

The angst and joy of autumn

A personal essay by Eric Grant

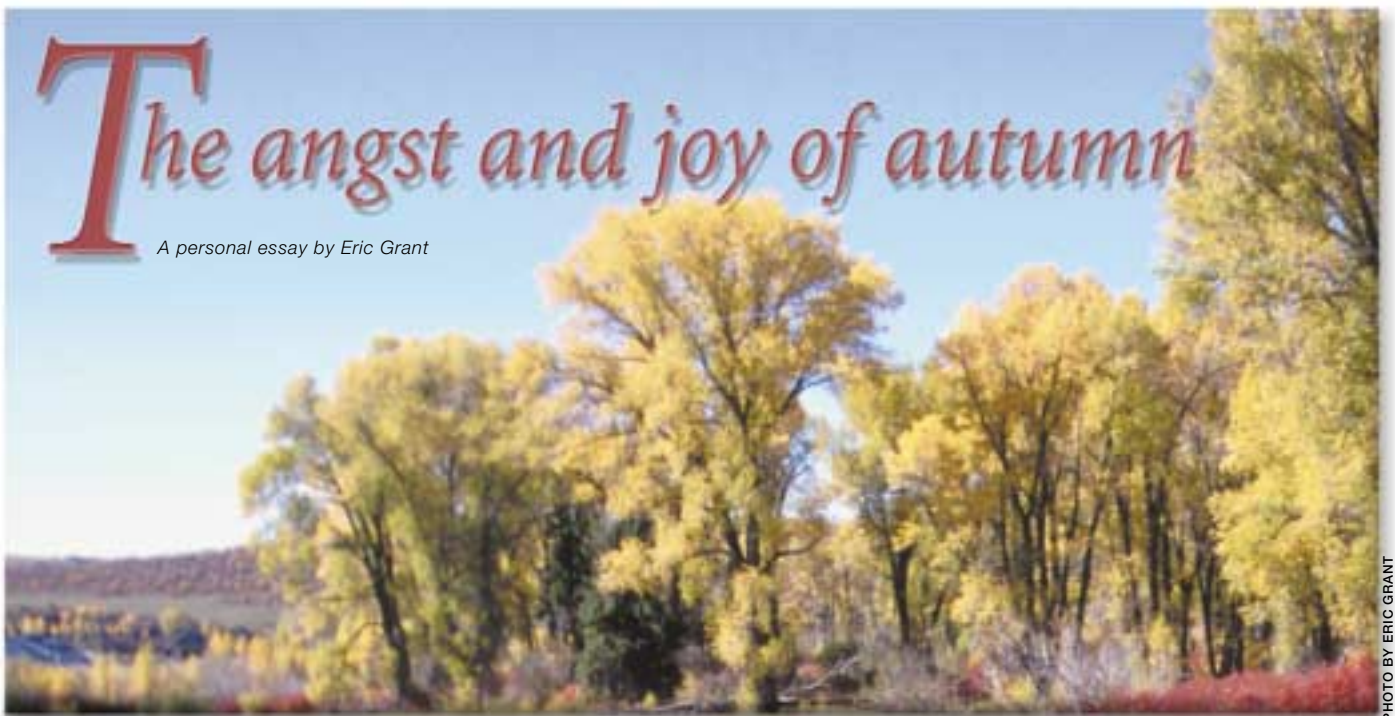


PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT

THAT WAS THE END OF IT.

The last hay bale of summer slowly crept its way to the top of the elevator, where my cousin Kent popped it with a hay hook and placed it at his feet. It represented the culmination of an entire summer's worth of work, summed up in 65 pounds (lb.) of orchard grass, timothy and clover tightly bound with twine.

We had worked together for nearly a week to stack it tightly beneath the roof of this shed, and now our task was done.

Kent's brother Bert, who had spent most of the day loading bales onto the elevator at the bottom of the stack, reached for the throttle of the old John Deere and shut it down for good. The tractor's rhythmic "pop-pop-poppity-pop-pop" and the elevator's squeak and clamor gave way to silence.

We paused for a moment to scan the hay field. None of us had noticed how the sky had shifted from summer's pale hues to early autumn's deep blue or how the shadows of the hay shed now reached farther into the field than any of us cared to acknowledge.

