

## Fly Fishing for Home Waters and the Examined Life

Anglers talk about the comfort of their “home waters.” These are the rivers, streams, and lakes that we know best, where the catch, and something more profound, is bountiful.

Discovering and navigating our home waters leads to deeper self-discovery and more thoughtful consideration of others and the seemingly insurmountable barriers we face. We all need a clearer path to our home waters.

Whether you fish or not, the literature of fly fishing can guide you there. The novels, short stories, memoirs, and essays are instructive, reflective, and humorous, offering wisdom and inspiration for the best and worst of times. Ted Leeson summarizes it best in *The Habit of Rivers: Reflections on Trout Streams and 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.” In *The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing*, Thomas McGuane reveals 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 arouse greater reverberations within ourselves.” Wayne Fields’ elegant memoir, *What the River Knows: An Angler in Midstream*, offers a vivid lesson about the solitude of home waters. “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.” Arguably the greatest American novel, *Moby Dick*, while an exception to the fly fishing genre and clearly depicting a more ominous type of angling expedition for the “monster” white whale, nonetheless reminds us that “meditation and water are wedded forever.”

Norman Maclean’s fabled novella, *A River Runs Through It*, is perhaps the most standout example of fly fishing literature that guides us to the contemplative value of home waters. It is an enduring story about love and loss, faith and doubt, and so many other contradictions and

paradoxes that define the human condition and the gray space where most of us live and work. As the story's final passage reveals, harmony and understanding are attainable but also limited, and the meanings and resolutions we assign to our most unsettling questions may remain imperfect and mysterious: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.... I am haunted by waters."

These are just a few of the authors whose words steer us toward and in our home waters. It is a place and a state of mind, sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent, but always a thoughtful, soulful base where we stand a greater chance of seeing who we really are, what we can and cannot do to help ourselves and others, and how to tackle our most confounding questions and obstacles.

Finding or rediscovering our home waters prepares us for the work of a purposeful, examined life. Socrates declared that "an unexamined life is not worth living." More recently, the psychologist James Hollis wrote in *Living an Examined Life: Wisdom for the Second Half of the Journey*, "No greater difficulty may be found than living this journey as mindfully, as accountably, as we can, but no greater task brings more dignity and purpose to our lives." Throughout our adult lives, and especially during transitional and disorienting times, an examined life asks difficult questions and makes difficult choices. Who am I? What are my dreams, strengths, limitations, and guiding beliefs? How do I connect and contribute to others? Where do I get stuck? How will I write my own, honest life story, apart from what others expect?

An examined life, for your own well-being and for the good of the whole, also critically reviews and, if warranted, changes assumptions, standards, and expectations that influence personal decisions and institutional behavior. It truthfully embraces what we love and just as

honestly confronts what we fear, in ourselves and in others. It understands that disappointment, suffering, and failure may be necessary precursors to self-enlightenment, and that falling down, as Franciscan writer and teacher Richard Rohr explains, is actually “falling upward.”

But arguably the most important and demanding quality of an examined life is its ability to welcome the tension produced by oppositional forces as more instructive than constraining. An examined life attempts to reconcile and integrate differences, to treat them as more complementary than incompatible, or even worse, insurmountable. It reveals the possibility for reframing conflicts, contradictions, and paradoxes as opportunities for greater understanding, harmony, even love. C. G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytic psychology, reminds us, “Life is born only of the spark of opposites.” On the stream or in the literature of fly fishing, this is witnessed and symbolized in many ways, but perhaps most notably by the constant dilemma of upstream and downstream choices, the equal force applied to the forward and backcast, and the bend of the rod and tug on the line as fish and fisher pull in opposite directions. Jung would have enjoyed *A River Runs Through It*.

The examined life, itself a paradox, is both close and far away, inviting and frightening. The gifted writers mentioned earlier, and most anglers, understand this. They seek the examined life and they come face-to-face with their problems and paradoxes in their home waters. As Mark Browning suggests in *Haunted by Waters: Fly Fishing in North American Literature*, they achieve this by moving “out of the realm of the known” into a space of uncertainty and vulnerability where things aren’t always as they appear to be, but where new insight and understanding emerge.

This may seem obscure or esoteric. And ironically, it was Jung, whose work focused on dream symbolism and analysis, who reminded us, “This is not to say that the fishes of which the

fisherman dreams are fishes and nothing more.” Granted, it is important to know when we take the metaphor too far, make things unnecessarily complicated, and overlook the obvious. In the case of fly fishing, however, the allegories and analogies are relevant. Citing Mark Browning again, who captures what streamside writers and anglers have known for years: “The pinnacle of fly-fishing ... 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.”

The opening line of *A River Runs Through It*, if we look beyond its literal meaning, expresses a dilemma that sets the stage for Norman Maclean’s narrative, but also reveals a paradox we all experience in many ways: “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” Things that seem miles apart may be closer to each other than we think, but the divide is often murky and uncharted, and it seems too difficult to cross. How do we come to terms with the partitions and struggles of our lives, knowing somehow there must be more common ground than separation if only we can find the way? Norman, his brother Paul, and their father the Reverend Maclean resolved this dilemma on their home waters, the Big Blackfoot River of western Montana, where “At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.” It is an imperfect vision, but the best they could do to find peace, restore faith, and instill love in a world shattered by confusion, grief, and loss. Inspired by this profound insight, Norman Maclean ended *A River Runs Through It* the same way he began the story, with a paradox that weaves together resolution and uncertainty, faith and doubt. It is worth repeating those final words and this important life lesson: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.... I am haunted by waters.”

*A River Runs Through It* is a story about the home waters we all seek, what they reflect at the surface and reveal in the depths. How will each of us search for our home waters to discover what Norman Maclean found on the Big Blackfoot? How will we pursue an examined life and deeper self-awareness to understand the polarities and paradoxes we face daily, and resolve our personal and collective struggles, even though the resolutions may be limited and imperfect? Will we even try? After all, as Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after.” That may be true, but it is time to change, to seek the examined life with greater determination and courage, and to understand why there is much more to fishing than catching fish. If Ted Lesson was right, “that given half a chance, a trout stream can make you a better person,” then maybe the solitude of a river, or a good book about one, is the place to start.

Steve Ehrlich, September 2020