

Fly Fishing, Adult Development, and a Meaningful Life

“At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.”

-Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

When I was a boy I rose ahead of the sun to catch the most and the biggest fish. It worked some of the time. As I grew older, I began to replace childhood dreams with adult obligations, and it took me a long time to understand that the former was a far better guide for a meaningful life. I learned that, and much more, from fly fishing. Dreams, and now I also know, hope and faith, rise with the sun. They also fade, especially during unsettling times as things change, and as once reliable, comfortable beliefs no longer justify or protect as they did before. But dreams, hope, and faith never really disappear. You just have to look up occasionally. And you have to look back, look in, and look down, to follow the paths of life stories that guide the way.

At childhood, the sunrise of my life, everything really *was* luminous, but as an adult it all became unclear. I will never fully understand why, but thanks to the lessons of fly fishing, on and off the stream, I can accept and even welcome this predicament. In time, I learned to love the child I left behind, the adult I've become, and everything else I've lost and reclaimed along the way. This essay is an expression of what I've discovered through the lens of fly fishing. Hopefully, it also can serve others as a roadmap for living a meaningful and rewarding adult life, one that uses fly fishing and its inspirational literature as guideposts for the journey.

A Meaningful Life

What is a “meaningful” life? For starters, it is *simply complex*, the quintessential paradox that represents and reconciles all of those seemingly clashing forces we face regularly—joy and grief, clarity and confusion, private and public, life and death, to name a few. Fundamentally, that’s what *A River Runs Through It* teaches us, that a meaningful life is “luminous but not clear.” It’s the story’s most profound and useful gift. When we’re able to receive and understand this lesson as the best we can do, we will know how *simply complex* it really is.

How do we get there? What enables us to understand and live peacefully with such tangled dilemmas and paradoxes? For starters, I lean on a few thinkers whose frameworks for a meaningful life serve me well precisely because they articulate, so “simply” and clearly, the utterly complex path to a meaningful life. In his recent book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, David Brooks, author and columnist for The New York Times, describes four commitments that engage a life of meaning and purpose, commitments to: a spouse and family; a vocation; a philosophy or faith; and a community. Brooks writes about two mountains. “The first mountain is the individualist worldview, which puts the desires of the ego at the center.” This is a mountain we climb for professional achievement, acquisition, “moving up.” But the second mountain is a worldview that puts relations—with a loved one, others, a community—at the center, allowing us to pursue those four commitments with greater clarity and authenticity. Brooks affirms that getting there and fulfilling those commitments requires contact with the deepest recesses of the heart and soul, and a transformation from “hyper-individualism” to a “relationalist worldview.”

I’m equally moved by the same themes expressed in Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson*. A true story about Albom’s

life-changing experience with his eccentric and wise college professor Morrie Schwartz, who is dying from ALS, *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a tutorial on the simply complex subject of a meaningful life fraught with emotional obstacles and demons. As Morrie explains to Mitch, “So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.” Reverberations of David Brooks and the trek on the “second mountain” of life. It’s *simple* (italics added), says Morrie: “Accept who you are; and revel in it.”

In his latest book, *Living and Examined Life: Wisdom for the Second Half of the Journey*, Jungian analyst James Hollis offers another compelling expression of a meaningful life. The first half of our life, according to Hollis, is spent reacting to and running from rules and expectations from family and culture. But the “examined life,” a phrase rooted in Socrates, asks what my life is *really* about based on an affirmation of all that is truly my own soul. Ultimately, Hollis asks each of us to nakedly consider if the paths we choose make us “larger or smaller.” At the outset he plainly affirms how *simply complex* it is to live such a life. “I offer this book ... in the hope that it will be helpful to each reader in the conduct of his or her life and bring a greater sense of purpose and personal permission to be, in the end, who he or she is. All that sounds so simple, but in fact it is very difficult.”

Parker Palmer, an inspiring lifelong educator, summarizes the meaningful life in the title of his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. He adapts an old Quaker saying—“let your life speak”—to convey how “simply” ambiguous and complex it is to search for true meaning and authenticity. Finding true self and vocation, according to Palmer, is not a

willful act. “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.” And as Palmer reminds us, we also must be willing to listen to things about our lives that we don’t want to hear—the limits, liabilities, trespasses, and shadows—in order to discover an authentic self and true meaning.

