

Alison Farmer

Cindy Updegrave

Bioregional field studies: the Duwamish River

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Finding the Center during times of Change

The Duwamish River has gone through many changes over the last decade and in 1949 it was one of the most important and successful rivers of the country. "The Duwamish Diary" written by Cleveland High School tells the story of the river, by the river. It ends by saying:

"I have thrilled with the progress made by the men and women who have trod my banks. These men and women have developed me from a careless, meandering stream to an important, vital waterway. They have built three flourishing districts on my shores. They have filled in most of my river bed that the gods of progress might be satisfied. From 1849 to 1949 they have lived and thought as moderns. And as moderns their eyes have ever been on the future.....it is hard to conceive what may occur during the next century.....I can not even guess how great my future will be. Whatever happens, Georgetown, South Park, and Beacon Hill, will develop as I develop. My progress will be theirs, my advancement, their good fortune" (Cleveland High School 116)

The introduction to the diary says that the people in the story are real, but "their individual destinies were as but threads in the fabric that was woven in determining the development of a section of a great city" (Cleveland High School VI). At the time Georgetown was the most desired location in the new city and the River had an excited anticipation of being extended to Tacoma. Today's reality is an undesirable Superfund backdrop woven by those very threads of development, and a never materialized dream that has turned into a nightmare. The rivers progress has, as predicted, mirrored the populations surrounding it; and all became subject to a disintegrating and polluting environment. The rivers fortune quickly became one of misfortune under worship to the god of progress, what went wrong?

One of the earliest signs of mans progress came with the invention of the "wheel". The symbol for the wheel is of cosmic unity and renewal of earth's cycles. This simple invention

enabled man to travel much further and faster than he could under his own power. It is simple physics; by turning a central axis a little, the outer edge of the wheel turns a lot. A simple two dimensional wheel is fairly easy to control; another kind of wheel that requires a little more mastering is the "Potters Wheel", it utilizes a third dimension. As an artist I like to turn to the act of "creating", (making something new) for many answers. My favorite quote is from Louise Bourgeois. "Art is not about Art. Art is about life".

Creating on a Wheel

Very early ceramic pots were hand-built using a simple coiling technique. Nowadays most pots are made on a potter's wheel. Unlike hand-building, in wheel-throwing the bulk of the energy used does not come directly from the hands of the potter, it utilizes energy stored in the rotating mass of the heavy stone wheel itself. Introduction of the fast-wheel brought benefits in the form of speed and symmetrical results. If the clay is not centered at the start, or you exert too much of your own energy on it, then your pot collapses. Once centered, a hard thing for a beginner, then the structure is fairly stable and you can begin to mold it carefully.

The wheel of life certainly has at least three dimensions, and possibly many more. Rather than a cycle of life of repetition and renewal, I see it more like a spiral, winding continuously, fluctuating around a central axis, constantly re-correcting the balance and always changing and evolving. For many centuries now "outward progress" has been the spiritual goal to be satisfied by western man and as we raced to the very outer limits of our technology, we have reached the very outskirts of the wheel, losing touch with the center of creation and pulling everything out of balance. With our own demise looming, our planet also sits on the verge of collapse. For thousands of years the stewardship of the Duwamish River had been in the hands of experienced native tribes, but under new less experienced management and worship to a different god, its ecosystem, which is also part of our own, is losing stability. Anything in our rivers also ends up in us, we are both polluted and re-infecting each other. How do we find that center again? Artists are nearly always trying to create a balance in their life, inside and out, either by expulsion and communication of weighty internal emotions or by external communication of an outside in-balance, communication is important. They have also

historically been highlighters of beauty and ugliness, rights and wrongs, so for a clue to the rivers current state and future, I turned to 'Claire Cowie', a western artist who has a studio in a federal building on the banks of the Duwamish River.

Claire Cowie

Claire Cowie moved to Seattle in 1997 from North Carolina after Graduate School and exhibits at the James Harris Gallery in Seattle. Following the loss of her Pioneer Square studio/home in the Earthquake of 2001 she moved her studio to the banks of the Duwamish in Feb 2001 and now lives in the affordable neighborhood of Beacon Hill, only a 10 minute cycle away. Her studio is constructed inside an old Boeing hanger, sits opposite Kellogg Island, which



Claire and myself outside her studio on banks of Duwamish, opposite Kellogg Island and Factory.

sits next to a large factory.

