

Front-Runner

A Memoir

Bayou de L'Outre, the River of Otters, begins in southern Arkansas and crosses the Louisiana border north of Spearsville. From there the green waters run southeast for forty-three miles through bottomland hardwoods and empty into the Ouchita River a few miles north of Monroe. Towering cypress trees hug the river's banks. Pines and hardwoods dominate the higher ground beyond. The only signs of civilization are occasional remnants of WPA road projects from the 1930s. The river seems almost untouched by humans and that makes it feel like a treasure. Bayou de L'Outre is my front-runner for the most alluring and peaceful place in the world.



In these forty-three miles of meandering water, my father taught me to fish and hunt, and the ways of the wild. It's where I first saw a water moccasin swimming with its wedge-shaped head held out of the water — Dad called them cottonmouths. Long, skinny garfish — spotted and longnose — lay in sunlit pools of calm water. Their tiny sharp teeth clip fishing line in two quicker than surgical scissors. These prehistoric-looking creatures got my imagination going about what the world was like before people came along.



When I was five, Dad worked on building the house for our family of two boys and two girls, the first in a new subdivision. The property, on a gentle rise, had once been a small cotton field. A remnant of a road bed from the horse-and-wagon days divided the

property into halves, north and south. Dad worked evenings, weekends, and all summer when college was out, and hired fellow math professors to help with the labor. The first thing he did was rent a tractor to contour the land into terraces and lawns, and level the site for the house. He laid out the plumbing, poured the concrete foundation, built the walls and roof, and wired the house. He also planted dozens of pecan, pear, apple, and dogwood trees. My father was masterful at everything he did, it seemed to me.

I wanted to help too so I begged till they gave me a job. My older sister wrapped a nail apron two times around my little waist and stuffed the pouch with roofing nails. I gripped the stepladder tightly with both hands, got my feet up on the first step, then the second, and climbed into the sky. Partway up, I told myself that I wasn't afraid of heights. At the top of the ladder Dad reached for my arm, pulled me up, took the full apron and tied an empty one on me. From the roof, the ground looked even farther down than it seemed coming up. I watched the men nail row after row of shingles on the sticky, black tarpaper and then I returned to earth to get more nails. My self confidence grew.



Before I was big enough to handle a fishing rod, I explored the forest bordering the river corridor as my father fished. One day I came upon a diamondback rattlesnake coiled by a fallen tree. It was olive green and yellow and its head was pointed toward me. Every few seconds its blue-black, forked tongue came out for an instant. I turned right around and headed back to the river. Dad had told me where rattlesnakes like to stay and warned me to watch out for them.

Dad fished from the bank or waded when he wanted to get to the other side or when his lure got caught on something besides a fish. Where the water was deep, he swam with one arm and held his rod above the surface with the other. Following his example, I took timid first steps into the swirling, dark water. Over time I learned that the best way for me to overcome fear was to head right into it while pretending to be bold.

When I was old enough, my father taught me how to fish and we paddled de L'Outre many times in his john boat before I finished college and left home. The river was narrow and shallow in places and sometimes blocked by fallen trees. When we reached a logjam, we both got out and balanced on the logs, and pulled the boat over. More than once I slipped and soaked my feet and legs. Sometimes Dad slipped too. It was good that we had each other.



In Dad's 85th Spring, during a visit home, we went fishing on de L'Outre again for old time's sake. I found two pairs of his old tennis shoes in the garage, one for him and one for me. He put on his well-worn jeans, narrow leather belt, and a short-sleeve striped shirt that was worn so thin I could see the curly, gray hair on his chest. Mom insisted that I drive the pick-up. Dad could still drive well enough, but sometimes got confused on directions. The last mile of the journey was a one-lane gravel road cut through the piney woods and most of the gravel was long gone. At the river I backed the truck near the water and got the boat in. Dad held the bow line while I loaded the ice chest, seat cushions, and fishing gear

— opposite roles from when I was a youngster. I was thrilled to be out with him again in our favorite place. Dad stood quietly looking at the sky and the cypress trees, and I wondered what he was thinking.

I insisted that he take the first turn fishing up front while I paddled from the back. His crew-cut hair had long ago turned gray, but his penetrating, dark-brown eyes still twinkled with joy at being on his favorite river again. Though he struggled with balance, he hadn't lost his touch for fishing the winding river with its low-hanging tree branches, and underwater logs and roots. At the first 'fishy' spot we came to, he cast his lure in a pool of deep water a foot shy of a large fallen tree that was blocking the water's flow halfway across. It was a perfect cast — one I couldn't make if I had twenty tries. He twitched the top-water lure once and a largemouth bass lunged, coming partly out of the water. He yanked the line to set the treble hooks and began the fight to bring it in. When the fish gave up the fight, Dad brought it beside the boat. I caught it by the mouth, unhooked the lure, and held it up high for us to admire. After we had the bass in the icebox, he spoke.

