

"THE VIRTUES OF FISHING" BY KARL JOHNSON

Some people simply have not caught on to the comforts and conveniences of modern life. Forsaking the convenience of securing fresh fish in an air-conditioned grocery, many favor the old ways, squandering untold hours during the fishing season and raising some serious questions about this pastime and the sanity of those who participate. Why bother? Consider the hassle of a typical fishing expedition. Get up at 4 A.M., don a musty vest and clown pants even baggier than current fashion allows, stumble through mud and brambles to a mosquito-infested stream, tie fake flies fashioned from feathers lifted off dead birds to belligerent nylon line using one hand and a few teeth, and then myopically stare at them as they float on the water. Surely these people have way too much time on their hands. A closer look, however, suggests there is more going on, much more, in fact.

Several years ago I ran an after-school recreation program for at-risk youth. Students often missed the program because of detention for smoking, threatening, stealing, and nearly everything else under the sun. One personable but toughened knife-toting fifteen-year-old missed out regularly because of his fondness for fighting. It wasn't long before I began to doubt my efforts. Why take Joey fishing when he would rather be beating up his classmates? Why teach kids fly tying when they can't read or write? Isn't recreation far less important than education?

Sympathetic to the "studies before sports" approach to education, I did question this conventional wisdom. My after-school program, I realized, had become a reward—teachers used it as a bribe to extract good behavior from otherwise bad students. Although consequences for bad behavior are important, this seemed to me to be an illogical consequence. Students are not kept from math or science as a punishment, not only because the threat would fail to serve as a deterrent, but also because students *must* learn math and science. As I pondered this strange activity of pursuing cold-blooded aquatic vertebrates with primitive technologies, I became convinced that there is much more to fishing than mere fun—it is a pastime with benefits, some of which are downright educational.

To those who see fishing as a waste of time—a mere recreation—I offer the following virtues of fishing.

1. *Fishing engages the mind.* As Norman MacLean wrote in *A River Runs Through It*, the art of fishing consists of "looking for answers to questions"—finding the right bait, the right hole, the right timing.

2. *Fishing engages the whole self—body, mind, and emotions.* The streamside has far more potential to civilize the passions than does the classroom, for our most deeply rooted emotions—love, hate, joy, sorrow, fear, and anger—can be harnessed only when they have first been aroused.
3. *Fishing teaches ethics.* The rules of self-restraint collectively known as "sportsmanship" require integrity, for the primary referee in fishing is one's own conscience.
4. *Fishing thwarts delinquency.* As Teddy Roosevelt astutely observed, delinquency is born of boredom. "Every child has inside him an aching void for excitement," he said, "and if we don't fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and good for him, he will fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and which isn't good for him."
5. *Fishing initiates the young into culture.* The stories and traditions associated with fishing serve to socialize youths into the norms and mores of their family and community.
6. *Fishing unites people across barriers.* A common interest in fishing creates a bond that can bridge cultural, economic, and even linguistic barriers. Most notably, mentoring relationships transcend the generation gap.
7. *Fishing encourages humility.* In contrast to "self-esteem" activities, which often serve only to make children more self-centered, fishing is a contemplative activity that confronts us with the fact that we are not ultimately in control of every aspect of our lives.
8. *Fishing encourages a commitment to quality and excellence.* The secret of fishing is to learn to define success as something other than productivity—to value the means and process of one's efforts at least as highly as the end product of those efforts.
9. *Fishing fosters an appreciation of nature.* Fishing requires knowledge of fish, stream ecology, weather, worms, and bugs.
10. *Fishing is fun.* This reason to go fishing is at once the simplest and most profound. It may sound like heresy to parents and educators concerned with the betterment of children, but it's not. "Fishing begins in delight and ends in wisdom," to paraphrase Robert Frost. One fishes simply to fish. The lessons are by-products, not the goal, though they are no less real.

In fact, fishing is likely to be most productive when pursued purely for pleasure. Unfortunately, when it comes to play, adults are far less expert than children. Adults tend to justify their recreation—

✓ for the health and fitness they confer—and turn play into work. But notice children at play. They do not have to be told to count their Monopoly money or to calculate Cal Ripken's batting average. They do it for fun—"just because." Play captures the imagination and focuses attention so intently that learning happens without effort. Fishing may build character, but no child is fool enough to be duped by the idea of fishing in order to build character.

Which brings us back to Joey. Is it a waste of time to take our kids fishing? And if not, what about kids like Joey who still have to work on their reading and writing, not to mention their manners? Not simple questions, to be sure, but ancient wisdom offers some advice. Paradox though it may seem, the ancient Greek word for *leisure* is *schole*, the word from which we derive the English word *school*. In other words, the ancient Greeks considered education and learning as games of sorts—activities that are *fun*—erasing the sharp distinction we often make between recreation and education.

The popular religious philosopher C. S. Lewis wrote that the devil himself hates innocent pastimes because they generally promote charity, courage, and contentment. In an age of performance anxiety, impending deadlines, immediate gratification, conspicuous consumption, compulsive achievement, obsessive productivity, competition without sportsmanship, and keeping up with the Joneses, an age of bored kids and overcommitted adults, the simple pleasure of fishing may be just the antidote to our collective neuroses. For kids like Joey, who not only suffer through school by day but also try to burn it down at night, starting with something fun may be the only hope. Fishing may not be "productive"; in that sense it is a waste of time. But it is, all things considered, time very well wasted.

In Phil Genova, *First Cast: Teaching*

Kids to Fly-Fish (Stackpole 1991)