

Confessions of an Okay Fisherman



I was looking back over my life the other day. Older people seem to do that for some reason. And I was thinking about how far I have come as a fisherman. I was thinking that it seems far although I know that it wasn't. I really never thought about anything seriously until I got older. Oh, I thought at the time I was thinking about things serious enough but I realize now that I wasn't. It is only at the end of Autumn that you appreciate the Summer. And I think that it is only when you can't do any better that you realize that you could have done better.

So why all this melancholy? There is really no need for it. I was never the best caster. I never was the best reader of waters. I never caught the most fish. I never caught the biggest fish. I never fished all the exotic places with name you couldn't pronounce. I never fished in countries where they didn't speak your language. I never invented some

new killer fly that would catch anything, anytime, and it was named after me. But does any of that really matter? Does it pain me in my heart that these things were always just past my finger tips?

Not really. For fly fishing has given me so much. And I think that is true for all us “okay” fishermen. It has given me friends of kindred spirit. It has given me an appreciation of wild things in wild water. It has given me moments that are etched into my memory like images in glass. It has given me tales to tell around countless campfires. It has given me memories to relive in that little place between asleep and awake. It has given me knowledge to pass on to younger fishermen. It has given me so very much. So “okay” is okay with me.

Now you are always reading about this place or that where the country is unspoiled and the fish run huge and rise to almost anything presented in almost any way. And the weather is always perfect and the scenery is always breathtaking. And the only people around are you and your partner and the best fishing guide in the world who can sing, dance, clean fish, cook, show you where to fish, and tell stories – all at the same time. And there are no bugs. And after a hard day of fishing and an excellent streamside meal, the northern lights dance to tunes played by elk. And then you crawl into a nice warm sleeping bag and let the night close about you. And as sleep seeps into your mind, your last thought of the day is, “Boy, that was an okay day!” Right!

That has never happened to me. If it did, I think I would want to end this part of my journey right then and get on with the next. But I have many “okay” days that have come close. And many “less okay” days that are still good. Seems like we remember only the good parts of these experiences and learn to find humor in any of the not so good parts that filter through. And at the end of the day, if “okay” was all we had, it’s really not so bad.

There are many of us who either have had or know of someone who has had a near death experience. Maybe you were a soldier and were nearly killed, or maybe you had a heart attack and survived. All of these experiences are horrible and I would not wish them on anyone. But it is this type of happening that steels me in the opinion that “okay” is really a lot better than okay.

I have a daughter who is a brain cancer survivor. She has been through two surgeries, chemo, and radiation. I was retired by the time she had her second surgery and needed to have someone drive her every day out to U of M for her radiation treatments. Her husband’s parents watched her daughter and I was able to spend the time to escort her. I

was one of the hardest things I ever had to do and yet it was one of the memories I most cherish. You may ask, "Why in God's name would you ever cherish such a memory?" I'll tell you. It is because I witnessed what a true hero does in the face of mortal danger. Every day, I would drive her out to Ann Arbor and we would wait in the waiting room for her turn with many other people in a similar peril. When her time would come, she would bounce out of her chair and prance down the hall like she was going to a birthday party. In spite of the pain and danger that she faced every day, she was brave and cheerful and never let anyone see the fear that must have been inside her. We got to know everyone in that waiting room fairly well and she lifted spirits and gave hope to them all. There is no way on God's green earth that I could have ever come close to her heroism. And through all that she would never admit to being any thing less than "okay."

But this wasn't my last vision of mortality. My wife and I were on our way to the Birmingham Art Fair on September 11, 2002. The fact that this had already been a day marked forever with horror never even entered our minds. We were going down Adams Road about 45 miles an hour when, just 4 miles from our destination, an SUV careened across the center line and hit us head on at nearly 50 miles an hour. There are no words that can express the feelings you experience and the utter terror of the impact and the aftermath. There are images that are burned into my memory like blurry still shots and to this day, I can see the vehicle and the drivers face as he slammed into us. All my memories of the next few hours are just that, still images of fear.

Turns out the driver was stone drunk at 11:00AM on a Saturday morning. It was his fourth offense and he was driving without a license. He was a young, college educated man with his whole future in front of him. He became a felon in a heartbeat and very nearly a murderer. All because of an addiction that he could not control. I pray that he gets the help he needs to cure himself and that he does not harm anyone else.

My wife suffered a broken arm, a broken leg, two broken ribs, and a bruised lung even though we had our belts on and the bags deployed. She is a strong woman. Within three weeks she was back to work with a walker and a walking cast. She teaches high school drop-outs and her dedication is something to behold. Like my daughter, she also is a hero.

My injuries were related to closed head trauma resulting in memory loss and a neck injury that required spinal fusion and some new parts and pieces and screws. But I am okay. It took a while but I

was able to regain both the full use of my hands and my memory. I can't fly cast very well but then, I wasn't ever that great as I have mentioned previously. And I had the example of two heroes to follow in getting well. My effort in getting better did not compare to their effort, but I did okay.

So, from my perspective, I am doing okay. And on a pretty summer day, when the wind is right, and the water is right, and a fish rises, and I lay out a fine cast to him, and he takes the fly, and I play him just so to my hand and release him, then all is okay. And even though this may be the exception, rather than the rule, that is okay too. I am happy with "okay."

Bob Bolton

