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Reading Article G1

Article #9: The Quality of Mercy

by H. Barrett Pennell, Jr.

The sky began to brighten in the north on that early-March day, as the roiled, greasy-gray clouds of the all-night storm began their retreat to the south and west.

We sloshed our way along the bank of the creek, "our creek" to us, a pair of

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waters. So we were somewhat angry with the water, as a bully who destroys a myth.

But the overall loss was slight. Our creek was still alive and our plaything, and there were no other little boys to take it, and claim it, and mother it, and dam it with clods of tough, worm-filled sod and its own rocks. And there was none to pelt its muskrats and scare its minnows and trap its crawdads and capture its tadpoles. So we inspected—hermetically sealed in parkas and overshoes—sloshing through the drowned grass and ratfurred moss with the utter confidence of proprietorship.

We worked our way slowly, examining every inch, the way one does for hurt to

valued property, while the excited air buffeted us with the first live messages of coming spring.

George found two marbles just below the gravelly spot beyond the willow pool, one chipped a little and the other polished by the sand and water to a better-than-new luster. I found a small earthenware jar with a clear, glazed finish and a kiln burn on the bottom side. I told George the jar was a remnant of the days when Indians used to camp along the banks of the creek. (I almost believed this to be true, and I wanted to.) George wondered who had lost the marbles. And great was our excitement and wonder that the creek was still as it had been, yet giving us new treasures, saved for years for some such special day as this.

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which could have been the sound of murder, and bright-gem eyes in the dark narrowing in pain and going out without the sight of another dawn. So, saddened by the ultimate outcome, we broke off the attack until the next time, not knowing if we were murderers or not, but hoping not, with all the desire serious doubt can bring.

Then we were explorers along our new-old creek—La Salle, De Soto, Lewis and Clark, voyageurs with muskrat hides stalking the banks of the Mississippi and other, lesser streams, seeking cautious trade with Indians.

Until George discovered the fish, swimming weakly in the stream.

We squatted on our heels in the creek-bed gravel, watching the fish struggle in our mighty, six-inch-deep Mississippi as it tried to make its way upstream. It floundered on the shoals of flattened boulders, its back appearing above the water in its struggle. It was a carp, about ten inches long, and far too large for our stream.

Evidently it had been washed down in the torrential night from a safe pool somewhere far away, perhaps beyond where the stream goes under the railroad tracks and disappears into the earth. Now it was trying to get home, upstream, from where it had come so easily the night before.

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Great was our concern for the trapped fish fighting hard for present life, mindless of a further soul, with the instinctive courage that man admires in himself, but tends to call bestial in the beast, and we searched about for means of rescue.

George found the bottom of a milk bottle, but that was too small; I discovered a small coffee can near the willow pool, but the bottom had rusted out. So we used my waterproof parka hood instead, bulging it full of muddy water, carefully scooping out the failing fish, and dropping it into the sodden hood. We began our march of mercy down the length of the creek and across the road, headed for the big pool in the bird sanctuary, where the water was 5 feet deep and 20 across.

And as we walked, fast but gingerly, holding the water-filled hood like a suspended binnacle and staggering somewhat with the weight, some of the water slopped out and dampened our clothes; it began to leak slowly through the waterproof hood, leaving a damp trail along the paving as we hurried along the road toward the deep hole. And every spilled drop was blood, and every step nearer, life.

At last we came to the sanctuary and slipped past the chain-link fence where the fence had to stop for the bridge of the creek, and we slid down the worn trail to the bank of the pool. The fish was almost dead, and its back was above water again in the hood.

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swam around the pool, merely moving, for there was still no strength or purpose in it. And still we didn't speak, as the fish seemed to grow new strength before our eyes. It gulped and it thrashed its gills for five full minutes, as if cleansing out the putrefaction of near-death with the new oxygen-full water.

George flipped a small stone into the water, a few feet from where the fish rested. With a small swirl, the fish disappeared, and the eddies made by the stone and the fish rocked one another into submission in the small wooded pool.

As we stared after our success, glowing inwardly in our Samaritanism, George knew why I had snapped at him when he had asked, back when we first put the fish in the hood, if I were going to feed the fish to my cat.

At home, the soggy parka hood was hung up to dry by my mother, who thanked me with her voice for the gift of the earthenware jar and wondered in her mind just what it was that made boys do senseless things like throwing the tops of their parkas into the stream.

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