FREDERIC WILL

Rivers

1. A SMALL RIVER NEAR MAYER, ARIZONA, 1940

When I was ten I was sent to the high desert of Arizona to conquer my asthma. The site of this cure was a working ranch at which there were eight other boys or girls fighting the same problems and left there for a year or two by regularly visiting parents. The ranch personnel were caring and muscular, and much of the life that transpired there involved cattle herding and horseback riding.

Like the other kids (I presume, since they were more or less my age) I was feeling the first urges of sexuality. I valued private time, was delighted to be away from my parents, as well as from the staff of the ranch. I had obscure feelings of longing, enjoyed taking walks alone, and more than once eyed the three or four girls who were there. Things were changing, and I was vaguely excited. I felt this aura keenly when I walked away from the ranch and out into the scrub plain.

It was on one such walk that I discovered the modest river that ran through the mesquite arroyos, a half mile at most from the ranch house. It seems to me, after so many decades, that the event occurred in early afternoon on a searing summer day. I sat down on a rock by this unnamed river, alone and far from the ranch house. What happened next, I cannot honestly remember. I masturbated for the first time. Then I felt hot and sweaty and thrilled with... thrill. I have never before felt so astonished by a feeling the body can bring. I have to say it. Yet my subject is rivers, and now this particular river, of no consequence, probably no name, that ran through a neglected edge of the dry gulch pastureland that surrounded the ranch. I experienced this new event of my body beside the river.

Why was the river an important part of the event?

The river was there when the event happened. A gentle current flowed along, between banks not more than ten yards apart. Clumps

of sagebrush and brittle twigs were ferried along by the current. Dytiscid beetles skimmed along the surface. Those perceptions stuck. But what mattered was what was containing all that: the removed and gentle presence of the river, its way of saying OK to the extraordinary circumstance, its breath of dampness in the remorselessly hot cicada-drilled air.

I will always remember that little river. It was there when my life changed. It still gives me joy and confidence.

2. THE CHARLES AT CAMBRIDGE, 1949

I went to Harvard for a year and a half before dropping out. I was unfit for the high-octane social and intellectual setting I found myself in. I have distinct memories from that high-pressure growing time. One of them involves the Charles River.

As I had few friends at Harvard, I used to go to bed early Saturday nights and get up early the next day to walk around the university campus. One crisp autumn morning in my second year I headed out around eight and made my way onto the embankment of the Charles, not too far from my room in Eliot House. As I walked down Boylston Street I realized that the embankment was covered with small white objects, condoms as I discovered on closer inspection.

At that time I was sexually virgin and had never seen a condom. In fact the very word was foreign to me; in my still adolescent stage I fumbled inwardly with the word *prophylactic*, which was all I knew, and which I believe was at that time still the reigning term for these objects. (It was in fact a term of preference for me, for in my Greek studies I valued the blend of *pro* with *phylasso*, that strong verb for *to protect*. Prophylactics were protection devices, a comforting metaphor. *Condom*, a word of unknown origin, still doesn't cut it for me.) I knew what those objects were for, and what was probably in them, but I didn't know their use was so flamboyantly widespread. Nor did I understand the logistics of the activities that had so thickly covered this green grass over night. Were couplers lined up side by side?

From that standpoint I came on this embankment of condoms, set against the gray flapping waters of the Charles, with the vast col-

leges facing us across the river. The river seemed a cleansing agent, though I wasn't sure exactly what needed cleansing. The river was a bulwark of peace and control, as it had been at Mayer in 1940.

At Mayer the river made me know that something was right, at Harvard that something was wrong.

3. THE NECKAR AT TUEBINGEN, 1957

Directly over the Neckar River hang shops, private houses, stores, and university buildings, all intermixed. Each building is colored differently: pastels predominate. The buildings, even though mostly Gothic, gabled, cross-beamed, angular, are as different from one another in shape as in color. One is just two rooms wide; its neighbor is a thick, flatiron-shaped building; next to it is a large, light-green optician's store. And so on. The whole facade is a harmony of Gothic eccentricities. The facade has enormous aesthetic unity, and is as convincing a fifteenth-century complex as can be imagined.

All this scene can be found mirrored in the slow-moving but constant river. The sight is most remarkable under a setting sun. The facades seem mirrored from deep under the river's surface, and quite solid. Yet if one looks closely at the river he can see the old illusion. The river constantly flows on, destroying and recreating the images of the facade, and at the same time losing and remaking its own form.

