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"Environmentalism: A Matter of Self Defense"

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Al Burt Papers

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It is nice to be back with you again. The last time was in 1986 at Homosassa Springs, and a lot has happened since then. But, to be honest, not much has changed. I have sunk a little deeper into retirement. I write less, travel less, fiddle with computers more and somehow manage to enjoy life more. But my message to you is essentially the same as it has always been: that most Floridians neither understand nor appreciate their home as well as they should and that all of us have an honorable obligation to do better about that. We need to do all we can to establish values, build customs, and set standards that reflect Florida history and heritage, as well as an honest but optimistic interpretation of current Florida realities.

That has always been the prevailing theme in whatever I have said or written about Florida. It is too late for me to change now, and I would not change it in any case.

Travelling is not as easy for me as it once was, and I now come out of my Melrose den only on special occasions like this one and at the special request of people like my old friend Bernie Yokel and for groups like Florida Audubon, for which I have special affection.

I ask your leave to ramble a bit

I guess this is a good time for conservationists to come out. Since we have a confessed He-Coon in charge in Tallahassee, things ought to be looking up for Florida wildlife and in Washington we have a Newt taking over, announcing all kinds of plans. Reading some of that stuff, I am reminded that Molly Ivins once said that Republicans have hearts the size of caraway seeds.

She also talked about a new ethic pronounced by one of her Texas politicians who said, "You got to remember, now, a promise is not a commitment." I hope we can count on that.

Melrose, the country village where I live, could be called the heart of Cracker Florida. I assume you know that when I use the word Cracker, it is an honorable term – a reference to old style, rural-based, native culture.

The Crackers have their own ethic, founded on skepticism and a kind of wry wisdom. Anytime we want to tell a joke, we always say we heard a Cracker say it – that way nobody takes it seriously. I heard one of them talking about Newt just the other day. "He might be a genius," the fellow said, "and on the other hand, he might not be." Sounded right to me.

"Newt means well," another one said, "but I suspicion that maybe his bread weren't quite done when they taken it out of the oven."

Crackers are like that. They poke fun at everybody and everything, and sometimes they sound like Democrats, but they usually vote Republican.

We had a Snowbird preacher come to Melrose one time and preach to us about the Immaculate Conception. Serious stuff. After the sermon, one old Cracker sidled up with a question. "Tell me, Preacher," he said, "What's the advantage in this Immaculate Conception?"

You never know what they're going to say. One of them had his house catch fire and he called 911 and told the fire department to get out there right away. "Right," the operator said, "how do we get there?" The Cracker hesitated a minute. "Um ... uh, well," he said, "ain't you got one of them big red trucks?"

One of my neighbors came by the house the other day with a nice string of fish; he had caught it in one of our lakes. Lots of Baptists up there around Melrose, and sometimes they do their Baptizing in the lakes; they duck 'em right under. I complimented the fellow on his fish. "Yeah," he said, "these are Baptist fish." I had to ask. "How's that?" "Well," he replied, "they start to go bad pretty quick after they come up out of the water."

Retirement is an interesting experience. You're out there working hard and making your way, and then suddenly – right in the middle of something you're trying to say – somebody tugs at your sleeve and tells you to sit down, that it's somebody else's turn. Sometimes, you look down and it's your left hand giving the message to your right sleeve and it's your own voice you hear.

What it comes down to is that while you weren't looking, you got old. So you sit down – but you live with that feeling of unfinished business, that you probably have been interrupted prematurely – that

there's just one or two more things you ought to say, one or two more things you ought to do. Then, when the chance comes, odds are you will repeat yourself – as I do.

As you know, I roamed Florida for *The Miami Herald* in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s and into the 1990s. All told I have been associated with the paper for 40 years – though it has been a loose association the last few years. They don't want to be held responsible for anything I say now – and sometimes I don't either.

As I look back, it seems to me those years I traveled – from Key West to Pensacola to Fernandina Beach, up and down and across the middle of the peninsula, trying to go to each part of the state at least once each year – might have been the most turbulent years in Florida history. Not because of wars or plagues or revolutions, but because of massive population shifts that so quickly placed overwhelming stresses on the state that there was no time for proper responses. It all came so fast and was so new that there was little time to react, and little knowledge about how to react. While we went to school on the problems, the environment declined all around us.

All those things were on our minds when Gloria and I retired. We picked Melrose in north central Florida as a place to live. We liked it because it was remote, largely undeveloped and still beautiful in a way that Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings called “primitive majesty.” It is part of Florida's scrub country, the area that Rawlings wrote about, and it still has the aura of old Florida.

