

Fly Fishing for Common Ground

It's been thirty years since Robert Redford brought to the big screen *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean's treasured novella, and fly fishing continues to grow in popularity and purpose as a source of recreation, respite, and service. More than just sport, fly fishing and its portfolio of novels, essays, memoirs, and videos stimulate deep personal self-examination, healing, and renewal. After all, there's more to fishing than catching fish. If that's the case, then I suggest there's another, even larger dimension. As an expression of our interaction with a far-reaching cultural and natural landscape—the commons—fly fishing serves a higher, collective purpose: to help us understand and repair a broken world, and find common ground and hope in these extraordinarily disorienting and divisive times.

Fly fishing is more than just a great escape from our busy lives and a troubled world. *Fly fishing engages us with life, on and off the stream.* In all of its beauty, complexity, uncertainty, and inspiration, it mirrors our life and our world. We are just “another version” of all that “nature and wildness” writes Quinn Grover in *Wilderness of Hope: Fly Fishing and Public Lands in the American West*. “Everything is connected,” Steve Ramirez reminds us in *Casting Onward: Fishing Adventures in Search of America's Native Gamefish*. But all too often we fail to see the connection, and consciously or unknowingly ignore both the gifts and the warnings we receive from the natural world and those streams, rivers, and lakes we fish. And if we don't even see, much less understand that common ground and the implications for an even larger cultural landscape, we can draw little wisdom and hope from that shared space to heal the wounds of our “civilized” world and guide us in a different, more compassionate direction.

Thinking about the broader value of fly fishing in the context of our current social climate, I find it helpful to consider the notion of “the commons” from the perspective of liberation psychologist Mary Watkins. In *Mutual Accompaniment and the Creation of the Commons*, she stresses the urgency of reclaiming shared space between the human and natural world—the commons—especially today “when divisions are being grievously deepened, neighbors turned against one another, strangers denied at the door.” She explains that a commitment to the commons involves “mutual obligations of stewardship: obligations between people, as well as between people and the local natural system,” and she asks us to sharpen our “sensitivity to how we experience a mutuality with nature in which we know we owe our own well-being to it.” Recovery of the commons, she argues, demands empathetic “accompaniment,” characterized by the desire to “re-orient ourselves to one another ... and the needs of the natural world,” as well as the creation of spaces that nurture this reciprocal bond.

To restore the commons and to create new commons we must attend to the creation of spaces where human relations can be regenerated.... we must restore and create sites of reconciliation where co-existence across difference can thrive.... To meet the possibility of the commons, people—you and I—must create psychic and social spaces where we can unfurl ourselves, where our bodily being can recuperate a sense of well-being and vitality, where we can unfold our thoughts, images, and desires with one another, and listen to other people’s to find modes of thinking and acting in solidarity with one another for the sake of creating sustainable ways of living. These are the psychological and relational capacities that must be built to re-claim the Commons.

Is it possible that the world of fly fishing represents one of those “psychic and social spaces?” Does fly fishing and its intimate relationship with nature constitute one of those “sites of reconciliation” that can inspire and equip us to reimagine the commons? Can we learn and apply lessons from the stream to create more “sustainable ways of living,” including restoring mutual respect and civil discourse in a divided and contentious world?

I believe there is a compelling case for fly fishing for the commons and common ground in the larger meaning of these terms. There are no clearer articulations of this than the two recently published books mentioned earlier: *Wilderness of Hope: Fly Fishing and Public Lands in the American West*, by Quinn Grover; and *Casting Onward: Fishing Adventures in Search of America's Native Gamefish*, by Steve Ramirez. These personal narratives, while eloquent stories about fly fishing, ultimately are about our personal, collective, and ecological well-being. They raise questions for each of us, angler or not, about the choices we make that define our relationships with our natural world and with each other, and that determine who we want to be and how we want to live. Grover's and Ramirez's observations and insights, while shaped in the context of fly fishing, are directed at anyone who views the great outdoors and our common ground as a source of wisdom and hope in a tumultuous, changing world.

In *Wilderness of Hope* Quinn Grover explores, literally and figuratively, common ground in the connection between his fly fishing experience and the ongoing national dialogue about preserving public lands. On a personal level, his interaction with nature through fly fishing is tantamount to "recalibrating one's own life." But just as significant, Grover describes how public lands and waterways also represent shared, common ground, and how "home waters," more than personal renewal or a geographic location, also conveys a public, collective "connection that cannot be built from wood and brick." He even draws on the wisdom of Indigenous peoples of America to make a case for communal living and its potentially restorative value for the current social and political climate. "If home is a place we share—with family, friends, and anyone else that might inhabit a place, like, say, your neighbor that has different political views than you or a native cutthroat trout or a river or a caddis fly or an otter—then the

communal model is an imperative.” All of this “recalibration” of life that fly fishing energizes, personal and collective, begins with “a communal home within nature” and a relationship that “requires communal lands, a commons where any member of the community can go and feel the elemental pull of natural landscapes and waterways.”

Perhaps most important for Grover, and for all of us, these “wild places” give us hope that can only come from “being among the trees and mountains,” and that force us to decide how we want to live. He adds that “Wild streams are great storehouses of hope.... and conduits of human relation,” a theme inspired by novelist and environmentalist Wallace Stegner, writing in *The Sound of Mountain Water*: “We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.” All of these words ring true today. It is time to pay attention to the “wildness” around us, recalibrate our personal lives and collective purpose, and look to the mountains, forests, and streams for guidance and, as Norman Maclean wrote in *A River Runs Through It*, “the hope that a fish will rise.”