The current of the Neckar sustains the fluidity and energy of nature—as well as of mirrored history. In spring a good portion of the town crowds onto the Neckar bridge to watch the rowboats pass. They carve their way gently through the still evanescent images of the city's facade. Nature and history intersect in this flowing passage.

The Neckar is the winding bond between the nature beyond and the historical culture within the walls of Tuebingen. The Neckar can be this because, as a river, it is a uniquely supple vehicle of meaning. It is a deep, reflective partner of the time-heavy city on its banks. It is also part of the unending energy of nature. How fitting that one of the clearest images on the Neckar surface should be that of

the house of the poet Hoelderlin, himself a master interpreter of the spiritual in nature. In his poetry, as in this river, the illusion of profundity skims across the vanishing images of its surface.

4. THE GANGES AT BENARAS, 1967

In 1967, while I was employed at the University of Iowa, I decided to take a plane trip around the world. I bought a ticket that enabled me to deplane at many cities along the way, and to stay as long as I wanted.

My first stop was in Japan, and from there on Asia blossomed for me like a giant new tree of life. After Taiwan I went to India. I arrived there under monsoon circumstances, saw surprising public settings—sacred cows dominating the highways, fakirs seducing snakes into the air, beggars sleeping on the sidewalk and out into the road—and planned a brief itinerary through the north of the country.

My first stop was Benaras, which had been described to me as a holy city. A brief plane ride away from New Delhi, where my visit had begun, Benaras struck me as teeming. Ox carts, rickshaws, market wagons, beggars, mendicant monks, farm animals, and the very occasional car; all these movable objects clogged the streets. I was barely able to thread my way through the mass to my modest dormitory-style hotel.

The first morning, when I rose, I grabbed a coffee and walked out into the main road, which was already crowded with people. I walked up and down for a couple of hours along streets that were crowded, as they had been in Delhi, by a seeming chaos of animals, vehicles, pedestrians, and beggars.

At mid-morning the heat crawled higher, and I sat down at a small shack/café to eat a bun and drink a sweetened coffee. I was covered with sweat. But I had at last come to the road that led, according to my guidebook, to the Ganges. I knew little about the Ganges, had a sprinkling of awarenesses of Hinduism, but was aware of the river's aura, and could tell that the crowds before me were drifting in the direction of that river.

Reinforced by sugar, I went out into the road again, and this time felt myself part of a flow, almost a procession. The random quality of the chaotic streets, which I had struggled through earlier, gave way now to a single direction of movement. On all sides I was brushed by people walking beside me, past me, some of them mumbling, some chanting, all intent. Gradually I became aware that many of the passers were carrying litters or small palettes on their shoulders. Light cloths lay across these passing corpses, which were on their way to the Holy River. Some of the bodies were partly visible, dry-looking as I remember, and shrunken small. I was walking beside them on our way to the ghats, the stone stairways that line the Ganges at Benaras. The air was getting heavier with smoke and ash: "ashes to ashes." I felt swept up into the crowd and into the human condition.

On the ghats, bodies were being burned and their ashes consigned to the river. Pilgrims were bathing in the holy stream. Life and death were being refreshed by the water. What struck me most was the openness with which death was being handled, and passed on from. The river was absorbing the wasted bodies, cleansing and purifying all.

This experience of death was different from any I was brought up with. At home when I was a child, in Urbana, Illinois, we did not speak of death. I saw my first corpse alongside the road in Austin, Texas, in 1963. (It was a perfectly preserved suicide, a lovely professional lady.) Furthermore, in the course of growing up, I didn't experience myself as mortal. I was in fact healthy in body, fairly healthy in mind, and not obliged to think of the end. There seemed every reason to suppose that the good life would continue forever. In the part of Benaras I saw, the attitude toward death seemed natural, casual, and in its way graceful. The power and holiness of the river had much to do with this. The river was the magnet drawing every faithful Hindu to it; Benaras was the preferred place to die, to draw one's last breath at the side of the Holy River, and to be freed of the need for reincarnation, from that *samsara* (passage) to which we are all destined, as our souls follow the results of their actions from one life form to another.

Did I learn something from the Ganges? I'm still puzzled and often worried by death. One side of me still pretends death doesn't exist. But when I get realistic, I glimpse death in my own heart and remember that a crowd was dying and getting saved that day in Benaras many years ago.

