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"Cracker Florida as Home"

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There is no map for Florida's future, because we live in a state that is headed in several different directions at once. We are moving, but it is not clear where we are going. We don't seem to worry much about it, either. What we have is a numbing combination of confusion and complacency, a chemistry that encourages the development of a toxic culture. During Earth Week, we look around and take audit. We see the loss of marine life along our coasts, the diminishing numbers of songbirds in our skies, the extinction of our most royal wildlife species. In contrast, the greatest gains in most Floridians' lives are in congestion and stress. I follow some Cracker advice I once heard: "If you don't know where you're going," the Crackers say, "any road will do."

I went around quoting that as Cracker intelligence for a year or two, and then someone put me straight. The line came straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*. I first started to toss it out, but then I decided not to. It involved corrupted wisdom, and a blending of classic imagery into a con job. What could be more appropriate for Florida?

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about Crackers. In Florida, we usually think of Crackers as simply native Floridians with Southern ancestry. We think of Cracker values as those involving love of family and love of the land. In its best Florida use, the term Cracker does not have racial overtones. I don't know whether that's a dictionary definition, but that's how I use the word.

Cracker for me is a synonym for common sense, usually applied with a wry twist. For example, most Crackers I know believe in environmentalism, but only intuitively. It's part of their love for the land.

Yet they tend to be suspicious of people who call themselves environmentalists, because that sounds elitist. That might sound contradictory, but it makes sense to a Cracker. Being a Cracker involves attitude – a conviction that home should be a refuge, and skepticism about almost everything else. Most of my Florida stories are put in the mouths of Crackers.

Like the Cracker who greets tourists each winter with a bumper sticker that proclaims: “Jesus loves you, and I’m trying.”

And the Cracker story about the religious politician who got up every morning, looked in the mirror and began humming his favorite hymn, “How Great Thou Art.”

And there was the Cracker who tried to explain how he was able to solve a problem that had baffled everybody else. “When you ain’t got no education,” the Cracker said, “you got to settle down and use your brain.”

Finally there was a snowbird who came to Florida in February, looked around at a couple of old Crackers and shook his head. “Lots of weird people down here,” the snowbird said.

“Yeah,” the Cracker agreed, “but there ain’t near as many in August as there is in February.”

A touch of the Cracker attitude – that combination of love for all things natural, and skepticism for all things exotic – would be healthy for all of Florida. It seems especially appropriate during Earth Week.

Sometimes, as Florida searches for its future, in my more pessimistic moments I think about the dilemma Woody Allen posed to some June graduates: “More than any other time in history,” Allen said, “mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

I suspect that at your Earth Week celebrations here you have been hearing the blessings and the problems of Florida being described with scientific precision and encyclopedic exactness. I bring you some relief from that. I deal in impressions and intuitions that I gathered in a lifetime ramble through this state – with particular emphasis on the last 17 years, when I spent nearly all my work time traveling to each part of the state, and talking to as many Floridians of as many different persuasions and experiences as I could find. I refer often to spirit and mood and attitude – and how the changes in Florida reflect in the human equation. I talk about simple things, about fundamentals, and as I go about the state I deliver the same essential message, with minor variations, over and over.

I don’t pretend to be a poet, but I like the way poets work. And I like what Dr. Lewis Thomas said about them, “We rely on scientists to help us find the way through the near distance, but for the longer stretch of the future we depend on our poets,” Thomas said. “A poet is . . . engaged in a qualitative science in which nothing is measured. He lives with data that cannot be numbered.”

The essayist E. B. White further clarified the poetic approach. A poet, he said, is like a mariner who approaches shore warily, determined not to scrape his bottom on anything solid.

With that in mind, I'll ramble for a few minutes about some personal prejudices. My major prejudice is that I think of Florida as home. In most other places, that would be a commonplace statement, but not in Florida. People who live here don't necessarily feel that this is their home. It seems to me that newcomers tend instead to adopt Florida tentatively, on an interim basis, with reservations. Home is still somewhere else. Florida's magical qualities tend to overwhelm and obscure the fundamentals that usually anchor a person and secure his heart. Reality seems too much like fantasy.