Our plan was to follow the advice of Hawthorne about happiness. I paraphrase it: “Happiness is like a butterfly,” he said. “When you chase it, it stays just beyond your grasp. But if you will sit down quietly, it might settle on you.” We sat down quietly in Melrose, and in our best moments we imagine that we commune with Hawthorne's butterfly.

The scrub country is a sweetly ragged land of bone-dry sandhills socketed with hundreds of lakes. There are no true cities, little agriculture and, in Florida terms, relatively few people. Creatures as exotic as the gopher tortoise and the coral snake, and as common as the raccoon and the transplanted South Floridian, do well. Once you have developed a taste for the scrub country, no other place seems quite tangy enough. But I am not recommending that you try it. Go somewhere else. I'm not sure we have enough butterflies to go around.

Melrose, and those surroundings, helped teach us a new appreciation of things like the weather – and birds. You know, in the city you are not as aware of daily weather. You are protected from it by plate glass windows and silent air-conditioning. Except in unusual circumstances, the rain and heat and cold touch you only lightly. In the country the weather seems a little closer. In open spaces, it routinely impacts more. The natural horizon is not blocked by buildings. You can see the weather as it comes and goes, and all this makes you tend to be more aware of how tiny a footprint you make and a little more awed by things like thunder and lightning. In the country it is easier, I think, to feel small in a large universe. I tend to think that is a healthy perspective.

I turn to one of my Florida heroes to launch us into a look at the nature and the state of this state – into looking at this business of understanding Florida. The late Archie Carr, the eminent naturalist and brilliantly skilled writer who was associated for so many years with the University of Florida, had some excellent advice about that. In his fine book, *A Naturalist in Florida*, published by Yale University Press this past year, he had a word of caution for fellows like me who like to moan a lot about what has happened to Florida.

He talked about balance – about how he worried over falling into the trap of offering only nostalgia and indignation, of turning his book into a diatribe against the passing of original Florida.

“Being a naturalist,” he said, “I am especially susceptible to the disease of bitterness over the ruin of Florida – over the partly aimless, partly avaricious ruin of unequalled natural.” What a wonderful line. He said too much of that would be “garment-rending in the dark, and a waste of time.” A better way to make the point, he said, is to talk about what joy still remains in the Florida landscape and sneak in some factual tooth-gnashing on the side.

So, Archie Carr’s recipe was not a nostalgic lament of things lost, or a jeremiad on the evil now afoot – but rather his words offer a joyful catalogue of what remains.

Archie Carr was just about always right on things like that. He knew how vital it was that we understand our home. He knew that you tend to love what you understand, and you tend to defend what you love. Understanding depends, in large part, on knowing how we got to be where and what we are.

We need to take special care not to forget what has happened, and what we have lost. I think we owe it to future generations not to waste the deadeye accuracy of hindsight. We need to back up the laments of old-timers with benchmark realities. We need the kinds of reminders that will stand up like witnesses in court – and guide us away from making the same mistakes over. We need these things for a more specific appreciation of how swiftly history marches in Florida – how this state in 25 years might face what amounts to a century of decisions in other places.

We need to remember, for example, why boondoggles like the Cross-Florida Barge Canal were started – what the arguments were – and why it was stopped. What was the cost of all that, whose interest did it serve, and why does the ghost of it still hover over us?

It is important to remember why the Kissimmee River was ditched, what the arguments were and who made them and why they prevailed. And we need to remember result, and the turnaround years later. We need to remember all those wasted years and all those wasted dollars. All this is educationally significant.

We need graphic details, catalogued experiences, a library of reminders. For example, here under this asphalt parking lot with the yellow security lights there once was a beautiful sand dune, or here off this shore was a living coral reef, or here there was a wild hammock, or a beautifully alive estuary. It would be stupid and wasteful to forget.

We need a more precise standard of measurement for the next decisions. This beautiful place died because somebody decided that a more profitable use of it was for a parking lot, or a convenience store, or a marina – and local zoning or growth management authorities approved. Were they right? Did the community benefit? We need to look back and see how this growth game has been played. We need to know – and never forget – who wins and who loses and who profits.

We can truly understand only if we remember these things when making our judgments.

Old-timers will tell you that probably the sand dunes went first. On the great dune ridges near the coast, which have the highest ground with the best views, tall condos went up. Now they look like

tombstones marking the places where Florida has been buried. Landscapes everywhere were altered. Wetlands became subdivisions with potential flood problems when the rains came, and potential fire problems when the droughts came.

