



ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

EXPLORATIONS IN COLLABORATIVE
CONSERVATION AND THE AMERICAN WEST

EDITED BY PHILIP BRICK, DONALD SNOW,
AND SARAH VAN DE WETERING

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too long ago, abundance. The watershed is home to all six Pacific salmon species and to core populations of Puget Sound chinook, recently listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. With more than one-third of these imperiled fish calling the Skagit home, this watershed is linchpin to the regional recovery effort.

This is a dark time for salmon. All over the region once seemingly inexhaustible runs, in decline for decades, are in a state of collapse. I imagine the Salmon People gathered in their villages beneath the salt water, engaged in a serious discussion about what they should do. They remember how, long ago, they decided that every year they would give the human beings a great gift, the gift of their flesh. They told the humans that they would allow themselves to be taken as food only on condition that they be treated with care and with respect. If they were not treated as honored guests, they would cease to come, and the memory of that time of abundance would be all that remained. I see the Salmon People talking for a long time before deciding that some of them would withhold their gift. Others would continue their annual runs for a while longer in the hope that the humans will change their ways.

Human beings, too, are engaged in much conversation about what should be done to keep the salmon coming. All agree that it is a daunting task to find cures for the many ailments that afflict salmon. Salmon range from headwaters to the deep ocean, their life cycle taking them through the entire range of human land uses and activities. Their habitat needs are difficult for the rivers of today to provide: natural meandering stream beds with deep pools and eddies, cool, clean water, sediment-free gravel beds, and quiet side-channels. Salmon present us with a complicated problem, and there is not a shared perception of urgency, let alone acceptable solutions. And because this is only one of many important issues, our institutions are not yet prepared to face up to the broader questions of environmental degradation that are raised by salmon decline. Still, I wait for the day when we collectively agree to mobilize a whole-hearted rescue mission, using all our resources and ingenuity and all the institutions of our society. In my mind's eye I see every last one of us rising up to protect what we say we value and what we call the soul of our region.

But the world we live in is far from perfect, full of ambiguities and contradictions. There is little that lines up neatly and it is futile to expect perfection from our systems or ourselves. Those of us who work on behalf of the natural world know that disappointment, disillusionment, and grief are constant companions, with us every time we act, every time we decide that the world can be a better place. Nevertheless, there is so much more to this world than that defined by human failing.

I arrived in the Skagit three years ago. To come here, I pulled up deep roots in the inner-city neighborhood of Seattle where I had lived for a decade and

"Salmon Is Coming for My Heart": Hearing All the Voices

Shirley Solomon

I live on the delta of the Skagit River and I work to restore salmon. My home is an old farmstead known locally as the Stroebel Place. Now highly productive industrial farmland, this was tidal marshland in another time, well used by native people and by salmon. The Squinamish, who did not survive the successive waves of white contact and the changes of that period, were once here. And so were the salmon, from the time they colonized these postglacial waters, some ten thousand years ago. I live among those born and bred to this place, descendants of those who arrived shortly after the Point Elliott Treaty of 1855 opened the area for white settlement. These are farmers whose forebears subdued the river and built farmhouses like the one I now call home, and who draw their livelihood from the rich soil. I am drawn more to the natural wonders of this place than to the economic potential of my 6 acres of prime bottomland. I look about me with eyes different from theirs and concern myself not with crop production but with the sustainability of salmon.

The Skagit River, third largest of the great West Coast rivers, has gone the way of most of our waterways. It has been harnessed, tamed, and replumbed from top to bottom. Five dams on her upper reaches, all fitted with hydroelectric power plants, supply electricity to the Seattle metropolitan area, 60 miles to the south. A vast network of dikes, levees, and drainage ditches make possible settled life and the variety of agricultural pursuits for which the Valley is famous. Famous, too, are Skagit salmon, both in variety and, until not

a half and where I had never been happier. I need to be closer to my work, I told people. The move surprised my colleagues and friends—and disoriented me for several months. But it was a studied venture, taken after much reflection and designed to bring me closer to the natural world I was feeling more and more distant from. That place could serve as spiritual center is something that I have always known intellectually. I have known too that for me to live a fully grounded life I need to be grounded in nature, in a place that is special to me. But I come from a people whose ways did not show me where that place would be. And so I have been free to wander, all the while longing to be an inhabitant, one who is rooted, connected and committed to the welfare of home.

In my new home I am surrounded by the elements and by all manner of living things, in deep, close interaction with the natural world. Season by season, I become more familiar with the wind patterns, the passage of the moon, the harrier hawks that hunt the meadow, the song of the coyotes, the lighting on the distant mountains. In the fall I listen for the familiar sound of the snow geese and trumpeter swans. I am teaching myself to pay attention to all the small details, to become attuned to the subtleties and particularities of this place. There is a certain spot where I stand, in the soft early morning light, in the fog, in the pounding rain or the ever-present wind, to look out on the landscape. Sometimes, when I am mindful, not wondering where the dogs are or agitated about what the busy day holds, the majesty of the scene draws me in and it touches my heart. I feel that I am an intrinsic part of all that is around me. It is the experience of interconnection, the abstraction that I pursue made real and personal.

