

Mirrors of Uncertainty

For a lost wax casting class at University of Alaska Fairbanks, I carved five small fish in blue wax. Disappointed that the wax wasn't capable of holding the detail I was capable of carving, I nevertheless, invested these five little fish, then melted out the wax and burned out the investment, the wax's smoke vented through the outside wall. The investment cavities were then filled with molten silver, which, when cooled, shined like five moons in January.

The fish were about an ounce and a half apiece so they represented some small investment in silver—I remained disappointed the wax hadn't better held carved surface details, but they satisfied one of the assignments for the class. However, I wasn't able to use them as I initially intended, and not knowing what else to do with them, I kept them wrapped in a paper towel atop the refrigerator, first in Fairbanks, then in Idaho after I drifted south to accept a fellowship at Idaho State University. They were there atop my refrigerator for years even after I remarried and acquired a fourteen year old stepson.

One day I couldn't find them. I didn't remember doing anything with them, but they weren't on the refrigerator, weren't anywhere I looked. While I didn't thoroughly search the whole house, I looked in all of the obvious places, all of the places where I might have stuck them, might have hid them, all of the places where I remembered sticking items since I moved into the house. I couldn't imagine where they went . . . actually, that's not true: I thought, since one acquaintance of my stepson, a teenager with a reputation for thievery had been in our kitchen months before, that those fish were stolen. I had no proof, no reason to suspect the teenager other than I couldn't find those fish. So I mentally chalked the fish up as gone. They were among the least valuable things that could have walked out of the house. I sort of forgot about them until I heard a poet, a tenured faculty member at Lewis-Clark State College, read selections from his book, and recite an extended passage from *Beowulf*.

The poet had been a divinity student, who had planned to preach Christ and repentance to sinners until he realized that he was a sinner. Then his doubts began. First about himself. Then about Scripture being the word of God. Finally about whether any god exists. He wasn't long into his doubts before he couldn't continue as a divinity student so he became an English major, and eventually a professor who could understand the cultural search for a spiritual absolute. He could never shake his doubts about whether he was worthy of elevation.

No one is apart from Christ, the reason why we are baptized into His death and raised in His life. And we regularly doubt ourselves.

This week the last *Peanuts* cartoon strip will appear for the first time. Charlie Brown's self-doubts are ours. And as we nationally consult more analysts and more counselors of all sorts we just confirm our doubts about whether we are able to cope with those things that didn't seem to phase grandparents and great-grandparents.

Last night my wife of now five years looked at a list of houses available in the area of Alaska where we would like to buy property. She became excited about one place. Its location was perfect, and its price a bargain. I asked if she realized the place used an outhouse. "Where do you see that?" she asked. I pointed to where. "Oh, well, we don't want that."

"Why not? I don't know anyone on the Kenai who hasn't experienced a winter using an outhouse."

"You have already spent a winter, and I don't intend to." She was mad at me for at least five minutes.

My memories of using an outhouse as a kid in Indiana are of how cold the edges of the hole were and of a huge harvest spider that lived in the upper corner by the door; I didn't know spiders grew so large, and I wasn't convinced a spider that large was harmless. I used to keep my eye on it as I sat out there, shivering, crumpling pages of last year's Sears catalogue, its yellow pages already missing. For me, the worst part of growing up was becoming old enough that I couldn't use the thundermug in the house at night, but had to get up, get dressed, and go to the outhouse, where I sat almost too cold for anything to happen, where I sat with that spider watching me.

So, no, I don't want to return to using an outhouse, but I have no *angst* about them, or about Sear catalogues, or harvest spiders. I don't want to return to logging on the Kenai: that winter of 1974-75 was enough. And I wouldn't take another contract with L-P for any amount of money—the only gypo who had declined a contract for export logs or cants was Denny Bell, with whom I became friends.

At Denny's one evening, I meant Clovis Kingsley for whom the road at Ninilchick is named. Clovis told a story about him and Denny shooting a bull moose just about dark one Friday evening. Like myself, Denny was a Sabbath keeper, and he wanted to get that bull hung and dressed before sunset. In addition, they shot the bull on Bell's Flats, and I have seen brown bear there. They didn't want to risk losing the bull, which meant they needed to get it to Denny's house, a mile or so away, before a bear claimed it.

