

# Reel Recovery

## Fly-Fishing Retreats for Men with Cancer

Richard R. Twarog

*"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in, and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul."*

—John Muir

The terrible words heard, "You have cancer!" This is your new, overwhelming, reality. After the first inevitable fear—after the first round of questions and their perplexing answers—the immediate reaction is *always*, "What's going to happen now?"

Understandably their minds are full of thoughts other than themselves, especially of their loved ones. I know mine was. And I've learned that for most men the first question is, "What's going to happen to my family?"

*"Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow."*

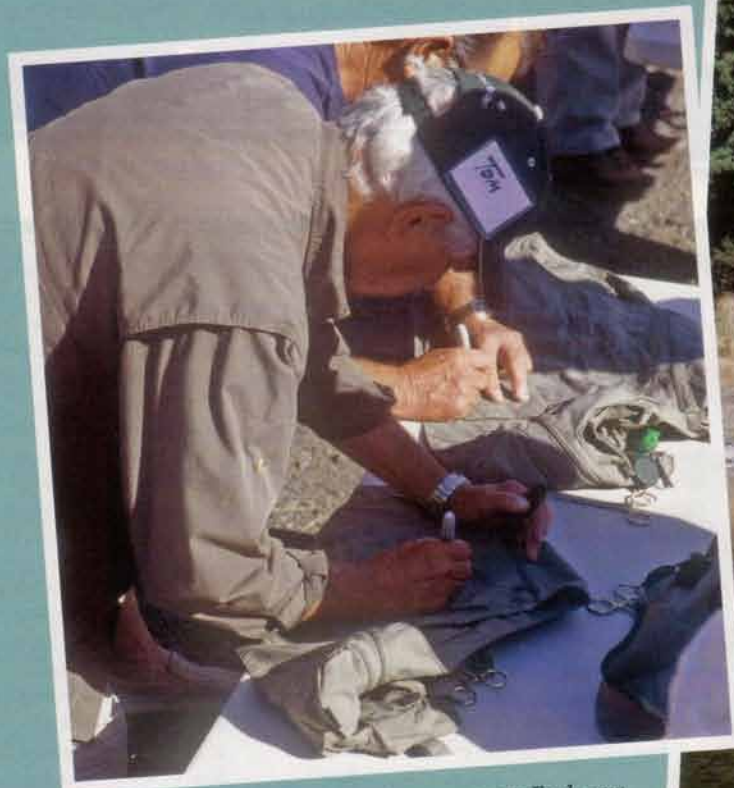
—Helen Keller

### In Memoriam Dennis E. Wolfe



August 25, 1990 – September 9, 2011

*Why does it take just a moment to say hello,  
and a lifetime to say goodbye?*



*A humbling, gratifying ritual of every retreat: Each new participant signs a vest used by his predecessor. It's like joining an elite club. Then they slip on the vests and continue the tradition by having a great time.*

Reel Recovery is a Boston-based organization devoted to helping men deal with the emotional shock of cancer and, by so doing, improve the quality of their lives. They offer three-day, specifically designed retreats (completely free of cost) at various extraordinary fly-fishing destinations throughout the lower forty-eight.

Essentially, there are two main components to the retreat: The most obvious is fly-fishing, (more about that later), it's been described as, "The hook to draw them in." The other component is *Courageous Conversation*. When the two come together—only then—does the astounding power of the total process manifest itself.