5. IOWA RIVER AT IOWA CITY, 1969

A horror indescribable befell me on a winter day in City Park in Iowa City.

A few months before the date in question my family and I had bought a long-haired dachshund and had her shipped to us from Germany. We had all fallen in love with this trusting and imaginative creature. We vied with one another for the pleasure of taking her for walks.

In early December my wife and our two children went for the weekend to visit my wife's parents in Chicago. I stayed at home with Elaine. We were all happy with the prospects for the weekend.

On Sunday morning, in a cold wind, I went with Elaine to City Park, through which the ice-covered Iowa River flowed. We walked side by side for a while, then she cut out in circles, chasing squirrels and smells private to her. I was relaxed, if icy cold. In a moment of my inattention, Elaine scurried out onto the icy surface of the lake, which I believe she thought was the surface of the park itself. She broke through the ice and the next thing I saw was her head going down. I started out onto the ice after her but it broke under my weight. I was half submerged in the icy water. While I was struggling to move farther out she drowned.

The aftermath? I drank a bottle of whiskey, contemplated killing myself, and wept. None of that touches what I learned then. Much of it I knew already. Animal vulnerability touches me more than human vulnerability. I have a certain contempt for humanity, which is counterbalanced by a morbid sensitivity to the loss of domestic animals. What I didn't know was that this sensitization is unhealable, and unteachable by the growth of experience. Can it be that

the broken heart of the universe is reborn when a beloved innocent animal is taken?

The disposition I describe here, in relation to the death of Elaine, may sit oddly with what I say about death elsewhere in these notes. Watching the dead in Benaras I felt elated, at least elevated. I felt part of the human condition. Pondering the destructiveness of nature as I chugged down the Mississippi at Lake Pepin (section 9, ahead), I felt above death, in some realm of reflection on death. Perhaps what I'd like to say of Elaine's death is closest to what I was trying to say about the movement of the Neckar river at Tuebingen. She became an element in the illusion the Iowa River was making out of movement. She remained a stable statement or concept in that illusion, like Hoelderlin's house reflected on the shifting surface of the Neckar; a surface both shallow and profound. It is in this sense that Elaine exists still outside time, forever being reconstituted. If I can imagine an immortality out of myself, it may be such an onwoven process of exemptions from temporality.

6. LOGGING RIVER, SHAWINIGAN, QUEBEC, 1973

In 1970 my wife at the time and I, with our two children, moved from Iowa to Massachusetts to teach. From Amherst it was not that far to Canada and the welcome opportunity for me to renew acquaintance with Quebec Province, where I had studied as a college student. I had a long-term interest in driving up to Chibougamau, and in the summer of '73, I convinced my spouse to take off a week for a tour of that area.

It did not go too well up there. Something *unheimlich* in the atmosphere touched us both. The weather was damp and penetrating, even in mid-summer. We woke up shivering in the mornings. The presence of nature was palpable and alien on every edge of the town. You stepped a few feet off the road, on the edges of town, and you found yourself in a kind of spongy tundra, berries and thickets and the occasional fox announcing territories off-limits to mankind. To be brief, we were glad to leave the town, and to head south.

The first day after leaving, we found ourselves on one of those wide and borderless logging roads that transect the habitable ranges of

northern Quebec. The driving was hard and the car kept slipping; the only traffic in either direction was logging trucks, lumbering past every hour in clouds of dust and gravel. We had no desire to slip off the roadside into the bracken and tundra. In the course of negotiating this nerve-wracking stretch, I took on a burst of testosterone and felt like making a pass at my wife. I made that clear to her, and was rebuffed. I am sensitive to that kind of rebuff, was more so then, and failed to put myself in her mind. I guess I had acted out of tension, and a desire for relief. But she had her own tensions—it was proving a hard day and she was not in the best of moods. My gesture and her rebuff set the seal on our moods; we froze toward one another. No more talking, no more glances, for hours.

It was what broke that mood that brings the episode into this essay. At a certain point the Saint Maurice River began to appear on our left, and to gain speed and width as we moved south. This river was a beautiful sight to us both; vigorous, fast-charging, sprinkled with falls and offshoots, and from a certain point on we began to note the logs that were being ferried down with the current. These clumps of stripped and chained-together pine trees grew in mass as we went, until at a point not far from the town of Shawinigan, we were driving beside a heavily charged and almost totally covered river surface. By this point our moods had changed, and we felt in sync with the unfolding energy of the river. Its strength became new strength for us.

