

Tucker Malarkey/Guido Rahr Introduction ©  
American Museum of Fly Fishing  
Izaak Walton Award Ceremony 11/14/24

In the early spring a certain restlessness sets in. Guido gets a little twitchy, you're not sure if he's hearing what you're saying. He's not. The spring Chinook are about to come in, and his mind is elsewhere. This last spring he called me on his way to one of his top-secret Chinook spots. "They're not here yet, but I'm going to look, just in case."

One knows better than to get in the way. Best to let the fever run its course because when he's finally in the river and the Chinook are in, it all comes right. A peace descends on his restless soul. He's where he's meant to be.

Because he has allowed me to follow him over the decades, I'm in something of a position to describe why Guido is a unique angler, and why he deserves to be celebrated tonight.

Guido was born with an ancient wiring intact. He is that rare thing, a pure hunter with a nature mystic's ability to commune with the natural world. In the course of his life, he has been endlessly driven to penetrate the mysteries of that world. For Guido, successful understanding ends in one place: the catching of its creatures.

I have watched him graduate from catching snakes and reptiles to fish - first rainbow trout, then steelhead, then pacific salmon, then Russian taimen - I've watched him develop a very special skill set that I want to take a stab at describing.

First off, for Guido, it's about more than the quarry. The hunt is about understanding a whole ecosystem. The river you stepped in yesterday is not the same today. The insects in the air may not be the same. The temperature, the moisture, the cloud cover, the shadows falling; the shifting rocks and silt and branches on the riverbed. Life is always moving, always changing. The fish themselves are moving. Where they are and what they're feeding on depends on all of these things as well as the time of day, the time of year, where they are in their life journey. It is an endlessly complex and ever-changing equation.

If Guido catches something he's after, he's told me, he feels he has shaken the hand of an entire ecosystem. There is a quiet pride and satisfaction he gets from this that goes far beyond the catch itself.

Since childhood, it has been a deeply personal and solitary inquiry for him. He has neither solicited nor accepted advice from others along the way. He wants to work for - and own - every bit of the learning process, every bit of the knowledge.

He's protective of this knowledge and perhaps a WEE bit competitive. Good luck prying his secrets loose.

When I think of the act itself, I can't help but compare Guido's fly fishing to a spiritual practice. Maybe some of you understand. Is there a Zen and the art of fly fishing? There should be.

For what makes Guido a great angler is his mindset. The calm that descends, his total presence, his awareness to detail, the lightning-fast intuitive gathering and weaving together of all the bits of information that tell him which combination of feather, fur and flash to tie on the end of his line.

Then there's the respect with which he enters the river. This is not his native habitat; he's a guest here. He hasn't come to intrude or disturb - he's come to have a conversation. If he has anything to do with it, it will be an interesting one.

Once he starts casting, he enters another realm, a sort of liminal world that is part wild and part human - connected by a filament of nylon line. Many of you have witnessed the graceful curl of this line, the perfect placement of his fly, his complete focus. And always how closely he observes.

And if he mimics nature well enough, and he generally does, the conversation begins. Some of you know the feeling of a powerful fish hitting your fly, the energy that vibrates up the line into your hand through your entire being. For those moments you are utterly alive and present and connected to something ancient and wild. For precious moments, "you" don't even exist. You are part of something greater.

This is the hope, and the craving. This moment of pure freedom. Alas, it doesn't always work out, but an angler who requires catching fish may not be destined for greatness.

When skunked, the great angler remembers his or her place in the order of things, returning to the simple joy of being in a pristine river, for a moment a part of life's current, with the light and air and birdsong, the song of the water too; the clouds passing, the sun angling, the insects buzzing. Really, there is no bad day on the river.

Which doesn't mean you stop trying. In Guido's fly box are plans B C D and E. Or maybe you need to move up or down river, or change out your leader. Adjustments can always be made. Another noteworthy mindset of Guido's is that No doesn't mean no. No is a just a more complicated Yes. No is a Yes with challenges.

And Guido has always loved a challenge. He loves cracking the code, as he says. I have never seen him truly discouraged. Failure seems to motivate him to try harder, to think differently, to see the situation anew. The important thing is to keep looking with an open mind towards solutions, towards what to try next.

To our great collective benefit, Guido has parlayed this skill set from hunting fish to hunting for the protection of their rivers.

It turns out saving rivers is not unlike catching fish.

In California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, Russia and Japan - Guido and his team have made it their organizational practice to observe every detail about the salmon strongholds of the Pacific Rim; their placement and habitat, their threats and their allies. They enter each new river system with respect. The Skeena is different from the Deschutes, the Dean from the Nushagak, the Zhuponava from the Tugur.

Like every fish, every river is unique. To find protection for these diverse places you have to keep an open mind, and not be attached to outcomes or strategies in your search for one that works. You look at the people, the industries, the stakeholders, the natural stewards. You tie a fly that will work. And when that fly stops working, you tie another.

Guido's fly box has expanded from feathers and fur to a deep understanding of human nature. Over the decades he has interfaced with timber barons, politicians, indigenous communities, scientists, oligarchs, billionaires, activists, celebrities, musicians, and other fishermen. And, moving between them, he has achieved a fluency in a language they can all somehow understand. It is perhaps a forgotten language - the language of fish, of rivers, of great migrations and the untold intelligence of our earth's natural systems. It's the rich language of connection with this planet, one we can sometimes hear while walking in a forest, climbing a mountain - or standing in a river.

Just last week I got Guido's post-election email and was struck yet again by his political acumen and how one of his superpowers will soon come into play - a willingness to engage with unlikely partners. Guido is the first to remind us that we are fighting for something bigger than politics, something that will outlast us all.

Even under this new administration, Guido finds something to hope for, because (for the most part) these are human beings too. He's seen them in the river, seen them light up as their lines go tight, seen them replete with happiness at the end of a day. He knows he can speak to the part of them that runs deeper than the material world, deeper than politics. He knows he can tie a fly they will rise for.

In the email was another phrase that caught my eye - I think it was LASER FOCUS, which describes Guido's MO in a nutshell.

I remember when I was fact-checking Stronghold with him. We were at his kitchen table with our laptops open when I noticed his attention wandering. He didn't seem to be quite on the same page. I started watching him more closely, suspicious. Then his face changed and he exclaimed "God damn it!"

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Nick something-or-other is at my fishing spot."

It turns out there are not just nanny cams, but fish cams, which means Guido is never far from the river.

Guido is never far from the river. The fish are always on his mind, and while that laser focus has landed some of them in his freezer and it has also ensured the bulk of their survival, landing their rivers with protections that will hopefully last lifetimes.

So thank you Guido for that laser focus, for not taking NO for an answer, for being so obsessive and for loving the river so well and for being a truly “compleat” angler...