

Wild Salmon

In the background is towering St. Anthony's Church near Tigard, Oregon with its rotting plum trees, brilliant stained glass, and high interior Jesus. But here, less than a football field's length from the altar, it is war. Coach is saying there is nothing more satisfying than when the man I am up against folds his cards and lets me sack the quarterback. A quiet voice inside me says, "Quit football. Come back to the creek and woods behind your house and learn who I am." Unfortunately, it is my turn to toss the blocker and tackle the runner. I take a deep asthmatic breath and aim my clenched hands five feet through the blocker's heart, as I was taught. In this moment with the evening sun behind Pacific Highway, I let go of my hesitation.

For many boys, the experience is probably different. They likely respect child-athletes they compete against from Portland-area and Vancouver parishes. I don't. The son of an alcoholic, I ride twin currents of anger and adrenalin. Coach uses my insane tackles and blocks as examples for other players. At the time, these compete with my remembered connection to places I have macheted trails, built tree forts, and stumbled upon deer, rabbits, orange newts, pheasants and giant owls.

Monday Night Football has taught me peak performance means total destruction of the opponent. One of the assistant coaches tells my father I hit people so hard, it scares him. I am an All Star tackler. A fifth grade kamikaze. I believe any time my team loses, it is only because I didn't try hard enough. Sometimes when we lose, I climb fir trees in grief and refuse to come down for hours. My Catholic school is preparing me to be a good soldier or corporate warrior. But I know that, hidden under these layers, my true desire is to be a good fisherman.

In the Pacific Northwest, the season of football is also the season of salmon. On days I'm not playing football, I watch huge silver slabs leaping against River Mill Dam on the nearby Clackamas River. Their focus is unmistakably clear: get to their spawning beds or die trying. This last part makes me identify with them. Standing beneath the dam, I watch salmon repeatedly smash themselves against vertical concrete, and disappear in churning foam, maybe taking their last gasps on the river bottom or gathering composure to try again. Here is my visual evidence that these salmon, like ancient Roman gladiators, never lose unless they die. However, their instinctive commitment seems justified while I am uncertain of mine.

Thirty-two years later, in 2006, at the conclusion of Portland General Electric's thirty year license to operate the dam, the company will agree to upgrade the fish ladder to improve upriver access for descendants of these fish. Their Web site will report that the Dam, built in 1911, "was very effective in its day." I will gasp in horror as I read this, thinking "Very effective? Certainly not for the many battered and stunned salmon and steelhead I saw sinking throughout my childhood and teen years."

I will read on *The Canadian Museum of Civilization Web site* that According to the Tsimshian [Native Americans], fish and people shared the same universal pool of souls. Schools of fish were villages of people in another world. Salmon people migrated yearly from their father's house at the mouth of the river to their mother's house at the headwaters. In the form of fish, they were appropriate food for people, who reciprocated the favour in the next incarnation. Lack of respect could sever this soul exchange and result in human starvation.

Back to 1974, even in fifth grade, I know there is something sacred about wild salmon. Jesus sacrifices his body each Sunday in the Eucharist. Chrome-bright salmon sacrifice their red flesh each fall and spring on Northwest dinner tables. The darker fish that make it upriver die beautiful black and flame-colored deaths. It is for this reason, seeing fish spawned in hatcheries on television makes me sad. After hatchery salmon fight their way past seals, sharks, trollers, gill nets, pollution, anglers, snaggers, and dams, instead of a serene pool of hovering autumn leaves for their ancient spawning ritual, they meet gray square concrete raceways, plastic five gallon buckets for their eggs and milt, and trash bins for their tired bodies that biologists say may have traveled thousands of miles in the Pacific Ocean to arrive at this unholy moment. Either that, or they are hole punched like factory time cards and "recycled" downstream to give anglers another chance to catch them. Eventually, hatcheries report, their corpses are used for landfill or fishmeal.

This is a stark contrast from the way I see wild salmon pair up on Eagle Creek that runs into the Clackamas River, not far from my house. Each season I watch them make redds with their broad tails, turn from silver to crimson to gold to reddish black, spawn, and die quickly, their curved jaws almost smiling.

As an eleven-year-old at football practice, running laps around St. Anthony's baseball diamonds, a haunting thought occurs to me: "What if, spiritually speaking, we are all hatchery salmon? What if the Universe is merely using us to coldly harvest the vast multitude of ideas in our minds? The energy

that gives rise to and sustains each successive Universe must be trillions of years old. I wonder what *It* values? Is love, *as any human defines it*, really part of the equation? Will all of us ultimately suffer our own miserable fates like these hatchery salmon in some great cosmic trash bin? And what is the true human equivalent of the wild salmon's honorable sacrifice?"

