

Down by River

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There is a spot at Freshford where the Frome joins the Avon, a place I visited several times a week during lockdown to talk with River. A sliver of bank separates the two Rivers, no more than a couple of metres wide, coming to a point where the waters meet. It's not private—there's a well-trodden pathway through the long grass and a muddy slope where dogs scamper into the water—but just after dawn on spring and summer mornings, I sat there unseen and undisturbed.

My visits were part of a project, via Zoom and Dropbox, with five other people, each of whom was visiting local Rivers asking the same question, “If we call to River as a sentient being, will we receive an answer?” Our inquiry has become part of a larger, worldwide project, Voicing Rivers, that seeks to encounter Rivers across the globe as living, culturally engaged beings that hold stories, histories, and animate spirits.ⁱ

My practice was to approach River quietly, doing my best to drop the chatter from my mind as I parked the car, walked over the little bridge, through the kiss gate and across the field. When I reached River, I would call out my names; place my hands together and bow, in a gesture intended to offer my identity-centre back to the wider whole,ⁱⁱ and ask River if we could be in conversation. Then I would sit, sometimes formally meditating, sometimes in ceremony or offering gifts to River, sometimes drifting off into my thoughts.

I was talking with River while the human world was in lockdown. The roads were empty as I drove from Bath to Freshford; there was no hum of traffic from the nearby A36; no planes, no contrails overhead; only the occasional rumble of a passenger train or the clickety-clack of trucks over the bridge just downstream of where I sat. In this strange quietness, I listened to the gurgle of the river, the souging of wind in the

trees, the splashing of ducks landing on the water, the call of the crows. And behind those everyday sounds, I listened to the deep silence from which all sounds arise and to which they return.ⁱⁱⁱ

Through that silence I attended to what was around me. One day I arrived to find a thick mist drifting in ghostly patterns over the water, blowing gently under the railway bridge. It was quite dense at first; then, as the sun rose, illuminated in shafts of light under the bridge arches; slowly thinning into a gossamer layer drifting across the surface, seeming to disappear under my gaze. As the sun finally rose above the treetops all haziness vanished, the world transformed into brightness and colour. The trees on the bank, the curve of the bridge, the birds and even the clouds overhead reflected sharply in the dark mirror of still water, an almost perfect image just disturbed by faint rippling.



Each visit I spend hours watching the water eddying around a cluster of willow roots, continuing downstream in a pattern of ripples and whirlpools, unhurried yet persistent, sometimes with a leaf or a white feather gently rotating as it passes by. Traces are still visible ten or fifteen yards downstream, gradually losing energy and identity until drawn back into the clean flow of the River. This line of turbulence is always the same, always different: moving lazily in dry times, faster after summer rain, overwhelmed by the torrents of an autumn downpour.

With this intense watching and listening at times, especially during formal meditation, I found myself losing the sense of the boundary between me and River. For fleeting moments my mind stilled, reflected and reflecting in the liquid river mirror; the comings and goings of the 'ten thousand things' the same as the thoughts passing through my mind. Once, sitting at night, I was surprised by a hollow call from

downstream. Familiar yet eerie, for a while I could not place it. Of course, it was an owl hooting, so I leant forward and cocked my ear to hear better. Listening intently through the darkness, I seemed even more to lose my separateness, to join with, to be more and more part of this place: a small birdcall in the willow, the dark reflections of trees in the still water, the crows overhead. In this moment I became part of a larger presence that joins all physical and living beings into one whole. Then the sharp call of a water bird pulled my wild attention to one side and focused it.^{iv}

Over time, as River and I grew familiar, I felt a response to my presence and my offerings. River speaks, not in English, but in a language of particulars, of things, of gestures that carry poetic resonance. Often these are ambiguous: “Does that movement in the treetops signify anything other than a gust of wind? Am I projecting significance where there may be none?” And yet at other times, if seen with what William Blake would call the Eye of Imagination,^v there is a serendipitous conjunction, a synchronicity, that unmistakably carries significance and meaning: Kingfisher flies past the moment I address River through ceremony; two Swans respond to an offering with a sequence of choreographed movements.^{vi} Of course, the Swans are going about their everyday business; and I have chosen to sit in the middle of Kingfisher’s territory. And yet, I am surprised, then touched and moved: there is a quality in these responses that cuts through any remaining scepticism.

Each time, after sitting by River for two or three hours, after offering thanks, I walked back to my car, back to the familiarity of reversing from the parking space and driving home, through the strangeness of the near-empty streets. Over a late breakfast, I opened my iPad and read the news on-line. Stories of people who had died of COVID-19 and the grief of their families. Accounts from doctors and nurses, under-resourced and overwhelmed. Reports from scientists struggling to make sense of the emerging evidence. Editorial comments on the government’s fumbling and at times corrupt decisions. To say nothing of the remarkable self-harm the UK was inflicting on itself through Brexit; nor all the news and opinion from America about Trump, his self-evident lies and misrepresentations of the pandemic.

I was shocked, upset, and often angry. Ashamed even, of my country and the unjustified claims to be in some way special. Strangely embarrassed by the hits to our national reputation.

However, rather bizarrely, none of this was affecting me directly. Of course, I was distressed not to see family and friends. Of course, I talked about the news a lot with my wife, and with my (socially-distanced) neighbours. Apart from my visits to River I scarcely left home (although as a well-heeled, middle-class person, my home encompasses plenty of space indoors and outdoors). We were well-served by deliveries from local shops. And I had plenty to do—writing, conference calls, working on our orchard. I was busy and lacked nothing.

On the one hand were these intense experiences with River, when I felt myself more intimately in touch with a living, sentient world than at many other times in my life. And on the other, this pandemic, horrific, pervading every aspect of human life, yet also distant and intangible. The River brought me into close contact with a sentient world at the edge of the human universe. The news, alarming as it is, reflecting the utter self-absorption of the contemporary human. We rouse ourselves to the threat to our species, shutting down the economy, inventing new treatments and vaccines. In the

meanwhile, we are deaf to the call of the wider more-than-human world of which we are a part, and which continues the reel under the impact of our collective actions.

References

- ⁱ Kurio, J., & Reason, P. (2021). Voicing Rivers through Ontopoetics: A Co-operative Inquiry. *Submitted to River Research and Applications, Special Issue: Voicing Rivers.*
- ⁱⁱ Hinton, D. (2012). *Hunger Mountain: A field guide to Mind and Landscape.* Boston & London: Shambhala.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Reason, P. (2017). *In Search of Grace: An ecological pilgrimage.* Winchester, UK: Earth Books.
- ^{iv} 'Our bodies are wild. The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout...' Snyder, Gary. "The Etiquette of Freedom." In *The Practice of the Wild.* New York: North Point Press, 1990, p. 16.
- ^v Vernon, M. (2020). The four-fold imagination. *Aeon.* Retrieved from [https://aeon.co/essays/what-we-can-learn-from-william-blakes-visionary-imagination.](https://aeon.co/essays/what-we-can-learn-from-william-blakes-visionary-imagination)
- ^{vi} The encounter with Swans is told in Reason, P., & Gillespie, S. (2021). *On Sentience: Essays / Drawings.* Dartington: The Letter Press. <http://peterreason.net/OnSentience.html>