

Remembering Bill Belleville

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“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

—Albert Einstein

A pale sun peeks through the hazy morning sky as my friend Bill and I push our bright kayaks away from the Monroe Harbor Marina boat ramp.

We’re off to discover a duo of peninsulas that stretch out into the east end of Lake Monroe. The map we’re using labels them as Mother’s Arms, and they seem to embrace a snug little cove that connects to the St. Johns River via a tangle of marsh and prairie.



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We paddle leisurely, admiring the native wildlife: River turtles—or Cooters, as Bill calls them, using the Southern vernacular; glossy Anhingas with welcoming outstretched wings; and a few gators sunning on the riverbank.

Bill is pointing out the subtleties of the flora and fauna around us to my untrained eye: neat, pearly clusters of apple snail eggs clinging to bright green shoots; a baby gator hiding in some mangroves; delicate mallow flowers nestled amongst the rushes.

But the water itself, however, was always his greatest passion—especially the St. Johns River and the many Florida springs.

Although he'd been to some of the most interesting and remote places in the world as a writer and filmmaker - the Galapagos, Russia, and Australia among them - Bill's heart was always most content when visiting any of Florida's natural water sources - the smaller and more isolated, the better. He intuitively understood the connection between water and the human body, mind, and spirit. Nothing was more important to him than trying to relate that sense of connection to others through his numerous articles, books, and lectures, his gentle, 'aw, shucks' easy-going manner becoming noticeably more intense as he spoke with great feeling and urgency about the environmental damage being done to those sacred places due to unchecked development and sprawl.

We're talking about these things as the sun reaches high overhead. It's time to go, so we maneuver our way through some tight, shallow channels and head back to the marina. After we've loaded the kayaks and reviewed some of the many photos each of us has taken on this brief journey, Bill hands me something: a small pottery shard he found while we were exploring during a lunch break, obviously pre-Columbian. Again, I'm awed by his discerning eye, his ability to focus beyond the obvious, to find a jewel among the familiar.

That was our last kayaking adventure. Soon after, Bill was diagnosed with a progressive illness, and passed away on July 30, 2020.

I treasure that pottery shard as a reminder of Bill and our times spent exploring the natural world together. I know his earthly remains will become one with the water he was so inspired by that he couldn't help but share his joy and sorrows about its future with so many, via his informative writing, his speaking engagements, his personal actions. I will say a silent prayer, old friend, each time I visit one of your revered places of personal worship. You may have left us to our troubles in our earthly home, but you will be eternal and free of those burdens, remembered forever through your words as they guide us to a more enlightened future.

“They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, the voice of perpetual Becoming.”

— Hermann Hesse