

FISHING WITH MY FATHER

By J.W. Northrup

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Now that I have reached the age of forty, I view my youth from a different perspective; no longer being inside of it but rather, viewing it from outside from a distance—as if viewing a town from a mountain top. The details are indistinguishable and only the prominent features stand out.

Looking back, I see a secure childhood life. My father worked for the newspaper, my mother worked as a mother and no one conceived of things otherwise. I remember my family vacations to the beach and to a cabin on Payette Lake that lasted two weeks but seemed to fly by in a matter of hours. I see myself hitting a few home runs, playing some good football games and some bad. I recall my buddies who have gradually faded away, my school teachers, my antagonists and of course the girls who infatuated me.

But now, looking back, I feel that I was never really a part of it. I was somehow individuated; I was aloof, introverted, detached—often stigmatized by the word "shy"—and though I participated, I was not involved. I cannot say why, but it does not matter now. And so, not being particularly proud of my past, yet having nothing to be ashamed of, I view these times through a self-imposed myopia preferring not to dwell upon them as there is nothing to be gained by doing so.

But there is one significant exception to this: The time spent in the mountains fishing with my father.

These memories stand out in sharp focus and I suddenly realize why the others are blurred. These trips were the focus of my youth. They were in fact, the reason for it; the rest was merely chaff—a distraction from the one thing I wanted so much to do.

In those younger days, the bulk of life was simply "busy work" done between

fishing trips. School was something to occupy the colder months when the snow covered the high country and if I suffered through it with acceptable grades, I would then be granted a summer of fishing.

Thanksgiving was the time to recount the past summer fishing adventures. Christmas was the time I received my new fishing pole or reel or backpack. Spring was the time to prepare for the summer fishing trips when we would break out the trail maps, trace our routes and campsites on a map of the High Uinta Mountains or the Wind Rivers and begin tying our flies in earnest.

To this day as I did then, I wished I did not have to grow up and my father would always be in his forties and we could plan our next fishing trip, don our backpacks and head up the into the mountains forevermore. If there is a heaven, when and if I arrive there, I will be sorely disappointed if this is not my fate for eternity.

But the realities of life eventually swept me away and I, like most other emancipated young men with my chimerical ideas of independence and self reliance, left home to pursue the generally assigned fortunes and purposes of my generation—something that I neither desired nor was I prepared for. And so being uncommitted, my pursuits were varied and arbitrary—from conventional academics to social recreationalism, from humanitarian martyrdom to utter selfishness. I followed many purposes but it seems that none were my own.

Now, as I write this, I am in the very same room that I slept in as a young boy in my boyhood home. Apparently I never left.

Now it is time to regroup, time to reflect, time to find something real, or release something that is too real. I find myself stuck in a time in my life that I never wanted to

let go of. Apparently I never did.

The rest of my life is out of focus—a waste of time but a gain in experience; and experience is all that I have. I suppose that when we die, experience will be all that we take with us and it will be then that we realize that those temporal things we spent our lifetime accumulating were a ridiculous game that, in the final analysis, meant nothing.

And so I sit here contemplating my youth as if I were an old man with my life behind me. Maybe it is ending; maybe it is just beginning—I don't know which at this point. For now I will look back at the things that are real and maybe in doing so, my life will begin to make sense.

My first memories are of a stream—I don't know exactly where. It is a mountain stream running through a meadow not far from our family picnic area. My father has just caught a trout. I walk up to it and stare at it as it lay there on the grass, its mouth rhythmically opening and closing. I reach for it apprehensively. Suddenly it flips and bounces spasmodically and I jump back in fear. I hear my father laugh as he reaches out and grasps the squirming fish. He pulls the fly from its mouth, and hangs it from a forked stick, handing it to me so that I may carry it back and show the family. I hold onto the end of the stick and follow along, keeping a wary eye on the fish whose eyes will not close and signify that the life is gone out him. And when I finally relax and look away, it suddenly gives a final twitch. I drop the stick and stand back staring suspiciously at the motionless fish. Despite my father's reassurance, I insist on a longer stick.

It was not long afterward that I caught my first fish, and I too, became hooked.

It was on Lost Lake and I can clearly see an image of a fish flailing wildly as it flies through the air over my head as, in the frenzy of the moment, I jerked it from the water. My father comes to retrieve the prize.

He shows me my fish. *My fish!*

"Should we keep it?" he asks smiling, "it's just a little one."

I nearly panic at the thought that he might throw it back. "Yes! Yes I want it! I want to show Mom!"

He holds it out for me and I summon the courage to hold it in my small hand. I grab it and, as it squirms in my hand I am prepared. I squeeze it tightly until it gives up, and then strike its head upon a rock as I'd seen my father do. The kill is complete; my initiation from child to boy is done. I am a fisherman and that is all that I cared to be, and if that is all there was to life that was good enough for me.

