

Eating the Salmon of Wisdom: Why Salmon Matter to our Souls

By John Rosenberg

[Presented at a workshop entitled *As If Salmon Matter: Making Ethical Choices*, presented by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns at Portland State University, December 4, 2004.]

Several months ago, Jenny Holmes asked me to offer a reflection on *Salmon and Souls; specifically on the relationship between the health of wild salmon and the health of our souls*. It's an interesting assignment and I hadn't thought about salmon in quite this way before. I won't attempt to define the human soul. Instead I'm simply going to ask you to do 3 things for the next 20 minutes or so:

1. **Assume** (as some but not all of the Biblical writers do) that you have a soul or a "spirit" as the Bible sometimes refers to it.
2. **Agree** on a working definition of the human soul as "the seat of intelligence and emotion,"¹ i.e., the human soul has something to do with both our heads and our hearts.
3. If it is the case that our souls involve both our heads and our hearts, then the health of our souls involves something that the Bible calls *wisdom*. Like soul or spirit, the notion of wisdom has a rich history, including a remarkable feminine figure in the book of Proverbs called Lady Wisdom (more about her later). But for the moment, let's go with a simple definition of wisdom as "*sagacity, i.e., skill in making thought issue in appropriate action.*"²

So the premise here is that in some way, wild salmon connect with humankind on a spiritual level that involves both our minds and our hearts and that this connection – this relationship between human beings and wild salmon – can lead us to spiritual health as well as appropriate action on behalf of salmon and the watersheds that sustain them – which, as it turns out, are also the same watersheds that sustain us and all other living things on the land.

Let me begin by stating something that sounds obvious to most people who have lived in our part of the world for any length of time. For the people of the Pacific Northwest, whether the first people for whom this place was home for thousands of years as well as for the rest of us relative newcomers, *salmon are in our souls*, i.e., they are both in our minds and in our hearts. Let me cite just two examples.

In Timothy Egan's novel, *The Winemaker's Daughter*, the heroine – a savvy, passionate, Italian-American woman named Brunella Cartolano – is walking in Seattle near the Pike Place market. Egan describes the scene:

The city feels sleepy at midmorning, ferries tracking back and forth across the impressionist Puget Sound, nobody raising a voice or honking a horn in the filtered sunlight. Brunella is glad to be back in the urban fold. Her routine takes her to Pike Place Market, to banter with the guitar-playing bluesman in front of the brass pig and to trade sex jokes with the fish merchant who sells giant clams, the geoducks that her father craves and make tourists blush. Walking through the market, she ducks to avoid a fish

¹ Alan Richardson, editor, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, Macmillan, 1950, p. 234.

² Alan Richardson, p.282.

tossed across the aisle to the counter. And when the salmon are not flying at head level, they are lighting alleys in bright neon, or holding candles in craft stalls, or going uphill, embedded in the sidewalk. *An anthropologist new to the Pacific Northwest would find more fish icons than crucifixes.*³

The second example is based upon two articles about salmon that appeared in a recent edition of the *Sunday Oregonian*. The first described an annual pilgrimage by a diverse group of Oregonians to Whitaker Creek, a small tributary of the Siuslaw River, to observe the annual return of fall Chinook salmon. The second was about a group of 50 children and adults who were tossing salmon carcasses into Gale's Creek, a tributary of the Tualatin River, in order that their decaying bodies might provide nutrients for insects and other denizens of the watershed. This is what salmon have been doing in our part of the world for thousands (some would say millions⁴) of years: bringing life-giving nutrients from the nutrient-rich ocean to relatively barren inland watersheds. The effort to return dead salmon to the river was part of an effort to re-establish and rebuild healthy runs of wild coho, steelhead, and cutthroat trout to the Tualatin River basin. I couldn't help but be reminded of some of the First Salmon ceremonies that have been practiced here for thousands of years by Indian people in order in which the bones of the first salmon are ceremonially placed back in the river in order to invite the salmon to return each year to bring life back to the river.

