

# *Gefilte Fishing*

*A Guide  
to Spiritual Awakening*

Written by  
RAMI M. SHAPIRO

illustrated by  
MICHAEL NEFF



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# *Gefilte Fishing*

TO ALL THOSE  
WHO STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THIS DYING ART—  
GIVE IT UP.



# *Introduction*

Gefilte fishing is the art of living life with full attention. Living life with full attention is also called spirituality. Gefilte fishing is the art of spiritual living.

Spirituality isn't about ritual, or affirmations, or dogma, or belief, or feelings. Spirituality is about paying attention. Most of us are surprised to hear this. We imagine that spirituality is something extraordinary; something only the most clever can achieve. We believe this because the most clever have taught it to us.

Each religion seeks a spiritual monopoly. Each religion seeks to promote its professionals up the latter of corporate spirituality. Each religion seeks to sell us what we already have: an intuitive sense that we are God playing out this particular life-time in this particular space-time.

To do that religions first have to convince us that our intuitive sense is wrong. They have to convince us that we are separate from Reality; apart from, rather than a part of, the Whole. To put it quite simply: religion has to sell us the disease in order to then sell us the cure.

The disease of religion is the idea that we are something other than God. The cure is the various methods, beliefs, rituals, etc. that each religion sells as a means (or, as is often the case with Western religion, as the means) for reconnecting with God. The cure works because it gives us permission to awaken from the illusion of the disease.

When we understand that spirituality is not about belief but about attention, we discover that there is no technique for paying attention; there is only paying attention.

Gefilte fishing is this paying attention. We sit and watch, waiting for the gefilte fish to appear. It never does. It never did. There is no fish called gefilte. There is only the attentive waiting. Waiting without losing patience; watching whatever is; doing whatever needs to be done. This is the art of gefilte fishing. It is also the art of sound living.

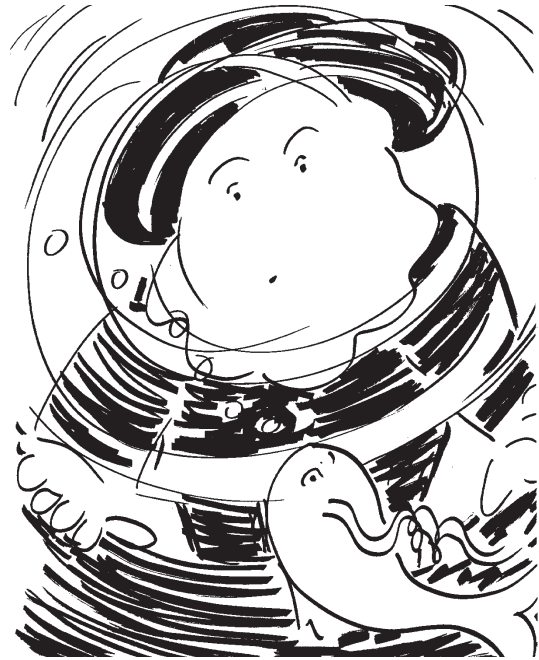
Yet most of us expect and do something else. We want something extraordinary to happen, never realizing that it always is. We want something to do other than the ordinary, because we have chosen not to see the extraordinary for what it really is: the ordinary when we pay attention to it.

This little book of ten poems and commentary, modeled after the Ten Ox-herding Pictures of the Zen Buddhist tradition, is a road map of what happens to us in our quest for the extraordinary, our quest to hook the illusory gefilte fish. It is meant to be read and contemplated slowly. Each poem and its accompanying drawing seeks to remove one more hook binding us to the illusion of separation. When we are no longer hooked on separation we will see what is and attend.

Good fishing!

## *Looking for Gefilte*

*A hunger gnaws at our insides;  
an emptiness craving fulfillment;  
a hollowness crying for substance.  
Like Pharaoh's cows  
we consume and are not sated.  
No matter how much we have  
we lack that which we desire most.*



"It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us...?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the seas and get it for us...?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it," (Deuteronomy 30:12-14).

