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The Endangered

Rick Mabrey

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THE ENDANGERED

Rick Mabrey

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

2007

ABSTRACT

This writing project is a culmination of essays based on my personal experiences as an educator, and an environmentalist. The work illustrates a mindset of abuse and neglect that harms nature, and mistreats children. It offers hope through those who will nurture and not turn their back on the problems of society.

The endangered list no longer singles out animals in the wild. It now includes what is left of the open land, the healthy waterways, and many of the kids I teach.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men."

Recognizing the commonality between how nature and children are treated becomes necessary to instill change. When society is allowed an open season on wildlife and the natural settings, it ultimately seeks the children for its next victims.

Signs of improvement are showing up all around us. Acknowledging what works is a necessity in the process of changing things.

As a teacher and an environmentalist, I am concerned with the kind of mindset that has evolved in society, where nature and children have become equally expendable. Wealth and status seem to be more important than preservation, and individualism became a higher priority than making sure our kids are protected.

I write to connect the problems that come with overlooking any forms of life that are being mistreated. There is a movement for positive change, and it offers the hope I still have for the future.

If society is unwilling to get on board, it will endanger us all.

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The Endangered

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INTRODUCTION

They used to be sources of comfort. My passions were found in teaching children, and in enjoying all the splendors nature had to offer. But things began to change.

My work and play became different over time. They were leaving me with unsettled feelings..

I found it hard to forget that a student had to miss school because her mother died suddenly in prison. I went to clear my head of the tragedy by taking a walk in the woods behind my house. The jaunt seemed to spook a coyote down toward the creek, but her agitation turned out to be more for her missing pups. A bulldozer's roar in the backdrop explained it all, as it turned her den into rubble.

I am dedicated to protecting children and nature, but the priorities of society have taken their toll. Shortsightedness has become another form of neglect in our culture. Forests have turned into pavement, and kids are more numb than ever before. The two worlds most sacred to me were under attack.

The teacher and the environmentalist in me began a quest to regain old hope. I am writing to bring it out again, and to inspire the change that needs to come.

As a young boy, I looked through the eyes of a wild dog for the meaning of morality. My concept of freedom came by imagining an escape in a makeshift raft on the Mississippi River. I taught ducklings to swim by picturing the process, and this

lesson in the importance of imprinted behavior revolutionized my own concept of how children should be raised.

It all came by reading one page at a time. Robert Frost and Ralph Waldo Emerson were capped off by St. Francis of Assisi's writings. Perusing *National Geographic* evolved into the process of devouring all of the *Missouri Conservationist* articles possible. I learned that saving the world would have to come from many sources.

Jack London's stories captured me as a young boy. He shared the same love that I had for wildlife, and had equal appreciation for the importance of open land. I got close to nature by running around on my family's farmland in the rural countryside of southeast Missouri. At the same time, *Call of the Wild*, and *White Fang*, were stories that added to the love I had for the wildness of the outdoors.

Mark Twain taught me that it was right to stand up against the wrongs of society. Being somewhat of a rebellious kid, it felt good to read about his characters. *Huckleberry Finn* illustrated that the innocent were often the ones most victimized in the world, and defending them was the noble thing to do.

Konrad Lorenz made me feel more normal for placing children and nature on the same level. I never understood how animals were allowed to suffer from so many horrible practices by people, and always thought they should have the same place as the ones dependent on them for food. *King Solomon's Ring* stressed the importance of offering dignity to all living things, and I have never forgotten the message.

As early as I can remember, I have always hated bulldozers. Their presence usually would mean that a forest would soon vanish, or another ecosystem would disappear. I wanted all of the development to stop, but could only watch the destruction in helpless dismay.

Weekend drives to my grandpa's farm would mean getting to romp through the woods, or hike stream beds to the point I would be exhausted. There was nothing better for me than getting to spend time in the country.

I began noticing more and more excavation along the highways as time went on. Every trip would have pavement replacing the scenery I loved, and hillsides swept away by development. It felt the same as a death in the family, and if it didn't stop soon, there would be nothing left.

My concerns grew over time. It got to a point where I began grabbing up all the surveyor stakes I would see on open land. It was my way of taking a stand against another greedy developer who planned on raping more of the land. The endeavor was fruitless, but it was all a young boy could come up with at the time.

The most excruciating part of wildlife disappearing was that no one seemed to care about it. Adults were too caught up with making their livings, and society was going through a phase where self absorption was more of the norm. My family was the exception.

My grandpa lived for the outdoors, and showed me the meaning of being at one with the land. From slopping hogs, to pulling cattails from the pond, he taught me the values of tending the land.

My grandma was the philosopher of the family, and illustrated a love for nature in her words. She cooked on a barge that went up and down the Mississippi River, and had endless tales of wildlife seen on the banks. Her stories ultimately found their way into a country newspaper known as *The Banner Press*. It printed her tales of the many turkey and deer she would see along the way, while vast fields of wildflowers provided many of the backdrops. I devoured every article she wrote..

My dad showed me the meaning of preservation. If we conserved the things we valued, it would mean having them for generations to come. He and I hiked open country until my legs ached, but it was a small price to pay for learning how to see the beauty in it all.

I got my mom's tenacity, but she also showed me how important it was to love and help others. She taught me the concept of fighting for people who can't fight for themselves. I understood the importance of defending innocent animals, but never thought that it would mean protecting children.

A love of nature evolved, and followed me into my college years. I attended the University of Missouri-Columbia, and intended to be a conservationist, but ultimately knew that my background was more suited for teaching.

From biology, to genetics, I took every form of science I could. After four years, I received my teaching degree, but added two more years of journalism before I was ready to go to work.

Armed with knowledge, and enough ability to write and teach, I went to work. I took the desire I had for protecting the environment, and transformed it into a lifetime

philosophy for changing the world. It became comforting to know there were many voices to help along the way.

After a couple of years of teaching, something started bothering me. It wasn't people disregarding nature so much anymore, as it was their same line of thinking that bothered me. It was cropping up in the way people were treating their children. The same mindset that allowed the environment to deteriorate had allowed old forms of abuse and neglect to resurface. But it was spreading like a cancer to the lives of children.

Instead of freeing animals from traps, I became busy trying to teach kids how to rise above their horrible conditions. Many of them were coming to me without the simple skills of eating in public, or dressing properly. They were walking into the classroom with mysterious bruises, and bloodshot eyes, but sometimes didn't come to school at all. Nobody seemed to be watching the children.

I went back to my roots for answers, and dipped into the knowledge I attained through my family. I also went to the thoughts of some of the great writers of the past. But what helped me the most was when I got back to nature. It allowed me to clear my head of all the things that didn't make sense in my classroom, and the calming allowed me to be more effective there.

Joni Mitchell sang, "They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot." It held as a mantra throughout my childhood. I was old enough to understand that once a forest was replaced by something as permanent as a strip mall, it would never be restored, or

replaced.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men." His philosophy reflected the way I still look at the various forms of wildlife.

Albert Einstein stated, "Our task must be to free ourselves...by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty." I have understood his words, and I am freeing children when I see them progressing in the classroom.