To be clear, behind each of these declarations of a meaningful life is a deep well of experience, substantiated evidence, and a wide range of information from multiple disciplines. There is nothing “simple” or easy about seeking a meaningful life or describing what it is. But David Brooks, Morrie Schwartz, James Hollis, and Parker Palmer display that rare ability to shift what’s exceedingly complicated and intimidating to an inviting space that all of us, despite our differences, can access and relate to. There is wisdom in transposing something so complex to its most basic elements, and there is profound “simplicity” and instructiveness in the common ground it creates.

Sometimes, like Mitch Albom who received lessons on living from his dying teacher, we catch a glimpse of this in our earlier years. Most of us, however, draw closer to wisdom during the second half of life as we rethink externally imposed assumptions and norms, solidify our own values and goals, find or renew commitment to others, and create a more authentic story about our larger purpose. That’s when we really begin to successfully navigate the dilemmas and paradoxes of simply being human. Richard Rohr, in *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, captures this sublimely. “This new coherence, a unified field inclusive of the paradoxes, is precisely what gradually characterizes a second-half-of-life person. It feels like a

return to simplicity after having learned from all the complexity.... We need to hold together all of the stages of life, and for some strange, wonderful reason, it all become quite “simple” as we approach our later years.” Integration and simplicity—and the wisdom, courage, and faith to see this. When all is said and done, that’s the enduring lesson of Norman Maclean’s treasured novella: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” If we’re wise enough, and lucky, we may discover, what makes our life so *simply complex*, and in that awakening, what makes it truly meaningful.

Adult Development

An examination of the meaningful life lies at the heart of the field of adult development. My passion for all things fly fishing, especially as a signpost for a meaningful life, is informed by an equally enthusiastic, thirty-year career in continuing education, adult learning, and adult development. As teacher, advisor, and dean, I’ve designed and delivered a wide range of programs and services for adult learners using a *developmental* framework that studies normal human thought, emotion, and behavior over time; how these change during life transitions, anticipated or not, joyful or stressful; and how they are informed by interactions with the social environment. A developmental approach considers how we learn, grow, and change throughout the entire life cycle; how we understand ourselves and others; how we make meaning, especially during disorienting crises that disrupt and shape our lives; how we adapt to roles and tasks of adulthood; how we contribute to the spaces where we work and live; and how, on a daily basis, we live according to the principles and elements of character that matter most.

While there are many different models of adult development, I lean heavily on two that are widely accepted and that are adaptable to a range of contexts including this essay. Erik

Erikson's psychosocial model of development, first circulated in the late 1950s, remains, at its core, influential today. Erikson identified eight stages or crises of development throughout the life span that represent the uneven interaction—sometimes smooth, sometimes turbulent—between the normal psychological growth of an individual and the demands of society. These stages, while generally sequential and aligned with biological age, also overlap and are subject to continuous reassessment. Erikson's contributions comprise voluminous research and writing, but given the focus of this essay, I want to highlight the words he uses to characterize the positive outcomes of the eight stages of psychosocial development: trust; autonomy; initiative; industry; identity; intimacy; generativity; and integrity. These outcomes or goals, I suggest, are developmental expressions of the meaningful life that David Brooks, Morrie Schwartz, James Hollis, and Parker Palmer have described so eloquently. They are, developmentally speaking, the key ingredients of a mature, adult life of commitment and purpose; the touchstones for a meaningful life.

Moreover, Erikson's psychosocial stages of development represent the topics that fly fishing can help us address as we use it to inform and evaluate our personal and professional lives. I believe we can use reflections from fly fishing to help us explore, for example, how well we trust ourselves and others, how our choices have made us more autonomous and independent, how industrious and productive we are in our work lives, how comfortable we are in our different roles and interactions with others, how we give back to others and society, and ultimately, who we really are and want to become. All of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development that collectively define a meaningful life in adulthood may be explored through the experience and reflections of fly fishing.

