



The Day God Met Me at the River

by Arpad Nagy

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It was on a late July morning in 1993 the first time I heard God speak to me. His voice did not come through the words of the homily during Mass, nor were they echoing in my head from reading scripture; back then, that happened only on rare occasions without the provocation of Easter or Christmas.

But I heard his voice as surely as I've heard my daughter say "Good morning, dad," at the start of each day or my wife's voice saying "I love you" each night.

I think about that day often, of that time and place where I stood anchored to the earth, my legs steeped in fresh mountain water atop stones tumbled and worked smooth by eons of spring runoff's carving out the valley I called home.

It was the only moment in my life where I witnessed and touched perfection.

How do I know?

Because He told me.

How long did it last?

Minutes? Hours? Days?

Maybe it lasts still.

Saying to someone you believe in God isn't a big deal. Sure, some are disbelievers or nonbelievers. Some mock, others ridicule, and cynics seek to disseminate logical skepticism. None of that is my business, and proselytizing is not my profession.

But saying to others, "I have heard the voice of God and felt his hands upon me," could, at the very least, spark some lively discussions and, at

at most, warrant some defense of that conviction—I am not afraid of either.

The only other time I have told this story, the way I have decided to share it with you here, in its entirety, was to Father Timothy, a 40-something Catholic priest in my hometown. And that conversation didn't come about by participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession; it began with a solemn-faced boy of five or six kicking rocks at the bottom of the church stairs.

God Isn't Home

I lingered inside the empty church after Mass, taking an extra few moments to look at the craftsmanship in the stained-glass windows and how the light shone through each colored pane (it still strikes me as rather beautiful). Then, finally, I moved through the nave to the narthex, dipping a fingertip in the holy water to cross myself before walking to the front doors to shake Father Timothy's hand.

As we stood, hands clasped, I spied the disappointed-looking boy below us, punting pebbles while patiently waiting for his parents to finish their chat with another mother and father a few feet away.

"Thank you, Father. I enjoyed the homily very much today," I told him, and I meant it. It's my favorite part of Mass. The Gospel can be tricky; the language is old. While I listen, I remember that the words are an interpretation deliberated and debated by different religious factions some 1400 years earlier. But to me, the discourse delivers the remarks of a man who lives with God in the present, and that perception interests me.

Breaking from our handshake, I motioned my chin at the sour-faced boy pacing below us. "But I can't say the same for the little fella."

Father Tim smiled, raised his eyebrows, and descended to meet the boy. "Are you alright, my son? You look troubled."

Clearly, the child had been in deep thought, and he didn't waste the opportunity to share his

concerns with Father Tim. "I don't think God lives here."

"You don't?" Father Tim answered, then he bent low, meeting the boy eye to eye. "Why not?" "He's never home."

Father Tim glanced at me with an amused smile before quickly returning to face the boy. "Well, where do you suppose he is?"

The boy shrugged and scuffed the toe of his shoe into the cement. "I dunno. But we come all the time, and I never see him or hear him."

At this point, the parents arrived, gathered up their child, and after a few quick words, went on their way. Father Tim and I shared a smile and walked together as I headed to the parking lot, having a chuckle at the boy's innocent and clever observations.

"But you know what?" I said to Father Tim before reaching my car. "He might be right."

"Is that so, then? And I suppose if you tell me this isn't His house, you'll know where it is?" I paused and considered how to proceed. I did know. I had been there. "Should I tell Father Timothy?" I wondered.

I decided to share my story. After all, if a Catholic priest doesn't believe you've heard God speak to you, then no one will.

"Father Tim, do you have time to listen to a good fishing story?"

The massive old tree lay on its side at the bottom turn of an S-bend in St. Mary's River. The roots, lodged against the bank facing upstream, created a break in the flow and, behind it, lay a deep pool with water smooth as glass. The fast water swept into the obstruction from above butted against the gnarly tangle of roots, branches, and twigs, which acted like a filter, gathering up all the bits and pieces of debris, and with them, a gravy train of insects caught in a line of foam.

Fly fishers have a saying about finding a foam line, "foam is home." It's a surface water conveyor belt of goodies, and a trout who's



staked his lie beneath one is sure to be fat, wary, and wise; fooling one into taking my fly wouldn't be easy. Adding to the challenge was the column of fast-moving water running along my side of the river. An effective cast from where I stood on the opposite shore was at least thirty feet to the tree, and that's not accounting for the added distance of having to move downstream, casting up so my line could run slack and drift the fly into the feeding lane without any drag.

I would need to cast fifty feet of fly line instead of the average twenty and do it perfectly on the first try. A lousy cast would splash the hole, waterskiing my imitation across the surface, announcing to the trout below that a tourist was in town.

The St. Mary's has gorgeous, crystal-clear water from its headwaters to its tail out. I had been fishing the river from mid-June to mid-October for five seasons, and I knew it well. The river was a treasure, and this particular hole was a jewel.

I needed patience and a plan.

I unzipped my vest, slung it off my shoulders, and felt the mountain air against the back of my sweat-soaked shirt. It was already warm out, and by late afternoon, nothing would make the big trout leave the comfort and safety of its shaded front porch.

I took a cigarette from the pack in my chest pocket and sat on a chunk of wild grass on the riverbank, letting the summer morning and wisps of tobacco stoke my patience. This wasn't the time to rush. I ate my lunch while intently watching for the trout to give itself away.

When the trout's nose broke through the still water near the very end of the tree, sipping down a large stonefly without a sound and barely a ripple of disturbance, I nearly choked—she was a whale.

My heart rate throttled toward maximum beats, and I nearly tumbled into the river, gathering my gear. I looked upstream and down, hoping for a witness to this potential trophy catch but also wanting no one around to see what I saw. I was alone.

