

## **THE RIVER THAT THIRSTS for ITSELF**

**As told by La Vieja**

**To those attending  
The RIO GRANDE CULTURAL WATER CONFERENCE  
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*Grandmother! cried the child. Tell me that story again! The one about the river! I want to understand....*

*Oh dear ..... my little grandchild, I am tired.....*

*Please grandmother?*

*Well, said Grandmother, it has been a long time since they listened to the elders.... Maybe they will listen to you... Come on down to the river and I'll tell you the story about what is happening, and what you can do.*

*Grandmother spoke, It wasn't that long ago that the same thing happened. You know, humans came to the river hungry and thirsty after a long time wandering across the desert. They praised its generosity and gave thanks. Then some years passed, and because they were no longer thirsty they forgot what it was like without the river. Soon more humans came to the river for its gifts. It did not take long before they forgot too.*

*The river kept on giving, all the while trying to teach the humans about the rhythms of water in the desert. Following her nature, the river shrank and grew in great turning cycles. Some summers she became a flood and gave the land a gift of rich soil and habitat. Other summers she was a clear stream well within her banks, leaving the new soil alone so it could strengthen.*

*What makes today different is only one thing.....*

*The river's generosity has not changed. Her nature is still to give and give. She winds green and glittery through the many-coloured desert. With her watery voice tumbling over boulders, or whispering among grasses and cottonwoods, or sighing in quiet pools, she still sings to the skies and calls for rain and snow.*

*Trouble is, now the river's voice is interrupted and weakened. Humans think of the river as being only water, and they assume the right to use it however they want to. They forget the RIVER's right to herself! They forget how good it is for the land – and so also for them -- when she can be herself fully, through all her great cycles and moods.*

*So, now the rhythm of her speech is irregular. Her voice seldom dances to the music of her own language. Sometimes it is so faint the skies don't hear her call, and do not know to send rain.*

*Grandmother paused. You see, without the river, the rains cannot come. She begins the great watery cycle of giving from river, to land, to skies, down again to the land, and back to the river.*

*So, you see? The river is more than water. She is the link between land and sky. And like you, little child, she has 'organs' made up of plant and animal communities. She is a whole community, living and breathing, just like you! The great organ of her skin is the soil, and like your skin it breathes, sweats, and nourishes her. Her lungs are the trees and other plants. They cleanse the air of carbon dioxide and give us oxygen instead! Her blood is the water flowing in her channel, and her kidneys are the wetlands. Together they nourish and cleanse the body of the land.*

*Now, the river is tired and thirsty. And believe me, Grandmother knows what it means to be tired AND thirsty! You just can't function when you don't have enough water!* Grandmother breathed deeply, and waited a few minutes before speaking again.

*And still the river gives, and will keep on giving until her last drop.*

The child began to cry. Not just because people would suffer as the river died. Not just because animals would suffer. Not just because plants would wither and die, taking their medicine with them. The child cried mostly to realize that humans could be so forgetful. That they would not remember how everything depends on everything else.

Without the river, the great watery cycle of giving would end.

*Little child, said Grandmother, your tears are good. They are the river crying for herself. Now that you understand, you must remind others. It may not seem like much, but you will be surprised!*

For a while the child was afraid to say anything, believing someone had to know a lot more before having the right to speak. Then one day a huge noisy machine tore out all the trees along one stretch of the river, and began filling in the wetlands there. *Why are you doing this?* cried the child.

*To make room for a new restaurant,* came the answer.

***BUT WHAT ABOUT THE RIVER?*** cried the child. *The river is more than water!*

From then on the child could not keep quiet. As if the voice of the river herself were speaking, the words *But what about the river? What about the river?* tumbled, whispered, or sighed their way from the child's lips. It seemed as if no one would listen. At last, the child sat on an old cottonwood stump and wept without stopping. Night came, and passed, and then the sun rose bringing a new day, and still the child wept. A grown-up who happened to walk past stopped and asked what was wrong. The child looked up hopelessly and with a voice hoarse from crying said, *What about the river?* At first the grown-up did not understand, and looked around at the construction site. Then, slowly, as if the rising sun shed light on the issue, the grown-up's eyes opened wide.

*Oh. I see,* said the grown-up. *What ABOUT the river?* Then the grown-up sat on the stump beside the child and began to weep.

No one knows how it happened, but as the day passed more and more humans joined the child and the grown-up. Each time someone new arrived, a weeping voice would say, *What about the river?* There were even construction workers in the crowd.

No one, not even Grandmother knows how this story ends, because it is still being written. We do know that one small voice asking from the heart, *What about the river?* awakens other hearts. This could make the difference.