"It" is awakening, holiness, the ever present awareness of God in and as all things. Because God is not other than Reality we cannot find God as if God were separate from ourselves. To look outward and to look inward are both mistaken. Direction is not the issue, looking is. "To observe It" Moses tells us. That is all that is asked. To look at what is; to simply observe the workings of mind and nature is the heart of spiritual practice.

Because we imagine a spiritual lack we fail to see the fullness. Because we fail to see what is we quest after what never was.

# Seeing The Bubbles

*In the lake  
shaded by the great oak  
pushing the grasses gently this way  
and that  
the breath of the Desired  
rises to the surface.  
Will we find the way,  
bait the hook,  
snare the prize?*



Truth bubbles up everywhere. There is no great spiritual tradition without Truth. Also none without falsehood. Religions are the by-product of insight; the myths we tell to reinforce memory, the practices we invent to embody Truth.

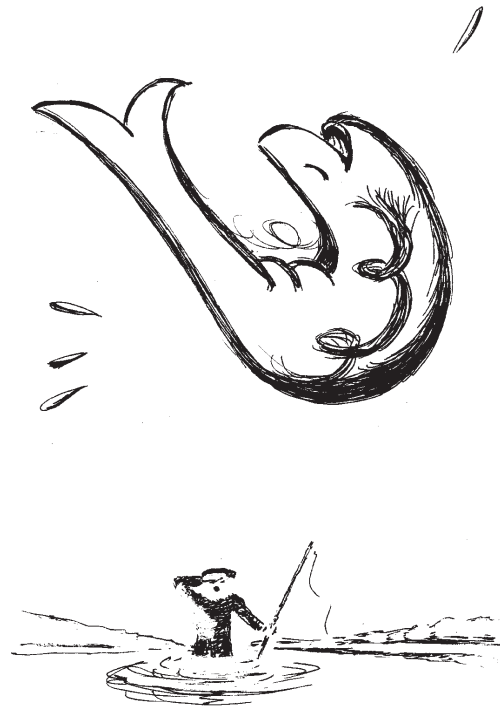
The eye is caught by the bubbles. Our heart races: "Aha! It is here, just beneath the surface! All I need do is reach in and grasp it!" And as we do we disturb the pool and the gefilte fish escapes.

If we don't reach in we cannot grasp. If we cannot grasp we cannot own that for which we so ardently hunger. It is the hunger that traps us in action that thwarts our achieving the goal.

Learn to live with the hunger. Learn to observe the bubbles.  
But refrain from disturbing the pool. The mind bubbles. Wait.  
Be patient. Watch.

# *Seeing The Fish*

*The sun is now high,  
its rays reflected by the lake.  
We are blinded and there is no shade.  
Suddenly it is there  
flinging itself skyward,  
defying gravity,  
soaring alone in the breeze.  
There is no place to hide.*



The fish is seen and everything is changed. For a moment time ceases, all our senses are acute and in harmony with each other and the world. We know in a manner we have never known before.

What is it we know? That all and every are one. That I and Thou are one. That there are no opposites only complements. We glimpse the One and know we are not other than It. We glimpse our selves and know that It is not other than us.

Yet the fish is still out there. Gravity still pulls. And the lake still swallows our gefilte fish with a splashless grace.

Time churns and we stand dizzy on the shore. Knowing and doubting all at once.

# *Hooking The Fish*

*The fish takes the bait and runs.  
What strength! What power!  
We had not expected this  
and are caught off guard.  
We dig in our heels,  
arch our backs;  
we pull and are pulled  
as the gefilte fish flies and dives  
across the lake.*



Control is the great trap. We grasp hold of that which cannot be grasped and seek to bend it to our will. But our will is as wild as the fish we hope to conquer.