Never have I known such a transfer of power from a river—rarely from any form of nature. Though that was decades ago, I find today, in reading, an unexpected access to that old experience. I am reading about the southern Delta region of Nigeria, where I have a house and friends. I come across an account of the founding myth of a village called Orogun. Not surprisingly, in that region perforated by rivers (especially the Niger), creeks, and inlets, the founding tale of the Orogun people involves a river. The sheltering and protective power of that river is part of what takes me back to *la Mauricie*.

When the present settlers of Orogun were being pursued by their enemies, they came to a river too deep and wide to cross. At the last minute, when they were about to be trapped at the water's edge,

their clan totem, the monitor lizard, came to their aid. A veritable army of monitor lizards appeared in the water and stretched themselves out like a firm skein from one bank to the other so that the Orogun people could cross to safety. When their pursuers arrived at the riverbank, the lizards had vanished, and there was nothing but an impassable surface. The covering of logs, which hid the Maurice River from sight, reminds me of the covering of monitor lizards that saved Orogun. Were these two different instances of a single river gift—saving one people from the enemy, saving another people from poverty—saving two people from each other?

7. THE CHARI, CHAD, 2003

I was surprised that the Ambassador had invited me for a motorboat ride up the Chari. Frankly I don't remember much specific or concrete about that ride. The river is wide, half the width of the Mississippi, low to the level of the surrounding shore, and quiet: no waves, no ruffles, as still as Lake Pepin.

My determining memory of this river, which gave birth to the capital and largest city of Chad, is that it is flat level with the ground on either side. To the west lies the tufa and brush and savannah called Cameroon; to the right the same stuff, called Chad. The river flows from the Central African Republic ahead to the south, emptying eventually into Lake Chad. But geography and direction seem of little interest as you sit in the four-person putt-putt with Ambassador Pete and the "pilot." Of greater interest is the large sack in the corner; in it you imagine a *fête champetre* with some of that sparkling that the French presence in this country still guarantees.

The pilot knew the place to go, of course, and we soon found ourselves slowing on the Cameroon side of the border, where eucalyptus trees were crowding the edge, and passages of shade were starting to form on the river's silent surface. By this time we were far upriver from our take-off point, at N'djamena, and it had been long since we had seen river traffic of any kind. For the first half hour we had dodged swimmers who were crossing the river back to their homes in Cameroon, from a night in Chad. Though the current was supremely gentle, one had to admire the swimmers who were making this stretch part of their daily commute. But now even this

kind of traffic had vanished, and we were alone on the open river, no villages or even passing nomads on either side. I could tell that Pete was anticipant for that sack, as I was.

That sack, as it turned out, was two sacks. A light lunch? Pete inquired, pointing to the larger sack. I smiled, controlling myself. Before opening it, though, he very carefully dislodged the smaller sack from its corner in the back of the boat. With equal care, and soft showmanship, he pulled the drawstring that closed the small sack. I saw something gray emerging, the flattened and brittle-looking top of a skull. With infinite care, now, Pete slid the entire skull out of the sack, and at once I recognized the dinner guest who was the talk of Chad. It was Tourmai, the seven-million-year-old skull that had been found in Northern Chad and was widely considered the oldest relic of human life on the planet. Pete placed the skull on a small stand that was folded up in the bag, and fitted the stand into slots in the bottom of the boat. He assured me that the skull was firmly fixed into the stand. We exchanged fraught glances with one another.

In the other bag was a splendid chicken salad with curry, and a bottle of Pouilly Fussé 1973. You might say that we were lunching in the presence of the origins of our kind. The empty intensity of those eye sockets had a way of whetting my appetite, and I enjoyed eating with my colleague in time.

Rivers can tell their own stories. Or they can be silent accomplices to events, like the river at Mayer or the Charles—or the Chari.

8. THE CEDAR, CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA, 2008

When I first came to Iowa, in 1965, it was to the University of Iowa, in Iowa City. That was the only place in Iowa, so far as I was concerned. Cedar Rapids I had never heard of. I settled in Iowa City, and, for the five years of my first stay there, I rarely visited or heard of Cedar Rapids, which though only twenty miles away had the reputation—with my set—as a milling and insurance and commercial center, and thus a center of little interest to people whose professions were the higher culture and especially literature and philosophy. For many of us, I think, Cedar Rapids simply didn't exist.

