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It Doesn't Hurt to Love a Turtle

ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR, at egg laying and hatching time, big and little turtles scurry about the yard to remind us that Florida does have its venerable seasons, though not measured by foliage or snow.

Often the hatchlings are swimming around in our pool. These are red-eared and yellow-bellied sliders and the long-necked, soft-shelled turtles, locally called softies, all in a hurry to complete their irreversible evolutionary imperative, the amphibian version of *carpe diem*.

There are exceptions, however. We have a photograph of our easy-going Great Dane, Zeb, sniffing the tube snout of a softie who seemed to like dogs as much as he liked their food, which we fed him off the dock. The Great Dane and the great softie appear in the photograph to be two newly acquainted neighbors.

That particular softie was named by our granddaughter. She called him Simpsons. We'd bang on the dock and Simpsons came paddling forth hoping to get a sampling of dry dog food. It wasn't only food he liked; he was downright companionable.

Our granddaughter told us the other day that she'd meant to call him Samson since he was so big. When we walked the dog around the pond Simpsons followed us, by water, of course. It was a sight to see. Once we took our parrot along, too,

so we'd have something that swims, something that crawls and something that flies, to quote a Cajun friend.

We mourned Simpsons' passing after he was gone. He was with us for 10 years. Occasionally, I swam with him at my side. One day he was gone. I remember when we discovered his shell, and the white, sun-bleached bone of his hollow skull lying under a pine tree close to the house. We left it there until it became one with the earth.

We often wondered about Simpsons' demise. Had a raccoon dragged the old fellow out of the water and eaten him? Any predatory

bird might have done it, or perhaps Simpsons, having achieved his destiny, just got as near to us as possible, and lay down and died. Before I am accused of anthropomorphizing, I must say that this was one exceptional turtle. Before laying eggs—yes, Simpsons was a female—she always alerted me, so I'd know where the eggs were. That way I could instruct the dogs not to dig there. If she hadn't alerted me to this egg-laying event each year, I might not have believed that a turtle was capable of interacting in such a way with a human. She actually required my presence, as a sort of benefactory insurance against canine predation.

What is turtle intelligence? Do we have any way of knowing? Well, one thing is certain. Turtles know how to survive. They've been with us since before we were with us, so to say.

FOR HUMANS, THE TURTLE HAS a variety of philosophical and spiritual meanings that go far into our collective unconscious mind. In Asian symbology, for instance, the turtle's shell is representative of the universe. It is the primordial turtle—top shell is Heaven, bottom shell is Earth.

In many earth religions, the turtle is maternal. She is usually a symbol of materiality, too. Her wisdom is that of nurturing, mothering and being. We might even say that her slower life force is a comment upon natural evolution. Things go slowly in turtle time. Unlike the way things seem to move in the busy world we humans live in.

Whatever the turtle might mean, however, we are amply blessed with so many turtles in Florida. I am always thinking of them, it seems, wondering about their incredible longevity. And I think there is something sinful about the killing of a turtle.

When we see one crossing the road, we help it to the other side.

Occasionally, if the situation warrants, we take it home. How many have ended up in our pond as a result of their slow crossing of Pine Island Road? More than I can count. Some sliders placed in our pond more than 12 years ago have great-great-great grandchildren by now.

I was free diving a reef in Jamaica recently, and I happened to see a Ridley's turtle paddling at a depth of about 25 feet. I was snorkeling and I took a big draught of air, shot down and got close enough to that extra-terrestrial face to look deeply into its large green eyes. What did it see when confronted by me? A mortal man with a glass face and an orange tube sticking out of his mouth? Was I a monster? Maybe. But the turtle didn't flee. It just regarded me with an open-eyed, intelligent curiosity.

After I surfaced, my diving companion told me that when turtle hunters cut up turtle meat—"even after it's been frozen and thawed, the flesh still contains a microcosmic heartbeat." Whether this is true, I cannot say. Yet longevity and spirituality seem to coincide in the turtle, this air-breathing creature that swims as if flying among the stars. If you have ever seen a sea turtle swimming in a phosphorescent sea at night in a boat, you know what I mean.

I HAVE A CHOCTAW FRIEND, EAGLE Walking Turtle. His signature consists of a turtle with an eagle gripping its shell. Therein, the cosmic joining of the dualities—to be a man not apart from the earth, the sky and the water, but firmly, as in *terra firma*, a part of them. The signature also has the grace of flying across the heavens.

I once found a young slider dead along a shell road. It was wrapped in Spanish moss. Since there is no Spanish moss within 20 miles, I wondered how this had happened. Later that same day, I saw the drama sort of re-enacted. An eagle caught a turtle and flew off with it. A strand of moss from somewhere was trapped between the eagle's claws.

Eagle Walking Turtle is a writer of journeys, of odysseys embodying flesh and spirit. I think of him, now and then, when I see our fecund little turtles flying across the blue of my swimming pool. After hatching, these misdirected infants get lost and seek the pool instead of the pond. We always return them to their natural place. But first my wife, Lorry, likes to keep them for a little while. They bring her great joy. She delights in them as much as she delights in her grandchildren.

"It doesn't hurt to love a turtle," she says.

She's right. Caring for one little turtle is the same as caring for the whole large Earth. If we could only cherish that simple act of charity, the world might be different all the way around. †