



A
Gift
Beyond Compare

by Todd
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*Maybe we need to
spend a little more
time looking –
basking in the
beauty all around
us – and a little
less time fishing.*

You know I'm a writer. Been one for thirty-eight years. I haven't written much over the last few months, but I'll do the best I can with this.

I was just watching two little birds. They flew by, twisting and turning in an intricate dance above the river, and for a brief moment I saw grace. Not the oft-used word but the thing itself. Grace. Wing-tip to wing-tip, feather to delicate feather, there was a living vision of purpose, beauty and control before my eyes, and then it moved on, upstream, out of sight.

You're liable to see such things on a trout stream. I know I have.

I'm sitting here because I can't do much else. My days of wading and casting are over. In fact, my time on this planet is just about over. My life, the only one I've ever known, is nearing its end. Cancer. The Big C. The only disease that mimics our culture. Growth without purpose, growth without restraint, growth for its own sake. In one of those delicious quirks of fate, my body, or at least what's left of it, has become a depressing symbol of all that's wrong with our society. I'd laugh at the irony if it didn't hurt so damn much.

Enough about me, though. This letter, one of the last things I'm likely to do, shouldn't be about pain or regret or disappointment. I've lived too well and accomplished too much. I will not move on in a cloud of self pity. Instead, I want to talk about life. I've come to understand the subject a little bit better over these last few months and I believe that I've learned a few things worth sharing.

The first, as you might have guessed, is choice. My choice, right now, is to sit here in the sun and watch the river.

From where I'm sitting I can see clear down to the Comer Pool and all the way up to the Lightning Hole. Nobody calls it that anymore, of course. Old Tommy Clark's been gone for almost thirty years and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who remembers the story, hard pressed to find an old newspaper clipping about the fellow who got electrocuted while fighting a brown trout. Killed Tommy, that lightning strike did, and then it ran down his line and killed his fish, too. A nice brown, a couple, maybe three pounds if I remember right.

But I digress. I can see the water here, a hundred yards or more, and I'm afraid that although I've fished this spot a thousand times, I've never seen it in this light. There's a shine on the surface, a golden reflection of the sun poised just above the trees on the western bank, and I can't help but think it's appropriate that I'm sitting here in my folding chair looking at the tail-end of a glorious day on the river, all the while thinking about the tail-end of my life. If I was a different kind of man I might be tempted to talk about this day as a metaphor and paint a pretty picture of time well spent, a river worthy of my life and a life worthy of this river, but to be honest, that sort of thing strikes me as awfully close to maudlin.

Instead, I want to talk about the light. You see, as a fisherman, as a fly fisherman, I was always a little too busy to notice the light. I wanted to see those rising fish, those delicate rings, those dimples slipping down the river like the fast fading tracks of a perfect moment, preserved just long enough to point

me in the right direction. But I never saw the light on the water for what it truly was. I can tell you now, though. It's beauty, it's perfection. To be honest, I wish I'd spent just a little more time looking and a little less time waving that pretty stick in the air. But that was my choice.

Choices. That's right. That's what I wanted to talk about. I've made a bunch during my life; some turned out well and others didn't. But it's only over the last few years that I started realizing what a great gift they are. We can choose to rush or we can choose to slow down. We can choose to move through life unaware or we can choose to see, to really see, the things around us. We can choose to touch, to feel, to love, or we can choose to close ourselves away from everything else. What a blessing, to know that the way we look at life is a choice and that we ultimately have control over every thing that really matters.

There are moments when I am afraid. Yet even in the midst of fear I'm comforted, for I can look around me and see the river, the trees, the birds, the fish, the sunlight. And each of these things is a great blessing. Each of these things is real.

Like right now. I could be propped up in my bed, watching the news on TV, listening to some slick broadcaster give me his snake-oil take on the world. That's one choice, although not one I'd typically make. Or I can drag myself down here to the river and sit in this chair, which truth-to-tell is not in much better shape than I am, and watch the water flow by. I'll tell you what. I'll take the river every single time.

A little secret. There's a branch that hangs off that big willow on the far bank – if you were here I'd point it out to you – and in the shade of that branch is a nice brown. Oh, I've never caught him. He's too smart and I'm too old, and even if I wasn't sick I wouldn't be able to wade across and make that cast. It's a young man's cast, the kind I haven't even considered for the last few years, but I know it's possible. Once upon a time, as the story goes, I could make that cast and catch that fish. In fact, twenty five years ago I waded out up to my armpits and caught a trout under that very same tree with one of the nicest casts I ever made. Jesus, that was poetry. You never really know until you try, and one day I did. A choice, it was, and the right one. Then again, with the advantage of hindsight you see that trying is almost always the right way to go.

