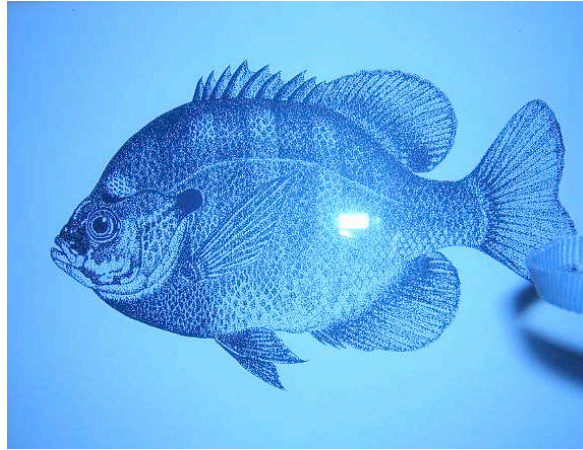


ATC



Drawing by Jim Duby

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The problems of our young men and women are a community's most important concern. The work of building good fathers, mothers, citizens, and minds for the future is about as essential as it gets. Family, church, friendship, school, and government combine to help in the process. How healthy is our community? We sometimes complain about crime and violence, but only through direct action can we make a significant change. That's where Wekiva can come in.

I met Guy Calabrese in a graduate course which focused on the growing sense of place in American culture. Guy works as a math teacher for Orange County in the Adolescent Treatment Center down next to Sea World. Since his project for the course was to create a set of lesson plans for a field trip out to the Wekiva River, he asked me to come down to ATC and get the kids psyched for their trip to Wekiwa Springs State Park. The day would start with hikes through some significant habitats, canoeing down from the spring to the marina and the Indian mound at Shell Island, then back to the spring for lunch and a swim.

Driving down the interstate to meet Guy at ten in the morning, I move from my own Howell Creek watershed to the St. Johns through the greater Orlando basin for the Econlockhatchee River, and then I am drawing up on south Orlando and getting closer to the Kissimee River and its long path down to the Everglades. It's all one county's jurisdiction for juveniles, but three different tributaries or river territories.

What can I say about the Wekiva to a group of 13-17 year olds who have been in retention for months? Each of them is somewhere on a humbling journey of recovery from abuse, violence, crime, drugs, and/or alcohol. Now there's the antithesis to an eco-system, if there ever was one.

Guy has forewarned me that not all of them will be fully de-toxed. I am, however, meeting with the best of the gang, those who have shown enough good behavior and promise to warrant the reward of a day out of detention and into the wild.

Strictly speaking, these young men are level six offenders. "That means," Guy explained one day in class, "they have been arrested for the last time as juveniles, but they are still considered as suitable for recovery programs and probation. The next offense will land them in jail. But this place is jail enough, for me, with double and triple layers of security as I enter and move about the building.

Let's talk about my small fears. I worry that I will let Guy down and somehow fail to connect with his charges. He has enormous excitement about this program which you can feel whenever he explains what he does. With a wife and a growing family of his own, he goes into jail-school every day and becomes one of a dozen foster-father-teachers for these young men. It is an enormous challenge that dwarfs all the kinds of teaching I have ever tried.

The primary rule of good teaching is to teach the students, not the subject. However, neither teaching nor learning is a one-way river. Guy is trained in mathematics and knows lots of other subjects the boys need, but he has to learn quickly about each young man, what great empty holes each carries in his heart, mind, and body; what strengths and talents each has to overcome his disease.

I open the front door, wondering where to go and on the front of the reception desk find a big sign: WELCOME DR. PHELAN! What a great thing to do for my own misgivings about walking into a major detention facility. I don't want to bore you with my own story, but I can readily identify with this place. As a boy growing up in the 1940's in the Bronx, I have done enough crimes and illegal substances to qualify for this school. I don't pretend that my Bronx experience in an Irish Catholic ghetto was the same as any of these fellows, but I know that I could easily have landed here, "but for the grace of God," as my loving family used to say. The evidence is now finally being weighed: peer groups have more to say about the way we grow up than parents, school, church, or criminal prosecution.

