

Fly Fishing as Spiritual Practice

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When I was a child, I slipped in a silent canoe down quiet rivers, looking out for the wildlife visible only to those who merge with the natural world. Paddling was as silent as possible, and in some places it was better not to paddle at all.

I learned at an early age to respect the silent fly-fishers, who often had traveled arduously by land to arrive at those secret still pools where trout live their mysterious lives. Without speaking, my father (in the canoe's stern) steered wide around the fishing line that drifted in the water, and equally silently, the fly-fisher would nod as we slid by.

Once I asked my father, "Why do they fish? They just stand there all day." My father's answer was oblique. "I respect them," he said. "They appreciate the natural world, and they don't leave trash behind."

In my father's moral universe, leaving trash behind was the ultimate act of disrespect—for the planet, and for other people who loved and appreciated the planet.

Later in life, after I was long grown, my father took an interest in fly-fishing. He gathered books and videos, pondered the options, and eventually launched himself into actual practice. He didn't talk about it much. When I asked him whether he liked it, he took a moment to answer. "It's difficult to do well," he said, "but that doesn't matter so much. It gets you out there. It's not about catching fish."

One British angler called fly-fishing "the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope."²

A few years ago I fell into an opportunity to learn fly-fishing without any effort or commitment. My instructor was an elderly man who demonstrated casting with fluid grace. The line floated on the air, seeming at times independent of the motion of the rod. Part of the line might be forward while another part was behind. There were moments when the line itself seemed motionless, the way a leaf might seem motionless while drifting on a stream.

I was immediately fascinated.

A book on fly-casting from 1885 advises that "the motion of the rod through the air should be almost, or quite noiseless." The writer goes on: "Nothing offends the angler's ear more than the

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² John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir.

‘swish’ of a fly-rod. It is like a false note to an educated musical ear. It indicates a degree of force ... appropriate to the end in view.”³

This was my first lesson, that grace, not force, was required.

I have not yet taken up fly-fishing either as a spiritual practice or as occasional recreation, but in those hours of basic instruction I came to understand why those silent fly-fishers of my youth had made their way to the river.

Eric Eisenkramer, a man who calls himself the “fly-fishing rabbi,” says:

“Even if we do not catch a fish, there is something magical about spending the afternoon casting. When we wave our fly fishing rods perfectly, the line loops backwards and forwards in rhythm. The dry fly drops ever so softly on the other side of the river, in front of a large pool filled with trout. A great cast can be magical and artistic, creating beautiful loops and twists of line in the air.”⁴

At least one devoted fly-fisher of the 19th century kept a fishing diary. The entry from April 1, 1878 reads:

“Opening day.... Managed to fall into the Ogden brook—in fact went in without the slightest difficulty amid applause from the bank; discovered from my involuntary plunge that the water is just as wet as last year, and if memory serves, a trifle colder. Reached home in the evening, cold, wet, tired, and hungry. Nevertheless, had a most glorious time.”⁵

I understand this sentiment from spending time not *in* the canoe but *under* it. “Had a most glorious time.”

There is a young fly-fisher named Norman Maktima, who might be considered the Tiger Woods of fly-fishing. Norman is in his late 20s and his Native American heritage is Hopi and Pueblo. His father, Duane, is an artist who works in jewelry design and who practices Laguna Pueblo religious traditions. Duane has founded a nonprofit organization to help

³ “But remember, the back cast is the foundation, and that unless it is solid the superstructure will be rickety. Remember also that the motion of the rod through the air should be almost, or quite noiseless. Nothing offends the angler’s ear more than the “swish” of a fly-rod. It is like a false note to an educated musical ear. It indicates a degree of force about as appropriate to the end in view, as a burglar’s jimmy to opening a watch. This should never be, except possibly when casting directly against the wind or for distance only.”—Henry P. Wells, *Fly-Rods and Fly-Tackle* (1885).

⁴ <http://theflyfishingrabbi.blogspot.com/2008/06/magic-fly-fishing-wand.html>.

⁵ A. Nelson Cheney: “April 1, 1878—opening day.... Managed to fall into the Ogden brook—in fact went in without the slightest difficulty amid applause from the bank; discovered from my involuntary plunge that the water is just as wet as last year, and if memory serves, a trifle colder. Reached home in the evening, cold, wet, tired, and hungry. Nevertheless, had a most glorious time.”

emerging Native artists.⁶ When Norman was seven years old, Duane began taking him fly-fishing on the Pecos River near Santa Fe.