As the sun drops, the bugs are starting to show. The caddis are already here on the banks, buzzing around in clouds, swarming. I've always liked the caddis. They're so full of life. They bounce and zoom and zig and zag, and if a guy ever told you he knew exactly what a caddis was going to do next, you could tell he was a liar. Of course he was a fisherman, so you pretty much knew that anyway.

The mayflies are starting to come off, too. Little sailboats floating down the current. It's funny but over the course of a

couple hundred years you'd think that we would have been able to come up with a better description. Sailboats. But we haven't, and that's what they are, and I have to admit that there's a certain comfort to finding the one description, the one word, that truly fits. Maybe someday there will be another, but it won't happen in my lifetime.

The fish aren't up yet. I honestly don't think they like the sun. The birds, though, are working the water in singles and pairs, picking off both the mayflies and the caddis as they have the

How can you be alive and not feel the glory of such a day? Even with my constant companion *Pain* by my side, I am blessed.

So I share these things with you, my friend. My discomfort – thanks, I know you'd help if there were only some way that you could – and my pleasure, my life and my thoughts, the beauty all around me, this wondrous world that we've been given to steward and protect, a



WAITING FOR THE SPINNERS BY ROD CROSSMAN

chance, and I can tell you that the trout are starting to think about switching to the top. There's something about trout, something about the species, that makes them want to feed up high in the water column. You look at the way they're built and you can tell that their body type just lends itself to sipping dry flies off the surface. If ever a creature was more perfect for the fly rod, I haven't heard of him.

The gift of this evening, however, is not the trout, or the bugs, or even the river. Instead, it's the fact that I'm truly aware of these things. I can close my eyes – I just did, although you'd never know it unless I told you – and experience the world through my other senses. There's a light breeze and it's soft on my face. There's warmth, too, because the sun is touching me with the last of its golden rays. I can smell the rich, heady scent of spring, which is nothing if not the scent of promise and rebirth. And the river . . . God, what music. Water is a symphony, and for this moment, in this moment, I am an audience of one.

gift beyond compare. These things, while not always comfortable or easy, are most certainly things worth sharing. I'm glad that you were, and are, willing to listen.

Some years ago I read a poignant tale, the truth of which became more and more apparent as I grew older. A student asked his teacher, a wise old shaman, why he was neither hot in the summer nor cold in the winter. The teacher answered, "I am both, but I am not bothered by them."

"Why?" pondered the student.

The teacher responded in four words. "Because they are real."

Because they are real.

Dear God, if only I had learned this particular lesson forty years ago. For tonight I sit here on the banks of a river I love, and I do know what is real. This river. The sunlight on my face. The birds, the insects, the trout . . . all these things, plus so many others. They touch me, they infuse my flesh and my spirit, they give

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me hope where so many people would see none. As I look around, I can push away my frailty and sickness. Wallace Stegner said, *“By such a river it is impossible to believe that one will ever be tired or old.”* I’m not sure we make our own reality, but here, in this place, I’m both an old man and young again; my body sick but my spirit soars.

Of course, I’d be lying if I said I was ready for what comes next. I don’t want to give up these days of sun and warmth. Spring has come, soft and gentle, and it seems strange, in fact it seems impossible, to think that I won’t know the fullness of one more summer. But all men pass, and it’s what we do with our lives that matters most. At least I’ve done enough with mine to hold the regrets at bay.

Oh, there he was. The first trout of the evening. A little guy, splashy rise, probably took a caddis. And there’s another. Nice fish. Looked like a brown, a hint of butter and brown sugar on his side as he rolled on the surface. It’s starting. I knew it would.

Someone, I can’t seem to remember who, once said that no man is an island. The Native Americans talk about The-Spirit-That-Moves-In-All-Things. The Taoists speak of The Force. I’ve studied these philosophies over the last few years, these two as well as a half dozen more.

Here’s what it boils down to. We are all part of nature, we are all connected. There’s something, an energy, perhaps even a spirit, that joins us together. As the ancient Greeks said, life is a tapestry and each of us a thread in the weave.

My days are almost done, my time is almost over. There are moments when I am afraid. Yet even in the midst of fear I’m comforted, for I can look around me and see the river, the trees, the birds, the fish, the sunlight. And each of these things is a great blessing. Each of these things is real.

Thank you, my friend. I know this hasn’t been easy. If you don’t mind, I think I’m just going to sit here a while longer and watch the trout rise. 