As Guy takes me around the hallways, poking in at all the facilities, I meet his colleagues and get glimpses of two clans of boys-- the buffaloes (blue t-shirts) and the coyotes (orange). A few others wear a purple shirt to indicate they have reached a position of leadership in the class or clan. Basically this is a small high school with standard subjects like English, history, mathematics, and biology. The one difference is that ATC has a program in food service which just about guarantees that graduates can get restaurant and kitchen jobs when they finally step back out into our tourist economy and support themselves.

The first impression I get with all the staff and students here is beef. It looks like everyone is pumping a considerable amount of iron. Soon I meet the ex-football star from a local high school team who is responsible for the physical training that gives these young men an appreciation of

their bodies in a clean and healthy state. Another early impression, as I am introduced to an ongoing English class, is that about half the students are not yet capable of sitting still. Their eyes are wide as walls to see an outsider. Who knows what Guy has told them about me--"He's cool, man, you'll like him, he knows everything you want to know about the river."

I have a simple plan about what I want to do—it's a little like how you figure you'll cross a low summer creek by using major stepping stones. Guy had asked if I had pictures or slides to get them psyched, but I am not inclined to do such virtual reality prior to their trip. I want their seeing of Wekiva to be entirely fresh--before, during, and after. The pictures can come in later to help the school administrators see that bringing these young men into the river community gives them an important way to become a part of the land and of us--to celebrate creation in their own beginning way.

Just as Guy can be a tough-loving substitute for the missing or abusive parent, Wekiva can be a rich relative to the poverty of a degraded urban environment where nature struggles to grow a livable habitat. Not all the ATC students have no sense of nature, as in Wekiva-- I have taken enough field trips with children of the suburban and exclusive country abodes whose sense of nature is equally impoverished--but still, Guy has the right idea. One antidote to the woes of society and urbanization is ready to hand in central Florida's Wekiva River Basin and its nearly 70,000 acres of publicly owned lands. This land could be their land, to explore and delight in. Perhaps, after our trip, the ATC might consider new clan names like gators, otters, and gophers.

I was expecting pretty much to walk into a classroom, as I usually do when I visit local high schools, 5-10 a year now for the past fifteen years or so. But Guy is enthusiastically showing me every nook and blackboard. Out in the parking lot again we meet the director of the facility, a former FSU football star whose name rings a bell. He loves his work, I can tell, and has found a way to take the discipline of football into another dimension. The staff is clearly an exceptionally motivated team and I accord him some of that credit.

Guy even takes me next door to the newly opened facility for young women criminals. These are all wearing orange jumpsuits and, without being told, I can see that they are worse off--level eight, Guy says--and you can feel, even in a small class of nine or ten, the network of tensions is fully palpable. I don't think it's projection on my part, but the fact that these bodies are hiding more of their hostilities and pains. The teacher is in constant effort to create an order of esteem that they can carry out of here someday, not soon. The battle is for behavior in accord with social norms--what we all need, really.

To me, the ATC is not a place apart from nature and society. It is not a metaphor for us. It is us. We are a part of it. If you think it couldn't happen to you, to one of your children, good. You are lucky and safe, but it could happen anyway.

Studies show that young women suffer more from their traumatic and abusive early-life experiences, that men take it more in stride. I hope somehow these young women will find a

turning point, a new spring of hope to latch onto and never let go. I have watched teenagers doing the annual river cleanup on a Saturday morning and the electrical charge they get out of being connected to the river, to each other, and the community. They embrace the task of keeping a river free of all the trash of cans and bottles, grocery carts, old tires, paint cans, rugs, broken toys, fishing lines, bobbins, and odd pieces of clothing. Somehow it enlarges their spirits.

It is 11:15 when the class I am to meet is finally assembled from all the different activities and classes currently in session. Twelve fellows sit, backs to three walls, and I sit likewise on the end of one row. Guy introduces me and tells how the students have so far been preparing by reading Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He gave them an assignment (with the English teacher's help) to write about their own childhood experiences with nature, something that might be equivalent to what the novel shows is a formative experience in Janie's early life. "Would you like to hear what some of them have written," Guy asks, showing me the first totally unexpected stone to vault over my creek on.

I say a few words about how I ask my environmental literature students to do this kind of writing about early childhood and how much courage it takes to share that. They begin along the wall to crinkle their papers and one boy reads about the days he used to love to go fishing with his grandfather. Most of these boys are Florida natives, so two or three can recount interesting river experiences.

