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Commentary — From the Margins
Pressure that Transforms

> At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. (Dan 12:1)

1.

I crossed the bar at Yaquina Bay, Newport, Oregon, for the first time in the late 1960s, this was after I had married and had opened a gunshop. I had not previously been to sea even though I had lived in Oregon's Lincoln County since November 1958. From experience I knew I was susceptible to motion sickness, but I didn't know how badly I would suffer, or that I would never really get over being seasick even after seven months at sea in 1979. But on that July day in 1968, I believe, in Howard Wyscaver's fifteen foot runabout, I ended up fighting silvers [coho salmon] while laying in the bottom of the boat. I was too sick to even sit up to fight them.

That one fishing trip across the bar was enough for me to keep me fishing rivers and bays—flat water. I was content to fish free flowing coastal streams. Fast water, white water. I landed many salmon and steelhead from mostly the Siletz River, fishing in the area between Bluejay Creek and Elk Creek, for those who know the river. I had in high school landed a literal ton and more of salmon from the Salmon River, Lincoln County, but this was between 1959 and 1962, before the Christmas Flood of 1964-65 changed the mouth of the river.

Why am I writing this? Because of what happened spring 1979.

I went to Alaska in 1974, initially falling timber for a gyppo logging in North Kenai. My intention was to continue building muzzleloading rifles, but handwork didn't pay enough to rent a shop anywhere on the Kenai; so I logged and repaired chainsaws for Ron's Rental at Kenai Korners, before he moved to the airport. During the winter of 1976-77, when his business was slow, I left him and opened my own shop, returning to falling timber to feed the family. I cut this winter and the following winter east of Homer, where the trees were bigger and the weather milder.

While my intention was to return to building rifles when I left Ron, I found that some of his customers followed me, particularly ones with McCullough saws: Ron wouldn't work on a Mac. So with a ready-made clientele, I contacted a sales rep (for whom I had built a rifle while still in Oregon) for a major brand of chainsaws. He set me up as a house account, and I was in business as a chainsaw

dealership. I would over the next year add four other lines of saws and a line of outboards, and all without having operating capital. So business became a matter of getting merchandise in and out of the door before bills came due, all the while attempting to satisfy customers that for one reason or another didn't want to do business with Ron (for saws) or Fred Braun (for outboards), who apparently became a Realtor.

But after an intense summer in 1978, I began to experience problems on the home front: operating a chainsaw-outboard dealership on a hand-to-mouth basis was placing too much stress on the marriage. I faced a dilemma. I—*we*, because small businesses involve both spouses—like many little businesses on the Kenai Peninsula were too poor to fail, but not well enough capitalized to succeed; so when Pipeline construction ended, and the big money construction crews were living off unemployment, our cash flow became nearly nonexistent … my wife couldn't handle the pressure and had to get away.

The business, itself, was becoming established, but I needed to sell to save a marriage: I put the business and property on the market. It sold in nine days; it sold before I had a chance to change my mind.

I wasn't interested in leaving Alaska, or even in going somewhere else in Alaska other than maybe to Homer. But the amount of money realized from the sale wasn't enough to do much; so I was faced with the decision of what to do next.

Actually, the way I have told this story before is that I couldn't find a bench not covered in grease on which to stock a rifle for myself. Angry about living in grease—we lived in the back of the shop—a Realtor I knew came in looking for a listing. She got one, and she capitalized on her opportunity. And I had to look for another job and another place to live, with a small amount of seed money in hand.

By this time, I knew keeping the Sabbath would cause difficulties working for someone else, when standard summer hours seemed to be seven/twelves (seven days a week, twelve hours a day). I had been keeping the Sabbath for seven years—I still do.

