Fly Fishing, Paradox, and Transformative Learning

"Piscator Non Solum Piscatur"- there is more to fishing than catching fish

Proverb from *A Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle*, part of the second edition of *The Boke of Saint Albans* written by Juliana Berners, 1496

"What do you do to help him?" I asked. After a long pause, he said, "I take him fishing."
"And when that doesn't work?" I asked.

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, 1976

Let's set the record straight. *The Boke of Saint Albans*, written by Dame Juliana Berners and published in 1496, predates Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* by approximately 150 years. It was a sporting nun who first suggested there is more to fishing than catching fish! Is there *really* more to it than the thrill of landing fish, preferably big ones? And who cares anyway?

Let's set the record straight again. There *is* more to fishing than catching fish, and we *all* would benefit from an outing. We need to go fishing, especially now, because we need help to recover the capacity for knowing and expressing the deepest joys and frailties of being human.

Norman Maclean knew this when he wrote *A River Runs Through It,* first published in 1976, and Robert Redford's 1992 film adaptation of the story reinforced Maclean's wisdom. *A River Runs Through It,* fundamentally, is about the simultaneous elegance and fear—the paradox—of being human. 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 story for all, and for all times, that captures life's contradictions—reason and faith, head and heart, light and dark, hope and despair, life and death—which define the paradox of the human condition and occupy the murky spaces of complexity, uncertainty, and volatility where most of us live and work; where, like Maclean's meditation on sunrise, "everything is luminous but not clear" (28).

Most of us, then, as Maclean teaches, are "haunted by waters" (104), but he also reminds us of "the healing effects of cool waters" (78). Confronting the mystery and paradox of haunting and healing, we just need a little help along the way, and we need hope, and we need much more love to guide us through it all, even when understanding is, at best, elusive. One of the most profound lessons from *A River Runs Through It* is revealed in Maclean's once reluctant acknowledgment about his younger brother, Paul, beautiful yet imperfect, for whom Norman would never be much help: "you can love completely without complete understanding" (103).

There is a wide collection of storied literature on fly fishing which, like *A River Runs Through It,* highlights the unavoidably paradoxical nature of the activity and all who engage it on and off the stream. As summarized by Mark Browning in *Haunted by Waters: Fly Fishing in North American Literature,* "The pinnacle of fly-fishing methodology as presented in the works of many of its most celebrated writers is found in the paradox of what the angler is actually pursuing. Far from the simple pursuit of fish, the best angler pursues self-awareness" (148). Browning succinctly and masterfully explains the paradoxical qualities of this pursuit:

> The fly angler seeks to forge connections with past and future. They are sought with nature and other humans. Most obviously, they are sought with the fish that lurk beneath the water's surface. The end-result of these ties, however, brings with them the ultimate paradox of fly fishing. The product of these myriad relationships is not connection but separation. More precisely, the angler, by means of clearly establishing his or her relationship with the world, creates and defines a present, a personal space, and a clearer self-knowledge (195).

How do we navigate life as a paradox? How do we read the stream and the stories of our lives, as Norman Maclean suggests, with more of an eye on helping, healing, hoping, and loving? None of it is easy. Too often these are fleeting, or they become more burdens than gifts. But I believe the meaning and experience behind these words—*what and how we learn from them*—shapes who we are, as individuals, as institutions, even as a society.

As a lifelong student and teacher of adult learning and development, I agree with my colleagues who argue that the central tenet of adulthood is "transformative learning." Pioneered by the adult educator Jack Mezirow in the early 1970s, transformative learning

> refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action…. Transformation Theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers…. Transformative learning has both individual and social dimensions and implications. It demands that we be aware of how we come to our knowledge and as aware as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives (7-8).

While it's been the object of much criticism and revision, transformative learning remains a centerpiece of adult learning today. *At its core is the guiding principle that high functioning adults are capable of finding meaning in the vexing and inescapable questions and contradictions of our lives, especially during unsettling changes and transitions that accompany the normal trajectory of adulthood, and that challenge or undermine our belief systems that we once leaned on for understanding and comfort.* Transformative learning prepares us to reexamine assumptions and beliefs—our own and others'—and, if warranted, to change them into more useful ones that help us adapt to new and challenging experiences, and for the betterment of our own lives, organizations and communities, and the planet we all share. Furthermore, transformative learning is directly linked to psychological development and overall well-being in adulthood. Deeply impacting the work of the head and the heart, its intellectual and emotional qualities enhance self-awareness and identity, strengthen relationships on all levels, sharpen understanding and critical assessment information, instill fair and merciful values, and navigate the lifelong tension between self-interest and social responsibility.

Learning, even more broadly conceptualized, is all about contradiction and paradox. Peter Jarvis, in *Paradoxes of Learning: On Becoming an Individual in Society,* reinforces and expands the principles of transformative learning. "A fundamental paradox may be seen at the outset: learning is an individualistic enterprise, but society is organizational" (4). And by extension, this "*must* raise questions, since one of its main arguments is that learning begins with a fundamental disjuncture between individual biography and the socially constructed experience…. Yet the process of questioning is itself a paradox for an uncertain humankind in continual search of certainty" (4). But perhaps the most relevant excerpt from Jarvis' work underscores why, in my opinion, the full experience of fly fishing—on the stream and off, reading the water or a book about angling—is a transformative learning experience that brings the angler face-to-face with the paradoxical nature of being human.

> The study is formulated with the framework of paradox, since the idea of self-contradictoriness in human existence is crucial: in life, there is death; in joy, sorrow; in freedom, a fear of freedom; in constraint, frustration; and so on. Indeed, the fact that individuals live in society causes some contradictions, because to enjoy their individuality, they need to be free of the constraints that relationships with others impose. But learning can be either conformist or creative, and so this also leads to paradoxical situations. Individuals can learn from the experience of life or learn to take life's experiences for granted. Learning, then, is not straightforward but complex and even contradictory (4).

This is why we need to go fishing, literally and figuratively, to become better transformative learners who can tolerate and pose questions which may not have clear answers, but that can lift us to a higher plane of self-understanding and meaning that embraces life's paradoxes. We need to go fishing to become more insightful, productive, and compassionate adults who, in turn, may more willingly give and receive help, hope, and love; and when these are more phantom than real, heal ourselves and others from the wounds of futility and despair.

We need to go even when it fails to provide enough of what we're searching for. The search is enough, and that is the deepest mystery, wonder, and paradox of fly fishing.

I believe, though many will disagree, that the all-important question Reverend Maclean charged his sons with on a daily basis—"What is the chief end of man?" (1)—is one of those complicated, unanswerable questions. On the one hand, it prompts the spiritually resolute response, as Maclean wrote: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever" (1). On the other hand, a question about our essential purpose and meaning appropriately invites so many different, subjective responses that it becomes one of those questions that "asks a lifetime of questions" (103). These are neither contradictory nor incompatible views if we adopt a paradoxical and transformative approach to learning and development. As Maclean reminds us, asking the question—the journey of inquiry—is more important than a single answer or destination: "it is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions" (42).

Norman Maclean begins the final paragraph of his story with the memorable line which, for some, suggests a form of resolution: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it" (104). The last sentence, however, is the most illuminating yet opaque, and the most transformative: "I am haunted by waters" (104). This may be the end of the story, but it also is the reader's awakening to a treasure of new questions.

"Piscator Non Solum Piscatur." Dame Juliana Berners was prophetic and pragmatic in the world's first instructional treatise on fly fishing, perhaps ahead of her time as a blend of monastic and secular. I think she was transformative. I suspect Norman Maclean would agree. After all, he began *A River Runs Through It* by proudly announcing and embracing the paradox: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing" (1). Like Berners' *Treatyse,* Maclean's *River* is a transformative guide and lesson for our time and our world that

needs help, healing, hope, and much more love. Let's begin the journey with a trip to the stream and see what we can find below the surface of the water and in all reflected above. Whatever we see will be "luminous but not clear."

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Sources

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