



As I sped over the bridge one brisk winter morning, the sun barely peeking over the crest of a hill in front of me, the familiar sound of rushing water found its way to my ears. I looked to the left and noticed the dam off in the distance, framed on either side by mountains blanketed in a fresh snowfall. The river snaked its way toward me, its calm surface an inverted painting of silver sky and charcoal gray clouds above. A million memories surrounded me, rushing with such overwhelming speed that they nearly took my breath away. Time and tide have altered so much of the landscape here at this place, and yet so much of it remains the same, as it perhaps has for centuries.

At 41 now, in my mind's eye I was transported to a distant season of life, a much younger time when I began to set out, to chart my own path. This stretch of river was the backdrop for what was even now one of the most formative periods in my life.

In the early 2000s, my friends and I found ourselves in this place between two mountainous seasons of life. No longer boys and not yet fully men, we experienced a kind of freedom in that moment that is unrivaled by anything I've ever known before or since. Descending down and finally completely off of the mountain of our childhood and adolescent dependence upon our parents, we stared straight ahead at the looming, treacherous mountain of adulthood and its manifold responsibilities, stresses, and challenges. Beyond ready to be out from under the rule and authority of our fathers, we were not quite prepared to embrace the challenge and burden of becoming men.

For a couple of years - a heartbeat really, a blip, a flash of light - we found ourselves standing in the thin valley where those mountains intersected, completely free and yet still somehow protected from the most dangerous storms life could offer. In the silver serpentine ribbon river of time that ran between these mountains, I felt fully alive, fully free. For the first and perhaps the only time, I lived my life without a care in the world. It was a season of transition, of changing. Of leaving behind who you once were and becoming who you one day will be. All these years later, as I reflect on that time of my life, I realize that it was shaped and defined most notably by the relationships formed during the countless hours my friends and I spent knee-deep in the cold, flowing water of the upper James River, surrounded on all sides by nature with the sun warm on our backs, catching smallmouth bass in a seemingly endless supply.