

A River Runs Through It has a rather startling beginning, at least for the uninitiated: “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” Think about it. What do religion and fly fishing have in common? After all, the goal of fly fishing is to pierce the mouth of a fish by fooling it into thinking that the menacing thing in the water is actually something it likes to eat. Once this cruel charade is over and you have the fish “on”, you then proceed to haul it through the water – the more it struggles the better! – lift it into the air, look at it in various poses for the camera while it gasps for breath and then dispose of it in various cruel ways, depending on your goal and its size. Now, unless you are contemplating the Inquisition, this does not seem like religion to me! And, I will confess, as a religious person, I have at times struggled with this question. In fact, I have a colleague who solved the problem by declaring that “fish don’t have souls.” She hasn’t caught a fish since. So, how is religion and fly fishing connected?

According to Webster, a religion is: “the belief in a god or in a group of gods: an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods...” I have known more than one fly fisherperson whose reverence for trout bordered on “religious” and there are many rituals experienced in a day on the water – arranging your fly’s,

approaching a stretch of water, testing your “rig”, warm up casts – yet this definition still seems lacking at least for our purposes. I’d like to share a more personal perspective on this novella, a gem of a story; I’ve been drawn to it since I first read it some 30 years ago. I bring to it my experience as a son, a father, a brother, a fly fisherman, and a religious person, all roles that I share with Norman Maclean, all themes found in the book, from the love of the river to the love of family and to the sense of great loss that permeates the whole.

I first went fishing when I was around five. I grew up in Louisville KY, just a few minutes from the great Ohio River, no Mecca of Fly Fishing, but a river all the same, where we would walk down to the bank – actually I think it was a dock – and throw our baited hooks into the water. Worms I think, and I do believe we caught fish, bluegill. Those were the first fish I caught but they were not the first fish that caught my attention. That happened a few years later in Miami Beach Florida where my grandma Ida lived on the top of the Doral Hotel. Ida hated my hair, I had long curly locks at the time which she always wanted to cut, but she loved me and she especially loved to take me down to the docks to fish. It was a very simple rig, a thick string wrapped around a plastic holder with a large, barbed hook on the end. She’d skewer a piece of frozen shrimp on the end of the hook,

and I'd toss it over the edge into the murky, salt water and wait. We caught fish, little ones mostly maybe 8 inches long, but one day we went through our usual ritual of walking down to the dock, finding our place, baiting the hook, me chucking it over and then the wait, when a fish, I mean a real fish, a monster of a fish, a whale of a fish, took my bait. My string went taught and I held on tight, it pulled hard and lunged for the open water, I desperately tightened my grip struggling to keep a hold of my "rod". Grandma Ida screamed as it looked like I was going in with the fish when the line snapped and I ended up on my tukkus (as she would say), looking incredulously, in awe and wonder at the broken string I still held in my hand.

The renowned, early 20th century philosopher William James in his classic work, The Varieties of Religious Experience writes that, "all religion begins with awe." Awe and wonder. That's what I felt holding the frayed string in my hand. "What was it, a shark? A sea monster? What else lurks below the surface of the deep?" From that moment on, fishing for me became a mystery, a search, a longing for things I could not see but dreamed about.

As I grew I came to know the local lakes and ponds and especially the still waters on the golf course of the Standard Country Club where my

family were members. It was the Jewish club in town which was necessary since when I grew up, Jews could not belong to anywhere else. There were Bass and Bluegill in the lake. I fished that water with a furry and was so successful at catching fish that the older anglers complained I was ruining it for them! I had by then graduated from bait fishing to lures but was still years away from fly fishing. It was my stepfather's dear friend, Jack Shapiro (May his memory be for a blessing) who taught me how to fly fish.

I was a freshmen at the University of Vermont and he lived nearby on the shores of Lake Champlain. He knew I was mad about fishing but still primitive in my methods. So, one day he invited me over saying, "I have something I think you are going to like." I was intrigued and showed up a day later. It was a late October and the fall foliage was a blaze of orange and red. We stood in his back yard, the lake shimmering before us, as Jack taught me the four count rhythm of the fly cast that Maclean describes as an "art" played out between "ten and two o'clock." (Pg. 2) It's harder than it looks, and, as he writes, "If you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess." (Pg. 3) I would like to say I was a natural but that was not the case; I spent my first 10 years of fly fishing catching everything but fish, yet I never tired of the experience.

What Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20th century called the awe of the ineffable, pervades the novella and my own experience both as a fly fisherman and as a religious person. It's why I can have a great day on the river and not catch a fish. It is the ground for my understanding of religion and the first place that religion and fly fishing intersect. It's also one of the reasons I love living in Sonoma County. Having a rough day, go to Hood Mountain or Salmon Creek or any number of other truly awe inspiring natural settings in our county. Surrounded in such beauty, it is hard to deny how lucky we are to be alive. Maclean writes with eyes made for wonder and in that sense, seeing Montana or even just fishing through his eyes is a religious experience. Take for example, this description of Paul casting along the Black Foot river found on page 29:

“Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of his line made momentary loops of gossamer, disappearing so rapidly in the rising big-grained vapor that they had to be retained in memory to be visualized as loops. The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of himself. The halo of himself was always there and

always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually circled to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they became rays of the sun.”

Or this, less reverent but equally poignant description of the moments after “the big one” gets away:

“Poets talk about “spots of time,” but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone. I shall remember that son of a bitch forever.”

(p.44)

There is something about those epic fish that get away that sticks with you, burned into ones memory, like a breath taking sunset. I am not sure I fully understand the experience but at least part of the story is the mystery of it all, the fact that you never know what can happen on any given day and you will never know what took your fly on that day!

I rarely keep the trout I catch; they are too beautiful to kill and eat. It is a prayerful moment when you release a trout back into the stream, holding it gently against the current so that the water flows through its gills

and it revives, feeling the sleek muscular body come back to life, watching the rainbow of colors pulse and shimmer in the undulating current; one moment the trout is in your hands, a flash of movement and it is gone, merged back with the river.

Along with “awe” and wonder” fly fishing offers the possibility for another “religious” experience described in the book and also attested to in many mystical writings: oneness

“I sat there in the hot afternoon trying to forget the beaver and trying to think of the beer. Trying to forget the beaver, I also tried to forget my brother-in-law and Old Rawhide. I knew I was going to have a long time to sit here and forget, because my brother would never quit with three or four fish, as I had, and even he was going to have a hard time getting more. I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.”

(p.44)

In this passage our narrator almost falls into his sense of oneness with the

river. In my experience fly fishing, unlike say, bait fishing where you simply chuck out into the water something the fish can't resist, requires an attunement with the environment that opens up the possibility for transcendence. This is because to successfully fly fish you need to mimic the natural food supply of the trout and to do that you need to learn the eco system of the river, it's flows and currents, the bug life in all its stages; even the birds along the river give you invaluable information about when and how to fish... We get a lovely glimpse of this on the brother's last outing. If you remember the story, at first the fishing is very slow but then the narrator notices that a certain large bug called a stone fly is hatching... As it turns out, his brother Paul, the master fly fisherman of the family does not have that fly and refuses to borrow one. A few minutes pass and now Paul is catching fish, his brother is not. What happened? Paul's brother asks:

“Well,” he says, “the first thing I noticed about this hole was that my brother wasn't catching any. There's nothing more noticeable to a fisherman than that his partner isn't catching any. “This made me see that I hadn't seen any stone flies flying around this hole.” Then he asked me, “What's more obvious on earth than sunshine and shadow, but until I really saw that there were no stone flies hatching here I didn't notice that the upper hole where they were hatching was mostly

in sunshine and this hole was in shadow.”... “Then I knew,” he said, “if there were flies in this hole they had to come from the hole above that's in the sunlight where there's enough heat to make them hatch. “After that, I should have seen them dead in the water. Since I couldn't see them dead in the water, I knew they had to be at least six or seven inches under the water where I couldn't see them. So that's where I fished.”

Fly fishing for me is very much a mindfulness practice where I try and focus all my attention on the totality of my experience... From that place of focus also flows reverence, reverie and sometimes a sense of oneness, the separate I of the ego melting away into the totality of being.

While fly fishing plays an important role in A River Runs Through it, at its essence, the novella is a story about family relationships, especially those between brothers; and a father and his sons. Fly fishing is the medium, like the river, that carries the story along. Of course Maclean is not the first American writer to work the waters of fly fishing and family. It's a well-worn genre populated with folks like Earnest Hemingway and Richard Ford. My favorite is the late great short story writer and poet, Raymond Carver, who I first read as a teen and have admired ever since. Carver often used fly fishing as a back drop for his gritty, spars tale of quiet desperation

and longing. What's missing in Carver but present in Maclean is love and a kind of optimism that even in heart break there is the consolation of memory.

