

10/24/10

“Life Lessons from another Species”

David R. Hudson

“I inch down the bank crabwise in the wet darkness, the heels of the waders digging furrows in the mud.

On the bank of the river at the bottom of the ravine I hold my breath and let my ears readjust to the sounds of the water. I think I can hear through the cascades of sound a systematic plop, plop, plop, as if pieces of fruit are being dropped into the water. Sometimes this is the sound of a fish searching for the opening upstream; sometimes it is not. I breathe quietly and wait...and then it stops. I wait and wait, I hold my breath but do not hear the sound again.....I yank on the long piece of parachute cord holding open the gate at the mouth of the weir, and it falls closed.

And now that I am no longer trying to sort one sound from another in the sound of the water, it is as if the water has become silent. It is dark....black....When I hear the sound I am waiting for, it is unmistakable: the sound of a full-grown salmon leaping wholly out of the water and twisting back into it. My straining senses slow down the sound so that each of its parts can be heard separately. A hiss, barely perceptible, as the fish muscles itself right out of its living medium; a silence like a dozen monks pausing too long between the strophes of a chant as the creature arcs through the dangerous air; a crash as of a basketball going through a plate glass window as he or she returns to the velvet embrace of the water; and then a thousand tiny bells struck once only as the shards of water fall and the surface of the stream regains its viscous integrity.

I flick on my headlamp and the whole backwater pool seems to leap toward me. The silver streak that crosses the enclosure in an instant is a flash of lightening within my skull, one which heals the wound that has separated me from this moment – from any moment. The encounter is so perfectly complex, timeless, and reciprocal that it takes on an objective reality of its own. I am able to walk around it as if it were a block of carved stone. My feelings (are) equal parts of dumb wonder and clean exhilaration, colored through with a sense of abiding dread. I could write a book about it.”

And he – one Freeman House - did. This passage is from the first chapter of his book *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from another Species*, which has been called “the quintessential deep ecology book”. It is about his twenty-year effort with a small group of lay people to restore one of the last purely-

native runs of king salmon on the West Coast – on the Mattole River in far northern, Humboldt County, California, and it is about what he learned through that effort.

House, an intellectual and sometime commercial salmon fisherman, had gotten involved in the emerging bioregional movement in San Francisco in the mid-seventies – a movement that seeks to understand what makes geographical areas distinct biologically, geologically, ecologically and what those distinctions might tell us about how we should live in them.

So, it was no accident, when House, his life's partner, and their daughter moved to Humboldt County as back-to-the-landers in 1980, that they became engaged in the effort to save salmon. He and his friends, who called themselves the Salmon Group, convinced the state Resources Department, through diligence and luck and connections and stubbornness, to let them capture salmon in their breeding streams (as he begins to describe in the passage I just read), take eggs from the females, fertilize them with captured males held in their hands, raise the fry in specially-designed and carefully-monitored troughs above the banks of the streams, and release them back into the river.

This effort to propagate the race of wild salmon distinct to the Mattole River basin had some success, but, like the massive salmon propagation the state had been doing for a century, raising salmon in hatcheries and releasing them throughout the state, while it increased the numbers of viable fry, it did not address the health of the river and its tributaries, which alone could ensure the ultimate survival of the salmon.

In his new home in the Mattole River Valley, House came to know viscerally what he had long known intellectually from his bioregional work: that the health of the Mattole River salmon as a race depended on the health of the entire environment – not just the water itself – but the banks and the hills and mountains above them – the tree cover – the pattern of the roads that coursed through them – and so forth.

Releasing young salmon every year could never bring back the salmon. The salmon were teaching them about watersheds, he says.

So they formed the Mattole Restoration Council - back-to-the-landers, biologists, do-gooders engaging with ranchers whose ancestors settled the valley in the 19th century, loggers, timber companies, others. Slowly, patiently they addressed these issues, and the river began to heal.

One of the fundamental lessons that House learned from the salmon – or relearned – was what he calls *the power of place to teach us how to act*. For the Salmon Group and the Mattole Restoration Council that meant coming to understand that clear-cutting on steep mountainsides above a river increases erosion exponentially, filling the waterways with silt, covering the salmon nesting sites – filling the river with more water than it can handle after a rain – washing banks clear of the brush that provides shade and cover for fish – that roads become culverts for water racing down a slope, if improperly constructed.

