

“SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES”

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“Know when to roll ‘em, know when to fold ‘em,” but there are times when greater forces do that for us, i.e. “dearly beloved” vixens Frances, Jeanne and Wilma that cut a waft of destruction and wailing through Florida that blew away mine, as well as thousands of others’ past lives.

I formerly lived a pleasant life on Hutchinson Island (off Ft. Pierce) in a condominium village on the beach constructed in the 1970’s within the virgin woods of natural habitat. Although it was a “brick and mortar” development, it was relatively compact and left most of the area unspoiled.

By 2004, hurricanes began to visit Florida more frequently arriving with a fierce determination. It was the last three “ladies” that forced me from my island paradise to embark on a new lifestyle in the natural habitat of Central Florida’s last pristine wilderness.

As Frances deadheaded directly towards Hutchinson Island, I evacuated to Naples which appeared to be off the course of her projected path. I watched the Weather Channel with dismay as Frances unleashed here fury directly over Ft. Pierce and the Island. I had a sinking feeling that my condo was doomed but hoped the shutters would hold up against the battering winds on the beach front.

After several days, when residents were finally allowed back on the island, the black creeping mildew was already making its way up the walls and through the wall paper in my condo. It was dangerous to be in the unit and breathe the deadly spores, but I threw a sleeping bag down on the patio, ready to camp out in the condo and deal with the past 20 years of “excess baggage.”

Besides the mold, I thought my life somehow had been spared viewing the catastrophic destruction of other condos with blown off roofs; it was too quick to make that assumption. When I first opened the shutters and saw the assault on the Village, I felt my place had survived well, until something began smattering down upon my shoulders. Moving quickly out of the way, I shockingly watched the living room and bathroom ceilings collapse. I called Disaster One, the company the condo association hired for clean-up, and a crew arrived with hard hats for us all. We quickly devised a plan to hurriedly move furniture that was being inundated by falling, wet, mildewed drywall to try and save something.

While we were dealing with this disaster, the few of us left in the building heard, by word-of-mouth (as we had no electricity), that we had to evacuate again as another hurricane, “Jeanne,” was poised to strike Hutchinson Island along the same path as Frances. Practically begging the one and only mover I could find in a 200 mile radius, “Anywhere, Anytime” in Sebring run by a very kind girl named Tracy, she picked me up from a Ft. Pierce gas station where my van quit waiting in line for gas and took me back to the Island to load up my water damaged and mildewed furniture for storage. As they

packed up what was left of the furnishings that I had not already thrown off the balcony, I splashed everything with Murphy's Oil running against the few hours we had left to be off the island. The insurance adjuster arrived swiftly after many frantic calls, and was busy scribbling down his assessment as everything was collapsing around him; however, he, too, was worried as he had no place to ride out his first hurricane. I recommended that he try to get a room at the Clewiston Inn at the bottom of Lake Okeechobee.

With the impending hurricane already whipping up wind and waves, I planned to evacuate to a hotel in Port St. Lucie, where I had booked a reservation in anticipation of more insurance adjusters block booking local hotels. As I prepared to leave, I learned that two older ladies down the hall still had found no place to go. I altered my plans, gave them my hotel room, and left for my sister's in Miami. As I was running down the stairs, I was startled by a UPS man running towards me with his last delivery before he escaped the island. He carried a small brown box addressed to me. Leaning against the staircase as the first squalls of Jeanne swirled around me, I hurriedly ripped open the package. Wrapped in sheaths of packing paper was the arrival of my first published book: *Where the Swallowtail Kite Soars: The Legacies of Glades County, Florida and the Vanishing Wilderness*.

After Jeanne cleared and I could drive back to the hotel in St. Lucie West, I discovered that it too, had been destroyed. Officials allowed those of with reservations to stay only long enough to retrieve what was left of our possessions. I could not find out from

anyone what happened to the two ladies as everyone was forced to leave the structurally unsafe hotel.

Back at Hutchinson Island, a week droned on before residents were permitted to return to their “homes.” Exhausted Ft. Pierce police and later the military had barricaded the bridge to the island until debris, sand and electric lines could be cleared enough for passage. Finally, after days of waiting, my son (from San Francisco) and I drove through the sand dunes lining A1A and made it to the condo. When we reached the third floor and pushed open the door, I stood in the middle of the rest of the rubble of my familiar surroundings, now somewhere scattered into the wind or stored in mildew. In the meantime, some indifferent soul had come by and painted a gaudy, giant yellow “X” on my front door, designating the condo: “Condemned!” My former life that seemed so “important,” was now twenty years of memories stored in boxes far away, and the rest in memoriam.

After months of moving back and forth across the state, I returned to the tiny place I had always come to as a refuge from the “fast lane” of city life: My 1952 Spartan trailer in Palmdale on the lush western shoulder of Lake Okeechobee. This was the place, where over the years, I had gotten to know a “free-spirited” type of people and whom I had written about in my book. Nestled within the native scrub, frequently visited by multi-colored buntings, a soaring Everglades kite, and butterflies, I sat for hours at night beneath a blanket of glistening stars patching together my life.