Robert Kegan's theory of adult development, published in the early 1980s, also helps to illuminate the intersections of fly fishing and the meaningful life. Becoming an adult, according to Kegan, involves transitioning to higher stages of development that represent increasingly mature ways of understanding ourselves and the world, from the "socialized mind" to the "self-authoring mind," and finally to the "self-transforming mind:" the adult's passage from living primarily in reaction to others' and society's norms; to claiming ownership and responsibility for one's beliefs and actions; to cultivating the ability to integrate self-awareness and external perspectives, and simultaneously holding multiple and contradictory views. Perhaps the most important component of Kegan's theory is the movement in adulthood from subject to object, from unquestioned beliefs and assumptions that we don't control or even think about, to those which we can internalize, assimilate, and act on more objectively. The subject-object shift in adulthood acts as both mirror and conscience, like the waters of a trout stream, enabling us to detach and reflect, to look at ourselves honestly and deeply, to make decisions more freely, and ultimately, to author the life story we really want.

A developmental framework for navigating adulthood, with Erikson and Kegan as the foundation, reveals the larger meaning and application of fly fishing to our personal and work lives. The full experience of fly fishing on and off the stream, including its literature, lessons, and reflections, parallels a family of developmental markers for a meaningful adult life that can be summarized as follows:

- Motivation and skills for lifelong learning, especially during transitions, that includes knowledge acquisition and critical reflection about ourselves, others, and institutions that shape our lives.
- Higher order, critical thinking that moves us from dualistic assessment to more complex analysis based on contextual understanding and ability to challenge assumptions and to consider multiple, relative, and competing perspectives.

- Capacity for understanding and navigating paradox, the tension of opposites between, for example, private and public, head and heart, life and death.
- Honest exploration of identity. Who am I? Where am I going? How do I get there? What's my vocation, calling, and larger purpose, and how is that evident in my work and career?
- Pursuit of intimacy. How do I interact with others? How do I demonstrate commitment, passion, and love? How satisfied and successful am I in personal and professional roles?
- Commitment to generativity. What do I contribute to others and society? How do I give back?
- Willingness and ability to seek individuation. How do I differentiate myself from others while remaining part of society? How is my complete, authentic psyche an integrated product of mind and soul, of things known and unknown?
- Mindset and skills for adaptation and resilience in multiple environments that are subject to change, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and volatility.
- Willingness to explore the unknown and expose, intellectually and emotionally, vulnerability, disappointment, shame, loss, failure, and fear.
- Ability to reframe change and the unknown as opportunity for growth, hope, courage, and renewal.
- Recognition and use of a deep pool of resources—conventional and unconventional, past and present, conscious and unconscious, individual and collective—to make meaning of our lives and create a life story about our overall purpose.
- Living from the head and the heart, using critical thinking and empathy, and adopting a genuine commitment to fairness, justice, and equality in interactions with individuals and organizations.
- Building capacity for principled leadership, beginning with self-leadership.

Fly Fishing and Adult Development

Fly fishing helps us get there. It teaches and reminds us what it means to be an adult.

Ted Leeson, angler and author, says it plainly in *The Habit of Rivers: Reflections on Trout*

Streams and Fly Fishing: “I don’t think I’m stretching the matter at all to say that given half a chance, a trout stream can make you a better person.” Leeson’s book joins Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, and so many other celebrated stories from the stream that illustrate how fly fishing can help you define purpose, navigate change, clarify roles and relationships, and solve problems in your personal and work life. Guided by lessons and reflections from some of fly fishing’s most revered literature, and by your own experience on the stream, you can learn to “read the water” of your own life for deeper meaning, face difficult questions and challenges, and create the life story you really want. In short, fly fishing can help you become that “better person.” The experience and reflection of fly fishing builds developmental capacity for:

- Understanding and using essential skills and attributes for living, working, and leadership such as communication, trust, critical thinking, collaboration, conflict management, resilience, and agility.
- Sharpening insight, self-awareness, and self-understanding for more rewarding personal and professional growth.
- Forming and sustaining trusting, intimate relationships on many different levels.
- Highlighting the beauty and instructiveness of the natural world and its ecosystem, which stimulates reflection, concentration, and integration of human experience and the physical world.
- Posing difficult questions and exposing vulnerabilities in relation to our personal and work lives.
- Revealing the shortcomings and shadows in our lives that require acceptance, understanding, and enlightenment.
- Illuminating and reframing confusion, uncertainty, vulnerability, complexity, disappointment, failure, and loss.
- Blending experience and reflection to produce adaptable and practical learning.
- Generating the insight, humility, and courage to change and heal, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

- Constructing a safe, comfortable, and inviting space for solitude, honest reflection, and conversation.
- Inspiring hope and faith, in ourselves, in others, in the work we do, and in the larger causes we stand for.

