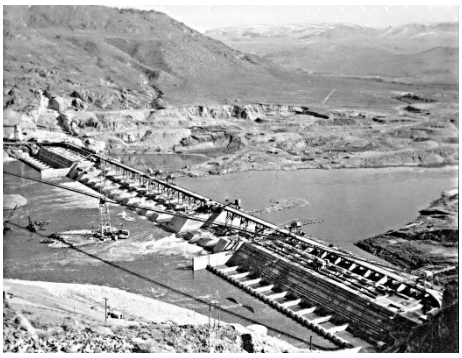
The Gift of Salmon



In 1942 Grand Coulee Dam was complete. The original plans called for a fish ladder. The contract offered a reward for finishing early. The builders finished early by skipping the fish ladder. Thousands of years of the gift of salmon were taken from the upper Columbia by greed and arrogance reinforced by technology. It is an old story but worth revisiting now after the 2025 summer solstice when local tribes call back the salmon in the annual Salmon Ceremony.

There is more to salmon than the incredible abundance seen when impediments to their return are removed and rivers are packed with fish. The salmon chief did not allow fishing until a multitude of salmon had passed Kettle Falls on their way to every tributary of the Columbia. There, they fed the apex predators: bears, eagles, coyotes, otters, cougars… Who in turn carried the diverse minerals and microbes of ocean water to the whole watershed. Even today on my tiny farm, fish fertilizer is the key to enhancing plant health and productivity.





The serviceberries were always in season when the salmon arrived. They too are abundant and were both a culinary delight and a basic part of pemmican, a staple of the indigenous diet. Native author, Robin Wall Kimmerer chose serviceberries as the icon of her latest book, **The Serviceberry, Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World**. The book delves into a bit of the nature of the berries but more into the gift economy, the exchange of goods from one person to another without the obligations of a sale but with its own added value of thought and intent, thanksgiving and friendship.

Those feelings were in abundance too at this year's Salmon Ceremony. Canoes arrive before the ceremony having been paddled down the river from Revelstoke and up the river too over many days. Every year the canoes are more diverse, more elaborate and emblematic of the pride of each tribe that carved them. The paddlers have worked and played together creating a bond with each other and the river on the journey. They are welcomed to the ceremony with drumming, singing and a eager crowd waiting to carry the canoes on shore.



The Salmon Ceremony itself includes everyone finding two rocks to click together. This imitates the sound of river rocks tumbling in the current, a sound that salmon could remember from their youth along with the smell and taste of the waters they left years ago to range in the vast expanse of the ocean. The ceremony calls them home. In many ways it is a family reunion bringing together not just blood relatives but neighbors too. Hopefully some day it will bring the salmon home to the family of living things from the place where we live.

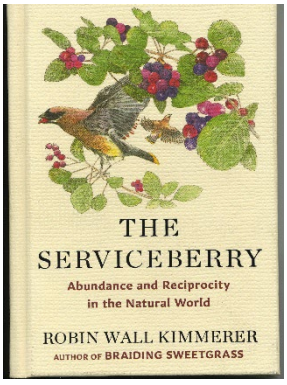
An unexpected but intrinsic part of this gathering is the serving of a meal to everyone and many other gifts as well. As the group has gotten larger, the meal has developed. This year it included not only salmon but also camas roots. On its own, camas has a somewhat bitter and unfamiliar taste to our western pallets. But mixed in the same bite with salmon, the two compliment each other in a burst of flavor. Imagining the work it took to dig and prepare camas for a meal given to hundreds of people, I appreciated even more the depth of giving and attention to culture that went into it.



Part of that attention was in a long list of awards/gifts given to those who worked to make it happen. Many of those paddling canoes received blankets with native designs. Others were tasked with choosing an item from a blanket piled with presents, not for themselves, but to give to someone they didn't know at the meal. My wife got a pair of beaded earrings in a pattern of yellow flowers. Replicate that over the many people eating at the long tables stretching out from the food distribution and those standing in a crowd on the periphery and the extent of the gifts is astounding.

Large beaded medallions depicting cultural mainstays such as hunting deer, fishing for salmon, gathering huckleberries and yes, picking serviceberries, were given to young people doing these things or intending to do them. Each award carried with it the expectation that the recipient would carry on that activity to the benefit of the whole community. A great deal of thought and concentration went into each medallion. In the native tradition of the potlatch, honor goes to those with great wealth or success who give it back to the community. A true test of character is not in the accumulation of wealth but in the willingness to forego it and start over.

Kimmerer contrasts this with capitalism, which promotes accumulation and derives an increase in value from the scarcity of an item. She advocates a "gift economy" where gifts reflect the attention of one person to the needs of another. Giving gifts with personal intention creates a bond between neighbors. For instance, giving a pie to a new neighbor sends a message of welcome and sets the tone for future relationships. Giving things away can end up being good marketing, but the gratitude and community that go with gifts become more valuable than any monetary consideration.



As a biologist, Kimmerer goes on to describe a gift economy in terms of a whole ecology. Biologists are finding that cooperation is the hallmark of a healthy biome. Every organism has a singular purpose within a circular round of exchanges from healthy plants to nutritious food for other creatures whose waste becomes the sustenance of the soil and in turn the source of plant vitality. Interdependence is stronger than independence. Serviceberries are her symbol of that fruit freely given which enhances the lives of those who pick them and share them with others.

The gift of salmon is themselves. Their life and their death brings more life to the whole environment as well as a rebirth to their species. It is a great tradition to call back the salmon. Wrapping it in an outpouring of generosity embodies the nature we share and the culture we need.