

## The River of Blood

10/12/98

Today I am giving blood over at Orlando's defunct naval base. In an old barracks, two nurses in tandem lead the trickle of mostly male, mostly elderly clients through the too familiar, careful process. It starts with the inquisition: "Have you been sick lately?" Obviously they don't want blood with a deadly virus or any bacterial illness. They just want good, clean blood.

"Are you on any medications?" In any given month, many persons take two or three different drugs to supply their deficiencies or cope with pains. I resist taking medicines. The people who come here remind me of Whitman, demonstrably proud of their good health. I am too, because I work at it. But then, the body is from the start a blessing from God and that's partly what brings me here. Last fall, when my uncle Jack was in ICU for seven weeks, I felt I was giving my blood to bolster his. When he died, I continued to give regularly because such health is a gift not to be hoarded.

The nurses tell you, when you leave, not to do strenuous exercise for a while and to eat hardy and drink lots of water. The healthy body miraculously re-generates the deficiency in a matter of hours and that newborn blood is actually better for me, purer than my old blue chemistry.

Now they want to know about my sex life. I am grateful we both imagine that I have one. When our hormones start to slow to a trickle and the replacement of them has harmful side effects, some of us senior citizens step more lightly. This month my wife and I will be married 25 years. . Our relationship is not perfect, but it's as precious to me as my ten pints of blood. I don't cheat on her. Once you cheat, you have to lie to yourself, at least, if not to your partner. The problem of cheating, then, is directly connected to faith in the blood supply – one important light source in our human being. So now come the ten or twelve questions about sexual partners and their blood-ruining habits. I rattle off my string of no's.

Finally the careful business of extraction begins. The other donors seem to know the nurses. Their playful chatter goes far to warm the sterile place. I know there's no chemical way for talk to enter the blood. Good thing, I guess, because my foul mouth on the basketball court might contaminate my blood on a regular basis.

I begin to wonder, considering the news of sexual license and the spread of AIDS and other STD's, how long there will be an adequate blood supply. In Africa, where the percentage of AIDS is so high, what are they doing for hemoglobin in the surgery rooms? Why can't our high-flung medical techno-researchers figure out how to clean bad blood the way we treat wastewater?

Since the AIDS virus emerged in the early 1980's, our society has gradually been teaching us how to keep our blood to ourselves. The idea should be coming home again to us that blood is sacred -- the flow from blue to red is dangerous. Keep it in or else share it only in the most hygienic of circumstances. We take our skin so serious, then, as the safe barrier to potentially bad blood outside ourselves.

The phrase "bad blood" now amazes me. Fortunately, our human history of racial bigotry, family hatred, and cruelty doesn't make a drip of difference to the actual blood. My pint today can, in general, go to any other human because I am O+, a universal donor. As the sacred blood flows, the races are not red, white, black, and yellow; but A, B, O, and AB. All the human blood is not identical, but when it is pure enough to share, it is indeed equal. I love the democracy of my blood, the way, like these words, it reaches out to all its users or readers in the same manner and perhaps enlivens some.

In the old patriarchal days, the blood river of a people was called The Nation. Because marriage outside the fold was avoided, all the folk were seen to share the same set of families from the kings on down to the lower gentry, peasants and slaves being left out. *Nation* comes from the Latin verb *nascere*, meaning to be born of the same blood. What courage it must have taken to make the first blood transfusion. On that day in 1905, the closed system of a nation's blood underwent a drastic change or rather exchange -- a national sharing of needles, as it were, began. Now we associate that vital reservoir with a symbol of salvation, the Red Cross. We have community in our blood ties. The blood bank has become the mystical body of our nation and our whole species. Forget about "My house is your house"; *mi sangre es su sangre*.