Next up is Jacob. He is a large-shouldered young man with sweat flowing down his face, huge thighs and calves pumping up and down in his seat. "Jacob is a little nervous yet (i.e. still not 100% detoxed), but he has a powerful piece to read," Guy says to get Jacob started. The language is raw and as real as it gets, as Jacob describes the day he saw his dad go after his mom with a knife. Eight years old he was. The confusion of that moment is just as great today as then, and as it will always be.

Each child emerges before us in this stream of young adults--a few read of harmless encounters and one fellow, Deyon, has a prose poem about a dream. With each one I inquire about the place where he grew up and his own experiences of nature there. Gradually I fill in a few words about Wekiva and start the process of anticipating our trip next week. The truth is that though Guy has been working on this trip for two months, the bureaucratic problems of authorization of every feature are still, right down to the last day, not pinned down. It is a negotiation worthy of our best summit diplomacy.

Ironically, the regular high school teachers I work with have never been able to get permission for their students to go in or on the water at Wekiva. Given the highly publicized image of violence in the schools, perhaps the risks of canoeing and swimming should be reconsidered.

Now I plant my own first stone, even though I feel well out into the creek. "Who can tell me, where does the river begin?" I ask. This question is a trap. At first, no one suspects it. They have been given the river booklets from the Friends of the Wekiva River which contain a map of the

river's path from the springs to the St. Johns. When one of them points to the spring, I ask whether it begins at Wekiwa or Rock Springs, just a few miles north. Now they are forced with multiple sources of outflow, but Jamal solves the problem when he realizes that the water precedes the spring. "But before the water bubbles out of the spring, where is it?" I ask, and we begin to establish the idea of watershed and rainfall. Now clouds are the river, and so forth, back across the Gulf of Mexico we imagine tomorrow's river arriving in a storm.

"So, does all of the rain go down directly into the soil and the canals and ditches and into the stony aquifer?" I ask, taking another step. We are now purely in midstream and water flows about us on all sides. Gradually we establish that some of the cloud-river becomes the cypress tree, the buttonbush, the aster, and the hickory nut. I get to talk about the hydrology of the tree, that greatest of water pumps, and several of them remember pieces of this story from their biology classes.

Now I take a big leap from the tree-river and the fruit-river to us, and I roll out my own piece of writing from my trip to the blood-bank (see River of Blood, Chap. I). Suddenly I am confessing about my life a little and talking about the river of clean blood our community counts on to help the sick, the injured, and those in operations. I show them the amazingly complex constitution of one molecule of hemoglobin and the thousands of atoms of H and O obviously derivable from our own water-bodies, 70-75% river.

So the final answer to the question of where the Wekiva begins is inside each of us--we are the river flowing forth. My last big stepping stone, the one I learned from Whitman, is the sense of democracy this brings each of us: "And every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you." There is a premium on a clean river that allows us to have clean families and to sustain one another through blood donations. My legs shake now too, as I read, because I want so much with my mere words to give them enough reason to get control of their addictions.

My last contribution is to speak of my own son who is now six years sober. I describe the AA meetings I always go to with him and his wife (also in AA) whenever I visit them. They always ask if I want to stay home with the kids while they go to the meeting, but I need the meeting too, the reminder that there is a greater force to which we all must submit and that we cannot hide behind denial that pollution of the river of our bodies threatens all life and that sober friends and sponsors are what we all need.

The class comes to an end with lots of handshakes and looking forward to the trip to Wekiva. Out in the hallway Guy points out the bulletin board which displays in detail all the recent newspaper clippings of a Buffalo who three days after his return to normal life died of a heroin overdose. I remember the day last fall when Guy came to our graduate class on Monday night, unable to describe his grief for this loss of one of his charges. The students here in the hallway, filing by the bulletin board, shake their heads. They are beginning to understand fully that chances of coming out of heroin addiction are slim. Wekiva is their best chance.

On our way out to my car, Guy is mourning that so far they have a 34% recidivism rate. I am amazed it is so low. To be reaching two out of three youngsters in ATC is probably a much higher rate of success than I achieve in my college teaching. I can see love and support flowing out of these teachers and counselors to every buffalo and coyote. Defense systems and paranoia are high, but the rain is falling gently, pretty much all day long here. ATC is cool.¹

¹ The ATC river trip itself is briefly reflected in the essay on River Traffic later in the chapter.