

Many of you know that I spent three days last week fly fishing on the San Juan River in New Mexico. I've been doing this annually with a friend for many years. The tickets for that trip were booked before the date for our auction was set, although I would like to have been both places. This is a reflection on that trip and on fly fishing. Am I enlightened? I'll get back to that.

When done properly, casting the fly is poetry in motion. Maybe this is why it has such a long and storied history in English literature. The first writing on this method of fishing dates back at least to 1496, when *The Treatyse on Fysshynge with an Angle* was published in *The Boke of Saint Albans*.ⁱ The book has been attributed to Dame Juliana Berners, the prioress of the Priory of St. Mary of Sopwell, near St. Albans in Hertfordshire, England.ⁱⁱ Note, a woman and a cleric wrote this early treatise on fly fishing. John Dennys, said to have been a fishing companion of the Bard, William Shakespeare, wrote a poetical treatise in 1613, *The Secrets of Angling*.ⁱⁱⁱ Probably the most famous of early English writing on fly fishing is Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler*.^{iv} We heard a quote from him in our readings. "As no man is born an artist, so no man (or woman) is born an angler."

What is fly fishing, for the fishing challenged among you? Fly fishing is a method of presenting a bug imitation, a so-called fly, to fish. Because the bug imitations weigh only a fraction of an ounce, a means of casting was devised in which the weight of the line casts the fly. Because this line is necessarily thick and heavy, the fly rides on the end of a leader attached to the line. The leader is a tapered piece of clear monofilament that is very thin and fragile toward the end. This is so the fish doesn't see that the fly is attached to a line. Not so long ago, leaders were made from gut, as were the strings on tennis rackets, and had to be pre-softened in water before use.

Classical fly fishing involved presenting a dry fly, an imitation meant to represent the adult form of an aquatic insect. These are fished on the surface of the water. Hundreds of years later some enterprising fly fishers who were also etymologists realized that there was lots going on under the water with the immature forms of these same insects. Nymph fishing involves presenting imitations of these immature bugs under the water surface. Remember this. Dry fly-surface. Nymph-underwater. It's critical to this cartoon I once saw. I don't recall the artist.

Picture a life raft at sea in a storm. Lightning flashes. Rain comes down in torrents. Waves tower over the little craft. Of the bedraggled survivors huddled in

the raft, one man stands. He is casting a fly rod. His friend yells to him: "For God's sake, man, at least switch to nymphs!"

Fly fishing involves two practices, both of which have been scientifically shown to be beneficial to our well being. The first of these is that it requires Zen-like concentration, a particular form of meditation. Some of us present today practice a sitting meditation weekly here in this sanctuary and are familiar with the benefits of practice. Others of us practice on our own, or wish we did, or are guilty that we do not. (This is not meant to be a guilt trip.) Benefits attributable to meditation include lowered blood pressure and more resiliency to stressful events. A quote, which I think originated with Tich Nhat Hanh, goes something like this: One should meditate 1 hour per day. If one is too busy to meditate, then one should meditate 2 hours per day.

I can easily tell if my mind has followed my body to the river to fish. Sometimes it takes awhile for my mind to catch up with my body. Until it does, I find I spend much of my time untangling snarls or trying to get my fly out of a tree. Remember what I said about poetry in motion? Without concentration, without being present in the moment, the poetry quickly turns into a mess. This can severely cut into my fishing time. A fishing guide once said to me, as far as he knew, no one had ever caught a trout when her fly wasn't on the water.

The other element that fly fishing adds that has been shown to be good for us is being in nature. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir were early advocates for being in nature, saying that it improved their mental health, although their stories were anecdotal. Modern research has confirmed the truth of their observations. "'We can see the changes in the brain,' said David Strayer, cognitive psychologist at the University of Utah," in an article published in USA Today.^v Research has shown that being in nature improves concentration and problem solving, reduces stress, and improves empathy and healing. One thing about trout--they are like canaries. If the water quality is not excellent, which means a pretty healthy ecosystem surrounding the stream, the trout die. So...if you are fishing for trout, you are very likely in a beautiful natural setting.

