Time and the River

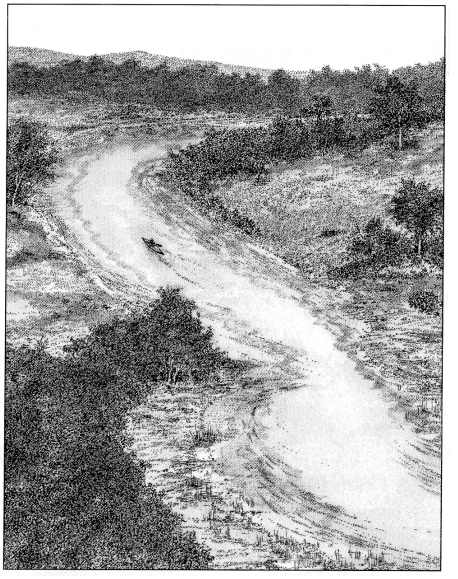
I once knew an eighty-year-old man whose passion was Sung Dynasty vases and whose choice of exercise was kayaking on the Concord River. Over the years he came to know the river intimately; he knew the quiet coves that the wood ducks favored and where to find the best pickerelweed beds. He also knew the location of a submerged stone wall just downstream from the North Bridge.

One quiet summer evening while he was out in his kayak, a high-speed powerboat, trailing a huge wake, sped by and swamped him. By way of revenge, the old man lured the offending vessel aground on the submerged wall, destroying the engine in the process.

The event is telling. In an age of cyberspace and cigarette boats, one wonders whether the art of knowing the waters, of intimacy with a river, is now the sole province of old people in kayaks and canoes. Time and running water seem inextricably bound, and in order to understand the meaning, to read the metaphors, it is possible that you have to have aged. World literature is filled with examples. Mark Twain wrote *Life on the Mississippi*, his account of the river he knew as a boy, when he was in his fifties. A year later, having got the particulars down, so to speak, he wrote the American classic *Huckleberry Finn*. Joseph Conrad had to retire from the sea before he could assemble *Heart of Darkness* from journal notes he had made years before on the Congo River. Norman Maclean wrote *A River Runs Through It* when he was in his seventies, haunted throughout his life, as he says, by the waters of the Big Blackfoot River, which he had known as a child. Edwin Way Teale saved his long-planned book about the Sudbury River, *A Conscious Stillness*, for the end, and in fact waited too long. He died while he was writing it.

A river, no matter how large or small, is really not any one thing. It is a compilation of waters, and the waters are compilations of lands, of hill brooks, of dells, swamps, upland marshes, forests, bogs, and those mossy little sinks you come across on mountaintops where wood frogs and toads seem to congregate. The essence is not what you see; it lies somewhere in the surrounding hills, between

waters and sky, between the narrow summer banks and the wide flooded shores of spring. And the meaning of river, in the larger sense, is obscure at best. You have to have lived through a series of years in one place to know that.



Henry Thoreau, who somehow assumed some of the wisdom of age before he died at forty-four, says if you can know the local waters you can know the universe. He ranked the poor "much abused Concord River" with the great rivers of the world, the Mississippi, the Ganges, the Nile. He saw the river as a constant lure to distant enterprise and adventure, an invitation to explore the interior of continents. Dwellers at headwaters would naturally be inclined to follow the trail of their waters to see the "end of the matter." He was thinking of earthly territory, of course, and the sea, but as always with Thoreau, he was also thinking of the great transcendental metaphors that are embodied in the natural world. "What a piece of wonder a river is," he wrote.

It is the natural conclusion for anyone who takes the idea of river to "the uttermost ends of the earth," as Conrad phrased it. But in the end it may not necessarily be age that allows insight. I once knew a little boy who from an early age had a natural fascination with running water. One day, standing on a bridge above the roaring waters of a brook, he turned and announced to no one in particular, "All the waters of the world come together."

Thoreau would have understood. So would the old people in kayaks and canoes.

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