That was many years ago, and I have gone through several lives since then. I have divorced twice, lived and worked for fifteen years out of Iowa, married for a third time, and eventually returned to Iowa, to settle in Mt. Vernon, not more than twenty miles from Iowa City. I have been getting used to the existence of Cedar Rapids, as it is my closest city, the place where we shop, and now a several-times-a-week destination for routine trips of every sort. I have come to accept Cedar Rapids for what it seems to be: philistine, on the whole well-heeled, but a cross-section of humanity.

That is, until the summer of 2008, when I joined many others in my area in viewing Cedar Rapids as an *exceptional* cross-section of the human condition. I refer to the Cedar Rapids that was attacked by the terrible summer floods of 2008, and that, over a period of a week, lost nine square miles of center city to flood waters.

I and mine remained safe and sound and untouched by these events, but like many around me I lived the days of water assault as though it were in my own house. Even in Mt. Vernon, it was hard not to feel the tug of "the event" as you went about daily life; and in fact there were ample reminders of what was happening: Red Cross encampments in our town, displaced persons in the library and on campus, omnipresent traffic delays, police presence on the highways, and closed roads. Many of the surrounding cities, including the Iowa City of these notes, were powerfully impacted by the floods, so that for a short while, Mt. Vernonites found it difficult to go anywhere out of town.

Two or three days after the worst cresting, we were able to make a sally into Cedar Rapids. We threaded our way in past police cars and onto Interstate 380, which coasts along the border of downtown Cedar Rapids. I remember thinking for an instant, as we entered the highway, that I didn't recall where the Cedar River was. That rather nondescript river actually flowed through the center of the city, surrounding the courthouse and the City Hall—where in fact my wife and I were officially married—and I had crossed and half-seen the river for twenty years; but I could hardly remember the river. That was before we joined the parade on the highway that gray Sunday

afternoon. Nothing I was about to see reminded me of the river I had known and not known for so long.

Now we were driving through a world without contours. A river of no special charm had flooded its banks and was no longer a river. It was an endless sheet of water through which, in places in downtown Cedar Rapids, you could discern the tops of the small houses in the floodplain, or see cars half drifting, covered to their roofs. The island on which City Hall sat was no longer an island but part of an amorphous sheet of gray water. We were seeing what a river becomes when it is more than a river; it becomes a non-river.

I was only at the start of discovering what a river is when it thus becomes a non-river. First of all, before all, the non-river is dirty. Cedar Rapids began to stink; the nine-square-mile affected area was gray and dingy—people spent days trying to power wash their houses clean; a great number of structures were condemned, and started to wear signs forbidding trespass; aid workers and emergency vehicles were everywhere; shelters sprang up on every side. It was a week later, on a drive through the former center of the city, that I saw the wreckage that had been vomited from mile after mile of downtown Cedar Rapids. (It is still there as I write, and will take years to remove.) The wreckage is what you would expect: ruined kitchen equipment, ruined furniture, ruined clothing, ruined appliances, piles of ruined books and magazines. Private lives were turned inside out and left dumped on the sidewalks and in the streets.

Like us all, I have read all my life about the terrible floods that hit other parts of the world: the Philippines, Bangladesh. Those floods typically take many lives with them. The Cedar Rapids flood took no lives directly, from what I understand, but it surely destroyed many lives, and it nearly destroyed a city.

9. LAKE PEPIN, MISSISSIPPI RIVER, 2008

Lake Pepin is a two-mile widening of the Mississippi River at a point in southern Minnesota—near the towns of Red Wing and Lake City—and central Wisconsin. That widening gives the lake almost an oceanic feel, especially on a misty morning in mid-summer. One sees the continuation of the river to the south, a border-

less on-flow. The corrective to this fake infinitude is a guided tour boat ride on the *Pearl of the Lake*.

That vessel leaves port every afternoon at 1 p.m. The dock is just below the Withers Harbor Restaurant and Hotel, and across from the best-situated condos in Lake City. When we stepped aboard, it was hot and humid, and there was a glassy glare on the water. There were almost no waves; the captain thought this the calmest water surface he had seen on the Mississippi. We had ninety minutes ahead of us to enjoy deck chairs, the captain's narration, and a very slowly changing set of views of the surrounding land, our speed some seven miles per hour.