"The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself," said Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He held my same concern for the devastating practices behind greed. Developers have wiped away many of the natural settings, and have never understood the meaning of replenishing what they take away. It seems to also apply with how progress overlooks children of poverty..

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages...in the woods we return to reason and faith," I keep his words in mind to reassure myself that things will get better.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is

deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen." I am as confused as Thoreau every time I hear another bulldozer over the horizon.

I looked out over the woods behind my house one day, and watched a doe making sure her fawns were acting in ways not to be seen by predators. While kayaking on another day, I noticed how a mother duck protected her ducklings by faking an injury just as a distraction. Every time I walk through the door, my dogs show me the importance of unconditional love. They were the teaching ways of nature, and the ones I learned to use.

With it all in mind, I still manage to get children through to the next level. I have a special fondness for the tougher cases, and always keep in mind that kids were never born to be bad. If anything, they are more likely to have had protectors who have fallen down on the job.

A mindset that used to devour the landscapes and animal life, is now threatening to devour the children I teach. They need to be saved before the parking lots of life get the chance to pave them over.

Lessons To Replant

...Lesson #1: Understand Resilience

As clear as if it were yesterday, I remember being five years old. I made “bucking broncos” from saplings with my dad’s guidance. He taught me to pick the trees that were small enough to bend over, but not to choose ones so small that they would break.

My dad would hold them down for me to sit on, and I would bounce up and down from their elasticity. He allowed me to ride them for as long as they had good spring. At a certain point, the trees would droop over from the stress we caused, and it worried me. But my father assured that if they were left alone, the little trees would grow upright, and strong again.

Land developers, and other profiteers, would be less likely to destroy as much, if they would try to think back to when they were children. It would remind them how great those trees used to be.

...Lesson #2: Find Love

Imagine taking your six-year old to the place he loves dearly, and watching him turn into a crazed animal every time. You find that he loves it so much that upon your arrival he transforms into something close to a kid who is “not quite right.”

Your child behaves as if he’s trapped while waiting in the car, but is willing to gnaw through the vinyl insides of the door when you don’t release him quickly enough. Ponder the thought of watching him rip across the open farmland, you call “the

country,” not knowing if any forms of life will be safe when he gets done. If you can put yourself there, you were able to understand what my dad went through with every trip to the family farm—I was the little animal.

For us, the country was a remote area in southeast Missouri, where my dad, Harold, grew up. He was part of the large Mabrey clan in those parts.

My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins lived there, while the rest of us lived predominantly in the St. Louis area. We would go there for visits throughout my childhood to get away from the noise, and fast-paced city life.

Forests, open fields, and sweet, clean air were the parts I loved most about childhood. Looking back allows me to understand the passions I have today, and where it all started. There were many lessons learned from the country that are still helping today.

...Lesson #3: Show Respect

Watching my uncles laughing and using shovels to attack a poor mole changed the way I looked at things when I was about six. It was too much to watch in the back of my grandparent’s house one day. The spectacle took place on one of our weekend visits.

I walked out back to see and hear the male adults in my family chasing a scared, squealing mole around, then hacking it to pieces. My uncles had dug the poor animal from its burrow.

It didn’t seem right, and filled me with a shame and disgust I had never known

before. People shouldn't be capable of that sort of thing, especially family members.

My dad wasn't out there, and was never one to disrespect nature.

If there was something amusing about brutality, I didn't get it. I was at an influential age, but even I knew to be above that type of behavior.

Hearing any story on abuse evokes my shame. I felt it at seven years old with my uncles, and feel it now when people hurt kids, and other forms of life.

It became one of my goals to slip decency and respect into each teaching lesson. My students may become better stewards in the future, than those of my generation. It would be a little bit of hope, because I never could get that mole out of my head.

...Lesson #4: Prioritize Family

I came from a solid family background, but still managed to screw up on more than one occasion. As a kid, there were always temptations, but I could always count on my mom, or dad, to give their input when I messed up. .

Passing on values to children seem less important today than when I was a kid. The fast pace, high divorce rate, and general quest to make a buck seem more important than raising kids. It was hard enough to grow back then, but even harder now for children begging for the loving attention of their families.

Television programs have become one of the many secondary parents to neglected kids, and have skewed the separation between right and wrong. I paid the price for listening to the wrong influences, but a Christmas tree became pivotal to understanding family values.

A young kid growing up in the sixties could find inspiration in two ways around Christmas time. Of course there was always the family, but they didn't have the inside track on everything. I could always count on my favorite TV programs to give me inspiration, whether it was positive, or not.

Stronger than any dancing sugar plums, images of "Hoss" and "Little Joe" tramping through the deep snow of the Ponderosa brought the holidays alive. At that time, Bonanza was the most popular western on the air, and I especially loved that it was geared around the great outdoors. I could always count on Bonanza to show a Christmas special around the third week in December.

Little Joe would always have a gun on his side, and a wild goose slung over his shoulder for Christmas dinner. His older brother, Hoss, was the one to carry the sharp axe in one hand, and dragging a freshly cut fir tree in the other. The "cool" images could have been partly responsible for driving me to madness one particular Christmas.

We all went down as a family to my grandparents' farm for the holidays, and I planned on being the same provider of an old-fashioned Christmas that my TV heroes had been.

There were evergreen trees everywhere, so what would it hurt to cut just one of them down? The philosophy on the Ponderosa was that the land provides what is needed. Who would have known it was meant to include only "your" land? That farmer up the road wouldn't know the difference with losing just one of those big Scotch Pines, despite the fact that it was in his well-constructed wind break.

So, who could have known what all the hoopla was about when he proudly

pulled that twenty-foot pine into his grandpa's front yard? The boy was waiting for hugs in showing such love for the holidays, but you would have thought someone drove a stake into his dad's chest to see him clutching himself and cursing. His grandpa's eyes had a look in them that would have only meant getting a switch down in earlier years.

Years later, the story still gets told by my family, but I wish it could be told without their embellishment. My version would tell how harmful it is when surrogates raise children. TV, computers, and friends, are poor substitutes for family..

The story would still include Little Joe, and Hoss, but would focus more on a dumb-assed kid that thought he lived on the Ponderosa.

Leave the lessons on values to the real-life characters.

...Lesson # 5: Show Compassion

I was brought up to understand that hunting was a necessary part conservation. As long as someone ate what was killed, it was okay.

My dad was a good hunter and a great shot, so he taught me to be pretty decent at both. There was only one catch—I couldn't stand killing animals.

I started hunting by age five and didn't realize how bad I hated it until into my adolescence years. It was always difficult watching my dad skinning squirrels. We would bring them into my grandparent's backyard with other wild game, and butcher the meat.

I always noticed a strange, sweet smell to the squirrels as we carried them by

their tails. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor creatures, and noticed the similarities with our pet gerbils, and guinea pigs. Whether I'd admit it, or not at the time, I had a soft spot for animals, but continued to hunt until age thirteen.

I went hunting on my own one day, and wanted to impress my relatives. I would understand the meaning of senselessness before the day was over.