For a number of summers afterward my father would prepare my tackle so I could fish and would always be nearby to patiently extricate me from my inevitable tangles with the line.

Not long afterward, I would be weaned from my father's side. Now I must tie my own tackle and land my own fish and when it bounces and flails about, I must steel my nerves and grasp this thrashing, squirming thing to retrieve a lure from inside the toothed mouth as the eyes stare blankly at me.

I wonder if it feels pain—if it can comprehend what I am doing. But I never question the morality of it. If it is good by my father, it is good by me.

As we drive to our remote mountain destinations we happily scoff at the peasants surrounding the roadside lakes, fishing with their artificial bait and their

worms, sitting there on the shoreline, or floating in their boats, lounging like walruses on a beach, drinking their soda or beer, eating their hotdogs and potato chips as they swat at mosquitoes and horseflies. They fish so monotonously, standing or sitting in their designated spots, casting and reeling, casting and reeling with no technique, no tactic, and no art.

If by chance they do catch a fish, it is certainly not from skill or savvy, it is mere luck and the fish are most certainly of the grain-fed domesticated variety recently planted there by a nearby hatchery. These people know nothing of what we know. They do not understand what we understand and we do not care to tell them, for if we were to divulge our esoteric destinations they would certainly follow along bringing their corn and their smelly fish bait. They would flatten the vegetation and drop their candy wrappers and soda cans on the shore. They would leave behind their tangled masses of discarded fish line, take hatchets to the trees and turn the pristine high mountain lakes into overrun parks bringing the cacophony and insanities of civilization with them—not because of some destructive intention, but simply because they know of no other way.

We were far too critical, and it was really all in good fun, this trash talk.

Until you spend an evening on a high mountain lake and experience the peaceful calm of the wilderness and the scent of the pines; until the only sounds are the babble of a nearby brook and the crackling of a fire; until you feel the open spaces around you and the clean crisp mountain air and look up at the night sky and see more stars than you'd ever imagine were there you will not know what my father instilled in me and you will not understand what we understood or be with us as we arrive at a remote high

mountain lake and wonder if the fish are as big as they were when my father was last here a decade ago.

The image of my father will always be of a man wearing a slightly misshapen cowboy hat and a fishing vest, working his way along the shore of a lake, intently watching his fly as he slowly retrieves it, deftly folding the line over and over in his left hand; then with a flick of his wrist, he brings the rod to the vertical position while the line rises slowly off the water, sailing back behind him, folding over itself further and further back until—at the precise moment—he flips the rod forward again and the line lightly flies forward over the lake, rhythmically unfolding just above the surface, settling softly upon the water with the fly being the last to drift slowly down and alight gracefully upon the surface.

That is my father and that image is senior to any other image. That picture is what I see when I look at him, even now, anywhere we are and anything we are doing. When I see my father today, the current scene is always double exposed with that image, and as long as it is there, he will never grow old. I know that is not true, but that is the way I want it to be and so I will hold on to the image, because to lose it is to confront the terrible consequence of time as it inexorably moves forward destroying everything that we want so much to be forever.

Together, we walk the trails to our secret fishing destinations. I follow along matching his smooth, easy pace—a pace that never tires and never slows—and I am always spurred on by another promising fish story told to me on the drive to the trailhead. We arrive at the lake and as if on cue, we part and go our own ways,

selecting our own fishing spots, determining our own strategy. Sometimes we disappear from each others' sight as he follows the outlet into a lower meadow and I navigate the shoreline to fish the inlet and then follow the stream to an upper lake. But when the sun disappears behind the mountain and the early evening cast its shadows upon the lake, as if by telepathy, we simultaneously meet at the head of the trail, nonchalantly asking, "How did you do?" and reach into our creels to display the day's catch.

When the day reaches its final, unfortunate, but inevitable conclusion, we drive back down the mountain roads, destined for home, and I try to stay awake on the drive as my father serenades me with hackneyed verses of songs from his youth. I stay awake because I want to smile and giggle at his purposely awkward singing and because halfway home, we stop and get a malt at a small-town drug store, and each time it is the best malt I have ever tasted.

My mother would be home ready to *oohh* and *aww* as I hold each fish up for her to see, patiently listening as I explained the technique involved in each particular catch.

I recall that at the age of six, I attained a significant stage of maturity. During that summer, I would accompany my dad and his fellow backpackers on a seven-day backpack. No longer would I be left behind at home as the men take to the mountains with me left at home with my sisters; now I would be part of this exclusive group. And so we would head into the high country, away from the comforts of home, carrying our heavy packs loaded with what was now our only means of survival.

I bore my burden as we trekked into the high country and at night proudly

complained of the soreness in my shoulders, knowing the backpack was a test of robust men, not for the soft city folk.