There was an obvious choice: salmon fishing was Limited Entry (a new fisherman had to buy his or her way into the fishery by buying out someone already in the fishery), but halibut wasn't. But fishing meant being seasick, day after day. Plus, I knew nothing about going to sea. This was a choice I didn't want to make—

The following are the opening paragraphs and concluding excerpts from the essay, "Smith, Logger, Fisherman, Writer," published in the 2001 collection, *From the Margins*:

> Since the narratives of Homer, life in Western literature has been portrayed as a journey, the metaphor being that the passage of life equals distance traveled. Often the journey is a voyage, a motif present even in a story like Moby-Dick; Thoreau quietly floated the Merrimack. The downstream river trip can signify that a person can't go back in time, that an adult can't recapture his or her youth; that no fountain-of-youth exists. But Homer's Odyssey tells of a figurative

upstream journey like a salmon's migration to its spawning gravel, the gravel of its birth, where it will breed and die.

A voyage into the unknown is living life itself, the unknown representing tomorrow, holding, perhaps, danger and excitement but most often the mundane. Literary heroes dared sail 20,000 leagues under the sea, or to the center of the earth, or more realistically, to trek over the Great Silk Road or mush dogs to the South Pole. A few of us humans have even walked on the moon. For more of us, though, a drift or fishing trip down Alaska's Kenai River is enough venturing into the unknown: we want to know most of what tomorrow will bring. We are not really looking for excitement, only for interesting things, those things that John Haines concedes to travel writers. The thrill-seeker is considered abnormal. We would like to have control of our lives. In literary shorthand, we want heaven when we die; we want to believe an idealized destination awaits us at the end of this voyage called life. Then the obstacles we encounter won't matter. The distance of our voyage doesn't matter. Only arriving matters. We can leave all of our problems in that metaphorical river we travel as if those problems were old tires or tin cans, oil slicks or biotoxins.

But it takes no courage to continue living shackled to the trash that the heavenbound person will leave behind at death (although nearly every religion believes humanity's ultimate destination is heaven, the focus of ancient Hebrew prophets was making the deserts here on earth bloom). It takes courage to clean up that left-behind trash, to pickup those pieces of our character that hang like plastic grocery bags on submerged tree branches . . . I once sailed out of Kodiak, heading for Whale Pass and Raspberry Strait. We were outbound for a week of longlining halibut. My wife was putting away boat groceries, and after rounding Buoy Four, I looked behind us to see if a following vessel had made the turn or whether its skipper was heading directly across Marmot Bay. And there behind us, one every one hundred yards or so, were floating the cardboard boxes in which we had packed our groceries aboard, each bobbing like a buoy. They were like the crumbs of Hansel & Gretel.

All of us leave a trail, but not all of us leave distinguishable footprints.

Courage is required to take that first step into an uncharted tomorrow, one in which our character is our only marker. It is there, at that first step, where most journeys end, or rather, fail to begin. Once a person is well on his or her way into the unknown, coping, adapting, learning, stretching oneself to do what wasn't before possible takes over. The momentum of the journey doesn't let a person think about not continuing. Explorer, pioneer, pilgrim—few have seen themselves as courageous. Survival is what the journey is about until the unknown becomes the familiar. Courage is about getting started.

I am familiar with the reluctance to begin a voyage. I have felt this reluctance, have felt hesitation, even fear. When I first went to sea, I knew very little; plus, I experience rather severe motion sickness. All the while I lived along the Oregon Coast, I fished freshwater. I didn't go to sea (I don't even like sitting in a passenger car; subtle movements make me vomit). I probably hadn't been across the bar at Newport, Oregon, ten hours total before. So after selling my Kenai chainsaw/outboard dealership, I questioned my sanity when I bought a 29-foot Bartender sitting on barrels in Homer, Alaska.

I hadn't been to sea in Cook Inlet, let alone out of the Inlet. Acquaintances thought I was crazy, but I knew I wasn't. I was merely pushing hard against

foolishness. But I was also facing some tough decisions: I had begun to dislike myself. Having a sales/service dealership had magnified character defects that I thought I had cleaned up. I needed to get away, at least for a while, from the temptation to tell customers that a piston or a CD module or whatever had been ordered when I had forgotten to order it. The telling of the little lie had become too easy, and it isn't the big hunks of trash like old car bodies that kills a river. It's the little things like oil droplets that smother life. One droplet here and there doesn't kill, but one droplet becomes another and another until there's an oil sheen, then a slick, and finally the river catches fire, a definition of life in hell or in Gary, Indiana.