The Florida identity began to disappear under an onslaught of development that ignored environmental harmony and followed no cultural pattern that honored heritage. We began to suffer from a deadly combination of confusion and complacency. Anchoring standards and values drifted. A toxic culture threatened everything.

Zoning boards nodded in the business breezes as easily as royal palms. Some developers reveled in the creation of quaint and lucrative disorder disguised as progress. Politicians restrained taxes while welcoming the burden of new population. Chambers of Commerce treated growth with a kind of patriotic passion and scorned dissenters.

It's a sad, now familiar story. Everything has been a tradeoff, a swap – beauty for comfort and convenience, spiritually soothing landscapes for profits, dunes for condos.

But we were trading values as well as physical realities.

Florida always has been a state that creates in us a feeling of duality – a feeling both of exhilaration and chagrin. Because we can look around and so easily see the best and the worst in one easy look. My feeling always has been that Floridians have before them a buffet of exaggerations –absolutely numbing tackiness that backs up to beauty so overwhelming that it has religious overtones. We are blessed and cursed at every turn. It's wonderful and it's maddening.

It's the nature of the place. Consider all the wonderful contradictions. Great swamps neighbor dune deserts. Summer flowers bloom in February. Homes open up and bring the outdoors inside. Benign winters give way to peppery summers filled with rains and powerful thunderstorms and occasional hurricanes. A population of strangers, people who came here from somewhere else, seek homes in exotic surroundings that are nothing like the homes they knew. Minority natives feel spiritually exiled in the place where they were born.

Florida hangs on to a history of self-inflicted imbalance. It sensitively builds highway underpasses for panthers while it insensitively lets teachers go without raises. It celebrates status as a Mega-State, the fourth largest, while it leads or ranks high among large states in the statistics of stress: divorce, suicide, fatal auto accidents, death. Florida, a state in constant percolation, enjoys champagne pretensions while toxic wastes jeopardize the drinking water.

Some newcomers to Florida flourish as exotics, the human equivalent of mala leucas or Brazilian peppers, growing and spreading at a dead sprint. More slow-going, persistent natives – who evolved their pace from long-distance lessons of Florida survival – have to re-gear and adapt.

But many other new Floridians for a long time feel that home remains the place they left, at their birthplace back in Michigan or New York or Georgia or Cuba. The making of a new home requires more than a change of geography; it demands a new mindset, a new identification, a fresh commitment, an enthusiasm for working at it. The heart is reluctant to let go the old things.

Nowadays, it is popular to declare success by redefining failure. Just change the rules. If you can't solve a problem, redefine it as a benefit. A story I heard not long ago that illustrates this.

This fellow went to a meeting, and in his chair he found somebody's personal diary. Apparently it had been lost, and there was no name in it. To find the owner, he started to read. It was a woman's diary and the most recent entries had to do with being on a cruise ship with 200 people. One entry noted that she had been seated at the captain's table for dinner. Another entry noted that the captain was getting very friendly. Later, the captain was making advances, and she was resisting.

Finally, she wrote that the captain had warned her that either she would get romantic or he would sink the ship – and 200 people would die – and it would be her fault. Later entries agonized over this awful responsibility. What should she do? Then came, the final entry. "All is well," it said. "I saved the lives of 200 people last night."

In Washington, that's known as political spin. I have been struck by what Nat Reed, the Hobe Sound conservationist, said recently. "Having grown up in a far different Florida," Reed said, "I am totally terrified by the demands of nearly six million Floridians now living in South Florida with an estimated four million (more) coming in less than 10 years." Those figures can be translated to the whole state: nearly 14 million now and up to 32 million by the year 2010. Terrifying is the right word.

In this age of the He-Coon and the Newt, and their warring philosophies, a lot of people worry about environmentalism, or conservation, or preservation – or whatever they want to call it. It all means the same thing, essentially: saving things of value for the future. People worry that environmentalism, by whatever name you call it, is dead. They worry that environmentalism may no longer be politically correct. That somebody will change the rules, and it won't matter anymore. That it will go out of style.

That's an unreal fear. Maybe elitist environmentalism will go out of style, but that was never the real thing anyway. Maybe those on the fringe – the advocates of esoteric, radical, and perhaps lunatic environmentalism – will go out of style. But real environmentalism will be with us always, because it is no fancy philosophy or elitist theory. It is a matter of self-defense. People will always get mad when they are punched in the nose. They will always get mad because it hurts. They will always have environmental attitudes now because that attitude springs from the belief that someone or something was hurting them – was taking valuable things away from them. Environmentalism took a long time to develop, but it won't ever go away. People will always defend a self-interest they understand. Whatever the political woe of the moment, that won't change.