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## An Affinity for Rivers

Having been drawn to rivers for most of my life, I have only recently begun to contemplate the origins of this attraction and whether it may be similar for others. And I have decided that the attraction is there because a river is a natural presence and a process, an entity in fact, on our domesticated landscapes, winding through distance as well as time. The flowing waters of rivers are carried from the far reaches of their headwaters, always interconnecting with other rivers, tributaries, and finally the sea; each is merely one stage in the great cycle of water, connected to the skies above, set into perpetual motion from the sun's limitless radiance. And waters have flowed over the meandering beds of rivers, through one course or another, ever since water has flowed over our earth. Though changed, and in most cases degraded, from our manipulations, rivers still provide us with these natural links to a timeless process.

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My fascination with rivers began in the mid-1960s in Chicago, Il-

*Side Channels*

linois. I grew up in a neighborhood that was typical of the older parts of most large cities: rectangular city blocks; small bungalows with small back yards; houses separated by only a few feet, called “gangways;” corner “mom-and-pop” grocery stores; and a field of view not much further than the houses across the narrow street. My compact world was secure, mowed, trimmed, under control, predictable, and all within view or within a short walk. I cannot imagine that I ever thought much about what was beyond this safe environment, and if I did, television took care of that.

During the summer months, we would occasionally attend large picnic affairs organized by my grandparents’ Czechoslovakian fellowship club held at the National Grove Forest Preserve in Riverside, a small Chicago suburb. My maternal grandparents came to the United States from Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) in 1920, and these picnics gave them a way to stay in touch with other Czech-Americans and to keep their culture alive. There was Czech food, the Czech language spoken freely, and accordion-led polka bands. The concrete dance floor in the pavilion was sometimes packed with frail elderly women dancing with each other, shuffling across the floor and barely lifting their feet. Their husbands were probably unwilling to dance, or perhaps they had already passed away.

While I would find all of these activities interesting today, at the time my thoughts—such as they must have been—were already elsewhere. Just beyond the shaded picnic tables and mowed field, the forests were quite untamed, waiting for exploration. I, of course, had never seen anything like those wild, tangled forests, and I was quite taken with this strange wilderness scene not very far from my home.

Though my parents came to the picnics to socialize and soak in the culture, during every visit it was not long before my brother and I begged and nagged to be taken for a walk through “the woods,” as we called them. The forests were dense and shaded, and seemed not to be under anyone’s care or control, growing as chance circumstances dictated—a very appeal-

ing temptation for a boy of seven or eight years old. But as unlike my Chicago neighborhood as these forests were, it was really the Des Plaines River, at the furthest part of our walks, that truly captivated my imagination and, as I look back, set my interests on a trajectory that continues.

Before getting near to the river, I recall that it was possible to smell it in the air; not an unpleasant aroma, it was one of mud, humidity, and decaying organic matter from the bottomland forests. (The Des Plaines River was quite polluted at that time, before much attention was given to water quality, but we were scarcely aware of that, and the river did not betray its dark secrets.) I remember standing at the riverside, watching the river's smooth, moving surface, throwing sticks into the river as far as possible to see them float away downstream. I wondered where the river came from—surely from some vast wilderness forest upstream—and where it went, not hearing for even a moment the busy traffic on First Avenue about 100 yards beyond the opposite bank. And I guess I already knew that rivers flowed eventually to the sea.

I could have stayed at the river's bank until after dark. But my parents were always eager to return to the picnic celebrations. So, reluctantly following behind, I immediately and eagerly looked forward to the next weekend's picnic and a return to the river. My lifelong interest in rivers—possibly also my independent ways and wanderlust—began at this very river. And I believe that I am finally beginning to understand why.