

# Recompense

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George Handley's *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*<sup>1</sup> practices theology the way a doctor practices CPR—not as a secondhand theory but as a chest-cracking, lung-inflating, life-saving intervention. The book models what, on my account, good theology ought to do: It is experimental, it is grounded in the details of lived experience, and it takes charity—that pure love of Christ—as the only real justification for its having been written. It is not afraid to guess, it is not afraid to question, it is not afraid to cry repentance, and it is not afraid to speak in its own name. The book's self-description reads, in part:

People who fly-fish know that a favorite river bend, a secluded spot in moving waters, can feel like home—a place you know intimately and intuitively. In prose that reads like the flowing current of a river, scholar and essayist George Handley blends nature writing, local history, theology, environmental history, and personal memoir in his new book *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*. Handley's meditations on the local Provo River watershed present the argument that a sense of place requires more than a strong sense of history and belonging, it requires awareness and commitment. Handley traces a history of settlement along the Provo that has profoundly transformed the landscape and yet neglected its Native American and environmental legacies. As a descendent of one of the first pioneers to irrigate the area, and as a witness to the loss of orchards, open space, and an eroded environmental ethic, Handley weaves his own personal and family history into the landscape to argue for sustainable belonging. In avoiding the exclusionist and environmentally harmful attitudes that come with the territorial claims to a homeland, the fly-fishing term, “home waters,” is offered as an alternative, a kind of belonging that is informed by deference to others, to the mysteries of deep time, and to a fragile dependence on water.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than responding to Handley's live theology with sec-

ondhand theory, I would prefer to respond in kind. The essays that follow don't review *Home Waters* so much as they give an account of what life—what thoughts, inclinations, sensations—its intervention pumped into me. My own meditations treat three themes: the soul as a kind of watershed, genealogy as a kind of ecology, and recompense as the way of creation.

### Soul as Watershed

Spurred by *Home Waters*, I've been reading Wallace Stegner. Like Handley, Stegner is interested in the tight twine of body, place, and genealogy that makes a life. On my account, Handley and Stegner share the same thesis: If the body is a river, then the soul is a watershed. Like a shirt pulled off over your head, this thesis leaves the soul inside-out and exposed. You thought your soul was a kernel of atomic interiority, your most secret secret—but as you stand there, shirt in hand, everyone can see your navel.

Stegner's novel, *Angle of Repose*, opens with the narrator's own version of this thesis. An aging father, writing about his pioneer grandparents, names the distance between himself and his son:

Right there, I might say to Rodman, who doesn't believe in time, notice something: I started to establish the present and the present moved on. What I established is already buried under layers of tape. Before I can say I am, I was. Heraclitus and I, prophets of flux, know that the flux is composed of parts that imitate and repeat each other. Am or was, I am cumulative, too. I am everything I ever was, whatever you and Leah may think. I am much of what my parents and especially my grandparents were—inherited stature, coloring, brains, bones (that part unfortunate), plus transmitted prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors that I defend as if they were personal and not familial.<sup>3</sup>

Right off, Stegner fingers what is different about this notion of a soul: time. Thinking that souls are tucked away inside us generally goes hand in hand with thinking that they are untouched by time. Dammed up inside, the soul, unmoved, is safe from the perpetual rush and tumble of Heraclitus's *panta rhei*.

But wrong-side-out, the soul has no such repose. Here, nothing is still and the soul's "I am!" is both compromised and constituted by its temporality. It moves but its movement is "composed of parts that imitate and repeat each other." It moves, but it moves as a gathering litany of brains, bones, beliefs, scruples, and preju-

dices copied from the bodies and lives of parents and grandparents and channeled through the narrow straits of *my* canyon walls.

As Handley points out, “This is the way with watersheds. They gather tributaries from upstream and connect all that is above, beneath, and beside and give life through unseen processes of exchange” (xv). Downstream, the river appears self-sufficient, its banks clearly defined, its water an unremarkable grace. But the accessible obscures the obvious. “A river is water, yes, but it is also soil, plant, and animal life—a watershed” (128). A soul is a body, yes, but it is also a place and a time. A soul, like water, “seeps through the edges of stone, leaps out of rocky walls, or surges from beneath the soil, and it grows in size and momentum as it flows downward from the tops of the mountains. Little capillaries of water meet up with others to form small rivulets and streams, which meet others still in naturally formed transepts, until a river takes shape and creates inverted mountains to aid its way down. Down to the sea or directly to the clouds from where it drops on the mountains again” (213).