I wanted to show them how much game a "city boy" could bring in one hunt. I had the shotgun instead of the usual kid-like single-shot rifle, making me feel more like a great white hunter that day. I shot two squirrels, and was greedily drawing a bead on my third.

I walked toward my prey, but it was too busy frolicking high in the tree to notice. I took quick aim, and pulled the trigger.

"Damned if I didn't get him," I thought, but I noticed the squirrel didn't make it completely to the ground.

Some strange part of its nervous system allowed the small animal to catch itself by one paw, and cling to a branch more than twenty feet up. It held itself up there, and shook involuntarily, but wouldn't drop.

My heart raced. I panicked when it seemed impossible to put it out of its misery from up there. In a rush, I went closer, and got just up under the half-dead rodent. I took a second shot.

Bam! It began raining squirrel parts. It spattered blood all over me, before I realized what happened. There was no time to get out of the way. I blew the animal completely apart—every bit of it.

Stupidity played a dual role with naivety. I lacked the concept of “too much fire power” in a short distance, but should have known better. Sad and disgusted, I felt bad enough from that point on to never hunt again.

Since then, I’ve grown to love catch-and-release fishing. It satisfies the primal urges, without taking a life.

Now, I find it hard to kill even the smallest of bugs in the house, and try to teach my students the same concept for insects that find their way into the classroom. Promoting life has become the only way to rid my senses of that dead-squirrel smell.

...Lesson # 6: Pass On What You Learn

My grandpa, otherwise known to the family as Daddy Lee, passed away when I was seventeen. It took the fun out of going to the country farm, but it didn’t take the woods and the wildlife away from me. Along with my dad, Grandpa had a great appreciation for the outdoors, and instilled it in me before he died.

Grandma passed away some years later. She was a great story teller, and a pretty good writer. Many of the tales found their way into the country newspaper in her “neck of the woods.” They told of all the wildlife and wonders seen along the Mississippi River as a barge cook.

There was always a good story to tell me during visits, or I would read them in letters, and features that made it to the paper. From hills covered in wildflowers, to fawns at the edge of the woods, Grandma painted a love for nature into her words.

They helped plant the seed in me to become an educator, and a writer.

Experience the beauty of the outdoors, and then pass it on.

The legacy continues.

Gift Of The Wild

It always hurt to see animals in distress. Whether it was the malnourished look of a stray dog, or an animal crippled by a motorist, I always found it troubling to see their pain. I learned to show compassion equally to children when I helped one particular animal, but this one was wearing a dirty t-shirt, and tattered blue jeans.

I made my way into teaching science because of my interest in preserving natural settings, and protecting wildlife. It was easier to feel sympathy for a wild animal's struggle, than to feel sorry for people. They are supposed to be the thinking animal, and should get themselves out of trouble. It was my plan to become a conservation agent, but my science courses were better suited for an education degree.

While attempting to find a meaningful career, I realized the money was running out to continue the schooling it would take. My first teaching job was just a way to pay the bills. I had no other choices, and it forced me to try my hand at teaching. It only took one day on the job to know I was needed there.

Wham! Losing his death grip the on the water fountain, the scruffy kid reminded me of a kitten getting pulled away from a favorite ball of yarn.

"Get him," one of the little girls said. She was part of the pack that was after him.

One of his first-grade classmates held him upside down, pulling forcibly on his legs to free the hold. The grade school version for a vigilante squad was busy dumping him headfirst to the floor, and showing no tolerance for the boy's attempt at butting in line.

Without missing a beat, he bounced up from the floor. He smacked two or three of his adversaries in mid flight. Whipping away blindly from the gathering, with me in the way, the human whirlwind found the space between my shins and rib cage to run into. Behavior modification techniques from college proved futile, as I found myself slumped over, and knocked out of breath. I quickly came up with the nickname of Chance for him, and he was already down the hallway to his first grade classroom before I could utter a word.

“What kind of monster is this kid?” I asked, meeting his teacher outside the classroom door.

I followed in the little boy’s direction to report the horrible behavior, but looked over to where he sat. Surprisingly, the innocent face of a cherub looked up, as if he wasn’t the hallway’s instigator. What appeared a Tazmanian Devil a few seconds before was now a quiet child. The teacher briefed me on the kid’s past exploits and told of a horrid home life.

“He doesn’t have a prayer,” she responded. It seemed laborious to give the details on Chance, as if going over it again, and again, was laborious. She had given up.

His mom and dad hauled their five kids from California in the back of a van to live in Jamestown, Missouri, where I decided to teach. Neither of his parents worked, and “squalor” would be the kind way of describing the living conditions they provided. The brothers and sisters were known to wear the same tattered overalls and dirty t-shirts to school. An excessive amount of bruising could be seen, especially on Chance,

usually explained as the parents getting a little "carried away" late night. They lived too far out for social workers to be concerned. Besides, in Jamestown's population, one-hundred and seventeen, you mind your own business.

The oldest child was especially a handful. Chance's big brother, Buck, had long, straggly hair and may have been more dirty and unkempt than the rest of them. Self-inscribed on each knuckle were permanent letters carved by an ink pen. On the right hand, the letters of the "F" word were boldly spelled out. The same joints on the left hand finished the message with "Y-O-U." Needless to say, Buck was no role model.

Chance had a reputation ranging from chicken thief to arsonist, but the worst thing I saw, beyond the first day of school, was the way everyone treated him. Nobody, not even the teachers, paid attention to him until he did something bad.

Small for his age and excessively skinny, the freckle-faced kid was part of a transient family that headed east out of California. His family bounced from place to place, but ultimately settled in Mid Missouri. Chance's name stuck with me because I always thought of the word, "neverhadda," coming before it.

He was three feet of dirt-covered boy, and would always wear the same faded overalls. The oversized hand-me-downs were so droopy that he would stumble on the pant legs.

His appearance spoke volumes for how he lived. An oversized bowl was the probable guide for the haircut responsible for his disheveled appearance. The mop-like style hid his eyes, but you could see the mischievous sparkle coming through the

strands.

Chance was little for his age, but could always get himself into big trouble. A commotion at school would almost always involve him, or his siblings. Jamestown, Missouri's was a quiet little town. It had the kind of setting where a rambunctious boy stood out, and especially a kid from the wrong side of the tracks.

I caught him shoving fellow students, and attempting to cut the line to get a drink. He, and another student, were jostling and pushing their way around the only working drinking fountain in the run-down school. He was pushed so hard up against the drinking fountain that the handle's impression became like a tattoo in the middle of Chance's back. It was small price to pay for such a trouble maker.

As a secondary science teacher in a school that housed kindergarten through twelfth graders, I didn't have the little monster to deal with in my classroom, but teachers were instructed not to let the "bad seeds" mess with the "good, farm kids." I had to break up Chance's fights because it was the right thing to do, and necessary to keep my job.

Chance's brother, Buck, was called "California boy" by the kids at school because he sported an extremely long head of hair, as well as the fist tattoos. Buck didn't live up to the farm community's standards, nor any other community for that matter. He, and his other siblings, contributed to the chaos that trapped little Chance.