The trout, as evidenced by her soft jawline, and pretty mouth, was female; she was shy, cautious, and careful not to make a scene.

A male of that size would have an elongated bottom jaw, be redder in the cheeks, and would have thrashed the stonefly more aggressively.

The ante just went up—a girl that pretty was going to require all the finesse I could muster.

I clipped the caddis fly imitation from the end of my line and replaced it with a large stonefly, bigger than the natural insect the trout had just devoured—because size matters. I was careful with the knot and greased my line. I picked my spot a third of the way across and began my approach.

Each time I step into the cold waters of a mountain stream, it feels like a solid, icy knock from a steel hammer at the base of my heels, sending a tuning fork resonance straight up my spine. I always know it's coming, and I'm never prepared.

I only “wet wade” rivers; I don't want a barrier between my skin and the water. I want to feel it tumbling through my toes and moving the tiny hairs on my legs.

The river's force pushed hard against my thighs as I wiggled my heels into the riverbed, the water was at my waist, but I was anchored and began peeling line from the reel and started working my casts. My target was the tree's base, where it met the roots. I wanted my stonefly to land as close to the partially submerged log as I could get it so that the fly would bump, turn and spin along where the wood met the water, and the current would pull the line straight as my fly floated along to bullseye of the trout's feeding spot.

With my rod loaded with energy and the line ready to launch, I put a little snap in my wrist, released my hold on the line, and let it zip across the pads of my fingertips. The whisper-whistle of my fly line cut through the air, and everything outside that moment of existence vanished.

I could hear the light knocks of the stones at my feet rapping against my boots lodged in the river bottom. I tasted the forest breeze on my lips, bringing hints of cedar, pine, willow, and wildflowers. My eyes zeroed in on the shape of the ripples undulating against the log. I saw the fine tips of the spun feather from the stonefly's neck touch the water without so much as a pin-drop ripple.

Then I heard his voice. It was inside me, everywhere, all at once.

“This is Me.” He said. “I have made this for you.”

It wasn't loud. Not exactly. But each syllable arrived like a padded drumstick hitting a gong. I felt it in my ears but heard His voice inside and outside me.

“You are a part of me now. A part of everything that has ever been and ever will be.”

I watched the gossamer end of my fly line straighten and the stonefly tilt and turn, the end of the fallen tree only feet away.

“And now everything that I have created is in you.”

I saw the round blue-green nose moving before it broke the surface. She hovered millimeters beneath the surface film, opened her mouth, and waited for my stonefly to touch her lips. A millisecond later, I watched the whites of her jaw clamp over my offering, then, as she turned to roll over and plunge back to the safety of the deep, I saw her eye catch mine.

In that instant, she'd recognized her mistake. She'd been fooled. Rolling over, I saw her silversides flash beneath the water as she turned to rush upstream, hoping to use the slack in my line and the current to spit the fly loose.

I snapped my wrist back, raised the rod tip high, and set the hook. The rod bowed, and her power ricocheted down the graphite shaft of my fly rod. Her gill plates pumped in tune with my heart.

A battle ensued. The beautiful brawny trout ran upstream, causing me to hand-strip the slack line and get it onto my reel as fast as I could. Then she reversed course and shot downstream like a missile, making my reel scream as she peeled the line off.

I turned, raised my toes from the riverbed, and let the current lift my heels and carry me downstream as I angled back to shore. A few minutes later, I was on my knees, the wide-eyed slab-sided trout and I, both panting from the fight.

I cradled her, my hands gently under her belly, pointing her head upstream while rocking her back and forth until I felt the power return to her. I released a hand, and she slipped away with a final kick of her tail. I watched her graceful form swimming low and slow until she disappeared back into the blue.

I remained in a prayer pose, on my knees with the ageless water running between them. I felt His presence everywhere, inside and outside of me. Then he spoke to me a final time.

“Am I not beautiful?” He asked.

I began to shake. First in my shoulders, then my stomach.

And I wept.

Father Tim had sat silently, listening without interruption. He rubbed his hands across his forearms to comb down the hairs which stood flared and erect. Finally, he spoke. “Have you gone back?”

I told him I returned the next day and the next, then set camp at the riverside and spent the rest of the week retracing my steps. I explained to Father Tim how I’d return to camp each night, arriving around midnight after finishing work around 11 p.m. I explained how I’d woken each morning, marched up and down the river, casting, watching, and waiting.

“He never came back to speak to me as He had on that day,” I told Father Tim.

“But He’s never left you either,” he replied.

“And I don’t believe He ever will.”

In my obsession to be at the river and in the water every possible moment, I’d been camping in a small tent off an unmarked woods road and thought of nothing else. I had been unaware that my father had been trying to reach me (this was before the time of cell phones), and he’d shown up at my apartment to find it empty and looking unlivable.

He met me at work one afternoon, worried I’d gotten into trouble (not an unreasonable suspicion based on my history), and asked where I’d been going after work for more than a week.

“To the river,” I answered. “I can’t leave the water; it’s all I’ve been able to think about.”

Though not formally educated, my father was a deep thinker, always challenging the conventions of society and religion and constantly pursuing enlightenment. We didn’t have long conversations often and were incapable of small talk. When we spoke, our discussions had a purpose.

He looked at me thoughtfully, then finally spoke. “You look different. What did you find out there?”

“God,” I answered without pause. “That I belong to something bigger. Beauty? Love?” Suddenly I felt foolish and embarrassed at this naked discord between a stoic and distant father and son.

“I don’t know what I’m talking about.” I said, then laughed, “Maybe I just like to fish?”

He stood, silent, regarding me and my words before speaking. “You know more than that,” he said. “Whatever it is you found, don’t let it go. It will hold you together when the world wants to tear you apart—and believe me, the world will try.”