The simile is striking, but I don’t want to leave it there. Handley’s attention to the force of place insists that we are dealing with more than metaphor. The soul names both the body’s place and that body’s being placed. There are no souls without bodies, but a body, in itself, is a wire unplugged. Souls socket bodies into the place of their time. It is in this sense, Handley suggests, that “geography teaches us the first lessons of being” (38), that every kind of being involves a being *there*.

This concept fits with Mormonism’s own original take on the soul. Sometimes we use the word “soul” like everyone else, but sometimes we don’t. Doctrine and Covenants 88:15 gives the term a twist: “The spirit and the body are the soul of man.” Where Plato’s soul is, above all else, indivisible, Joseph gives it as composite. “Soul” names the body’s being-there-with a spirit. And given that the separation of body and spirit is death, the soul—this being-there-with of body and spirit—is synonymous with life.

We might take the idea one step further. In Mormon parlance, the separation of body and spirit is physical death, but the separation of my spirit from the presence of God is spiritual death. Eternal life, spiritual life, depends on my spirit’s being-there-with God’s Spirit. Eternal life sparks when body sockets into spirit that

sockets into Spirit. This compounding togetherness is the essence of a soul. Souls are the “taking place” of this shared life. They are the “there” of our being-there. There is no salvation without this shared place or promised land.

Sin, on the other hand, dis-places us. All sinners are expatriates—not because they’ve left some particular place behind but because they’ve come ungrounded from place altogether. As sinners, we no longer know where we are. We no longer feel earth beneath our feet, smell rain in the air, or stain our hands with walnut hulls. Sky turns unnoticed.

Religion, then, is revealed geography. Angels, when they come from the presence of God, do as Moroni did for Joseph Smith: They point to the ground and say “Here!”

Attention to place involves not just attention to landscape but to the body as well. The body is the place where life happens. While the soul is the place of the body, the body localizes the extended geography of the soul. “The body is the cup in which to drink the world” (42). This cup always runs over; but without the body, life won’t hold water.

We stuff, abuse, and ignore our bodies at our own peril. The soul as watershed feeds the body’s current through the capillaries, rivulets, and transepts of sensation. In order to be here, “sensation is what one needs” (57). A respiring body, a sweating body, a wind-chapped body, a sun-kissed body is what one needs. A body in open air. We forfeit our souls, our place, if our bodies become just “excess baggage, things to be maintained so that we can continue to live as if they were irrelevant, as if we were not embodied biological matter” (34). Handley climbs mountains to pace out the dimensions of his watershed, and it is the work imposed by the slope that wakes him to it. “The mountain,” he says, “stirs me from strange and varied slumbers of the body” (187). Awakening to our bodies is the key to awakening to our place.

None of this is to deny that we are “insufficient vessels,” that our bodies are “not built to withstand [even] the daily tremors beauty offers” (162). But this insufficiency, this dependence of the river on a watershed that spreads from view, is the whole point. The body that I am, the repetition of blood, faith, and sin that I am, is necessitated only by this insufficiency. This insufficiency is the tie that binds body to place and parent to child. A

soul is the sharing of this insufficiency in a common place. It is the wakeful shouldering of its burden from one body to the next.

### Gene/Ecology

Earth is stratified time, the past piled up in place. Use some wind, water, and pressure. Sift it, layer it, and fold it. Add an inhuman number of years. Stack and buckle these planes of rock into mountains of frozen time. Use a river to cleave that mountain in two. Hide hundreds of millions of purloined years in plain, simultaneous sight as a single massive bluff. It's a good trick.