The boy's future was about as bright as a flickering lamp in a prison cell. Incarceration seemed better to me than the daily beatings he received at home.

One cold, December morning I pulled up to school and watched the kids arriving to start one of the last days before Christmas break. I got out of my car and headed toward

the building, when I saw a little girl come down the steps of the bus flailing and ranting.

“Cut it out!” she yelled.

“I didn’t push anybody!” shrieked Chance. The words came from his lips just in time to hear a big whap.

The girl Chance harassed was toting a clarinet in her gray Bundy case. She turned the instrument’s vinyl container into a whirling weapon of death. Smacking noises lead to something that sounded like broken glass. Chance’s body took most of the blows, but he couldn’t save what he tried to protect under his jacket. Like the decency hiding inside the boy, Chance made the mistake of thinking his armpit was a good place to hide his fragile gift. It was a hand-made Christmas ornament for his first-grade teacher.

Pieces of the shattered ornament landed on the pavement around the boy. Chance could only look down and whimper, as he began picking up the pieces. He tried to recover them all, as if hoping to make the gift whole again. Seeing how distraught he was, I walked over to Chance and said, “I want you to know that you’re a great kid for making that ornament for your teacher. You know that shoving Judy out of the bus was wrong, but the good intentions you had with your Christmas gift means you’re a good boy.”

I felt like I was able to give Chance a lesson on manners while appreciating his kindness. Chance said sniffing and crying, “I’m gonna kill her!”

I said, “If you stay away from killing Judy and be the best boy you can be today, then I’ll bring you one of my favorite ornaments to give to your teacher. How does that sound?”

He said something like "okay" and snuffed the wetness up and inside his nostrils, while shoving his way up the school's steps and inside.

The next day I presented him with a fairly expensive, store-bought ornament. He took it graciously and thankfully. I had hope for the rest of his day.

Later, I spoke to the teacher Chance was so fond of and realized she was the kind, gentle person he had never known, thanks to his lousy upbringing.

At home, or whatever you would have called his non-nurturing hell, he was rarely taken care of by the sub-humans he was born to. He was affectionately referred to as their "little burden."

With this environment, it was no wonder he wanted to give my replacement gift to the only adult who had shown him kindness.

I said, "Broke it? How?" His favorite teacher was quite embarrassed when she had to explain that he had even broken this second attempt at an ornament while scuffling into the class' Christmas tree. It seemed only fitting that the only thing that crashed to the ground was, of course, was his.

I guess he may have learned a lesson from that experience, and may have even learned to be thankful, and a bit more gentle. I was a little disappointed, but realized kindness was a foreign concept in Chance's world. Maybe a little lesson on character would sink in down the road.

I used to think that if you were born to crap, you would remain in it. It was easy to be witty, but I was never aware of how bad some kids had it in life.

Unlike the head of his household, Chance wasn't the one to lose every job he had

ever had. He wasn't the one who was drinking himself sick every night like the adults in his world. He wasn't born to be neglected. Christ! He was just a little kid who wanted to be loved, and wanted to be given love, like any other kid.

He didn't pop out of the womb bad! He had nothing to do with the garbage strewn in his path, and blocking his way.

He reminded me that beautiful and amazing things can come from soil that was tended. Chance gave me the hope that a kid from the poorest conditions can rise above it all.

My education began the first day I taught. It was twenty years ago that I first ran into him, but I still think of the little boy with the scruffy demeanor. He was the animal in distress, but I remember that I didn't give up on him.

I hope that no one gives up on a child, and that no book is judged by its cover. The one that appears most tattered may be the one with the most to offer...if it is given a chance.

The Rule Of Nature

“Dammit, they're drownin' a river; they're drownin' a river, man, Lewis said.

In 1972, *Deliverance* painted a prophetic portrayal of the consequences that come for those that push the envelope. Thinking those on top of the food would always win, we attempted to beat nature at its own game.

The rain was blinding. Fighting it from my eyes, I saw Dave drop over the spillway, with me in tow. In a matter of milliseconds, we were fighting for our lives.

Looking back, we could have tried a little more with planning the excursion, but there was no time. Caught up in the excitement, we may have underestimated what we thought was just a glorified storm ditch.

It had come to the point where Dave and I were willing to take what we could get for adventures. Strip malls and condominiums had taken over most of the convenient places for paddling our little boat, making it necessary to jump onto a suburban creek in horrible weather—just to have a bit of whitewater fun. Take into consideration there was a torrential rain, me in hip waders, and a couple of fools in their twenties. It had all the potential of a fiasco.

My dad warned us not to go. I finally offered him my prized, new amplifier if anything happened to his polyethylene craft. This shouldn't have been the biggest concern for two guys bent on conquering the elements. We couldn't have known the price we were about to pay.

Consequences never occurred to me growing up. After all, I was going to be a stunt man. I'd climb a ladder, one rung at a time, and dive on to the hard ground in a

well-choreographed belly flop. The game would end when I reached the height that would knock my breath out. I was gutsy, but not long on brains.

Through my college years, hockey became such a passion that I couldn't wait for the lakes to freeze. The chance with skating on thin ice meant shooting the puck around for an entire day. I was always the first one to test the ice—the last one thinking of falling through. It took three icy plunges in frigid waters before I ever got a clue it was dangerous.

Equally clueless was my brother-in-law, Dave. We met in college and realized we both loved a good challenge...any kind of challenge.

From playing handball in snow and sleet storms, to free-climbing high cliffs barefoot. We tried it all. His marriage to my sister didn't slow us down a bit. Dares became challenges, and the challenges could be as simple as tossing a rope swing over a tree branch.

I had nose surgery when I was twenty six. The pain was so excruciating that I thought pieces of my brain were coming out my nose when they removed the gauze. The doctor told me to guard the area for about three weeks after taking the stitches out.

Dave came over for the usual Sunday get-together, and wanted to put a rope swing in a tree behind my mom and dad's house. I was still feeling a bit woozy, but I was going stir crazy in recovery. Besides, he issued a challenge on who'd hit the mark first, and I went for it.

It wouldn't have been that risky, but we took an old hammer head, tied fishing line to it, and tied that contraption to a heavier rope. It was necessary to use a "David

and Goliath" approach, slinging it over a limb.

First, he tried his shot at it. It wasn't even close to the mark. My turn then, with about the same results. I grabbed the line for one more throw. I put so much centripetal force into the makeshift sling that it started humming. I tossed the weighted end up, released it, and I mean it went "straight" up. No angle, no arc. The flying metal end reached its stalling point in the sky, and began coming down toward the spot we were standing.

Whether it was my recovery or the pain medication, my senses had me spin quickly away to escape the injury it was sure to bring. So did Dave. He ran one way, I ran the other.

Smack! I ran right into the tree on my immediate left. It was the element of the challenge I had forgotten about. It was a Scotch pine that knocked the crap out of me, not the projectile I'd thrown.

Moaning and bleeding from my reopened nostrils, Dave could only laugh. It set me back an additional two weeks for more recovery.

Flashbacks of past adventures were impossible now. The swirling pothole was like a whirlpool. It sucked Dave down, then me. We were more than on the creek, now we were under it!

