

# **Rivers and Rocks**

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## **Perceptions**

A little boy and a little girl stopped to peer into the quiet waters of a branch creek. "What do you see?" asked the girl.

"I see rocks and leaves and mud, some minnows and a crawdad," said the boy. "What do you see?"

"I see trees growing up toward a blue sky with white, fluffy clouds and a bird flying," the girl replied.

They both stood there quietly, still looking into the stream, until the girl broke the silence. "I see it now!" she exclaimed. "I see the rocks, the minnows swimming; I see the crawdad. He's funny!" she laughed.

"I see it now too!" said the boy. I see the trees and the sky and the bird flying." With that, they both looked up, seeing everything more clearly.

Of course these were soft-hearted children. Had they been hard-headed adults, they may have argued for days.

People see things differently. If we are willing, we can learn from the perceptions of others. We are limited in our ability to perceive and lack the vantage point from which to see the whole truth about anything. There *are* false perceptions. Still, two perceptions may be very different, while equal in truth.

## **Conversation with a Long Person**

I was sitting in a car in a parking lot in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. From my vantage point, I could look out across the Cape Girardeau flood wall to watch the mighty Mississippi River flowing by. As I watched, I began to contemplate the life of the great river. I thought about how an uncontrolled river is constantly changing, naturally snaking back and forth across its flood plain. Then I tried to imagine what the Missi Sepe looked like 400 or 500 years ago. From the depths of my contemplation, I found myself speaking to the spirit of the river, expressing the emotion of my heart. "I am sorry," I said, "that men have come and have presumed to control you, digging channels, building levees and even erecting this flood wall."

And the river laughed. It was not heard with my physical ears, but it was unmistakably and overwhelmingly a long, low and hearty laugh. And when the river finished laughing, the river spoke, and this is what the river said, "I was here long before those men, and I will be here long after their kind has vanished from the earth. No man controls me. Before long, I will rise up and shake myself, and you will see just a little of my power."

This conversation happened early in 1993. In the summer of that same year, the Mississippi flooded. Even as I helped with sandbagging in various communities on or

near the river, I remembered the laughter and the words spoken to me by that long person.

That's what we call streams and rivers. We call them long people. We understand that a stream or river is alive and living and is a person lying down in the earth.

But what exactly *is* a river? How do you define its boundaries?

Is a river the water that flows along? That water is constantly changing.

Is a river defined by its banks or by the river bed? The banks are constantly changing too, in spite of the best efforts of the Army Corps of Engineers. Also, if you dug far below what we might perceive to be the bed of the river, you would find water flowing there as well.

What about the fish in a river? What about the bugs and all the microorganisms? Are these parts of the life or person of the river, or are they entirely separate?

What of the smaller rivers and streams that feed into a river? Does the life or person of a river include these, or are they entirely separate?

What would a river be without its tributaries? What would a river be without its banks or its bed? What would a river be without its fish, bugs and microbes? What would a river be without its flowing water? And what would a river be without its floodplain? What would a river be without the rain or without the clouds that carry the rain or without the oceans from which the waters evaporate and into which the waters return?

Rivers certainly move, but can you pick up a river and move it? If you could move the Mississippi River to Europe or to Mars, would it still be the Mississippi River?

## **Rocks**

Examine a rock. A rock seems to have very well defined boundaries. It's easy to tell where the rock stops and starts. What is the rock and what is not the rock does not seem to be in question. You can always count on a rock, can't you? A rock just lays there in the same place, just being a rock, until we come along. You can pick up a rock and move it somewhere else. It remains the same rock, doesn't it?

Well, rocks may not be as solid as they seem. Rocks are constantly on the move and constantly changing. Large rocks float up toward the surface of the earth, where they are worn down or broken into smaller rocks. Small rocks sink down into the earth where they will eventually be compressed or even melted together to make larger rocks. Rocks not only change in size and shape, but they even change from one type of rock to another. Rocks have a very active lifestyle, not so different from rivers, just at a different speed, usually. Sometimes the speed of rocks can be very swift, as with the eruption of a volcano and the flow of molten lava, or the rocks that are tumbling along as part of a river bed.

## Human Beings

What defines a human being? What defines you? Where are your boundaries? Where do you stop and where does what is not you start?

