned with river perception or with any other kind. It is this: we have learned to become overdependent on our vision in order to perceive, yet we know that when vision is attenuated or even blocked — as it is in the dark — we may make a useful perception based upon internal processes which are largely independent of vision. If we then close our eyes and deny any vision, then the images which we experience seem almost to present themselves. The production of such images is not hard work.

This suggests that it is possible for us to take our cue from the fully visible river, to then close our eyes, and to receive (as it were) an image or a perception of how the river might look in its more complete state. In doing that we may well be enabling ourselves to see — through imaging — how the invisible underside of the river looks, and how the more complete river may be perceived. This is very much what we do with each other: we size one another up, we imagine the more complete or rounded person.

This may seem unduly psychological to the reader; it is not intended to be. My suggestion is to reconsider how we typically perceive so that we may perceive more, i.e., more than we can literally see. Also, the perception may not only be more realistic (than seeing the lighted flat surface of the river, for example): it provides us with a new, or a different, or perhaps a better reality. If there is any truth in this idea, then it is certainly time for us to provide an improved theory of perception. The current model of perception has been accepted for much too long and is now outmoded.[3]

Consensual reality or ordinary consciousness is changed when we close our eyes. By shutting out the shared reality with which we are all familiar, it becomes possible for us to experience a reality which is less noisy, less cluttered, less sensate, and certainly less censorious. When we close our eyes we immediately switch from ordinary consciousness to one which is extraordinary. We may then begin to appreciate our being prescient as well as sentient. Imagery has become much more accessible.

Usually when we look at a river we see only a part of it, a view. This is a strangely biased way in which to form a perception, because we fail to gain anything more than a very limited or partial experience for our effort of seeing. Most of the river is not experienced. In other words, almost all of the river is neither seen nor fully perceived — and that is an experience which is certainly less than it ought to be. Most of the river remains undiscovered: it appears as not much more than a banked or bounded sheet of water, and its fuller dimensions cannot be appreciated, nor can its biological richness be appreciated. It requires only a well-motivated simple choice for us to learn much more of the river by making better use of our senses and our imaginations. If we use more care and consideration we can enjoy a fuller appreciation of the river and its otherwise concealed qualities. We can at least begin to experience it as having depth instead of merely being a flat surface. The river may then be understood more fully as a thing-in-itself, as a lighted and colorful living body, as an organic creature moving like a great fluid snake or dragon and one which is utterly dynamic and changing because it is so filled with life and liveliness. Its previously hidden bed is revealed as a new landscape; all of the moving and changing volume of the river swirls and pulses within the eternal moment. The river is then a magical demonstration of possibilities for us and is filled with information and lessons.

> Of all the elements, the Sage should take Water as his preceptor. Water is yielding but all-conquering. Water extinguishes Fire, or, finding itself likely to be defeated, escapes as steam and re-forms. Water washes away soft Earth, or, when confronted by rocks, seeks a way round. Water corrodes Iron till it crumbles to dust; it saturates the atmosphere so that Wind dies. Water gives way to obstacles with deceptive humility, for no power can prevent it following its destined course to the sea. Water conquers by yielding; it never attacks but wins the last battle. The Sage who makes himself as Water is distinguished for his humility; he embraces passivity, acts from non-action and conquers the world.
>
> — Tao Cheng
> 11th Century AD
> (In Brower, 1974, foreword)

A few days after the flood has descended there are a number of new torrents running over the rapids. Two cormorants take off upstream using the big wet billow of air above the rapids of the center-streams. They bank sharply to the east and cut across the new wide stone beach to make up the lost distance and gain altitude as they then fly straight down the big green river. It is a soft cloudy afternoon in late April.

The river wells upwards, almost like a boiling, in certain areas when it is in a state of either rising or falling fullness, usually after prolonged rain or when a high flood takes days to fall. The apparent boiling is water flowing around upward while it is also moving downstream, and if the river is full enough, some of the turbulence will meet with water rebounding from the mountainside further downstream — water flowing back and up the river and partly into this upward welling. Waves near this turbulence are breaking upward and curling back on themselves in the direction from which they began to take this form. It is as if the breaking wave, as it unfolds and rolls downward is also reaching back against the onward flow to its origin.

The rapids of a river usually are formed over stones or ridges of bedrock, but they are also composed of disparate things. The rapids seem to be a significant aspect and quality of the river which help to signify its riverness, that which identifies this thing-in-itself as river. We will find ripples in creeks and streams and brooks, but rivers have rapids. Rapids are like an inscription or an epigraph. The rapids are not only signatures of the river, they are obviously produced by or are a consequence of the river. We could not observe rapids but for the dynamism of the living river — although the river does not need rapids to be what it is. It is unusual to speak of a single rapid even when only one of them is visible. Perhaps we multiply the phenomenon in our minds because a single rapid undulates, swirls, waves, and rises and falls as if it were multiple and composed of more than one rush or flow. There is a strange sense of wonder concerning what a river truly is because some rivers are mighty cataracts and seem to comprise systems of rapids rather than anything else; other rivers are so slow and quiet that their movements are almost imperceptible, and we may then describe young or old rivers. — And some rivers are so immense and multiple — like one in South America which seems to be a linked array of rivers joined in cataracts and waterfalls.

