

Pondage I: Overflow

by T. P. Murphy

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To own a farm pond is to attract the notice of the gods. Gathering together the waters in creating a pond means imitating the biblical god, and the claim of ownership, of dominion, is itself an act of arrogance. But other, older gods are woven into the fabric of ponds as their warp and appear most as they begin to unravel.

I began to grasp such a presence in our pond during a heavy rain a couple of years after we had bought our old farmhouse and the small remnant of the acreage that had been the farm. That day, through binoculars, I had been watching the pond from the dining room window—scanning its surface, looking for the mouth of the four-inch wide, vertical standpipe that channeled overflowing water down and out through the pond's bank. The almost perfectly circular, thirty-foot wide pond was about three-hundred yards downhill from the house, and on that day the standpipe was not easy to see, since it was under water and its only evidence was a small whirlpool. When I could no longer persuade myself that, yes, there's the whirlpool, I put on my Wellingtons and a hooded rain jacket and slogged down the path to the pond to see what was happening.

What was happening was not good: above the pipe the surface was smooth and the muddied water of the pond was closer to the top of the bank than I had ever seen it. New to this pond business, I had been told by someone—I don't remember who, but someone I trusted—that if a pond overflows you lose it. I could see the logic: as with many ponds in this mountainous area, ours was built into the side of a hill, scooped out on the uphill side and piled up on the downhill. How long could that downhill earthworks wall hold out against the water forcing itself over? To prevent that erosion, toward the middle of the of the pond, stood the empty space inside that cast iron standpipe, which channeled the overflow down, turned at a right angle, and ran along the bottom of the pond and out through the downhill earthworks wall into a small ditch draining into the stream below the pond.

I fought my way down to the base of that wall through brush and blackberries and various saplings, across angled ground that was rocky and muddy and wet, stumbling and slipping, two feet and one hand on the ground. Nothing moved in the channel to the stream; it had become a trough full of inert green gruel made from partially rotted remains of the weedy vines that grew so profusely in the pond. I reached in and started dragging vines out, discovering that some of them were still lodged in the standpipe outlet. Having pulled out what I could, I saw a slow pooling of water among rocks below the pipe. Up the embankment and up the hill, back toward the house, I went, turning over in my mind what tool I could use to clean out the pipe. By the time I left the barn, I was wielding a large crowbar: the hook for dragging things and the straight end for poking. I resisted the urge to name it.

The crowbar and I scrambled back down the embankment together and set to work. I began by removing some of the rocks piled about the opening of the pipe and discovered that for a foot or so from the end, the rusted iron pipe was missing its top and that the space was plugged

with weeds. I cleared them out with the claw. Next I jammed the end of the crow bar into the pipe and met resistance, but when I pulled it back and struck again I felt some give and more weeds became visible through the jagged slot in the top of the pipe. I cleared those weeds and kept poking. After a couple more pokings and clearings, the plug began to move more visibly under its own power, to extrude out the end of the pipe and then pick up speed. I had been straddling the drainage ditch, but thought it wise to pull one foot back as I watched more weeds spew from the end of the pipe. Then as water and weeds hid the end of the pipe and began to boil, a burst of water shot up into the air and rushed down the ditch. The pond was draining again and I was flooded with relief. As I hefted the crowbar in my hand, I named it Hrunting.

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Two years later, however, I increased the risk of an overflow to save the pond from another threat—a muskrat. These animals look like rats, with long bare tails, at least so my sources tell me since I’ve never actually seen one alive. The outward sign of the pond’s inward muskrat was a V-shaped wave moving across its surface, but as with any apparition, belief was preceded by a long period of doubt and denial. From the dining room window all I could see was a movement in the water that never appeared when I was near the pond. Just the wind, I told myself. As it recurred no matter what the wind, I made the cause into some kind of water skimmer. That interpretation did not hold up well under examination: the wave was too fast and too strong. One day, walking by the pond, I noticed the arch of the top of a tunnel in the bank side just above the water level. When I looked more closely along the bank I found a worn spot, almost a groove in the muddy edge of the pond, that led up over the bank to a faint but definite

path through the grass into the brush. At the other side of the pond, hidden among the cattails was a mound of dried stalks, a structure that did not happen by accident.