Too many of us regard this as a temporary stop, an experiment in jobs or lifestyle, maybe, or a vacation, or a winter retreat, or just a stage in life through which we will progress to other things and other places. We left our heart back in Ohio or New York. When we die, we will have our body shipped back there for burial. Too many of us reside here in what I call The Florida Split – the body in one place, and the heart in another.

Where the body is, we tend to worry about short-term things such as convenience and pleasure and today's market prices. Where the heart is, we tend to be more concerned about permanency and preservation, the lasting things – familiar landscapes that still support a lifestyle fondly recalled, customs and people and institutions that reinforce a web of personal experiences and add dimension to a life.

So, in Florida terms, I am one of those old fashioned folk who tries to keep his heart and his body in the same place. I am psychologically tied to this; wherever I might travel or wherever circumstance might take me to live, Florida always will be the place that is home to me. It would take a long term of affectionate adoption to another place before I could dilute that feeling, just as I am sure it must take a similarly long time for those Michiganders and New Yorkers who move here.

Everything I say is filtered through that perception. I don't speak as a tourist or as a short-timer, or as a business opportunist, or as the representative of any organization or any special group. I'm just one man talking about personal impressions of a state that he calls home.

My parents moved to Florida before I was born, and there will be generations of Burts here after I am gone. For me, it's as simple and as permanent as that.

There are times, though, the way Florida is changing, that I feel like an exile – an involuntary exile, one who didn't leave home but who had the distressing experience of seeing home leave him, saw it change under his feet and all around him to a different place, one that is better and worse and different all at the same time. Edward Said defined exile as that unbearable rift that occurs between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. That's what I'm talking about.

Becoming a stranger at home is an upsetting experience, especially to someone who has always felt that knowing a place and identifying with it, accumulating experiences that ground you to a location are important to a personal sense of wellbeing.

That can be a painful lesson to learn. My friend E.W. Carswell up in the Panhandle once gave me an excellent example. He said that for years Panhandle chicken farmers kept roosters around in the

belief that that they were essential to egg production. After the farmers found out this was not true, the number of employed roosters dropped dramatically. Hens laid eggs anyway, and the eggs tasted just as good, but they were not fertile. Carswell reported that farm efficiency went up but he said the atmosphere in the chicken houses became depressing. The hens were unhappy, and the few roosters that did not wind up in the company of dumplings were going through a crisis of doubt about their roosterhood. They had lost their sense of place, their certain compatibility with their surroundings.

When the things of home begin to wear away and vanish, you cling a little tighter to those few that are left. You become more emotional and protective about them. As later arrivals shift their emotional allegiance, they might take up the same causes, but there is an inevitable time lag. You need to allow at least five years for real roots to begin to take hold in this sand, and sometimes they never do.

In Florida, five years represents between three and four million new residents. So in this state, we always have between three and four million people – right now, somewhere around a third or a fourth of the whole state – who are floating around in this time-lag zone, who can't yet be expected routinely to make an informed and caring commitment to the needs of this state. Add to those the percentage of natives and old timers who never make a civic commitment, a percentage that exists in any community and in any state, and you begin to see the problem of our numbers. There are potentially enough people floating around in that time-lag zone, and in that don't-care zone, to tilt any Florida election toward the political whim of the moment.

In elections, Florida's situation is like the democratically irreverent comment about an election that Mark Twain put in the mouth of Huckleberry Finn. "Ain't we got all the fools in town on our side?" Huck said about an election. "Ain't that a big enough majority in any town?"

I am biased in favor of quiet and serenity. Tourist dollars fill up many Florida pockets, but they don't fill up mine. Mine aren't filled up in any case. New subdivisions and shopping malls long ago quit adding conveniences to my life, and instead became nuisances that added problems.

In 1974, my wife Gloria and I moved out of Miami and into the country – to a little house in the woods by a clear lake in north central Florida, six miles from the unincorporated community of Melrose – and have lived there ever since. That location has helped us develop an immense respect for the natural things of Florida. As Emerson said, I learned to like the silence in the chapel before the service begins better than I do the preaching.