Kicking, I couldn't escape the turbulence. It wasn't until those waders started filling up with creek water. They took me straight to the bottom. The same water that engulfed me over spillway allowed the weight needed to walk on the creek's floor. Thanks to those ridiculous hip waders, I finally made it to the shallows.

I came to my senses clinging to a boulder, and looked downriver for Dave. I noticed the boat spinning like a waterwheel, and stuck in the falls. It was in the same place we went down. Pieces of polyethylene were getting chunked off with every tumble, and I could only think of my amp going into my dad's hands.

Seconds felt like hours, but I heard my brother-in-law scream my name in the distance, as I saw him wading upriver toward me. The yelling became music to my ears because we both had made it.

Bobby asked, "Yeah, we beat it, didn't we? Did we beat that?"

After many years, we look back at the craziness, and understand the scheme of nature. We know how it wins in the end.

I look at society wanting to "beat it," like Dave and I, and am now facing the consequences that get in the way of gain. Developers are raping the land for the sake of progress and profit, while no one questions what the future will hold for such practices. Repercussions are on the backburner.

Just as I begin thinking it will lead to the world's destruction, I am reminded of one law of nature. For every force, there is an "equal and opposite" force. It acts as a balance to perpetuate life, and is set in place for certain populations to not take more than they should.

We were only trying to grab thrills from a creek, but I remember what happened to New Orleans, when Hurricane Katrina decided the fate of an overdeveloped coastline. I understand why the AIDS epidemic continues to devastate poorly managed

portions of the world, and especially where they overpopulate. Wars, starvation, and diseases are natural limiting factors for those that are out of control.

Survival of the fittest will come down to those that make the best choices. There is a part of society that push the rest of us toward the deep end with their practices and I hope they can be stopped. Otherwise, there will come a day when we are all in over our heads.

"You don't beat it. You don't beat this river," Lewis responded.

A Calling

When everything I stand for seems to be under attack, I want to retaliate. Nothing subtle has been ample protection for the environment so far, but I also know that violence is not the solution. But there is something cathartic to letting it all play out in a dream.

My arms were chiseled and brown from all the outdoor excursions in my kayak. The river was once a source of solace, and floating was one of my favorite pastimes, but recent practices were causing much of it to disappear before my eyes.

Paddling with a new sense of desperation, a low roar in the distance spoke to me. It was trying to get me to defend the environmental wrongs of society. Face it head on, or bail out...fight or flight? It was coaxing me in.

While others were riding their bikes, or mindlessly playing, I was busy worrying. Atypical for a young boy, it more than sickened me to see the slaughtering of baby seals, or the wilderness dwindling away. Any man-made tragedy could do it. My world was killing itself, and it needed to stop.

My dad could only placate my concerns in the many drives to our farm in southeast Missouri. I announced that I wanted to blow up every bulldozer we passed on the way. Developers were buying up the rural land, rich in woodlands and wildlife. As a kid, every mile brought anguish from seeing forests cut down and open spaces getting paved over.

"Where do animals go when they do that?" I asked. "You know...when they

cut down the trees...and stuff.”

My face pressed against the car window, sticking to the glass while I waited for the answer.

My dad replied, “They’ll find there way elsewhere. Animals adapt, forests grow back.”

“If they, umm...cut...if they cut all the elsewheres down...then where do they go?” I asked, trying to hold back my emotion.

My dad became chillingly silent. He didn’t have any absolute answers to the questions. As a boy, the silence of my father was so frightening that it was as if the rivers had all suddenly stopped.

I waited and agonized for the answers needed, but they didn’t come. In order to hear the river’s beautiful sound again, I had to be the one to stir up the current. Like an oarsman follows a beckoning river, changing things became my calling.

The gentle current of the Missouri began to pick up speed, a rushing sound, in the area below Marthasville where a beautiful stand of majestic sycamores stood guarding the shoreline. From my kayak, I had my first sighting of an albino squirrel in the bows of those particular trees.

I didn’t mean to hurt anyone there. The spikes were just supposed to break chainsaws and delay the project. Besides, trees with five-foot diameters had been there longer than any “damned” loggers. The current subsided, almost softening to a gentle flow, as I headed toward Defiance.

Passing a farm beyond the banks, I could hear and feel the current. It picked up

again. The field was where I spotted a three-legged coyote I nicknamed Will. I was amazed by the animal's spirit to survive, seeing it chase down a field mouse like a cheetah. I thought that Nature had been genetically cruel, until I later read about outlawed claw traps still used in this part of the country.

When I tripped every one of the "mutilators" there was no thought to my anger at tossing the disengaged traps into the thick alfalfa.

"Next time, that crippled farmer may feel a little more sorry for the poor animals," I thought. "They did just fine before he moved in!"

The flow eased up, as my kayak skimmed toward Weldon Springs. The surface of the water took on an oily sheen past the Weldon Spring's boat ramp. A slimy, black film clung to the craft's exposed sides, but washed away by a quickening flow, gushing over boulders at the bend.

I gripped my paddle and dug in, barely managing my way around a corroded, old barge. Amidst the swirling river, the wreckage stuck deep in the silt, defying the current's washing effect. Its metal corpse held leaky, rusting barrels stamped in faded lettering "Exxon." Like a shipwreck still hanging on to worthless treasure, the barge held the polluted relics of its embarrassing past.

I thought it ingenious to place the dilapidated barrels on the mayor's front porch, figuring it allowed the town's government an understanding of improper waste disposal. I would think it a shame when reading about the official's wife dying such a horrible death from tetanus.

I shrugged my shoulders, and moved on. The water began easing up and

quieted again.

My entire family enjoyed hours scouring the floodplains for arrowheads. There, I found what was believed to be a tomahawk mallet dating back to the eighteen hundreds. We were all saddened to see the levies go up. "Keep Out" signs were everywhere.

I asked my dad, "Why do the farmers have to spread so much fertilizer?" Even as a child, I knew the best fertilizer could be found naturally in floodplains. My dad was embarrassed, having no answers for me. The confusion remained.

My kayak floated through the calm waters below the I-70 Bridge. Looking across the open land on both sides of the river, I felt a knot form in my throat. I noticed signs for two gambling sites on opposing banks, and they seemed to stare in confusion at one another. The current sped up, becoming louder.

I wondered, "What happened here?"

I thought the city councils on both sides would take more time to veto the idea if I continued pulling the surveyors' stakes. I truly believed that with more time to study the impact of corporate greed the "good" people of the neighboring communities would vote it down.

A high-pitched scream came from over my shoulder passing by the casino. Strangely smirking, it comforted and relieved me to witness a woman's suicide from Harrah's rooftop. For me, there was no mistaking what had gotten her up there. The chips she must have been desperately clutching before the leap had fallen from the sky like rain.

“One of those ‘good’ people that voted in the casino,” I thought. “They had the time to get it right before it was too late. I offered them time and they just...wouldn’t...take it!”

The river slowed and the singing water slapped against the kayak, and it seemed to call me again. I paddled on, barely able to sidle between a bridge support and Ameristar’s foundation. It protruded so far into the river that it was a wonder that bigger boats could avoid colliding with the monstrosity. The water picked up again.