What I didn't know about the sea was so great I believed I could sail to Kodiak, and possibly into the Aleutians. But I did know enough to be scared: in a very real sense, I was afraid of the unknown. I had heard stories of how rough the weather was in the Barren Islands, on Shelikof Strait, at Sand Point, King Cove, Dutch Harbor. I knew mileage-wise how far away Kodiak was. I bought charts of the archipelago. But for the three years I had been selling outboards to Cook Inlet fisherman, admittedly, to mostly setnetters, I was told many, many horror stories about Shelikof Strait. So when these Inlet fishermen learned that I had bought a boat their advice was that I should stay in Cook Inlet, and fish out of Homer or Seldovia, perhaps Kenai or Kasilof. But at Kodiak, I was told by an equal number of fishermen about how terrible the weather was and the tides were in Cook Inlet. As far as Kodiak fishermen were concerned the only place that began to compare in roughness with Cook Inlet was fishing at False Pass. But when I sailed south to King Cove, I spent a Sabbath afternoon with a fisherman who regularly fished False Pass, and he told me the worse seas he had ever seen were on Shelikof Strait, that no place was as bad as there.

Every fisherman I spoke to in 1979 said somewhere else was worse than where he fished. ...

The metaphor of life as a journey works because the easiest choice is to not make a choice, to not take a first step into the unknown, to play it safe by staying in the familiar situation, to hunker down and drift, letting time take you where it will. It takes courage to start; it takes common sense to actually travel that unknown course, for life is no planned tourist trip to 5-Star hotels, medieval castles and cathedrals, with tour guides and rigid schedules. Rather, life is more like sailing an everchanging sea to where others have gone before, but where every voyage is different. It is like my sailing to Kodiak. I knew where I was going. I even knew how to get there. I just didn't know what the weather would be; I didn't know whether I would have engine problems; I didn't know if I would have enough money. I only knew that there would be problems I would have to solve, and that I would see spectacular scenery while catching fish. I never entertained the idea that I would regret setting out for Kodiak, then later the Aleutians. Perhaps I wasn't that insightful. Or perhaps the same spirit is in me as was in my forefathers who sailed into the unknown on the *Mayflower*, or left Amsterdam for what would be New Amsterdam half a century later. Or perhaps I was merely following in the footsteps of my forefathers who poached whales in Alaskan waters from under the guns of the Tzarist navy. ... [a gap in the text]

We fished around Afognak Island during June and for the first half of July before the poundage quota for Pacific-caught halibut was met. The Bering Sea remained open, and I was again faced with the decision of whether I would stay

where I was or continue farther west. I knew the Bartender was far too small to weather the storms of the mighty Bering Sea or so everyone I talked to told me. But I had no real connection to Kodiak. We were living aboard the boat while tied to the transit float in the small boat harbor. We were literal sojourners. And I didn't have the ability to fish anything else but cod, which was then an iffy market at Kodiak. Canneries would only fool with cod when they weren't processing more valuable fish.

To digress for a moment: I encountered a phenomenon this summer of 1979 that I should have previously realized. Some of the first generation Norwegian skippers have a reputation within the fleet for bravery, for fishing weather that keeps every other vessel in port. In the *Guppy*, I couldn't get the marine weather forecasts: I had neither an AM radio, nor a particularly useful CB. As a result I never knew what the weather was supposed to be. I had to quickly learn to forecast my own weather, and most of the time I just didn't pay any attention to the weather. So I would find myself fishing with these highliners whose reputations for bravery were truly impressive when most everyone else stayed in port. Of course, I wasn't as far off-shore as were those highliners.