I know what all the experts say about growth being inevitable and necessary, but I don't regard it as necessary to my life. It might or might not be inevitable, but I don't regard it as something sacred that should not be curbed or controlled or influenced before it reaches the status of something resembling a plague.

Florida in many ways remains a frontier. Swift and unchallenged growth has given it an uneven history and a ragged texture. Not being able to keep up with that growth has meant that the common denominator for the quality of life has been lowered.

One of the great dangers is that we grow accustomed to the idea of lowered standards. We get used to them. We forget, and we lower our expectations. We expect the traffic to be bad, the air to be hazy, the water to taste funny, the landscape to be measled with billboards, the politicians to be slippery if not corrupt. That sort of thing grows on us. Loren Eiseley explained the danger this way: "If I were to spell out in a sentence the single lethal factor at the root of declining or lost civilizations up to the present," he said "I would be forced to say adaptability. Man has the capacity to veer with every wind."

The growth and development that was so cheered by my parents' generation has become a threat to the kind of life I would like to continue living here, and surveys suggest that a majority of Floridians feel the same way. Growth has begun to take things away from me that I value more than what they are being replaced with.

Too many of Florida's natural vistas have been displaced, in favor of developments that would fit just as well in Cleveland or Jersey City. Too much of Florida's memory of a distinctive history has been displaced, in favor of a homogenized, rootless perspective. The natural surroundings have been bulldozed away and the state has been given a transfusion of new citizens who have different customs and standards.

Those things have brought a new look and a new character to Florida. In broad terms, they swap Floridana for a kind of placelessness that could be lifted up and transplanted to almost any other region without damaging its appropriateness. They represent the franchising and selling of a packaged lifestyle. Under this deluge of pacification, we tend to lose our genuine feel and full appreciation for this distinctive peninsula. We tend to submerge the peculiar details that give this place its special charms. As they dim, we overlook the variety in all the life forms around us – forms made possible by the incredibly benign climate and singular geography of a peninsula that rises out of the subtropical Caribbean and slowly and beautifully climbs into the temperate zone.

Those are a few of my prejudices, not all. I could go on and on. They require many footnotes and exceptions not yet noted, but they give you a framework for my view of Florida. Keep those in mind as I elaborate.

One of Florida's greatest problems – and perhaps the least recognized one – is understanding itself. I have devoted most of the last 17 years of my working time to seeking a broad understanding. Year after year, I travelled to each part of the state to clock the changes and make comparisons and to watch how the future was taking shape.

I tried to write about the things that I thought were important, even though they might not be the stuff of headlines. I tried to explain how we are exchanging old customs and traditions and places of unspoiled wild beauty for new conveniences, enlarged visions and greater diversity. I have tried to emphasize that the great task for Florida is finding the right balance for that exchange. In that time I became aware of the difficulty of trying to understand something that is still in the process of defining itself, as Florida is.

I became impressed that without a serious approach to this understanding, there can be no political will to face Florida's realities – no focused expression from the voters to guide the politicians. I became convinced that upon better understanding rests the survival of certain qualities of life that we grew up with, things that historically have been associated with Florida. These distinctive things are either diminishing or disappearing.

One trouble with talking about understanding Florida is that it is not easy. Every time I think I know something about this state, I discover something new, or I find out that something I thought I knew has changed, or that I was simply wrong. Finally I realized that understanding Florida is not something you accomplish; it's a lifetime pursuit, but a pleasant one.

Another problem is that understanding is a tough message to sell in a state where the differences are so visible and so jarring. Sometimes, I think that what Napoleon said about Italy – that it was too long to be one state – could be said about Florida, too. Anyway, my accumulated impressions and worries give me the message that understanding is the framework that can hold all our disparate pieces together – make some sense out of them, so that they can be seen as part of a functioning whole, like a mosaic or maybe a patchwork quilt.

