

A Creekside Conversation

By Tim Bennett

There is a place in Lake Oswego where my sister and I used to go in the early 2000s. From an unpaved road, it is a ways in. A narrow trail winds downward through a canopied forest. No one else goes there much, no hikers or walkers. It's a moseyin' place. The trail leads to a pretty little creek, coldly sluicing between mossy rocks, forming miniature pools. Fallen trees angle along its sides and above it. Large boulders rim the bed.

The path to the creek usually takes a while. I remember the last day my sister and I went there. I led, wagging a dead branch ahead of me, freeing our passage of spider webs. Katy crabbed over a muddy bog, grinning, legs widely splayed. She wore a preposterously large red plaid hunter's cap, with ear flaps. Katy jogged downhill, laughing as she passed, ear flaps bouncing along. Chuckling, I wondered how she had her hat secured, as I hustled to keep pace. My pulse quickened when we heard the water's voices. As the creek came into view, we hurried, impatient to arrive.

We clambered over boulders into the creek. Call and response birds, a multi-toned symphony of whistled chirps and notes, surrounded us from all sides. Fallen logs served as our balance beam, small rocks our landing pad. Katy was talking about Huckleberry Finn. "Think what it would be like on our own out in a raft, seeing new places around every corner. To find a cool rope swing or swim whenever we wanted!" she effused, wistfully. Is that Life dancing in her eyes? Out loud I muttered, "Imagine rafting that dirty river now."

You'd have to be an IDGIE to get in that water!" Katy chortled, pleased with "idgie." My thoughts remained on the pollution. You sickly Mississippi, befouling a kid's dreams! I suddenly grabbed a small boulder and heaved it with all my might, splashing Katy and myself. That felt better. Katy giggled, then flung a hat filled with creek water my direction. I turned in the nick of time, feeling clean frosty droplets spray my back.

With a peace sign and a smile, I called for a truce among all siblings. We jumped across to the embankment, climbed up, and then tight-roped our way along a log suspended three feet above the creek. We sat upon it over the middle of a pool and dangled our legs. We slowly inhaled the sweet smelling fir-and-sun-infused air. A meandering pale yellow butterfly lit upon the dry tip of a submerged branch before fluttering away.

"I wonder if Jim and Huck, with all that time on their hands, ever thought their river would one day be too polluted to swim? Katy asked with a furrowed brow.

"I doubt it. That wouldn't have been much fun." I paused, heavily. "I'm pretty sure they were worried about escaping slavery and Huck's dad."

"Yeah," Katy said, glancing in my direction, "pollution is about as much fun as the disappearing glaciers and snow packs. Drier, hotter summers are depressing and scary. Plus, there is always personal stuff to worry about, right?"

“Yeah, maybe so. Someday this place will probably change for the worse. Fresh clean water will become rare, even here.”

A long period of silence followed. Dappled sunlight filtered through towering trees. A small green and purple dragonfly appeared out of nowhere. It helicoptered up and down, turned on the spot, and jetted away. Katy declared softly, “Beautiful places, no matter how small, should never be taken for granted.”

A red throated fish – two inches long on its proudest day – flashed just beneath the surface. As quick as a raindrop, it swooped up a tiny insect and disappeared, leaving behind only a ripple which grew ever larger. Every kid should know a place like this, I thought.

“Katy, sisters are like beautiful places. I’ll be in touch nearly every day.”

“I know.” The sun, captured by a cloud, cast Melancholy’s shadow.

“You don’t want to stay a kid forever, Peter Pan. You will want more of a say. We ought to always remember this creek, these trees,” I paused, “and each other.”

“To always act bravely and sometimes still be funny,” Katy added, now smiling and nodding, and extended her hand, luckily without having spat first on her palm. We sealed our handshake instead with grins. The wind shifted. The sun slipped free. With Katy’s freckled face dwarfed and shadowed by her wet hat tilted askew, we continued to sit side by side. A fallen leaf circled a slowly swirling eddy then continued its voyage downstream. Two weeks later, I left for college, a large red plaid hat, with ear flaps, tucked inside my bag.

Years passed, and by 2016 both of us, grown up, had chosen to return to Lake Oswego. Over the following three and a half decades, we strived to not waste our turn. We installed solar panels, planted trees, removed English Ivy. We wrote grants, worked for non-profits evenings and weekends, advocated for community rain barrels. We walked, biked and laughed. We cared for each other and tried to act bravely. Sometimes we saw beyond the view obscured by our daily preoccupations.

Today, in 2050, the sand in my hourglass runs faster. I see my sister less often. Our creek, however, still inspires dreams and happiness. We know because our grandchildren go there. Upon their return, the sparkling, faraway look in the eyes of the littlest one, barely visible under an enormous tattered hunter’s cap, suggests that the Mississippi just might be raftable yet.

Tim Bennett has been practicing law in Lake Oswego for over twenty years. He represents individuals in employment, consumer, and contract disputes. He is married and has two daughters, one of whom is a teen representative for the Tryon Creek Watershed Council.