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A View from the Swallow-tailed Kite

To get our bearings, let's take a short flight up the St. Johns River into Wekiva-land (yes, we're going to be tourists, briefly now, like Disney-goers, but it's just a prelude to our working to be natives). Draw a map of Florida in your mind. It's like a rudder sticking down from Georgia and Alabama on the keel of the US mainland.

Inside the upper and western half of that shape, trace another, slightly smaller shape, a shark's tooth with the flat head parallel to Georgia's southern border and the incisor curving down into Orlando at the center of the peninsula. That shark's tooth represents the central ridge of limestone with its thousand springs gushing out eight billion gallons of freshwater a day flowing into major rivers: the Apalachicola, Ochlockonee, Withlacoochee, Suwannee, and Hillsborough on the west coast, and the St. Johns on the east.

Now put Jacksonville at the upper eastern edge of the rudder, with the stream of the upper river miles wide at the top and extending from the Atlantic west about forty miles and then turning south for another two hundred and fifty, all the way down the eastern half of Florida to the middle, where it originates in a swamp. Of course, on the river-go-round, anywhere the water runs or flows is the river.

The St. Johns rains from above, springs from sea-rock below, and swells to or seeps out of a thousand swamps and many grand Florida duck-stops with lake-names like George, Dexter, Woodruff, Monroe, Jessup, Osceola, Virginia, and Harney. Think of all the animals along the river and throughout its basin. They too are springs that, as the British would say, make water all day long and give back almost all the water they take up without filing a single consumptive use permit.

How convenient for us to think that we are not a part of this, that somehow, because we flush ours into a pipe, our animal connections to the great water-closet in the earth are different. The plants of the St. Johns are also springs, powerful pumps chugging out the river into our atmosphere, purer than before, and ready for rain or fog or dew. Why is it so hard to remember that our rivers run through us?

Coming upstream from the Atlantic, we follow the path of the Timucuan Indians (and their ancestors for several millennia), then the French, the Spanish, the British, and the Americans (confederates as well as yankees). The first major tributary we encounter is the Oklawaha River to the west of Palatka, draining 2800 square miles of north central Florida including the old world tourist attraction of Silver Springs.

Moving south then through Lake George toward Lake Monroe and the town of Sanford, we pass several powerful spring-fed creeks and streams, some right on the river and some off to the west in the Ocala National Forest. This is the route taken by hundreds of steamships in the nineteenth century, filled with people like us, explorers and settlers. We are also moving in the path of the anadromous eels and shad whose lives breathe in and out between fresh and salt water. Just before our imaginary ultra-light takes us to Sanford and Lake Monroe, we pass over the expansive native mounds at Hontoon Island and then catch a glimpse of the manatee's winter haven at Blue Spring. Finally, we reach the confluence of the Wekiva River.

We have no record that William Bartram, on his two trips down the St. Johns in 1765 and the early 1770's, ever stopped here to explore the Wekiva. We know he saw Blue Spring, next door, but not at manatee time. Audubon came to Florida in 1832 and visited DeLeon Springs, ten miles to the north, and John Muir hiked his way through Florida almost forty-five years later, but there's no record either of them touched down in the basin. Many of the great writers and painters of early America have taken steamers down the St. Johns and the Oklawaha, leaving us poems and stories and landscapes of their imagination. But right now we are standing on a threshold of that same kind of pristine beauty, except that for the most part it hasn't been properly celebrated. At least for now, Wekiva stands largely intact as it was in 1774 or 1775, on the eve of the American revolution, a river community not yet strangled by human population growth and the steady stream of visitors that far outnumber the natives.

Looking southeast down over the Wekiva, we can easily see the outlines of at first two sub basins, then a third. Directly west and then north, almost immediately you can make out the large swamp into which flows the Blackwater Creek. It drains the entire northern half of the Wekiva Basin from all the way up into a corner of Marion County across the southern edge of Ocala National Forest down over to State Road 46. You can make out the wedge-shaped Lake Norris, above the arc of SR 44, that starts the main flow of the Blackwater and then gathers stream from Seminole Creek to the west. Just below where SR 46A meets SR 44, Seminole Springs emerge, a fistful of deep cone-like fissures that spurt forth enough water to keep large areas of swamp from becoming hydric hammock. This territory of NE Lake County is today entirely rural, boasts a few small towns and villages, but mostly has a population fiercely divided on whether to grow freely or to maintain the integrity of their rural community by designing that growth.

As we fly on south now over the Lower Wekiva, you can see in the east the city of Sanford, growing out toward the river, but mostly below the SR 46 bridge on the east side. On the west side there are ten blocks of older country homes, set back from the river and then directly to the west almost no population until you get to the west side of Rock Springs. There, almost in a straight line along Wekiwa Springs Boulevard, you can recognize the fine suburbs of metro Orlando reaching up to the front door of the large parcel of public lands now protecting the river. As we hover over Wekiwa Springs, looking south, you can see that the surface water is flowing

all the way from the Orlando's north western corner and that's where the third sub basin also arises, the Little Wekiva River.

