

## Freeing the Pike

by Richard Wagamese

As a boy I loved nothing better than a solitary wandering along the serpentine lengths of a river. I'd study the water, searching out the places where fish might be hiding, or lie on the riverbank, lost in thought under an endless blue sky.

Back then a river felt like an opportunity. Within it lay the lunker fish of my dreams or the magic passage away from the world that had me snared. Only in the aloneness the land and rivers represented could I find the freedom to dream and create. Many of my stories were born along a river.

In my adopted home there were no fishermen. Nobody spent time in the outdoors. Camping for that family was a travel trailer parked on a cultured lot with a convenience store a short walk away, laundry facilities and public showers. I could walk for miles through the bush. I could sit for hours in a thicket of trees and watch things. I could feel at ease with nothing but the land. They could never do that.

So I fished alone. What I learned on those solitary jaunts I kept to myself. No one was interested anyway, so they never knew how much I learned of life and nature and the universe on the riverbanks of my youth. More importantly, they never understood how the land, rivers in particular, fleshed out my insides, soothed me, comforted me. They would never know that I was born into the Sturgeon Clan, or that the teachings of that clan membership would define me and give me purpose. Instead, they found me odd and left it at that.

We camped once beside a river outside a southwestern Ontario town called Tara. The family parked their trailer in a small roadside area along a gravel road. There was an iron bridge over the river, and I stood on it reading the water. It was shallow and weedy without much current. I could see cow-pies and horse dung along the rocky shore. It didn't look hopeful except for the clumps of lily pads dotting the surface whenever the river got deep enough.

They laughed when I said I would fish it. But that didn't matter. It was a river. Along the shoreline on the opposite side of the bridge I turned over rocks and logs looking for insects. There weren't many, so I opted for worms.

I cast to different parts of that river. About a mile downstream I reeled in a few small bass. That excited me. Even as a kid I understood that the presence of small predator fish meant the presence of huge predator fish. I moved on, rounding a wide curve where the current carved a trench that looked dark and promising. Submerged timber angled into the depths. I chose a bobber and a long leader that would allow me to drift my bait along the entire length of the trench. It was about three feet deep, just over the top of those fallen trees.

My first casts came up empty. But on the fourth cast I watched an enormous shadow glide out of the darkness and aim for my bait. The fish gulped the hook and swam off almost casually. The weight of it arched my rod, and when it felt that pressure the fish exploded, threatening to tear the rod right out of my hands. I backpedalled to get more secure footing.

That fish gave me the fight of a lifetime. It breached the water four or five times,

jumping clear and rattling the bobber in the air. The splash it made when it landed was awesome. When it sounded, as it did a half dozen times, I could feel its weight like a truck pulling away. Reeling it in took forever, and whenever it got close enough to the shore to see me it took off again.

I had to step into the river finally. I couldn't lift the fish over the bank without snapping the line. Standing thighdeep in the water, lifting a pike far longer than my arm, I felt totally alive. As I removed the hook and rested the fish against my other palm, I knew I'd landed a monster. I shook with excitement.

But something happened to me then that's taken years to fully understand. Seeing that huge fish gulping at the water, straining for life, its power ebbing, its beauty already beginning to fade, I lowered it, let it rest in my hands and then watched it swim away.

I never spoke of it, even though they laughed when I came back empty-handed. I ate supper silently, and when I got to bed that night I thanked that fish for the challenge. They would never have understood. They would never have appreciated the enormity of that encounter or how sitting on the riverbank, after it was over, I could cry and feel incredible joy at the same time.

That river pike was freedom in my hands. When I chose to let it go, I chose life. For the Indian that lived in me, that fish was honour and respect and love. They never would have gotten that, either.

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