

Early in the 1970s I first heard Bob Dylan's song "Watching the River Flow," and, probably because I had already developed a growing fascination for rivers, it grabbed my attention. Since that time, not only have I not grown tired of the song, but, interestingly, it has followed me through life—a life during which I have collectively spent many hours watching numerous rivers flow, learning the gentle art of quietly sitting and observing.

In our society, though, with its worthy emphasis on making tangible accomplishments, such idleness is frowned upon. Indeed, I suspect that most would feel guilty to simply lean against a riverbank tree, taking in the surroundings; not fishing, not hunting, not gathering morel mushrooms; just listening and watching. Admit to engaging in this activity more than once, and one may likely be labeled a "good for nothing." A fair enough assessment, I must admit, on the surface.

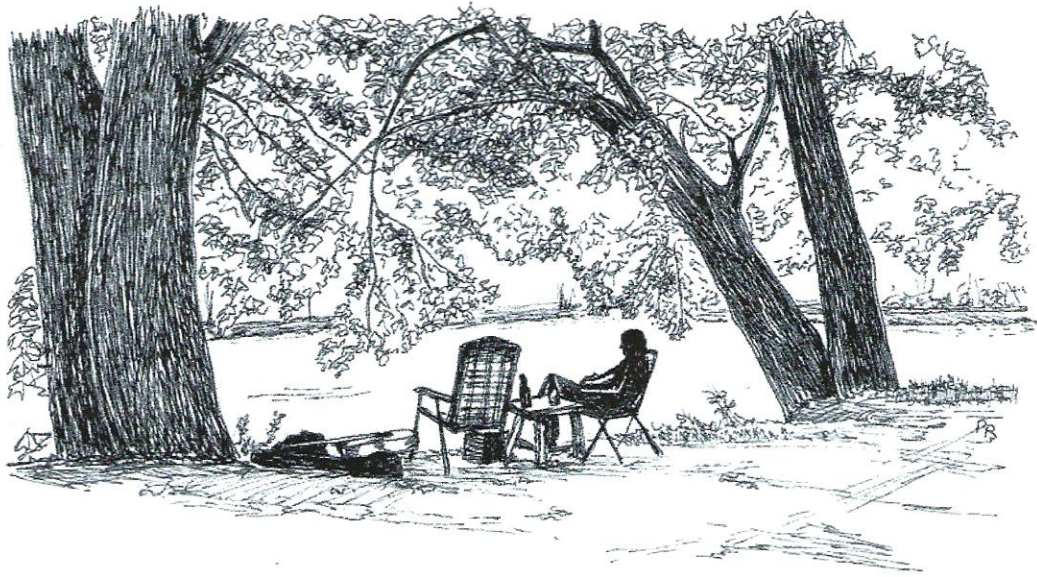
But where the body may be idle, the mind and soul are not. A heightened awareness results from remaining still, actually quite an active mental

### *Side Channels*

state that is not preoccupied with physical activity. I recall many experiences immediately after reclining against a steep riverbank, first beginning to notice each bird and insect sound from near and far; then the very slight movements of plants in the merest shifts of air—not even enough to be called a breeze; changes in temperature from one side of my face to the other, one in the sun, the other shaded; sunlight filtering through layers of leaves—flecks of light throughout the forest continually changing shape as the sun moves and cloud patterns shift; a river's flow discernable by countless minute bits of debris carried along with the current, occasionally a small twig or large log, maybe even an entire tree; boils on the water's surface where the current is forced upward from a large, submerged object; circular eddies where moving water is drawn downward; a musty scent of humidity and rotting organic matter carried on a momentary breeze. Nothing is ever the same from one moment to the next. No reruns.

The mind freewheels and wanders to the past, speculates on the future, contemplates the passing moments. New ideas emerge from the depths. Until some outstanding sight or sound breaks my concentration, and I might look to where the river curves around a bend, curious as to what may be there and realizing I do not know the time of day or how long I have been lost to my senses. So by instinct, I may determine that it is time to move on, eventually to face the pressing issues of the day and responsibilities that I have become expert at putting off.

So what have I accomplished by this sitting and staring, at those moments when I have sat to watch a river flow, when I hear that Dylan song in my mind? Perhaps nothing. Unless it may be considered an accomplishment to have slowed down my life but momentarily. For a middle-aged life that seems to be passing more quickly with each year, that is quite satisfying.



*Watching the Mississippi River at Bear Creek, Illinois*