The tiny 100% organic South Federal Park created by the Port of Seattle sits right next to her building, she used to go canoeing there but a large fence now stops her immediate access. Next to the park sits a major sewage/storm drain at Diagonal Way which was one of the first clean up sites but

still a major regular pollutant. The disparities are large and her landscapes are a response to the dualities experienced. Interviewing her about her Duwamish images, Cowie explained that her work takes queues from 100's of photographs, nothing literal, taken from her immediate view of the river. The people in her images are more like characters and animals and she constantly shifts scales, playing with how things are connected. She particularly likes the mystical, magical, smokiness that comes through the graininess of fog and rain, and those moments of brightness when the sun comes out and highlights the reds and blues of the barges and cranes. When I asked her if she thinks about the pollution in the river, she references the images that contain shapes of red or black in her Duwamish pieces and said about it "relationship with nature becoming problematic, toxic – pretty, but also polluted and dirty". Many of her pieces contain a subtle way of talking about things out of



The RedRiver by Cowie



The Ruins by Cowie

whack (tortoise), with multiple horizons indicating something not right, something out of balance. Though her most current work has taken a different direction, maybe related to the birth of her daughter 9 months ago, she says her work is still greatly influenced by the Duwamish and the Japanese art culture engrained in the Seattle area, it definitely captures a sense of place for her.

What struck me most about Cowie's images was the space and balance, the odd crane, bit of land, a boat added here and there, until the composition is balanced by the empty space. She has often had the serendipity, of painting something that then appears in photograph years later, but is quick to say it could be because she only seems to understand things later and it is not a prediction. She does however; call it “meaningfully neat”. Not all Cowie’s images of the Duwamish are ones we would like to see repeated in real life, but the overall balance is.



The Port II 2004 by Cowie

Claire is choosing to live the life of an artist, her husband is an artist and all their friends are artists. They have established a unique little artist’s community hidden within a concrete block, building walls together and sharing their knowledge and skills. Claire chooses a slower more observant life, a less predictable but colorful one. She is prepared to sacrifice luxuries and delights in moments of synchronicity. She works hard but also finds time to sit and watch. She gives thanks for the uptimes and does not give up during the bad ones, knowing life has to have both. She says of being an artist “even on my worst day, I would rather being doing this”. As an artist she has the power to give significance and symbolism to everything she notices. She can make a urinal into a piece of art and turn a stone into a fairy. It is a hand-built life, and she has to stay focused to remain in the center on the fast wheel of progress. Her life today is not unlike that of indigenous people of the past, a mindful one of observation and reflection, her central focus is Art, theirs is Nature.

Native American Center

Today local Native American tribes, after getting pushed from their center to one side, are fast racing for the other; no longer want to go back. One way Native Americans are trying to keep centered is to look back at their oral tradition of story telling and their central focus of nature, their mother is the earth. These stories are about the world we live in and how we live in it, and for centuries have supplied them with their understanding of the world and their relationship with nature. When told with heart, Native American stories inject every thing with life, everything is infused with spirit. Much like in an artwork, mere objects become symbols, obtain significance and majesty. Similar to Cowie's later understanding of her work, the message of a Native American story has to be understood through different ears and eyes. Neither have literal meanings and interpretation is meant to come from the imagination, altered perception and larger horizons. Artists, Indigenous cultures and children view things differently and can see the magic. When a child at Cleveland High School suggested writing about the Duwamish River in the first person, the river gained a personality and came to life. The river has personality for Cowie and the Duwamish Tribe has always attributed it with one.

