

Thinking Like a River . . .

Of course, rivers can't think. They can't feel. But their movement and hosted life force – how we feel when we're on them and how we feel about them makes us want to attribute thoughts to them. They feel so alive with their omnipresent motion (until, like some great western rivers, they're drained to death). They act as a nursery to millions of fish, birds, amphibians and yes, mammals. They feed our cities and our souls – so surely – even if they do not think or feel – they teach.

And they teach each of us on our own terms. They teach the watchful farmer how to keep his soil in his field; because without plants the river will steal soil away.

They teach the water utility worker about supply and demand. Take too much here and there's not enough for handling even "managed" waste outflows downstream.

They teach the barge operator vigilance because, just like humans, rivers move most easily down the path of least resistance, which changes in relation to everything else. On the last trip he saw a sand bar here; now it's there. Neither the operator nor the river considers the results of actions here downstream. Of course, the river has an excuse. It cannot think.

They teach the industrialist efficiencies. After de-watering (a fancy way of saying "draining") a river in one part of the world and suffering the wrath of its people; one company evolved more enlightened conservation practices. Now it saves water and money by tightening leaky pipes.

They teach the professor her subject, the singer his song and ancient everyday life to the historian. They teach children and the child in each of us adventure, play, beauty and discovery.

We speak regularly of main stems and learn their names – Missouri, Ganges, Sierpe, Pearl. But what of their undiscovered tributaries? What do they teach us?

Profit is learned when a developer opts to keep a tributary and add a nature trail instead of paving over the creek.

Sustenance is learned when the rice grower allows the floods to come; revitalizing his soil.

Faith is learned as the Baptist and the Buddhist cleanse and join with the larger host under the firmament.

Community is learned as the town councilwoman stands on the bank looking at the new water tower in the background as children fish beneath a sycamore nearby.

I have also learned much from tributaries even though I've spent years teaching the benefits of keeping rivers healthy in content, volume and rate of flow. Tributaries and their inhabitants are the best teachers. They offer up lessons about the value of recharge. They have taught me about the colors of a clean river – whether blue or green or almost black. I have learned about birth from the Madison and the Jefferson as we floated toward the Gallatin to start the longest river on our continent. Math was taught to me by spring flows on the Jacks Fork in Missouri. The Potoo on a Costa Rican tributary of the Sierpe taught me the value of patience as he perched stump-like above the river until he pounced, wings spread, on an unsuspecting beetle. I have learned and relearned anger management from the tributary's soft gurgling splashes as I've watched too many people continue to take the short view on natural resources; and hope as I travel the waterways with people new to them – their delight overflowing like rivers in the spring.

I once traveled as far upstream as possible on tributaries forming the Cumberland River in Kentucky. I wondered what would happen to this water. It could not think; but what would these tributaries teach all of us as they traveled to the sea? I know this much – only what we are willing to learn.