In a way, what is happening to hatchery salmon is also happening to me, psychologically, in football in the sense my alignment with the Creator is being silenced by forces of popular culture. This thought will haunt me throughout my football career. It will follow me as I play varsity football as a sophomore at St. Mary's in Cheyenne, Wyoming, breaking Matt Brinkman's leg. And, as a senior defensive end at Tigard High School, where the highpoint of my career will be to sack Beaverton Beavers' quarterback Roggy Pflug, and make a game-saving tackle in Tigard's early victory before the Beaverton team emerges as the 1980 State Football Champions. After the Tigard-Beaverton game, my teammates will congratulate me in the local pizza parlor on Pacific Highway just up the road from St. Anthony's Church amid my boyhood memories of the unconscionable compromises to attain this goal. The realization will sink in that, like hatchery salmon, my life has been one ill-fated circle. I will long for wilderness and wild creatures.

Three and a half years later, this dissatisfaction will build until I will be sorry I ever played organized football after third grade, and sorry for all the unnecessary years I spent in educational boxes while the fall leaves exploded in color, the quiet mountain snows fell, and the Oregon springs blossomed.

As a 21-year-old commercial salmon troller and charter-boat captain of the *Starfisher* in Depoe Bay, Oregon in 1984, I finally reconnected the severed relationships with wild animals that I enjoyed in the wild forests directly behind my house in my grade school years. Orcas, basking sharks, sea turtles, puffins, albatross, seals, halibut, salmon, and rockfish brought a deep sense of being home again in the world. On one of my trips to Newport for charter supplies, I saw a bumper sticker on a rusted blue truck, "Real Oregonians Don't Eat Feedlot Salmon." In my mind, reflecting on grade school and high school football experiences, I added aloud "[Or Act Like Them]". I remembered babysitting five-year-old Michael Bogle during Monday Night Football, and him asking, innocently, "Why don't they just give both teams a ball?"

Later, I heard Joseph Campbell speaking in a video *Transformations of Myth Through Time, Program 2* about a Navajo story, "Where the Two Came to Their Father," in which Changing Woman gave birth to two sons. The first boy, whose father is the sun, is born "Killer of Enemies," an "outward-

directed” “warrior.” The second boy, whose father is the moon, is born a shamanistic “medicine man” called “Child of the Water.” Watching this video, it occurred to me that part of my resentment against my culture came from being born a “Child of the Water” later pressured by peers, elders, cultural heroes, the media, and myself in my formative years to become a socially-bastardized version of “Killer of Enemies” I was never intended to be.

Now, forty-seven, I am drawing from my “Child of the Water” intuitive side to make salmon art. The 2007 Spirit of the Salmon Fund for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission < http://www.critfc.org/Gala/the_art.html > sold my pieces “River Fire” and “Fall Chinook” in their Wy•Kan•Ush•Pum Gala with proceeds going to wild salmon restoration. Additionally, Columbia River Gallery outside Portland sold “Return to the Source” and accepted a few other pieces. More recently, Gary Lawrence selected two of my pieces for an exhibit at the City of Gresham, Oregon, Visual Arts Gallery, and The Clackamas Arts Alliance granted me a January 14 to April 8, 2010 show in their 3-D Gallery.

When making the art, I remembered two pieces of literature. The first was from Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* when Guildenstern said, "There must have been a point somewhere at the beginning when we could have said -- no. But somehow we missed it." This was the feeling I had giving up my time with forest creatures and wild salmon for grade school and high school football. It is also the feeling I have now as I read about narwhals and polar bears' demise as a result of global warming, and immense human suffering as a result of the global financial crisis.

The second piece of literature was a section of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, written by Willa Cather in 1927.

He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible. [. . .] One morning, several weeks after the Bishop came back to Santa Fé, one of the strong people of the old

deep days of life did appear, not in memory but in the flesh, in the shallow light of the present; Eusabio the Navajo. [. . .]

"I have wished for this meeting, my friend. I had thought of asking you to come, but it is a long way."

The old Navajo smiled. "Not long now, any more. I come on the cars, Padre. I get on the cars at Gallup, and the same day I am here. You remember when we come together once to Santa Fé from my

country? How long it take us? Two weeks, pretty near. Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things."

Moments of reflection on my rushed, wasted years trying to gain social approval are painful but productive. “The old deep days of life” in my boyhood forests were silenced but never completely removed. Making clay and mixed-media salmon art requires me to slowly wade rivers whose names include Clackamas, Sandy, Nestucca, Wilson, Trask, Kilchis, Siletz, Deschutes, Rogue, Kalama, Grande Ronde, Wallowa and others. It means slowing down to watch redd-making, dying and dead wild salmon and steelhead, as well as working with river teeth, driftwood, and whatever the world brings in both inner and outer realms. One summer day last year, just before dark, I stood on the bank of a small coastal creek near Astoria with my girlfriend and watched huge fall chinook slabs splash through the riffles. We watched over twenty salmon in less than two hours. Even though they weren’t biting, being in their presence gave me a deep satisfaction I never found in football, Catholic school, television, movies, or public education.

I am part Celtic, I am not Navajo. Therefore, I do not claim to be an authentic “Child of the Water” medicine man. In addition, my life has swerved too far off that course for too many years. The best I can hope for is to get on the right path now, and stay on it as long as possible. Making art, I often wonder, where in our culture is the useful education of boys in the United States born as the Navajo equivalent of “Child of the Water”? Where are the places, mentors, rituals, stories, and art works in the Pacific Northwest and beyond that have transformative powers to feed and develop these souls?