

The One That Got Away

The day on Dry Creek began with a wish and a lie, and at the time I didn't know the difference. I wished, again, for the big one I had seen earlier, and I lied to myself, again, that this time would be different. I would land that 18-inch rainbow trout that seemed to glide effortlessly between shallow riffles and deep pools, waiting patiently for food, yearning to rest. It's curious that what's inevitable and unknown, in relation to fly fishing and much more, is really the same yearning notion.

Not so ironically, this gentle creek in central Missouri, despite being my home waters, is guarded and unforgiving. Glittering, turquoise runs are inviting but deceiving. They hide slick rocks and sharp branches below the surface that provoke stumbles, bruised elbows, and twisted ankles. The darker, tawny pools are tempting because they usually house larger fish. But the excitement and impatience to step closer pulls me into sudden drop-offs or quick-sinking mud. That charming little creek can be a demon in disguise. I shouldn't be surprised. After all, we invade, deceive, steal, but rarely ask permission or seek penance. So, it's only fitting and fair, that frustration and failure normally outweigh elation and success when I fish the creek. Each time I'm reminded how difficult it is, with any consistency and accuracy, to feel truly satisfied.

It's the same with life. But despite the obstacles, I always learn a lot when I'm out there, both gratifying and painful, about the water and the woods, about others, about myself. I'm humbled there is so much more to learn, and so much I can never really know. On a trout stream, especially home waters, understanding grows and recedes at the same time, like a swirling, mischievous eddy that, even for a moment, pulls back and churns everything moving forward.

The first time I saw him he was just under the quick riffle, suspended, shimmering, searching above and below the surface. He was determined, magical, mysterious, frightened. I was inspired, humbled, mesmerized, also frightened. Like most memories and dreams, that moment meanders and fades in my mind but never disappears. Despite trying everything, throwing a variety of dry flies, nymphs, and streamers, I would never catch that beautiful 18-inch rainbow. He was then, and remains forever, free. After years of struggle and denial, I'm beginning to comprehend that what I love can't "get away" because I never owned it to begin with, and never will. Knowing this sets me free, enables me to let go, and paradoxically, draws me closer to those I love. Fly fishing on Dry Creek that Sunday morning, I understood and felt this, and everything really important, for the first time.

Many others, both in and outside the world of fly fishing, have written about "the one that got away," masterfully exploring themes like grief, anger, disappointment, guilt, humility, resilience, forgiveness, respect, and hope. Rivers and streams teach about all of these because moving water can heal and transform loss into new, generative insights about ourselves, others, and the world.

In thinking about "the one that got away," I'm reminded, as Jungian author and psychoanalyst James Hollis writes in *Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*, "All of life is attachment and loss, an unavoidable, rhythmic exchange." Fly fishing, as a metaphor for life, is both unsettling and instructive. It helps me navigate this paradox and the murky, unpredictable space between the worlds of attachment and loss where we all live.

Wrestling with the tension between attachment and loss, especially in relation to my family, I draw on “the healing effects of cool waters” that Norman Maclean wrote about so elegantly in *A River Runs Through It*, the treasured story of his own family “living between worlds” in all of its joys, frailties, and unthinkable loss. “In my family,” Maclean wrote, “there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” Knee deep in a trout stream almost every week, searching for “the one that got away,” I’ve learned that the line between attachment and loss is just as unclear. But if we open our minds and hearts, we can see that this imperfect space is also full of warmth and hope. It is the “sunrise” that Maclean describes in *A River Runs Through It*, when “everything is luminous but not clear.”

About a month after making my peace with the 18-incher on Dry Creek, I lost a 34-inch steelhead on the Rogue River in Oregon. Cold rain, gusty wind, and prickling sleet—classic winter steelhead conditions—guaranteed an exhilarating and challenging day on the water. The fish grabbed the purple stone fly as it slid in a lane between the bank and a boulder, and he ran, probably for ten seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. Then he paused, I stripped in line, got him on the reel. He jumped nearly two feet out of the water, a silver and crimson missile, then thrashed angrily, attempting to shake the fly. Again, he ran, paused, and I reeled. Five or six more times, back and forth, closer and farther, angler and fish alternating control, locked in tension, seeking equilibrium. The racing line screamed that high pitched “zzzzzzzzz,” music to an angler’s ear. My right shoulder throbbed each time I raised or turned the bent rod to maintain pressure on the fish. But it was worth it. He was only a few yards from the boat.

Then the monster spit the hook, just a foot from the guide's landing net! He lingered for a few seconds, then slapped his giant caudal fin against the water and slowly swam away, leaving only a soft wake behind as if the whole affair wasn't a big deal. I think he was laughing at me. After the cursing, kicking, and blaming, after a few weeks of reflection, I thought about the space between worlds—attachment and loss—that I share with that steelhead, everyone I've loved and lost, and everything in my life that represents "the one that got away."

They're all there with me, and they teach me to let go, to be free, to love. Facing it all is a tall order that warrants critical reflection about myself, others, and the state of the world, but that's what coming to terms with "the one that got away" is all about. That's the essence of living in the ambiguous space between love and loss, and navigating its uncertainties and contradictions. It's terrifying and disorienting, but at the same time enlightening and restorative. It's a hard, complicated way to live, but it's a more productive and realistic approach to facing problems, conflicts, and life transitions than relying on neatly packaged explanations.

In my life, and I suspect yours as well, there are many examples of "the one that got away." These are the people and experiences that situate us in that ambiguous space between attachment and loss where we learn, sometimes painfully, to let go of what we can't change, to try to understand what eludes us, to be the person you truly are, and to live the life you really want. I think about my parents, now gone, who inspired a lifetime of learning and teaching, and an unconditional love of all creatures on Earth. There are no greater lessons. I think about my wife and children, siblings, extended family, friends, and colleagues. I think about the highs and lows of my career. I think about a divided nation and a threatened planet, how to balance private

interest with public responsibility, how to survive and grow as one species. I think about continuous learning and unavoidable decline as I age. I think about death. I think about the dreams, achievements, and disappointments in my life, personally and professionally, and I'm haunted by a few nagging questions: Where did I get it right? Where did I fail? What could I have done differently? Where am I stuck? How do I forgive, others and myself? How do I move forward? How do I want to live?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but I find some clarity and much solace when I'm wading a trout stream. If there's something to the proposition that "all of life is attachment and loss," then coming to terms with this can generate insight and wisdom for an examined life, one that not only struggles to understand what we've lost, but more importantly, what we stand to find if we look closely enough at our reflection in the water. I believe that was Norman Maclean's message in *A River Runs Through It* as he wrote about his father's mourning the loss of his younger son Paul, "the one that got away": "For it is true, 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. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them - we can love completely without complete understanding." Steve Ramirez, in *Casting Onward: Fishing Adventures in Search of America's Native Gamefish*, extends this lesson to an even more profound level: "Everything is impermanent. We can hold onto nothing. Once we accept the letting go, we come to love, not loathe, that sweet release. Fly fishing and love are both about freedom. Love lets go."

Since those memorable days on Dry Creek and the Rogue River where I came to know “the one that got away,” and myself, I now read more closely Kahlil Gibran’s wise poem, “On Children.”

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, "Speak to us of Children."
And he said:
Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as he loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Anglers and archers, fly rods and bows, mayflies and arrows, they are all the same, helping me let go, setting me free, teaching me to love, restoring hope, like “the thing with feathers,” as Emily Dickinson wrote, that “never stops – at all.” And like Norman Maclean, I will continue to “hope that a fish will rise” whenever I cast into broken water for rainbows and “the one that got away.”

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