"Remember when ya caught that lively two-and-a-half-pounder right here in '63?"

"No, I don't," I said. "How d'ya remember the spots and weights?"

"How could I forget? It was your first big catch!"

Tears of admiration for my father rolled down my face. *How'd I get so lucky?* I swished my hands in the river to get the slick off, wiped them on my pants, picked up the worn wooden paddle, and stroked the water to get us moving again.



De L'Outre's waters mirror the majestic cypress, oak, beech, and gum trees that hold the banks — trees that have witnessed thousands of days, bleaching sun, and drenching rains. The river corridor is home to red-tailed hawks, blue jays, fox squirrels, deer, bobcats, armadillos, and river otters. Roots grip the bank like strong, determined fingers, and the wind stirs the sparse green cypress needles high above. The moss-covered banks are punctuated with crawfish mounds, sandy and moist, and hundreds of cypress knees. The air is a marvelous brew of earthy, fishy, rotting, woodsy smells. The ever-changing banks are sculpted by the water's gentle flow, uprooted trees, and ravaging floods. Whenever I hear the word enchanted, I think of this place first.



Drifting downstream, we entered a long, straight section called Patterson Lake, where the river was deep and wide. Dad said hi to a black man sitting on an overturned bucket fishing for bluegill with a cane pole and crickets. He looked to be about my father's age.

"Doin' any good?" Dad asked.

"Caught a couple," he said, grinning.

I spotted his stringer looped over a cypress knee near the water's edge. The fish he'd already caught swirled the water. He had more than a couple. He winked at me and I winked back.

I rested the paddle across my knees as the gentle current pulled us along; billowy, white clouds drifted high above while Dad fished the best spots. The wide view of the sky brought back a childhood memory of a dark winter night.



Without warning, my father's hand touched my shoulder and I groped through the maze of sleep trying to make sense of the early awakening.

"If ya wanna see Jupiter, get up now," Dad said, anticipation in his voice.

I pulled on pants, slipped into my high-tops, and grabbed a blanket. In the backyard I was enveloped by the wet, earthy odor of last season's corn stalks plowed under in the garden. Air whispered through the ever-present pine needles and cold snuck underneath my blanket. Tiny glimmering star lights sprinkling the blue-black sky reminded me of the waters of Black Lake, another of Dad's prized fishing places. Darkness was an invitation to wonder, not something to be feared.

We had no telescope, but that didn't matter because Dad picked cosmic events we could see without one. We sat side-by-side in silence in the still night. My sense of self vanished in the vast darkness of the sky and set me free to wander among the stars, planets, and the spaces in between. How peaceful to be so insignificant.



In midafternoon I turned our boat around and headed upstream. The change of direction presented the browns, greens and grays of the wood and water in new perspectives. Without warning, drops of rain fell from the clear, blue sky, pebbling the mirror-green surface of Bayou de L'Outre. The quick shower passed as rapidly as it arrived, leaving the air moist and cooler. Husky booms of thunder rumbled like kettledrums in the west. From behind, a great blue heron swooped low over us, slow-moving wings almost touching our heads. Making a graceful turn following the river's course, it faded out of sight round the bend, behind the green curtain of the forest.

"It's your turn," Dad said. "Let's switch."

"Keep fishin'," I answered. "I love paddlin'!" He laughed and didn't protest. *I have more years to fish*, I thought to myself. As I guided our boat, he fished with the eagerness of a boy and I expected he might hook a big one with each cast.



On the drive home I clicked on the radio and the first song they played was the Beatles "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Dad tapped his foot and hummed along. In the '60s when I played my music on our home stereo, he didn't much care for it. His favorite album was Handel's *Messiah*, which he sang along with on Sunday mornings before church. *For the times they are a changin'*.

"Why are we turnin' here?" he asked.

“You’ll see,” I said.

Shortly, I turned into the Dairy-Ette in Farmerville and Dad reached for his billfold.

I waved him off, “Wait here.”

I bought two large chocolate milkshakes and we enjoyed them in the truck just like we often did before I left home to be on my own.

When we got home, Mom was there to meet us.

“How’d y’all do?” she asked.

“Got a few good ones,” Dad said.

I offered to clean the fish, a task we usually shared. He readily agreed and went to his room to rest before dinner. I weighed each bass, penciled the pounds and ounces on a strip of paper, and totaled up the weight just as Dad had always done, and I put it by his plate at the dinner table.