Do we really control our minds? Do we really control our hearts? Do we really control our will? Or do we simply succumb to desire and whim pretending with hindsight to have planned it all along?

Have we hooked the fish? Or has the fish hooked us?

## *Reeling in The Fish*

*Given freedom  
the fish abandons the fight.  
Allowed to be itself it acquiesces to the line.  
Yet we still hold the rod too tightly  
fearing our fish will suddenly flee.  
We reel in the line hesitantly  
lest it grow too taught and break.  
But our fears are groundless.  
The fish is ours... but we are not yet the fish's.*

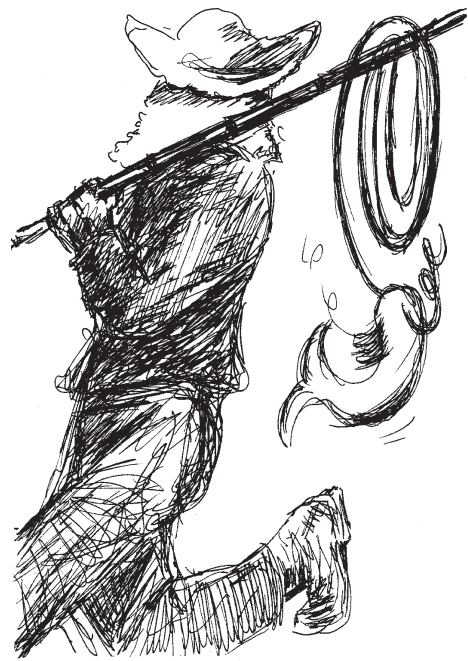


The mind is a tumult of thought and feeling. There is no end to it. One thought leads to another and then another still. There is no rest and our hours are filled with the churnings of self and the stories we tell to excuse our foolishness.

And there are moments of stillness. Thought ceases. So does time. There is no movement. The fish and we are connected though not yet one. And the connection brings a quiet that opens the heart to compassion and wonder.

# *Carrying The Fish*

*Singing with joy,  
keeping rhythm on our fish  
we walk home  
draped in joy.  
Who can say what rapture this is?  
Who can give words to such uplift?  
A song rises spontaneously,  
the words forgotten as soon as they are mouthed.  
The rhythm alone carries us.*



The struggle is over. The fish is caught. It is time to go home.  
We have satisfied our deepest hunger; there is an end to the  
battle with self and other. Contentment reigns. We have what we  
want and there is no need unmet.

We cannot be bought. We cannot be sold. We are our own  
person. Complete in ourselves we need nothing, desire nothing,  
contribute nothing.

We think this is It: pure Self, true Self, the person of no rank, the  
hidden saint unknowingly supporting the entire world. We are  
wrong. It is only refined selfishness. We have much to learn.

## *No More Fish*

*We are home.  
Sitting in the shade of our house  
our mind absorbed in the unfolding of Reality  
around and within.  
The trees wave to us.  
The grasses bow to us.  
The birds sing to us.  
We are content and full.  
The fish is gone.  
There is no need.*



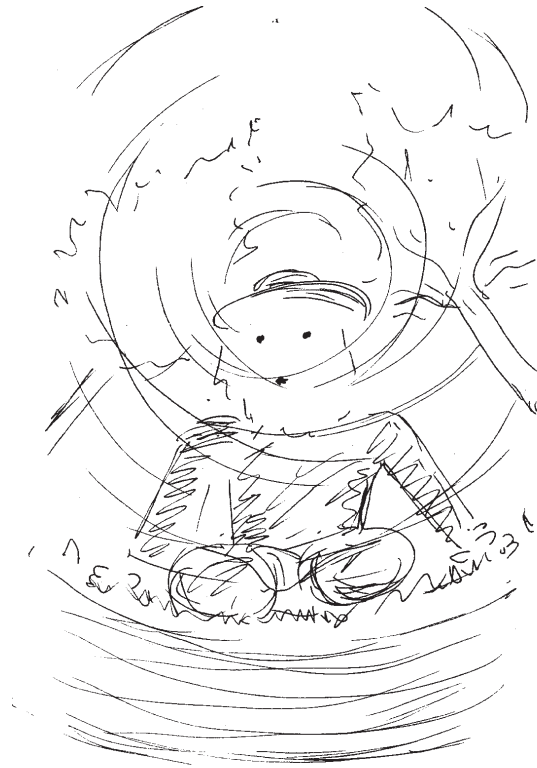
The first stirring of awakening is this feeling of at-homeness. We realize that we have arrived. And, more importantly, that we never left.

