

Greenberg: A young boy and the sea

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Out on the puke-green waters of New York's Jamaica Bay, under an equally unappealing gray roof of cloud cover, I found myself trying to convince a child that fishing, my greatest childhood passion, should be his passion as well. My 4-year-old son Luke and I were aboard what we New York and Long Island fishermen call a "party boat" — an affordable, pay-per-fare fishing vessel that fathers and sons once flocked to in droves but that today often can't attract enough old-timers to cover the cost of gas.

Nothing was being caught aboard this particular party boat. I was working both poles since my son's hands were occupied with his childhood passion — the iPhone. As the device sang Beatles tunes, flashed choo-choo train videos from the YouTube queue, and chirped with texts and calls from Luke's mother in search of updates on how this father-

son fishing trip was progressing, I stared with grim disappointment into the un-bountiful sea. "Some party," I thought.

Who will take to fishing and who will bridle at it is a random affair. In reporting on the world's fishy places, I've found just as many fishing fathers with fishing children as I have fishing fathers with children who prefer video games. The fathers of the video gamers are deeply sad. It's a sadness that stems not only from a failure to bond with one's child but with a fear that one's child may never bond with reality at all.

"Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation," the French philosopher Guy Debord wrote in his "Society of the Spectacle" way back in 1967. Even in 1967, real experiences were palpably being replaced by recorded ones. And Debord didn't even have an iPhone.

But I think anyone who fears that life might be drifting irrevocably toward some kind of media-produced land-of-make-believe might benefit from a little more time with a fishing pole in hand. Unlike the ever multiplying nature channels, Al Gore aps and branded nature websites that play the role of nature in our lives, fishing demands something beyond viewership. To catch a fish, you must not only know what it looks like, you must know how it lives and the natural conditions that allow it to thrive.

And amidst all of this there is of course a lesson about life, death and the food we eat. A little while back, someone who had seen an Internet video of me teaching kids to fish wrote in to the parenting website that had produced it that "it would be far better to teach [children] the wonders of nature, of animal life, and teach them to respect it rather than slaughter it." While a sentimental education spent observing "the wonders of nature" on Animal Planet or even in nature itself might be a good thing, I'd argue that what's missing with our relationship with nature is a sense of give and take.

A fishing child has a tangible goal attached to his relationship with nature. For him, nature is not just one more channel in an otherwise crowded field of one-way entertainment. It is literally a way of taking nourishment from the natural world, something that eventually teaches him that he owes something back. It is a rare fishing child who doesn't grow into an adult with a desire to preserve the very habitat where fish thrive.

Were it not for a group of sportfishermen fighting to save the American striped bass in the 1980s, that fish might have disappeared from our shores instead of becoming the multimillion dollar backbone of a Long Island sportfishing industry that stretches from Montauk to Massapequa and beyond. If more children had learned to take nourishment from New York waters a little earlier, perhaps we might not have lost Long Island's trillions-strong oyster colonies to raw sewage and our tremendous Riverhead herring runs to careless dams that are only now being removed. Perhaps the continental US would not have come to depend on Alaska and Asia for more than three quarters of its seafood.

Of course all these arguments are a little too sophisticated to make to a 4 year old. And as the fishless day on Jamaica Bay started drawing to a close, I began thinking of other less ambitious trips I might try with him to win him over to my side. Crabbing on Shelter Island, Porgy fishing off Port Jefferson, toe-clamming in the Great South Bay.

But just as I was getting ready to punt on the day, one of the old curmudgeons that are the guts of the Jamaica Bay party-boat scene burst into the cabin. "Send out da kid!" he said excitedly.

A guy fishing in the corner had hooked a flounder.

I grabbed the iPhone out of my son's hand and recorded him as he ran to the rail. The fisherman gallantly handed over one end of the pole. Luke held it tentatively while his four-year-old buddy Olive cranked the handle.

A few minutes later, a 14-inch flounder came over the rail and all at once, the sky brightened and seemed not so gray. The waters lightened and seemed not puke-green in color but aqua-marine, alive with the plankton that is the very basis of all living things. I saw the flush come over my son, the flush of connectedness and mystery that only the world beneath the waves can deliver. A sense that no Wii can hold a candle to. Though it was not entirely his fish, my son had participated in its capture and was, I think, hooked. Holding up the fish he paused briefly as I finished recording the scene. Then as the moment faded into memory the weirdness of our modern era reared itself once again.

"I want to see that fish again," Luke said as we settled back in the cabin for the ride back into port. "On the iPhone."