Fall's intensity

Fall had begun, and I wasn't prepared to accept it. The task of putting up hay had preoccupied my days, and it seemed something that would not end. But now, with the last of the bales stacked and stored, there seemed little to hold off the cold, dark seasons to come, and summer's sun-drenched days had suddenly shifted from presence to memory.

Even today, there is angst for me in autumn. I tell my friends that fall is my favorite season, but there is contradiction in this statement. Few things can match spring's scent of freshly bloomed lilacs or the return of redwing blackbirds or that first afternoon in May when warmth returns to the mountain valleys where I live.

Yet there is an edge and desperation to fall's spectacle, too — a strange, fleeting beauty that ends as soon as it begins. In the evenings, I drive a few miles from home to listen to the elk bugle, their cries carrying across the valley and piercing the still of evening like a pin. There is also emptiness; the birds have all but gone, and the quaking leaves of aspen have all but fallen.

Near perfection

But if I were asked to rank my life's favorite days, ironically, most of them would be in September. I recall one in particular in 1988, the same year I returned to the ranch. I was operating a stackwagon at the Robbins Place, one of my grandpa's ranches, and it seemed the entire natural world around me had reached perfection.

The day was warm. The sky was clear and dry. I could see the finest details across the valley, and the grass beneath my tractor was still green and fresh, a contrast to the golden leaves of the cottonwood trees. I said to myself, "Remember this. This is the benchmark. This is the most beautiful day you'll ever see."

So I filed it in my memory, and

whenever a day comes along that might eclipse it, I hold them up together and make a comparison.

I had such a day last September, when my son, Ryan, and I piled into our car and drove the 40 miles or so up the Elk River Valley. We took our fishing poles, rubber boots, and every kind of lure, hook and bait imaginable.

As we rounded the first bend and got a glimpse of the river's sparkling waters, the possibilities seemed boundless. This was it. This was all there is. This was all that anyone could ever ask for.

I had spent much of my summer preparing Ryan for just such a day. I showed him how to tie a proper knot, how to select the right lures or bait, how to handle frustration when his hook would get snagged or a big fish would break his line.

He had learned a great deal. More than anything else, he had gained a love for the process of fishing, not just the act of catching. He spent many of his evenings poring over library books on fish, learning the differences between cutthroat trout and brookie, and dreaming of big browns in the deep, swirling holes.

On this afternoon, it all came to fruition. He tied his own knots, baited his own hooks, and waded into the cool waters confident, natural and poised. Without me. As I watched him cast across the stream, his line a silver streak backlit by sunlight, he placed his lure precisely where he had intended it to go.

The moment

It's a strange feeling watching your boy take his first steps into adulthood, and occasionally I catch glimpses of what kind of man he will be. Today, as he worked this river, it seemed a watershed moment in time, a pause along the continuum that marked a crossroads for me on a deeply personal level.

Much like seeing the onset of fall, there was trepidation for me in seeing this unfold. At once, it represented a culmination of all that I had wanted him to become, but it also marked an end of something else — something unrecoverable, something that had suddenly moved from presence to memory, something that I had encouraged and nurtured but now began to fear.

No longer did he need his dad to teach him fishing. He had moved beyond that and could do most of it for himself. He could fish alone in whatever waters he chose without my guidance and catch whatever he sought without my presence.

A storm rolled up the valley that afternoon, putting an early end to our fishing expedition. Apart from a small rainbow that I pulled from the stream, Ryan and I went home empty-handed. "That's OK," he said. "We still had a good time."

On our way home, we skirted the edges of hay fields and pastures, and I watched several ranchers scramble from their balers and stackwagons to the shelter of their pickups.

My thoughts returned to those long

afternoons with Kent and Bert up the Salt Creek Valley. I remembered the unshackled freedom of life on a ranch. I remembered the camaraderie of cousins. I remembered the hungry haying crew at lunchtime, eager to consume the piles of Grandma's mashed potatoes, roast beef and green beans. Jokingly, Grandpa would scold us: "Only one knee on the table at a time, boys."

Most of all, I remembered the scent of freshly mown alfalfa, the smell of dust and sweat, the fulfillment of an empty field and well-stacked hay, and the sadness of the end of summer.

It's like this in autumn, I thought to myself, as I glanced back at Ryan, asleep in the backseat, still a boy for a few more years. 