What I realized was that the highliners didn't necessarily believe the weather forecasts. "Ve go out & see what it's like." And they would leave port and sail out to their fishing grounds. Once they were there, they would say something like, "Now that ve here, ve fish awhile." First thing they knew they had a full hold and an extra day of fishing over all of the boats that had stayed in port. They weren't braver than other skippers; they just didn't believe everything they were told. And I was out on those days because I didn't receive the forecasts that said to stay in port. I probably would have stayed in port if I had received those forecasts. …

When halibut closed in the Pacific, I knew I had to keep fishing; I had to head for Dutch Harbor. Economics dictated that I head west. But I felt tremendous apprehension about sailing so far out with so small of a boat when I had been told I couldn't make it out there. I felt this apprehension until a fisherman in a chance conversation mentioned that another small boat had gone out to Unalaska two years earlier, that perhaps I should talk to the skipper of that boat to find out what I was up against. Good idea. I located that boat—it was a pile of floating junk. It was so unseaworthy that I wouldn't have taken it out of the harbor. And I realized then, while staring at that boat, that I could make it. Sailing into the Aleutians became less a matter of courage than of again applying common sense to overcoming every obstacle I would encounter.

For this summer and the following year, my life was an actual voyage. The metaphor had lost its metaphoricalness. In quiet bays dressing halibut without another vessel in sight, or for that matter, not another human being other than a family member in sight, a healing of character can occur if it is allowed. But I was still on an outbound voyage. I hadn't yet turned around to challenge, say, your belief in escaping to heaven. I was content to keep going, to continue sailing towards tomorrow.

But the metaphor of voyage-as-life extends beyond tides and tidetables. My voyage begins with an early memory and lasts into the future. And as with that ancient Greek whose name I inherited from my dad, my voyage doesn't conclude in the Aleutians. Like salmon that migrate north, then return to the river of their nativity to spawn, the mature journey home, upstream against currents of politically correctness and bi-polar philosophies and one-eyed Cyclops, has only

> begun. Mom traced her lineage back to the preacher who preached the funeral for Mary, Queen of Scots. Perhaps I, too, will journey that far back towards my birth. Perhaps I, too, will preach.
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I wrote the preceding essay about 1990, while in graduate school at University of Alaska Fairbanks. I wrote the essay after the traffic accident (headon with a Peterbuilt) in 1984, in which I lost my right knee and lost my wife, with the story of the accident being more complicated than is appropriate to relate here. Needless to say, I was left with three teenage daughters to finish rearing, and to educate, and to do it without much money. Regardless of how much money I would have had going into the accident, I would have emerged from it broke.

While fishing in the Bering Sea with a small vessel, I understood what Russian explorers wrote about when claiming they sailed by the feel of the water: the waters of the Bering Sea feel different than do the waters of the Pacific—and the deep water of the southern Bering Sea (off the Aleutian Islands) feels different than the shallow water above the shelf (Bristol Bay).

Russian navigators who sailed by the feel of the water didn't express (at least not in translated language) what they felt. I don't know that I can express what I felt, but what I felt relates to the energy retained by the water … the sea feels alive, but the Bering Sea with it low salt levels feels particularly alive.

A farmer can reach down and grab a handful of dirt and can tell you much about the soil without necessarily being able to tell you what he [or she] feels when squeezing the handful. The feel of the water conveys knowledge without necessarily being describable. The "feel" of a text is similar. When I came down from Alaska to accept a Doctor of Arts fellowship at Idaho State University, Pocatello, in 1991, I purchased an older house in McCammon, twenty miles south of Pocatello. It was a Mormon community, proud of having 91% of the town in services each Sunday. And it wasn't long before I was given a copy of the Book of Mormon and asked to read it and see if it didn't seem true … the book had the wrong feel about it. Plus, I had written a parody of a 17th-Cenury religious track when in graduate school at Fairbanks. The professor for whom I wrote the piece thought it was good, but when I gave a copy to Janis Lull, then the 17th-Century specialist, she sat me down and gave me a lesson in 17th-Century English grammar, which the writer of the Book of Mormon needed to hear. It's one thing to hear King James text in your mind from reading familiarity, and another thing to actually write in 17th-Century English. Not only do characters behave in ungodly ways in the Book of Mormon, with shoes latches that would have been inappropriate for the period, but the entirety of the book is intended to mimic the sound of King James prose by someone who doesn't know 17th-Century grammar. In addition, men as sons of God don't become angels, created as servants. Men as *men* are created as servants. Human sons of God are not servants, but are heirs, inheritors.