Abram and Smith on the Center

In David Abram's book "The Spell of the Sensuous", Abram re-awakens us to the spellbinding possibility of an animate world and opens the door to an altered state of perception of alertness and respect. Talking about the role of the Shaman within indigenous populations he notes, they do not reside in the center of the community but place themselves in isolation outside of it. The Shaman places himself in the center, between the different spirit worlds and "he ensures that the relationship between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal" (Abram). The Shaman maintains a healthy balance and corrects in-balance (illness) of community individuals by prayer and ritual to the spirits of this world and others, repressing or exorcising malevolent spirits causing harm. Abram is reawakening us to find a center outside of us, reminding us we are only part of a larger ecosystem subject to polar energies outside our bodies. Carl Jung believed it was possible to find an inner center, "a psychic axis mundi which he called the Self" and we can find it through

the process of “Individuation” (Smith). Jung is assuming the center is within us, in one world, though he does say the individuation process “is not a linear progression, but a circumambulation around a numinous center point” where the center is the archetypal self. This long, hard and often painful journey can be considered a “crafting of the soul”.

Mandala, the Journey to the Center

Even on our internal journeys to the center, we appear to use external focuses like the mediation tool of the Mandala to center us. Mandala is from Sanskrit word roughly meaning



Sri Yantra. Rajasthan c.1700.
Red and Yellow earth colors

“circle” and represents wholeness. Buddhist Scholar, Professor A.F.

Thurman notes “every being is a mandala... We are our environment as much as we are the entity of the environment” (Cunningham 12). A

metaphor for Indian spiritual philosophy is “a spider’s threads emanate from a central point, connect, and converge back to the center – just as

life throws from a single point of creation to all things, and then

returns to the creator” (Cunningham 14). If to get back to the Center

we have to look outside of us, where is the single axis point of creation we can return our focus to for stability?

Center of Creation

Creation of the world is probably the single most incredible piece of art. Since man first set foot on the earth the question of “where we came from” has been a constant cause of theory and debate. God and Darwin are the main contenders for westerners

today, Native cultures have their own. The Native Americans of the Lower Puget Sound have many creation stories and in the Lushootseed story, "Moon, the Transformer," the first animal created was a Salmon, given to the people by Moon for their subsistence. “As Moon traveled around Puget Sound, he came across all the animal species and all of the elements of the earth and transformed them into what they are today. His first transformation changed dog salmon into "food for the people." At the end of the transformation, Moon tells the people, "Fish shall



run up these rivers, they shall belong to each people on its own river. You shall make your own living from the fish, deer and other wild game." (Ott).

Native Americans believe the soul of the Salmon lives on and during the First Salmon



Ceremony the carcass is always returned to the river to ensure its return.

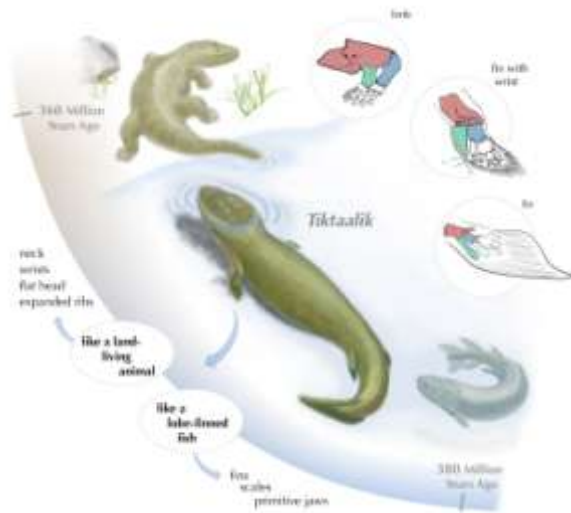
These Salmon stories point us towards good stewardship of the land and they describe how people should treat salmon and emphasize that salmon runs are not an annual certainty. They could and did fail for any number of reasons, sometimes because people had acted inappropriately. "We must be humble and appreciative. If we are cruel and arrogant, our elder will not come" (Barsh). A typical chant at the ceremony is, "He's coming - my elder brother! Welcome, my elder brother!" (Julius Charles' reef-net chant, recorded in 1942). To the Native American a Salmon is not a mere animal, but an elder member of his family with authority and wisdom" (Barsh).