Bodies, made of earth, are just the same: In my face, generations of people are stratified in plain, simultaneous sight. My father's nose, my grandfather's ears, my mother's wink, the lines my kids have etched into my squint. My wife pats my cheek and says: "Dear, your genealogy is showing." She's right. The lines on my face and in the palms of my hands are family lines. But these lines aren't easy to follow because, counter to expectation, time's line isn't straight. Time is composed not only of necessities but of repetitions and contingencies that make it loop around, knot up, peter out, and jump ahead. Time moves in fits and starts. Its straight-shot inevitability is tempered by the meandering play of accident and coincidence.

Handley finds the same thing. Alone in the family cabin, he tries sorting out his own family lines. He's got rolls of genealogy, "full names, dates and locations of birth, dates of death . . . each name like myself, a knot of time and flesh" (75). These knots are tough to untangle because life is not the line but its skein. "There are simply too many tangentials and too many generations in the past that must exhaust us and be arbitrarily ignored to create the impression that families are 'lines' at all and not wide webs, connected below the surface of time like that grove of aspen trees out my window breathing in the same nutrients through the same shared root system" (71).

Here, stately family trees turn out to be more like thorny briar patches. And if we're going to talk, not about oaks but briars, we may as well just be honest and make room for sun, rain, and dirt. Who can draw a bright line between what lives life and what gives it? Plotting *these* family histories, we're going to need more paper.

“If genealogy teaches us anything, it is how narrow and contingent our understanding of kinship is” (104).

The illusion that I’m simply me, free of ecology, independent of pedigree, is just another variation on the illusion that only the dramatic events in our lives or notable names in our trees are decisive. Everyone wants King George for a second uncle, but your kinship with a diabetic great-aunt, a charwoman, will probably have more sway. This kind of “Great Man” history squeezes off-stage the ordinary and tangential that compose the bulk of our lives. A more faithful family history would have to be much more modest. We’re wading in the muck of a river here, poking in its rushes with a stick, not digging an irrigation ditch with the industrial reach of an excavator.

Handley turns and re-turns in the course of *Home Waters* to the abrupt tragedy of his brother’s suicide. Like a stiff punch in the eye, this death leaves Handley seeing stars, and rightly so. He can’t help but finger the deep, tender bruise and wonder how this life and its passing have shaped his own. But this bruise is not mine; and in the end, I am just as interested in all the room that Handley’s book purposefully gives to a colleague, a gas station attendant, a peach farmer, a soccer mom, and a hiking buddy—his accidental companions, his collateral pedigree, tossed together by circumstance and offered as oblique recompense. Whether our lives are filled with or bereft of Spirit depends on learning how to see these small, unrequested contingencies of time, place, and family as a grace rather than a spoil. Doing this means learning “something about how to assent to circumstances, how to live within constraints of place and culture, and then maybe [we] will know the depth of extended mercy” (16).

### Recompense

Of his awakening, Dogen says, “I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.”<sup>4</sup> Tinged with enlightenment, you see what Dogen saw: that life is borrowed and that mind itself is mooched. Mind borrows mountains and rivers, earth, sun, and sky. But you can’t just keep these things forever. Even if they weren’t quite what you wanted, they gave what they

had and now some compensation is needed, some recompense is required.

“Recompense is payback,” Handley says. “It means to weigh together, to bring back into balance” (xi). What was loaned must be returned or replaced. What was given must be given back. Nobody gets to start from scratch, not even God. To make a world is to borrow, recycle, and repurpose the matter that, even if disorganized, is already out there mattering. All creation is reorganization. Even the mind of God must mooch its mountains, cajole them, persuade them, serve them, compensate them.

This is messy, and its messiness is compounded by the fact that everything is in motion. “Nothing is still,” Handley reminds us (3). Nothing can be still because recompense is itself never done. Recompense compels the world’s motion: Everything is in play as everything borrows from everything else in giant, intermittently harmonious rounds of exchange, compromise, and negotiation. Leaves borrow light, cows borrow leaves, people borrow cows, worms borrow people, etc., etc. The world is the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, everyone’s a broker, and the closing bell never gets rung. The whole thing echoes Anaximander’s famous lines:

Whence things have their origin,  
Thence also their destruction happens,  
According to necessity;  
For they give to each other justice and recompense  
For their injustice  
In conformity with the ordinance of Time.<sup>5</sup>

This is the world in a nutshell. It will die if it stops swimming. Handley sees it. He goes fly-fishing, but “every time I step off the bank and into the water, the shape of the current is noticeably different. The water has risen or fallen, it is muddied, olive, or amber, the banks carved differently than before” (29). Every time he wades in, something new has been borrowed, added, or traded away.

