

Salmon Theology: Return to Traditional Reasoning

Joseph Clair

Abstract—When beauty and utility are divorced in the loss of wonder, beauty begins to perish. Salmon go extinct. The fragility of beauty is the fragility of wilderness. It does not perish due to weakness but from the generosity and vulnerability that are bound up with its usefulness.

Introduction

Today we have heard about brilliant work, interesting research and thoughtful proposals on the state of salmon. I feel very fortunate to be part of such a symposium. But now I have the job of token-philosopher, the almost perverse task of standing up at the very end of the show and asking, “What does it all mean? No, what does it all *really* mean?!” I may never get used to the perversity of philosophy, but there is nothing I’d like to ask questions of meaning about more than salmon.

Contingency

Scientists tell me that the ancestors of Pacific salmon emerged a mere 18 million years ago. Most of the Pacific salmon runs as we know them today emerged 18,000 years ago, after the last glacial maximum, spawning in the great thaw.

The salmon myths of the indigenous people near my home, the Columbia River watershed, tell me of great Coyote running off the Ice People and defeating old man Blizzard to make winter easier and to make way for salmon. Coyote is the maker and helper of human beings, they say.

Scientists tell me that salmon can navigate the open sea and migrate thousands of miles relying solely on small particles of iron in their brain tissue and polarized ocean sunlight. Then, after landfall, salmon can migrate hundreds more miles up wide channels and narrow slots to the gravel beds of their birth relying solely on a keen sense of smell.

The salmon myths tell me that Coyote drove a hole through the Cascade Mountains and breached ancient dams to make way for salmon. He led the fish upstream to the starving people.

Scientists tell me that Earth is a rare planet in the galaxy and that H₂O is hard to find. Seventy percent of Earth’s sur-

face is water and so is seventy percent of the human body. Water is crucial to the variation, adaptability and resilience of life on this planet. Fish are therefore the prime example of the contingency of hydrogen and oxygen binding, river fish in particular, and anadromous fish the premier symbol of fortunate contingency, connecting fresh and salt, mountain and sea.

It could have been otherwise. Salmon didn’t have to run up the rivulets of thawed-out glaciers, from Baja to Yukon to Taiwan. The Pacific Rim has contingently evolved such that salmon continue to swim thousands of miles, up creeks and waterfalls, from gravel bed to natal gravel bed, and into human nets. They have done this for a long, long time. It could have been otherwise.

Beauty and Utility

Columbia River salmon mythology tells me that Coyote made Willamette Falls from the body of a woman. He squeezed the banks close together at The Dalles and he designed all falls, riffles and eddies to make fishing easier for humans.

This sense of the contingency of Coyote’s work signaled the importance of salmon as a divine gift. But it would be misleading to say that this sort of divine-gift-receiving was not a utility-based relationship also. They were as much concerned with commodities, resource supplies and protein-units as any of us who hope to winter over in the Northwest. In the people’s system of annual utility—catching and drying and trading—salmon myths functioned to remind them that the utility-cycle was much larger and older than the human animal’s memory stretched. In “ancient times,” the myths say, other animals had been privileged and depending on human behavior privileges would come and go. The utility of the salmon cycle wasn’t to be taken lightly, it was to be respected, celebrated and gratefully received. Catching them became art: work that paid attention to principles of generosity. Salmon were a way of life, based on utility, but also on consciousness of salmon’s independent relationship to a higher order of being, their participation in a larger story.

Wendell Berry says that one of the great crises in modernity is the divorce between beauty and utility. Saint Augustine said that utility disconnected from beauty is the root of our violent relationship with the natural world. He said that self-oriented pride blinds us from beauty, and thereby the “true utility,” which actually resides *in* things. The usefulness of things is often separated from their symbolic power to reveal higher forms of order and interdependence. This separation is part of the death of wonder. Wonder is a type of seeing, a vision, that gives us access to the beauty of things and places. This experience of ‘wonder unveiling beauty’ Henry Bugbee referred to as an experience of the *finality*

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of things, the reception of things in their *own* importance. Henry David Thoreau called it a glimpse of, “the infinite extent of our relations.” Gerard Manley Hopkins: “the dearest freshness deep down things.”

