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JANUARY 6, 2019 ([HTTPS://COLUMBIAREDIVIVA.ORG/HEARTS-LIKE-THE-MOUNTAINS-2/](https://columbiarediviva.org/hearts-like-the-mountains-2/)) | BY  
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## Hearts Like the Mountains

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*This essay is adapted from the author's talk to representatives of 15 Native American Tribes and First Nations at "One River, Ethics Matter - the 5th annual international ethics conference on the past and future of the Columbia River" in Missoula, MT on May 11th, 2018. As Canada and the United States began negotiations on a new Columbia River Treaty, Tribes and First Nations were excluded from participation.*

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## I have a friend, a fine old poet named Tom Crawford...

Who has reminded me of wild Columbia and Snake River salmon these past months because Tom too is now lying close to extinction's door.

Endangered in several ways, he drifts in and out in the way our last few wild salmon and steelhead drift in and out. That shared tenuousness, Tom's and salmon's, make both more precious to me. Here's part of a poem Tom was working on before things got tough.

Boys know what the tribes know: the fishing hole is sacred.  
A young woman, seated in front of a thick glass window  
inside a dam on the Columbia, counts salmon.

Her holy grail: open the dying horse's mouth; count  
its last few teeth; keep trying to sell the horse anyway.

When my novelist friend, facing the PBS camera, tells us that  
when we destroy nature's fabric everything comes unraveled,  
I feel the old dip net inside me come alive, scoop down.

But you can't take that into the lab. Our tool box is so small,  
yet we keep reaching into it. One man slits the belly of a female  
while another pours her thousand eggs into a plastic sack.

A third man, clutching a male, milks in its sperm. All to fetch  
a few sockeye the 900 miles home to Idaho's alpine Redfish Lake.

Our rivers are paved with the dams of our good intentions.



Salmon leap at Willamette Falls, Oregon

The last time I spoke with my endangered friend he had just had a dream. In the kind of weak, extra-endearing voice some wise old men have, he told me it turns out that Mother Teresa is still alive, and more powerful than ever in spirit. But her body is like an icon in appearance, about the size of a three-year-old child, with a range of movement little more limber than a wooden icon's. So at age 79, Tom got a new job. At Mother Teresa's request, he picks her up in his arms and carries her as she directs him to places where crowds have gathered. When he sets her down Mother T then

speaks to the people, blowing them away with a love and wisdom that now seem boundless. After which Tom picks her up again and carries her away, as directed, to the next place and crowd.

When my friend signed off I sat quiet for a long time, feeling the old dip net inside me come alive, scoop down, and marvel at how beautiful some ragged old hearts manage to become. I share this story because, when it comes to the question of how to heal the 260,000 square miles of the Columbia/Snake watershed in a time of climate change, I believe that ragged, beautiful old hearts have everything to do with our purposes.

You'll notice I call the great river the Columbia/Snake. I'd call it by its tribal name but I can't say it right and—a detail I love—the people who do say the word right refuse to spell it, knowing white folks will just mispronounce it. Thank you for remembering that the word *sacred* is nearly synonymous with *secret*. I call our river the Columbia/Snake because the Snake is no more a tributary of the Columbia than is the Columbia a trib of the Snake. The river entire is shaped like a wishbone, the upper Columbia one branch, the Snake the other.

Measured from the two rivers' confluence, the 1,100 mile Snake is longer than the Columbia by 270 miles. More central to a lot of us, the Snake's headwaters comprise a huge network of climate-change resistant, high elevation, pristine-watered rivers and streams that until recently burgeoned with salmon and steelhead. With four lower Snake River dams gone, 5,500 miles of near-perfect habitat would be accessible again, offering us the largest salmon recovery in history. Is there another river on earth more worth naming? Not where I live.

Why do I say we need beautiful old hearts to pursue spiritual, social and ecological transformation in a climate-change-threatened river system? Here's just one of countless examples: four hundred dams and thousands of miles of slackwater now heat the system's flows so horribly that, in the summer of 2015, most the year's adult salmon and steelhead cooked in the lower river before they even reached the John Day, 200 miles from the Pacific.

