

A Member of the Wetting



9/05/00

A typical late summer Sunday at Kelly Park. We try to get there early, before the gates are closed. Walking down to the swimming area, Jobie, my daughter-in-law, spots a “big ole turtle” in the eel grass at the head of the supervised pool, just before the footbridge over the narrow canal. We watch the large striped head mosey around in the bottom silt. Though fifty folks are swimming here and there, the water is still as clear as the sky it reflects quite blue. We walk along the island where tubers are floating down from the spring head and cross the bridge over them, setting our blanket and towels in the shade on the far side.

D.J., my ten-year-old granddaughter, and I jump right in to swim and explore, using goggles and a snorkel to find the turtle again, happy to become a part of his element. We cross over and investigate a ten foot deep vent in the middle of the pond, then on to the algae and eel grass building up by the wall. Some hefty bass are cruising around over there. It is surprising to me that the crowds have not yet driven out these high flyers on the aquatic food chain. Don't they know, by experience, both the Sunday and the summer counts at Rock Springs Run?

The main reason D.J. chose this place for her family's visit to Papa Steve's was to hunt for shark's teeth. Thousands of children (adults as well) get a special thrill every year out of sifting through the rocky calciforms for remnants of the ancient sea beds that constitute our aquifer. Is it an innate idea that we activate when we embrace the salty ocean from which our life and blood emerged? Do our calcium atoms rise up in every synapse, muscle, and bone to sing the song of the sea, a chorus of ecology with bass and turtle and mussel? The teeth of the shark, in a live

specimen, would prompt great fear, but trickling out of a boiling sulfur soup in one of the many small outlets at Kelly Park is somehow charming. To find one is to enter the dragon's cave and make off with a golden goblet. I am straining here to capture the excitement of a ten-year-old who never misses a trick in the wild, if she can help it.

Later, we stand together in the small sulfur pool. The water is up to the tops of my calves and my toes are wiggling among tiny stones, not all smooth. "Do you feel things moving under your feet?" I ask D.J. "Naw," she says, thinking I am trying to scare her, but I do feel things moving under the arches and the toes.

Sean and Jobie have joined us now in a walk back through the woods to explore all the little caves and boils that come out of the high bank south of the main cave. We follow one streamlet as it empties into the main channel from the head spring. You can hear the tubers clamoring on by, calling out in several languages, but one joy.

Descending the ridge bank another time, D. J. leads the three of us to a new pool, half embraced by an arching limestone rock-form about the size and shape, we decide, of a small manatee. It even has a hole to represent the eye of a graceful mammal that would come up to the spring in winter if it only knew how warm the water always is.

Inside the dark cave of manatee rock, a creature is flitting that Sean begins to remark about. The light bouncing off of its gyrating eight-legged or eight pointed form makes it attractive to our attention. It seems to have almost no substance, but occupies a space the size of your palm. Jobie thinks at first it's a very large daddy longlegs, but it flutters back and forth in this dark space above the little rill as though it might be caught in some web. Then it seems to tumble over or spin.

Jobie bends down to catch or touch it, but there is no web around it. It has movement, but almost no direction. Instead, without touching her hand as she reaches out to it, the critter rolls over her hand. Underneath this one, we then spot another, a smaller version of the same mystery and gradually our pursuit of them causes their evacuation down stream and immediately out of sight.

I talk about how unique each of these vents can be for snails, as my friend Bill has found out recently in making his documentary film of the Wekiva. He took the world's authority on freshwater snails around the Seminole Forest, and they discovered five new species of snail, each endemic to its own tiny spring or seep. Perhaps, I speculate wildly, there are airborne insects or spiders here that can be found nowhere else. It matters not. These two are now endemic to us and better than a shark's tooth. We've never seen the like and now they populate the wilderness of our minds.

We go next to the big cave and the iron bars erected years ago to keep divers from death underground. The fun here is to belly down over all the large patches of limestone rock amid the black rubber donuts full of merry floaters. Why does splashing water make us so happy? In spite of the several scrapes I will feel days later on my knees and arms, the trip down stream is great, watching all the churning of human bodies and sea stones. In *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon words for all the shining creatures in Grendel's mother's mere come to mind: *sea-deer* and *worms*, and my favorite, the simple term *undern*, the underworld critters. We have this very day become aquatic mammals and reptiles slithering noisily down over the crevices, the ooze of wildness in the slime of creation, a fully Florida scene replete with every size and color of monster.

By the time we return to our blanket and open the cooler for drinks and snacks, the main swimming area is at full blast, five lifeguards watching five hundred people sloshing around the bend. Every three minutes a whistle and a megavoice try to stop tubers from hanging onto the bridge before they enter the main pool, passing in front of a large bed of spatterdock where we have been watching the new-greenest chameleon romp about. D. J. is back in the water and I am catching up with my son's life when the nearest guard's whistle sounds and people are being told, in no uncertain terms, to get out of the water.

The other guards soon follow suit and suddenly we realize that something strange is happening. I had been talking about how recently they had to close Blue Spring to swimmers because they were finding coliform bacteria in the water. So I was imagining that perhaps swimming was about to be suspended for the day, when Jobie points out a gator swimming down along the edge of our spatterdock. Just a three footer, maybe a little bigger, taking his good ole time, whirling and girling like Esther Williams.

Gradually the crowd gets the message (which no lifeguard had mentioned). This is a first in my lifetime of spring going, a gator taking the whole pool to himself. The excitement in the crowd rose to a pitch, as though Elvis himself had strolled in our midst. Everyone pointed and called to others to watch. It occurred to my wretched mind that this would be a good tactic for the lifeguards to get a break from the summer Sunday crowds. Just tie one of these babies up in the woods and let 'im loose now and then.

After about a half hour of tracking the critter down stream past the swimming area, they placed one guard at the end of the main pool, in the water, and told everyone they could return to swim as long as they didn't go past the last guard. D. J. and I went right in, but the crowd had already dissipated quite a bit and in general wasn't too sure about getting all cold again.

I take for granted that most wildlife recedes from the human party, but this fellow gives my settled mind pause. Did this one, like the turtle, just not care or did he get caught hunting in the

swampy patch of weeds beyond the first bridge when the crowd arrived? Don't gators and turtles and bass like the spring, too, and come often at night when the park is closed? The picture of a ten-foot gator walking down a sidewalk in Seminole County on the six-o'clock news does not surprise me or turn my settled gator notions upside down. But this bold creature exploring the clear spring pool with half a thousand bathing suits is troubling. Maybe he thinks he's growing up to be Lord of the Springs.

In my mind the gators recede to the swamp and the muck, their proper element. They don't fly upstream looking for shark's teeth or little girls in goggles. In Wekiva, you always have to learn to think again.