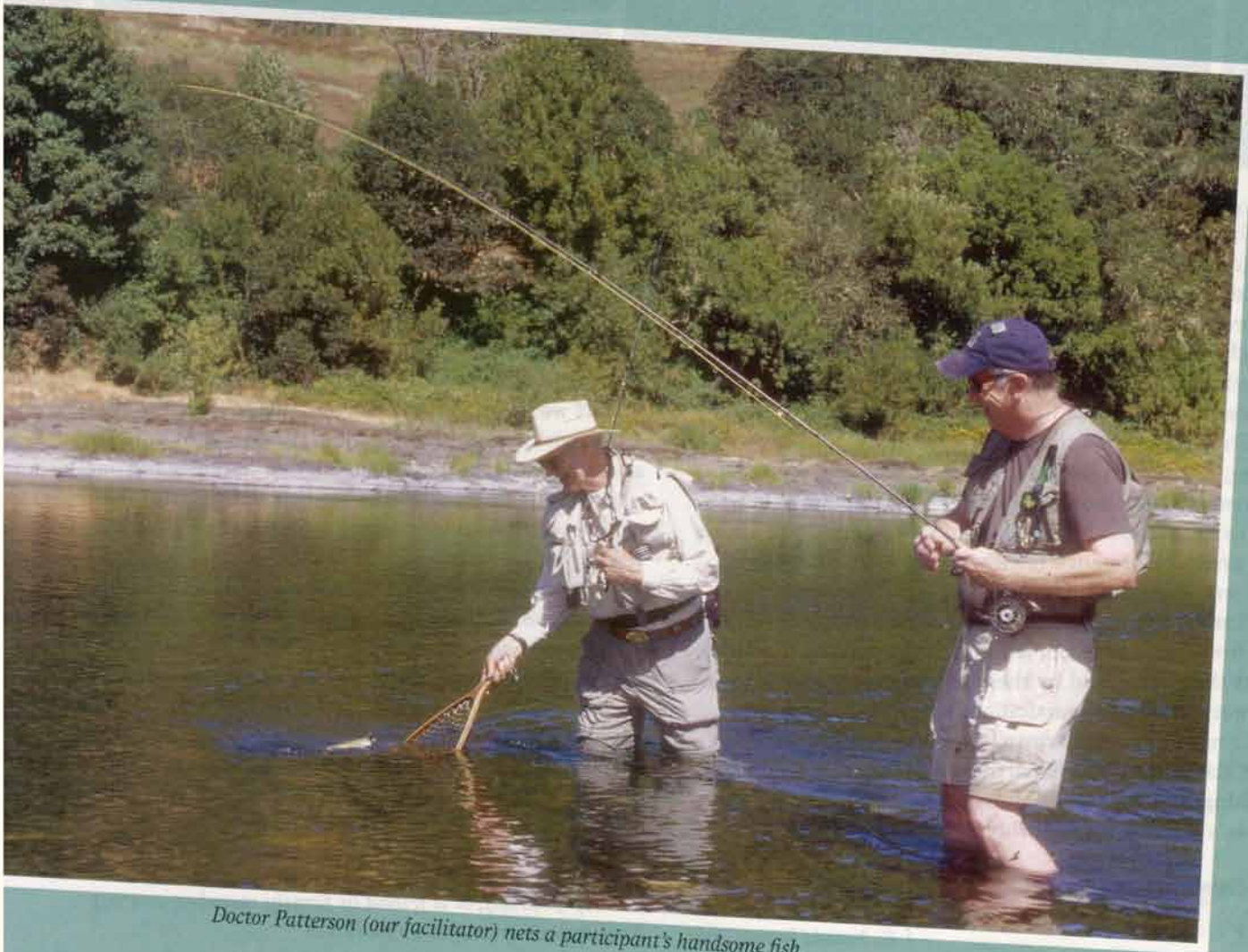
*Courageous Conversation* is not a psychotherapeutic method (precisely speaking), however, it surely has an astounding therapeutic effect. Participants feel less isolated: They're inspired by being a member of a group of men with like concerns. It's a safe and supportive environment, they can take a few risks: Open up. The men can (and indeed will) support each other. They, each of them, feel a sense of belonging, and

acceptance. It's a very warm and comfortable, powerful and cathartic, place to be.

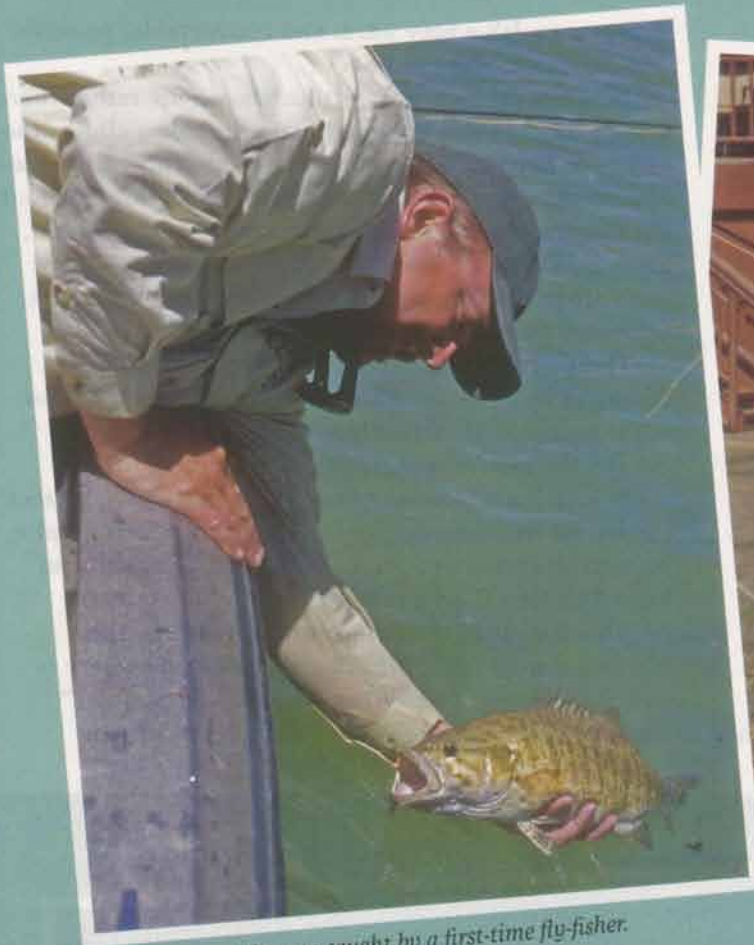
Building cohesiveness within 'the group' rather than attempting to solve an individual's problems allows 'the group' to help each of its own members. This technique eliminates a group member's sense of isolation. Without the *Courageous Conversation* component of the retreat, all there would be is a bunch of guys, who don't know each other, fly-fishing on the same body of water for a weekend. Instead, a healing process begins.

