

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER: A ROMANCE

“In Its Time” is the essay that explains the origins of my current project of writing my thoughts on ageing and dying. In it I state that “I would look through my files to see what material from the past could be incorporated into this work.” What joy was mine when I found such a story today! Originally written on May 1, 1996, this story contains references to Heaven, always appropriate for my topic. It also contains many memories, an important element of our lives as we age. It is interesting to look back over the incidents of the past from new vantage points and find God there, molding us into the beautiful people he intended us to be. I know that as I type, further thoughts will come to me, which I will save for the conclusion of this essay. Here now is “The Mississippi River: A Romance.”

Until June of 1968, I never knew I had romantic feelings for the Mississippi River. Yet I should not have been surprised, for the river played a big part in my childhood.

Oh, no, I did not see it during my growing up years. I lived in Annville, Pennsylvania, and my knowledge of the Mississippi River came strictly from my school books. In geography class I learned that the river was long, running north to south, practically splitting our country in half. Really big things had a way of filling me with awe when I was a child and so the romance may have started with a simple fact.

History classes added a different dimension to the river. I grew up with a great desire to travel and see places and things, a desire not shared by my mother who thought there was no place like home! Wisely, though, she told me that I could do all the traveling I wanted after I graduated from high school. This turned me into a dreamer of sorts. I had a vivid imagination and was able to put myself into the stories I read. So I got a lot of vicarious enjoyment from other people’s adventures, both real and fictional. When we studied the early explorers in history class I could just imagine how excited De Soto must have felt coming upon such a large river! And then there were La Salle, Lewis and Clark and others all having such a grand time exploring the Mississippi!

The books and stories I read in English class and on my own completed the sense of romance, awe and adventure that I was unknowingly developing with the river. So many of my favorite stories were played out on the Mississippi! All these fond childhood memories and impressions were being filed away into my mind for future recall.

Everything came to the fore on a trip my husband, Leo, and I were taking with our five young children in the summer of 1968. We had traveled south from our home in New York until we reached Alabama and then turned west, heading for Arizona, our destination. One afternoon Leo, who was driving, said, “Look! There’s the Mississippi River!” From my high vantage point on the front passenger seat of our new Dodge van, I saw it, and what a shock it was to me! My mouth dropped open, my throat tightened and my eyes filled with tears. I was actually seeing the Mississippi! Just as the explorers had done! There was the river of Tom Sawyer! Huck Finn! Showboat! There was Old Man River!!

What amazed me the most was the strength of my feelings toward the river. I really had had no idea I felt that way, but I tucked that memory, too, into my mind – for later. And soon a memory is all that was left, for we had crossed the river and were continuing west.

Several times after that I was at the Mississippi at various places along its length. Our whole family enjoyed spending some time in St. Louis on another cross-country trip. There we saw paddle boats and I could again imagine Showboat. Another time Leo and I were in Minnesota and saw the headwaters of the Mississippi, an interesting sight. The year was 1989, and perhaps that reacquaintance with the river led to the incident soon thereafter that ended the romance for me, or at least changed it forever.

In the summer of 1990, Leo and I were planning to visit our son David, who lived with his family in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I went to the travel agent to see about going on Amtrak, as train travel was something we both enjoyed. At that time Amtrak was running a special offer whereby you could travel anywhere in a certain section of the country for one reduced price. You could even get off the train up to two times, stay for awhile, and then re-board and continue on at no extra charge. I checked the map and found that our eastern section ended in New Orleans. New Orleans! That's where the Mississippi River ended!

"Leo, suppose we visit David and then go to New Orleans and have a few days to ourselves as vacation?" "That's fine with me," he said. "Go ahead and make the plans."

And so I did. The travel agent located an offer that, besides motel accommodations, included a ticket for a guided bus tour of the city, special restaurant offers and a ride on a paddle boat on the Mississippi!! Could anything be finer? I thought there could be nothing more romantic in the world than to take that ride on the river. And so we went.

Walking in New Orleans the first evening of our stay, Leo said to me, "Look! There's the Mississippi!" I couldn't believe it! There I was, looking at the river, but there was no tingling of my spine. Was something wrong? Oh, well, just wait until the next day when we would be on the river in a boat! That would be different!

On a beautiful sunny day in June, 1990 my romantic dream of a lifetime was about to come true. I got onto the boat and, with Leo, found a seat at a table on the deck and waited for the boat to move. It did, and still there was no special thrill for me. Something was definitely wrong – or had there just been a change of some sort? What was it? I thought as we moved along, "I can't believe this! I could be having just as much fun taking a boat ride on the Hudson River with Leo as I am having here!"

And then it hit me! Into my mind came the words: "There is a river, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ..." (from Revelation 22:1,2). What a revelation! I looked at the Mississippi and it was muddy; not clear at all! In an instant I realized that I had been thinking so much about my Heavenly Home that it had become more desirable to me than any place on earth, and just as real! At that moment I felt as though God was chuckling and saying, "You see?" And I had a good laugh with God. It was so funny! "Oh, Lord," I thought. "Did you really bring me all the way to New Orleans just to let me see that the things of this earth are fading away as I center on you?"

And that ended my romance with the Mississippi River. I did, of course, enjoy the vacation. That's different from having a romantic or awesome feeling about earthly things. That will never happen again, I thought ... but it did!

There was one more place on earth to which I was romantically attached, unknown to me. This was again from my childhood studies, and involved some big structures. Mysterious! Awesome!! What were they? The pyramids of Egypt!

Then in February of 1996 there I was, standing right by the pyramids, with no feelings of romance at all! I had expected to be wide-eyed with wonder!! Again I laughed as I sensed God laughing with me. Six thousand miles he had brought me to let me understand that the most awesome thing in the world is his kingdom, and not something made by people. Lesson learned (I think!). I have no idea if God has a record in my "file" of some other place or thing to which I am still attached from childhood. If so, he'll take care of the matter, I'm sure, no matter how far he has to take me to get it settled. What an adventure it is, living with God!

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Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life

is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

In revisiting this story, it is clear to me that I could have titled it OUR HEAVENLY HOME: A ROMANCE. All the romantic feelings I have had toward the river, the pyramids, and other places (for there were other places I saw through fairy-tale eyes to be ideal), were not silly or wrong, but served a useful purpose as preparation for thinking of the True Paradise to which we are going. With childlike faith, let's anticipate the Eternal Romance that awaits us. It will far exceed the sum total of all the romance we experienced or wished to experience on earth. What a romantic God we have!

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