However, as I adapted to what I felt was the “wilderness,” some lingering words of a late pioneer Okeechobee fisherman, Ray Donald Thielen, (who was in my book) kept churning in my mind: “Would do, could do, made do.” I adopted these words as a basis for survival and starting over on the cusp of the 20th and 21st Century living in Palmdale. The former “luxuries” that I perhaps had taken for granted on the Island, began to slip into the background as “survival” took precedence. I returned to Nature, first, my own then the Land.

For the next year, I took the “road less traveled,” tossing around some thoughts I remembered reading about over the last few years, but was not sure what they meant: Living a “sustainable lifestyle.”

As a Native Miami “city girl,” I became more familiar with those words living in Palmdale as they came to mean not only, “would do, could do and made do,” but “adapting well” to whatever circumstances life presents. In Palmdale, it meant learning how to live in harmony with the natural world, growing food and surviving “well” without all the so-called “creature comforts.” It meant accepting termites, walking on uneven plywood boards quickly thrown over rotting floors, reluctantly welcoming a new Native Florida black and white spotted skunk as a neighbor who took up residence underneath the trailer, enduring electrical and pump outages, putting up scrap metal over a leaking roof, caulking windows, strapping down the trailer and adding a screened patio to live more outdoors than in. It meant adapting “well” to practical circumstances and learning that living with “less” is “more.”

The first step in initiating my “sustainable lifestyle” was attempting to grow my own healthy vegetables. I planted an organic garden in pots: tomatoes, bell peppers and onions. I planted flowers to attract more butterflies, threw out some grass seeds, planted two cabbage palms, a Tamarind and Jamaican dogwood (donated by my sister) to add to my yard. Then, I learned to patiently “wait.”

As I nurtured the garden, the grass became lush. I found a “no motor” push lawnmower to cut the new grass and got fish emulsion fertilizer to feed my organic garden. I washed most of my clothes by hand and hung them out to dry. I found a broom to be more efficient than vacuuming in small spaces. I hung curtains, laid down the cowhide rugs I saved, and pasted the trailer together with air conditioning tape and super glue. It became cozier and somewhat sounder. I lit the candles (hoping my “matchbox” trailer would not catch a spark and go up in flames), sat back and pondered the next phase.

Then, later, Wilma came to Palmdale. I evacuated again, bundled up my Frances/Jeanne retrievals in plastic bags, threw what I could into my van thinking that the trailer would surely be blown away this time, hoping I could still find the bags of work clothes, shoes and other staples somewhere when I returned. I put the little garden-in-pots underneath the sawhorse bed on the patio, hoped they would somehow survive, and left again for Miami.

Miami was badly hit by Wilma and all the way up Highway 27 to Palmdale, but I ventured back to the trailer. I pulled into my shell driveway and discovered that the little “silver bullet” remained in tack, although water logged and mildewing inside, at least it was still there. But, I knew I had to move again.

I looked for the “garden” under the sawhorse bed and found one little brave plant that had lost its identity during the storm, stretching a fragile sprout into the sunlight. It was my joy!

Preparing to move again, I packed up my belongings, cupped the little survivor into a protective spot in the van along with some ragged plants and vowed to give them all a roomy new home in the white sugar sand of the paleo-islands along the Lake Wales Ridge in Sebring.

After two months of nurturing the little sprout, dark green leaves began to spread in its new flower bed, developing a tiny pod beneath its protective shield. Each day I looked to see if the little plant was still alive and what it was sculpturing. Then, it appeared. From a small and fragile bulbous bloom grew a solid and big, bell pepper. Not knowing when to pick it, to appreciate its full ripeness, I waited until I could not any longer. I tenderly removed the little pepper to prepare it in a special dish of other organic vegetables I ordered on the internet from Diamond Organics in California, until I could grow my own. It was through the gift of this little pepper, surviving the storms, and adaptation to the

Glades County wilderness that I begin a journey on the long road ahead learning how to live a “sustainable lifestyle.”

The significance of a “sustainable lifestyle” for this Native Miami city girl, took on its own definition over this past year. It meant selectively putting back into my life what I consciously hope to sustain as part of a healthy lifestyle, more harmonious with my own Nature and the natural habitat. It is a renewal, the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning a new way of life. For others like myself, who desire to venture along this path into a new understanding about life, and to those pioneers who have “hoed this road” already for a long time, it is a life worth pursuing and maintaining. Like the pioneer “cow hunters” who learned by trial and error how to nurture cattle and cultivate thousands of acres of virgin land, there are new pioneers who want to learn similar lessons on whatever parcel of land available, to renew the spirit and live a “sustainable lifestyle” in this rapidly changing 21st Century.

The next challenge: Xeriscaping: Replanting Native scrub.

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