What was fascinating to me was how quickly and easily people who were in direct contact with the salmon – either watching them spawn and die or returning their dead carcasses to the water – used what I would call religious or at least “spiritual” language to try and make sense of the experience. This has also been my experience in getting close to salmon and in taking others to see salmon in the wild. ***There is something deeply spiritual about experiencing wild salmon and people instinctively use spiritual and often religious language*** – the language of the soul – ***to describe it***. Listen to the way in which people describe their experience to writer Alice Talmadge:

- “When they come home, they bring the world with them,” says Astoria ceramic artist Richard Rowland. “The salmon make this place big.”
- “Many artist, writers, Native Americans, biologists, fish lovers, and just plain folk in Western Oregon make it a point to witness the salmon's annual return. Some are fascinated by the life cycle, which takes fish from mountain and coastal streams down to the ocean and back again to lay eggs and die,” writes Alice Talmadge.
- “Some say the determined, exhausted fish gives them hope. Some say the salmon links them to the primal pull of nature”
- “It's a connection to wildness,” says Eugene environmental attorney Bern Johnson ... “You cannot see these fish and not be touched by them.”
- The trip to the creek “is the equivalent of our Mecca – our annual pilgrimage,” says his wife Hilary.
- Writer Barry Lopez feels a great sense of relief when the salmon finally arrive. “There's something about the perpetuation of this annual cycle by fish that have been decimated by industry, by pollution, by logging. When I see them come in, it's like taking a deep breath of good air.”⁵

³ Timothy Egan, *The Winemaker's Daughter*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p.120. (italics mine)

⁴ David R. Montgomery, *King of Fish, The Thousand-Year Run of Salmon*, Westview, 2004.

⁵ Alice Talmadge, “Many happy returns,” *Sunday Oregonian*, November 14, 2004.

I'll come back to the article in a moment but for now I simply want to emphasize the language that is being used here – language of the soul that speaks of both the spirit and health:

- “The salmon bring the world with them. They make this place big.” (a sense of *transcendence* which is an important aspect of spirituality)
- Words like death, hope, and determination.
- Primal pull of nature – “It’s a connection to wildness.”
- “Our annual pilgrimage, our Mecca.”
- “When I see them come in, it’s like taking a deep breath of good air.”
- One of the participants in the Tualatin River effort, Corine Oishi, said, “I don’t know whether we’re making big world strides in doing this. Maybe the best part is getting people to think about it. Another plus is all these people willing to get blood and slime on them as they put fish in the creek.” (immanence – the earth-centered aspect of authentic spirituality))
- Eleven-year old, Alea Martin said, “The best part was getting all slimy.”⁶

John Muir once said that if he could just get people into the forest they would understand what he had experienced and would love Nature as he did.⁷ Muir was talking about the virtues of “getting all slimy” for the sake of the health of our souls. I’m convinced that if I could take you all up to Andrew Emlen’s farm on Skamokawa Creek and let him show you wild, fall Chinook spawning, this talk of mine would be unnecessary. You would intuitively sense the relationship between wild salmon and the health of your spirit just as Timothy Egan does – the same Timothy Egan who defines the Pacific Northwest as “anywhere the salmon can still get to.” You would understand it in the same way that Alice Talmadge, Richard Rowland, Bern Johnson, Alea Martin, and the others in these stories sense the relationship between wild salmon and the human soul. Sensing that relationship, which involves both our head in seeking to understand these magnificent fish and our heart in sensing our deep relationship to them, might also result in wisdom that would lead us to right action – like being willing get all slimy like young Alea Martin as she tossed dead salmon back into the river in order that they might sustain and nurture new life for a dying watershed.

