

Wading in a river can wash away the fears

By Joyce Winslow

Trout-fishing season has begun, along with the start of spring semester. My elementary-grade students' questions will force me into a river with my fly rod to cast for answers and for something more rare: childhood innocence. The kind that sounds like laughter or a stream bubbling over stones. I need to fish up some innocence for children who have lost it.

Ten-year-olds tell me they've "lived though a lot." They tick off these words: Suicide bombers. Columbine. 9/11. Hurricane Katrina. No other group of American pre-teens lived through all this.

I'm fishing for courage to face them with no antidotes for their terrifying vocabulary, their sudden awareness of mortality and, more stunning, their lack of trust. They don't trust the nation's leaders to help the hurricane victims or keep their families safe from terrorists. To be sure, they mimic some of what they hear from parents. But messages of fear and cynicism have sunk in, affecting even how they perceive each other.

So I have put myself in a river. From where I stand, red-winged blackbirds sip from a shallow, facing inward toward me. Frogs just out of hibernation twang like plucked cellos. Baby turtles swim in circles in the sunlight. I am dressed in a vest and waders, but I've never caught a fish, nor want to. I know how it feels to be on the line and wish desperately to live.

Like many other boomers, I recently witnessed my parents' struggle with death. In 2003, the latest data available, America buried 688,000 people 85 or older and 700,000 people ages 75 to 84, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These statistics, which represent our mothers and fathers, put boomers like me close enough to mortality to kiss it on the lips. Now, more than ever, I want to protect this river and give kids something meaningful to lean on when they straddle visible and invisible worlds.

It's hard teaching children now. In my school, most students are third-generation Americans raised in freedom and affluence. They

can't relate to my history lessons about kids who were ballast on immigrant ships or victims of sweatshops. They don't see, and so can't understand, how poverty affects other children in America or brings chaos close to home. Some of my students have nannies. Once, when we passed a charity envelope, one child asked whether classmates had change for a \$50. Two students did. My sixth-graders prize sneakers that morph into roller skates.

Their ideas of paradise look like designer bedrooms or video arcades. Most cannot name a tree or bird. Few have grown a vegetable from seed.

It was easier to teach when kids had grandparents who had come to America clutching candlesticks. They taught children the meaning of sacrifice and the power of community. So I want to walk my students

through this river. "Look," I'd say, pulling fishing flies from my pocket. "Each of these has a fabulous name. Royal Coachman. Ratface MacDougal. They can help you catch something as radiant as a speckled trout and as wild as fear."

My students fear strangers. Perhaps that's because so many children grow up in gated enclaves or sprawling suburbs that prize privacy. These children often don't know neighbors. Kids are taught to fear other children, backpacks in airports, priests and, often, police.

I'd like to introduce these children to a bit of exquisite innocence by walking with them in a sweetly flowing river. We'd feel the direction of wind on our faces, watch how breezes ripple water. We'd note where sun shines brightest on the river's surface and what insects are hatching in its reflected light. Fish bite only at tied-flies that mimic the hatch du jour, I'd say. Look at the water. And up in the trees. Are birds waiting to eat insects? Fish look for birds' shadows to help them find food. So do fishers. We're all in this together. Be wondrously aware of what is around you.

No test questions, but it's important to know: You are but one part of the river, though you stand in its center trying to lose or find yourself, as I do now.

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By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY