

The Turtle and the Cardinal Warned Us



SUSAN SANFORD

A FRIEND OF MINE JUST asked me where I wanted to go. Paris? Cuzco? Ocho Rios? Prague? He'd finished writing a book and was dying to get away somewhere. I told my friend, "I'm happy where I am."

When you're in that kind of laid-back, euphoric mood, beach-combing sounds like hard labor. And you must ask yourself, why do what nature does best? Mother Nature can make a mansion of sand. Or reduce that mansion to a single grain of crystalline.

Sit back and watch—that's my motto of the moment.

I felt so content that day that I almost forgot—until the phone rang—that I was supposed to do a radio interview on the new book I'd written with my wife. It's called *A Mind with Wings: The Story of Henry David Thoreau*.

The first phone question was appropriate: "Would you like to say

something about idleness?" the interviewer asked.

So I talked about how Henry Thoreau treated his hours at Walden Pond. Henry was an idle listener. Well, you have to be "on idle" to listen, to hear what someone else, what something else is saying. Remember, Henry is the one who said, "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in."

One day, when he had nothing but time to spare, Henry Thoreau studied a honeybee. His question of the day was, how far will a honey-

bee fly to get a meal of goldenrod and aster blossom?

To find out, Henry trapped a bee and dusted its fuzz with red powder. He then set the bee loose on the breeze. Watching it rise and go towards Concord, Henry made some notes. Then, in less than a half an hour, that same busy red-jacketed bee was back at Walden Pond. Henry wrote: "He may have gone more than three quarters of a mile. At any rate, he had a headwind to contend with while laden. They fly swiftly and surely to their nest, never resting by the way, and I was surprised—though I had been informed of it—at the distance to which the village bees go for flowers."

I should like to be that observant—not to miss anything. I should like to be as idle as Henry was and as proficient at understanding the moods of the seasons and the ways of the bees.

LAST WEEK, AS A STORM WAS coming in from the Gulf, our dog Zora (a Katrina survivor, who howls and quivers when it rains) found a subject as worthy as Henry's, and she informed me of it by barking. I followed her out into the back yard, that place of mystery my granddaughter calls the jungle. And there was the object of Zora's passion—the largest gopher tortoise I have ever seen. It was a boulder with legs, the elder statesmen of all Florida gophers. And it must have been wise indeed to have survived so many years. But now the venerable old man was stranded on the wrong side of the fence. I could see he wanted to get to higher ground. So I hefted him to the piney side of the fence, and thought no more of it.

In the afternoon Zora's barks told me that the turtle was back. He had dug under the fence and had returned to his former position, facing not only Zora, but our other Great Dane, Hilly. Not to mention

the invincible Mouse, the dachsy that runs the dog show at our house.

For the second time, I hoisted Grandfather Gopher over the fence, but, figuring he wanted to be elsewhere, I took him to the western corner of the property where the ground was higher and drier and well away from canines. Straightaway, Grandfather Gopher got going, lumbering off into the middle distance of pines and palmettos.

Within a few days, all sides of our fence were flooded with rainwater. Yet there was one place that was dry as a bone.

The same spot where Grandfather Gopher had wanted to be—the high spot, 12 feet above sea level. It's called the Ridge on Pine Island. Well, it was a Thoreauvian moment for me.

If we would take a good look at things before moving on in our inexorable human way, we might learn what it is like to be something

other than merely a human being. We might imagine ourselves to be a young worker bee, perhaps, or an old, retired turtle.

BEING IDLE MIGHT BE THE BEST way to discover Mother Nature's secrets. "Be still," my mother used to say on our nature walks when I was a kid. She was the one who taught me that redbirds, or cardinals, are quiet in the summertime. But if you find one who is not—who is talking up a storm, then be quiet and listen. The bird's message might be for you.

The other day a redbird warned me that a lightning storm was coming ... and soon. It flew, as they do, at odd low angles to the ground, as if propelled not by wings but by the wind itself. Swiftly here, there, everywhere—it flashed and skipped through the air in a pantomime of lost control. Only once did the bird speak, and then in a cheerless kind of cry, not its usual merry greeting, but

a bitter and ominous warning. So I knew something was up.

And so it was. That night we had a lightning storm to outdo all others in terms of white light and dark destruction. I was told by a weather station that 5,000 strikes hit our area within one hour. Zora went into the shower stall that night because she's certain it's the safest place in the house; leave it to a dog to know that truth.

In all the lightning mayhem, I wondered if my redbird messenger could make it through the maelstrom. Next morning—miraculously—he was boldly there singing his song—"All is fair, all is fair."

Symptom and sign, they say in Jamaica. That ability to read Mother Nature's news, and profit spiritually by the reading.

My late friend Mr. Fred Rogers of TV fame wrote of what he called "guided drift." The place where

we may be both guided and carried along into a world beyond the known. Trust and faith will get you there, he suggested.

Fred told me once that he enjoyed reading a story I'd written simply because I had wanted to write it. I asked Fred what he meant.

He said, "It was your wanting to write it that got it written. That is what I like and appreciate, the need to share with others."

I told Fred I couldn't have done it without the time I took to stare at clouds in the big Florida sky. Fred knew what I meant. He was a Florida cloud lover too.

So, of course, was Henry Thoreau. He and Fred Rogers were much alike, I think. They were men who took the time to see things, and to wonder about them. What would it be like, I wonder, if all of us took a moment, just once in the course of the day, to look at a page of Mother Nature's news. We might see things coming and going, the way Fred and Henry did. ♣