We need to understand for example that in history the job for pioneers was to conquer natural Florida – to tame it, to make it habitable. That was overdone. The straightening of the Kissimmee River and the routing of a barge canal through north Florida are examples of that overkill. Now the job for pioneers is the opposite – to preserve the spirit of the real Florida, to nourish that wild side and keep it alive. There was a time when growth meant protection against wild animals. It meant getting electricity and running water, instead of oil lamps and outhouses. It meant getting a paved road in your neighborhood, and it meant getting rid of malaria, and it meant schools with formally trained teachers.

That changed. Now growth means that the public is losing access to its own beaches, and it means awful traffic problems, and it means crime rates that lead the national statistics. We have reached the point now – finally – when we have begun the much more difficult task of making the necessities and conveniences of a large population compatible with a sense of identity as well as a quality lifestyle.

The great challenge in life is how to face change and Florida, with its massive, mobile population, faces an exaggerated version of that challenge. *How* we change is the question – whether we can make it creative, or whether we let circumstances slip away from us and it becomes destructive.

“Either you ride away upon time's back,” Eiseley wrote, “or you stop, and life goes by with someone else waving farewell.”

In this computer age, when we like to reduce every quality in life to a number, I try to keep in mind the warning that Wendell Berry offered. He said that any statistical justification of ugliness is a revelation of stupidity.

Let's try to take a look at Florida as a stranger might.

A stranger sees a rather odd place, with a lot of peculiar, moving parts that don't seem to fit together. It is hard to tell sometimes whether this is one state – or about seven states stuck together under one label. It is a puzzling place.

It is a place that started as paradise, and after four centuries of diligent efforts at improvement, it is in trouble, under siege, this time by population growth that has overwhelmed the state's attempts to accommodate it. There are too many new needs and new appetites that came too fast, and accommodation to them came too slow. You look at Florida and you see that not only Hell is paved over with good intentions. Paradise is, too.

The pace of history has been erratic here, coming with a great rush in some places, dawdling along in others. On one hand, the state has St. Augustine, the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in this country, 425 years old. It was here before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. On the other, there are new cities being born, created by recipe and formula for residents not here yet, tailored to wishes and needs they don't yet recognize.

Take a long look at Florida, as though from a spaceship. One long, linear city covers most of the state's east coast – and another one covers about half the west coast. In the middle, a third stretches out across an interstate highway, linking the other two. The three great cities, like a great concrete anthill that spreads across Florida, take the form of an 'H'. Elsewhere the state is measled with smaller developments, and with great patches of green as well as many lakes and streams, making the 'H' stand out.

Nobody knows what it stands for – maybe for hybrid, which would fit; maybe for honeypot, which is what this attractive state is; maybe for hedonic, which also would be descriptive.

Our state inhales and exhales people in great bunches, and grows not from births but from migration. The newcomers are mostly refugees from the cold, troubled Rust Belts of the Midwest and the Northeast – plus an opposite stream from the warm and even more troubled Caribbean. They meet here in a kind of migration riptide, creating a human froth as they adjust to a new place and a new place adjusts to them. Florida becomes a giant staging area, a terminal where people come to be rerouted in new directions, where they can assemble new lives.

The migration provides Florida with a largely uprooted, opportunity-sensitive population that includes everything from Crackers to international sophisticates. The newness of so many of them in a strange land encourages in everyone the search-and-consume attitudes of nomads.

Florida receives something like 700,000 new residents each year – and about half that many people move out. That's more than a million people every year moving in or out of the state. Add the comings and goings of 41 million tourists per year, plus migrant workers and people moving from one place to another within Florida, and you come up with the most turbulent, or transient, state in the union – more turbulent by far than either California or Texas. The turbulence shapes our character, affects our culture and changes our environment.

We have to worry about the most elemental things, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat. We worry because everything around us changes so fast, and because we seem always to be living among strangers. We worry because there is so much uncertainty, so much unease. We have to question whether we are developing a suicidally toxic culture. We have to wonder whether we are developing a zest for the tacky and the ugly and the artificial, rather than the natural and the beautiful. We need to look far down this road and try to picture where it is taking us.