What fly fishing for trout usually does not involve is killing fish, for those of you who are wondering. Much of the time the trout we are fishing for are naturally breeding populations. There are far too many fishers and far too few natural trout waters left to take fish from these waters. The flies are barbless, so they are removed

without tearing the flesh. The nets we use to land fish are specially designed to not harm the fragile skin of the trout. The caught trout are handled minimally and quickly released once landed. If landed. There are no guarantees. My only exception to taking trout is when I am backpacking, when I will occasionally take a fish or two for the frying pan.

Fly fishing is not all about fishing. There is the sound of the riffles and rapids. The tug of the river on one's feet and legs. The osprey screaming overhead, hunting for those same trout. The red-winged blackbirds singing in the willows. The willow flycatcher darting out from its perch to snare one of those aquatic insects I am hoping to imitate with my fly. Quail calling from the bushes. The scream of the falcon, hunting those songbirds. A beaver swimming across the river in the light of dusk, slapping its tail and diving as it sees me. One of the most beautiful sunsets I have ever seen, over the ridge in a cloudy desert sky.

And it is not all about nature. I have spent many, many days on rivers with the same friend of more than 25 years. Over meals and in the evenings we tell fish stories of events long or recently passed. We talk about our lives and our families. We have each seen huge changes. This year, for the first time, we invited my 29-year old son to fish with us on the San Juan. (I taught all of my children how to fish and two of them to fly fish.) Here is how that invitation came about. On our trip last year, as we were grouching about the state of the world and growing older, I said to Ken that we needed an infusion of some younger energy. We needed to prepare to pass the torch. We agreed to invite our sons. While Ken's son was unable to make the trip, my son was able to joined us. At the end of the trip, I asked if he would do it again. He said yes!

Let me finish with two fish stories from my trip. Did you really think you were going to get out of here without a fish story? In one, things go nearly perfectly. In the other, they do not.

First the one that did not. Much as I would like to be, I am not always in a good head-space while I am fishing. My friend, my son, and I were about 20 yards apart, fishing a nice stretch of water that held big fish. Midges were coming off the water periodically. Every time they did, the fish would go crazy hitting our flies. The trouble was, they were just barely biting and almost every time would get off. After losing seven fish in a row, I was growing increasingly frustrated, and soon had a major snarl to contend with. I wasn't in the moment. I had to cut my line and retie

everything. I resumed casting and soon hooked a really big fish. And she didn't get off immediately. She seemed to be well hooked. I worked her out of the main current into some shallows where I could land her. But I blew it and she darted back out into the channel. Before I could bring her in again, she was off. I said "darn."

Contrast this with the previous day. Rather than wading, my son and I were in a drift boat with a guide. We were fishing with nymphs, as one usually does on the San Juan, and our indicators were drifting nicely. An indicator is a glorified name for a bobber, because, you know, one doesn't use bobbers while fly fishing. Bobbers are used by people who fish with worms. Anyway, my indicator drift changed almost imperceptibly. Even the guide didn't see it and guides see everything. I raised my rod to set the hook, just in case. I had a fish. Years of experience came into play in the few minutes it took to me get the 18-inch rainbow trout to the net. Then these words from the guide: "That was really a Zen set on that strike. You played it beautifully. It's nice to see an expert in action. I don't think I would have done anything differently." This was high praise from a guide, the Master. It was good that he didn't see my un-Zen-like shenanigans the next morning. Grasshopper had thought he had reached enlightenment, but it was only a glimpse.

Fly fishing is just one of my spiritual practices, one that I engage with not often enough. Daily walks with my dog, on which I take binoculars to bird watch, are much more the bread and butter of my spiritual practice. As is my daily sitting meditation.

What spiritual practice do you have that takes you into a meditative space? What do you do that takes you into nature? How do you connect and reconnect with your friends. Whether you believe the benefits from meditation and nature derive from the hard wiring of our brains over tens of thousands of years, or whether it comes from a connection to creation and the Creator, doesn't really matter. Maybe it is both/and. What matters is the regular practice.

May it be so.

ⁱ Accessed 4/28/2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fly_fishing#Origins

ⁱⁱ Accessed 4/28/2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juliana_Berners

ⁱⁱⁱ Accessed 4/28/2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fly_fishing#Origins

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Accessed 4/28/2017 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/nation-now/2016/11/27/why-parks-matter-nature-improves-your-brain/94521962/>