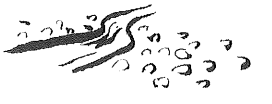
We ascribe a new and derived quality to rivers where they are mostly vertical: the phenomenon we call waterfall. While the fall(s) is still a river we immediately call it something else because its flow has turned through 90 degrees. Huge volumes of water falling vertically in a river somehow override or over-write the usual signatures of a river; its identity is radically altered so that the waterfall incorporates the thing-in-itself river and all but drowns it. A waterfall is pure power and wonder; and where has the river gone? A waterfall cannot be a thing-in-itself unless it is primarily also a river (or an artificial fall). When the water in a river does not fall vertically we no longer describe "the falls" as something more-than the river — but describe instead large rapids, cataracts, cascades, torrents. These are important features of a river; they do not subsume its identity.

A river may be so immense that we are unable to see its banks; we still call it the river. Our perception of smaller, narrower waterways is very different: we describe streams, rivulets, brooks and creeks. The qualitative difference between a river and a creek is also presumably quantitative. What distinguishes a river from its tributaries and from all other smaller streams is volume. It is not clear when a brook

may become a river — yet we seem to be able to intuit this although there are no laws which enable us to discriminate accurately between their different volumes. Dictionaries do not help; mine describes a brook as a small natural stream of fresh water; and a creek is a watercourse smaller than a river. There are no benchmarks, either, for "smaller" or for "river." — And what of rivers that suddenly become canals?

Sometimes, despite our relying on the apparent certainty of our perception we may suspect that whatever else the river is it is also something of an illusion. If a river has visible rapids, quiet pools (and perhaps even a modest fall), fullness, depth, and shallows, we see all of these aspects and yet arrive at an incomplete perception which we pretend is otherwise by summing all of the parts and pronouncing the result to be a river. Perhaps this is most easily done when there is a lot of water flowing by, or when the volume moves quickly. We see what we want to see and perceive what we want to perceive even when the obvious falls have dwindled to a trickle, when the rapids have dropped into narrow channels and all but disappeared, and when the quiet pools are little more than puddles. Whatever the state or condition of what we believe to be the river, we enjoy the illusion of our experience, for we not only sum all of the parts which we know constitute the river, we see the river as whole, an entity which is much more than the mere sum of its parts. The river as a whole-thing-in-itself continues to be an illusion because we impose a delusion that it is whole, that it is complete, even though we will have made a very limited perception of that. There is more than a touch of psychosis in our perceiving: we regard as normal any perception as being more than it is if that suits us. And so we decide perceptually that the river is a complete entity whether it is flooding or falling, or barely flowing.

Independently of the strangeness of our perceiving, the river as a whole living thing is a system; more correctly it is systemic, a system of systems. Here in all of its wonder is the wholeness of a system running and writhing its stately life before us: a magical giant, a fluid serpent, always changing, yet remaining a whole thing. This single entity is comprised of continuous movement, of many parts in flux, yet it holds together as flowing water to give us the illusion of a thing which is real and substantial. It has composed itself of many things and we may see it in any instant — even while it continues to compose itself before our eyes. It owes its composition to light and movement, to the time of day, the weather, the season, clouds, sun, all of the creatures in and on and beneath it, its stones and gravels and sands and silts and mud, its froth and foam and flotsam and smells, its rising mists. The river is also air, haze, humidity, weeds, reeds, islands, bushes, trees. Light is broken and bent — as the river; it flashes and dances, wavers, fades, glitters and sparkles. We can see this broken-river-surface-light only because of the river; and it is an aspect of the river which we could never see without the flow of its water. The river is also fluid energy which is very visible as it pours over stones and slowly changes them.



To watch the river daily is to appreciate that fundamental law of the universe: constant change. Sometimes there are two mainstreams in front of me. One must be larger or faster or deeper and that should be the one and only mainstream — but now there are two because there is more water flowing. They are certainly different from each other; and they are also so much alike that both of them are deservedly mainstreams. Minor floods and rises make four or five or six streams going through the rapids and then I no longer see them all as mainstreams although they are clearly streams. Soon, if the flood rises, the rapids will cease to be: they will be covered silently by faster water; the rushing sound will be shut off; and the streams will no longer be discernible. There will

be a flood, and a very different and dramatic river will be racing by. It is still the river. Every possible aspect that can be a part of the river will be influenced or moved by the flood. During the flood the river smells different: a sweet and sour smell of organic materials moved about and relocated. During the flood a vital part of the river is removed, one that helps to define the river: insects and birds have disappeared. It is still the river.