The quest for the gefilte fish is a quest of the mind, imagined by the mind, and sold to the self as a cure for loneliness. Once the fish is caught there is no need to search. Once the fish is grasped there is no need to hold on. Once grasping stops we are filled with the wonder of ordinary reality.

It is not other than here. It is not other than now. It is not other than this and that and the other. It is not other than.

# *Altogether Gone*

*All is empty.  
The fish.  
The rod.  
The reel.  
The line.  
The lake.  
The house.  
The field.  
The self.  
Gone, gone, altogether gone.*



Contentment is still of the self. As long as the self is full, awakening is not. True awakening is an emptying of the self. This is the great death, the dropping of self, the letting go of 'me.'

This is where all opinion is consumed in the fires of Truth. This is where every ism fades and only the Is remains. This is where all religions end and all philosophers fall silent.

Here silence reigns. Here there is no speech, no propaganda. Here there is only listening. No hearer, no heard— only hearing; no knower, no known— only knowing. This is the great death that reveals the awesomeness of all Life. If you are afraid of dying you are too afraid to live.

## *New Birth*

*All is full.  
The fish.  
The rod.  
The reel.  
The line.  
The lake.  
The house.  
The field.  
Here, here, altogether here.  
But not yet the self.*

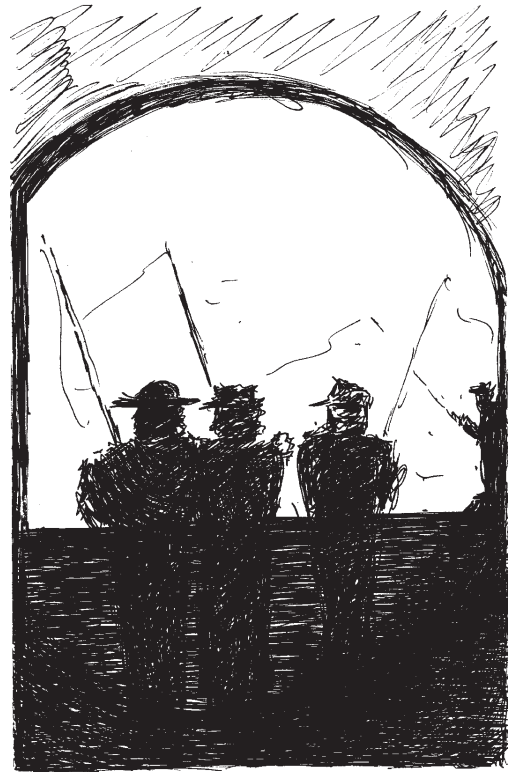


“Behold, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity... I have put before you birth and death, blessing and curse. Choose life,” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). Choosing life means choosing death. Choosing prosperity means choosing adversity. The two go together, flip sides of a single coin.

There is no self present here to choose. There is but the choiceless, selfless awareness of what Is: birth and death, prosperity and adversity, good and evil, joy and suffering. The fullness of things is revealed only when the emptiness of self is allowed.