That turbulence, all that movement in and out and around, creates great commercial opportunities, especially for the real estate people, but it brings great risks. It puts us in jeopardy. We have to give more thought to that downside. Think of the human impact, the lives uprooted, the friends lost or left behind, the tearing away of ties to family as well as to place. Think of how it affects stability, the impact it has on continuity in politics, the loss in terms of heritage and self-identity.

Those 700,000 new arrivals every year assure Florida a wonderfully diverse, talented, interesting mix of people, but they arrive here without yet having had a chance to learn how we in this state can seem to have so much water and still be worried about having enough of it to drink. Without having had a chance yet to learn that swamps, and barrier islands, and aquifers, and birds, and insects – and all those other things of Florida that sound so exotic in Ohio or New York or Georgia – how they might be as economically strategic in the long run as a fine new shopping center. The migration is like a perpetual transfusion of energetic ignorance about this place we call home. We gain a lot, and it costs us a lot.

Growth is a great tide that sweeps everything before it. The economy is built as a bet on continued growth, on a belief that new numbers will solve everything. University of Florida economist Jeffrey Denslow put the dilemma of Florida this way: “If we continue to grow rapidly, we’ll use up all of the water and jam the roads,” he said. “If we stop, our economy will collapse.” That’s a Woody Allen kind of dilemma.

Subtly built into this state’s consciousness is a kind of population hypnosis: the feeling that the power of new population will overwhelm anything – good or bad – that comes up. It creates a sense of fatalism, a sense of having to ride with the tide because there is no choice. There is a danger that we count the numbers so proudly, and finger that fresh flow of cash so gleefully, that we might not notice in the full measure that we should that the natural treasures of Florida are withering away.

In this kind of situation, as H. L. Mencken put it, voters choose leaders the way we used to buy bootleg whiskey – never knowing precisely what they were getting, but pretty sure it was not what it pretended to be.

Consider the extraordinary impact of these numbers on Florida’s natural resources. When nearly five times as many people live in Florida now as in 1950 – sharing the same space, the same geography and the same resources – the share for each of us is necessarily smaller. What is left requires greater care and understanding. On public officials and upon voters there is a greater responsibility for knowledge and judgment. Yet, while the needs are greater, our turbulence creates a loss of knowledge.

We tend to be so restless and so opportunistic that we fail to merge our sense of self and sense of place in ways that give residents a feeling of belonging where they live. We are losing that definition of home as a place that is more than just another possession, that it is more than just an investment to be cashed in when the price is right.

In the past 10 years, for example, Florida – a state of 13 million – has accepted about 7 million new residents, and has lost about 3.5 million old ones. That means that it is statistically possible that half of Florida's population could have arrived here since 1980. It also means that Floridians must understand and adjust to the fact that strangers to our home will have the balance of power in it. We have to help them to understand, we have to recruit them to our cause. They will tilt the decisions of our future.

But how do you grasp and hold a thorough understanding of a state so varied physically, that has such a revolving, spinning population and that continues to change so fast? The geography ranges from sea-level to hilly, and from desert-like to swampy, the temperatures from tropical to temperate. The soil varies from white sand to black muck to red clay. Each of those variations represents the natural preferences of certain living things, certain people or plants or animals, and those living things cluster to them, accenting the differences.

How do we understand so varied a people in so varied a land? People whose gourmet delicacies go from pompano and avocado to mullet and grits? What kind of real understanding can newcomers have of all that?

Even we who always have lived here tend to know Florida only in the way that we know next week's weather, or tomorrow's arriving stranger. We have some idea, but the specifics stay just ahead of us. In this state, we rely on uncertainties. The weather is our major commodity and arriving strangers are our best crop. We thrive on mobility and change, the ingredients of impermanence, and out of those we try to mold a sense of the permanent.

Our state lives by a series of rhythms, almost tidal in their broad patterns. The lives of its people fall within those. The rains, the birds, the fish, the people come and go regularly.