Now it is raining. The surface of the river is grey-green in the suffused light. The surface of the water is distinctly dappled by raindrops in some areas and apparently smooth or undisturbed elsewhere. What I see appear to be smooth-topped streams contained by the bigger and relatively more-dappled-top of the river proper. Is this yet another illusion or does the rain enable me to see that which is always there yet not always visible unless it rains like this? There is sometimes a similar phenomenon when the wind blows across the surface. I have no difficulty believing that I see a river composed of several streams and rivers, especially when it rains. Is this what I actually perceive or is it more than I perceive, and am I being treated to something unique? I can see, too, that although these streams are constantly shifting and forming momentary patterns — at least on the surface — there are sufficient identifying signatures for me to be able to discern streams-within-the-river. What I may be seeing is the passage of the faster-flowing or more dynamic and larger volumes of water. I know from my experience of the river that these streams represent the deeper parts, the mainstreams of the river. When I write this way I am being dualistic because I have even more information on the river as a whole-thing-in-itself, yet I reduce the river to component parts in order to explain it to myself. Now it is easier for me to write that the streams within the river may only be an epiphenomenon. I do not need to reduce or analyze; I can know more by being aware that there is always more, that what I call the river is simply a system of systems and that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts. This huge living creature, the river, influences and is influenced by the systems that contain it, just as I am influenced. Were I to see this more plainly and completely from a satellite my conditioning would encourage me to make a discrimination between river and Earth — yet they are one and the same thing, just as Earth is the solar system and the Milky Way galaxy, and ultimately the universe. Everything is interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent because everything is one whole. Nothing in the universe can be separate from anything else. I am the river; the river is me. We are the planet, the whole, and also an aspect of the greater whole, and therefore can only ever be the entire whole. I am you, you are me.

It is a bright windy day in November. The surface of the river flashes and sparkles in ever-changing patterns of light. I can no longer see that area of the river as such; only the broken light, yet my intuition tells me that the river is still there.

I can never cross nor drink nor swim in the same river twice because its permanence is illusory.

It is late afternoon in midsummer. I sit on the lawn and look down across the big pool in the river. The river is well up and lively. As I watch I see versions of the colors of the stones comprising the rocky beach on the opposite bank — they are waveringly reflected on the broken surface of the pool. These reflected colors seem not to match, perfectly, the true colors of the beach, nor the true colors of the nearby trees, nor the overall true color of the forrested slopes in the distance. The reflected versions of the true colors (as I see them) seem subtly different. They flicker and waver continually and provide me with a new kind of river signature which is almost cinematic, and readily identifiable. There is a large bar of mellow light on the surface which points toward

me. When I attempt to somehow separate this from the whole I realize that it is the partial reflection of a distant tree on the ridge, a tall eucalypt. Its real color is not what I see reflected. The light is crystal clear. When I watch the lighted surface of the pool I tend to narrow my eyelids and blur my focus. Watching is different, I think, from "looking at." Perhaps I waver between ordinary and extraordinary consciousness because the reality which I now see is strange and beautiful. And then as I dwell upon the small smooth waves on the surface of the pool I see a radiantly deep purple light which mingles partly with a soft yellow-orange light. I see also that these beautifully lighted wavelets have the onward-flowing motion of the river beneath them and at the same time they appear to display a visible movement of energy which is in the opposite direction — upstream. I watch this in fascination because the waves flowing down provide the opportunity for those strange colors to flow back upstream. I can nowhere see the precise origin of these colors and so conclude that they are not reflections. If I remain in this state of reverie for a while longer I realize that my imagination has been triggered and the wonderfully colored wavelets encourage a vision: one in which I begin to see, not waves, but the shifting sands of the desert. This shift, this movement, is contrary to the onward flow of the river and is probably nothing more than a benign hallucination.

The river is low today, the lowest it has been for six months. A new river once more, yet the old one, too, for I can again see some of the familiar rock outcrops emerging which have been covered for days. The river is of course at a particular height as I look, and at this moment I see that there is a sizeable area of flotsam: leaves from an upstream breeze which have not been noticeable down here...until now. I do notice though, that at this moment the leaves have arrived in front of me and will soon be gone, when they continue their journey in the ever-present moment. Our paths have crossed. Now I see that the leaves have slowed half-way along the pool and although they barely move they have also begun to present themselves as something additional: a growing spiral, a large and continually changing pattern which is also a moving spiral. As it moves in my direction it becomes much larger, spreads out, changes again. My eye is caught by the near-surface movement of a fish or a platypus. And now the spiral has diffused; and now the pattern is gone. I see some leaves moving a little faster downstream.