Over the phone I described the symptoms to the Wildlife Conservation Officer, who agreed to come out and look at the pond with me. “Well,” he said standing on the retaining wall of the pond after a quick inspection, “you’ve got a muskrat, and you need to get rid of it right away or it will destroy your pond.” He paused and must have concluded my silence meant I needed an explanation. “They dig tunnels all through the walls of the pond and weaken it, and then the wall gives way, and it’s good-bye pond. Now we could come out here and trap it for you, but the best thing to do is for you to raise the level of the pond and flood them out because they need space above the waterline for their tunnel entrances.”

I like to think that I am older, wiser, and more humble today, that now I would say, “That would be great if you’d trap it.” But in those days I aspired to self-sufficiency and thought I should be able to take care of things myself. When it is not overwhelmed, the standpipe determines the depth of the pond, so to deepen it, I needed to extend the drain pipe. A rubber “boot” slipped on the end of the cast iron pipe with a section of PVC drain pipe inserted into it would do just that. But first I needed to measure how wide that pipe was out toward the middle of the pond.

We were storing a canoe in our barn for some friends, a big, dark green Old Town, at least fourteen feet long, and they had said we were free to use it. Teenaged Christian, our son, and I dragged it down to the pond and slid it in. While Christian stepped in, I held the canoe, and he steadied it while I tried to step in without tipping it, and since I do not recall falling in, I must have been successful. It was not a long trip out to the standpipe; in fact, with one end against the shore, the canoe could almost be a bridge, but of course, part of the fun was paddling the big

canoe around the little pond. Eventually, I grabbed onto the pipe while Christian paddled to keep us from swinging around that pivot long enough for me to measure its four-inch diameter.

The next time we launched the canoe, our task was more daunting. In the bottom of the canoe we had a black rubber cylindrical boot, a ten inch long piece of white PVC pipe—enough to raise the pond level close to the top of the bank—two silver metal bands with screws to tighten them and a screw driver. Christian and I positioned the canoe and there was much shouting and maneuvering as I tried to slip on the boot, then fasten it with the band, then jam the PVC into it and then put the second metal band on. The actual event did not have so clear a sense of direction as that summary. At many points we floated majestically away from the pipe with me leaning over the edge of the canoe with an object in my hand that only seconds ago had been almost in place, or so it seemed as we drifted off. When we finally dragged the canoe back up on shore, Christian’s arms and my hands aching, we congratulated each other on what we had accomplished. The pond level rose, and after a while I stopped seeing the wave pattern across its surface.

During the winter, despite my care in tightening the bands, the movement of the ice on the pond worked the PVC pipe out of its sleeve so that at some secret time it drifted quietly to the bottom, and the pond level fell. However, even though the water level was back to its pre-muskrat level, during the next spring thaws and rain, the pond rose and the whirlpool again disappeared. This time Christian came along to reconnoiter and we brought Hrunting with us. Sure enough, there were weeds plugging the pipe, but this time when the plug started to move on its own, out came the partially rotted body of what must have been at one time a muskrat. This outcome was not what I had planned. But what exactly had I expected, that the muskrat would move on to a more hospitable pond and live happily ever after? I had won this round of the pond

competition, and I see now what I missed then as we finished our work; I did not think of Tennyson’s “Nature red in tooth and claw” as I put the crowbar—tooth at one end and claw at the other—over my shoulder and returned to the warm house where we would change out of our wet clothes. But such trappings of civilization disguise only thinly the elemental nature of the struggle. Thoreau notes how, when caught in a trap, “The muskrat will gnaw his third leg off to be free.” How that being who could love freedom so much must have suffered trapped in that void inside the pond as its spirit died. But I have my pond, damn it.

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However, defending the pond means more than keeping the standpipe open. I learned that some years later when I experienced the physical reality of the definition of “watershed.” The Environmental Protection Agency in its definition of watershed quotes explorer John Wesley Powell, who defines it as “that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community.” Our house is in the middle of a long hill, and during the rains and spring snow melt, the stream below the pond captures the runoff from both sides of the hollow in which we live. On the house side of the stream, a drainage ditch channels the rain that roars down the hill alongside the road. Just above our house the road, like a fox trying to shake a pursuer, takes a ninety-degree turn, and the water, in the grips of its own inertia, cascades over a twenty-foot waterfall at the top of the hill and crashes and tumbles through a deep gulley until it reaches the middle of our field.

