

The River of Life

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Water has always fascinated me. I can still vividly recall, as a callow youth of fourteen, sitting in solitary contemplation on a rocky foreshore on the Spanish Costa Brava.

Under a brilliant blue Mediterranean sky, wave after wave came crashing onto the rocks beneath my feet, throwing up clouds of spume

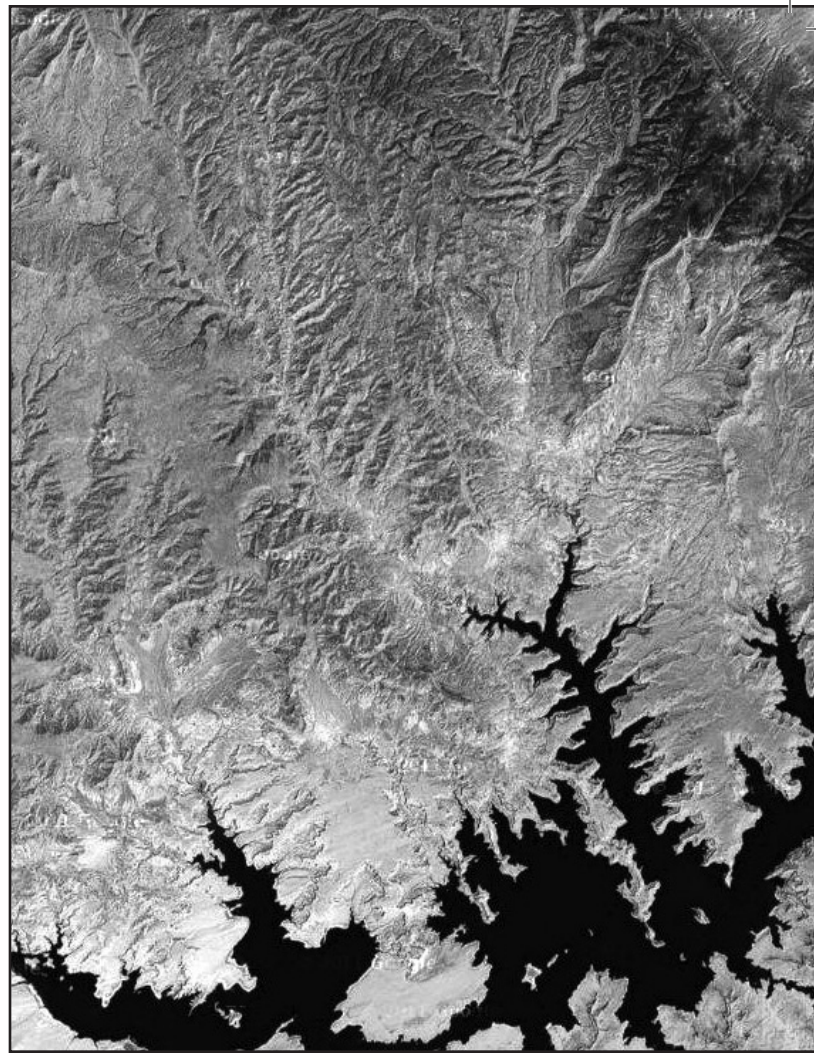
and vapour, before receding, gathering strength and then returning with renewed fury in an endless assault on an unyielding foe. Something about the constant seething motion, the inherent restlessness held me spellbound for what seemed an eternity, but was probably no more than half an hour. Waterfalls too have a hyp-

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notic attraction for me, almost as though I am drawn to cast myself over the abyss to become one with the torrent before me.

Without water, life as we know it would not be possible. Life on this planet after all originated in the sea, and 90% of the weight of a human at birth is water. Without it we can survive no more than a few days.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his lyrical poem *The Stream of Life*:



“The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.”

In many ways water in motion is a metaphor for life itself.

A stream, after all, starts life as a small spring, seeping uncertainly from the womb of the earth, flowing tentatively at first, as though finding its way. Then as the terrain steepens, the pace quickens until it splashes over rocks, gurgling and laughing in the full exuberance of youth. As confidence builds, the flow swells, fed by the tributaries of knowledge, experience and the love of family and support of friends.

Before long, a full-blown river, proud and confident, carves its course through mud and sandstone, speeding up through chasms and then churning in tumult and frenzy as it negotiates the rocks and boulders that are strewn in its pathway. Occasionally a formidable obstacle appears, blocking progress, forcing the water to build up pressure and head, desperately searching for a way through or over this hindrance.



Satellite imagery © 2012 TerraMetrics

Glen Canyon, Utah

Reluctantly the flow is forced to divert around the obstruction, changing course before settling on a new route through life. At last a broad plain is reached, and the river widens, adding girth and slowing to a more sedate rate of progress. Now all is peaceful, the passion and fury of youth are spent, and the river seems to meander at times, lost in a reverie of what has been and what could have been.

At last the flow reaches the great silent sea. All forward motion ceases, the river as a recognizable entity ceases to exist. Its myriad molecules are now lost, nameless and unidentifiable in an endless expanse of ocean.

Before long the molecules that once constituted a living, breathing river of life, rise as invisible vapour, soul-like, to the firmament above, where they are reconstituted as clouds, before falling elsewhere as rain, the very seeds of life, to reenter the womb of the earth. There they will germinate and accumulate before escaping to the outside world as a newly consti-

tuted wellspring of life. The cycle of life is thus endlessly repeated.

Norman Maclean, in his evocative story *A River Runs Through It*, captures perfectly the poetic mood and the irresistible pull of Montana's Big Blackfoot River in the concluding lines of his tale:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of those rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

John Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting engineering in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B.Eng. degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University.