

Fly Fishing

I just love fly fishing. Getting down in the water and matching wits with a dumb trout who almost always wins the contest. Watching the little bugs float by on their way to oblivion. Tangling my line and spending an hour untying all the knots. Slipping on a rock and taking a tumble dangerous at my age. Feeling my old knees creak in the cold water on an early April morning when the fish are fast asleep and there's not a chance of catching one. But here I am anyway. At peace in the glory of the early day and in the company of God and the ghosts of dead fishermen. And hopefully my guardian angel; I'm convinced she is a fine looking woman....cute, capable and skilled in heroic water rescues.

I wasn't always a fly fisherman. I used to have a job. No, of course we're not all unemployed, but many of us are retired. And certainly most of us who fish on weekday mornings are jobless, for one reason or another. As for myself, shortly before retirement I took up fly fishing to assist the transition. Every time I ask myself how the transition is going, I find it has grown, somehow, broader and deeper. And maybe a tad more confusing.

Toward the end of my career, I had a sense there was something more

important to do in life than work, but I was damned if I knew what it might be. Forty years hard at the task of making money made me the best worker I ever met. I did it so well I forgot how to do anything else. So one day I decided to hand in my retirement papers, buy a fly rod and go stand in the creek for a while. Cool my heels, so to speak literally. I hadn't played in the water since I was eleven. I'd let my inner child and my guardian angel sort it all out.

I drive up here to the West Canada Creek in the southern foothills of the Adirondack Mountains near Utica a few times each year. Fishing where I grew up always evokes a sweet nostalgia. I get to thinking about who I wanted to be back then. I well remember a seminal moment at age 13 in a similar setting on a crisp blue-sky day in September when the Holy Ghost of Puberty descended upon me and baptized me with the absolutely thrilling realization I was a Man! Not a sexual stirring, it was rather a clap of revelation that I was capable, competent and the world lay before me. I could do anything I wanted. Eventually I realized consequences would be included. When I sometimes ask both men and women if they remember a similar awakening at that age, many do.

Fly fishing is unlike the bait-casting we did as kids when we tied a worm and a weight to the end of a fishing line and flung it out over the water with a rod and reel from Sears. In fly fishing, the bait is a tiny almost weightless fake aquatic fly and to get it out on the water one has to throw the line rather than the bait. The fisherman lets out 20 feet or so of relatively heavy fly line and whips it up into the air in a graceful arc, casting it out over the stream with the fly

following behind until the line unfolds and the fly drops gently on the water. Imitation flies, often named after their inventors, are made from tiny feathers and animal fur wrapped artfully and often beautifully around the hook. To a hungry trout they look good enough to eat.

There is something about studying or “reading” the water and the rocks and the shadows and riffles to predict where the fish may lie. Actually catching one, while always a thrill, becomes less and less the goal. A perfect cast underneath a tree limb and control of the line so the fly floats to exactly where you want it with just the right drift brings more satisfaction than the taste of a pan-fried trout. And honestly, I’d rather go to McDonalds for a fish sandwich.



Fishing can be a social experience. I don’t hang around a lodge or bar and tell fishing stories, but meeting a fellow old codger on the stream usually brings out the conversationalist in each of us. “Any luck?” I ask. “Two browns, 8 and 14.” he says, meaning inches. “On what ?” (type of fly) “Hendrickson. You ? ” (catch any fish?) “Nope.” “Yup.” “Yup.”

-Codgers exit opposite directions.-

Like any adult hobby, we can make it complicated. So we have dry fly fishing, wet fly fishing, nymphing, streamers, terrestrials, etc., etc. But simply

put, dry flies float, wet ones don’t. Nymphs bounce along the bottom of the stream or rush along in the current. Fish sit just outside the main current, conserving their energy, waiting for the food to pass their way. They lie in the seam between the faster current and slack water. Some fish are more aggressive and so they grab more food, gaining in size and prowess. Then they can elbow their way to the head of the line and get even more. Just like some folks I used to work with. Food intake matters much more than age in determining the size of a fish. I’ve seen trout two or three times the size of their siblings of the same age. There’s a word in my Biology book for this, but I’m too lazy to look it up.

In fact, I’m getting too lazy to do much of anything “useful” anymore. I do like to play. Oh sure, there is my volunteer work. I believe in giving back. And I now have the time to help my family more. But when I stand in this creek waving a stick, pondering the world and my place in it, I realize the most important job for me these days is to just be here. For a while, anyway. The world lies before me as it did when I was 13, but no longer does it beckon me to work my will on it.

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The Press at Windswept Farm



Saugerties, NY

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