

Fishing and Catching

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We're rigged for muskie: a stout baitcaster, 20 pound line, a wire leader, and a lure the size of a small torpedo. My son is casting into the boat basin at the foot of Bathurst Street, next to the derelict sugar silo and across from the Music Garden. We know these waters rarely float a sunfish, let alone the mighty muskellunge, but it's a good place to try out his new equipment.

There are, according to Toronto fishing lore, some pike in the harbour, although we've never caught one or even had a follow. A friend at Al Flaherty's Outdoor Store tells us that you can catch them at the right time of day, the right season, the right water temperature, with the right lure at the right depth, etc. etc.; but our hopes for a fish aren't particularly high. We're just happy to be down here, sipping lukewarm coffee, watching the lake bright with wind and late sunlight, companionably chatting about his day at high school and mine at work. We do a lot of fishing around Toronto, with meagre results. We often have to remind ourselves that the sport is called "fishing", not "catching."

Mostly we fish in a lake up in the Gatineau Valley. We have countless pictures of him standing proudly on the beach holding a surprised-looking bass for a photo op. Some we keep and cook, but most are returned to the dark waters of Roddick Lake. Around the Greater Toronto Area, truth to tell, we've caught more beauty than fish: a heron flying up the Credit River at dusk; a snapping turtle sunning itself at Eglinton Flats; the Don River sliding dark and mysterious before hitting the humiliating concrete ditch at its mouth; the sun going down behind the CN Tower as we stand on Leslie Spit trying for pike; the salmon leaping against the current on the Humber. My one notable success was landing a small trout at Heart Lake, in a conservation area surrounded by dreary subdivisions. My son, astonished, exclaimed, "You, of all people!" He knew that what I like best is driving the boat, cooking the occasional bass, and documenting his fishing victories.

The son I'm fishing with is our youngest child. It's amazing that he's here at all. When he was born he had an Apgar score of two. This is a measurement of vital signs, and six or seven is considered normal. He spent his first three weeks in the neo-natal intensive care unit of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. Then, when he was four, he was diagnosed with Prader-Willi Syndrome. It is a rare condition, the predominant feature of which is that the body cannot regulate appetite. People with PWS experience constant, maddening, insatiable hunger. It was in the news this fall because the manager of the Colorado Rockies, a team in the World Series, has a daughter with PWS. Families living with this disability get used to locked fridges, careful measurement of food, and heartbreaking meltdowns when their children can't get at the food every misfiring nerve in their body is telling their brain they need.

He's a good fisherman. He has patience, tenacity, a formidable capacity to concentrate, and an uncanny ability to imagine where the fish may be lurking under the dark waters of the lake. Sometimes these qualities help him - and us - cope with PWS; sometimes we're swept away by it, discouraged and panic-stricken by crises none of us has the wisdom to resolve. But even on the bad days, days when we get the dreaded call from the vice-principal to say something's happened and could we come to the school immediately, even then we try to remember that he - like all teenagers with a disability - faces each day with more courage and heroism than many people muster in their whole lives.

He knows, because we often tell the story, that his beginnings were precarious, and that his great-grandmother, nearing her own death, said, "He's here for a purpose." Once, as he was trying to

get me to pick up the socks he was too lazy to reach for, I asked why I should do him that favour. "Because," he said, playing his heroic ace, "I chose to live." It didn't work, of course, but we both laughed. He also knows that his disability is an enormous, complex, daily challenge. It is difficult for a teenager with Prader-Willi Syndrome to be in high school, to walk through a cafeteria filled with tempting food, to focus on academics when your body tells you to go secretly foraging for left-overs.

As all parents do, whether or not a child has a disability, we've learned to store up the good moments as ballast against the hard ones. We rejoice in the memory of him giving the opening speech at the Prader-Willi Syndrome Association conference, or performing a poem at an open mic, or using his exceptional sense of pattern to create a piece of beautiful gemstone jewellery or to win at Scrabble. We hold on to a sense of his immense generosity and sweetness as an antidote to the daily, demoralizing struggle with the syndrome's insidious effects on behaviour, rationality, and health. In other words, we keep fishing, even if we don't always catch what we're hoping for.

My favourite fishing story is about the first fish he ever caught. We were out on a rowboat near the shore of an island. His rod bent double and I said, "You're caught on a log." He shook his head and whispered, "It's a fish." "It's a log," I affirmed with grown-up certitude. Then the line began to run out, and, after a memorable battle, my seven-year-old fisherman reeled in a two pound smallmouth bass. I was wrong, as he's never tired of reminding me. I was wrong, and delighted to be so. I was wrong, but may I say in my own defense that it's sometimes hard for parents to tell the difference between a log and a fish.

So we're here at the harbour, ready for muskie (and he did catch one once, near Bancroft; I have the photo to prove it), but more than content to sip our now-cold coffees, watch the sunset, cast our lines (the strollers on the promenade give us wide berth, afraid his fearsome lure may snag their poodles), and remind each other of the Jewish proverb: It's better not to catch a big fish than not to catch a small fish.