I said I wanted to come back to the article about the annual return of the salmon. Near the end of the article, the author notes that while the salmon’s resiliency is a hallmark, salmon also teach people about sharing and sacrifice. She introduces a woman named Agnes Pilgrim, an elder of the Takelma Band of the Rogue Valley who says,

“The Old Ones used to believe that salmon were people who looked like us, the two-leggeds. They lived in beautiful cities beneath the ocean floor. Every spring and fall they chose to put on the form of salmon to come back and feed the two-leggeds. They teach us that you have to give back.”⁸

Each time I hear that story – and I think almost every tribe in the Pacific Northwest has a similar story to this one – I am reminded of an important part of the Christian story, described in the words of an ancient hymn found in the Letter to the Colossians in which the Apostle Paul (or

⁶ Jim Kadera, “Good use for dead fish: toss ‘em back,” *Sunday Oregonian*, November 14, 2004.

⁷ Rik Scarce, *Fishy Business: Salmon, Biology, and the Social Construction of Nature*, Temple University Press, 2000, p. 198.

⁸ Alive Talmadge, “Many happy returns,” *Sunday Oregonian*, November 14, 2004.

someone very close to him) urges his readers to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” And then he tells them to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself [like the salmon] taking the form of a slave ... and became obedient to the point of death.”⁹ **So part of the way in which wild salmon contribute to the spiritual health of humans is by pointing us back to our own story of how God took on – not a salmon form – but a human form in order to carry on the work of salvation for the whole creation – people, salmon, watersheds, and all.**

Author David James Duncan captures the sense of these verses well when he writes: The real sacrificial dramas of the Northwest, the Christ-like activity, as I saw it, was taking place not in the buildings where Christians so brackishly tried to worship, but in the lives of the salmon I spontaneously *did* worship, for the way they poured in from the sea in defiance of every threat, predator and Pharisee, climbed increasingly troubled mountain streams, nailed their beautiful bodies to lonely beds of gravel, and died there not for anything they stood to gain, but for the sake of their tiny silver offspring.¹⁰

I might argue with David Duncan that what goes on the buildings – at least the ones that I’m familiar with – and what goes on in the life and death of the salmon are more closely related than he allows. There are many people of faith who are also citizens of Salmon Nation. And after today’s workshop, we hope there will be more! But Duncan’s overall point is well taken.

Which brings me to the place where I want to conclude this reflection on salmon and the health of our souls and the reason for my title, “Eating the Salmon of Wisdom.” The phrase is borrowed from an article by Mara Freeman entitled, “Eating the Salmon of Wisdom: Celtic Ways of Knowing.” Toward the end of the article, she relates the story of a shape-shifter and seer named Tuan O’Cairell, who was discovered by a Christian monk named Finnian. The Celts (or the Irish as we now call them) were also “salmon people.” In the story, Tuan described how he became a seer and lived his life as a shaman until he became an old man. In the wretchedness and exhaustion of old age, he prayed for renewal. As he undertook the perilous journey of transformation, which involved intense hardships, he says:

“I passed into the shape of a silver salmon ... was vigorous and well-fed and my swimming was good, and I used to escape from every danger and from every snare [sounds like a verse from “Amazing Grace”!] – to wit, from the hands of fishermen, and from the claws of hawks, and from fishing spears – so that the scars which each one of them left are still upon me.”

And then Mara Freeman writes:

Tuan’s life as a salmon is brought to an end when fishermen of the chieftain Cairell catch him and serve him to Cairell’s wife, who eats the whole fish herself. She becomes pregnant with Tuan, who remains conscious while in her womb, fully aware of who he is and everything that is happening [I might add as an aside that’s not a bad definition of wisdom – to be fully aware of who we are and what is happening in the world around us]. So in a mysterious reversal which serves to highlight the magical interplay of human and nonhuman forms in the Celtic tradition, the man that eats the

⁹ Philippians 2:3–8, (NRSV), Oxford University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*, Sierra Club, 2001, p. 14.

salmon to become a seer turns into the salmon who is eaten so that a man can be born. The circle is complete.¹¹

I said earlier that the best way for us to discover the relationship between wild salmon and our own spiritual health and well-being is to simply be with the salmon – watching them return to their home rivers and streams to spawn and die; “getting slimy” by returning their dead bodies to other rivers so that they can nourish and sustain new life; catching them and holding them in our hands as we either return them to the river or kill them so they can nourish and sustain our own lives and the lives of others.