The weather is fine and I sit at one of the outside worktables; this one is a 3m long flitch of riveroak. I look down and onto and into the head of a big pool in the river, immediately below some impressive rapids. I also look across to the stony beach where visitors often appear. They invariably walk to a point opposite where I am now sitting to meet the river. Why there, I wonder? Why not further up or further down? Visitors seem drawn to a certain spot by a certain something — and what might that be? Although both the rapids and the pool are visible from the road, these aspects of the river are not always visible; it depends, for instance, on the relative height and fullness of the stream, yet most visitors head unerringly for this particular spot. They then stand at a point which is more or less at the confluence of the tail-end of the rapids and the head of the pool. I suspect that this certain something which draws them, this quality X (if you like) appeals initially to the senses. And yet, my intuition tells me, there has to be something more. Behind or beneath the richness of sensory messages and signals there are surely implications of abstractions and qualities which are all but hidden, which are much more covert than they are overt. There is something about X which is almost hypnotically compelling — and it draws people to the river where all of those who can will allow themselves the pleasure of visual enjoyment. Imagine, for example, that you choose to come to this place, or to one like it: you know that there is a river; you will know that there is something about a river which is meaningful for you. Imagine

stopping here opposite where I often sit (no, I am not always immediately visible, nor do I think I am as compelling as the river), and walking toward the place I have in mind. What might it be that draws you? If you close your eyes do you see images which suggest qualities in the mind which we might agree on? For instance, qualities like beauty, or nature, peace, wonder, joy, pleasure, awe — and so on? Whatever else it may be, this precise location, and others like it provide us with opportunities to experience something more than mere sensory impressions. It is almost as if this beckoning of the river begins to meet a need we have to receive sensory information which we then project choicefully into our individual perceptions. — And there is the magical possibility, too, that the river may have a need to be seen. Having arrived at the sort of perception which is appropriate for each of us we may then proceed further along one cerebral pathway or another: the aah! path of pleasure and relaxation, or annoyance at being noticed by another river watcher, or contemplation. The river has now become an opportunity for what might come next. There is also the implication that we each come to the river by choice, seeking something: perhaps the opportunity for inspiration or for a particular enthusiasm.

Inspiration means to breathe in; it is our connectedness with everything that is in consciousness — and the word enthusiasm contains the Greek word for God, as does the word theory. To arrive at such a nexus on the river may have much to do with enthusiasm, with being possessed by God.

It is two days after my experience of seeing the spiraling pattern of leaves on the water. After two days of rain the river has risen more than a meter. It is a new river. Almost everything about it is different: its volume, its pace, its color — from grey-green to brown — the new sounds it now makes, the transformation of rapids into a related turbulence. As I sit writing in sunlight the near-flood has peaked; the level is now falling again and will continue to do so unless it rains again soon. How is the new river still the same river that I saw yesterday?

When I drift along the river in a canoe I often see a haze of insects a few millimeters above the surface. They, too, are part of the river, part of the system. This living top of the river must be typical of the living top of the planet, the biosphere. The two phenomena are really only one: the river and its miniature biosphere are systemic parts of the Earth and its biosphere.

After another near-flood the river is falling once more. Just below where I sit there are swirls and the turbulent boiling of water flowing upward while it also flows back against the stream — and at the same time is itself a new dynamic pattern which is contained by a larger part of the river. When I look further toward the two obvious mainstreams I notice their signatures of white water and the inverted V of apparently quiet water which lies between them. I know from my experience of swimming the river when it is like this that I gain some respite in such a V-shaped area: I can rest there without fear of being swept away because the water is almost still. When I look more closely now I see that there is a great deal of movement in the apparently still area: large slow spirals marked by froth and flotsam; some upward-flowing and back-flowing turbulence; wavelets reaching back upstream. When I swim and rest in such an area my senses tell me I am in still water; when I see from a distance it is obvious that there is no real stillness in the quieter water between the streams. The river always moves on, even when it is flowing against itself.

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Notes

1. "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly...It is nothing jointed: it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (James, 1890/1950, Vol. I, p. 239). "The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other molded forms of water. Even were the pails and pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook." (James, 1890/1950, Vol. I, p. 255). Quotes in Frager and Fadiman's textbook (1984, pp. 247, 281, 283).

2. See Smuts (1926). The notions of "holism," and of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts are from Smuts; he developed his arguments from the Greek philosophers (e.g., all things come to be as wholes).

3. "The Gaia hypothesis, if taken seriously, has logical implications that call into question the mechanical model of perception upon which most contemporary scientific discourse is based. These implications reach beyond the separate sciences and begin to influence our ordinary perceptual experience. To view Gaia as an entirely objective entity only trivializes the radical nature of the hypothesis." See Abram (1985). Abram has quoted part of Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis as: "...the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts." The notion of the biosphere as superorganism is examined in Lovelock (1982).