God doesn't respond to stimuli as men respond, as servants respond. God has no malice as human persons express this emotion. God is not looking to destroy sinners as an act of revenge, but as an act of love for His creation. There is

nothing humankind can give God that He doesn't already have, except for one thing, the person's obedience—

Because every person is humanly born consigned to disobedience (Rom 11:32) as a son of disobedience (Eph 2:2–3), every person is humanly born in rebellion against God. If the person follows the natural course of this world, the person will die far from God. But following the natural course of this world—steeped in rebellion—will cause the person to engage in rebellion against parents, against community, against society, with the task of parents being to funnel this rebellion into constructive activities such as starting a family of one's own, not living with parents until twenty-six so as to take advantage of the parents' health insurance. This rebellion is crafted into obedience by this world's militaries. It undergirds the industrial revolution. It is, when it is "safely" released, what makes the world go around. It is, also, what lies behind mass murder, and extinctions of natural populations.

The Book of Mormon is a textbook for sculpting rebellion against God into a functioning ideology. So too is the Qur'an although Muslim ideology has an inherent flaw: how does a believer know whether he or she is "good enough" to get into heaven without dying in *jihad*, the struggle?

Is a person's life—the sudden ending of that life—a gift to God that He respects? The human person is a servant, born as the slave of disobedience; that is the slave of the Adversary. There is nothing in the murderer's death that God wants. What gift has the murderer given to God, evidence that the murderer is of the Adversary, thereby making one fewer rebels? There is nothing in this created world that God will not recreate if He desires more of the thing except disobedience. It is the Adversary that broadcasts his nature (as the prince of the power of the air) into the disobedient, with the disobedient sincerely believing that through rebellion they will be set free of whatever thing it is that they have come to loathe.

Because the only gift worth giving God is human obedience, which of itself is not a thing and only becomes tangible when personified by the deeds of a person, the person who desires to please God, to serve God, will give to God his or her obedience that leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16) … James discusses making faith complete by works, which was his way of saying that a person's belief of God that is called faith [*pisteos*] becomes alive when it was personified in the professing person.

The sea becomes alive when the wind blows across its surface, transferring energy from the wind to the surface of the water. Likewise, because a human person is mostly water, when the person stands against the wind, energy is transferred to the person—and this is a phenomenon not well understood or described.

The Affliction, the first 1260 days of the seven endtime years of tribulation, isn't about God bringing His wrath against greater Christendom as Christians will come to believe, but about putting Christians under enough pressure that the wishy-washy faith of Christians is replaced by faith that will move mountains. The Affliction is about doing in a short period what it took seven years for God to

do for me, that is get me to where I knew, with certainty, I could walk to Lava Point, Akutan Island, from where we were in the rip.

As for being seasick, I was all summer and fall, but after a while, I acquired a taste for bile, an acquired taste that went away with being ashore for a winter. Each spring it became more difficult to head out to sea, knowing that everything will taste of bile. After three years, I had enough. But then events conspired to keep me ashore, not the least of which was selling sport fishing articles to national and regional magazines.

Over the next few weeks, I want to address the subject of why the Tribulation is necessary; for God is constructing living stones that will form New Jerusalem. And the construction of physical stone here on earth takes time and pressure. Even shifting sand can become stone in the right circumstances.

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