In my late teens, I took a girlfriend to skinny dip in a secret slough I discovered off that river. Around Orchard Farms area, it was a tranquil setting, having a sandy bottom and was well off the beaten tracks.

As we splashed the summer day away, we laughed while collecting dozens of freshwater mussels. The small animals had shells that would squirt us when we picked them up. Falling onto a warm sandbar, we soaked up the sun’s rays and hoped to dream the day away.

The low sound of an engine startled us, as a revving noise seemed to come down the slough in our direction. Rounding a stand of willows, the rider of a four-wheeler with oil spilling and gas spewing everywhere ripped through the shallows past us. Half in the water, and half out, it left deep tracks and cracked open the mussels we collected. We returned them to below the sand, and thought they would be safe there.

The rider tore off around the bend. As quickly as he rushed in, he was gone.

I felt defiled, and was disgusted that I hadn’t defended the pristine setting I valued. This was “my secret spot!” It was one of the last places I knew to go for

getting away from "that kind of calamity."

The absolute disregard for an undisturbed ecosystem was what had spoiled it the most for me. I knew others had been there, but up until that moment I thought they had my same respect for the sanctity of such a place. I could never go back there again...it would never be the same.

Drifting a mild straightaway between the Missouri Bottoms and St. Charles, my body locked stiffly, not moving, as I spotted a bald eagle perching in an old den tree. It was feeding on some form of fish or small game, but I felt lucky at the sight because they were usually found toward the cliffs.

My right hand eased slowly toward my camera, hoping not to spook it. Drawing the viewfinder up to my eye, I brought the marvelous creature into view. Quietly, I attempted to get the shot with my index finger on the button, inching there like a worm. I was just about to snap it, when a roaring sound interrupted the moment.

"Reeeennnnndddd...reeennnnndddd...reeennnnndddd!" the engines roared, as two men passed within feet of my kayak.

"God damned wave runners!" I yelled.

Both carotids bulged, about to burst. I watched two riders narrowly miss me, as they went crisscrossing up the river and beyond sight.

The river began to surge, carrying me through a shoot. The waves smacked the kayak, spraying my face. The river moved faster, louder.

Startled by the whirring, tinny buzz, the eagle dropped its prey and took flight. The rowdies made foul hand gestures, as they headed out of sight. It left me

dumbfounded, not understanding how their contraptions were legal, much less how they could be so mindless.

The arteries on my neck were completely inflated, just short of exploding. Shaking, my face transformed to a strangled, reddish hue. I knew this was the point of reckoning. I had truly had it, and my plan would make what I was about to do no accident.

I paddled past the boat ramp in Old St. Charles and remembered seeing two wave runners next to the water. I knew if I waited long enough they would have to return to their trucks, and remembered that I had about one-hundred feet of trot line stuffed in the stern of my kayak. These were the trotlines that were designed to catch the "big ones."

"Those hooks stretch at least ninety feet of that line. It would sure look good on those jerks!" I thought.

I pulled out the prickly, bundled roll and noticed a fixed buoy on one side of their river path, and looked for a strong enough tree to tie from on the opposing bank. I paddled toward each spot, tying one end on a buoy, and the other end to an elm on the far bank. I looked at the line stretched tight against the sunlight, and realized the large, swinging hooks reflected like Christmas lights. At that point, I was in no frame of mind to sing any carols.

Off in the distance, I heard the sound of the two wave runners. They were on their way back down the straight. I paddled off to the side of the watery thoroughfare to witness the event, but felt too much like a sadistic voyeur to wait and watch for the

results.

I was a quarter of a mile in the distance, drifting away from the sounds of the engines, when he heard a high-pitched whirring. Then came faint, gurgling noises. It sounded similar to a deer impaled on a jeep's grill.

I finally felt vindicated. The swiftness of the current became strangely calm again.

I became an avid fisherman as I was growing up. I had been the type of outdoorsman who would say he loved catching fish, but I would be happy to be outside, whether they were biting, or not. The difference between me and a sportsman was that I really meant it. I hiked streambeds until my feet bled, and climbed "shit rock," known as limestone. I savored my time out in the open air.

My grandfather taught my dad, and my dad taught me. Placing the highest value on wooded, untouched soil ran through family blood. Like American Indians that worship the land, I had grown to feel equality between all organisms, and humans were on the same level as others. It was easier for me to watch the commercials about starving children in Bangladesh than it was watching a news clip on abused animals.

"Someone always speaks for the humans," I said. "Abused animals can't speak for themselves."

As a young man, I went fishing at Busch Wildlife Conservation Area. A local spot. I didn't want to make the long drive to one of my distant fishing holes in southeast Missouri, so I drove to the wildlife sanctuary for an easy day of catch-and-release fishing.

I chose one of the most secluded walking ponds I could find. It felt more out in the wilds if there weren't a lot of people around.

I cast a worm and bobber beyond a fallen snag, knowing it was a lousy cast. Just as I began to reel the line in, and try casting again, I saw the bobber shake. It popped below the water.

In a swoop, I hooked the small version of a large mouth bass. Forgetting the snag, I realized the tiny fish was pulling up and out of the water. The line formed a natural pulley on the poor fish, and had it dangling in mid air. The mess was fifteen feet out from the bank.

I panicked. I couldn't let out enough line from the fishing pole to make a difference, and couldn't reel the fish in at all. The poor bass was suspended, gills flapping, and sure to die. It was about fifty degrees in early March, and it was too cold to go in. Or, so I thought.

Like a child, my eyes began filling up. My stomach tightened, and an anguish welled up inside me. I moved into the frigid water, like a man going in for his drowning child. Robot like, I moved toward the dying fish, until my feet lost touch with the murky bottom.

The water's depth got up to my chin, and had to start swimming. I dogpaddled up to the limb that held the gasping fish, and it was a struggle to free the hook from its lower lip. Heading toward hypothermia, my hands shook violently as I freed the fish. It plopped into the water alive, and darted off.

I noticed how peaceful the pond became after dragging myself up on the bank. I

felt the pain of being soaked and cold, but could only grin with the accomplishment. I felt my grandpa winking at me for the effort.

The peace attained that day was meditative. He saw the campaigns, and heard the term all of my life, but I finally understood what it meant to be “humane.” It was a simple act of kindness, but it was one of my greatest moments of pride.

A distant barge sent wakes lapping against my battered kayak. Like a drumbeat to revive a fallen warrior, I blearily regained consciousness. Sand embedded between my lids, I pried open my swollen eyes. I touched a bloody knot on my head, after realizing how badly it hurt.

“How can a science teacher, at home in the outdoors, explain this one?” I wondered. My students already thought of me as a “wacky environmentalist.” So, how would I explain this one?

Spitting silt and crustacean bits from my teeth, I couldn’t help grinning through the pain. To kayak a treacherous stretch of the Missouri was bad enough, but doing it alone made it even crazier.

I knew the story was more than a tale because I was the one who was face-down and battered. My track of time was gone, and I couldn’t make out what part was a dream, and what part was culminated fantasies of what I had always wanted to do. I couldn’t even make out the body of water I was on.