There are six *Courageous Conversation* sessions managed by an experienced facilitator at each retreat. After everyone is settled into rooms and has had dinner, the men all congregate in a meeting room—some wearing a facade of bravado pasted on their faces caused by trepidation, others with a self-effacing smile, soon to be exchanged for looks of trust and faith and hope. The first Conversation begins.

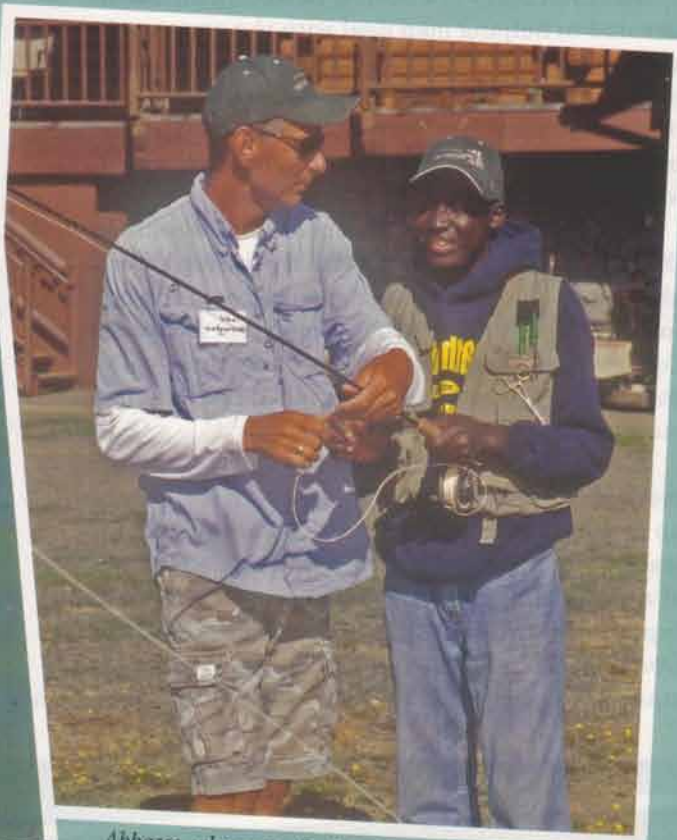
An example of the first question asked by the facilitator might be, "What's your name and where is your home-town?" or, "When did you first fly-fish?" Each man answers (only if he wants to) in turn, in



*Doctor Patterson (our facilitator) nets a participant's handsome fish.*



*A beauty caught by a first-time fly-fisher.*



*Abbase, who never fly-fished before, gets individual instructions from his new Buddy.*

a clockwise direction from the first person on the facilitator's left. It's a nice start to knowing each other: A nice 'buy-in' to the process.

In subsequent meetings each person will be both interested in others and interesting in his contributions which will become forcefully optimistic. He will now be asked different types of questions. Such as, "How has cancer affected your life? Your masculinity?"

They soon learn that things are never just one thing; but rather, there are many truths. During these Conversations, they'll tell things that they wouldn't say to their closest friends or spouse or children. There is a great significance to (what may seem like) trivial matters. The healing has begun.

Among the many and varied rituals at the retreat, the first (prior to going fishing) is the signing of fishing vests that were used by their predecessors at previous retreats. Each new participant signs his name, date, and sometimes home town.

Each participant is partnered with a volunteer, a 'Fishing Buddy', who is always a very experienced fly-fisher available for the whole of the retreat.

*"I discovered that while fly-fishing, I was in another place. In this place there was no cancer, no pain and no fear."*

—J. C., Nevada Retreat 2004

Unusual, a few flurries of rain last night; everything smelt and looked clean this morning, it was pleasant and not too warm for August. It was a good day to be alive.

Outside, the Umpqua River was calling us (screaming really), "Come here, fly-fish, forget your troubles." So we did.

Off we went, two-by-two, participant and Buddy.

A fish caught: photos made, the sound of laughing and whooping, high-fives, a fish lost (a really big one, naturally), followed by a few muttered, unprintable, choice words—all wonderful sounds echoing off the river.

And so it is... Goals are defined, and conversations become more meaningful, and friendships become tighter, and addresses are exchanged. The healing continues, and will continue long after this retreat has ended.

*"I thank you God for this most amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees, and for the blue dream of sky and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes."*

—e.e. cummings

To help yourself, or a friend or family member, contact Reel Recovery at 800-699-4490 or [info@reelrecovery.org](mailto:info@reelrecovery.org). Donations are welcomed.