This makes me wonder what we Industrial people have been ‘seeing’ these past 150 years, since we arrived with our canning machines and dams and hatcheries? When we see salmon what do we see? Dollars and cents? Protein-units? Turbines and electricity bills? Surely we do, we must. We increasingly see only the usefulness or un-usefulness of salmon as our human populations increase and global markets competitively shift. A telling title in environmental ethics is Frank Ackerman’s new book, *Priceless: On Knowing the Cost of Everything and the Value of Nothing*. Salmon value is part of our commodified economic landscape. The otherwise-ness, the contingent-gift-ness of salmon leaping up waterfalls in spring is muffled by necessity in the ringing telephones, crying bellies and stacks of kitchen-table bills.

Fragility

In the salmon myths of the Columbia, ‘beauty and utility’ remain appropriately connected in the attitudes and practices of receptivity taught by Coyote: gratitude, celebration, order, and generosity:

“Then he and the people had a big feast—a feast of salmon cooked in the proper way, the way he explained to them. Coyote said to the animal people along Big River and along all the streams that flow into it, ‘Every spring the salmon will come up the river to lay their eggs. Every spring you must have a big feast like this to celebrate the coming of the salmon. Then you will thank the salmon spirits for guiding the fish up the streams to you, and your Salmon Chief will pray to those spirits to fill your fish traps.’”

When these practices and attitudes are forgotten or lost there are consequences. The relationship is fragile. When Coyote teaches the Columbia River people the appropriate ways to catch, clean, cook and celebrate the salmon’s miraculous annual return, he warns against greed. He makes Beaver the Salmon Chief and promises that there will always be enough salmon, even for strangers, if the people are not overtaken by excessive desire. “If you cook three salmon and can only eat half of one, the salmon people will be ashamed and will not return.”

Scientists tell me that 10–16 million Columbia River salmon used to return each year, but due to “anthropogenic threats” (over-fishing, dams, resource extraction and industrial influences, to name a few) the returns have recently dipped below 200,000. Pacific salmon have survived threats for 18 million years. These “anthropogenic threats” are less than 150 years old.

The beauty and utility of salmon have been separated long enough now that we must take account of how much has perished. This is the work of mourning. The salmon stories told by the Columbia River people today are mostly lamentations. This past year’s run of spring salmon was so meager that the tribes had to import salmon from other rivers for the First Fish ceremony in April. We can only mourn in part with Elizabeth Woody as she remembers Celilo, or with Sherman Alexie as he observes the ghosts of salmon jumping over Spokane Falls.

Memory

What right do we “white men” (new-comers) have in mourning the extinction of salmon? Not much. Our memory is too short. As Hopkins put it, “After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.” We do not have the cultural, tribal, co-evolved, storied-past and ancient memory with which to do any real mourning. But we mourn the perishing of beauty, even in an adolescent way. For some of us, the embodiment of beauty in these fish is the most of beauty we’ve known, quickly perishing as it is. For me, short-remembered, utility-and-pride-blinded, adolescent-new-comer that I am, literally, my first memory is salmon-fed.

I spent this past year in my childhood basement bedroom in Oregon. In between graduate degrees I decided to take a wonder-year back home to do some reflecting and reorienting before my next migration to New York City. I spent much of the year sick-and-tired, slowly realizing I had a genetic blood disorder that I did not want to realize, a lot of time on my bed or couch near the woodstove, living amidst the fragments of my past 25 years. My parents’ kindness has kept my bedroom pretty much intact since my departure, including shoeboxes of baseball cards, mini-compound bow-and-arrow, fly-rod, build-your-own moccasin-kit and snowboarding gear: the stuff that my kids will one day have to throw away. My parents figured my homecoming was a good chance to comb through the over-stuffed storage spaces of our house and *simplify* (or ‘make room for all the new crap,’ as it were). As I was combing through the artifacts, a Polaroid picture (fig. 1) slid out from between two boxes and fluttered to the linoleum floor. I couldn’t believe what I saw!

For many years I’ve had a vivid image of my first memory, my first self-conscious flicker, the first stored perception of something on my mind’s screen: I smell a coastal squall coming over Mary’s Peak, a giant western red cedar and my dad standing in the periphery. I see a coho salmon.