Shaking off the confusion, I was able to get to a standing position. I looked across the water and marveled at the setting. I hoped a lesson about my fiasco might inspire students to have more passion with the preservation of natural settings.

Thinking along the river, it finally dawned on me what needed to be done. Leave the criminal acts to others, and try to inspire change in the only way logical for me. Teaching had always been, and would always be, the best way to instill values for nature.

I vaguely made it out, but there were answers in those lapping waves along the shoreline. The fight begins in the classroom. Arming my students with education would be the best way to fight back, and the only way to change the world.

Getting up to the alarm, I rose from my bed, and shivered.

At The Core

Like an animal does in the wild, I bristle. All the hair on my body stands on end, my eyes bug out, and my nostrils flare. It was useful playing hockey against overly-large goons, and helped on more than one occasion with neighborhood dogs that were intent on biting me. It would even seem to work against students.

Being a teacher is tough enough, but teaching today is even tougher. Regular lessons, combined with all the character education we now include, turns into a monumental task. Include all the behavior and learning disordered kids, and it sometimes seems to be impossible.

I can spend at least an hour a day with special education students, otherwise known as "sped kids," and think I'm getting through, but they go home and seem to unlearn everything. The more I teach, the more I find out that home is where most of their problems begin.

I taught one little guy that stood about four-feet six inches tall, but it was impossible to think of him as scrawny. He was all of seventy-five pounds, but could act up with the best of them. He came off like a bully, but I had a tough time looking at him that way. I thought of him as just another "sped kid" acting up.

He had recently come in with a sling supporting his arm, but it came off more like the damaged wing of a baby bird. A four-wheeler accident was to blame. Being a tough kid, it didn't prevent him from acting up one day, and it was one of those days that my hair started standing up.

The rest of the students were listening quietly to the lesson, and I had just gotten

them settled down, but the little kid began elbowing a buddy next to him. I didn't know why he was doing it, and didn't care if he knew the reasons why...it needed to stop. I wasn't about to let one student screw up the good thing I had going with the others.

"If you don't stop, I'm going to chunk your teeth out!" I yelled. I couldn't believe it came out of me, but it was like holding back the snarl of a lion.

With enough time, my past students usually ended up liking me, once they got used to my ways. They knew I would temper the discipline with humor, and it usually worked, but I didn't know this particular kid well enough to know his name at this point. He had missed nearly a month of school before showing up, and it was only his second day in my room.

"You're not going to chunk anybody's teeth out!" he yelled back. Like a mouse who roared, he took me by complete surprise. The kid stood ready, and held up both fists.

I looked at the fierce intensity in the little man's eyes. Across the room, I saw the blank faces of the others in the room. They were as stunned as I was. The outburst was excessive, even for a room filled with a menagerie of "sped" behaviors. It almost seemed instinctive for the boy to ready himself for the encounter.

I am no giant at five-foot four, but this kid had to be kidding. I could have twirled that seventy-five pound whipper snapper on the tip of my index finger, if I wanted to. I never believed in humiliating kids in front of their peers, so I asked him to "STEP OUT!"

My voice was commanding and stern, as I walked him into the hallway. It was my best act of aggression, and it made no sense to why he wasn't intimidated one bit. I

needed to know what kind of hornet's nest I was stirring up, and learn about the one he probably came from.

We went outside, and I noticed him panting in anger. Backed against the wall like a trapped animal, he seemed to know only the "fight or flight" response. I felt sorry for him at that point, and realized I meant nothing by my comment, and it could have been my mindless comment that started the whole thing. I put my hand on his shoulder and apologized. It allowed me the chance to explain my off-beat style. I told him that it was just a way of keeping kids on track, and not to take it so personal.

"I didn't mean I would 'really' chunk your teeth out," I said, letting him know I would never dream of hurting any of my students. .

With that, the little boy's body seemed to relax. His hair no longer stood on end, the way mine had done. His breathing began to regulate, and it was at that point when I realized the problem. There was more to this encounter than I thought.

"He really thought I was going to pop him," I thought..

As a child advocate, I always had the policy to look beyond the behavior, and figure out what was going on inside. In most cases, I find that if something is wrong inside a child, there is something going wrong at home.

The boy hadn't popped out of the womb bad, and my short time with him shouldn't have stirred such emotion. I wanted to understand what caused him to have such a powerful defense mechanism.

In less than four minutes out in a hallway with a boy, I found out about a lifetime of child abuse. It made sense why such a smart kid could be pigeon holed into a special-

needs class. He was easier to monitor than digging to the deeper source.

He reacted like a dog that been kicked by his master. The only people close to any masters over him were two, hard-drinking parents. He told me that child abuse charges were nothing new to his mom and dad. I looked down at his arm sling, and wondered if the four-wheeler accident was a true story, or just a cover-up.

I came to understand his difficulty with confrontation, and learned how to feel empathy. I knew a gentler approach with kids may be the better one.

The tears rolled down his cheek, and dripped onto his white, cotton arm sling. Even the tough kids need a time to let go. He cried, and it told me that his aggressive front was only for his own protection, as mine had been most of my life.

He asked if I would refasten the sling's strap. It was hanging loose on the unreachable portion of his back. I kneeled down, and hooked him up. Tightening the small brace, my stern demeanor was long gone.

"I didn't mean anything by what I said, but it's kind of hard teaching science when kids are knocking each other around," I said, explaining my behavior to him.

He sniffled, and said, "Yeh, I know...sorry."

I knew there was meaning behind his apology, and it allowed me to see there was a decent side to the kid. I asked him for a favor, in order for other "crazies" in the room not to think it would be open season for challenging the teacher.

"Hey, will you make sure you pretend you're in trouble when we get back in the room?" I asked. He knew there was no more to the punishment than our talk in the hall.

"I don't want anyone in there to think I'm too soft. Kind of hang your head

down a little, and we won't let anyone know that I let you off the hook." The look he gave let me know we were friends, and I felt like I could better help him with his problems.

Just as I finished patting myself on the back, a humbling began . One of the special education teachers assigned to my class came ripping out of the room before we headed in.

Pointing to my chest, the teacher said, "Look down."

He motioned to remind me that I was wearing a microphone the whole class period. Earlier, he strapped a sound device to me so a troubled deaf kid could hear the teacher. I forgot that it was not only clipped to me, it had been on since the beginning of the period. My secret was out, and being transmitted to the entire class of sped kids that awaited our return. They heard the entire dialogue between me and the boy..

The smart-assed deaf kid turned the monitor up so that everyone could listen in on the hallway discipline session. The students thought I would rip the boy a new one for his aggression in our yell match..

"Now, every knuckle head knows I'm a phony when it comes to discipline," I thought.

Coming back into the classroom, twenty Cheshire Cats were smiling, as if they knew our secret. To them, I was just an old "softy."

It took less than four weeks for those "supposed" sped kids to see through my rough exterior, and about the same amount of time for me to see them. Eighteen of the twenty were from abusive homes, or some other form of neglect in their lives. To think of

them as disabled was just as wrong as thinking of myself as an angry old teacher.