The earth was once covered in water in both Gods and Darwin's theories, rather than the land masses disconnected by water, water is the main connector between the lands and its inhabitants. Today 78% of the earth is covered by water and up to 60 % of the human body is water. 83% of our blood is water, the brain is composed of 70 % water, and the lungs are nearly 90 % water (U.S. Department of the Interior). In Gods story of Creation sea creatures and birds were created on the 5th day, land animals on the 6th. In Genesis 1:26-28 the following appears: Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God rested on the 7th day and admired his creation. While this creation story has been subject to "literal" misinterpretation like many other religious texts, it was only intended to give an order to things and teach us how to be good stewards of the earth. It gives us fish for our sustenance, as in the Native American story, but no member of the created order is a deity (Freeman).

The Jesus Fish has been a symbol used by Christians since ancient Roman times and is an acronym of Ichthus (ΙΧΘΥΣ, Greek for fish) and compiles to "Jesus Christ God Son Savior. The

symbol is also seen as doorway or portal between worlds, and symbolizing “the intersection between the heaven and the material plane” (symbols page). Maybe fish can link two worlds like a Shaman, bringing balance and connection.

Darwin’s theory of evolution is very complicated, but has all life stemming from the sea. In 2006 a fossil species was discovered in Arctic Canada that fills a missing evolutionary link



between fish and land animals over 375 million years ago. Local Inuits named the new species “Tiktaalik” from a word meaning “a large, shallow water fish” (University of Chicago). “Tiktaalik blurs the boundary between fish and land-living animals both in terms of its anatomy and its way of life,” said Neil Shubin, professor and chairman of organismal biology at the University of Chicago and co-leader of the project (Harvard Science). Darwin has fish as

one of our relatives, a similar belief held by Native Americans.

If not the center of creation the Salmon appears to be the very backbone of a coastal Pacific river system. Its cycle provides food for over 50 birds and mammals and fertilizes the soil for many plants. A diverse ecosystem is a healthy one, naturally keeping out “exotic” invasion and whenever the river is held together with the threads of salmon it is strong, healthy and balanced, like a centered pot.

Turning our focus on the Salmon is helping our river systems back to health. By the late 1990’s Fourteen species of Salmon were listed as “threatened”. As part of one big ecosystem, the health of the river system is critical to our own. In a paper by Peter Leigh he notes: “The environment is not an externality as claimed by economists, it is the system in which we are an intrinsic part; like a cell in a body” (Leigh 12). Maybe we have finally found a central focus and are on the way back to a stable structure, a more mindful life celebrating all of creation. “The salmon is a symbol of the majesty of the Pacific Basin, as it were, a symbol of the power of the

planet and its an indicator species of the health of the whole system that we must restore in order to survive, in order to keep in tact the weave of creation, and in order to live the kind of lives that we set out to try to live” (David Simpson, Mattole Watershed Council).

Salmon Recovery

Focus on Salmon has led to discovery of the 4 H’s critical to Salmon revival: Harvesting, Hatcheries, Hydropower and Habitat. All four affect us and attention to them is finally slowing down our destruction of the planet, causing us to stop and think and even restore things.

In 2005 a Salmon Habitat Plan was drafted for the Green/Duwamish and Central Puget Sound Watershed and with the help of the Duwamish Ricer Clean-up Collation the river is being cleaned up bit by bit. Earth based medicine, religions and studies like Eco-psychology, which habitat restoration work incorporates, are on the rise as more people become aware of the powerful energy contained within the earth’s stone that can help us to wellness and wholeness. Just as in the potter’s wheel, we have a source of energy in the earth’s core that we can utilize to aid in strong healthy structures with a deep soul connection to our planet. All these earth based modalities bring stewardship of the earth back into focus and highlight the sensual world we live in.

Harvesting is being regulated, on Tuesday April 15th, the state Fish and Game Commission voted to ban fishing for salmon in state waters off the California coast. Hydro systems are also slowly being adapted to allow salmon to complete their Journey. However, Hatcheries do not appear to be under the same intense radar, are on the increase due to depleted stocks, and I feel they threaten to undermine all the efforts of the other three.