Because, like the previous owners of this property, we had done nothing about clearing or maintaining the channel, thinking that it was best to let nature literally take its course, we did not

cut down the trees and shrubs that clogged the way, nor did we dig out the accumulated silt. But the water must get to the stream somehow as all surface water in the bounded hydrologic system of this valley must. Thus when the water flow was great, it had begun to cut small waterways diagonally downhill across the field. For a long time this was not much of a problem, because those waterways had always threaded their way through the field and emptied into the stream before they reached the pond. Finally, however, the situation changed: a clog occurred further up the drainage ditch, and water began to move out of it and along a wrinkle in the field right into the pond and eventually out through the standpipe into the stream.

That year the spring melt was especially fierce and we watched the pond fill up while the standpipe disgorged water full-bore. Madalene, my spouse, and I fretted at the dining room window. Finally I decided to go out in the rain and check. The muddy water of the pond had risen into the grass on top of the earthwork wall, the low point of the pond's edge. I had always imagined that if water began to flow over the bank, it would wear a notch and the pond level would be lowered as the notch wore wider and deeper so I thought that perhaps by using one of the clear plastic sheets that we put over the garden, I could create a spillway that would protect the wall. If I put one end of the plastic in the pond and draped the rest of it over the top and down the side of the bank, then I thought the water would slide over it and leave the underlying grass and dirt and rocks in place. I went back up hill to tell Madalene what was happening, and while I sloshed back down across the field in my blue hooded rain jacket and black Wellingtons, dragging twenty-five feet of plastic behind me, from the window she watched this odd figure and called the neighbors who lived downstream from the pond to warn them we were concerned about whether the pond wall was going to hold. By the time I returned, the pond had reached critical mass and the overflow had started, a wide band of water flattening the grass, smooth and

almost transparent. I tried to spread the plastic out under the flowing sheet of water and weigh the plastic down with rocks, but the water kept flowing under it and around it, twisting and folding it. As the water picked up, I could also see the danger was not at the top of the bank where I thought it was, but just over the embankment where the water was beginning to get violent and noisy.

Once I saw it happening, I recognized what was going on. The power of flowing water is easy to underestimate, even when we feel we have given it the proper respect. But water does not care; it goes where it will, and though we block its way, it nurses its power like a grudge, except that it is not a grudge; it is calculated inevitability. When rocks are placed in a stream in the right pattern so that water falling over them can curl back under itself, the stream creates a scour pool, digging a hole in the streambed. The water rolling over the embankment began to develop that curl and to dig into the side of the bank about six feet below the top. If the wall is weakened enough, it will blow out and the pond will have destroyed itself.

I had given up my futile and probably pointless plastic spreading and made it to the driveway when Bruce pulled up in his maroon pickup. Bruce is a lanky, jack-of-all-trades who is also the son-in-law of the down-stream neighbors.

“So,” he said as he opened the truck door, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. “Butch tells me you’ve got a problem with your pond.”

“Yeah,” I responded. “It’s overflowing.”

“Let’s go take a look.” he said.

We trooped down to the pond discussing all the rain we’d been having. When we got to the wall, Bruce looked at my large wad of plastic piled next to the band of water flowing over the bank as I shamefacedly described my effort to protect the wall.

He said nothing, just shifted position. He looked uphill and across the field at the water pouring into the pond, tracing it back to the drainage ditch, and then he said, “Let’s go over and look at that stream there.”

I said, “Sure,” although I knew that getting through the thick and thorny shrubs along the drainage ditch would not be easy. But we found a gap between two thorn bushes and crushed our way through the non-thorny dead weeds from last year into the tangle within. At our entry point, there was a running stream, but just below that point, ambiguity raised its many heads and the stream split up into strands: first two then four and from them, one headed out into the field and others split more and then hid themselves in the brush. We stood there in the rain and looked the situation over.

Bruce said, “Maybe we can clear some of this out.”

I said, “This looks pretty hopeless.”