All of these features reflect the theories and contributions of Erik Erikson and Robert Kegan, and they inform key principles and markers of adult development noted earlier. They are gifts from the stream that inspire and reinforce the meaningful life described by David Brooks, Morrie Schwartz, James Hollis, and Parker Palmer—an authentic life of commitment, connection, purpose, and soul.

A River Runs Through It: Life's Paradox and Haunting Questions

There are many stories from the stream that teach us to read the waters of our lives and help us explore these complex and demanding developmental themes and questions. Norman Maclean ended *A River Runs Through It* with a short, mystifying sentence: “I am haunted by waters.” But this ending is really a beginning, an invitation to face, with deeper self-understanding, the simultaneous elegance and fear of being human. *A River Runs Through It* is an enduring story about a family’s love and loss, and the imperfect faith and understanding to bear the splendor and weight of both. It is a memorable narrative about life’s contradictions such as reason and faith, head and heart, light and dark, hope and despair, life and death, that ultimately define the paradox of the human condition and the gray spaces of complexity, uncertainty, and volatility where most of us live and work. The central tenet of *A River Runs Through It* and, I suggest, purposeful adult life, is the capacity and faith to live and work in those gray spaces where, as Maclean writes, “everything is luminous but not clear.” Most likely, this is your own story as well.

A River Runs Through It also teaches that these unsettling spaces are more enriching than crippling because ultimately they can produce a more thoughtful, compassionate, and productive life. While the waters of a trout stream—our gray spaces—are haunting, just as important, they also are healing. Living and working there can foster deeper, critical, creative thinking and problem solving. In our gray spaces we can reframe disparate perspectives and reimagine conflicts as opportunities for reconciliation and harmony. We can rewrite each of our complicated and conflicted narratives, as Maclean did, as stories of understanding, acceptance, and hope. We can open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts to others, at home, at work, in our local communities and beyond. The waters of a trout stream, the gray spaces of our lives that both challenge and inspire us, can disclose common ground and shared human needs, and encourage civil communication among people who seem irreparably divided. Overall, learning to live and work there will bring greater value and satisfaction to our personal, professional, and civic roles.

“...it is not fly fishing if you’re not looking for answers to questions,” wrote Maclean in *A River Runs Through It*. I wrote this essay, which includes a sample of fly fishing literature, to examine how these questions that configure the normal course of adulthood are posed and resolved by fly fishing and some of its most revered writers. How are their questions and narratives your own? Much like the haunting questions that Norman Maclean posed in his story about the parallel journeys of fishing and life, these are some of the difficult questions we all confront:

- What is your calling?
- Why do the people and things we care most about allude us the most?
- Why do we dwell more on what divides us than what we have in common?
- Why do we hurt the ones we love?
- Why do we dislike the people and ideas we understand least?
- What do we abandon and collect as we develop through adulthood?
- What frightens us about ourselves and others, and why do we avoid rather than face it?

- Why is it so difficult to acknowledge our mistakes, and to ask for and receive help?
- What roles do faith, hope, and courage play in our personal and professional lives?
- What larger, unknown, or unconscious forces may influence our lives?
- How does our thinking and behavior reinforce and enable bad habits?
- How is change both intimidating and liberating?
- Why do we strive for perfection and control?
- How do we navigate the boundaries and responsibilities of our private and social lives?

If fly fishing is about much more than catching fish, then I suggest we're not really living completely unless we're wading and casting in waters that hold these questions, and then dipping below the surface into our souls for answers. These questions, like *A River Runs Through It*, pose challenges about adult development, and they all, one way or another, ask about a meaningful life.

