

Fly Fishing, the Gray Space, and the Healing Effects of Cool Waters

In 1976 Norman Maclean graced us with “A River Runs Through It,” an enduring story and universal lesson about love and loss, and the imperfect faith and understanding to bear the splendor and weight of both. This is a powerful narrative about life’s apparent contradictions—reason and faith, head and heart, light and dark, life and death—that ultimately define the paradox of the human condition and the gray space of complexity, uncertainty, and volatility where most of us live and work. This is plainly evident in the first line of the story: “In our family there was no clear line between fly fishing and religion,” and the theme is reinforced from beginning to end as Maclean observes through a series of family dilemmas and crises: “At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.” In the face of life’s unfairness, confusion, disappointment, and pain, both narrator and reader seek comfort and resolution, but in metaphorical fashion we receive consolation and understated advice as only Maclean can offer: “Many of us would probably be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.”

But what, exactly, is Maclean’s message to all of us struggling daily to be “better fishermen?” 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 that gray space*, in a world where “everything is luminous but not clear”—uncertain, imperfect, complex, and even paradoxical—*and ultimately to see this as more enriching than crippling because it leads to a more thoughtful, compassionate, and responsible life*. Life in the gray space can foster systemic, critical, and creative thinking and problem solving. It can reframe disparate ideas and perspectives, and reimagine conflicts and contradictions as opportunities for deeper insight, reconciliation, and

harmony. It can embrace each of our complicated narratives, like Maclean's, as stories of understanding, acceptance, and hope.

Just as important, life's gray space can open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts to others, at home, at work, in our local communities and beyond, to the range of individuals who occupy national and global stages, and with whom we adamantly disagree about important matters. The gray space can recognize common ground and shared human needs, and encourage civil communication among individuals and groups who seem bitterly and irreparably divided. It can reveal, in Maclean's words, that we are able to "love without complete understanding."

The gray space of complexity, uncertainty, change, and contradiction defines the "tension of opposites" that philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, and a varied host of other writers have pondered for many years, but it is not the domain of intellectual elites. It permeates each of our lives, at home and at work, and it is played out in social, political, and cultural debates that shape our national identity and influence global security. Each of us cares deeply about this, but even more importantly, we want to know how to translate concern into constructive behavior and change for the better. In that sense, we all seek, as renowned fly fishing author John Gierach suggests in one of his collections of stories, *Trout Bum*, "what all anglers are after—a shred of understanding with a practical application."

The gray space defines key challenges in three prominent arenas of our lives: personal, professional, and civic. Our individual paths to intellectual, emotional, and social well-being—normal, healthy adult development—are rarely flat or straight. They tend to be bumpy and twisted. Authentic self-understanding is difficult to achieve. It fluctuates and it's constantly challenged by others' and societal expectations. Furthermore, how we see ourselves affects our ties to friends and loved ones, and even the most satisfying relationships can be complicated and

burdened with taxing dilemmas and seemingly impossible choices. These phenomena, normal but stressful, are at the core of long-studied psychological frameworks (e.g., Jung's "individuation," Erikson's "psychosocial development") about individual identity in relation to others. In more familiar terms, however, this is the mysterious, gray landscape of our personal lives.

Our professional lives and workplaces also can be complicated, unpredictable, and unsettling. VUCA, an acronym coined by the U.S. military in the late 1990s to describe a dramatically altered, unstable geopolitical world, and still widely applied to business today, highlights four qualities that characterize complex organizations: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Additionally, meaningful professional development, career advancement, and leadership, are gauged more by a person's experience and competencies in the gray space of VUCA which, increasingly, needs "soft skills" like communications, critical thinking, collaboration, and managing ambiguity, more than mastery of technical, operational, or area-specific skills. These measures of organizational effectiveness and individual performance, while the subject of much research and assessment in leadership and management journals, also characterize the challenges we face regularly in the familiar gray space of our work lives.

There is a larger civic context that further complicates and expands the gray space of our personal and professional lives. Locally, nationally, and globally, we are awash with controversies that seem to polarize more than unite. In many different arenas—politics, race, ethnicity, gender, economics, religion, law enforcement, education, climate change, nuclear disarmament, regional warfare—there are deep chasms between rivals but insufficient will for civil communication and common ground. These are battlegrounds that call for thoughtful

moderation and compromise, and that test our individual and collective ability to navigate private interest and public good, national supremacy and global cooperation.

This unsteady civic context that contributes to the gray space in our lives is nothing new. Though deeply troubling and overwhelming today, the earliest political origins of the private-public tension are enlightening, rooted in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, written in 1690. This document addressed the limits of individual rights and liberties in a civil state, and helped shape the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. This dynamic is a central theme of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835, and still a foundational analysis of our nation's strengths, limitations, and threats in relation to individualism, equality, freedom, democratic governance, and a host of institutional forces. Tocqueville introduced the phrase "habits of the heart," a positive expression of principles and behavior in America that enabled us to navigate the gray space between private interest and public responsibility. During the past half century, a breadth of scholarship has examined changes and erosions in this central feature of the American experience, but the fundamental question remains: How do we manage the tension between private and public, individual and collective? This civic context represents a vast, gray, social space that is complex, uncertain, and volatile. It is also pivotal, and each of us, and not just politicians, can choose to make this a space that either supports or undermines fundamental values and principles for a just and democratic society.

We may be, forever, as Norman Maclean concludes "A River Runs Through It," "haunted by waters," by life's mysterious, elusive questions that have no clear answers and that often generate more anxiety than solace, but after all, as he also contends, "it is not fly fishing if you're not looking for answers to questions." We may not find the answers, but in the gray

space of fly fishing and life, where “everything is luminous but not clear,” we will at least have a better chance to ask the most thoughtful and useful questions, and to also make it a *shared* space where “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.”

Fly fishing, literally and figuratively—doing it, reading about it, reflecting on its higher meaning—can help illuminate the unavoidable gray spaces in our personal and professional lives. Its lessons and analogies can even guide us through the threatening waters of today’s social and political unrest. In the eventual union of a forward and back cast, in the bend and quiver of a fly rod as we play a fish, we can feel the “tension of opposites” that haunts the gray space. The “best thing” about fly fishing, returning to John Gierach in *The View from Rat Lake*, is that “it led you inexorably to one paradox after another. The idea was to catch fish, but ... it was perfectly okay not to as long as you failed to catch them with the proper grace and style.” In the same collection of essays, Gierach shares a deep, personal story about his father and the “never far enough north syndrome” to catch the biggest fish, a memory that echoes lessons of grief and enlightenment in Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, and that underscores the paradoxical essence of fly fishing:

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.

The full experience of fly fishing can help us affirm, examine, and resolve one of life’s greatest challenges: living and working in inevitable uncertainty, complexity, and change. This theme, in one form or another, typifies daily life—at home, at work, in the headlines we wake up to each morning—and it will not change. What can change, however, is how we think and feel

about this challenge, how we choose to live and work differently, how we navigate the gray space. I suggest starting with time on a stream, one of John Gierach's essays, or a copy of "A River Runs Through It." If we are willing to try, and to seek and receive help, we can learn much from fly fishing, the gray space of our lives, and, in Norman Maclean's words, "the healing effects of cool waters."

Steve Ehrlich, May 2018

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