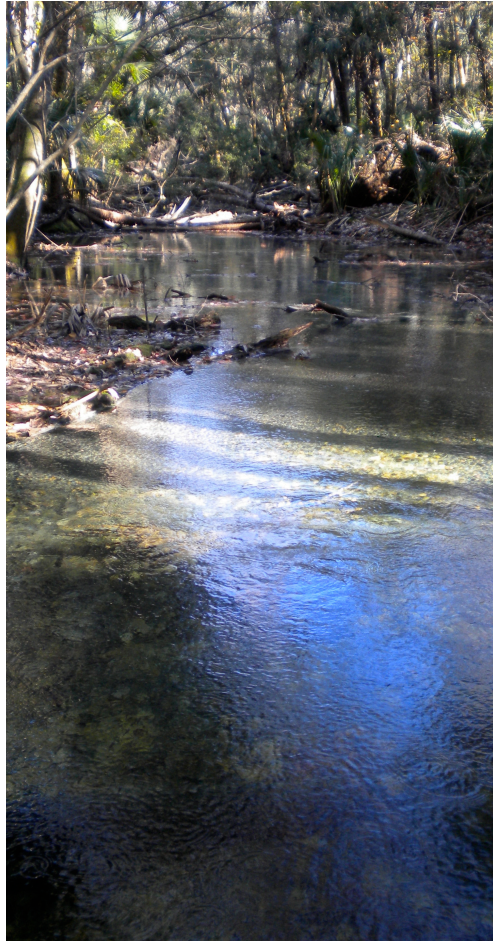


# Hospitalism

Helen Spring flowing to Sulphur Run



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My sweetheart is in the low salt levels after three and the killer flu. In the admission, I notice how of a hospital--that of practices governing a contingencies--governs Someone is carefully and purity and accuracy of instrument, each every procedure. Most of disposable because each contamination for other is high. To everyone here, amount of care and because with any disease this flu) the whole staff risk.

hospital with dangerously and a half days of nausea emergency room awaiting carefully the whole system enormously complex web million kinds of waste of all kinds. efficiently designing the each use of each measuring device, and the material involved is patient's level of individuals of the species it is self-evident that this expense is necessary (or indeed in the case of and client population is at

The question is very real to me, whether and to what degree that care and efficiency stops at the disposal site. It is so easy outside the hospital to think that we humans are safe from the danger of infection. We need to see our neighborhood, city, county, state, nation, and globe as one big hospital for populations of plants and animals--giant water systems, aerators, xray-mechanisms, kitchens, and cafeterias.

When Jean finally gets a bed, I listen to the man with chest pains in the next unit receive with good humor the explanation of how this wonderful test with tiny tiny tiny doses of radiation will allow the doctor to prove he has had a heart attack when the radiation is "turned on" in his heart

muscle. The jokes about glowing in the dark are great except that radiation can be dangerous to life--from the free radicals in our cells to the nuclear fallout from our cold war testing. No one would ever authorize indiscriminate radiation in a hospital.

The friendly man who brings his heavy xray machine in to image the congested chest of my dear heart is careful to step into the hallway to avoid the blast. I watch him locate his target with his crosshairs right at Jean's sternum. But now imagine him riding down the hall, shooting indiscriminately as he goes. Imagine he goes out the front door and gets on a city bus greeting passengers and standbys, drivers in cars and trucks, traffic cops on corners (oops--in patrol cars), zizzing merrily as he goes, pall mall through the city. We would lock him up, but not of course the designer or engineer who failed to keep the rays from going outside the target.

The problem in the world at large is our way of designing. All design should from the beginning follow the use of every object in our human-made world, biosphere II. Our first biosphere was a prototype, and just about failed. Our second one is already here, as Bill McKibben keeps showing us. Capitalism has largely remade the earth--the entire planet--in its profitable way, but it needs to hurry up and get smart that "disease" is rampant in earthkind's hospital and we have no other safe place to hide, well almost no other.

Think about the most remote wilderness in the world where no human road has been allowed--Rick Bass's Yaak Valley, for example, in Montana. Everyone knows that even the most pristine area is doomed as an outside-the-hospital place if we build a road into it. Once a road is there, all of America can arrive and all of capitalism will figure out how to make a buck out there, extracting values from the land and selling or importing diseases to the natives. These actions are not bad in themselves, but they can turn outside into a medical condition. The whole globe is like the nineteenth-century hospital before antiseptics. We have to learn to be as systematically careful of the planet, our house-made-of-dawn, as we are of the ER.

The American way, if i understand it, is not just to capitalize everything for profit--from robber barons to MacDonald's, from Microsoft to Disney--but also to share in the tasks of practical improvements. Different Americans see different values in the outdoor hospital and some have great ideas about how to improve it. We seem to be the leaders in healthcare and that's not all because of science. We don't do this exclusively by ourselves, but invite bright doctors and nurses from all over the world to contribute to this incredible complex of interactive practical procedures that are changing at an amazing rate. What should we call this interconnected, interdependent activity in its pattern of growth through time?

## The Hospital Ethos

It all started in the nineteenth century when surgeons taking care of wounds and broken bones noticed that patients were almost all dying of the procedures designed to save them. The complex

of diseases they recognized as responsible for this were loosely described as "hospitalism." Finally, using Pasteur's explanation, Lister got the idea of fighting these diseases with antiseptics by killing the little organisms he thought were flying into the wounds and causing infection and gangrene.

