Home on the Hillsborough

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It's mid-morning at Hillsborough River State Park, a half-hour's drive northeast of my Tampa neighborhood. I'm about a five minute walk from the Hillsborough River. And I've got about five hours to spend in the woods. Ironically, I've come to the woods to let go of time and to tame an urban sensibility that demands I notice it; for too long seconds have ticked by the sounds of circular saws, axle-challenged delivery trucks and 747's.

Walking the worn foot-path to the river, I still hear the urban call of cars "whooshing" as they pass the park's paved entrance off U.S. 301. But there's relief knowing encroachment's kept in check: nearly 16,000 acres of state-owned land buffers a thirteen mile stretch of the fifty-four mile long Hillsborough in this forested corridor that includes the park. Better yet, its headwaters trickle from 125,000 preserved acres in the Green Swamp. We rely on the upper Hillsborough for drinking water, so we know we should protect it. But perhaps we should rely on it as much to reset our sensibilities. Watching the river reminds me to live, not simply to keep up.

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Shades of green and brown surround me; the same color of my shorts and shirt. And now I realize why I wear earth tones. I'd never really thought about it, but perhaps subconsciously I favor the woods' colors as a buffer in my urban outings.

Though I'm eager to reach the Hillsborough River, I stop to study a sabal palm's peculiar growth pattern. It's no longer covered with "boots," or old leaf bases that resemble wide wishbones typical to some sabals. Skyward the palm stretches at a forty-five-degree angle, re-routing itself ninety degrees near its peak to avoid a sturdy oak. It's the United Nations of trees, seeking pathways of agreeable growth. Or maybe it's just trying to avoid the ghosts of pioneers past: mortals harvested the treetop's bud for swamp cabbage.

Turning riverward, the half-mile walk to the water is a cool-down for my urban pace. The rapids of the nearby river applaud my effort. I reach the railing overlooking the river and breathe easy. Here I can be "mentored by the land," as Terry Tempest Williams writes. I can "dwell in a deeper place where my blood-soul restores to my body what society has drained and dredged away."

Upriver is a downed, split cedar. I run my hand along the cedar's grain, which feels like the sturdy neck of a horse, its curled fibers like a mane. Moments earlier I'd peeled off a splinter and now my saliva is searching for flavor. There's no immediate taste, but my mind picks up a scent: weighing the merits of a cedar toothpick versus a hundred dollar dental cleaning I had an hour earlier.

I survey my surroundings, the river, as a break in the woods, though of it, creates a comfortable space to be still and quiet. Above spins a leaf with curled edges, its ridges like ribs. Following the wind's lead, it twists, dangling from a web spun from a wild grape vine with new growth. Now it's origami, a crane tucking its beak under its wing. Not to be outdone, the leaf's shadow, nature's negative, eclipses part of a bleached shell. What can we learn from watching shadows or reflections? Concentrating solely on the second image, the outskirts of reality? This is the pensive world, the step-aside world. Personified, it's the child on the bus taken by the blurred landscape beyond his window that others have seen and forgotten.

A shadow of an otherwise ubiquitous saw palmetto frond sparks a memory. Walking through a thicket of saw palmettos I knew its sharp ridges would cut my legs. But I wanted the scratches, the blood, to shake me out of my comfort. To remind myself I do bleed, and as a bleeder, life is fragile, and because it's fragile, so beautiful.

A cloud blocks the sun, and shadows fade, this second world receding into the first. From the palmetto frond, an ant dangles, then drops to the ground. The distance? My shin down, or about six stories were it me that fell. The ant scampers to a fallen leaf, scaling its rolling edges that resemble mountain peaks. Reaching the last peak it arches its body and wiggles its head as if to shout on high, then crawls from the leaf to the railing by the river and disappears.

As I leave the common area, I ask myself: how genuine is a river experience in a frequented spot? Am I discriminating against the beaten path because I'm sort of a nature purist too good for a prescribed experience set up by the parks service? I'm inclined to say yes, preferring to tromp through the woods and explore. But experience tells me disregarding the path is a short-sighted and arrogant impulse. Along the one-mile Baynard Trail, watch a crab spider (its abdomen is disc-shaped with pointed edges like the shell of some crabs) reinforce its web by continuously circling inward more than twenty-five times. A spun triangle spanning the trail encloses these circles. Three palm fronds, aligned as a triangle, anchor the web. The leaves of the palm fronds are triangles, too. Then triangles side by side, like bicycle spokes, form the web's interior circle. That circle is reinforced by the ones I watched the crab make.

Looking beyond the web, I notice that its geometry mirrors the shape of a live oak fifteen yards away. One sturdy trunk supports two thick branches that together form a similar triangle. The web's foundation is the same shape as the live oak, merely horizontal. Perhaps I wouldn't have experienced this profound patterns-of-life moment off the unobstructed trail, where undoubtedly I'd be focused on finding a clearing for my next step.