It is a state forever poised on some new turn of an old cycle, some new tide or migration that repeats history, and whose threats seem fresh only because they arrive to a new day and to new conditions. People sit by their pools and worry about drought, or they light up their gas grills and worry about fire exploding in nearby fields where once there was a marsh. During cold snaps, they wrap up in heavy coats and walk barefoot on the beaches.

Consider some more of the peculiarities. There are two seasons: cool-and-dry and wet-and-hot. They contradict each other, and they sometimes are careless about their schedules. Year to year, Floridians never are allowed a constancy that permits them to perfect either their rain prayers or their sun worship.

Life in Florida rides a pendulum, from the sublime passing through the tacky to the dangerous, and back, again and again. Life is like building sand castles, waiting for the winds and the tides and the sunbathers to do their damage – and then building more sand castles.

Bits and pieces reflect some of the state's grit and wonder. Think of the range: our wealth of bays and islands and lightning, the powdery fine sands of the Panhandle beaches that once were trucked north to replace sawdust on barroom floors, the Lake Okeechobee catfish so tasty that they once passed in New York restaurants as filet of sole, the water that historically has moved down that invisible slope of the Everglades, aquifers nourishing extraordinary plant and animal life, the hurricanes that can drive rain so hard that it will peel the paint off your house or the skin off your neck, the wildlife once so abundant but now losing its habitat, creatures like the panther giving way to raccoons, scavengers that can thrive on the urban fringe. All those are the things of Florida, each of them influencing or being influenced by peculiar rhythms and population pressures.

Everybody tries to define Florida, but few of the definitions stick. It has been called Lousy Land, a haven for hedonists, and Noah's Ark. What T.D. Allman said in his book about Miami could be said about all of Florida – it is built on the bedrock of illusion. It has unique combinations of good and bad, gorgeousness and ugliness, depravity and chic, utter weariness with life and great enthusiasm for it, escapism and civic responsibility.

Fortune Magazine said that Florida is like California without pretensions – or Texas with water. In *The Book of America*, authors Neal Peirce and Jerry Hagstrom called Florida a deeply disjointed society. They said it had never developed a coherent sense of itself and probably never would.

There are so many Floridas. Consider this poetic one envisioned by the late Ernie Lyons, former editor of *The Stuart News*. "My Florida," he wrote, "is the winding tropical river, heavy with the musky scent of palm blossoms, with water turkeys sunning themselves, striped-neck turtles plopping from logs.... Millions come to Florida and never see it. They are like motorized pellets in a glamorized pinball machine, hitting the flashing lights of widely publicized artificial attractions before bouncing out of the state and back home."

We need to understand that a range of influences have created a perpetual mood of unease in this state, a mood that results in stress, that invites instability, that encourages the kind of behavior we associate with a full moon. The statistics, as well as the headlines, reflect a kind of full-moon-madness running loose. Mixed in with its space shots and world-class tourism, there is a downside to paradise. Among the 10 most populated states in the country, according to the latest statistical abstract, Florida has the best business climate, but it also has the leading crime rate, the leading suicide rate, the leading divorce rate, and the leading death rate. It has the highest percentage of residents over the age of 65, and the lowest percentage of nursing home beds. The Census Bureau reports that Florida ranks near the bottom in per capita tax collections, and near the bottom in tax expenditures per person.

As Raymond Chandler wrote about another scene, in an atmosphere like this meek wives are encouraged to feel their butcher knives and to study their husbands' necks.

Florida is being separated from its history and its natural identity. We are being separated from our native place, and it hurts.

We have a state that is full of all these separate dreams, one beset by uncertain, changing standards, one that has little appreciation of community. The lack of common ties and identity, the failure to recognize and focus on mutual interests, discourages common solutions and cynicism grows. Loyalty becomes a chip in the marketplace. The future becomes this afternoon, or maybe tomorrow morning. No wonder the young are so strange.

All these things underline the state's greatest challenge: educating that ever-freshening population to Florida's peculiarities and to the frailties, so that the newcomers can cope with the problems they bring. So that in election years, the issues facing Florida can be weighed against this state's own history and its own potential, not against the eroded standards and expectations of some other place with far worse troubles.