One of the other key ingredients that makes the hospital successful is kindness--consideration of the feelings of others. I see two nurses comforting each other in the hall way and realize that this hospital, whose goal is to serve God, has an important investment in kindness as the mindset which makes all the practices as close to perfect as one can expect. Democracy is not only a matter of justice and science, but kindness as well. Just as the ER principle must ignore economic and other class issues in favor of triage and disease control, so our expectation of how to make a planet earthkind, for all species, must consider the level of crisis. Neither the possible heart attack in the well-to-do business man nor my dear heart's dehydration takes precedence over the sickle-cell crisis in the next bed.

The word *environmentalist* has been vilified by those who don't want regulation of their pathways to profit or to values of their own making in land use and production. However, in the hospital, where health and wholeness and democracy function at a high level, no one would ever sneer at a hospital's care for the safety of its clients through what amounts to "environmental regulation." Lister found that you had to treat not only the wound itself, but all the adjacent territory around the wound, the healthy tissue as well as the sepsis.

Furthermore, when I look around the room at those attending the Sierra Club or Audubon meetings or my fellow board members on the FOWR, I am completely unable, with critical thinking, to define the "environmentalist." All the different parties and churches are represented. The diversity of religious, scientific, political, and humanistic perspectives is about as broad as you would find in the Chicago Trade Board or Grand Central Station, at a Magic basketball game or in Disney World.

Almost three fourths of Americans are willing to say in broad terms that they are environmentally concerned (who wants to be any kind of -ist?). Perhaps we should just replace the stereotype that Rush Limbaugh wishes to create, exchanging "wacko tree-huggers" for "nurses and doctors in the outer hospital." For me, environmental-ism is nothing more than the good old American concept of know-how. It's the practical imagination trying to be aware of the whole system and trying to create a better way to do everything. In this sense, sound scientific knowledge coupled with careful design and practical management experience is the best regulator. No one goes into surgery complaining that there's too much regulation respecting the purity of the blood supply.

I don't want to pretend that moving the hospital ethos outside is a simple thing, but I also want to present a few examples to show that I am not just using the hospital as a metaphor. Let's start with language, one of the slowest industries to improve. Our language is growing wildly through time, as all the people speak it and write it. It was not built to accommodate systemic thinking.

The history of science is the history of how our forbears, indeed even the brightest, consistently made assumptions about the simplicity, stability, and thingness of life. Our language is stuck in that passé mode.

Plenty of environmentalists are just as uncritical in their language and thinking as the rest of the world. In my profession as English teacher, I work in the long tradition of rhetoric and poetry which seeks to purify and improve the language of the tribe. We use language as carefully as we can to avoid waste of words and the reproduction of false actions over the right action--ethos. How many generations since the Declaration of Independence, for example, has it taken America to get democracy to sink into the language. Language is a wilderness of free thinking into which we try to infuse a standard of political correctness so that everyone can feel comfortable to participate.

Another example would be the wilderness of reproduction. A year or so ago I read an article on the folks who are trying to stack the sperm so that they can have a girl or a boy "this time." At that time the technology was 93% successful if you were wanting a female. This is hospital entering the wilderness or the free world. It raises a key question for America. Do we want to improve on the randomness of our system of species reproduction. Is this kind of birth control--the kind of world this individual couple wants--a danger to the species as a whole? Is it any different from extinguishing or killing the wolf in your pasture or the panther on the poorly designed highway? Is it any different from breeding a dog species with shorter and shorter tails until there's nothing to wag?

Our bio-engineering know-how has not yet reached prudence or wisdom. It seems to many to be at the stage of Lister's use of phenol for antisepsis. How can our American know-how achieve prudence and wisdom without understanding of the environment and how it works, i.e. systems analysis. The ecosystem analyst is a friend to all of us, not just a Friend of the Wekiva River.

One more example. I remember being tickled to read about John Burroughs and the early history of the automobile. Burroughs is one of our finest nature writers in the American literary tradition, a friend of Whitman and the equal in time and comprehension of Thoreau. The great technocrats of his age, Ford, Edison, and Rockefeller, used to invite him to come on their excursions to the Smokies, the Rockies, or even Alaska. One day, as a gesture of appreciation, Henry Ford sent John one of his fine cars, straight off the assembly line. Burroughs gave it a try and shortly ran it off the road into a ditch, smashing into a tree. He left it there and wrote to Ford afterward about how he didn't think he would ever get into having a car. Ford offered to send him another, but he gracefully declined.

Burroughs should be alive today to see the consequences of the automobile in the masses. How slow has been our design for safety to the individual and the environment in the building of the 300,000,000 cars and trucks in America. We have however worked out some of the traffic flow problems. There the hospital ethos is approaching prudence, but no one at Ford has yet designed the clean, safe car. An enormous sense of hope abides in the maintenance of a working world.

Our collective psychology requires the assurance that our formal and informal rules of traffic order are working, but we don't want one more rule than we need. Otherwise, imagine the nightmare of conducting open heart surgery in the equivalent of Animal House.

Some critics of environmental or systems thinking argue for laissez faire, as a complement to the random pattern of development they see in evolution. I know there comes a time in parenting when laissez faire is a good policy. But sometimes, indiscriminate pollution of the environment is just plain malpractice by people who know better.

Jean is admitted to a regular room upstairs, and I sit relieved that that her salt levels are slowly being restored. A uniformed woman comes to clean the room and greets us very kindly. When I ask her how she's doing, she says quite cheerily, "Oh, ahm bless-ed in the house of the Lord." Anyone can see this is the case. She says she is praying for the recovery and good health of both of us. Up and down the hall she moves slowly with her cart and her mops. She is a part of the enterprise of God's blessing and committed to something more than the random house made out of the Big Bang, adding good will to good science.