There is a tendency to define or perceive a human being as an independent or separate entity, unique and alone in the midst of the rest of creation which is seen as different and apart. So, what exactly are the bounds?

There are those who define a human being according to possessions (net worth) or by what is accomplished or done. Are you defined by what you own? Do you really own anything? Is there anything that you brought with you into what you might call “this life”? Is there anything that you will take with you when you leave “this life”? Some people, when introducing themselves, are quick to say something like, “I am a plumber,” or “I am an engineer,” or “I am an office worker,” or “I am a farmer,” defining themselves narrowly by how they make money. That may indeed be an aspect of who a person is, but is there not more? It is funny to me that all those words: plumber, engineer, worker, farmer, are nouns in the English language, as is the word human. A noun is something to hold onto, something to closely define or delineate, something to own. Our Cherokee word *ᎠᎩᏍᏔᏅ* *yvwiya*, often translated as “real person” is, in reality, a verb or action word or phrase. It is impossible to hold onto action. It is harder to define and resists confinement, delineation and ownership. But, that’s how life is. In reality, even the English phrase human being is a verb phrase rather than a noun phrase, although few English speakers understand it that way. Turn the phrase around, and it’s easier to see that it describes not something solid one may hold onto but rather the action of “being human”.

How would we define or delineate the human being? How would you define yourself? What are your boundaries? Are you defined or bounded by the body that we see? The human body is something like 80% water, but it’s not always the same water is it? Just as with a river, water is constantly flowing through you. Part of your body is also made up of air. You are constantly breathing in and out. You breathe in and extract oxygen from the air, and when you breathe out, some of the carbon that has been in your body flows out in the form of carbon dioxide. The part of your body that is not water or air is made up of various solid elements of the earth – minerals of all sorts, rock if you will. This too, is forever changing, forever flowing, so that seven years from now there is not a single molecule of matter in your body that will not have been exchanged.

Are you the food that you eat? Are you the water that you drink? Are you the air that you breathe? Are you the sum total of all your ancestors and of others who may have changed and shaped your life? What would you be without all of these?

What we take for the outside boundary of a human being is constantly changing in form and shape, maybe even more quickly than the banks of a river. We grow up and out. We get broader or thinner, sometimes shorter. Finally, our bodies stop altogether. The elements of the earth stop flowing through our body, and our body decomposes, distributed back into the earth, the water, the air, the rock. Yet all continues to flow, to live.

What about thoughts and memories? Are these who you are? Certainly they are important, but what happens when thought fails and memory fades?

Are you the voice in your head? Is that you? What of the awareness of that voice; who is that?

As Cherokees, we speak of the Elder Fires Above and of the Fire entrusted to our people and of the Fire that burns in our hearts. Perhaps there is no division between these. Perhaps they are one and the same. This is a great mystery. But, is there that which is beyond the Fires?

In times past, scientists said that matter was matter and energy was energy. Now scientists understand that matter is simply energy in a different form or at a different frequency. So, what of the division between the physical and the spiritual?

Scientists have said that most of the universe is empty space and that even what appears to be solid matter is an illusion and that our own bodies mirror the universe, being mostly empty space. More recently, some scientists say that the notion of empty space is itself an illusion, that space is not empty at all but filled with strings of dark matter which hold everything together in unity, as one organism, one entity, one being.

Are you a rock? Are you a river? Where do you start? Where do you stop? Are you simply what you see in the mirror, or is the person whose surface you comprehend in the mirror part of something much larger, something infinite in scope and wisdom? And how old are you? Are you as old as the number of birthdays you have counted, or are you part of that which is eternal?

What would happen if one of your skin cells decided it was not really a part of your body? What if this skin cell convinced other skin cells that they too, are not part of the body but rather independent of the body and superior to the body? This actually happens sometimes. We call it "skin cancer."

There are those who speak of caring for "our environment." That very terminology serves to separate us, as if we could be separated. "Environment" means "that which surrounds," so by extension it means "that which is not us."

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is a wise saying. Why? Because your neighbor is yourself and not just your human neighbor, but everyone, everything that seems to surround you – you are part of it. And by loving all, you love yourself.

Are you a river? Are you a rock? Whatever you are, whoever you are, you are inseparable from the whole, from the entirety, and you are never alone.