Julie and I sat across from a sixty-year-old pair. The man was obese and taciturn/friendly, the woman bubbly and politically liberal, a Wisconsonite concerned with the environment, the prospects for wind power, solar panels, Al Gore. The woman was trying to cozy up to the man, who was a bit reluctant, and whose obesity dampened his response system. There was clearly a house drama going on between the two of them, and it was no surprise when the bubbly lady, trim enough in her track suit, handed us her digital camera; she wanted a couple of shots of her and the man. We photographed them and asked the same in return.

By this time we were plugging along through the waveless surface and noting with surprise that even small movements forward transformed the visual context: a headland where there was none ten minutes before, a panning shot of Lake City's downtown replaced by a view of sandy beach, a forest of dense parkland replaced by a view of that seemingly open passage south. We listened to the captain's account of life on the Mississippi as seen from this small replica-boat in a widening of the river. What I learned from him reminded me that for people who live on rivers, mastery of the river is a source of livelihood, even survival. The floods that had devastated Midwestern rivers in the summer of 2008 had presented unaccustomed problems in Lake Pepin. Concrete marina pillars had been covered with water and rendered invisible. More than one river boat had crashed into these structures, rendered lethal by a related by-product of the flood—the covering over of those red pylons which

line either side of the river channel and indicate the limits of acceptable closeness to the shores. The same flood disaster had uprooted tree trunks along the shore and set them loose in the current. Northbound river traffic was imperiled by these often fast-flowing battering rams. For people seriously involved with river traffic, all these hazards were bread-and-butter direct. On the gentle waters of this ninety-minute trip, we had to work to imagine the ferocious onslaught which had so recently assailed the Mississippi.

No amount of econo/bureaucratic dominance will have the last word over nature. Of the former there is a lot on the Mississippi. The locks, which punctuate the upper river from Minneapolis in the north to Alton, Illinois, are bulwarks of control. The level of the water is as carefully controlled as possible so that water transport can follow a level path. All shipping or boating is registered, and instant communication systems provide for an inventory, from any point on the river, of all the traffic currently out there. There is a regular Coast Guard and police presence at every point on the river. But when it comes to a flood, which wipes out all the contours of the river, which threatens the surrounding land and property, which deposits lethal debris where traffic had passed as thoughtlessly as we were passing this afternoon, then human order is displaced.

When human uses of nature are turned back against the human, we tend to feel hurt. It is as though legitimate overtures to a love object were spurned. We may lose our lives, not to mention our patio furniture, but deep down we are hurt by the bad behavior of Mother Nature. Mother Nature is a form of the Mother concept—whether it be goddess, Mom in Dubuque, or the factor of Embracing Care in general. When that principle rejects us, we are on our own. And indeed the notion that we are on our own is one of the ways we try to solace ourselves for being on our own. Fascinating books have tried to take the sting out of this sting: Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper,* Unamuno's *El Sentimiento Tragico,* Ernst Bloch's *Man on His Own*. But the fact is that the sting is there to stay. It is not indifferent to palliation. Modern medicine and good sense can adjust us to our condition, up to a point. But after that point the maladjustment of man to the natural reasserts itself. We are conquered. And that

is where the river becomes "a strong brown god—sullen, untamed, and intractable..." (T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages").

And at that point, to some, it seems necessary either to proclaim man on his own or to ask for mercy. If we ask for mercy we are at the brink of the religious. If we proclaim man on his own, we are committed to lonely pride. Between pride and the lottery, one move is *hermeneutic feasibility studies*. The Professor of them is Pascal.

Pesons le gain et la perte, en prenant croix que Dieu est. Estimons ces deux cas: si vous gagnez, vous gagnez tout; si vous perdez, vous ne perdez rien. Gagez donc qu'il est, sans hésiter.

Let's weigh gain and loss, in asserting that God exists. Consider these two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. So bet that God exists, and plunge ahead.

(Pascal, *Pensées: De la Nécessité du Pari.*)

Pascal proposes putting ourselves in the hands of infinite possibility. He proposes learning by doling out growing wisdom in discovery stages. That won't tame the river. Nothing will. But it's a viable response to destiny.

This afternoon there seems to be a truce between conflicting accounts of "what it all means," and "how to deal with it." The devastating flood of 2008 has left its worshippers to pick up the pieces, while we senior citizens peer in quietude down onto the sleepy pond. The lady across from us recounts her experiments with solar panels. The tour guide continues to regale us with statistics.