Turning to *Casting Onward*, Steve Ramirez reveals a higher calling of fly fishing as he hikes and wades across the country searching for native gamefish. There’s a bigger picture in mind. “I don’t write fishing stories,” he emphasizes, “I write living stories. I write about the things that make life worth living,” the most important of which is connecting to other human beings. “This book is about more than fish, it’s about people.... It’s about friendship and pulling together for some common good.”

Ramirez also recognizes that we have serious problems, environmental and human, that impede the pursuit of common good, and that “We are both the problem and the solution.” Nature can help us resolve this dilemma, he explains, because it “teaches, heals, and unites.” It even helps us understand and respect the many “others” we turn our backs on because it forces us to see “home waters through their eyes,” and consequently build pathways to greater “environmental and social justice.” Reflecting on the intersection of fly fishing, nature, and the human condition, Ramirez is inspired to “propose a new restorative justice ethic for how we choose to treat each other and the Earth. It is within our ability to hold ourselves accountable and find redemption in creating healing where hurt has been caused.... We are better than this, I hope.” As part of this ethic, Ramirez draws on the teachings of Indigenous peoples of North America who widely embraced common ground and “the importance of balancing individual liberty with collective responsibility,” an essential democratic ideal that continues to elude us today. Inspired by his experience and observations while hiking and fishing, he even proposes the adoption of a common “creed” and a set of shared principles including these two foundational beliefs:

Our Culture is one of Kindness and Courage; individual liberty balanced with collective responsibility; individual and collective resilience, resourcefulness, and resolve; and an optimistic mentality.

Our common interest is to live in such a manner as to promote the health of nature and the best of human nature and to reject anything else.

Quinn Grover and Steve Ramirez make elegant and persuasive cases for the restorative power of nature and fly fishing for common ground. But I believe we still need more to repair the tears in our social fabric today. We need new approaches to leadership, both personal and collective, to

better guide ourselves and others toward a more compassionate understanding of common ground and the corresponding behavior to move us there.

Fly fishing offers many principles and lessons about leadership, especially self-leadership. John Childress, in his excellent book and thorough examination of the subject, *Fly Fishing for Leadership*, underscores that fly fishing teaches character as well as competence, and that leadership, like fly fishing “starts and ends with heart.” Therein lies the key to self-understanding, and subsequently the motivation for healing, helping, learning, and changing, directed both within and toward others.

The literature of fly fishing overflows with references to this kind of self-leadership, self-understanding, personal confrontation, and renewal. For example, Thomas McGuane, in *The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing*, describes how fly fishing and rivers “arouse greater reverberations within ourselves” and reveal “how to look at people, myself included.” Wayne Fields, in *What the River Knows: An Angler in Midstream*, reminds us that self-understanding also entails a face-off with self-doubt, vulnerability, and fear: “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.”

Educator and author Parker Palmer echoes this sentiment in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. He asserts that “leading from within,” an often overlooked first step toward leading others and organizations, usually begins by battling our own insecurities and unresolved questions, our “shadow casting monsters.” Palmer warns us that “Our frequent failure as leaders

to deal with our inner lives leaves too many individuals and institutions in the dark.” These are just a few of the writers and teachers who elucidate the intersection of self-understanding and self-leadership, a space often illuminated by the lessons of fly fishing and nature.

Self-leadership is a prerequisite for successfully leading others and institutions, but circling back to the central theme of this essay, *wise leaders also understand and engender common ground and common purpose*. Manfred F.R. Ketz de Vries, leadership expert, psychoanalyst, and seasoned fly fisher, focuses on the connection between personal wisdom and public good in his most recent publication, *Leading Wisely: Becoming a Reflective Leader in Turbulent Times*. Attuned to the dynamics of “these very turbulent times, when enlightened leadership is needed more than ever,” Ketz de Vries writes that wisdom “always takes the common good into consideration,” and he asserts that wise leaders, through self-reflection and personal growth, must also pursue “activities that also would benefit other people besides themselves.” His “plea for more wisdom in leadership” includes a list of qualities that address the public good and common ground: love above hatred; harmony instead of divisiveness; bridges not walls; and social trust. He claims that leaders who possess this kind of wisdom will inspire nothing short of “a transformation of humanity.”

Mary Watkins, introduced earlier as an advocate for the commons and restoring the bond between our cultural and physical world, also writes about leadership, more precisely, “revolutionary” leadership for “re-seizing the Commons.” Echoing the views of the Brazilian educator and social activist Paulo Freire, she reviews the essential qualities of this form of

leadership, and at the top of the list: “A revolutionary leader holds the common good of people, animals, and earth as her highest aim.”

“Both solitude and society are improved on a trout stream,” writes Ted Leeson in *Jerusalem Creek: Journeys into Driftless Country*. This short but powerful declaration captures the essence of this essay and appeal: we share common ground, with each other and with our natural world, and we bear the accountability for its demise and the responsibility for its restoration. On Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau offered a similar message: “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” Even in his solitude, Thoreau was connected, as we all are, to each other and to the world we share. Steve Ramirez, referenced earlier, reminds us that “Everything is connected.”

We just need to find the way and the will to lead there, within ourselves and with others, to our home waters and common ground. Fly fishing offers hope that we can get there, to the commons, but it won’t be easy. Maybe that’s what Norman Maclean was thinking when he wrote the final words of an enduring story—his and our own—about love and loss, and the imperfect faith and understanding to bear the beauty and the burden of both: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.... I am haunted by waters.”

Sources

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