We need to realize that these 900 or so new citizens a day coming down from the Northeast and Midwest are remarkable in more ways than just their numbers. Gauged in terms of individuals and families, their decisions to move here represent a historical exodus from one urbanized part of the country to another. No war, no single great disaster prompted them and no shared sense of sadness binds them together. They don't flee political persecution, as do our Caribbean refugees, or come to homestead free land or to search for gold. They come instead simply dreaming of a better place to live.

They gave up their old homes hoping to find new ones. They gave up old friends hoping to find new ones. They were not drafted. We need to remember that they volunteered to come to Florida and we have to assume that they come prepared to love it. They can be recruits to the cause of a better Florida. They represent the most significant of Florida's new opportunities that carry risks. They are the future.

Our new citizen refugees come here ready to relax and to enjoy, and we have to acquaint them with a new set of problems and ask for their help, for their participation. We have to explain things to them.

When they eat a kumquat, they might ask why we let it go sour. If they eat guavas, they might ask how long they have been dead. We have to persuade them that it is safe to be in the same room with a mullet.

We oldtimers need to remember that Florida's reality doesn't always match up with that first dream. Some have to work at acquiring a taste for Florida, for the long, hot summers and the mosquitoes and the long rainy seasons and the threats of hurricanes and then the threats of drought. Eventually, anyone who lives here happily has to face up to that learning process, learning to balance the dreams with the realities. They have to learn that the official taste of Florida is bittersweet. They have to accept the fact that if you are going to be a Floridian, you will sweat a lot.

Those newcomers help free us from the mistakes of the past. They give us broader horizons, a culture richer in diversity. But we have to take care that they do not separate us from the good things of the past, too – from the security and balance of knowing who we are and where we belong – and from the understanding of what kind of wonderful and peculiar place this is.

That's the real job for Florida, understanding itself, blending its parts, bridging all the gaps.

We need to understand that everything we love is at risk. We need such a clear understanding that we express our love and appreciation in the way that we live. We need to live in ways that make our values clear, in ways that set standards of respect that others will observe.

For Floridians, conservation is not some esoteric society for the elite. It's not a matter of liberal or conservative philosophy. It's a response to clear and present danger, a matter of protecting the good things in our lives. It's a matter of self-defense. Each of us needs to know, and we need to encourage the knowledge in others, that sandhills and swamps and scrub forests have intricate, fragile beauty and importance. We need to be aware that study of them reveals a great drama, a struggle for life that affects our own struggle.

We need to illuminate the thousands of mysteries about Florida so that everyone can know their fascination. We need to realize that the great migrating tides of Florida are as wonderful to read as a classic book that you never can finish, one that goes on and on, adding chapter after chapter. We must understand that there is a balance among all those tidal forces and this physical environment that permits us to have the extraordinary advantages of Florida, but only if we pay the cost of being responsible, only if we do our part.

We need to understand that a Peter Principle of growth has been demonstrated in Florida, that an attractive place grows until it becomes ugly, and then it stops growing. We must understand that the things that keep a place from growing ugly are laws and regulations and behavioral customs that nourish quality in life. We must understand that paying for growth by cannibalizing the natural environment is self-destructive.

We must understand that most of our problems do not derive from not knowing what to do. Rather, they derive from not mustering the will to do difficult things. We must find a way to give the politicians an enlightened, focused public will to respond to. We must hurry along the definition of Florida by shaping our laws and our customs to reflect a quality vision. There must be a constituency for quality in Florida.

We must develop an optimistic vision of what kind of people we are, of what kind of special state this is, and we should not tolerate the careless damaging of the processes that carry us toward that vision. In Florida, we need both the imagination of poets and the precision of scientists.

When I begin to feel a little bit overwhelmed by these challenges to the future, I try to remember the positive things. I try to move away from concentrating on those numbers, and I try to think instead of values. I try to remember that we should be what someone has called happy warriors,

that we ought to look just as hard for reasons to be optimistic as we do for reasons to be pessimistic.
We need to do that to sustain ourselves for the long haul, because it will be a long haul.

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