A Storied Approach

This also is an essay about stories and storytelling, especially in relation to fly fishing, as a powerful framework for understanding critically and communicating honestly what it means to be an adult, and more, to be human. Normal, healthy adults, as we grow and change, have the interest and ability to use stories to describe and explain motivation and behavior. It is a natural function to create stories that interpret events, and then to evaluate and change those stories in order to draw more liberating conclusions and lessons to clear the path forward. Furthermore, writing our own stories and reading others' helps us understand life's complexities. It's a relatively safe and honest way to inform, challenge, and reshape our identity. It offers, without an expectation of anything in return, the gift of reflection. Life stories are not just compilations of facts and events, but rather crafted tapestries of experience. Moreover, what's left out of the story—unwritten, unspoken, unconscious, or otherwise unavailable—is as vital as what's included. Finally, we should pay attention to patterns in stories, and to other collective elements

of stories across time and cultures in order to understand the larger significance of a single narrative, and to offer perspective, solace, and hope from sources that may appear outside of one's close or comfortable reach.

As narrative psychologists explain, we understand the experience of being human by observing stories and listening to the stories of others. Dan McAdams, for example, demonstrates that personality development can be analyzed as an individual's lifelong course from "actor" to "agent" to "author." Drawing on some of Robert Kegan's earlier research, McAdams asserts that we spend much of our early years reacting to others' expectations and societal norms. Eventually, we develop our own sense of agency, our own goals and values. We become more genuinely self-aware, and begin to make our own choices. But we achieve even greater maturity and sense of purpose only as we claim authorship for the big picture, the larger story of our lives. Educator and author Jill Ker Conway exclaimed it clearly: "All of us live with a life history in our mind, and very few of us subject it to critical analysis. But we are storytelling creatures. So it's very important to examine your own story and make sure that the plot is the one you really want."

There is no better illustration of the developmental value of storytelling than stories about fly fishing and rivers. Like the people and places behind the words, the best of these stories, like rivers, are both mirror and conscience, revealing unadorned truth, joyful or frightening, glaring or hidden. The river itself, is its own powerful story that, if you let it, can take you even further, beyond what is within eyesight or mental retrieval to a larger, mysterious realm of what is invisible, unknown, and unconscious. The river is simply natural, elegant, and profound, and as such, it cannot lie or omit. It knows only truth and tells only a true story. It is what it is. That's easy for rivers, but for the rest of us it remains elusive, even in the very best stories we create.

As Norman Maclean reminded us on the banks of the Big Blackfoot, “It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books.” So we look to the waters of rivers—above, within, below—to find the truth and the stories of our lives that we really want.

I was not on a river bank when I started this story, but I had streams and water on my mind. And I’ve waded enough rivers, landed enough fish, and lost even more, to begin to understand the intersections between fly fishing, adult development, and a meaningful life. I wrote this essay to illuminate these intersections and to invite you to create your own as you face the haunting questions and developmental challenges of adulthood. But my words, and even those of more experienced and talented fly fishing authors cited later, are purposely incomplete and can only reinforce Norman Maclean’s profound affirmation that “At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.” I’ve tried, in this modest work, to cultivate a bit more insight, humility, and grace to see this.

Stories and Questions from the Stream

The challenge of writing about this subject is to convey the overarching theme of *simple complexity* in both fly fishing and adulthood—“everything is luminous but not clear”—while at the same time keeping the essay accessible and enjoyable to read. In order to achieve this I’ve selectively chosen writers whose stories about fly fishing pose deep-rooted questions and teach valuable lessons about life. The excerpts below are included to engage you in an honest, intimate exploration of the intersections of fly fishing and your own life. They invite you to contemplate these intersections in relation to your own transitions and challenges, and to use the insights and lessons from fly fishing to nourish your own personal and professional development.

These authors and selections, on their own and without further commentary, can guide the reader's journey through adulthood. However, I think it's useful to point out, more intentionally, the overlay of developmental themes associated with these extraordinary stories about fly fishing, to elucidate the synthesis and intersections between the two, and to clarify how they inform each other. With that in mind, I've added questions that reflect developmental themes noted in this essay to help you connect your own life and experience to the characters and plots in the stories highlighted. I've tried to bring the lessons of fly fishing closer to home.

I invite you to read these selected passages from the literature of fly fishing, to reflect, and to then ask yourself a few questions that mirror the key themes of this essay: How is the passage a commentary about meaning and commitment in my life? How do the words tap into an unsettling developmental principle, stage, or marker in life? How does this story about fly fishing inform my response to a challenging transition in my life? What haunting questions, like the ones inspired by *A River Runs Through It*, am I facing? After each passage, I've suggested a few additional questions for reflection that further reinforce developmental concepts and inform a meaningful life.