Place can teach us how to act, *if we are attentive to our surroundings*. Through observation – “systematic attentiveness”, he calls it – mindfulness, really - we can become aware of the relationships of a place, its geology and terrain, and its inhabitants – and we then can act in a way to preserve the balance of the place – if that is our goal.

Human history offers examples of harmonious living in place – like that of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, who built a culture over several thousands of years around the salmon who returned from the sea annually to spawn in the rivers of the region.

But human history also contains countless examples of environmental degradation that resulted from not understanding – or willfully ignoring - the lessons of place: the plowing of the prairies in Oklahoma , removing the long-rooted grasses that both built the soil and kept in place – allowing the soil to blow away in the dust bowl of the Depression; the denuding of Easter Island by its Polynesian inhabitants for logs to transport their giant stone sculptures; the building of levees along the Mississippi that funnel silt from the entire river basin out into the Gulf of Mexico, preventing it from replenishing the marshes of the delta at its mouth; and, of course, the clear-cutting of the old-growth forests in the watersheds of the Pacific Northwest. These are just a few of the many.

We understand how those living closer to the natural world might be more aware of the power of place to change behavior than we here in the suburbs and city. Those in the Mattole River valley, for example, might see much more easily the results of changes in their behavior - in the ways they harvest timber or manage their fields and pastures. But how does this idea apply to us?

I can walk the creek behind our house about half a mile to the Chattahoochee River and see how whatever I put on my lawn – fertilizer, pesticide, weed-killer – will end up in the river. I can see silt in the streams

that most likely washed off construction sites. I can see the beaver and otter, ducks and fish, as I do on my regular runs, and know that they are affected by what washes into their homes.

We can support the Upper Chattahoochee River Keeper and Adopt-a-Stream in their efforts to educate us all and to monitor the health of the environment; we can reduce the use of chemicals on our lawns; we can build our houses in ways to take advantage of the shade of trees – or to take advantage of a southerly exposure for warmth or electricity generation, but the affect of our awareness of place on our lives would seem to be more limited for us than for those out in the country.

Through “systematic attentiveness” House, and his friends learned, as he puts it, that “the happiness of humans has a great deal in common with the happiness of salmon” – which is to say that – to survive and thrive we – humans and salmon – need essentially the same forms of sustenance and protection – food, clean water, oxygen to breathe, shelter from predators, a safe place to raise our offspring, protection from extremes of heat and cold. This shouldn’t surprise us; after all, before we were furry, squirrel-like tree dwellers, before we were snakes and salamanders, we were fish – way back in our evolutionary history. And somewhere deep in our genes, House says, lays the memory of the elemental needs of those ancestors. Sounds strange doesn’t it – fish as ancestors!

For House it took the drama of dying fish flopping around on the deck of an Alaskan salmon boat to bring that home. But this epiphany can come more quietly, as it has for me, standing amid the giant oaks and poplars in my backyard, consciously attentive, feeling the sap flowing through them as the blood in my veins. It comes as Thoreau and Emerson have told us it will – if we are quiet and open and receptive to it.

This gut-level recognition of the common needs of the many different inhabitants of a place was a deep learning for House and friends. But perhaps the deepest learning for those engaged with the Mattole Watershed restoration – a learning related to this recognition of common needs – came through the process of engagement with the whole that their effort represented – the whole watershed and all of its inhabitants, human and other. And this is the lesson that is the most important for us – wherever we live.

And that is that each person – no, each creature – holds a piece of the Truth, as the Quakers say – an “exceptionally vital piece of the truth”, as House says.

The Mattole Restoration Council succeeded because it respected and included the positions of each of its disparate members, because its members recognized that they all have the same basic needs, enough that each came to understand that they had a fundamental common interest - that there was a common good - the health of the watershed.

Progress was slow - and incomplete. They used a consensus model, and consensus was sometimes impossible to achieve. Common ground couldn't be found. For example, an effort to accept guidelines for the use and stewardship of privately-held old growth forests was blocked by two landowners who feared that such a policy might be used against them in the future by outside agencies unfamiliar with the particulars of their place and time.