Why did this happen? Because bureaucrats and politicians in charge of those salmon couldn't see mass slaughter coming. As the old saying goes, *No News is Fox News*: the bureaucrats denied climate change, ignored the hottest decade in history, ran the grid for maximum hydro in torrid heat, handed America the largest man-made salmon slaughter in its history, walked away scot-free, and *still* have the gall to call their manipulations of dams, grid, river temp and flow not just *stewardship*, but "salmon recovery efforts." A recovery effort that cooks to death, to name just one casualty, half a million perfectly healthy sockeye trying to swim home to the Okanogan falls outside any definition of recovery I'm aware of. And the financial and cultural loss to a people for whom wild salmon are the spiritual lodestone is incalculable.

So, an obvious difficulty in real river recovery: how to disenfranchise concrete-and-rebar-hearted bureaucrats and empower the watershed's beautiful old hearts instead?





Our techno-industrial approach to producing salmon has left them more vulnerable than ever to changing conditions in their environment. Here, an entire batch of hatchery juveniles wiped out by a virus. *Steve Pettit photo.*

I have friends in salmony places working hard on this task, but it's an intricate, wonky, lawyerly kind of work. For the purposes of this gathering, I'll simply say that recovery begins by admitting that any treaty process between the U.S. and Canada that fails to treat the first nations and tribes as the two nation-states' equals is not a treaty, but a travesty. Every Indian struggling to preserve their particular place, in my book, is an old-souled cultural treasure.

How many times, tracking Standing Rock last year, did we hear beautiful old Indian hearts, often beating in the small chests of the very young, sounding like walking talking archives of what's needed to resurrect not just the Columbia/Snake, but to tend whatever's left of our planet after the forces set in motion by fossil fuel have had their way?

For revering humanity's most lasting truths, for insisting that water, earth, air and all living things are sacrosanct, Indians are ignored or punished. What an irony, this event where the people who have *not* lost their way are excluded in guiding a watershed under the thrall of a government that has completely lost its way. Thank you for you! I'm so sick of the hypnotized portion of our populace awaiting good to come of the vision of cave trolls like Ryan Zinke and Scott Pruitt.

How to enfranchise beautiful old hearts? I'd like to offer two pearls of wisdom on that. The first is from poet Tom's new companion, Mother Teresa. In this world, not the next, Mother T once said: "***When I finally see Jesus, I'll tell him I loved Him in the dark***". I repeat her words today in empathy for and abject apology to all Indians who continue to love and tend their traditions and places in the face of forces of darkness they did not create.

My second pearl in regard to how to empower beautiful hearts is from Bernard of Clairvaux: ***Amor ipse intellectus est. "Love itself is knowledge"***. Love itself is vital knowledge in guiding the life of a great watershed, for starters, because it bears no resemblance to the hydropower stewardship whose north star is money at the ignored expense of life. Love is also vital because, once we embrace it as a valid way of knowing, our efforts to effect spiritual, social and ecological change are energized and unified by a self-giving, noncoercive fuel.

Hydropower played a key role in our history when aluminum aircraft were needed to win World War Two. That the abduction of river current for that purpose also caused ongoing devastation to the tribes is too seldom even a footnote to that story. And when love is not honored as a form of knowledge, what forces those in charge of the great river's current to end the devastation if it's profitable to them? The same hydro grid that built the aircraft used cut-rate wartime electricity rates for decades after the war to commandeer life-giving current to manufacture billions of aluminum beer cans. As salmon went missing the repurposed current also poured billions of dollars into the coffers of the most cynical power with which I've ever done battle: Bonneville Power Administration. The form of government BPA long ago brought to our river has a world-famous name: *apartheid*. A form of power condemned globally and eradicated in South Africa has no place on the Columbia/Snake.

My wise friend Wendell Berry says that there are just two kinds of places on earth: sacred places and *desecrated* places. The spirituality of the Northwest's native people is rooted in the Earth and its sacred places, and wild salmon remain the essence of that connection. Brownlee, Oxbow, Hells Canyon and Grand Coulee dams unleashed total desecration on the tribes by extirpating that connection. To enfranchise the beautiful old hearts of our watershed and address the desecration we must repudiate religious and cultural chauvinism and recognize this truth: God so loved the world that He gave it both a beloved Son *and* the beloved ocean-goers and mountain climbers known as wild salmon.