Dad worked me hard when I was a boy, compared to other families. I remember a particular Saturday when he told me to mow the whole property, about three acres — a job that took a good part of the day. About half was terraced yards of thick Bermuda and St. Augustine grass. The other half was a pine tree forest with flowering white dogwood trees underneath. Clearing it involved mowing underbrush and hauling limbs to the ditch, the remnant of the horse-and-wagon road. I hated to work when the other kids were playing, especially when I saw them streak by on bikes or heard them yelling from the woods. *Damn-it, damn-it, damn-it*, the phrase ran through my mind, words I’d never said out loud, ever. Anger at my father seeped through my pores. *Why can’t he be normal like everybody else’s dad?*

In an act of sabotage one day, I filled the fuel tank of the Yazoo mower with lighter fluid from a blue, five-gallon can, and put it back in its place in the garage beside the nearly identical gasoline can. I was surprised and a bit relieved when the mower fired up on the second pull of the cord and I pushed the heavy, noisy mower to the front yard, my nose sucking in the pollen and dust it kicked up. I made one pass along the edge of the flowerbeds and turned back down the row before the motor stopped dead. The starter cord broke in two when I yanked it. Dad had told me years before that lighter fluid couldn’t substitute for gasoline, even though it was a great fire-starter. The motor was frozen and I was in big trouble. Dad’s punishment for me was the cost of the mower repair — about \$30 as I recall. I paid him back from the lawn-mowing money I earned cutting neighbor’s yards, about ten weeks of work. Disappointing my father was my own punishment. Lesson learned.



For years I struggled with ‘having to work’ and ‘getting to play.’ Sometimes I saw it as a battle between father and son. After I got married, working to support my family took priority and there was a lot more work than play. I realized that even though Dad had made me work regularly, I still had plenty of time to play. As I matured, the distinction between work and play slowly dissolved like chalk lines on a football field during a drizzle.

Now, in retirement, all accomplishments, pleasant or not, bring satisfaction. Getting my body stretched and moving in the morning feels important for itself, not just a means to an end. Each mess of red beans and rice I cook feels like a special occasion. The present has become more holy and I finally understand, I think, how my father valued the cycle of work and play. He often planned fun outings for us, but typically didn't tell me about the fun part till the work was all finished. Over time, I anticipated something special might follow, especially a big job, and that increased my motivation for working hard and fast.



In my father's 88th Spring, we sat together in his room after supper and I asked him how he was feeling. In a quiet voice, in short sentences, he said he felt useless and frustrated that he was unable to help Mom much.

"I can't manage the checkbook anymore," he said, shaking his head.

I thought about the irony of those words coming from a PhD math professor who taught calculus, probability theory, and differential equations.

"You still enjoy readin', don't ya?" I asked.

His eyes showed no joy and he didn't reply. I knew he'd been reading the same chapter off and on all day, and I suspect he did too. It was sad to see him so limited and worst of all, his spirit disheartened. In my eyes he'd always been strikingly capable, vigorous, and independent. It seemed to me that he knew how to do just about everything that needed to be done. Now he was grudgingly dependent and he knew his life was running out. I was the one refusing to accept it.



The next day I made him go fishing with me even though he'd told me he didn't much want to go. I refused to believe that he had lost interest in fishing. I unloaded the boat by myself, positioned him up front to fish, and we made an afternoon of it together on Bayou de L'Outre. He fished skillfully as always, though he grimaced with aching shoulders, and he had so much trouble hearing me I finally gave up. We took delight in our favorite river and he caught a few nice keepers — bass a pound and a half or bigger. After an hour, I noticed a block of fallen trees clogging the stream ahead. In the past we'd have pulled over and fished on the other side, but with Dad's limitations this was now out of the question.

I paused our boat at the logjam and we took in the smells, sights and sounds of the river bottom once again. No words were necessary. The water gurgled as it passed under our boat, and more memories of other outdoor times with Dad flowed through my mind. The limbs of a large uprooted sweet gum tree reached skyward, still bearing green leaves. There were signs that a raft of otters was nesting among the fallen trees — life and death intermingled. A fresh breeze in our faces brought a hint of pasturelands nearby, and I spotted some loblolly pines on a hill north of the farmland. High above the pines, three turkey buzzards spiraled without effort in an updraft. Greens, browns, and grays of the natural world surrounded us — intricate patterns in slow, elegant motion, seen again

reflected in the water. Birds flitted from bush to bush, and squirrels skittered along the ground gathering nuts. I heard the snort of a deer, hidden in the woods.

We passed through a sunny spot and I watched him make one excellent cast after another. Suddenly the sunlight faded and I looked back to the west. A towering column of thunder clouds was rolling our way.