You might have difficulty making out a stream of any kind in there because all you see are lakes with names like Pearl, Lotus, Little Bear, Spring, and Trout. Occasionally you can see some canals and runs connecting them. In one place the county even put the river underground for part of a mile, but now and then the river has exceeded this boundary and damaged homes built in the flood plain.

The Little Wekiva finally escapes engineering and becomes a naturally flowing stream when, flowing north and east, it approaches Interstate 4 and crosses SR 434 in Longwood. There the Little Wekiva gets a shot in the arm from three powerful springs—Sanlando, Starbuck, and Palm—and moves into a wild river bed quite quickly. The large kidney-shaped Lake Brantley, directly west of the Springs, flows west and north into MiamI Springs Run and then the Upper Wekiva. Everything east of that, including some territory on the east side of Interstate 4, drains down into the Little Wekiva sub basin.

Our survey now complete, we see that the map of current land use corroborates what flight pilots see 100,000 times a year. The northern two thirds of the entire Wekiva basin is swamp forest and fields with low densities of human population. Directly below that in an east-west pattern that is mostly a straight line, we have an urban basin with medium to high density in two different counties. Right now, therefore, most of Lake County and a sliver of northwest Orange County are sucking in sprawl.

So these three sub basins spell out the five river segments that will gather up the essays in this collection into five chapters. Arranged in a chronological order, they show the gradual, but steady progress in land acquisition and conservation in the Wekiva basin for the past eighty years. Each of these chapters has one or two background essays based entirely on research, but most of the writing comes out of the river itself in a variety of forms: nature essays, prose poems, memoirs of childhood and of teaching, and a few experiments in the nature of language. They sing forth from my sporadic exploration of all these magical streams, their uplands and bottomlands, and take the form of the journal accounts I wrote, usually within a day or two of the experience.

In revising those journal entries, I have been scrupulous to be true to the actual experience, to make nothing up, to supply little or no details later. Each of the essays and poems, therefore, will provide the original date of the journal entry. I have sometimes done research to confirm my estimates or findings and sometimes have added questions afterward to clarify my judgments, but for the most part I want you to have the experience that I had.

Of course, in memory and writing one always selects details and leaves out others, but in these accounts I don't take the liberty to make them more dramatic by rearranging them or by adding a creature or behavior from some other encounter. The common people and places, the plants and animals, in their history and their current activities, are fully rich enough in the light of truth without my teasing or tweaking Wekiva to increase your blood pressure. The poetry of earth speaks for itself.

Inside of these many Wekiva trips, I do at times pause to contemplate the issues of humans, nature, and literature that I have studied for a lifetime. While many of the pieces are supported by autobiographical detail, as the nature essay since Thoreau has always done, the story of Wekiva is really not about me at all, but about the transformation of mind and spirit that has taken place in me and to some extent in literary and cultural theory, especially over the past quarter century.

This autobiographical path will form the foundation of four literary interludes that describe the intellectual progress of my life, what brought me to write these nature essays and poems in my later career as an English professor. The foundation of that life-episode was my reading of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1976. I have felt strongly since then that the poet of the people provides a better paradigm than Thoreau for the kind of earth poetry and essays that America needs. He provides a much stronger sense of what it takes, politically, to form a river community.

Whitman argued that the democracy that would seal the contract of America and that was worth true freedom would have to be constructed from the ground up and he usually imagined it occurring in some western habitat. Wekiva is demonstrably the democratic vista that Whitman foresaw in 1871, as I try to show in the five-part structure of this book.

As you move through the five runs of the river, you will be accumulating the steps for building a river community. Whitman's poetry and my own experience have come to this:

I. if we take our biochemistry to heart, we attach ourselves deeply to the land and its rivers;

II. then our sense of land use and private property will change, achieving an important balance, and making our economy take root in nature's;

III. then, if we join up with community organizations of every kind to celebrate and preserve the river, all the other human values of education, public health, and recreation will be served;

IV. and we will have a reservoir of wildlife to give us spiritual strength and a democratic outlook;

V. finally, this draws a picture of hope because once enough land is protected and we are renewed by it, we can all carry out and foster programs of natural restoration, not just in the public parks and preserves, but in our neighborhoods, subdivisions, pastures, farmlands, and homeowner associations.

The source of this argument is contained in the interludes at the end of the each section of the history of the river's protection spread out over the five geographical areas of the basin. They chronicle my growing understanding of Whitman's poetry of earth and my own spiritual development as a Wekiva activist and writer.

So, my friends, you will have to be a little gymnastic, multi-tasking like the river itself, as you jump from section to section, chapter to chapter, and form to form. Moving down stream from spring-fed tributaries to the St. Johns, you will experience the river at first in the context of the history of its settlement and the struggles of the Friends of the Wekiva and the central Florida community to protect and restore it. But the river gets wilder as we go and its history recedes into the hopeful present.

BEGINNING my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

Whitman: "Inscriptions" ***Leaves of Grass***

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