



## WADING THE RIVER

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In April of 2013, I lost my father, Wally Eagle, at the age of 86. He was my constant companion in my youth, going fishing, hunting, golfing, skiing, backpacking, and to high school and college sporting events. In those early years and for decades thereafter, he remained for me a source of constant support, anchoring values, and endless encouragement and love.

In July of 2013, our family and many of his friends celebrated his life in West Yellowstone, Montana. As part of that celebration, I prepared the following remarks.

*“One of my earliest fishing memories with my father occurred on the Eagle Bend of the Madison River 7 miles into Yellowstone Park. We always fished the other side of the river, so we would wade across the quiet but heavy run just above the rapids. I was so small that I could not wade this section of the river, so Dad put me on his shoulders, legs over his chest. He steadied himself with an old tonkin wading staff. I carried both fly rods in one hand and held onto his head or neck with the other. Often, a bald eagle watched us with amusement from the ridge.*

*In our family, there was no clear line between nature, fly fishing, and the wealth of friends and family that intersected the Eagle’s family, Yellowstone Park, and the environs where together we fly fished. A seemingly endless fraternity of fishermen colored our lives, day by day, during halcyon days of summer and fall, on lakes and rivers that take your breath away. It was in those days that my father taught me about rivers, insects, trout, birds, weather, mountains, geysers, friendships, hardships, and life.*

*There were several unique facets to my father that tell you a lot.*



**Figure 1.** Nephew Mark McPhie, son Taylor Eagle, and Kim Eagle, arms locked together, wade into the Upper Madison River with ashes of Wally Eagle in an old wicker creel.

*First, his greatest joy was not in catching trout himself, or catching the biggest or most trout, but rather in the success and joy of the people who fished with him. He taught me everything I know about trout, and when I caught one, he would watch carefully from wherever he was. When I was young, he asked me to yell every time I hooked a fish. If it was a good one, he’d immediately stop fishing and come to watch me bring it to the net. When he hooked a good fish, he’d yodel loudly so that I could come watch him, too. In this way, he taught me to embrace the joy and success of other people.*

*Second, he considered his fishing trips as a chance to become one with nature. Methodically he measured the air and water temperature, studied the insects, and documented the spots where he saw or caught trout in his fishing log, and, most importantly, who he went with. He had an endless appreciation for the glory of God’s creation and all the creatures in it. He knew the birds and their calls, and he was always in awe of Yellowstone’s wildlife and thermal formations. Fishing with my father was a journey into the origins of Yellowstone and Montana and everything in it.*

***“Every fisherman is a liar except you and me, and I’m not so sure about you!”***

*My father was the most honest man I have ever met. He taught me this in many ways, but on the river, he had to keep teaching me. When you’re young and you catch a fish, resuscitating it carefully in the water before setting it free, I swear the water acts like a magnifying glass! I call it the “oculo enlargo factor.” Well, my father was adamant about an honest measurement of any trout. He even wrapped thread at various points on his rod at key measurement lengths to be sure that we measured each fish properly and accurately. You see, I always thought the fish that I caught were a little bigger than they really were. My father taught me that any dishonesty, even measuring a trout, is intolerable.*

*My father also taught me to love humor and laughter. When you’re fishing hours at a time, things happen! Sometimes, you wade too deep, and water fills your waders. Often, the biggest fish do get away! Occasionally you catch a wonderful fish even using bad techniques. Most importantly, the pursuit of trout with friends and family is not a serious business; it’s time to laugh and poke fun, and embellish, and appreciate. I remember one time my father was preparing cheese and crackers for lunch for two good friends, both teachers from California. One of them said, “I wonder what the poor people in Montana are doing today.” Without a pause, my father said, “They’re probably serving lunch to rich Californians!” Dad loved a good joke, a clever pun, or a well-told story. His laughter will stay with me forever....*

*The last time my father and I crossed the Madison at Eagle Bend together, Dad was beginning to have problems with his balance. He’d taught me years before that if two people are wading a difficult spot in the river, the stronger wader takes the upstream side and offers his lower arm*



**Figure 2.** We pour Dad's ashes into one of his favorite fishing spots on the Madison River.

to the other fisherman. By locking arms and wading close together, you can mitigate the strong pull of the river on both fishermen. We bumped along, cautiously, and made it safely to the other side. Dad smiled at me, I smiled back. Neither said a word. He knew that he'd taught me well, and so did I.