This is evident from the first page description of his father who we are told was “a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman.” “It is true” he writes, “that one day a week was given over wholly to religion.” And then the narrator lists all the religious activities he and his younger brother Paul had to participate in: Sunday school, morning services, the study of Presbyterian religious doctrine in the afternoon and then evening services! As a rabbi with twins now freshmen in college, I am very sensitive to the plight of PK's or RK's (Preachers Kids/Rabbis Kids). There is no doubt in my mind that the narrator and his younger brother Paul would have found the religious rigors of Sunday oppressive and intolerable if it were not for their love for their father who, the narrators tells us, would take a break between services and walk the hills with his sons to recharge. Ostensibly this was the time he would test them on their catechisms, but, the narrator writes, “he never asked us more than the first question..., ‘What is the chief end of man?’ And we answered together so one of us could carry on if the other forgot, ‘Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.’ This always seemed to satisfy him as indeed such a beautiful answer should

have...” Two boys of the rough and tumble type described in the book must have had a mighty strong love for their father to endure so much religion when they could have been fishing! Maclean doesn’t spell it out for us, but in between the lines we feel the love and it sustains us through the whole story.

I was initiated into fishing by my mother and her mother but it was my father who taught me how to fish. My parents were divorced and he would pick me up in the dark hours of the early morning, long before the sun was up, and we would drive to one of a number of lakes a few hours from Louisville. We’d arrive just before dawn. I always fell asleep in the car and never really woke up until the boat was briskly parting the calm early morning waters of the lake, the hum of the outboard echoing in the distance, the mist rising off the lake, cool and wet on my face. We’d fish and talk the day away. We caught fish, but fishing was the pretext for what our trips were really about; the binding of a father to his son, and the transmission of knowledge, fishing lore for sure, but much more, from one generation to the next. In truth, my father was not much of a fisherman. Fishing for him was really an excuse to be on the water – he loved the water – and to tinker with boats, his true love. But we made a good pair, a father obsessed with water and boats and a son crazy for catching fish. Even so,

my father taught me how to tie the hook to the line, where to look for fish, how to cast a spinning rod and he set me on a path of learning the rest that never ends.

If the religious experience begins with awe, it is fructified, realized in relationships. I learned this first from the German Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber who fled Nazi Germany, finding refuge in Israel where he lived until his death in 1965. Buber taught in his famous work, I & Thou, that God arises in the space in between people when they see the other as a Thou, someone like themselves, animated with divinity. According to Buber, this kind of revelatory experience was not just limited to human relations but could also be experienced with other sentient beings like his childhood horse:

“When I was eleven years of age, spending the summer on my grandparents’ estate, I used...to steal into the stable and gently stroke the neck of my darling, a broad dapple-grey horse...When I stroked the mighty mane...and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin...It let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the real relation of Thou and Thou with me. The horse , even when I had not begun by pouring oats for him in the manger, very gently

raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal to be recognizable only by his fellow-conspirator; and I was approved.” (*Between Man and Man*, p. 23; Macmillan, 1965)

I doubt Maclean wrote *A River Runs Through It* with Buber in mind yet the book is a soliloquy to the sacred, if you will, holy nature of relationships. We can see that in several scenes we will turn to now. The first comes just after the narrator picks Paul and his girlfriend up from jail where they were sobering up from an unfortunate night on the town. Paul is in trouble, this is nothing new, except one senses that this time the trouble is more serious on a number of levels, a clear foreshadowing of what is to come. Our narrator deposits Paul and his “friend” at Paul’s apartment and then drives to the small town of Wolf Creek. This is a short excerpt of what he is thinking about as he drives: (p. 28)

“Then about twelve miles before Wolf Creek the road drops into the Little Prickly Pear Canyon, where dawn is long in coming. In the suddenly returning semidarkness, I watched the road carefully, saying to myself, hell, my brother is not like anybody else. He's not my gal's uncle or a brother of my aunts. He is my brother and an artist and when a four-and-a-half-ounce rod is in his

hand he is a major artist. He doesn't piddle around with a paint brush or take lessons to improve his short game and he won't take money even when he must need it and he won't run anywhere from anyone, least of all to the Arctic Circle. It is a shame I do not understand him.

Yet, even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as our 'brothers' keeper,' possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go."

I think the key phrase is the last, "It will not let go." Sibling, parent, child-- the bounds we have with family – for better or for worse – “will not let go” and define in some powerful ways who we are.

This next passage occurs much later in the book after their ill fated outing with Neal, the narrators' brother in law... We pick up when the narrator faces his wife: (pp. 76-77)

"Jessie," I said, "... I don't like him. I never will. But I love you. Don't keep testing me, though, by giving me no choices. Jessie, don't let him ..."
I stopped from going on because I knew I should have found a shorter way to say what I had already said.

