

In the Spirit of the River

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Today's Readings & Sources:

"I'm Not the River" by Mary Oliver

"At the River Clarion" by Mary Oliver

"The Unbreakable Thread" by David James Duncan, *The Sun*, November 2014.

"Siddhartha" by Hermann Hesse, p106.

{Sing Volga River song}

This was a song taught to me by an Estonian woman who lived at an assisted living facility where I worked many years ago. She was perhaps 90 years old and I kind of fell in love with her. After teaching this song to me, I asked, "Marta, what does this mean?" And she looked at me with her crystal clear blue eyes and spoke, as much with her hands as with her voice, "Volga....Mother of rivers."

O Mother! ... Necklace adorning the worlds!

Banner rising to heaven!

I ask that I may leave of this body on your banks,

Drinking your water, rolling in your waves.

Remembering your name, bestowing my gaze upon you.

These are the words of the Gangashtakam; a sacred Hindu hymn where one expresses ones longing to be united with the holy Ganges River upon death.

In the Vedas, Indra, the Lord of Heaven slays a heavenly serpent, Vritra; it's liquid, the nectar of the gods descends to earth as the sacred Ganges River; a river connecting the earthly and heavenly realms. The Ganges – a banner rising to heaven.

Just a few weeks ago, along the banks of the holy Bagmati River in Kathmandu, Nepal; I saw bodies first being dipped in the river three times so that the endless cycle of samsara, the endless cycle of rebirth and death, could be ended and Nirvana realized. The body is then ceremoniously prepared for cremation. The lighting of the funeral pyre along the river bank then followed. The ashes are then

placed in the river. It is a great honor for believers to have their ashes placed in such a holy river.

In Greek mythology we have the River Styx. A river that forms the boundary between the Earth and the Underworld. In contrast to the Ganges, the River Styx is a dread river of oath. Zeus demanded that oaths be sworn upon the river. A ferryman ushers departed souls across to enter the Underworld. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Siddhartha of today's earlier reading, after a life of chasing after God, Nirvana and enlightenment, ends up being a ferryman, ushering people across a river that most simply view as a traveling inconvenience.

In the middle east we have the River Jordan; a river that runs through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. It is the border between Jordan and Israel; and it runs along the disputed West Bank. After years of wandering, the Israelites finally enter the promised land when crossing the River Jordan.

...As soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing...while the water flowing down to the Sea Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off.... The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completely crossed on dry ground (Joshua 3: 13-17)."

And then there's our Chattahoochee River. The Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area website says that it is "an ancient river in a modern city." Chattahoochee means the river of painted rocks (or painted cliffs). There is archaeological evidence indicates that humans have lived along its banks as far back as 1000 BC.

Without a doubt, the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, a string of natural areas along the river from Lake Lanier down to near the Atlanta Braves new ballpark, is my favorite part of metro Atlanta. Having such an ancient river and pristinely preserved natural areas in such a large metro area is truly unique. In the West Palisades section, you can feel like you're in a remote wilderness setting yet you're less than two miles from the massive I-75 / I-285 junction near the Braves ballpark.

<https://www.nps.gov/chat/planyourvisit/maps.htm>

No, I don't go on the river itself and no, I'm not a fisherman. I hike and run on its neighboring trails. I'm familiar with the turtles at Vickery Creek, the herons of Gold Branch, the geese at Island Ford, the deer at Sope Creek and the owls of the Palisade cliffs. There's even an old nineteenth century cemetery in Cochran Shoals.