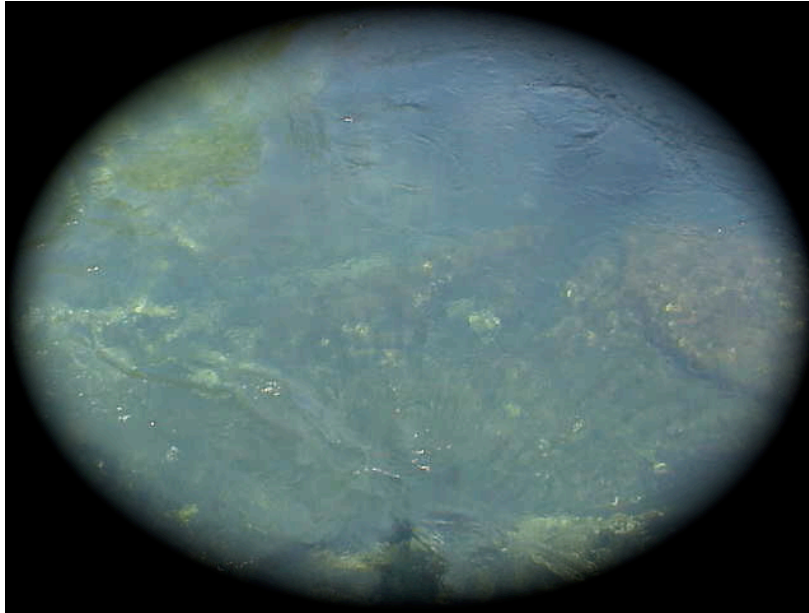
Our blood river can become polluted just as easily as our freshwater streams and the seven oceans they trickle into. If we could only handle our water and land as carefully as these two nurses, we'd have little to fear in the health of our bodies. Corporate America and even our governments have been cheating on our rivers for hundreds of years, on a large scale. As individuals, we often have done no better in our own back yards and vegetable gardens. However, the lies they have used to cover-up that cheating are prodigious. Those who profit most from this pollution don't want you to realize that water, like mother's milk, is the blood of all life. I can't take my blood and my water individually. Poison dropped anywhere can enter the stream. All the water is the water I drink.

You might imagine that most of it is coming from the Wekiva basin, but all the water you drink does not come from a bottle, a spigot, or a stream. Food is mostly water and it comes from the whole planet. I eat all-water and it becomes all-blood. Is it the same with hormones? If some hamburger has injections of hormones from fattened cows, scientists are beginning to wonder, then maybe some of us have hormones we don't need. With each "transfusion," we need a complicated chemical analysis to see what filters out and what is carried on. So, we are learning to read the labels. Water is in almost everything, even trapped for eons in rock.

The nurse asks me to compress my fist every ten seconds to help the pint flow out. It takes just a few minutes. Into the small bag she squeezes every last drop out of the long tube with the fervor of a drunk at the bottom of his bottle. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Written while preparing for a visit to the Adolescent Treatment Center with an eye to priming them for a day of hiking and canoeing on the Wekiva. For that adventure, see the sequel essay "ATC" in chapter II.



**The Main Boil at Wekiwa Springs**

### **Building the River Community, Step 1**

We have come at last to the end of our first run. In our historical sweep of the river, it is 1927 and Dr. Kelly has just started the process of preservation in the basin. The two major springs are done with their mill work and the majority of the native mounds are still intact. Wekiva is on the verge of a gigantic cypress logging operation (1935-45) that will build trams throughout the swamps to haul the giant logs out, as we shall see in detail in chapter V. The essential concept for building Florida's premiere regional river community has been established. It constitutes a radical change in thinking about our bodies and their connections to the earth and its rivers.

The plants, the animals, and the humans form one biochemical community and rely for their health on one another. Organic chemistry is the foundation for ecological imagination and good neighborhood. The wing of the egret is our symbol for its complexity and grace. We are all swimming in the same springs. The joy of Rock Springs Run extends far beyond its swamps and uplands. It has a time-mode belonging to the cell, with cycles and recycles that are working simultaneously in every part of the body electric.