



THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF RIVERS

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Fall was coming to California. You could feel it in the hot, sere winds that occasionally blew down the canyons to rattle the sycamores across from our house. Just below our kitchen window the Carmel River flashes under a stand of trees. In July and August the river is little more than a brook racing down stone terraces shrouded by willows. In the morning the ravine is sun-shot and changes color with every hour's shift of light. By late afternoon the river canyon is hot and settled; stacked clouds the color of slate tower above the mountains to the south.

Over this short section of river we witnessed extraordinary changes in the passage of a season. The river chiseled two new channels and deposited tons of smooth granite stones forty feet from our door. Canadian geese came and went and came again. The water changed from mud-saturated brown of winter to the empyrean blue of spring. We were, however, still outsiders in the riparian drama and never really learned the vernacular of water. Although we heard the river's eloquent speech, we never thoroughly learned the language of water.

What are the lessons of rivers? My daughter Pilar was three years old and fearless that year and loved nothing more than wading along the shallow shoreline of the river. On the Fourth of July it was eighty-three degrees, and we were knee-deep in the slow current, threading our way upstream, moving over submerged rocks as if great weights were tied to our feet. Pilar randomly stalked fish swimming against the current. Pairs and threesomes of mallards lifted from the water and pounded the summer air furiously to put distance between us.

Holding hands, we walked barefoot upstream quietly in the water, stepping delicately over stones. Other than the water sounds, there was only immense silence. We stopped and listened to the water. Pilar wanted a story; I did not have one. Listening again, she turned in delight and announced: "Daddy, this water is talking."