A River Runs Through It, Norman Maclean

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.

As a child, what do you remember most about your family?

What were the family beliefs and rules?

As a child and adult, what about your family was both clear and confusing?

If boyhood questions aren't answered before a certain point in time, they can't ever be raised again.

What were your childhood interests, dreams, and questions?

What did you abandon from childhood as you grew into adulthood?

Why is it difficult, as an adult, to raise the questions or reignite the dreams of childhood?

For it is true that we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. As so it is those we live with and love and should know who elude us. But we can still love them—we can love completely without complete understanding. Help ... is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly.... So it is that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed.

Who or what do you think of in your own life when you read this passage?
What is challenging for you to give and receive help?
What are the benefits and sacrifices of loving completely without complete understanding?

At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.

What, in your own life, is luminous but not clear?
How do you adapt to change, uncertainty, and complexity?

Many of us probably would be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.

What's the alternative to perfection in your home and work life?
What would have to change in order for you to be more accepting of imperfection?

I also became the river by knowing how it was made.... Fisherman also think of the river as having been made with them partly in mind, and they talk of it as if it had been. They speak of the three parts as a unity and call it a "hole," and the fast rapids they call "the head of the hole" and the big turn they call "the deep blue" or "pool" and the quiet, shallow water below they call "the tail of the hole," which they think is shallow and quiet so that they can have a place to wade across and "try the other side."

How are your personal and professional roles integrated and consistent with one another?
How do the roles conflict?
Are you the same person at home and at work?
Which roles are most authentic, really you?

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of these rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.

What are the sources of division and harmony in your life?
What is your higher sense of purpose, philosophy of life, or faith that provides meaning?
What haunts and sustains you in your personal and professional life?

What the River Knows: An Angler in Midstream, Wayne Fields

To sit by a river is to enjoy the fittest place for contemplation even as one awaits a struggle with whatever monster might reside within those depths.

What “monsters” resides within you?
What makes you feel most vulnerable or threatened?
How do you resolve these conflicts?

Rivers are themselves threads, lines that link us to whatever we have left behind.

What have you “left behind”—from your past, a relationship—that you would like to reclaim?
Why did you leave it behind?
How do you determine what to retain from your past, and what to let go of?

I have maintained ... the illusion of control, the dream of constancy. Change has always been the enemy.... The old dilemma: I want something to happen but nothing to change.

What do you want to remain constant?
What are some things you want to change?
What are you able to change, what are your limits, and do you know the difference?
How do you feel when you lose control?

On the Spine of Time, Harry Middleton

At once angling broadens a man’s vision while often threatening to blind him. Beauty comes like lightning, spontaneous, brief, brilliant, dangerous, with a light or a motion or a shape that unsettles emotions.

What or who in your own life illuminates but also threatens to blind your vision?
How do you typically react to these kinds of dilemmas that are both enlightening and unsettling?

Up in the mountains ... I let myself drift toward what I like and enjoy rather than what others believe I need.... Once on the mountain highway, once the road rises out of these foothills and serpentine about the scalloped slopes of the mountains, things change, sensations change, priorities change. I change. I gather about me only what seems necessary, fundamental; I delight in what is basic—a cool wind; clean, fast water; the smell of sweet earth; a fat trout in deep water.... You take what is given, even the fear.... The fear is real and I fight it with the fly rod which lets me cast beyond the obvious.... The idea is to concentrate on living rather than merely surviving.

What’s the difference between what you like and what others need from you?
What can you do to close the gap between the two?
Where do you go, and what do you do, to concentrate on living authentically rather surviving?

The Earth is Enough, Harry Middleton

The challenge never dulled; the thrill never faded. The reward was angling itself, just meeting the trout in its world, on its own terms, feeling the tenuous nature of its life and suddenly understanding the tenuousness of your own.

What is tenuous about your own life, and how comfortable are you with the uncertainty?
How is the uncertainty of your life thrilling and frightening?

