

Creation Care Ministry, Saint Mark's Seattle

## Autumn Musings

*November 7, 2021*

Flight to Newark to see our daughter Kate, son-in-law Andre and of course baby Walter. Sitting next to two young Jersey girls who were vacationing in Seattle and are heading back home to Newark. We discuss accents. Travel. The pleasures of Seattle and its views. All of that water. In teacherly mode I describe how over two hundred years ago sailors “discovered” not just Puget Sound but that there was a naturally deep harbor close to where a major river –the Duwamish—flows into the Sound. River to Sound to Ocean. From ocean you then can travel all the way south along the North American coast and eventually turn left. Water can take you almost anywhere in this world.

We're in autumn and a return –blessedly – to rain. Rainfall on the low-lying plains. Snowfall in the mountains accumulating over centuries into glaciers which slowly and partially melt in the summer, feeding creeks and streams and rivers that in turn merge into larger rivers led by the beauty of that gravitational pull until, as the song says, the river meets the almighty sea.

Freshwater to saltwater. The mystery of what happens to salmon as they reach the ocean and swim in saltwater. And then back again to the river to spawn.

Last Saturday night Judy and I had salmon for dinner, along with a good salad and a nice bottle of something to drink, purchased at Pike and Western wine shop which has been at the Market since 1975 – coincidentally the same year we arrived in the Northwest. Good timing on our part. The salad ingredients came from the University Farmer's Market along with a few things from our p-patch. The salmon I purchased at the Pike Place Market from one of the fish purveyors there (not the one where they throw the fish around for the television cameras), a nice pound of coho which, I was told, came right off the Olympic Coast. I thought about all of this while we were eating, how spoiled we are out here; salmon you can find at the PCC, at the QFC and Safeway, at Costco. But for some reason, last Saturday night, as I ate that beautiful piece of fish, I really found myself thinking about the mystery of it all, how that common and yet miraculous fish had found its way as a fledgling down some narrow river and eventually out into that massive ocean, had lived, fed, swum, had a life for itself before finally obeying some ancient instinct which caused it to turn and head back to its natal river, make the climb up against gravity and god knows what other natural and man-made barriers until it finally reached its spawning grounds.

Or in this case, since we ate the fish, didn't.

Again, I'm aware of how common the story is, but that doesn't make it any less strange or miraculous. That fish had been all over and down under. It knew in its own salmon-like way worlds that are far beyond me. And then –it became me. Human made of fish.

October rains. The call to sleep while it's dark, to nap in the afternoon. To listen, to stare out the bedroom window at the massive Douglas Fir in the small front yard and the little bit of sky that I can see.

Just to stop.

We think that a good novel needs a fair amount of plot but does a good life? How much wandering in fact is necessary? Terry Gross asks Paul McCartney on Fresh Air what gives his life meaning at the age of eighty. He's still making music, he answers, but really it's family. Grandkids. Paul McCartney!

Bruce Springsteen talks with Barak Obama about kids and how they changed his life. He used to be up all night and would sleep in the day until his wife Patty told him that he's missing out on their growing up. He changed his pattern, started making breakfast for them and welcomed them in while he was working, risking the interruption of inspiration.

But of course this is the pondering of an retired male who is on his way to New Jersey to meet his first grandchild. Like that salmon this journey is ridiculously common, even cliched. But so what? Take nothing for granted. Salmon. A grandson.

My grandparents were once like that little one; they were born back in the 1890's. There were no cars, no planes, no television, no radio. No jazz, blues, rock and roll. My parents, born in the early 1920's. Judy and me, early 50's, our daughter, early 80's. And now the grandchild, born almost exactly a century after my folks, and who, God willing, could live into the twenty-second century. With grace and luck he will grow up, see something of the world, swim down that river out to the far reaches of the ocean – and then maybe come back, grateful for the journey. I wish him God speed.

Of course who knows what that world is going to look like in the year 2100? In these challenging days I'm struck by the insight of theologian Catherine Keller in her recent book *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances* (Orbis, 2021) as she wrestles with the imagery of plague and environmental destruction in John's *Revelations*:

To *mind* such metaphors is to recognize that John is *not predicting future facts*. But he may be *revealing fatal patterns*. We might read the images for meditation and for confrontation. Might facing the Apocalypse in its ancient intensity help us face apocalypse in our own time? Such "facing" would not mean mere recognition, submission, acquiescence. It means to confront the forces of destruction: to crack open, to disclose, a space where late chances, last chances, remain nonetheless real chances.

And now a short quiz:

In 1863 homesick European settlers released half a dozen rabbits in New Zealand –where rabbits were unknown – for the pleasure of “sportsmen and naturalists.” What do you suppose happened?

Correct! As Natalie Angier writes in her review of Mary Roach’s book *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law*, “facing no natural predators in their new setting, the founding rabbits followed classic ‘rabbit arithmetic,’ which says that two rabbits left unchecked will in three years spawn a staggering nine million descendants.” In short, the place was “overrun by bunnies – pastures destroyed, sheep farmers driven bankrupt.”

So what did they do?

Correct! “Call in a posse of rabbit predators.” They imported nearly eight thousand ferrets and stoats and unleashed domestic cats, “most of them feral, some stolen from pet owners.”

You can’t make this kind of thing up.

So what happened next?

Correct! The ferrets and stoats and cats ate rabbits all right, but “they also preyed on native wildlife: penguin eggs, kiwi chicks, rare reptiles.”

To get the rest of the story, see *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 2021 issue, or buy Mary Roach’s book.

—Doug Thorpe