If wildlife embraces the beaten path, it's one I can follow. So downriver I go, finding a sandy bank below and sitting on a root for traction. The rapids are hushed, replaced by voices on the paths above. Hundreds of water bugs rain on the river, conjuring magic on a clear sunny day. The splinter in my mouth has dissolved and tastes like the earthy perfume of a musty cedar closet. Feeling less my body and more my surroundings, I lament time "wasted" on sedentary interests such as sports television. However, I'd miss my mental and emotional junk food, and realize the moment is magnified by intense solitude and calm.

Suddenly, an anhinga breaks the river's surface, its protruding neck seemingly a snake dancing on water. To see it firsthand is to appreciate its other name, snakebird. This one I'll dub Nelly: it looks as much like the far away image of the Loch Ness monster. Nelly goes under again. I give intuition my eyes, scanning downstream, the bird found as it pops up twenty yards away. I am the anhinga, surfacing from an urban pace to reclaim my bearings.

I hear more voices on the path above me and they break my train of thought. No wonder wildlife scatters when we approach: lack of respect for space and silence. Just because we can talk doesn't mean we must. Defer to the woods, to the river, to the wildlife. Listen. Be silent and open to stimuli. No speaking or projecting. Invite nature to dictate thought. This is ideal. But admittedly I'm easily distracted by the lone plane, a human voice or distant traffic. Collectively, they're the kid who jumps off the see-saw when you're on the high side. You slam to the ground startled, but bounce back.

By now the cedar toothpick has split. Twenty-four pieces in all, and I spread them on my knee looking for images. I see a triangle, a saw palmetto frond, but not the bounty of detail rich images I'd hoped for. I'm reaching, so I make up a flaky image to amuse myself: a beloved childhood wagon rusting in the rain. Humor is a hiccup to reverence, laughing as much an appreciation of life.

Crouching at the river's edge, I dip my fingers in the cool water darkened by the tannins of rotted vegetation. I inspect a bird track. It's not webbed and looks like the image of the day — a palm frond. An ibis perhaps? I haven't seen one but the curled-beak bird is common to the Hillsborough.

Still I am crouched by the water when fear creeps in: images of gators pouncing on Bambi lapping at tranquil waters. I stand up and walk away. Is fear of the alligator magnified by its popular portrayal as a menace? It's something to ponder on higher ground.

As the sun intensifies, so do the yellows and greens around me. Photosynthesis and science explain their color. Chlorophyll, required for photosynthesis, accounts for the green. The hidden colors of fall emerge as photosynthesis, lacking enough sunlight and water during shorter, dryer days, ends, and the chlorophyll fades away. The tree conserves its energy and the leaves die.

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In lieu of science, how did people account for the change? By myth? Since yellow and blue make green, perhaps the sun and sky danced, their hybrid sweat splashing color on the leaves below. The leaves in turn danced with the wind, and when exhausted, gave way to calmer colors and fell, the signs of summer's play.

The snakebird reappears. Knowing they're territorial, I'll assume it's Nelly. Perched on a low limb about three feet above the water, Nelly darts its elongated neck downriver, then upriver, seemingly squinting as if hampered by poor eyesight. A four-foot gator suns on a nearby bank. Nelly barks. It's a harsh sound that would make even a goose shudder. A warning shot to the gator?

It's after noon and I've ignored my hunger to focus on the outing. But now I turn my attention to lunch, a Cuban sandwich. As I'm unwrapping it, I hear a loud splash. The snakebird's gone. However a tri-colored heron claims the abandoned perch. I write this in my journal, but looking up again the heron's gone. What's nature telling me? It's not there for my convenience. You look away you might miss something. You don't write down a thought you might lose it. TiVo doesn't work out here so you have to rely on instinct.

Finishing lunch, I head downriver and descend another bank. An eight-foot gator claims the other side. I've brought along Archie Carr's essay, "Living with Alligators." I read it, looking up every so often to ensure the gator hasn't stealthily slid into the water. Carr was trying to remove an alligator eating wildlife in his pond. After several unsuccessful attempts, he gave up. But in defeat he learned something valuable about alligator psychology: predator and prey can co-exist. Mimicking a cattle egret, the gallinules, ducks and herons ate small things disrupted in the vegetation parted in the gator's path. It taught Carr a "necessary protocol for future vital relations between her species and our own."

The essay reminds me of nature's nuances. Where we see predator and prey, there's actually a working relationship. An alligator will eat a turtle, yet a turtle will lay its eggs in an alligator nest, furthering their chance of survival.

I head downriver, dump my backpack at the base of a pop ash, and climb. The limbs of the tree reach over the water and I'm stumped: take the branch low enough to dangle my toes in the river ala Huck Finn, or climb higher? The behemoth gator on the bank weighs on my mind and I opt for a higher fork at eight feet. Praising the virtues of Velcro pockets, I'm playing vertical Twister: left foot against spotted gray trunk; right hand on limb with yellow-speckled leaves; balance, balance, balance, and don't lose the book wedged in your shorts. I reach the fork. The trunk supports my back but is lower than my legs. I'm not comfortable but pleased with a higher vantage point. I settle in to read an essay about sense of time on a river.