Writer David James Duncan writes:

Smaller rivers and streams especially led to mesmerizing glimpses on an interior wild corresponding to, and made accessible by, the exterior wilds through which my favorite rivers ran.... I sensed something extraordinary hiding inside my boyhood passion for fishing. I'd heard at church that the kingdom of heaven is within me, but our preachers proclaimed a faith that excluded everyone I knew but a small fold of yeasayers. Whereas the first time I walked up a trout stream, rod in hand, I was struck all day, and on a thousands of days to follow, by a suspicion that mountains and rivers are myself, turned inside out. This truth had been presenting itself in spirit-thread form since earliest childhood, but due to the influence of stone-cold religion, and to the scientism, realpolitik, and social and hormonal chaos we were legally forbidden to escape in school, I had trouble catching hold of this promising thread [until much later].
(David James Duncan, "The Unbreakable Thread," *The Sun*, p40)"

He talks of an interior wild corresponding to an exterior wild. He talks of a kingdom of heaven within him; and that kingdom within when turned inside out is made manifest in the mountains and in his favorite rivers and streams. He talks of an intuitive spirit-thread he'd known all his life – though a spirit thread that had been covered up in the clutter of everyday life.

He then tells the story where he comes to experience, not simply feel, not simply intuit, this spirit-thread for the first time. He goes deep into the Cascade wilderness to fish at a place beyond where any ever fish. It is dusk. Using a light line he hooks a huge steelhead, one that he could never reel in, one that could easily snap his light line. He loosens up. He surrenders to the fish. He decides to let the steelhead do whatever it wants to do. Instead of bolting and snapping the

line, it simply ignores him; hook, line, tension; and continues its migration from the Pacific to its birthplace in the mountains.

He allows the steelhead to lead him. The sun sets into a moonless night. He's led upstream, over boulders and through rapids. Hours pass. He can feel every thrust of the fish, every swish of its tail. In his connection with the fish he loses his own sense of self and he is transported into a fearless realm where everything is right; everything is right because it simply is; and he is a part of it. He is not "interconnected" to all that is, he "is" it. He is part of all that is. His gentle and light line has transformed into a spirit-thread connecting him, for the first time to something that for all his life he had only intuited; the spirit-thread had connected him, through the steelhead, to all that is.

Every time I volunteer at NFCC, I'm drawn to any stack of old LPs, vinyl records from yesteryear. I'm not alone in this, every time we volunteer there, many of us end up leafing through the old record stacks. Anyway, I'm going through the stacks a couple of weeks back I am across one of those albums that fall into the category of "an album you've always wanted but never actually go around to buying." For a buck how could you go wrong?

I bought an album of songs sung by a Bulgarian women's choir – interesting stuff. Technically speaking, music can be said to consist of melody, harmony and rhythm. Often in Bulgarian choral music, the melodies, generally speaking, aren't too complex; the harmonies can be quite dissonant at times, which I personally find most interesting; and the rhythms are definitely not 4/4. The time signature of a Bulgarian tune might be in 25/16 or 13/16...something like that.

Anyway, I get home and cue the record and I'm getting into the melody, harmony and rhythm. But often, underneath all that, there might be a group of singers singing a sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, low, flat, vibrato-less drone. "Ahhhhhhhhhh." I hear this and I think of the Siddhartha reading that was read earlier in the service.

"That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the

shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future (Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, p106).”

It’s as if the singers are singing a drone that is everywhere at the same time. The singers could be singing Om “Oooooooooom.” It’s everywhere, underneath the melody, harmony and rhythm, and underneath any changes in melody, harmony and rhythm. There is always that low, flat, vibrato-less vibration of a single drone note....a note that I now call Siddhartha’s “river note.” It is a musical form of the spirit-thread.

Siddhartha would say too that your life is like a river that exists outside of time, that it has no past, future or even present; that the past, future and present exist for it – for the river of your life that always was, always is, and always will be. And underneath it all, underneath the melody, harmony and rhythm of your life – the goings to and from work, shopping for groceries, pumping gas, making love, dropping the kids off from school, taking them to their karate lessons – underneath all that is that low, flat, vibrato-less drone of “Om.” Your spirit thread. Your river note. May the discovery of that be your life’s work.

*O Mother! ... Necklace adorning the worlds!
Banner rising to heaven!
I ask that I may leave of this body on your banks,
Drinking your water, rolling in your waves.
Remembering your name, bestowing my gaze upon you.*