In a few minutes, we actually will have an opportunity to “be with” the salmon – we’re going to eat them! It’s one of the best things about this workshop to my way of thinking! I remember when I was growing up; my mother would call fish “brain food” – the implication being that if I ate more fish, it would make me smarter, perhaps even wiser. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the getting of wisdom is sometimes pictured as involving a meal. In Proverbs 9, Lady Wisdom prepares her house and a lavish meal to which she invites anyone who wishes to join her by calling from “the highest places in town.”

“You that are simple, turn in here!

Come; eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”¹²

In the New Testament, this idea of a “wisdom meal” is carried forward into the Christian tradition of the Eucharist – part of the worship we Christians sometimes brackishly but also faithfully carry on in our Sunday morning worship. Christians celebrate the Eucharist because, among other things, we believe that the Risen Christ is present with us “in, with, and under” the bread and wine, bringing gifts of “forgiveness, life, and salvation” as Luther says. In other words, Wisdom’s meal as experienced in the Eucharist brings health to our souls that issues in appropriate action as we become Christ’s body in the world – not unlike old Tuan, the Celtic seer and shape-shifter becoming renewed and transformed as he eats and is eaten by the salmon of wisdom.

Now for some of you that might seem like quite a stretch. However, its important to remember that one strand of our tradition tells us that the first celebrations of the Christian Eucharist involved not only bread and wine but also fish. One of the places where that tradition shows up is in John 21. You remember the story. After Jesus’ execution by the Romans, his disciples returned to Galilee to continue in their vocations as commercial fishermen. As is often the case for commercial fishermen, they weren’t having much success. All of a sudden a stranger appeared on the shore to give them some advice. (That seems to be a common enough experience among people who fish – someone is always ready to provide advice whether it’s desired or not!). The stranger informed them that if they would only cast their net on the other side of the boat, they would catch plenty of fish. The next verses describe what happened: “So they cast [their net]. And now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.” John continues by describing what happened as a result of their encounter with all those fish; an encounter in which they certainly must have “gotten slimy.” “That disciple whom Jesus loved

¹¹ Mara Freeman, “Eating the Salmon of Wisdom: Celtic Ways of Knowing,” *Parabola*, Volume XXII, No. 1, February 1997, p. 15.

¹² Proverbs 9:3—6 (NRSV)

said to Peter, *‘It is the Lord!’*” So in the encounter with the fish, the disciples recognized the presence of the crucified and risen Lord. It is an experience that is not so different from those people watching salmon on that small tributary on the Siuslaw or those returning salmon carcasses to the Tualatin.

But the story continues. The disciples hauled the fish ashore and even though they now recognized the stranger as the Risen Christ, they were still not quite sure what to make of this encounter. So Jesus invited them to bring some of the fish that they’d caught. He prepared a fire and cooked the fish along with some bread and invited them to have breakfast with him. And then John writes in words that closely resemble the language in some of our Eucharistic liturgies, “Jesus came, and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.”¹³

From a historical perspective – and I seriously doubt that this story is describing an historical event – but even if it were, I don’t think it’s possible that Jesus fed the disciples with salmon, though salmon were a familiar delicacy in some parts of the Roman Empire. But from a spiritual standpoint, I want to contend that in this encounter with the fish and with the Risen Christ, the disciples were learning what we might learn as we sit down to eat salmon together in a little while. To “eat the salmon of wisdom,” is to feast at Wisdom’s table and to have our hearts and minds transformed and renewed in a way that “issues in appropriate action” on behalf of not only of salmon but of the whole creation. And when that happens, the wisdom of Paul Schell, son of a Lutheran pastor and former mayor of Seattle will take on new meaning. When he was asked about what the listing of so many stocks of Pacific Northwest salmon might mean for the people of our region, he pointed to the marvelous irony that “as we work to save the salmon, it may turn out that the salmon saves us.”¹⁴ Thank you.

¹³ John 21:1-14 (NRSV)

¹⁴ Timothy Egan, “Meet the Fish That Might Save Seattle,” *NY Times*, April 19, 1998.