



GENEVIÈVE FOURNIER ON THE YORK RIVER

BY DAVID FINKELSTEIN

FAITH IN FISH

PHOTOS BY JEAN-GUY BÉLIVEAU

AN AGING ANGLER'S BELIEF MANIFESTO.

AN OUTDOOR EDITOR FRIEND OF MINE, A MAN BORN in the South but long resident in New York City, recently moved back to Alabama. Calling to say hello from his new home in a Birmingham suburb, he reported “a big difference down here from up there.” Whereas his fellow apartment-dwellers in the North, he said, generally had greeted him at the elevator with a simple “good morning” and followed with a question about what cultural event might be on his agenda that evening, the first question his Southern suburban neighbors invariably asked was, “Have you decided what church you’ll belong to?”

But if New Yorkers seem unconcerned with the religious preferences of others, they’re certainly not shy about proclaiming their own. Forget the Ash Wednesday

crowd—that’s just a once-a-year thing. No, I’m referring to New Yorkers who in their everyday life, in celebration of a holiday or otherwise, have become increasingly insistent on asserting their various theologies through any means possible: in-your-face crucifixes dangling from necklaces over often-revealing cleavage; Hasidic fur hats,

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even on the hottest summer days, perched atop curly sidelocks; yarmulkes and *kufi* skullcaps covering balding pates; head scarfs draped around faces otherwise unabashed in their generous use of makeup. Hop into a

taxi and the first thing likely to catch your eye, apart from the exorbitant flag-fall rate on the meter, is an amulet of Krishna or Ganesh swinging from the rearview mirror.

Even in the relative sanctuary of one's own home, it's impossible to escape this fetishistic flaunting of faith. The high-rise building in which I live offers a perfect example, because every second doorframe in the hallway leading to my apartment is bedecked with a *mezuzah*, a small decorative cartouche within which (I'm told) sits a biblical passage declaring the "oneness of God." Sometimes referred to as the "Jewish security system," the *mezuzah* is thought to provide protection to those within its ambit, but the folks on our floor don't seem entirely convinced—I invariably catch them surreptitiously activating the electronic alarm device in the lobby as well.



The fish on the doorjamb announces what the author believes in to his high-rise neighbours. He and his wife met through a shared love of fly-fishing.

As nonbelievers, my wife, Evelyn, and I have somehow felt deprived, simply because we have no faith to proclaim. Brought up as a Catholic in postwar Vienna, Evelyn began to see through the hypocrisy and false "holiness" of the clergy even as a child, and her adolescent years at a convent school only served to confirm her skepticism in that regard. She's a gentle soul, however, unwilling to offend anyone unnecessarily, so when accosted on the street by importuning evangelists asking whether she loves Jesus, she sweetly (and truthfully) responds, "No, but I love cheeses," leaving her inquisitors visibly puzzled by the apparent non sequitur. And in rejecting the exhortations of the more non-denominational among the city's self-styled street saviors, who inquire only whether she has faith in a loving God, she replies, "No, but I do enjoy a lovely cod," which unfailingly elicits a similarly perplexed reaction.

As for me, I was born into my (lack of) faith, having been brought into the world—or more precisely, a very small part of it called Rhode Island—by two profoundly thoughtful humanists. Unlike many in today's highly polarized world, where a cartoon or novel can inflame

such hatred that only craven submission or a cycle of senseless killings seems capable of palliating it, my parents were fiercely committed to the right of free expression as a universal proposition.

To them, as to any decent-thinking person, that simply meant that society must respect—and the law protect—the right of every individual to express whatever he or she believes without fear of recrimination other than by reasoned argument to the contrary. One needn't respect the beliefs themselves; indeed, one might regard them as terribly offensive, but one must nonetheless respect the person's right to express them.

By the same token, of course, those who wished to take issue with a particular set of expressed beliefs, whether religious or political in nature, have the same sacrosanct right to do so, and again, without fear of recrimination, regardless of how "offensive," how disrespectful, or even mocking, the criticism might seem to the believer. For my parents, the now all-too-familiar cry of "blasphemy" was just a disguised—and despicable—way of saying, "My beliefs are protected, but yours are not. My right to free speech is to be respected, yours is not."

In this regard, my mother—whose strength of character was such that author Paul Kresh, in his book *The Power of the Unknown Citizen*, equated her with Rosa Parks—spent her entire life as an activist fighting to uphold the principles embodied in the First Amendment. In one instance she shepherded a church-state case to the Supreme Court and, against all odds, won.

Equally committed to secularist values, my father, an avid fisherman, dedicated his entire life to the fight against religious intolerance and racial bigotry. Despite the hostility he often encountered in that role, he never lost his wry sense of humor.

As a young boy, I remember him pointedly reversing the lyrics of the patriotic World War II refrain "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" by singing instead, "Pass the Lord and praise the ammunition." And once, when solicited by a rabbi to contribute to the establishment of a Jewish cemetery in Providence, with mock histrionics he responded, "What! You want to divide people in the grave, too?"