Within the paradise of water and wood, we drifted effortlessly on the river's back, each bend awakened memories, some joyful, others sorrowful — all cherished. *How do I say goodbye to this man who loves me dearly, who showed me how to work and play, and then let me go to find my own way?*

Dad took a few final casts in the waters of Bayou de L'Outre, then it began to rain. As heavy drops strummed the river into a sea of bouncing plops and spouts, I paddled more quickly. We hurried through the storm and the rain soaked our clothes and dripped off our ears and noses. As we docked and stepped out on the wet, clay bank, the rain stopped and we were bathed in sunlight.

Dad said he was dizzy, so I helped him to the truck and he leaned on it for balance. A breeze brushed sprinkles from the leaves and birds fluttered about as the dark cloud passed eastward. No longer able to help, Dad watched as I dragged the boat up the bank, lifted the stern to the tailgate, and shoved the boat in. As I loaded our fishing gear and ice chest, I wondered what he was thinking. The lines of his face and the look in his eyes lay bare his sorrow and fatigue, and I felt guilty for making him go fishing with me. I helped him get his wet shirt off and into a dry one, and then made sure his seat belt was fastened.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.”

On the drive home, I thought about how he had lived with such passion, energy, and desire. He was a lover of life and master of his world. And now he was grappling with loss of hearing, memory, and strength. I refused to believe that my father was losing interest in living. To me his life was like the river, a testament to the wellspring of being and the constancy of change. It was his last fishing trip.



During his final years, Dad lost interest in reading, his last foray into adventure, as mini strokes affected his brain. He never lost his love of sitting outside and holding Mom's hand, and he enjoyed visits from his children and grandchildren. He especially liked to sit by the playground next to the assisted living residence and watch children play. The caregivers loved his gentleness, humor, and appreciative smile. Sometimes when I visited him and asked leading questions, the memories of his youth came tumbling out almost as fresh and detailed as ever. I listened earnestly so I could remember for both of us. Once, when he was talking about the years when all four of his children were at home, he called it 'the time when we were all boys and girls together.' When he got confused about whether I was Van or my older brother Danny, it didn't really matter. The sparkle in his eyes showed his abiding love for us all.



When I was growing up, Dad kept three or four quail hunting dogs in a kennel he built beside the barn. The kennel had concrete floors, separate fenced rooms to manage breeding, and water service and septic tanks to make it easy to clean. I loved all our dogs, but Zip, our beautiful, white-and-black English setter, was my favorite. He had long, soft fur and, unlike our others, was affectionate. He settled down and enjoyed being petted for a long time. I told him about things that were bothering me when I didn't feel I could tell anyone else. Sometimes in cold weather I crawled inside his wooden hut and snuggled with him.

When Zip died of old age, Dad let me bury him. I dug a grave in the terrace next to our pear trees, laid his body in the bottom and shoveled the dirt back in. Dad and I stood on opposite sides. There were tears in his eyes too. I sprinkled brown pine needles on the loose dirt and added a cross I made from scrap wood. Dad left me alone at the grave and I cried.



It seems I have a thousand memories of times with Dad, including hundreds of fishing trips. That certainly can't be true because we didn't go fishing every day. If I'd kept a calendar and could count them up now, I'd likely find that we fished together a few dozen times at most. So why are my memories so vivid and lasting? I don't know for sure, but maybe it's because he shared his favorite places with me.



In his 94th November my father passed away. Three days after, I went for a run at a state park near our home, where there's a one and an eighth mile track surrounded by tall trees, with a pond, fields of wild grasses, and a majestic stand of hardwood trees inside the oval. In its heyday, the track was used to train racehorses. The air was chilly and moist from overnight rain. The sky overcast with a light wind — weather that reminded me of afternoons quail hunting with Dad.

As I ran, the dense, gray clouds traveled fast from west to east, and the rustling leaves clung to their branches. A gaggle of geese awaited me part way round, one a few steps ahead of the others. The lead goose stopped grazing, stood perfectly still, and fixed its gaze on me. Turning my head, I noticed that all the geese, spread out over thirty yards, watched me as I passed by, something that had never happened before. A prickly sensation traveled down my spine.

The soggy gray cinders, sprinkled with wet leaves, crunched under my shoes as I raced along, warmed up and invigorated. Turning northward on the track, the chilling wind cut through my sweat suit and I remembered how much my father loved to run, no matter the season.

As I neared the end of my first lap, the clouds low on the horizon parted abruptly, revealing a startlingly brilliant sun — the most intense orange I'd ever seen! The sudden sunlight fired the leaves to bold shades of canary, goldenrod, pumpkin, and dark cherry.

I raised both arms to the afternoon sky and stretched tall to take in the stunning fullness. From inside the burnt orange sphere, my father's spirit called to me, "I am here. I am here." A gust of wind pressed me from behind. "Go ahead, I am here."

Ahead, through the trees, round the next bend, I thought I saw an old man running, but when I emerged on the straightaway, there was no one in sight. No one in sight.

In loving memory of my dear father William Benson Temple