Immigrants whose forebears worshipped the Gospels for two thousand years and native people who've worshipped salmon for eleven thousand have *both* been given a rite through which to enact gratitude to the Creator. Migration of salmon from headwater to sea to headwaters forms a prayer wheel as central to the tribes as the Host to the Mass.

The streams and landscapes sanctified by salmon runs are tribal *holy lands*. To ask Indians to "be realistic" and give up on those lands and that sanctification is like asking a Pope Francis or Mother Teresa to get real and knock off the old hocus pocus about the Body and Blood of Christ. *Love itself is knowledge*, and John of the Cross sounds as much like a Nez Perce elder as the christic mystic he was when he reinforces this truth in six words: ***'We live in what we love.'*** Native people inhabiting their ancient watersheds are doing just that, and their refusal to give up on extirpated salmon and inundated homes is a timeless spiritual necessity that, in the end, will prove timely as well: no dam is forever.







Art and photo by Wil Wilkins, on Hwy 93 outside Salmon, Idaho.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/salmon-running-the-gauntlet-video-full-episode/6620/>

**A wake-up call to rate-payers and tax-payers:**

Because Bonneville Power uses *our* money to “control the salmon narrative” in the national media, control the region’s salmon science, and control the release of life-giving river current, we *all* betray the tribes and salmon whether we like it or not. \$20,000 of our tax dollars subsidize every single barge in or out of the perennially bankrupt so-called “seaport” of Lewiston as the four dams sustaining the barge route convert the most courageous salmon migration on Earth into an aquatic oven. As migrating smolts and adult salmon die in those ovens in droves, the last Southern Puget Sound orcas die of starvation for lack of those salmon, speeding toward extinction along with them. Electricity users are still told that hydro means clean green power.

Here’s the real bang we’re getting for our BPA bucks. The greatest inland fishery on the planet: *wasted*. The Eucharist of the tribes for eleven millennia: *gone*. The Northwest’s supreme embodiment of a pre-Christian self-sacrifice reminiscent of the Mass, the Loaves & Fishes miracle, the vocation of the “fishers of men,” the post-Resurrection “miraculous draught of fishes,” the Genesis blessing of “great whales” and “every creature the waters brought forth abundantly”: *erased*. 5,500 miles of the world’s last best spawning streams given a hysterectomy, under the Endangered Species Act, via bogus science spearheaded by the lords of the dams.

Giving control of the Interior West’s salmon recovery to BPA and the Army Corps was like giving control of the nation’s drug rehab programs to meth cooks.

Good news is brewing that I’m not at liberty to speak of, yet. To drop a hint though: replacement of the lower Snake River dams’ worn-out turbines, over the next ten years, would cost at least \$1.5 billion, far more than removal of the dams, and dam operations, sediment removal, lock repairs, and so on add more expense. It would be greatly to BPA’s financial benefit, and to the benefit of the families and businesses of the Northwest, to remove the lower Snake River dams now.

I’ll end with this: if Cormac McCarthy lived in Extirpation Country on the upper Snake or upper Columbia, the last paragraph of *The Road* might read like this:

Once there were wild salmon in these mountains. You could see them standing in the clear currents, the edges of their fins trembling in the flow. They were wounded silver; massive; muscular; torsional. They smelled of ocean in your hand. That uncontrollable wildness. In every stream. On their sides gleamed maps of the seas in their becoming. On their backs, mazes of the ways by which they'd come. Maps and mazes of things which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In their high mountain birth houses all things hummed of mystery and all things were older than man.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/salmon-running-the-gauntlet-video-full-episode/6620/>





its last month above slackwater, feeling the dip net inside me spring to life, scoop down. The faces of  
n the sea: they wreck me still. When I was five I had my first close encounter with a big male coho in a  
:k face assails me still. When I was eight I hooked my first winter steelhead in a little tributary of the  
both at once. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts to remember how much wild wealth and beauty and joy has been  
the loving heart that hurts, I say, *Let it*. Mountains, broken and broken and broken again, become the  
y our hearts be like the mountains.

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NEXT STORY

Power Shift



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