But when one considers the widely disparate interests that made up the Council, it would seem a small miracle that they were able to cooperate at all - industrial timber companies, loggers, fishermen, ranchers, tree-hugging back-to-the-landers (like me).

From my perspective, this is a profoundly religious learning. It's a living example of what Process Theologians describe as "creative interchange" - which I have mentioned many times before - what they define as the creation of goodness - whereby people listen deeply to each other and incorporate the other's perspectives into their own in a way that profoundly changes them - each of them - and produces new perspectives - hence the term, "creative interchange". This is the process that theologian Henry Nelson Wieman calls *God* (which you should know, if you've been paying attention).

The Buddhist nun Pema Chodron teaches us that calm attentiveness is an antidote to reactivity and a key to accepting both ourselves and others. The Mattole Council learned, through such calm attentiveness that - in the words of Freeman House - "vital communities are those that include every creature and every human neighbor." What a learning! It's both a learning and a manifestation of several of our most revered principles - inherent worth and dignity of every person, acceptance of one another, the use of the democratic process, and respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part.

The philosopher John Dewey tells us that the best learning is experiential - that we learn best by doing. House's corollary is that our world cannot be interpreted to us by others. Nor can our community. To know it we must

engage with it honestly, openly, intimately – learning its intricacies through careful attentiveness.

Some of the huge mistakes of our human past we have made by not understanding place – or our part in it – or by ignoring the implications and imperatives of place – be that place a natural system or a human community – the Great Plains and prairies of mid-nineteenth century – or a modern corporation or a state or a church.

The life lesson from the salmon – or any creature to which we might attend carefully – House articulates beautifully. It is the lesson of Buddhism – and, in one form or another, of all religion, I imagine. It is the lesson of Martin Luther King, who tells us, “I am not whole until you are whole.” It is the lesson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who talks about the great Oneness in which we all reside. House says, simply and profoundly, “There is no separate life.....Engaging with the expansive community offers the best hope of realizing ourselves as fully human. ”

But, now, back to the river on that cold, wet New Year’s Eve of 1982 and his engagement with the salmon.

“King salmon and I are together in the water.....The basic bone-felt nature of this encounter never changes, even though I have spent parts of a lifetime seeking the meeting and puzzling over its meaning.....I waded into the watery pen. Nowhere is the water deeper than my knees....The pen is small enough so that anywhere I stand I dominate half its area. Here, within miles of its headwaters the river is no more than thirty feet across.....I waded slowly back and forth to get a sense of the fish’s speed and strength. This one seems to be a female, recently arrived. When she swims between my feet I can see the gentle swollen curve from gill to tail where her three to five thousand eggs are carried. She explores this new barrier to her upstream migration powerfully and methodically, surging from one side of the enclosure to another.

Using the handle of the net to balance myself against the current, I find the edge of the pen farthest from the shore, turn off the headlamp, and stand quietly, listening again....The whole weight of the river seems to tear against my legs as I take the few steps toward her. I reach over her with the net so that she lies between me and the mesh hoop. I hold the net stationary and kick at the water near her tail; she twists away from me and into the net....I move her toward deeper water and rest.....I reach for the PVC tube and position its open mouth where I want it.....I move the net and the fish around to my left side and grasp through the net the narrow part of her

body just forward of her tail – where she is still twice the thickness of my wrist.

I only have enough strength to turn her one way or the other ...not lift her....I drop the handle of the net and move the fish forward, toward the tube....There is a moment when I am holding the salmon when everything goes still....her gills pump and relax, pump and relax, measured and calmly regular....there is a sense of great peacefulness, as when watching the rise and fall of a sleeping lover's chest. When I loosen my grasp, she swims out of the net and into the small enclosure.....(now) she lies quietly, the tube just submerged and tethered to a stout willow. I sit down beside the dark and noisy river, beside the captured female salmon. I am sweating inside my rubber gear. The rain has begun again. I think about the New Year and the promise of the eggs inside her. I am surrounded by ghosts that rise off the river like scant fog."

May we engage the expansive community as passionately, and may the ghosts that rise before us be images of meaningful encounters, lessons learned, relationships formed, attentiveness rewarded.

May it be so.