I was recently on a panel with my friend Larry Campbell, talking about local partnerships to protect salmon. Larry is Swinomish and schooled in the old oral tradition. He speaks from the heart, unrehearsed, his words conveying what is on his mind and what the spirit in the room moves him to say. He starts by identifying himself with his people and his place. Names his grandparents and parents and tells us where they were from. His paternal line connects him to the Skagit River upstream while his maternal side places him on Skagit Bay. "I am just like the salmon, at home in both the salt and the fresh water," he says. He shows us on the map where he was born and raised and where he lives now. Smiles his sweet smile and lets us know that we are on his ancestral land. He speaks for a long time, in the sweeping circular indigenous manner, telling us about a way of life that is no more, about the grief and displacement his people experience daily because of the decline of the salmon, one loss among many. "You can't separate the Indian from the salmon," he says. He tells us that the elders have encouraged him to reach out to people because the salmon needs help so urgently. He asks that we expand our families to embrace salmon and all the other animals. That we include the rivers and

streams, the trees and the grasses, the roots and the berries. He talks about care and respect for the earth and its creatures. He reminds us of our responsibilities and our obligation, as humans. He closes by blessing us. His is a different voice, a story counter to the prevailing one, a truth-teller who does not deal in blame or judgment. In another time he would be a respected elder and a wise teacher. Today, he journeys into often hostile and unreceptive terrain to speak to those whose views, experience, and style could not be more different from his own. I watch him as he stands before us. His is a voice that has been systematically silenced, ignored, buried. Thought of little value. Yet here he is, determined and gentle, telling us what he thinks we need to know. I have heard his message before and am always moved, but this time it stirs me profoundly. I know that if I do not hold on tightly I will throw my head back, raise my arms and wail, releasing decades and eons of anguish into that windowless meeting room.

Later, when it's my turn, I tell the assembled group about the watershed council I am part of. The council, with a broad and diverse membership of thirty-six organizations, has developed a basinwide approach to repairing and protecting salmon habitat and is changing the way things are being done on the ground. I'm leery of the success we have had because I have seen other hopeful, vigorous efforts implode or flounder, so I spend time describing how we built what we hope will be a solid foundation. We chose to address only one part of a multipart problem—and our work alone will not ensure the future of salmon. We spent time educating one another on the complexities of our task and came to a collective understanding of how best to proceed. I describe the council's three-point program: a science-based strategy for restoration, the education of council members, and a celebration of place. And I talk about what I believe to be the true mission, that of laying the foundation for a different future, seeking not quick fixes but deeper understanding and new alternatives. I see us a hundred years from now slowly and respectfully applying our knowledge, shaping and fine-tuning with thoroughness and patience. Together, living in and making use of our watershed in a way that keeps it alive. Honoring the gift of life by giving back—and not taking too much.

"What about the farmers?" someone asks. A man I recognize as a neighbor says, "I think farmers are the salmon's best friend." And we talk about the challenge of maintaining the economic viability of agricultural production, the hard work and the uncertainty in the face of global markets and international competition, and wonder what it would take to better accommodate the needs of salmon. I say, as is my job to say, "We took so much and changed so much when we first came here. We will need to replace some of what has been lost and return some of that which should never have been taken." Other questions and discussion follow, genuine and serious inquiry into taken-for-

s of thinking and interaction. The farmer says he's not against but that it is hard to be confident that you're not going to get it won't turn into something quite different from how it started. We see that where there is familiarity and trust, much is possible. Agreements are reduced to legal documents or subject to nit-picky regulations. My neighbor, the farmer, shakes his head and got to make a living, but we better do something before it's too

late. I ask me about the council's decision-making process and we see the importance of commonly held principles, clear, adhered-to and how the council's process requires that there be common among all members. The council chose to name its method "consensus" instead of consensus. One member's viewpoint was that the consensus is broadly overused and misused and not applicable to security. He feels strongly that consensus is a spiritual process, not a political one. In his experience participants, gathered to make decisions on behalf of the community, come to their choices under divine auspices. His consensus is that the process brings with it the power of a shared spirit, where participants are moved from the "I" of self-interest to the "we" of common purpose, and so have a deeper obligation to carry out that decision.

A woman wonders if there can be such a thing as common purpose in a world as diverse as ours, with problems as complex as those we face. It is hard to see an adequately compelling vision of the future. At E. F. Schumacher said: "It takes a genius to make things simple, what is important is that we are willing to act our way into it. Intentional acts that reflect our values help us cut through the noise and connect us to each other and to what is real. Barry Lopez and I, if in despair, we should step onto wounded ground and plant it. Larry and I exchange a few words outside. He touches my arm and I touch his. Salmon's got you. I don't have to ask what he means. Salmon is my heart and will teach me what I need to know. From my learning is that there are many dimensions to being grounded. I move onto a new home and let it claim me, I move onto a new path from my old path. Long the facilitator, the third-party go-between, I am a substance and all the messiness and ambiguities that come with it. The world more intimately, my life becomes more sensory, more mindful of the details. I pay attention to sounds and smells, textures and colors. Outwardly, my house is messier than it ever was, more no longer city-crisp, and the dirt of my kitchen garden is often on my hands. Inwardly, there is less despair, more joy. I am beginning to hear my heart and find the sun.

In talking about the barriers to women's equality, Gloria Steinem likens the female spirit—relational, intuitive, nurturing, caring, and cooperative—to a garden of sun plants that has been grown in the shade. They survive but at the cost of their true form. As a child in apartheid-era South Africa, my world was shadowed by patriarchy, dominance, and violence. I saw the high price to be paid for being different and found a way to leave, cutting myself off from heritage, family, and birthplace. As a woman professional trying to get along in an intellectualized, impersonal, man-dominated work world, I took on what felt like a genderless persona, one that gained me access and provided me safe passage but stifled intuition and caring.

Now, past the midpoint of my life, I no longer live in the shade. I see myself in a circle of resilient, determined, loving women, the grandmothers, the mothers, and the aunts who tell the new stories of community, the stories that reconnect us to each other, show us what right living is about, stories that bind us closer and closer to our place as the people of the Skagit. I hear the music and the happy laughter of the dancers as they celebrate the changing of the seasons, welcome in the harvest, and honor the first coming of the salmon. And I smell the flesh of that salmon cooking over the cedar logs.

In nature, I become myself. Through salmon, I may yet come to be at home.

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