

**Rivers Alive In Us:
A Chinese Poet's Universal Wisdom
About Pittsburgh's Three (FOUR) Rivers**

© Vikki Hanchin, LCSW

“When a Westerner looks at Pittsburgh’s three rivers...he or she sees only water in the ground. When an Easterner looks at these three rivers, he or she sees the flow of the Heavens and the Earth united with the Human... and the rivers are experienced in the body.”

When I heard these words on the “Peace It Together Pittsburgh” radio show in the Spring of 2008, I was so moved that I knew I had to find a way to meet the speaker, and to have a conversation about the rivers with him. Since discovering that Indigenous people have profound perspectives on the sacred geography of Pittsburgh’s rivers, I have become quite passionate about collecting this river wisdom. I tracked down the speaker, Huang Xiang, a poet/calligrapher in exile from China who resided in Pittsburgh several years. He was inspired by the rivers, and wrote a series of poems about them.

It turns out that Pittsburgh’s rivers inspire many visitors. The confluence of three rivers, joined by an underground aquifer, or “hidden fourth river” is a rare geographic feature, making Pittsburgh unique among other river cities. Indigenous cultures recognize water as sacred, and see the joining of multiple rivers into a convergence point as creating holy ground. This explains why the first Hindu Temple in the West was situated in Pittsburgh, the choice of its location being informed by this understanding. Several other Indigenous cultural leaders visiting Pittsburgh were also compelled to speak about the spiritual significance of our three rivers—and the hidden fourth. One of these cultural leaders, Don Alejandro, Grand Elder of the Mayan Council of Elders, came to Pittsburgh in 2007 in order to confirm our three-rivers link to the Mayan Calendar’s 2012 prophetic teachings. He told about the three rivers showing us a story in our geography, of the prophesized return to unity—as the two rivers flow into the third, becoming one.

So I was eager to learn Huang Xiang's perspective. When I got the chance to interview him, I was amazed to discover that, although he writes and speaks about a fourth river in Pittsburgh, he did not know about its actual physical existence. Pittsburgh's fourth river, as an underground aquifer, feeds the fountain at "The Point," the public park where the three visible rivers converge. When I asked him about his references to the fourth river, Huang Xiang laughed and replied, "I went through the three rivers' joining, and found the fourth river in my heart! I am the fourth river in my body!"

...He found the hidden river in his body, through his heart?? I knew then that this interview was going to open fertile ground for Western minds...certainly for mine!

The Heart of Oneness

Huang Xiang expressed hope that "Pittsburghers not only know they have three rivers in the land, but that these three rivers are also within each Pittsburgher's body. These are the Heavenly River, the Great Earth River, and the Human River. And the fourth river is in each heart."

I recognized this as a teaching about "oneness," and obviously not just for Pittsburghers. Oneness is unfortunately just a concept to most of us in left-brain-dominated Western cultures, with our literal, logically-based material orientations. Left-brainers have only a mental idea that all life is interconnected, which quantum science now actually confirms. However, oneness is a more real, lived experience to those who are right-brainers-- holistically-oriented individuals-- mostly from Indigenous and Eastern cultures, with their embodied sense of connection to the Earth and all life. Huang Xiang began addressing how to open into a more right-brain mode, in order for left-brainers to have this experience of oneness too.

He continued: "Our bodies are here, but they are also sitting somewhere else." That "somewhere else" might be called "the One Life," or "the divine intelligence" or "the greater flow of universal consciousness." And the concept of FLOW is central to Huang Xiang's wisdom about Pittsburgh's rivers. He sees his poetry as

“spiritual acupuncture” allowing our flow of understanding to move unimpeded. Having our flow of consciousness move unimpeded---like a river---is a fundamental aspect for entering an experience of oneness, so that the rivers are also experienced inside our bodies.

Looking With Different Eyes

Huang Xiang described that we must begin by looking at the world “with different eyes”—that is, beyond our two physical literal-seeing eyes. We must “look at the world from the heart, aligned with the “third eye” (the area of the forehead just above and between the physical eyes), which connects us to spirit and imagination.” When we do this, we discover that our bodies open to a sense of unity with the Earth and the Heavens, which become like an “open book that we ordinarily can’t see...we begin to perceive the entire vast creation as the biggest vast book,” he explains. Although the left brain filters out this way of perceiving, through its concrete functions of literal seeing and thinking, we can choose to shift and see with this other sight--with our spirit eyes, and heart. This way, we enter a non-linear “language,” of imagination, unity and communion.

We begin to see ourselves as part of the vast book of life, and to have a deeper experience of participation in this larger story. As Huang Xiang describes it, “the animals of the forest, the bear, tiger and fish—they become our language. The birds of the sky are the punctuation to the words of the animals.” It is like we are all writing a shared story together, living the same language through heart and spirit. I pondered this for some months.

Writing a Shared Story Together

Recently, I had an opportunity to ask Huang Xiang to help me understand this process better. He told me this story: “I went to the pond where I live, and began singing a song with no words, just with sounds from my heart. Soon, all the swans that were across the pond flocked together and flew over to me. They flapped their wings, hovering just above the water. Their webbed feet were just tapping the surface of the water, like they were doing a dance on the water, like they were dancing to my song. We made a song and dance together. We shared a story.”

