

Take me to the river

How fly fishing cast a spell on a boy, and his mother, as they learn together: it's not about the fish

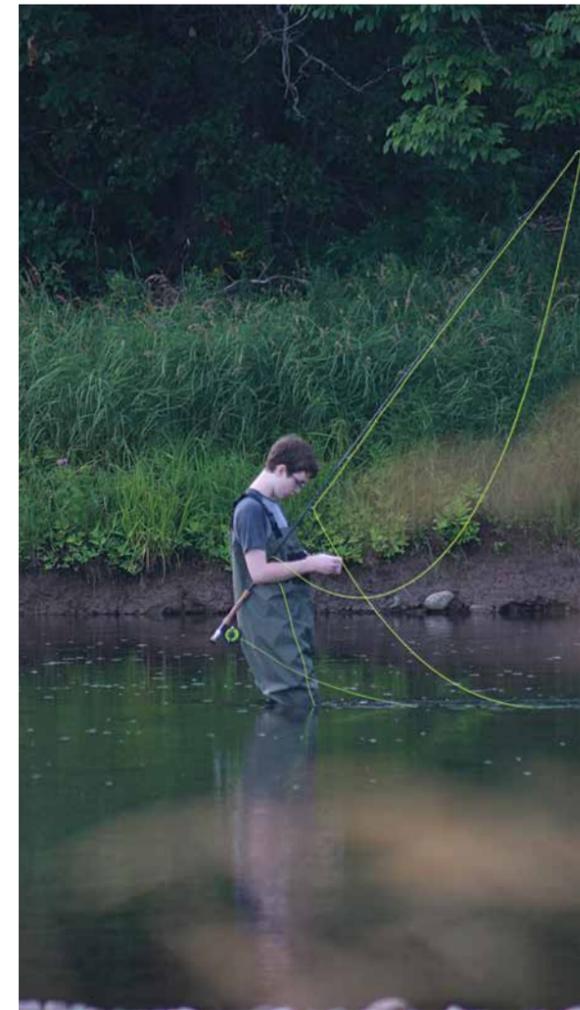
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Not so very long ago, there hung a poster in my youngest son's bedroom that states "Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not the fish they are after—Henry David Thoreau".

It was a beautiful poster, all mossy greens and shimmering water, featuring a lone fly fisherman wading near the banks of a tranquil river. It was a peaceful piece of art—quiet, spiritual, and Zen—but not something that would really gel with the décor of his then eclectic gamer/soccer/hockey-themed bedroom.

Nonetheless, when Jacob asked me to buy that poster, I bought it for him gladly and without hesitation. At the time, you see, I knew that fishing, particularly fly fishing, had become a near obsession for him.

At only 11 years of age, with money earned from his weekly flyer delivery route, Jacob would buy hooks and lures and gizmos and gadgets. He even bought a fly-tying kit so he could learn to make his own salmon and trout flies. He spent hours with clamps and glue and thread, feathers, fur, and sparkles, making wee things with weird names like nymph and woolly bugger. He contacted fishing guides from all over the country to ask them if they could or would outfit and guide kids. He also asked certain outfitters if they would give him a special rate because he was small—something I only realized when I received a call one day from an outfitter in northern Quebec, who had actually called to give him a quote for a week-long



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fishing package. (And yes, a lecture on contacting strangers over the Internet ensued. Still, the outfitter and I both agreed it was kind of funny.)

Jacob researched and read about fishing endlessly, and he learned, and he asked bog-gling questions (What's a grilse, Mom?) that I simply couldn't answer. And, for the rest of my life, I will never forget the Christmas Day Jacob received his first coveted Orvis fly rod. There he was, out on the lawn and street in suburban Dartmouth, practising his cast over and over, catching nothing more than snowflakes and quizical looks from neighbours.

While I never got to the point of fly fishing the front lawn, I nonetheless did begin to take a great interest in the sport myself. While Jacob seemingly embraced fishing because it led directly to fun and adventure, I grabbed onto it as a way to reconnect with a young boy who had become distant and angry in the aftermath of his parents' divorce.