# *Rebirth*

*Embracing all,  
embracing nothing,  
we return to the ordinary  
aware of the extraordinary.  
No sacred, no mundane;  
no priests, no piety;  
no magic, no mysticism;  
nothing hidden, no one hiding  
we reenter the everydayness of life—  
the hustle and hassle and humor  
and hurt and horror  
that is our daily round.  
Filled with Life and empty of self  
we embrace the world  
uplifting the fallen, freeing the captive,  
embracing the lost, pointing the Way that is no way.*



Choose life: blessing and curse and everything in between. Choose life with all our heart, with all our strength, with all our soul, for it is the allness of our choosing that constitutes awakening. Choosing all with all is living life without hesitation: accepting each moment as it is and responding to it appropriately.

Awake or asleep; enlightened or befuddled, this is all we can ever do.

# *Conclusion*

there is no fish called gefilte. Carp, tuna, salmon, bass, but no gefilte. Fishing for a gefilte fish is foolish. It betrays an ignorance about fish and about life. It is like mistaking the moon's reflection for the moon itself. It is like eating the menu and imagining it to be the meal. We may become full, but we are never nourished.

Gefilte fish is stuffed fish. Fishing for gefilte fish is stuffing oneself full of nonsense. And we do it all the time.

Gefilte fishing is a metaphor of the spiritual quest. We are seeking that which cannot be sought. If we seek outward we find that it is inward. If we seek inward we find that it is outward. Why? Because the gefilte fish is smarter than we are. It sees us coming and flees.

True spirituality is not inward nor outward. God is not inside us or outside us. From God's perspective there is no in or out. In and out only makes sense from the point of view the self that defines it.

God and gefilte know no self. God and gefilte have no point of view, no perspective. God and gefilte are all views and all perspectives simultaneously. Good and evil, right and wrong, war and peace— all this comes from God (Isaiah 45:7). One need not seek God amidst the stuff of everyday life, one need only recognize God as the stuff of everyday life.

All spiritual practice is contained in our ten gefilte fishing pictures.

We begin our quest for the fish imagining that it is out there or in here and that eventually, through hard work, faith and perseverance, we can grasp it and make it ours. Then, so we are told, we will be blessed with happiness, contentment, and boundless joy. After all, if we were told the truth that the fish is illusory and that in the end we will return to the world as we left it, who would take up the quest?

So we allow ourselves to be tricked. And we sit by the shore and fish. We wait and we fish. We fish and we wait. And then a nibble. Something stirs— in us? around us? We tug and tease and finally

achieve our aim. We have arrived; the prize is ours. There is a joy in this, but it is temporary. Even as we return home with our fish we are already dying, already fading. We have come too close to Truth to maintain the illusion of a permanently separate self.

What promises eternal life brings us the great death. Eternity is not living forever in an infinite linearity: a horizonless time line of endless days. Eternity is ending linear time, stepping outside the time line and glimpsing the beginningless circle of Life: birth–death–new birth. The self is born, the self dies, but the flowing whole of which the self is but a fleeting part never ends. With the grasping of the gefilte fish comes a glimpse of Reality's round, and with that seeing comes the great death—a letting go of the illusion of a permanent and separate self.

With the great death comes a new birth. We return to the world with all its pain and possibility, and we return to it with fresh eyes and arms and mind. We see not only the parts but the whole that includes them. We see not only the isms, but the Is that transcends them. We tap Being and are no longer bewitched by becoming. We are awake.

Awake not only to ourselves, but to the world. Not only to God but to godliness. We are a force for holiness, a conduit for creative grace and healing humor. We do not seek to change the world only to nurture it toward awakening.

How? We give it a taste of gefilte fish.

And point to the reel and rod leaning against the wall.

Rami M. Shapiro  
is a rabbi and storyteller.  
An award winning poet and author,  
Rabbi Shapiro's other Light House Books include:

**Embracing Esau**  
exploring masculinity

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an interpretive reading of Ecclesiastes

Michael Neff  
is the artist who created the modern classic  
**One Small Hand: Hasidic Meditations**  
He lives in Philadelphia.

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