Upon hearing his story, I realized that I had already been deeply affected by Huang Xiang's message, because an experience similar to his recently happened to me. I was paying an afternoon visit to my favorite tree, in the local cemetery. Nearing my tree, I encountered several animals that each approached me without fear, instead of darting away in alarm, as is typical of my usual wild animal encounters. First, two deer held their ground as I rounded the bend, looking me right in the eyes. One was in the road, the other in the nearby brush. We all stood there for some time, simply connecting. Finally, I was the one who broke the connection to continue on. They remained in place as I respectfully thanked them and moved on. I wondered why they had not shown any alarm or disturbance.

Then a far-away bird of prey began flying straight toward me, where I was now sitting on a tomb-stone. As it flew closer and closer, I saw it was an owl. It continued flying in a straight pathway towards my head, coming so close that incredible details of its face sharpened into visibility. I watched, enchanted, never thinking to be concerned that it was still propelling towards my head, now barely eight feet away. Then the owl suddenly veered off to the right, just in time to avert our collision. I only felt awe, no alarm. I wondered why it had approached so directly to me. I wondered why I had felt no alarm.

This experience of animals approaching me continued to occur that afternoon, with a woodpecker, a bluejay and a squirrel...each encounter typified by that direct and intentional sense of harmonious connection. Five animal encounters of this quality occurred that afternoon. I emerged from my walk feeling like a different human being. These wild creatures had created a story together with me, too. It seemed to be one that read, "We are safe and respected in each others' presence. We participate in grace together." The power of this experience has not faded.

Women, the Deeper Story, and the Rivers

Huang Xiang is passionate about helping left-brainers return to our ability to "read" this vast book of creation, through our hearts aligned with our third eye of spirit. He says that he especially trusts women to grasp his message of the deeper story of creation and help bring it

forth. Women are more attuned to their right-brains, and the qualities of interconnection, intuition, relationship and nurturing that are accessed by it. That is why he agreed to interview with me. He told me, “Vikki, you have the music of the rivers in your heart. Because of the waves flowing there, and your openness, you heard the river in your heart. The river in your body is alive.” He said that since coming to the West and to Pittsburgh, I was the first person to notice his ideas about the rivers and to ask him to speak about them. And that of all the conversations he has had in the West, this one about the rivers is the most important one to him—certainly more important than politics. He is very grateful.

He says it is women who are most able to assist him in this process of helping others comprehend how to “read the book of creation through our bodies.” He is looking to women for this help because “women are like rivers.”

Huang Xiang spoke movingly about seeing the female body as a metaphor for the river. Both bear life, and nourish life with heart and love and movement. He reminds us that all great humans in history came through woman’s body, through the water of woman’s womb. Several of his poems are about rivers as female characters. He sees the geographic juncture of the rivers at Pittsburgh’s Point Park as depicting in the landscape the sacred genitalia of woman-- that v-shaped mound from which life issues forth. And he sees women as most likely to have hearts that are open to hear the music of the rivers, as mine was, and to have eyes of spirit aligning with our hearts. So women can remember more easily how to “read the vast book of creation,” written in the landscape and in the human body, and to remind the males how to join into the deeper story of life.

Rivers of Life, Rivers of Peace

Returning to the rivers, and the gift of an unimpeded flow of the life-force, Huang Xiang says “the rivers in our bodies are our blood vessels, veins and arteries.” These inner rivers “circulate the vision that is taken in through every cell of the body.” He says that “every cell in our body is an open eye.” We take in more vision (wisdom, life-force) than we allow ourselves to notice. The “cellular eyes,” which are everywhere in the body, access a deeper seeing. And our inner

rivers circulate this deeper knowing. This is the deeper knowing that lives both in our bodies right here, but is “also sitting somewhere else.” Remember that “somewhere else,” that might be called “the One Life,” or “the divine intelligence” or “the greater flow of universal consciousness?” This universal flow is what we tune into for this deeper knowing.

Huang Xiang urges us to remember that we access that universal flow through our physical bodies. The heart, the third eye, the cellular eyes, the artery-rivers of our body’s landscape ---all are gateways into this “One Life.” And that intangible, child-like human gift--the imagination--is a special gateway too.

Why imagination, I wondered? Then I recalled the poster in my sons’ room. It quotes Albert Einstein: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

Imagination is a limitless, universal language that allows us to enter into the essence behind the words and forms, and to sense the presence of creation moving--that One Life that expresses as all life. Through that One Life we can witness and consciously participate in the story we are writing together with the animals, the waters, the sky and with each other. We can experience that we are one creator--together creating our future. From this place of Oneness, impulses toward greed, judging, blaming, being right, exploiting and harming lose their allure. From this place of communion, peace flows like a river.

Vikki Hanchin, LCSW is a wholistic psychotherapist, writer, speaker, and workshop facilitator, who is a catalyst for personal and planetary transformation (www.WholePersonWholePlanet.com and www.VikkiHanchin.com). Based in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, Vikki is also engaged as co-creator of “Women Waking the World,” a web-based portal for restoring women’s wisdom, values, and influence in service to all life (www.womenwakingtheworld.com). She can be reached at 412-241-7001 or Vikki@vikkihanchin.com