Two passing people distract me. One of them spots my black and red bag.

"There's a backpack," says one.

"It's mine." I say, surprising them.

The other one smiles goofily: "There's a tree dweller."

Earlier I'd passed them and overheard something about homemade bowls; I doubt they were looking for pre-historic pottery.

Descending the tree and heading upriver towards my car, I pass the gator I'd seen earlier. It's about a quarter past three and he still rests idly on the bank. A family of four heading downriver has to know about the gator, so I tell them. The young mother's eyes widen, the husband appears wary. She wonders aloud if the gator would cross the river and get her. "Give him space and you'll be fine," I assure her. Baiting me, the husband tells her I was scared too, right? And see how he came out okay? But I have to be honest. "I'm not scared at a distance." I can tell it's not the right answer. They head downriver towards the alligator.

Safely, I assume, hearing no screams.

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One week later, mid-morning, I return to the state park to hone my sense of place. I want to claim these woods as a refuge when I'm city-spent.

An egret greets me, perched on a rock amid the rapids, its yellow beak stark on white feathers. The climate is ideal, balanced by a cool breeze and warm sun. I've brought a digital camera this time, and snap a picture of the egret. But he's too far away, his image lost in the background. I'm annoyed. Something's unsettling.

Putting the camera away, I watch the egret. It flies upriver, lifted by unseen plateaus stacked like stairs, until it crests around a bend. My gaze returns to the rapids, and my mind wanders as the water does downstream. We're like water, cycling through birth, life and death as it does through liquid, solid and gas. We are energy and spirit, unbound like water if we allow ourselves. The divine in nature allays the harrowing thought of eternal unconsciousness. Could uncertainty, fear and death — mortality's trinity — be gifts that encourage us to embrace the passing present?

"If men could only disintegrate like autumn leaves, fret away . . . would not our attitude toward death be different?" asks literary naturalist Loren Eiseley. If only we could be porous, water running through us, would we feel, and thus realize, we are forever the land?

My pensive moment is figuratively tapped on the back by a kindly fisherman with two poles and a bucket. He's probably in his seventies. "How ya doin' sir," he says. I nod and say fine, thanks. But I dwell on his 'sir' and the discomfort I feel when someone older says it to me. It's an inconsequential thought. It reminds me how easy it is to slip in and out of self-consciousness. How being human, and living among humans, predisposes our attention to social settings — my backpack episode, the family of four, distracting voices on the trail, the fisherman — and not nature. No wonder Thoreau sought Walden Pond: to unleash his attention.

Heading downriver to the snakebird bend, I find Nelly perched on an oak limb draped in Spanish moss. Nelly's croak sounds like a baritone cricket. Downriver, another snakebird unseen croaks back.

Whose territory is it?

Nelly is about 20 yards away; I need a better camera. But then I realize something profound: I can draw. I have pen and paper. I have an eye and time.

To think I'd forgotten that seems ridiculous. John James Audubon and William Bartram were lucky to be camera-less. They had to pay attention to detail and rely on their eyes. To point and click is to be somewhat blind.

I draw Nelly's snake-like head, its beak extended like a snake's tongue. As I'm drawing I hear the plunge — Cannonball! — of the second snakebird. Its head appears above water. Nelly flies by the other snakebird and nips at it. They continue at odds for the next five minutes, Nelly alternating perches while the other snakebird stays in the water. Finally, Nelly plunges into the river as the other snakebird passes underneath. They tussle. One comes up, but I can't find the other. Who's Nelly? Certainly I missed the second snakebird reappear somewhere. The one I see heads to the bend, finds a stump in a thicket near the gator and spreads its wings to dry.

What can you learn by studying a river? Another creature's sense of home, its boundaries. Here it's communal ownership unbound by titles and surveys. Revisiting this bend reveals how we emulate nature by claiming territory. The premise of home is universal, but not always recognized or respected.

Returning to my pop ash, I bypass the low limb within feet of dark waters and unknown territory; the temptation to dangle my toes is still strong. But I make the right choice, as a six-foot gator passes beneath that same limb within minutes. Thankfully my instincts aren't too buried by a modern pace.

Crossing the river on a suspension bridge, I spot Nelly and a gator within ten yards of each other. Quietly, I follow the trail upriver until parallel with the snakebird; Nelly is about ten yards below on a limb. Either Nelly doesn't notice me or the bird is comfortable with park-goers. At this range I can see its feet, webbed like a duck; its tail, a collapsed hand-fan with brown and yellow tips. The tail shifts back and forth, independent of the body, perfect for a rudder.

The gator, only head exposed, eases within a few feet of Nelly, but Nelly shows no outward signs of stress. Several minutes pass, as if Nelly and the gator are river commuters unthreatened by close quarters in common space. Finally, Nelly flies upriver, perhaps sensing itself a gator snack. I won't know for sure, but knowing that is reassuring.