(Segregated or otherwise, cemeteries were to him a misuse of good habitat, land that would have been better left as wilderness for other, living creatures to enjoy. True to his belief, he opted for cremation, after which we scattered his ashes at a reef off Newport where during his life he had taken so many stripers and where, with a twinkle in his eyes, he had once said to me, "When I get too old or sick to fish, cut me up and use me for bait.")

Coming from such vastly different backgrounds, my wife and I met only by virtue of a shared love of fishing. Two ardent anglers brought together by a mutual friend ill at ease imagining each of us alone at the end of a jetty, or at the end of our lives, fishing in solitude. And because our piscatorial passion, which the uninitiated tended to view as something akin to religious mysticism, had nur-



BLACKWELL POOL, ST-JEAN RIVER

tured us throughout our lives, at times we'd regretted having no outward symbols. No necklaces, no headgear, no doorpost totems to show the outside world just how devoted we are to the pursuit of that pastime.

"If people concentrated on the really important things in life, there'd be a shortage of fishing poles."

—DOUG LARSON

Recently, however—in an effort to keep up with the Joneses, the Javitzes, and the Jahanis, so to speak—we decided to match our neighbors' displays of zealous devotion with one of our own. Simply stated, we placed on our doorjamb a replica of a fish, a beautifully hewn model of an Atlantic salmon that had previously served as a fridge magnet. In taking that momentous step, we felt we'd come that much closer to being in tune with the times, realizing nonetheless that since we possessed no cell phone, smartphone, iPod, or iPad—let alone a website, blog, or, heaven forbid, a Facebook account—we still had a long way to go.

Predictably, perhaps, the fish on our doorjamb hasn't aroused much attention. Still, a few weeks ago an amiable fellow-tenant, whose own doorpost sports a *mezuzah*, looked at it quizzically, then asked what it sig-

nified. To which we could only reply that, having long believed in the importance of ichthyology, we were letting it be known to the outside world how devout we were in that belief, regarding it now as tantamount to an ich-theology. Clearly mystified by that answer, he beat a hasty retreat down the corridor, making it unnecessary for us to add a further note of explanation, that our creed demanded only a belief in "super fishin'," as opposed to superstition.

But as the old Austrian adage goes, "The devil never sleeps." Just a few days later, another tenant, one well-versed in the history of religion, pointed out to us that the *ichthys*, a symbol consisting of two intersecting arcs replicating the profile of a fish, was used by early (persecuted) Christians as a secret code of recognition, subsequently to become known as the "Jesus fish." So while our Jewish neighbors probably regard the fish on our doorjamb as nothing more than a camouflaged *mezuzah*, the Christian contingent is likely interpreting it as a secret sign of solidarity. What our Muslim neighbors think, heaven only knows.

We're gratified, at least, that our ich-theology is more benign than most. No dogma of ours, for example, regards women as second-class citizens, nor relegates them to a subordinate status that holds them unfit for the clergy. In our congregation, women ascend to whatever rank on the ecclesiastical ladder their talents allow. The



OFFIE POOL, YORK RIVER

legendary Joan Wulff, now in her late 80s, held what amounts to the papal position as distance fly-casting champion of the world for almost two decades. And as for our approach to kids, our (uncapitalized) catholic creed commands that we enthuse them, not criminally abuse them.

Within our (fishing) ranks no internecine warfare poisons the water and tears us asunder.

True, we are sometimes guilty of proselytizing our passion (though not by donning suit-and-tie and parading the streets in pairs, and definitely not by ringing doorbells and invading people's privacy); but we've escaped the hubristic curse of imagining that ours is the one true faith. To those who prefer hunting, so hunt already. And even if, may the odds forbid, you're a devout golfer, you'll suffer no persecution at our hands.

Equally important, within our ranks no internecine warfare poisons the water and tears us asunder. The fly-fishing purists among us may look askance at those who spinfish with lures, but neither sect would ever

consider launching a Crusade, an Inquisition, or even a modest pogrom against the other. And despite serious differences of opinion between them, the catch-and-releasers in our community wouldn't think of sending a squad of car-bombers against the catch-and-filet crowd. We're too busy fishing to engage in those kinds of extra-mural spiritual activities.

As a matter of fact, my wife and I will soon be heading off for a fishing trip with our editor friend. Let's hope that nobody down there confronts us with the question as to what church we're planning to join. Will they get an earful! 🐟

Before turning his attention to writing about his first love, fishing, David Finkelstein wrote extensively on political and environmental issues, his articles appearing in *The New Yorker*, *Audubon*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Asian Wall Street Journal*, (London) *Observer*, *Times of India* and *ASJ*. He is the author of a "travel classic," "Greater Nowheres—A Journey through the Australian Bush," and has served as a Chinese interpreter for the U.S. Dept. of State, a member of the Harvard Law School faculty and he was the Ford Foundation's first China specialist.