"Don't let him what?" she asked.

“What were you going to say?” “I can't remember what I was going to say,” I replied, “except that I feel I have lost touch with you.”

“I am trying to help someone,” she said. “Someone in my family. Don't you understand?”

I said, “I should understand.”

“I am not able to help,” she said.

“I should understand that, too,” I said...

“Tell me,” she asked, “if my brother comes back next summer, will you try to help me help him?”

It took a long time to try to say it, but I said it. I said, “I will try.”

Then she said, “He won't come back.” Then she added, “Tell me, why is it that people who want help do better without it – at least no worse.

Actually, that's what it is, no worse. They take all the help they can get, and are just the same as they always have been.”

“Except that they are sunburned,” I said.

“That's no different,” she said.

“Tell me,” I asked her, “if your brother comes back next summer, will we both try to help him?”

“If he comes back,” she nodded. I thought I saw tears in her eyes but I was mistaken. In all my life, I was never to see her cry. And also he was never to come back.

Without interrupting each other, we both said at the same time, “Let’s never get out of touch with each other.” And we never have, although her death has come between us.”

I brought this passage for a few reasons: It’s beautiful and while the book is pretty “manly” this passage is so tender and intimate. There is also here the recurring theme which runs through the whole story; the limits of our ability to know and help even the “Thous” in our lives.

This is how their father puts it towards the end of the novella as he and his older son recall the events that led up to Paul’s murder”

“So it is,” he said using an old homiletic transition, “that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed. It is like the auto-supply shop over town where they always say, ‘Sorry, we are just out of that part.’ ”

It’s hard enough to lose a son, to feel that you just didn’t give him what he really needed, never had the right “part”. Even more devastating for a retired pastor who committed his whole life to serving and helping others, to admit that “we can seldom help anybody”, that love, knowledge, good intentions, will not necessarily overcome the challenges, the mystery that confound

relationships of all kinds. Paul's death, like most that occur outside the life cycle, leaves his family with more questions than answers. They want to know why he had to die and especially if they could have done anything to help. They are sad and frustrated yet even in their grief the current of familial love flows strong and clear.

In the final pages of the novella, the three of them – the brothers and their father – go fishing and it is on the waters of the Black Foot where the true nature of their relationship - the love they have for one another - is fully expressed:

“Not only was I on the wrong side of the river to fish ... but Paul was a good enough roll caster to have already fished most of my side from his own. But I caught two more... After I caught these two, I quit. They made ten, and the last three were the finest fish I ever caught. They weren't the biggest or most spectacular fish I ever caught, but they were three fish I caught because my brother waded across the river to give me the fly that would catch them and because they were the last fish I ever caught fishing with him.”

(pg.94)

This passage brings me to the last subject I would like to explore with you this afternoon – death, loss and memory. As a rabbi, being with people as

they walk through the valley of the shadow of death is a regular part of my life. In addition, keeping faith with those who sleep in the dust, remembering the dead is a basic and important Jewish value.

Over the years this close up view of death, loss and memory has taught me a few things which are mirrored in [A River Runs Through It](#). This includes the question that haunts Paul's family: "Could I have done anything to help?" No matter how much we do, and how hard we try, when we lose a loved one we are rarely freed from that question. This question is asked over and over again in the story, and is the most raw and poignant at the end:

"...my father came back with another question. "Do you think I could have helped him? he asked. Even if I might have thought longer, I would have made the same answer, "Do you think I could have helped him?" I answered. We stood waiting in deference to each other. How can a question be answered that asks a life time of questions?"

Another truth also present here is how limited is our ability to truly know even the most beloved in our lives. Paul was a mystery to his family. They knew him intimately yet they felt as if they did not know him at all for, as Paul's mother says near the very end: "It is those we live with and love and

should know who elude us.” (p. 104)

And then there is memory. On one level, the whole novella is about memory and the deep human desire to hold onto those we love and lose through memory. More than that; to redeem our dead, to go back again and again and try to make it ok even, especially when it wasn't ok. And Paul's death wasn't ok....Yet, ultimately what do they remember about Paul?

“That he was beautiful.” (p.102) This to me is another one of those “religious” moments in the book, the idea that love can rob death of its ultimate sting, and that our loved ones live on in us in as much as we can recall and embody the good they did and were when they were alive.

I began in the beginning and would like to conclude with the last words of the story which read like scripture to me, poetic, with a depth of feeling and a sense of the unity and the mystery of being:

“Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.

Of course now, I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the

sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.”