If a fellow intends to pack a moose on his back, he usually butchers it into eight packloads of eighty pounds or so each. With two fellows packing, that translates into four round trips. Hiking, especially with a load, a mile of muskeg in the dark will take an hour. For Denny and Clovis to have packed that moose out on their backs, they would have been until two or three in the morning. Denny would have certainly worked hard enough to have violated the Sabbath in his mind. He had a better idea: he hurried up to his homestead, got his D-4 Cat and rattled it down the hill and across the muskeg as fast as he could. He and Clovis hooked onto that bull—it was already dark enough that the lights of Denny's cabin could be seen from across Bell's Flats—and Denny headed for his place by the most direct route across the muskeg.

There are things on the Kenai Peninsula catskinners call *Alaskan creeks*. The average person doesn't notice them. Catskinners say that's because they are one inch wide and ten feet deep. Denny ran into one. The Cat sank to the top of its tracks, and sat there jiggling, unable to move, as it threatened to sink even farther.

Clovis said that for awhile uncertainties nearly overwhelmed Denny, who just knew he was breaking the Sabbath and didn't know how he could free his Cat, which continued to sit there idling, jiggling, sinking farther into the muskeg.

Denny and Clovis cut every willow and black spruce within two hundred yards of the Cat and shoved them under its tracks to try to keep the Cat from sinking farther. The Cat was a cable blade with a pony motor, meaning the Cat had no hydraulics to force the blade down so it couldn't lift itself with its blade. Plus, the Cat used the gas pony motor to start its diesel motor. The gas motor didn't have a starter but only a crank located behind where the blade was floating as the Cat sank farther. They couldn't again start the Cat if they shut it down, and the vibration of its engine idling continued to cause the Cat to sink into the muskeg.

Denny used the Cat to skid logs which he then milled for his sole source of income. He couldn't afford to lose the Cat, nor his salvation: if a person is convinced that God requires him or her to keep the Sabbath holy, refraining from doing any work on that day from sundown to sundown, and then that person finds, in this case, himself working harder than he ever has to keep from losing a mainsource of his income, that person will experience doubts about God and about why God is letting this thing happen. He will tell himself this is an ox-in-the-ditch situation that can be forgiven, but he will know that is not the case. This is a situation where he put the ox in that ditch, and he will begin to doubt his sincerity as a Christian. He will have doubts about the wisdom of him pulling

that trigger so late Friday afternoon (the bull was a big one, over sixty inches). I know. I have been there, and Denny told me that he was there.

When Clovis told this story, he laughed and Denny had a red face. It was only a year later when Denny brought that D-4 up to my shop to put in a driveway and parking lot that I heard what he was thinking. Denny said he felt guilt with every chew of every bite of that moose that winter even though he knew the incident was covered by blood.

Traumatic occurrences seldom produce real trials of faith. It is in these little incidents where faith is eroded by those moments of uncertainty, which, like dripping water droplets, wears away at our resolve.

Denny and Clovis worked until dawn getting enough wood under the tracks of Denny's Cat for it to pull itself out of that Alaskan creek. Then they still had the moose to skin and quarter. That moose was both families' winter meat.

In those cast silver fish, I had invested my best effort in creating life, the illusion of motion suggestive of living creatures. They seemed to twist and turn back upon themselves as steelhead do on their first leaps for freedom. But those fighting steelhead are hooked fish, tethered to their doom by an invisible strand they could easily break if they could get a direct pull on the line. They are living mirrors of uncertainty. Too much drag, and they are lost. Not enough, and they throw the hook. Fighting them requires patience, and a feel for how hard to work rod, reel, and fish.

The poet wrote, revised his writing, then revised his revisions, then revised them again until his words shone more brightly than those silver fish, newly cast. It was as if his doubts about worthiness prevented him from sending forth his words, which might reveal his failings as a poet, a man, a moralist. As long as his work remained hidden, his sins remained concealed behind words or letters or faint utterances. But if he projected himself onto his work, he gave life to doubts about whether he was good enough to be accepted—his hope for salvation became hope of acceptance.