Michael Keopf who is former commercial fisherman and a novelist who lives in Elk was appalled at the ban of fishing in California and feels the solution to salmon decline is to build more hatcheries. He sees salmon as being sustainable and blames broken bedrooms for the Salmon decline, “There's no place for hanky-panky to spawn little fish”, along with the 1,400 dams in the state of California and global warming. He notes the Congress solution of subsidizing fisherman and says “The welfare state is sailing out to sea”. He does agree with

environmentalists that hatcheries are a Band-Aid fix, but sees the band aid masking the degradation of streams and rivers. “They are correct, but in so doing they see salmon as a symbol instead of a fish. Salmon create salmon, not regulation and symbolism” (Keopf).

In a letter from Jim Lichatowich, Chair of the Independent Scientific Advisory Board to Dr. Usha Varanasi, Science Director of Northwest Fisheries Science Center, on April 16, 2001, Lichatowich reviews several questions pertaining to the disposition of "surplus" hatchery-reared adult salmon. After lots of analysis Lichatowich concludes: “1) Demographic "boosts" from allowing excess hatchery fish to spawn with wild populations are unsubstantiated. 2) Domestication selection can genetically alter hatchery populations in a relatively few generations. 3) Hatchery-reared adults returning from the ocean and spawning in the wild generally produce progeny that do not survive as well as progeny from adults of wild-origin. 4) we find a reasonable basis for suspicion that: Interbreeding between hatchery-reared adults and wild fish can reduce the fitness of the wild population” (Independent Scientific Advisory Board).

A research study carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for “The United States Department of the Interior U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service” in 1981 about the “Distribution and Food Habits of Juvenile Salmonids in the Duwamish Estuary, Washington 1980” indicated at least 32% of all Coho fish taken from the river in the spring were untagged Hatchery Salmon (United States Department of the Interior U.S. Fish and Wildlife). Nearly 30 years later Hatchery “escape” is still causing a major problem and hotly debated due to economics. The Duwamish has already suffered greatly due to economics and unless we start treating Salmon like a symbol we are prone to continue the repetitive cycle of destruction. To the Native American, salmon symbolizes creativity, generosity, intelligence and intuition. “It expresses a need for purpose and goals, and has no trouble finding volunteers for his/her personal crusades. In a supportive environment, the Salmon is stable, calm, sensual, and giving (Native American Animal Symbols). The Salmon is also known as a provider of life, a symbol of abundance of prosperity and clean cool water.

Cynthia Updegrave, my teacher, has a passion of connecting people to the diverse ecosystems found in this region. She wraps up my own symbolism of a Salmon wonderfully; “Salmon are intriguing, they weave it all together and die with the greatest of faith in the intact watershed being there to feed their young, more intense than mammals really”. Before moving to America I had only ever seen Atlantic Salmon, they do not die in the river after spawning and return home to sea up to 8 times. Though many admired their return to the same river each year, it is no more miraculous than a bird returning to the same nest each year, “so as above, as below”. It was not until I saw my first river of red sockeye salmon in Canada, with dead carcasses lying over buried eggs that I was struck with awe and majesty for the creatures, even cloaked with dead flesh the river felt so alive. A Salmon threads its way inwards from the sea into the land, continues its soul journey in new strong woven threads of life weaving their return to the sea, creating a strong intricate tapestry, binding the region together in a rich cultural fabric. For one fish to journey so far, to give up its flesh for so many and still complete its soul journey is truly a miracle of creation from a divine hand and worthy of great respect and symbolism.

Being a non Native Salmon in Pacific Waters my chances of survival are low, but if I can learn from my environment and adapt my behaviors, I have a greater chance of survival. The study of my locale, as well as spending time with the Duwamish River has helped me acclimatize and feel more assimilated. The salmon is a very profound symbol for this Region.

Duwamish Diary update: The fish in the story are real, but “their individual destinies were as but threads in the fabric that was woven in determining the development of a section of a great river”

Spiraling into the Center, the center of the wheel (x2)

We are the weavers, we are the woven ones

We are the dreamers, we are the dream



River of Life

These two pictures of fish were painted by me approximately 5 years before this paper and given the topic, they have not become “meaningfully neat”, as Cowie would say. “I now understand them much better”(Alison)



Evolution

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