*In this day of celebration, Dad's lasting lessons would be that we should facilitate and embrace the joy and success of others; journey into God's creation of nature with people you love, as often as you can; pursue honesty and integrity in all things; for goodness sakes, laugh and do it often; and finally, when wading treacherous waters (or the hardships that come in life), lock arms with your friends and family and go forward together. That's kind of what we're doing today: Wading through a rough spot, together, arms and spirits joined.*

*I'll miss you terribly, Dad, but I will never forget what you taught me and did for me. Your spirit will remain firmly in my heart and life forever."*

After the celebration, it was time to carry out my father's "after death" wishes, which included spreading his ashes in one of his favorite places, the Madison River. Our family gathered streamside, and my cousin, a minister in Butte, Montana, conferred last wishes to my father and prayers of hope and condolences to our family. We had placed Dad's ashes in a sealed bag inside



**Figure 3.** The three of us embrace as we consider the last goodbye to a man we loved and cherished.



**Figure 4.** Kim Eagle, Taylor Eagle, and Mark McPhie ponder a frantic rise of trout on the far bank after spreading Wally Eagle's ashes.

of an old wicker fishing creel. My nephew, Mark McPhie, my son, Taylor Eagle, and I waded into the middle of the river, arms locked together, to a place where my father and I had fished on many occasions. Upon reaching our destination, we turned and faced our family and extended family on the bank and carefully, methodically, poured Dad's ashes into the river. Below us they swirled and danced in the eddy currents created by our presence, then floated down the river, creating an ever-widening triangle below us.

Then, and quite unexpectedly, several things happened. First, a majestic bald eagle flew up the river, coming from the general direction of Dad's ashes and riding upstream on hidden updrafts of wind. Second, and particularly surprising, a large number of trout began to feed on the far bank. In late July, the warmth of the water in the Upper Madison is typically associated with few fly hatches and also less-active trout. Our entire family marveled at the frantic rise of trout just beyond Dad's ashes. I looked at my son and my nephew, and it was clear that we were thinking the same thing! We needed to drive back to West Yellowstone, get our fishing gear, and fish with my father one last time. So, that's what we did. After retrieving our gear, stringing our fly rods, and wading into the river, the rise continued. We tried several dry flies, for it looked like the trout might be feeding on a small pale



**Figure 5.** A bald eagle watched our spreading of ashes from a snag downstream. Moments later he flew right by us going upstream.



**Figure 6.** My father, Wally Eagle, decades ago on a lovely golden fall day of fishing in Yellowstone Park.

morning dun that we could see riding the surface here and there. But the trout weren't interested. No takes, and no fish.

Finally, it became all too clear what we were supposed to use. Nearly 40 years ago my father had designed a fly called "Eagle's Feather Duster." It is a nymph pattern that includes ostrich hurl body and pheasant tail legs, wing case, and tail. My father started tying it by using feathers stolen from old ostrich feather dusters that store clerks used to clean glassware in the Eagle's Store and Fly Shop, founded by my grandfather Sam Eagle, in West Yellowstone in 1908. Of course we should be using my father's special fly on this last fishing trip with him! My son, Taylor, put on a small size #16 feather duster to mimic the emerging nymph of the pale morning dun. Within several casts he was into a nice brown trout, then another! As the rise began to wane, we saw a



**Figure 7.** Dad's feather duster nymph with pheasant tail wing case, arms, and tail along with an ostrich hurl body and thorax.

very large trout still sipping nymphs on the far side of the river, at the tail of an island that I have fished for 55 years, including times with my father from my earliest fishing memories. My son made a terrific cast and the big trout turned with power, taking the nymph downstream and breaking off on its way. In my mind's eye, I saw the fish, with Dad's feather duster in its jaw, swimming through a cloud of Dad's ashes down below. The line was limp, and so was my heart at the loss of a man who would have done anything he could to help me find happiness, success, love, and meaning in life. Sharing that last fishing trip with my son and nephew, in the place of so many generous memories with my father and now his final resting place, swelled my heart with a simultaneous sense of sadness, hope, warmth, and joy that will stay with me forever.