What blew my hair back about this photograph is that it seemed to be a picture of that exact flicker. A picture of me having my first memory. Strange. Mom says that I must be two-and-a-half years old because she can see my diaper underneath my pants and I’m wearing my big sister’s rubber boots. There is the coastal squall dark in the West behind me, a soggy Oregon afternoon, red cedar to my right, dad



Figure 1—Joey’s first memory (photo by Mary Ann Clair, 1982).

to my left, and there the coho. We are both about two-and-a-half feet tall.

What struck me when I picked the photo off the floor was the look on my face. I don't appear to be looking anywhere or at anything. I look astonished. I have the look of wonderment. I am rocked back in my oversized rubber boots, standing on my heels, mouth agape, screaming. Not crying, screaming for joy, for wonder, not just at the buck in my dad's upraised arm, but for wonder about a mystery that the fish represents, or symbolizes, or bears witness to. (Side-note: When I received an email awhile back about this symposium asking what sort of equipment I would need for my presentation, I realized I wasn't going to a humanities conference! I figured I should have some visual aid. My dad graciously flew up to join me here in Anchorage this week and brought me a picture of my first memory.

Please note that the wonder-look was not just county-fair, cotton-candied happiness. It was wonder, a scream for salmon-finality, both joy and fear. Riding my dad's back across the slick mouth of Fall Creek down to Alsea's Big Bend at two-and-a-half years old was sobering joy. Remember that river fishing the coastal streams for fall salmon is not some happy-summer-in-Montana-Brad-Pitt-fly-fishing-for-two-pound-trout-type of experience. For a two-year-old, coho fishing was as terrifying as a hospital delivery room and as melancholic as a nursing home. After five years feeding in the open sea those river deities became totally disproportionate to their little natal creek. Bucks thrashing around the hole, me stumbling onto rotting hens, jawing their last gasps, hidden in the long grass along the bank. The pungency of death and new life in the ceaseless sound and sight and smell of a rushing green river. My first memory is also my first experience of wonder, my first perception of beauty, my first experience with the finality of things: salmon.

To experience salmon in their own *finality*, to understand their own meaning, is to bump up against the edge of a mystery much larger and deeper than most of us realize. That is why these fish have historically inspired the most elaborate seasonal rituals and detailed stories, an attempt to make sense of their fortuitous annual arrival and attune ourselves to it. Salmon, more than any other character in Columbia River mythology, offer an insight into the very heart of being, a vision of the way things *really* are.

One of the great gifts of modern salmon biology has been the careful, intricate observation and narration of Pacific salmon's function as *keystone species*, contingently supporting multiple other species and weaving multiple ecosystems. From bears to eagles to humans to flora to fauna to nameless species we haven't yet named: salmon nourish others. The crucial nutrients and essential marine elements of salmon-chain-linked-life have been traced at the top of 200-foot spruce trees and in the embryos of salmon's very own offspring. Biologically we have only begun to understand "the infinite extent of their relations." If you think that giving life to others is beautiful then salmon are absolutely gorgeous.

It is a crucial historical moment for us, for salmon. It is time to offer salmon a gift in return: inland hospitality, maybe even sacrifice. To hear salmon stories, new and old, offers us an attunement to the landscape, people, fish and even ourselves. To celebrate salmon as a way of life offers us an assessment of our contemporary cultural attitudes and socio-economic practices. This assessment is a damning

critique and inspiration for new possibilities. Pacific salmon as *indicator species* are more than a 'canary in the coal shaft.' For Pacific Rim peoples they are an outright vivid, symbolic and substantial reminder of the hospitable wheel, the circle of sacrifices that makes our lives possible. To trespass on this beauty and stand by while it vanishes is more than an assault on bio-diversity, it is ignorance of a greater mystery.

In one short generation, in one life, salmon-inspired-wonder can birth a whole new tradition, or rebirth an old one, as it were. In the end, salmon will save themselves. New stories have emerged, lives have been made whole, and beauty continues to be revealed.

