

Meditations beside the

story & photos by **John D'Onofrio**



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“It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end.”

– Ursula K. LeGuin

Baker River

Springtime settles over the valley of the Baker River like a luminous mossy dream, a tangled green world of gnarled roots, twisted branches and the hypnotic swaying of old man’s beard hanging like prayer flags from the tenacious limbs of age-old cedar and hemlock, the patriarchs of the north woods.

Donn and I walk beside the boisterous river beneath the ancient forest, the pale half-hearted light of midday making the luxurious gardens of lichen and moss glow with a vibrant, florescent green. We stop and observe a water ouzel dancing in the riffles, purposeful and elegant. We pick our way through the steaming forest beside the splashing river, negotiating winter’s deadfall and crossing ice-cold rivulets of temporary streams and boot-sucking mud. The air itself seems green.

Water is everywhere, ingeniously making its way down the valley walls in a thousand streams and cascades. Distant waterfalls roar high on unseen cliffs, providing an impressive counterpoint to the all-encompassing water music of the river. We climb through alder and vine maple and skirt a complicated bog, the work of ambitious beavers. Glimpses through the new spring greenery reveal snow dappled rock faces a thousand feet above the clear river, drifting in and out of the mists.

The trail ends at the moss and fern gardens beside Sulphide Creek and we stop here, listening to the melancholy conversations of unseen birds and the click-clack of rolling rocks in the tumultuous water. There is a campsite here but it inhabits a depressing and claustrophobic spot in the gloom beneath the forest canopy. We never camp at the campsite. After a short rest and a handful of cashews we head downstream, walking directly in the stream bed, picking our way over the rocks, negotiating between icy channels of the creek. Eventually, high water forces us back into the tangled forest, bushwhacking through dense thickets of spidery salmonberry and devil’s club. Progress is slow but eventually we break out of the clutching undergrowth onto a sweeping gravel bar beside the Baker River.

Great uprooted trees litter the banks of the river, silent witnesses to the awesome power of the muscular water. We startle a heron and watch it rise above the river mist, making its slow and dignified way downstream. Once the heron is gone, we have the river to ourselves.

We make camp near the confluence of river and creek on a wide bar below the wall of lush greenery above the river’s bank. We explore along the bank and momentarily a light drifting rain falls and then stops again. Wisps of cloud drift through the trees like lingerie. As the afternoon light begins to fade, the sky is filled with rich orange-purple light and the white plumage of the water flashes and shimmers. High above the moss-swaddled trees, the looming ice towers of Shuksan rise, their ragged summits cloaked in swirling clouds 8,000 feet above us.

Donn stretches out beneath the tarp, reading Yeats. I put on my magnificent fleece goat-herder’s hat and sit on a rock and watch eddies swirl in the green water. The river’s edge is a mosaic of polished stones, river rock grooved and rounded from eons of tumbling water. There is much to see.

As evening settles over the river, we coax a small smoky campfire to life with damp wood, eat elegant goat cheese and apples, and discuss the magical business of rivers. With the coming of darkness the birds grow silent and the dusk is filled with the hushed music of evening, the ever present elegiac murmuring of the restless river and the lonely sound of the wind whispering in the tree tops.

There is a simple and profound joy, a deep contentment, in sitting next to the crackling fire beside the river—invisible now in the darkness—that is impossible to describe, a sense of being that appears to reach deep into our collective unconscious. The moon appears, vague and indistinct through drifting veils of cloud, and then is gone again.

In the morning, shafts of new spring sunlight illuminate the green under-story, and garlands of mist rise from the cold, clear river. We drink coffee in the sweet morning light and sit in silence as the sun warms the chill early air. We load our backpacks and reluctantly turn away from the river, plunging again into the tangle of green. We turn south, past the beaver ponds, through the moss-covered boulder gardens, beneath the timeless cedars, towards the trailhead.

To hike on the Baker River trail in the glorious first days of a new spring is to understand that after all is said and done, it is the journey that matters—not the destination.

GETTING OUT THERE

Take Highway 20 East approximately 15 miles from Sedro Woolley. Turn left on the Baker Lake-Grandy Lake Road towards Baker Lake. Pavement gives way to gravel near the head of the lake before dead ending at the Baker Lake trailhead. If you arrive late, there are several well-used but pleasant enough campsites near the parking lot above the river.

Total walking distance to the official “end” of the trail at Sulphide Creek is only 2.5 miles. Another twenty minutes of stream bed walking/bushwhacking downstream along the creek brings you to the confluence. The elevation on the trail does not exceed 1,000 feet, making it an excellent choice for a spring weekend when the high country is buried in snow.

