



## Redemption

*(Some of the names in this article have been changed to hide their true identity.)*



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**When I first started saltwater flats fishing in the 1980s, I reacted to casting to fish like I did when trying to shoot my first deer with a bow and arrow. When I saw my quarry and had my big chance, my heart would start pounding and my excitement prevented me from hitting the mark. We call it “buck fever.” A few people never get it, but like most, I did. I only got over it by seeing hundreds of deer on hunts and shooting many to eat. I remember saying, I now view deer as calmly as if they were grazing barnyard animals. The same thing happened with tarpon, bonefish and permit after a lot of exposure to them and the right guides. A good, reassuring guide who teaches a little will help in this process. Unfortunately, I started off with a guide who wasn’t interested in this.**

I was on the deck of Tom Smith’s flats skiff when I was just learning to flats fish and it was the tenth time I blew the final cast at tarpon. The cast was too short; the fly spooked the fish etc. Every time I got in range, Tom would start yelling orders and I was so excited, my body wouldn’t do what my mind wanted it to. The more he yelled, the worse it got. He couldn’t take it any more and said, what’s your problem? I’m not poling all day against this wind for my health! There were more instances of his anti-social behavior.

On another trip he refused to turn around to get my guest's hat when it blew off running to new spot. The hat was made for the hosts of In-Fisherman Television and had sterling silver Master Angler Award fish pins in it. I knew I needed to learn to cast better and get over my excitement with a different guide, who didn't yell. Tom called me a month later asking if I wanted to fish again and I said I was busy.

I went down my original list of guides a successful flats fisherman gave me and fished with all of them, one by one. Once I became desensitized by seeing hundreds of fish on the flats; singles, doubles, big schools etc., I calmed down and made good decisions and good casts. I was gloating one day thirty years later while fishing with a guide named Jack Sparrow and we reminisced about some Marathon guides who had reputations for rudeness. I made the mistake of picking the wrong name and Jack said, Tom Smith! I like Tom Smith; he's my friend! Oh, sh\_\_\_, I said to myself.

I then replied, I'm going to find Tom's number with my smart phone and call him to tell him what I said. Within seconds I found it and pressed call. It rang and Tom picked up! I said, Hey, Tom, this is your old client John Field and I'm fishing with your buddy Jack Sparrow. I told him how you mistreated my guest and me many years ago and felt bad talking behind your back. Tom stopped me and said, you're right, I did treat you badly but things are different now. Wanna go fishing? I said yes and we said goodbye. When I got home from my trip, I called him to set up our trip. We were going tarpon fishing.

I was a little worried but Jack Sparrow told me he was a different fellow these days and had lots of close friends. On my next trip to see my dad in West Palm, I drove down to Duck Key early in the morning to reunite with Tom and spend the day on the water tarpon fishing. He launched his Hewes skiff and I handed him my gear, wiped the bottoms of my boat shoes on a towel he laid-out, as is customary, and came aboard. We headed out the winding channel and looked ahead for rolling fish. We were headed to the Atlantic side for migrating tarpon that confusingly move up and down the coast with the tides, but generally head north in spring and south in winter. The tarpon that get chased by jet-skis, spongers, and fisherman are nervous tarpon and act like a pinball bouncing from bumper to bumper. They also feel very vulnerable on the white beachfront sand flats. We prefer happy, relaxed tarpon.

We staked out on an outside corner of a bank on the flats and awaited the Mongol horde of tarpon. We had a couple fast movers swim-by but had no

shots early in the day. When the sun got up, we saw a big school coming right down the edge as hoped. My guide, like an artillery commander said, ready...hold... but before he said fire, I launched the kind of cast I learned from ACA distance tournaments and started stripping slowly. I let the leader overtake the fly and he bit! The fish exploded as it felt the hook. It ran and jumped repeatedly. Tom was quite surprised and elated. I fought the fish to the boat and he quickly unhooked it with his pliers while holding the fish's head by the gill plate. He said, I guess you've been practicing since the last time!

That would be an understatement. I think the humiliation I experienced twenty years earlier made me overcompensate. I became driven and learned as much as I could about casting and flats fishing. I kept a flats skiff in the Middle Keys and fished in it myself and poled my northern friends around in it too. I caught a couple hundred tarpon, lots of bones and a few permit alone and with my guides.

Later in the day with Tom, I surprised him when I spotted a single tarpon on the opposite side of the boat than the bank we were focusing on. The fish was forty feet and coming right at the side of the boat. I made a cast right to it and it followed my fly but I was afraid the fish might spook from the boat, so I broke the rules and sped-up my retrieve with both hands like I do for false albacore. The fish charged the fly with its mouth wide open and it ate as it almost hit the side of the boat!

I struck to the side and saw the fly in the corner of its mouth. The tarpon reacted by turning and running and jumping away from us. All of a sudden the tarpon stopped swimming and went belly up! Tom extracted the push-pole from the sand and guided us to the quivering, dying fish floating belly-up. When he grasped the gull cover we saw the bleeding from the hook buried in the isthmus, the white flesh below the gills. The hook must have come out of its mouth on a jump and the hook and leader lashed around and re-hooked itself in this lethal spot covering the heart. We unhooked it and let the dead fish sink to the bottom, letting other organisms benefit from this unfortunate loss.

We were both sad but knew this was a fishing reality. Tom had gotten over whatever demons he had twenty years prior and was a compassionate happy man. I had an idea to further our new friendship. I knew Tom also guided trout in the Rockies and my wife and I would be out there that

summer.

After we motored in and Tom loaded his skiff on the trailer, I asked him, would you guide my wife and me in Montana the end of this August? He said, I'd love to. This was before we had kids and I could make impromptu plans for just the two of us. We went fishing with Tom in his drift-boat on a big famous river on a warm day that changed to cold and wet. We both caught fat brown trout casting woolie-boogers and mending a tight downstream loop while floating. I normally abhor this type of fishing but it was good for my wife who was just a beginning trout fisher. I prefer wading and match the hatch. The excitement wasn't enough to keep my new thin bride warm. Tom and I could see her discomfort.

Tom asked her if she'd like to warm-up with a fire and she enthusiastically agreed. I couldn't tell if she was nodding or just shivering. Tom gathered wood and rapidly started a nice fire and we all shared in this most primordial comfort. We went back to fishing with more feeling in our hands than minutes before. We continued our float until we reached our take-out point and when Tom jumped over the side to handle the landing, he slipped and took icy water over his Dan Bailey waders. He expressed his shock but didn't swear like I would and just kept smiling. The next day when we left, new snow capped the high peaks. I really enjoyed the fishing and his company but it also renewed my admiration of human redemption.

He developed a contented life despite earlier personal problems. I think of this determination when I listen to Aaron Neville, the R&B singer who turned his life around after prison and heroine addiction and is now thankful for his blessings. Making four platinum records didn't hurt his sense of accomplishment any. Aaron turned it around with religion and maybe Tom found peace and his attitude adjustment through fishing and introspection.