After this conference, instead of returning straight to the East Village in New York City, I will fly home with my dad to greet the returning salmon on our homestream, the Alsea. The coho have all but disappeared now. We will fish for their cousin the chinook. Sometimes I offer my dad a hand crossing the heavier riffles.

I am proud to bring a dime-bright 20 pounder home to my mom's table. We offer prayers of gratitude and butternut squash with brown sugar to celebrate the first fish's arrival. My dad doesn't keep fish anymore. He doesn't need to. I see him on the basalt bench down river, crouched with both hands in the cool water, reviving his catch in a quiet pool, muttering something, talking to the salmon. He leans down on his knees and kisses the fish before it swims away.

Why does he still fish? Hungry for wonder, I suppose. He prays that they will be around another year; around long enough for his grandchildren to experience wonder, to touch the finality of things, to see beauty. Each fish released is a prayer. So is every fish counted, every ecosystem fought for and kept intact, every sample taken, every report written, every observation noted, every sacrifice. Wonder gives way to beauty, gives way to mourning, gives way to hope: the place where prayer becomes action. I sincerely thank you for your work at that intersection where biology becomes story, becomes conservation. It is the action of hope and, I believe, the work of love.

Postscript (Three Days Later)

The sun is moving through mist in the Alsea valley. I stand on two rocks, my rod bouncing with a wild salmon. It's 6 a.m. and the fish is taking a heady run down the pool, possibly heading all the way back to sea. I am trembling on my homestream in the first light. I feel the nervous pulse of joy, gratitude, wonder and fear in having this huge salmon on my line, mixed with the awkward emotion of hooking and piercing something that you love. To my surprise the net is filled with a million ocean-going silver scales. A bright chinook: a 'keeper' on the Alsea. I realize it is the first salmon of the day on the bank, the first of the season. I feel torn. There is no guarantee I'll see another fish today, the river is low and clear, its early in the season, I have to go back to New York soon.

The act of offering first-fruits back to the earth, or first-fish back to the river, is supposed to be an act of gratitude, a sacrifice. It is a conscious act of remembering that everything is a gift from beyond yourself. (Sometimes the sacrifice feels more difficult, foolish and inefficient than others). The offering-back is symbolic, mysterious, and material gratitude. I raise the chinook to the lightening clouds. I let out a

two-and-a-half year old coyote-yelp of wonder and offer the king back to his river. The nervous salmon waves back into a million invisible currents of an underwater rhythm.

Nothing enjoys being tricked, pierced, dragged, netted and thrown back (even lovingly). Depending on water level and color and barometric pressure (and a whole host of superstitious fisherman speculations) salmon are more or less wary of biting your hook. They are not stupid, and I've never caught the same salmon twice.

You can imagine my surprise, when twenty-six minutes later, I'm standing on those two rocks, rod bent, line buried in the narrow slot and that same silver-scaled, sun-beamed, God-sent, gift-fish swam into my net. Infinite generosity. Another chance at salmon-wonder. Given once, given again, and again.

Inexplicably, the Alsea River was flooded with an early mystery-run of wild coho this year. They were stacked in like cordwood. We kept catching them, hand-over-fist, wide-eyed, all morning. What some fishermen might consider to be a catch-and-release, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife 'bother,' we met with honest-to-God-grateful-wonder and secret-delight as we kept on kissing and releasing coho with

prayers all morning...prayers for their journey, for this fall, and all falls. For as long as the coho run and the rains come and the gift-wheel whirls on and humans have the chance to admire, catch, and eat wild salmon, we will also have the chance to become wild, sacrificial, and self-giving like the salmon, and their Maker. The salmon-Maker is my own Maker.

Salmon, more than any other character in Columbia River mythology, offer an insight into the very heart of being, a vision of the way things *really* are. They poignantly embody the self-giveness of God's very Being in nature, which, in Western theological terms, is the "Christological" witness of creation. Theology says that we live in a "cruciform" cosmos wherein every life requires a series of gifts and sacrifices to continue and these salmon-gifts and river-sacrifices witness to and participate in the gift and sacrifice of God's own life given in creation and represented in the food of Christ's death and resurrection. Celebrating these mysteries opens the crucial connection between the beautiful, generous, sacrificial self-giveness of God's world (in salmon, in Christ) and the shape of our own lives.