



An angler casts for trout in the Madison River.

Many Men Fish

Not as Many Know Why

■ BY WELDON KIRK

Many men fish their whole lives without realizing it is not fish they are after. This little gem of wisdom has been credited to the pen of Thoreau. It certainly sounds Thoreauesque. But it is also claimed that this sentence cannot be found anywhere in the volumes of his writings. Google the sentence and you can be lead through myriad exposés on the matter. Surf around a bit and you could come to the conclusion that, well, yeah, Thoreau wrote the same thing but not in exactly those words. Somebody somewhere paraphrased Thoreau and started this *did he or did he not write it* debate. That seems the right take on the deal.

As with any gem of wisdom it can be an interesting exercise to set your musing side loose on this one. This is especially so if you are one of those who have a large bite of your identity tied up in fishing. During those many days and long hours on the water, midst all that fishing is, you can pick around the edges or maybe even spiral deep into the heart of it. It's a handy piece of solace as well when the fish are snubbing you and you fall into that sin of taking it personally. You can get back at them. Let them know there's more important stuff you are after. It can also be a good conversation starter when you and your fishing partner fall into the doldrums after hours of dwindling anticipation for some action.

"Remember Joe, it's not fish we're really after."

If you're a fisherman, or fisherwoman, what reaction do you have to the meaning of that statement? You could do a survey. Try casting it upon another fisherman to see what their take might be. It's fun. Try it.

"...it's not fish we're really after.'...what reaction do you have to the meaning of this statement?...Try casting it upon another fisherman to see what their take might be..."

"To hell if it isn't fish I'm after," is a common response. The reaction from some is a sort of blank expression as though taken by surprise or momentarily confused by the inherent contradiction. You might hear, "What the heck does that mean?" Then some will respond, "Well, it's the outdoors, being with nature, the total experience—getting away from it all, the solitude, tranquility, or camaraderie." One man, with but a moments thought, said, "God. It's God they're after."

Here in our neighborhood, along the banks of the Yellowstone, we witness the arrival of many fishermen when the flooding river calms down and returns to that lovely shade of jade. Up and down and across the state it is the same. Where famous rivers and trout are found the fisherman hatch is quite amazing. Fly fishing has captured the imagination of a lot of folks. It is not just in Montana, or the West either. Fly fishing has gone global, with connoisseurs of the sport covering the far-flung corners of the planet seeking not only trout but a considerable list of species in both fresh and saltwater. When you consider as well the amount of literature fly fishing has generated, the explosion of scientifically engineered rods and fly lines, the pre-

cision reels, fine riverboats, tons of *must have* accessories, and destination lodges around the planet, it becomes clear that fly fishing is a major industry.

All this, "without realizing it's not fish they are after." It seems only just to give Thoreau credit. He was, after all, an exceptional literary talent with a bent to his character that comes down and touches men here and there with that yearning to take on self-imposed exile from the world, to try for a while or a lifetime the hermit's way. Some men likely just can't stomach the ways of the world. Others may so love the peace, quiet, beauty and order of nature and a kinship with the creator that it becomes the preferable life. And who knows what perceptions might occasion such a man removed from all the dis-

show us? Isn't the human spirit ultimately stronger than all the deception, manipulation and coercion seeking to mold us all into conformity? Aren't there a lot of people out there living lives of purpose and meaning? Or are we, the masses, in our basic state of consciousness, our state of being, adrift upon a sea of meaninglessness? Could our descendants in some not-so-distant future become so technologically oriented as to actually become robotic? Like computer-game addicted teens we know or some futuristic science fiction movie we've seen. Rome burned, you know, while what's his name fiddled.

A guy can go down some curious paths trying to figure out what Thoreau was getting at. Or, he could get lost thinking about things—those mind-bending imponderables. Such as—on the very river bank you're walking upon, gigantic and frightening dinosaurs once roamed that could suck you down like a trout snagging a minnow. Or, that the earth is something like four billion years old. And all those zillions of stars we gaze upon in the night sky over Montana. How big is the universe? How far is a hundred-million light years? What happens where the universe ends, or does it end? What scenarios play out there in all that impossible infinity. And when and how in the heck did it all begin? You have to admit, again, that science, for all its accomplishments could yet, in a certain sense, be quite puny. What future revelations will shatter the arrogance of our present day so-called knowledge?



Contemplation—Henry's Fork of the Snake River.

tractions while dwelling only with the stillness of nature penetrating his inner being?

Perhaps Thoreau was exercising a deeper insight than most of us typically allow ourselves. Maybe he was considering something like the age of industrialization that pulled mankind away from his kinship with the earth into the synthetic environs of terribly polluted cities with all the alienation and existentialism that followed, that it was important not to lose our roots with nature, with the land, to be grounded in something real. You have to admit that from Thoreau's time to our own we have been on such an accelerating trajectory that one wonders if the human psyche can keep up with it without crashing (like a hard drive), or maybe I'm just getting too old.

When the fish aren't biting and you're wondering what you're really after you might fret about what's going on in the world, where the human race is heading. Is there something real our souls are longing for with which we've lost touch? What inspires us? Making money? Is the world really what the media blitzes

Thinking about things and searching for answers can get a little strange. Some times you have to put it all on the shelf and just go fishing. A few evenings ago at sunset I was working a piece of the Yellowstone. Caddis were about. After getting into position I made a fair cast, managed some slack and got a decent drift, take, and slugged it out with a scrappy cut-bow. Then released it. It was satisfying and I raised my eyes to scan the water for the next rising fish. And then all the cloud-dappled heavens from the aftermath of afternoon storming flamed to indescribable glory and reflected on thousands of dancing facets of the river's surface. An ethereal light lay upon Emigrant peak and it seemed a subtle heavenly chord vibrated on the air. For a long spellbound moment God played, netted, and held me. The wonderful light slowly faded. I was released.

There I stood, a mere speck in all the wide universe with a solitary thought echoing in my head: be mindful, be wary, of falling for anything artificial.