But he started wading into the streams ripping things up and throwing things around, so I headed up to the barn to get some tools. You may have noticed that this whole affair involved a good deal of walking around and a lot of looking. When I first gained responsibility for land measured in acres and a pond, I found this aspect of problem solving annoying and was always impatient about the delay involved. I would need to look at something and then walk 200 yards and look at something else and then walk back and look at the first thing again. I was used to solving problems that involved words and ideas, but when the problems are spread out on the face of the earth walking around and taking a look are essential components of the problem. Bruce is a smart guy, but going to college never appealed to him probably because going to college would have meant sitting around indoors, and he is simply not interested in dealing with problems that don’t require walking around and taking a look. These are the problems that

engage him fully. I have learned under the tutelage of men like Bruce to savor the patient joy of solving problems that map themselves onto the land.

I returned to the stream with a mattocks and a shovel, and with them and our hands we dug and pried and pulled and dug some more changing the direction of downhill so the water was compelled to go where we wanted it to. After half an hour, wet and muddy, having redirected some of the wayward water, we stopped, looked at what we'd done, and decided we'd reached the level of diminishing returns, though that's not the way we put it when we decided.

We walked back over to the pond to take a look. The rain fell, rivulets of water continued to thread their way through the field, and the pond was still overflowing; it was hard to see any difference yet. And next, in what seemed to be a vindication, Bruce suggested we put the plastic over the wall to protect it. With two of us working, holding the two sides, tucking the one end into the pond, and weighing the plastic down with the biggest rocks we could find, we actually got it in place. We stood there for a few minutes admiring our handiwork, watching as water flowed over the plastic.

“Maybe that'll do something,” Bruce said as he lit up a cigarette. I began to wonder if his offering to help with the plastic might have been a generous gesture to help me save face brought on by the simple logic of our being part of a community. Either way I was thankful.

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The pond survived that crisis. I am not certain how much the plastic helped, but our rerouting the water in the drainage ditch decelerated the rate of the runoff pouring into the pond so that the water stopped curling over the edge sooner. I packed a few rocks into the small indentation in the dam, but as I stood on that dam and looked at the-filled-to-the-brim pond, I also realized that on its own the pond would not survive the mere passage of time, especially if

the warming climate increases the intensity of storms. The inexorable erosion that clogged the drainage ditch was merely a sped up version of what was happening to the pond. In the drainage ditch, the water from thunderstorms and spring run-offs roaring down from further up Blair Hill created the twenty-five-foot waterfall near the road, and further down the hill that same roiling water dropped its load of dirt and rocks filling in the narrow channel. Trees and shrubs and weeds stabilized the new ground when little rain fell, and the water roiling downhill in the storms was forced by the filling in of the channel to fan out into the field, eventually reaching the pond.

It is likely the pond was dug in the 1940's or 50's; it had been ours for almost twenty years, and during that time the cattails—their long graceful leaves clustered tightly at the base, fanning outward below the ramrod stalk shooting up from each center and topped with a hard brown brush—had spread from a small colony along a quarter of the pond to a thick band along more than two-thirds of the shore line as the water around the pond's perimeter became shallower and more welcoming. Any pond, whether made by chance or design, is no sooner created than it begins to bury itself. The aquatic plants that it nurtures, knit their bodies from fire, air, and water and die to become earth that displaces water. The runoff that feeds the pond smuggles in, suspended inside itself, soil that settles out to raise the bottom. Fish poop: the verb produces the noun which makes its contribution while increasing the vigor and bulk of the plants that die and rot each year. All beings betray the pond, which itself dies so they may live. The technical term for the process is eutrophication.

But there is another way to describe the state of this pond. Out of my meager Old English wordhoard from grad school, ironically one word that has endured is the word “*læne*,” which means “transitory” or “perishing.” In Old English the “*æ*” is pronounced like the “a” in “jazz” and the “e” sounds like, “eh” but more like a light cough than a syllable. While the Greek-

derived language of science sounds cold and detached, “*læne*” is like a wail. This pond was *læne*; every pond is *læne*. So as an aging man, I was a sympathetic caretaker, because like the pond I face death and perhaps first, a time when the experiences of life will silt over my mind, fill in the crevices of my brain and leave it shallow and murky. I knew that the ancient and elemental god who was the pond would surely see the wisdom of our partnership because I was also earthworks holding back water somehow animated by my own god. And those other, eternal gods made of fire and air with their thunderbolts and Inquisitions would mock the pond and me in our doomed efforts for we were *læne*. But we were *læne* because we were part of something living; we were neither alone nor inert. But the pond and I could not mock those gods in return; there was no point in mocking those who cannot change.