With reluctance, the poet completed his collection of poems, for which he had a contract in hand. He knew they would be published as soon as he submitted the complete manuscript; he delayed that submission until embarrassment overcame his doubts.

For this poet, eternal life was no longer achievable. Polite applause was enough to quiet his uncertainty for another day or two.

I look back through English literature to the era when one of Mom's forefathers preached the funeral for Mary, Queen of Scots, and I wonder if I can write with the self-assuredness of those poets, playwrights, and preachers, who mocked deconstruction long before the linguistic icon existed. They felt no need to qualify everything they wrote. Instead, they wrote with verbal muscle, certain that not only was communication possible but through words they could create a world and a faith that had never before existed.

Today, we know nothing for certain. With deconstruction, we wonder if written communication is even possible. We have deconstructed our history, our literature, our language, our faith, and we are left to drown in a flood of disconnected signifiers and signifieds, none of which have meaning, making our suffocation equally meaningless. No wonder that tenured poet was reluctant to say, *This text is finished*. As long as he held it close to his breast, it remained alive, strong and healthy as it grew, matured, like hidden *Leaves of Grass*.

Writing has become a process, like the growing of *Grass*, but with revision instead of publication its product. We have circled half way around on ourselves since Jack Kerouac was *On the Road*.

Too many of us lack faith in our convictions. As was said in an ancient Pogo cartoon, *We have opinions because somebody said we should have opinions*. We have endured a President still discovering his core convictions (they might all wear stripes), and a Vice President who invented the Internet. We profess faith in a Creator God, then deconstruct

and carefully, thoughtfully, emotionally reconstruct the only text that reveals this deity. We questioned whether our military could defeat Iraq. Yes, we did. Then when our military did, we asked them to use *safer bullets* as they were and are sent to figuratively deliver pizza around the world, a phrase that belongs to Rush Limbaugh.

The popularity of radio personality Rush Limbaugh might have as much to do with him voicing his convictions as to him validating the opinions of his audience. Rush, G. Gordon Liddy, Chuck Harder, Allen Keyes, a few others—all might stand out because they deconstructed their uncertainties instead of their opinions.

During that first winter I spent on the Kenai Peninsula, working but not getting paid, I would sit in the outhouse and wonder if I had made a mistake moving North. I had lots of uncertainties, did a lot of second-guessing of myself, and even a considerable amount of praying. Continually, though, a single phrase meandered through my thoughts: *if God is for us, who can be against us?* Who can be? Really, only ourselves.

After I sold my shop in March 1979, I bought a 29-foot boat, and rigged it for longlining halibut. Most everyone was certain I had lost my mind, because before I sailed from Homer for Kodiak in May, I had only been to sea in skiffs, and then never out of sight of port. I didn't know what I was doing, didn't know much about the boat I bought, but I was willing to take educated chances. Besides, if God is for us, who can be against us. Still as I watched the lights of Homer disappear as I headed south towards the Barren Islands, 210 degrees, south by southwest, magnetic, I felt all kinds of uncertainties, ones I again felt when I left Kodiak for Dutch Harbor in July, the story of both journeys I tell in other essays.

What does it take for God to build sufficient faith in a disciple that this disciple will challenge orthodox Christianity to deconstruct centuries old spiritual understandings, and overturn the world. More than a quarter of a century ago, I was drafted by God to do that very job. I wasn't chosen because of my righteousness, but because I would, by faith, send my words forth to do the work of Christ Jesus. I might not want to, but I will, for who can stand against me if God is for me. No one, not even Satan himself. Uncertainty can only be whether God is for me—I wouldn't have written the pieces in this collection on my own, so the words I have set down are mine, but they really aren't.

Last month I found, in a rumpled paper bag among moth-eaten fly-tying necks in a tin cookie can, those five cast silver fish. They were tarnished, one of them almost black. I don't remember putting them in that bag or in that tin, but I must have. And my doubts about that teenager were unjustified.

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