Going with the flow

With the father-son bond damaged and severed, I did the only thing I could think of to do in my new desperate, single mother state. I packed up the car with Jacob and all of his gizmos and gear, bought myself the most stylish pair of rubber waders I could find, and set off for the Margaree River in Cape Breton.

The learning curve was steep on that first trip to "The



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Margaree". With the help of a young yet experienced fishing guide, however, the curve was manageable and surprisingly fun. Jacob—no surprise—was a natural. He discovered and mastered the rhythm and timing and grace of fly fishing very quickly. Me? I fumbled, was hopeless at knots, complained of sore shoulders and abandoned fishing for photography more often than not.

And yet, the trip turned out to be an astounding thing. Jacob shone and dug in to perfect his new skills. I gushed over the scenery and the beauty of the place. The colours of the mountains against the blue of the sky and the mirror of the water did our hearts good and made my photographer's eye weep. And even though we didn't catch even one little fish that year, we vowed to return.

And we did.

Every autumn, for the next four years, Jacob and I returned to the Margaree River. Sometimes it was only for a few days—whatever we could manage—but we returned. Every time we went back, it was with better gear and more knowledge (not to mention more stylish waders) and with yet another year of healing from heartbreak under our belts.

Not once, in all the time we spent there, did either of us ever catch a prized salmon. Still, we considered every trip time well spent. We considered the experiences we had more important than a few landed fish.

Our annual trips gave us our own tall fishing tales to tell. Like the one about Jacob almost getting swept away the first year (he was so small that first trip) and having to be carried through the strong currents by the guide, or about me comically snagging my hat with the hook, or of Jacob deciding what dog he wanted in the future after falling in love with a bird dog named Bella.

After every outing, we had additional stories and memories to bring back to the city.

Most of those memories inevitably involved the people

we met. From the guides that put up with us over the years (Thank you Bradley, Greg, Leonard!), to the random and helpful strangers who shared stories and tips, it was definitely the people that made our expeditions shine the most.

I think it was on our second trip that Jacob actually remarked that so many of the other fishermen were coming over to talk to him that he was losing serious fishing time.

At the time, it dawned on me that Jacob, as a child out on the river in waders (in all the time we spent on the river, he was the only young person I ever saw) was something of a novelty to the adults fishing around us. It was awesome to see this young boy—my boy—create a natural bridge from younger to older. We listened to all the stories, and humbly accepted all the knowledge that the fishermen who approached seemed so willing—even eager—to pass along. We listened to the reminiscences of days when the salmon were brighter and more numerous, when kids weren't so plugged-in and actually fished with their elders, when the future of sport fishing was not threatened or worried over. We learned about the need to take care, and worry ourselves, about the future of this place that had so quickly become dear to us.

Jacob learned, and grew, and soon enough—all too quickly—things changed and tables turned. I began to worry less that he would be swept away, and began to find myself relying more on him to teach me, fix my gear, and pull me out of the muck and goofy situations than I too often tended to get

myself into.

It's only five years beyond that first trip, and yet Jacob now towers over me. He shaves. He's grown up, has a job, a girlfriend, his own young life. He now is living with his father (time has healed) for the few years he has left before heading out on his own.

He still visits me occasionally, however, and we fish when we can. Neither of us, to date, has caught that elusive salmon yet, but that's ok, as the chances of doing so have increased dramatically in the last little while.

I now live in Cape Breton, you see, and I can head down to the Margaree River whenever the urge strikes. And Jacob can now visit, whenever that urge strikes him.

All of his gizmos and gear are here with me now...waiting.

And that old poster? Well, it currently hangs in the entrance to the wee farmhouse I now live in. And there it will stay to forever remind me of a simple truth.

Jacob and I both went out, all those years ago, thinking we were simply after fish. I think what Jacob found, instead, was healing and growth, nature and adventure.

And me? Well, it seems I found a home.