But rivers are a cheap example. Take the mighty mountain instead. Handley sees it here, too. “Mountains as landmarks belie what any hiker—or anyone with the eyes of an impression it—knows,



that a mountain never retains the same shape. There are as many mountains as there are steps it takes to climb them, or as there are angles of sun and shifts in the weather" (92). To climb a mountain is to negotiate its shifting face. You can borrow a handhold here in exchange—quid pro quo—for breaking up some ice over there.

Mountains and rivers both wake Handley's mind to the "fundamental recognition of an ongoing creation" (130). They wake him to the recognition that creation must be ongoing because creation is compensation. Everything must always start again—and again, and again!—because all the debt is shared, we've borrowed against our own lives, and what we're borrowing is each other.

This is where things get sticky—where we begin to hear more clearly a call for repentance in our talk of recompense. We should do unto others as we would have them do unto us because we will all—inevitably, necessarily, repeatedly—be doing it unto each other. We will all impose on, borrow from, use up, and trade away parts of one another. Everyone will both repurpose and get repurposed.

Obvious problems result from all this claim-jumping: You *will* get borrowed as something you don't want to be, and you *will* have to borrow stuff that isn't "exactly" what you wanted. Either way, our shared lives are such that the potential for offense abounds. In response to these offenses, forgiveness must be understood as more than an occasional virtue. It must be cultivated as a baseline disposition. You will be forgiven only as you forgive.

You will get lots of practice. The world will resist you. It will exceed your grasp. It will practice indifference toward you. Like a borrowed shirt, it will fit you imperfectly, it will be loose in the neck, short in the cuff, and the tag will itch. The world will irritate you, bruise you, thwart you, anger you. In the end, it will even—at least for a time—kill you. Suffering the indignity of these rounds, you will, by default, be tempted to just flit from one offense to the next, simmering in frustration, stewing in quiet desperation.

But to live, you will have to let these offenses go. You will have to learn how to make and accept recompense. You will have to forget the fiction of cash equivalences and barter with whatever is at hand.

You didn't get what you wanted? Or even what you needed? Your life was repurposed by others for something other than what you had in mind? Join the party. I'm sympathetic, but in the end these objections are going nowhere. That bus, while always idling,



never actually leaves the station. You presume a world that doesn't exist, and you fantasize a fixer-God who, unlike ours, is Himself doing something other than divinely serving, borrowing, and repurposing.

Ask instead: What *were* you given? Where were you taken? What was your recompense? Learn to like lemonade.

But you had plans? You didn't want that recompense? Do not be so proud. You have done to others just the same. You have, in turn, taken, borrowed, and appropriated—and probably with quite a bit less grace and restraint. What have you taken? At what cost? What recompense have you been withholding from whom? You've been using up mountains and trees, the great wide earth, the sun, the moon, the stars? You've been drinking the rivers dry? You've been repurposing your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends? You've borrowed and wasted at your convenience? You've squeezed hard, turned their cheek for them, and then squeezed again? Nursing grievances, you've justified such actions with accusation and, often enough, even invoked God in your own defense?

This, Handley suggests, is a kind of “ecological apostasy” (130). For my part, I doubt that there is any other kind.

We need to wake up to the recompense of what has been given. We need to freely offer that recompense in return. “We need,” as Handley advocates with a borrowed phrase, “to learn to think like a mountain” (xv).

### Notes

1. George Handley, *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010). Quotations from this book are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

2. “Home Waters,” University of Utah Press, <http://content.lib.utah.edu/u/?/upcat,1668> (accessed January 5, 2011).

3. Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 3–4.

4. Dogen, quoted in Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 215.

5. In “Anaximander,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anaximander#Apeiron> (accessed January 5, 2011).