We cared little for the things that would bring comfort. On a backpacking trek, one shed the comforts of modern society and survived on the bare necessities. You lived free from the distracting world filled with artificial comfort and ease. You experience the elements of the wilds and feel the chill of the mountain air or take shelter from a thunderstorm beneath a tall pine. You take off soggy boots to dry by the fire at the end of a long day's trek through muddy meadows and talus slopes and inspect the blisters on your toes.

As we all sat around the warm fire at night, tales of past adventures were told by the elders and I would smile and nod and laugh along, so happy to now be a part of the adventure, knowing that after this trip, I would be able to join in the telling.

To my father and I and our exclusive, esoteric clan, adventure was reduced in proportion to the amount of accommodation and ease. We would scoff at the fancy tents and expensive gear carried by other "prima donna" hiking groups. It seemed that few understood the purpose of such a trip. Few knew that a hiking trip was not a test of equipment, but a challenge of the environment versus man. To stack the odds in your favor was a violation of the game of "roughing it." To avoid the elements with fancy camping gear carried by horses was seen as an insult to the serenity of the mountains.

But the object was not the camping or the scenery or the hike or the hardship. Had that been the reason, I would likely have given it up altogether and moved on. Without a fishing pole in hand, the hike would lose much of its purpose. We were there for the fishing—for the thrill of the hunt—for the chance that one of these lakes would

contain a four-pound brook trout lurking somewhere in the depths of its cold waters, poised for a surprise attack on a hand-tied greenish fly attached to the end of a transparent floating line.

For my father and I, the more remote the location, the greater the effort involved in getting there, the bigger the mystery, the better was the promise of bagging a native trophy trout from the waters of a remote, uncontaminated mountain lake. It was not necessarily true, but that is what we sought. And since the telling of the story would be the legacy of the trip, this made for a good story.

The mountains were the playing field; big fish were the purpose of the game.

The perfect lake where the trout were huge and abundant and took every fly you cast—this was the thing we sought and the object of our struggle as we carried our heavy packs over high mountain passes, through rain storms and blisters, through swarming mosquitoes and cold nights sleeping in primitive tents on unpadded hard ground.

Yet, ironically enough, had we ever reached this fabled place, the game would be over and the struggle would be meaningless. I believe that is why we never found such a place—we came close a few times, but only close enough to make it necessary to come back the next year.

Maybe this is why I am here today writing of these times. Had we reached such a place, perhaps I would have gone on with my life, but sadly, I feel I can never get there. My father has grown old somehow, his body no longer able to endure rigors of the steep mountain passes and the fifty mile backpacks. Now he has the roll my

grandfather once had, and for me, the roll of the father—but a father without a son. I have broken the chain, and I can't help but wonder why.

I see now that it is not wrong to reflect upon the past and to hold it dear. I am not living in the past.

Rather, I have let myself be distracted by a society filled with materialistic purposes and forgotten the lesson I learned while fishing with my father—the lesson of adventure and challenge and companionship. For that is—or should be—life.

To this day, as we sit around at the family gatherings and reminisce of those times, we do not speak of quality of a weather-proof tent, but rather, we talk laughingly of the disastrous tent that let in the rain and soaked our sleeping bags during a miserable stormy night. We do not talk of the easy trail through the green meadow, we talk of the hellacious route over a backbreaking pass. We speak of the lightning and the rain and the trials and tribulations and when we speak of these events, it is not with a furrowed brow but with a contented smile and a longing to return.

It was not the fish or the mountains or even my father—it was the game! It was a game that my father and I could experience together in the spirit of adventure. And no two were better paired in this game, or in more agreement upon it. That is the gift that we shared.

And as I look back over those years, I see that the things in sharp focus are the activities that involved agreement upon a game, a purpose, and the hard-won skill gained from true desire to participate. Those things that are out of focus are the games I was unwilling, obligated or undecided about playing—that is all.

And that is life in a nutshell.

It is spring now. Time to break out the trail maps and make some plans and heed the lessons taught in my younger days fishing with my father—that life is the challenge of the game and the game is whatever YOU choose to challenge you.

J.W. Northrup

More Short Stories by J.W. Northrup available on Kindle

- Wild Hair!
- Lost on a Train in France
- Throwing Rocks at Deer
- Running a Marathon with the Runs
- The Great Subway Adventure

Novels by J.W. Northrup

- The Gold Slaves
- Total Amnesia (coming soon to Kindle)

○ THE GOLD SLAVES SYNOPSIS:

Remember the Heaven's Gate Cult? What if they had told the truth? What if they in fact had rendezvoused with the ship behind the Hale-Bopp comet after their mass suicide and were now thriving on a new higher plane of existence. And what if the member who stayed behind were to stand out on the street corner with a megaphone and give us this "truth". What would we have done with it?