I cast my line, and felt the tug of cold water against my thighs. Always that tug, that urgency of motion, of life ongoing, resolute. I lost all sense of time, of place, of everything. Concentration absorbed me. Never had I felt such a consoling aloneness....I knew standing there in that stream that, from then on, things would be different.... I had changed in some fundamental way that I could not understand or undo. I felt, too, a sense of actually becoming, belonging. If my life as a refuge was not over, at least it had changed in both direction and purpose.

What do you do, or what can you do, to experience this sense of purpose and belonging?
What gets in the way?
What experiences—joys and losses—have changed you, and why?

Holy Water: Fly-fishing Memories & Remembrances, Jerry Kustich

In my mind, beyond the catching of fish, I have always felt that just being in the wonderful places that trout—or any fish, for that matter—live is the best therapy for whatever ails the human soul.... perhaps it is the multi-dimensional interaction of water, artfulness, and meditative calm inspired by fly-fishing that is key to its impact on the human spirit. So, upon the realization that my devotion to spreading the fly-fishing word was more profound than I had ever considered, maybe my career wasn't as trivial as I once feared.

What ails your soul?
What's your form of therapy for relieving what troubles you?
How satisfied are you with your career?
In addition to your job and career, what's your vocation or calling?

For some, fly-fishing is a meaningful way to pray in the grand cathedral of nature. For me, it is that and more.

Beyond its recreational value, what are the benefits of fly fishing, on and off the stream?

But that is the nature of rivers. One leads to another, and then another. They flow on forever, and forever connected, they enrich our souls and touch our spirits with mysteries that none of us can fully comprehend.

What mysteries defy understanding?

Do you have a faith or philosophy of life, personally or institutionally defined, that guides you?

What remains constant in your life as you continuously adapt and change?

The View from Rat Lake, John Gierach

The best thing about fly fishing is that it led you inexorably to one paradox after another.

What are the paradoxes in your life, the tugs you feel between contradictory forces?

How do you navigate or balance these conflicts and paradoxes?

I remember that as one of those profound moments when you realize not only that your father is actually human, but that even the finest parts of life can hurt you: that it's possible to want too much of what you can't have. Dad died too young, but he was not a tragic character—quite the opposite, in fact. Still, he never did catch the big fish, and there came a time when I thought I could see that in his eyes. I'm not saying you shouldn't go. I think you should go as far and as often as you can, just don't go staring off into the trees like that when there are fish to be caught just five minutes down the road.

What are the finest parts of your life, including people, and how do they help and hurt you?

What's the lesson behind this excerpt, and how does it apply to your own life?

The River Why, David James Duncan

As my walking and wading and attending to the line became less conscious, more free and easy, I found I could free my mind.... I found myself remembering Titus, talking about the ancient Taoists—and of an Equilibrium of which they spoke. He said this Equilibrium derived from a kind of inner balance: it transmitted itself from the soul to the mind, and from the mind to the body, and when a man possessed of it put his hand to an art or craft he was capable of unheard-of feats.... A line breaks at a stress point. But if the fisherman experiences no stress, and if he transmits this experience through his hands to his pole, to his line, to his hook, then there will be no stress point, therefore no point at which the strand can break. By virtue of this principle ... these fishermen could hook the biggest fish that swam and still coax them at last into their waiting hands.

What are the sources of stress in your life?

How do you add to the stress, through your own thoughts and behavior?

How do you relieve stress?

How do you attain inner balance for a more fulfilling life?

Like playing a fish, how do you increase and release tension to your advantage?

The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing, Thomas McGuane

I'm afraid that the best angling is always a respite from burden. Good anglers should lead useful lives, and useful lives are marked by struggle, and difficulty, and even pain. Perhaps the agony of simple mortality should be enough. But probably it is not. As they say in South America, everyone knows that they are going to die; yet nobody believes it.

What burdens accompany your otherwise good and useful life?
How honest are you, with yourself and with others, about your own vulnerability and struggles?

Early on, I decided that fishing would be my way of looking at the world. First it taught me how to look at rivers. Lately it has been teaching me how to look at people, myself included. To the reader accustomed to the sort of instructional fishing writing which I myself enjoy, I must seem to have gotten very far afield. I simply feel that the frontier of angling is no longer either technical or geographical. The Bible tells us to watch and to listen. Something like this suggests what fishing ought to be about: using the ceremony of our sport and passion to arouse greater reverberations within ourselves.

