

EVERYBODY NEEDS A RIVER

By Michael Ventura

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What is sanity? The *Oxford* definition has gotta be tongue-in-cheek: "state of being sane." In other words: "How would *we* know?" Its second definition is merely British: "tendency to avoid extreme views." (Sanity is a *tendency*? What could that possibly mean?) *Webster* isn't any better: "soundness of mind," whatever that is -- which is how the *Oxford* defines "sane." The pocket *Webster* doesn't attempt a second definition, as though to admit, "What's the use?"

I can't do any worse as a definer, so why not try?

Sanity is a balanced, symbiotic relationship between the heart and the mind. Since such a relationship, like any relationship, must always be in flux, one person's sanity on one day, in one situation, would be different from that same person's sanity on another day, in another situation -- for different situations call forth different qualities of heart and mind, different emphases between the two, though their essential balance remains the same. (When balancing on a rail we lean from one side to the other.) By this definition, your sanity might sometimes seem to a casual or even trained observer not sane at all. Sometimes, for instance, it's sane to be extreme -- for extreme situations may require extreme reactions. Someone who behaves within the limited range traditionally defined as "sane" (logical, temperate) in *any* situation ... that person might lack the flexibility that my working definition implies, and so in some situations this "sane" type would be insane, yes? As you can see -- and as the *Oxford* and *Webster* lexicographers obviously fear -- to go at all deeply into a definition of sanity is, sooner or later, to call your own sanity into question.

Or to quote my friend Stanley Crawford: "Begin to explain something, and you end up having to explain everything."

So when I say that Crawford's recent book, *The River in Winter: New and Selected Essays* (University of New Mexico Press), is exquisitely sane -- is, in fact, the sanest book I've read or expect to read in these mad times -- I mean that on his pages you experience a balanced, symbiotic relationship between the heart and the mind, a heart-mind relationship constantly in flux but always consciously focused. It is a wonder to behold.

For 30 years Stanley and Rose Mary Crawford have worked a small farm an hour's drive northwest of Santa Fe, near the Rio Embudo (the river of his title). Now and then he takes time off to write a book: nonfiction (*Mayordomo* and *A Garlic Testament*), fiction (*Some Instructions* and *Log of the S.S. the Mrs. Ungentine*), or essays of the sort collected in *The River in Winter*. Other novels, before the days of the farm, are the prophetic *Gascoyne* and *Travel Notes*, which contains the sentence that could summarize *The River in Winter*: "All landscape is moral." Those who know these books also know that I've not exaggerated when, several times over the years, I've written that Stanley Crawford is (with Steve Erickson) the finest prose stylist in the American idiom.

Read this passage from the title essay (it must be quoted at length for you to receive the gentle cumulative effect of Crawford's force):

"In the riot of growth it is easy to become confused about the deeper hierarchies. We take for granted the water. The river? But of course.

"I can remember the shape of the cottonwood, the texture of the lump of basalt, the darting trout, or the call of the killdeer. But the river, that sly and elusive presence, flows wordlessly through my memory and then surprises me again when I return to its waters each day. When I bother to listen carefully, its movement always sounds different, perhaps as tuned by temperature, humidity, depth, speed, air pressure, and my own mood: sometimes soft, a flat washing sound as over gravel, and sometimes a hearty roar. When low, it issues distinct notes, musical. Higher, at a certain stage of flood, it hisses past. At full flood, six feet or more deep, boulders unloosen and bounce along the bottom with muffled bangs. ...

"When I go each day on my walk and gather up these images of water, tone, and feather, twig and wood, and the sounds they make, and feel the gravel underfoot, I know I am a little safer. In their granular disorder, in their flow, in their thickets, they are the emanations of the power of a place studied and absorbed in daily habit; they are the grains and spores and seeds of a place, whose shapes give no hint of what ultimately may spring from them, in understanding. ...

"Winter is about water, the accumulations of snow and ice banked up and then released from the mountains, from the shadows of canyons and forests, in the warmer seasons. Snow and ice, such convenient storage arrangements. To springs and streams and rivers and oceans again, and then mist and cloud, and then to rain and snow and ice again.

"Winter is about water, and about the river. It is the season that feeds the river in this slow and indirect yet clever way. Perhaps snow and ice came first. Perhaps they invented the river. The river is their solution, the link they created to form the cycle. Then the river invented the vegetation that lines its banks, and the fauna that inhabits its waters, to enliven its endless days and nights, including eventually the dogs and me, and all the other watchers and strollers. ...

"The river is an inventor. I invented you all, it says as it rambles by, its waters disappearing around a bend beyond some overhanging willow branches, which marks the turnaround point of my walk.

"I retrace my steps, returning home against the flow."

But *The River in Winter* is no rhapsodic invitation back to nature. "Woe to he," Crawford warns, "who would move to the country seeking peace and quiet." He writes, in a contrapuntal rhythm of grave and humorous detail, of the endless chores and tensions and duties and frustrations of rural village life -- "the larger reality is that the small places of the world are run on the backs of the unpaid, the underpaid, and the volunteer." He writes of the do-or-die grinding political struggles against developers and against callous government and of struggles between the villagers themselves. "The village can also offer a useful lesson: that the man you may quarrel with today may have to help put out the fire

or repair the *acequia* [an irrigation system] next to you tomorrow. And he will probably be among those you shake hands with at a funeral. At the very least, you will run into him again and again at the post office or the village store. The village says: Deal with it."

He reminds us that "these days most cities live with only a three-day reserve of food-stuffs on hand." In this era of imminent catastrophe -- whether from human motive, climate change, or primeval force -- that's a scary realization for us city folk. And, speaking of city folk, Crawford asks: "What is the lifetime of our industrial civilization? ... What vast suffering are we storing up for the future in our unthinking ways?"

That question echoes in me: "What vast suffering?" The question plays between the lines of *The River in Winter's* every page, like the sound of something rustling in the darkness beyond a campfire. For Stanley Crawford knows cities, too. Born in San Diego, his *Gascoyne* is a masterful satire of the L.A.-San Diego megalopolis. He's disturbingly well-informed about issues like soil depletion and water scarcity. These essays are, in part, a record of how he's fought -- up close, nose to nose -- the arrogant ignorance of governmental land management. He doesn't rant, he isn't afraid; he is simply, and deeply, experienced. Out of his experience he offers proposals that would be politically feasible if enough of us could bring ourselves to give a shit. He also knows that most don't and probably won't. This grieves him but doesn't stop him. He does his part. This book is, above all, the record of a man who does his part.

Watching him do his part, you question how you're doing yours. That, and its beauty and its graceful sanity, is what makes *The River in Winter* matter to someone like me, a city guy who recoils at the daily manual toil that a man like Stanley assumes as a natural part of life. An intellectual who has chosen to be a peasant, not sentimentally but because he loves the job, loves its harshness and its surprises and the sounds of the river, Stanley Crawford represents the best of what we were and what we might become, while making his stand midst the paradox of what we are.

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