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Where Does the River Begin?

I tend to take walks in the morning, as any English professor might, past the two rivers that meet in a place in Binghamton called Confluence Park. My route takes me over the walking bridge, into the circuit of that small park, past a garden planted next to the water's edge a few years ago by a team who'd donated their time, and alongside the hotel's outdoor seating area where there are rarely any guests in the morning.

As I looked out from the walking bridge one day, I asked myself, "Where does the river begin?" To me this was an interesting question. As human beings we can be preoccupied with the idea of origins and endings, where we come from, where we will go, and when any particular thing started. When we are angry we are often fond of pinning a beginning down. "All this started that day," we might say, pointing our finger at that vanished happening. "Things have never been the same since." And maybe we are right. Maybe what we think began that day really *did* start then, in that moment we have in mind—and maybe we are bringing this event to the attention of a listener, who might have a different story.

When we are talking about a river, the answer should be a little more plain. There are, after all, maps that could show me something I could call a beginning, a little pale blue finger of water acting to indicate the place where it started, and I might be

able to see that grow into the current flowing beneath the bridge, which has occasionally passed over the flood barriers into the street.

But a river isn't just a span from here to here. A river is also waves you can watch as you stand on the pavement of Confluence Park. Those waves are never the same, even if their forms might be similar. You never step into the same river twice, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once wrote, because that thing you're calling a river is always changing. We might refer to it by one name—the Susquehanna, the Chenango—but the Susquehanna River is a series of changing waves, and differing levels of height, and waters whose chemical makeup is different on any given day. Pollutants from cars are certainly in the water in varying concentrations, given the activity of traffic. Sometimes rocks are visible above the water when the river is dry. Sometimes it is brown and swollen with mud. Every portion of the shore is continually eroding, gaining area, expanding and contracting, like a creature taking breath. When we are trying to locate the river, *which* river are we speaking of? The river as it was yesterday, or the one as it is today?

Even if we make some kind of conceptual room for all those changes of activity, trying to fix in our minds the form of a thing that is not so much an entity as a *process*, we might still tell ourselves, for the sake of argument, that “The Susquehanna River begins near Cooperstown and ends at Chesapeake Bay,” forgetting there is the simple fact of *clouds*, which provide a source of river water that confounds all our attempts at

describing things as a simple straight line. As I stood at the railing behind the Holiday Inn, I asked myself, "Doesn't the cloud rain into the river?"

I haven't really been able to answer the question of where the river begins. Maybe it's because the question presents things as a kind of choice between this straight line or that straight line. Maybe the *question* is itself confused, since it is based on a static, unchanging, *linear* account of reality. Like the name we have for the river, our words don't always map exactly onto a lived experience, but we use them because we have to. There really isn't any alternative, if I want to tell someone where that thing I'm calling a river happens to be. Because, chances are, I'll find it if I go in the direction of the walking bridge.



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