How does fly fishing help you become more self-aware and insightful?
What insights about yourself and the world has fly fishing produced, enhanced, or changed?
What prompts you to look inward and become more self-aware?

I had in my own heart the usual modicum of loneliness, annoyance, and desire for revenge, but it never seemed to make it to the river. Isolation always held out the opportunity of solitude; the rivers kept coming down from the hills.

How or where do you find solitude?
In your own solitude and reflection, what do you confront?

Angling is where the child, if not the infant, gets to go on living.

What about your own childhood do you want to revisit or reignite?
What about your adulthood extinguished the childhood flame?

This was the first time all day that the river had asked me to figure something out, and it was becoming clear I wouldn't catch a fish in this run unless I changed my ways. The selective trout is that uncompromising creature in whose spirit the angler attempts to read his own fortune.

What does the full experience of fly fishing teach you about changing your ways?
What will never happen if you don't change certain things?
What opportunities for growth do you have if you make some changes?

A Flyfisher's World, Nick Lyons

There is a rhythm to each day we spend on a stream or lake or ocean, and a rhythm to each fishing year. And there is a discrete rhythm to every fly fisher's life—though it's rarely predictable. Mostly we're just too busy to notice all the patterns, though it's well to notice them.

What are the rhythms and patterns to your life that help you live authentically and enjoyably?
What routines, responsibilities, and obligations define your daily life?
What can you do to pay more attention to the patterns of your life?

The Habit of Rivers: Reflections on Trout Streams and Fly Fishing, Ted Leeson

Trout streams tug at the mind with an insistent, contradictory pull, presenting both a plain and perfect simplicity and a subtle link to sources of hidden significance; fundamentally alike, yet endlessly variable, they offer the solace of the familiar and the inexhaustible fascination of a thing that can never fully be known.

What are the apparent contradictions in your personal and professional life?
What is simple but unknowable, alike but different?
How do you resolve these dilemmas?

Fish and fishermen both work upstream, pursuing ends but oriented toward beginnings, winnowing the extraneous to converge on essentials.

How do you work upstream in your life, and how does that improve or impede your effort?
How do you remain focused on your goals?
How does your past, or a part of it, encourage and impede those goals?

Fishermen, like the rest of humankind, will talk relentlessly and authoritatively about what they understand least.

Do you fit this characterization?
What do you think or talk about that you'd like to understand more clearly?
What can you accept but never understand completely?

I find it impossible to speak about fishing at all without using the word "hope," because angling fits into a category of human experience that is rooted more in expectation and possibility than in some kind of achievement or fulfillment.

What are your greatest hopes?
What do you need to do or change to ensure your hopes are fulfilled?
Is it helpful to hope for something, knowing it may never come true?

I don't think I'm stretching the matter at all to say that given half a chance, a trout stream can make you a better person.

What will make you a better person?

What will make you love yourself and others more fully?

At some level, though, fishing becomes concerned with catching things other than fish. It assumes in the psyche the shape of longing, and perhaps in its own modest way, even the lineaments of a quest. This deeper impulse is the most engaging dimension of any passion. It is also the most equivocal.

What's your quest or calling?

Despite what we think we understand about rivers and lakes, they hide what they know with remarkable ease.... This capacity to reveal and conceal simultaneously is most apparent in the visual sense. The swells, slicks, roils, and riffles answer to the workings of deeper currents and streambed topographies, tracing, if imperfectly, the hidden contours of the river. Yet at the same time the fluctuating and reflective surface inhibits our ability to see beneath it.

What challenges do you understand at the surface, but struggle with at a deeper level?

The Path Ahead

Hopefully, this essay, and the questions and passages within, will lead you to more reading and deeper reflection, and to a trout stream where, as I've tried, you will look to the water—above, within, below—and see why, as Norman Maclean wrote, “stories of life are often more like rivers than books.” *A River Runs Through It* is a magical story about fly fishing and the continuum of life as they merged “at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana.” I wrote this essay to help you locate that junction in your own life story, and when you find it, to stop long enough to see it for what it is, “luminous but not clear,” and then look up and take the next step. Then, on the bank of your newfound home waters, you too can rise with the sun each day knowing that, while blinding at first glance, it will warm and enlighten as it ascends higher in the sky.

Steve Ehrlich, May 2019