

The Scene beyond the Seen

Three Vignettes

9/13/96

“The visible is made pregnant with the invisible.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Recently while doing a basic biology experiment with the protozoa *Euglena*, two students and I wanted to test the hypothesis that the organism would change position in its "pond" when we changed the temperature. Being in a hurry to finish our experiment and thinking only of our problem, we subjected the samples of creatures to additional water at different temperatures and they sank quite soon to the bottom. Was it temperature shock or chlorine in the tap-water that killed them? I don't know, but I am certain of one thing: we dis-COUNTED the life requirements of our subjects. We saw them, sure enough, but didn't consider their needs. Sometimes we are so domesticated that the earth is almost invisible, in the social sense that Ralph Ellison has shown us in *Invisible Man*. We often completely discount the sun, too.

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Every summer Jean and I drive six states north to Ithaca, New York, with our cat Thistle. Born and rescued in Ithaca, she packs up her ancestral memories and makes the long, three-day trek with us to her homeland. This first morning, watching the sun rise on the fourth of June from our fifth floor apartment, Thistle has adjusted her schedule to the sun brightening out the east window, distinctly to the north. The clock means nothing to her and so she has us up at 5:00 am instead of 6:30. For her, the sun and stars are time-and-place markers, whereas we have discounted the sun in favor of our digital phosphorescence. Ernst Mayr, paraphrasing Max DeBruensch, has opened my eyes to the *Euglena* and the cat with this remarkable statement: **“Every organism carries with it the information acquired by its ancestors during the past three billion years.”**

So what have we humans done with all our information from the beginning? At times it seems as though we are driving the car of the earth satellite, but no longer imagine how it works in natural communities, including ourselves. Or else we leave it to the experts in mission control to tell us the good or bad news of our bodies and the earth. Here is a democratic vista that should certainly open up wide in the new millennium, restoring our ancestral vision.

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The invisible is the negative of day's photography, and it can be developed only in the darkroom of the imagination, the shadow of God.

David Lehman, from *The Line Forms Here*, a book on contemporary poetry.



Let's go to Wekiwa Springs. It's where I take my friends and family, as well as several classes each year, at all times of day. It's my favorite place to swim, to be, to make love, to stroke the flesh of this Florida, our home. The delight of seeing the invisible here is the ecstasy of slow undressing of the long longed-for other self, so too of dressing an idea or hope in words or paints or action. How easily we can give the mind body, the body mind.

I usually bring my students to read Wekiwa Springs early in the morning. We open the park and sit in silence around the pond. They meditate and write for half an hour and then we share the experience--some classes combine photography with their writing, but the pictures are only embryos to be developed later. Their writing shows what they have immediately seen and felt, how their minds perceive the springs. By sharing we come closer as a temporary community, see better inside one another.

The students usually identify first, the things that "spoil" the scene--taught, as we all have been, to see earth as a postcard or a garden room to decorate. Today the list of ruinous features includes: the concrete restraining walls, the airplane noisily streaking overhead, the three soda cans I scooped up earlier at the bridge, and the yellow paint on the pool ledge which shouts: NO DIVING! Personally, I'm happy in the thought a sign might prevent a broken neck if one of us were to dive too deeply into an unseen shallow.

I show them some of the invisible things I imagine as I walk around the mysterious waterworld (misty and indeed eerie this January morning): the limestone cave of water up under the hill, pouring out of the fissure; the half-inch mosquito-fish (*gambusia*) clinging to the sunny side of the pool-wall for warmth; the Tomoka tribesman I imagine canoeing up from Shell Island, contemplating his coming wedding ceremonies or chanting songs of his homeplace; the three teeny turtle heads popping up and down there along the surface, facing into the current; the pileated woodpecker we can hear hammering slowly in the woods behind and then crackling for his mate or perhaps a rival; the mastodons that left their long bones along the riverbed more than 10,000 years ago for my friend Eddie Williford to find; the rising and falling of the oceans over those years and before; and the sea's building up of the large underbelly of our peninsula with the Ocala rift as its backbone. Now we can count more than 100 major springs in Florida, but none more exciting to swim in than this.

We have come to Wekiwa Springs in educational community to observe what Aldo Leopold described as "the community of the land." Surely one of the most important documents of our age, "The Land Ethic" recounts briefly the long history of our western moral sense, how gradually all the discounted and invisible segments of the human population were included in the social contract and eventually formed a viable concept of community (barons, non-landowning males, unbelievers, blacks, women, natives, and other minorities). Leopold argues that we have to add one more important ingredient to our ethical concern, the biological community of the land and its ecology. Only here at Wekiwa we are more likely to call it a watershed ethic.

After we take the measure of ecology in what we can and cannot see, I talk about the Friends of the Wekiwa River and their successful efforts on behalf of the river, the black bear, the limpkin, bass, and bream. Then I give them an outline of the State's exemplary program for preservation of the rivergreen corridor up through the St. John's River to the Ocala National Forest.

I see unity in the visible and invisible world. When I look back over the spring to the hill behind and the grand old live oaks on the right, my horizon for 140 degrees encircles a bubble of perception, a depth of field the photographer would say. Suppose we were fish living inside of this horizon, this perception bubble, and swimming in a school through all that we see in the chaos of a million points of light stimulation. We would not see ourselves as apart from the scene. We would not act like the audience outside of a proscenium arch, observing some miracle play called "Nature." On the contrary, as fish swimming in this air, we would be ever alert in this world, ever on stage and in the play itself. For Whitman's sake we should call it "Song of Myself."

Do you remember as a child how you once were a part of all you could see and touch? Mary Austin described this experience in her autobiography as happening to "Mary," the "child that I was" at age five or so:

There was a wild foxglove at the child's feet and a bee dozing about it, and to this day, I can recall the swift, inclusive awareness of each for the whole--I in them and they in me, and all of us enclosed in a warm lucent bubble of livingness (*Earth Horizon* 371).

Of course, we hominids were fish at one time, but we've forgotten. In every "advance" over the past three billion years of evolution, we have lost our species memory of who we were. We still are fish and can take this new way of seeing from our old habitat. I am reminded of a presentation years ago in my wife's course, Creative Writing for Children. Imagine a half dozen college students dressed up like fish and performing for pre-school kids a giddy little musical called "The Great Fish Waltz."

The fish grown into humans need not construct a new philosophy or objectivity just because they are out of the water, just because some goggle-eyed mudskipper brought us up out of the brine. However, the amphibian human for sure would have to have a new brain to move from water and land to air. We are the world that thinks itself. Why then did the whales go back? Have they given up their objectivity? I'll have to ask our river otters, who live down around the first bend of the river, why weasel life was not enough for them. They will probably tell me that Buddha Thor says: "The community of all beings is in water."