When Norman was 19 he took home a gold medal in the Junior Fly Fishing World Championships in Wales. Two years later he became the youngest member of Team USA in the World Fly Fishing Championships. Now, at age 29, he's based in Santa Fe as a guide at High Desert Angler, and is working on plans for sustainable fishery management on Native reservations.⁷

In the World Fly-Fishing Championships, judging is based on the number and weight of fish caught over five days, divided between three rivers and three lakes. Norman Maktima considers "the ability to 'read the water' in connection with normal fish behavior" to be the single most important element.⁸

Normal fish behavior.

This young man has spent a lot of time in the presence of fish. He says: "There are a lot of points to consider when you look at the water. Is it reflecting light, or is there cloud cover? What about wind direction and speed? Are there any large rocks or boulders in the water? And you need to think about the eating habits of the fish."

"You need to have a good idea of where the fish might possibly be," Norman continues. "If you cast your fly into areas where fish don't normally hang out, you aren't going to catch anything. If you know where the fish might be holding, you're almost guaranteed of catching something."

Casting only comes into play once the fly-fisher locates a likely spot for fish. "You still need to get your fly to the right spot, and it might take a long cast to get it there," Norman says. "You also need to get the fly to the right spot in the right way, so that the fly is presented to the fish in the same way that takes place in nature." Although a competition is won by whoever catches the most fish, to develop these skills requires a kind of concentration and attentiveness that is akin to mindfulness practice. There is a meditative quality to the practice of fly-fishing.

This meditative peacefulness comes not only from the rhythm of casting but from the still pool of being in the moment. The "fly-fishing rabbi" says: "[W]hen I am waist deep in cold water, and

⁶ George Joe, "Spirituality and Success: The Life and Art of Duane Makima," (2005) on the website *RezBiz, Business News for Today's Native American*, www.rez-biz.com/html_past/i8_maktima.htm.

⁷ outside.away.com/.../200212/atomic_youth_6.html.

⁸ Dave Holden, "America's Best Young Fly Fisherman? Cast Your Eyes at Norman Maktima," Fly Fishing Team USA press release (June 30, 2001), <http://www.flyfishingteamusa.com/TeamUSANews/article008.pdf>. Other quotes on this page are from the same source.

I am tying a new fly on my line, and I am not moving, and I am not talking, and all I hear are the sounds of the bugs and the flowing river, then I feel at peace with all that is around me.”⁹

All forms of spiritual practice share one fundamental quality: they bring upon the practitioner a sense of peace. This peace does not come from mastery of the practice; a focus on mastery (while it can be very interesting) is counter-productive. I think of it as simply putting ourselves in the way of the world, the Tao of Life. Not the busy, mechanical, technological world, but the natural world of which we are a part, the Earth that was here before we came and, I hope, will be here after we are long gone.

In the warm spring sunshine, gardeners dig their fingers into the soil. Beach-walkers inhale the salt air and their steps match the rhythm of the ocean. Bird-watchers slide kayaks quietly through reeds that whisper and shiver in the early-morning air. People who stand on Altar Rock at dawn, or sunset, or in the full bright light of day allow the moment to pool around them. People who hang prayer flags feel the wind that carries wishes of well-being out into the world. People who pray pause in a moment of connection with something beyond themselves. People who meditate, people who dance, people who sing, people who move in the graceful poetry of Tai Chi, all re-connect with currents of Life that are outside human control.

Fly-fishing—anything at all—might be taken up as a form of recreation. But often there is a moment when whatever it is becomes more than simple fun. Even the briefest attention to the moment is a form of spiritual practice: “Earth teach me.”¹⁰ We have a great and loving teacher, if we will simply pause and listen. Whether we “listen to the stream flowing, or take a moment to notice the sky or the deep green of the leaves, we are witnessing the most profound of miracles.”¹¹

Fly-fishing, as spiritual practice, is the act of listening to the Earth and hearing the Trustworthy that is at the center of the universe.

⁹ <http://theflyfishingrabbi.blogspot.com/2007/02/fly-fishing-and-harmony-harmony-is-when.html>.

¹⁰ A phrase from the Native American spiritual tradition of the Ute people.

¹¹ <http://theflyfishingrabbi.blogspot.com/2008/06/magic-fly-fishing-wand.html>.