

## “Why, the River?”

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6 August 2023

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Have any of you ever heard the sound a bull moose makes during the rut when he feels challenged? It sounds like “Whump, whump, whump.” If you’re close enough to a bull moose to hear this, you should be looking for a tree to stand behind. Bulls can be aggressive, especially when you turn out to not be a cow moose.

So there I was with my friend Norm, fishing the Lazy Tom pool on the Roach River in Kokadjo, north of Greenville. As I was contemplating the ice forming on the ferrules of my rod due to the late September cold north of Greenville, I heard this sound: “Whump, whump, whump.” I said to Norm, who was fishing downstream of me, “What’s that sound?” At which point his eyes got really big and he pointed. So I looked where he was pointing and directly across the river from me, twenty feet away, stood a bull moose with his front feet in the stream. Being ignorant to the fact that the sound was his challenge to us, I said, “Wow!” Well, what else would you say if, unaware of the danger, you were in absolute awe of a majestic moose in its prime that close? The moose regarded us both and then simply turned around and melted back into the woods.

I think we also caught a few fish. Big landlocked salmon come up out of Moosehead Lake to spawn in the Roach River, and we were there to fish for them. But I may have been there to share the experience with my friends Norm and Randy, and to have an excuse to stand in a river while not working, letting the water flow past my feet.

I enjoy fishing when I can. Lately, I’ve had other interests than fishing in the spring, like cycling and baseball. Spring is also a very busy time at work, with the out-migrating smolts leaving for the ocean. We count these fish, and that number serves as a data point on our restoration activities, letting us know if a decision we made two years earlier has made a difference of any kind. The smolt count also gives us the denominator in the smolt-to-adult return ratio, which is a measure of mortality at sea. We also are stocking fish and beginning to trap adults returning to Maine. So maybe I do get to “fish” in the spring, even if not with a fly rod, my preferred implement.

But fishing on my own time can be a great opportunity to sit in the quiet, reflect, appreciate creation, and adore our creator. Often I’ll stop and take it all in—not fishing, just smelling, listening, and touching the riverscape. From a very young age, being on or near the water was something that I needed to do. That’s likely why I have an obsession with all kinds of boats, or why I feel a need to know all the streams and then share that information with passengers in the

car, even if they don't really want to know. On a trip to Ellsworth one day, Bonnie didn't share my enthusiasm upon learning that we crossed Tunk Stream three times on a direct out and back trip, when normally we would have expected to cross it twice. But because it flows out of Tunk Lake going north and then loops back south crossing the Blacks Woods Road twice . . . Well, you're getting the same glassed-over look that Bonnie gets, so back to it.

When I was a child, I got in plenty of trouble for going to the local pond, mostly because I'd come home wet and dirty. I guess I was in some danger, but I was oblivious and really felt safe where I was. There is something about standing next a stream, or just drifting along in a canoe, that can be very relaxing and peaceful. Except maybe for times like when the mayflies were hatching, and the trout were feasting, and I was fighting off blackflies—and try as I might, I couldn't get the right size or color of mayfly pattern.

Until I finally did, but I'd had to add more leader to make up for what I'd trimmed back changing flies. When I found the right pattern, the trout struck, and I raised the tip to set the hook. Then the rod started to bend, but just as I was about to haul in a leviathan, my poorly tied knot let go and my rod sprang back—and the only fly I had that the trout were eating disappeared with the trout. You might have heard my cry of anguish that fateful day as I cursed my mistake and my frustration at losing the fish. But yeah, fishing is mostly gurgling water and beautiful fish, and sometimes the best fishing is when you just take in the view or feel the water washing over your hand.

In today's gospel reading, for lack of anything better to do, the disciples go fishing. Yes, they made their living as fishermen, but they were also just looking for some food—and trying to come to terms with the loss of Jesus.

In one of my favorite books, *The River Why* by David James Duncan, we read about a young man named Gus growing up in Portland, Oregon, in the 1950 and '60s. His father is a snobbish fly fisherman sportswriter and his mother a country cowgirl spin caster, and Gus grows up a fishing prodigy. At the center of the family dynamic is the debate over the Isaac Walton book, *The Complete Angler*, and its supposed endorsement of fly fishing over spin casting, although as Gus reads this book for himself he discovers that Walton was talking less about fishing and more about this person called God. Gus also reads the Bible to try to understand why some families, like his, live in nice houses and can go fishing at all the best places, while one of his friends has to beg for relish packets for something to eat before he goes home to his one-room house crowded with family. So Gus starts on a journey to try to find his place in the world and understand his connection to his creator.

During the tale, Gus discovers, in the same scripture that we read today, that the disciples counted the fish and that the number is recorded in the Bible. Immediately he felt respect for

those fishermen, especially given the vagueness that is present in other parts of the Bible. Think about that. The apostles go fishing and have little luck at first, but then Jesus shows up—after being dead for three days—and tells them to try the other side of the boat. When they do, they catch a huge number of fish. Then, despite being surprised that the newly risen Christ is there, they actually take time to count the fish and record that number. So Jesus was a fisherman too. Makes me wonder if Jesus ever exaggerated about the “one that got away.”

In the end, Gus finds what he needs to connect to his creator. He tries different approaches to find meaning to life, and this is done through his gift as a fisherman and his connection to the rivers he fishes. The climax of the story is when Gus follows a large Chinook female salmon upstream and finds an inner peace that helps him deal with the Vietnam era and all the other issues that are part of life.

Just like for Gus and those disciples, fishing can be a way for us to disconnect from our day-to-day lives and connect to our world and creator. The disciples are not just fishing, but also finding food. Maybe this is a metaphor, especially with God, in the form of Jesus, providing the direction to cast on the other side and fish provided for food or spiritual food or just fishing for more Christians. Who knows? Where do you find your connection to your creator? Hopefully you do make time to break away, put the phone down, or just sit still and listen to your surroundings. We need spiritual food as much as earthly food. I hope you have a way to fish for your spiritual meals.

Now go and get fed.