We would have declared him crazy of course – possibly a murderer. Maybe we would put him in a state hospital and load him up with enough Thorazine to make him "sane" again.

But what if WE are wrong?

Well from where we are sitting, we just can't tell. You can roll your eyes and say, "everybody knows they were some crazy cult", but you don't know that, you can't know that. You can't jump in a spaceship and fly behind that Hale-Bopp comet and take a look for yourself, so frankly you just don't know. You can claim you do all you want; you can declare yourself an *Anti-Heavensgapist* and preach how they were misguided beings lead by an evil man and you'd probably get a whole lot of agreement, but so what? You still don't know. You would be "right" according our society, but you could not know.

So what if we ARE wrong and they were right? Would we be able to "see" their truth? No way. Our vision would never penetrate the boundaries of our own dearly beloved principles and philosophies; confined as we are by our scientific laws, religious doctrines, economic principles and pet philosophies. We can't see through them any more than we could see the sky from inside a mine two thousand feet below the surface.

And that is what my story is about; a group of gold miners that live two thousand feet below the surface of the earth.

For over a hundred years the Gold Slaves have been trapped within the earth, completely unaware of the surface. They have no idea they are "in" anything. They call their world *Space* just as we call ours Earth and their barrier is obvious—solid rock.

The Gold Slaves offer gold to the Gods above through two mine shafts (they believe they are divine connections to their gods) and in return, they are granted food. That is the basis of their existence. From the surface we can *easily* see that they are slaves to

a mining company. We laugh critically and think what a silly fairy tale these people have fallen for! Gold is offered to Gods? Food only comes from gods? The universe is solid? Mankind's purpose is to follow the golden paths to Heaven? How silly and ignorant can these people be!

Here's the irony; during the one hundred years the slave miners have been confined in their stark, inhospitable environment, they have developed technologies that would baffle a Harvard Professor. For instance, they discovered electricity, which they utilize to illuminate their underground world and run their machinery; and it is completely wireless! (Don't ask me how it works, I don't know). And don't try to tell me it's impossible, all you MIT know-it-all's. If you knew everything you would have a formula that would reduce war to zero or an equation that solved arguments, or a potion that dissolved hate—all of which, incidentally, have been solved below by the Gold Slaves.

The mental and spiritual technology of *Space* is far superior to ours. In their world there is no neurosis, psychosis or any of the hundreds of other "mental disorders" listed in the ridiculous Diagnostics Manual that our supposed mental health professionals use to justify our conditions.

They may have to execute some wild twists with logic to explain the world from their viewpoint but as far as sanity and happiness is concerned, they are far better off than the people on the surface.

In the story, two of the Gold Slaves—"Columbus's" of their world—accidentally escape through an adjoining cave network and step out of the earth into the sun. Now the "truth" of their situation becomes obvious. From outside the cave, they can clearly see

that they have been trapped inside the Earth. They also realize that they were trapped by a philosophy that inhibited them from looking.

Once they stepped out of the Earth, their religion falls apart; not by conflict or persuasion, or terrorism or war, but simply because they suddenly found themselves in a position from which they could actually see! Could our religions and schools of thought fall apart were we to step out of whatever fixes us into our “tunnel vision” on Earth?

I’m suggesting this because I think we can all agree mankind hasn’t exactly come up with workable solutions to happiness and well being. Now far be it for me to add my solutions to the overflowing mishmash of dearly held and ferociously defended opinions, pseudo-facts and philosophies, but allow me to suggest the possibility that from the position we are in, we just can’t see it. BUT were we to “step out” and view things from another, as yet unforeseen viewpoint, it would become as obvious as the two Gold Slaves stepping out of the mine.

So what is this thing we are “in” that has makes it impossible for us to see? What is our two thousand foot solid rock barrier?

Are you ready?

Amnesia!

That is the “out” we the surface people have never been freed of. First because you don’t even know you have it. Second because you don’t know how to removed the veil of unknowing that has been placed upon you by a mechanical mind—a mind

programmed to make you aware of what you need to be aware of and keep you oblivious to your past—and I'm not talking past *life*, I'm talking past LIVES. Don't believe it? Of course not, you mustn't believe it. It would ruin everything – it would render war useless, introduce incredibly advanced technologies, invalidate Charles Darwin, cause the pharmacology industry to collapse, blow up the insurance industry, completely nullify control of the people by force and thus put the police and the military out of work, even step on the toes of a few religions. No, you don't want to know this. It would ruin the game. It would be as earth shattering as two Gold Slaves walking out of the mine. Don't walk out of that cave, go back inside.

But if you care to investigate this a bit further, read the next Science Fiction novel by J.W. Northrup; "Total Amnesia" and find out how you—like the two Gold Slaves—can step out of the mine.

J.W. Northrup

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