Now, I make it a practice not to be overly concerned with classifications, or stereotypes. I don't even need to bristle quite as much anymore. Fronts and labels were equally worthless, and it took an encounter with a scrawny "sped" kid for the education.

Not only did the kids get to know the teacher that year, I got to know myself a little better. Who teaches who?

No Rhyme Or Reason?

Like a stand of trees in the way of a children's research clinic, some seem destined for elimination. There seems to be something noble if death perpetuates life. Some cases aren't as easy to understand.

A couple of summers back I learned how neglect could make a river as deadly as the dioxin that ran through it. Man had polluted the Meramec River to a point where the government had to step in, and close the neighboring town of Times Beach down. Ultimately, the threatened forms of life received the care they needed, and recreation became possible on the water again. But neglect is allowed to move on, and seems to find more fragile forms of life for more victims.

It wasn't good enough to know that five children, unable to swim, had just died in the waters of the Meramec in the summer of 2006. Life, nature...divine plan? Their tragedy made me question if God was truly out there. If he was, did he discriminate with who gets what?

"It is what it is," I thought, trying to believe my grandpa's old saying. It referred to the tragedy of dying too young, and things that didn't make sense.

The dead children had grown up in rougher conditions than most. It didn't seem fair that they would perish from something so horrible. I worried that the Meramec would be blamed, but there had to be more to it than that.

The news report included more than just the usual how-and-why information describing the horrible event. A point was made to make sure the public knew they were all African Americans, and four of the five were from the same family. It went on

to include that the kids went by three last names, and were all from the same mother. The fifth turned out to be one of their cousins.

The dead came from the poverty of the inner city, and the news story connected it as the reason for never learning how to swim. It illustrated the lacking opportunities for the family, and that church-owned housing was the only way they had a roof over their heads. Reading about their dismal conditions made me struggle with old prejudices of my own, rather than dealing with the sadness of the tragedy. It was easier to be angry, and find who to blame.

“Don’t cry,” said Edris Moore.

“Let it go. My kids are in heaven now.” The mother of the dead children spoke to the cameras.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked, looking at my wife, Misty. She seemed just as confused by the remarks as me.

Ms. Moore had just heard about her children dying, but appearing on the news that very evening seemed too quick to be on my television screen. Was she in shock, or were her kids that expendable? A “good” mother couldn’t have the ability to speak after such horror, much less to grant an interview. Why wasn’t she suffering?

I watched a coyote searching for her missing pups one day, and it was easier to see the forlorn in a wild animal, than in the face of Ms. Moore. Had it gotten to a point where people in society were calloused to the death of their own children?

Their unstable home seemed to stand out most in the broadcast. It must have played some role, or was it the little concern she might have had all their lives that lead

up to it? Hell, she wasn't even there at the river with her kids in the first place.

It had to be more than just my take on why she wasn't there. A scenario of her hanging out at home with one of the many daddies was easier to think of, rather than thinking of her as a confused, grief-stricken mother. Were it not for my preconceived notions, and unresolved prejudices, I'd only be dealing with senselessness.

I loved the Meramec, and didn't want to think that nature was responsible. I had seen a lifetime of neglect with the environment, and wondered if God was allowing it with innocent children. Maybe it was his way to get people to pay attention.

I wanted to hate the mother for her family's circumstance. This wouldn't have happened if "she" hadn't done something wrong. It couldn't be as simple as "it is what it is." Otherwise, I would have to deal with the grief of the circumstance. I had to blame someone, or how would I get solace from the river again? It had always provided comfort, and I worried of the haunting feelings I would get there, if I didn't go to it for the answer.

I decided to face the river. I kayaked the Meramec many times before, but looked this time for answers. Circumstances beyond my control didn't allow me to let it rest.

I was searching for "how's and whys" of my own, and hoping to get it all explained. The force behind it all would be there. Paddling the same current that had stolen the lives of those children seemed the only thing to do.

The power of the river made it unnecessary to paddle, as the current carried me downstream. The float allowed me the opportunity to gaze into the water and try to

imagine those young children. A tearful emotion followed me and the craft, as the small boat seemed to navigate itself forward on its own. Distance and time were irrelevant because something bigger was carrying me. Before I knew it, I was able to let it go. The search was over.

It made little sense to have such emotions for those kids and their mother...I never even knew them, anyway. The only time I remembered feeling release like that was attending the funeral of my favorite grandparent. It was necessary to say a proper goodbye to him, as it was now to them.

Making sense of the tragedy could only come from the reflective current. I needed the feeling of embrace that came from the river, and being hugged by my grandpa again.

The rippling current tapped the underside of my kayak to remind me to continue to help the kids that are still out there. The rhythmic sound spoke like a voice beyond the water.

“It is what it is.”

The following poem was inspired by the work of Langston Hughes, and the Meramec tragedy:

They, Too...Five Kids Went Into the River

They, too, sang America.
 Expecting the same as we.
 Born worthy of someone's attention
 And getting much less,
 Holding on,

Needing care,
But to die.

Tomorrow,
Now never comes for them
And all tears are useless.
We had the chance
To do right
For those overlooked
Then.

Again,
We'll get to explain it to them
How we were wrong –

They, too, were America.

Seeds Of Change

We stood above the creek bank, and gazed down. My dad, and I, were hoping to rekindle some old memories. The little tributary spilled into the Missouri River, and was one of the many outdoor places he had taken me when I was a kid. My passion for nature developed from the outdoor adventures with my dad, and I came to learn that those experiences paved the way to becoming a science teacher.

We scanned the landscape below, and anticipated fishing again at the water's edge. My dad's eyes suddenly looked the way they did when we attended funerals for loved ones. Mine became blinded from anger. There was nothing left of the creek, but a cesspool.

I have grown far too familiar with this kind of human disregard, and have never gotten used to it. As a teacher, I've looked into the eyes of abused children and witnessed the same dead look that the creek environment had taken on. My vision was to someday see things change.

I was reeling with similar emotions just the month before the creek excursion. A reassignment placed me with the district's alternative program the following school year, and I would no longer be just a science teacher. I was dreading the thought of working with kids that most teachers run from.

My new principal explained that the kids I'd be teaching would be coming from the wrong side of the tracks in most cases. I would come to understand the true reasons for the paths they were on. An initial briefing at school provided their background information, and some of their stories were almost too hard to hear.

It was necessary to face the way my two worlds were coming apart, and write about the similar conflicts. As a child advocate, and an environmentalist, I hope to find the answers.

I have always chosen to be the protector of something, or someone. My dad instilled it in me. Growing up, I learned that romping through the woods, or hiking stream beds was just short of being in heaven. I always sided with nature over Man, if there was a conflict between the two. I did the same thing for kids as a teacher. My enemies growing up had always been bulldozers, but I became just as passionate in fighting to protect children.

The stench gagged us, as we stood motionless and confused. Multitudes of dead fish bobbed in the water. They were moving up and down on a black, oily sheen that blanketed over the surface. The dark soupiness that had once been a creek was filled with tied-off garbage bags of unknown content. They must have been tied off quickly to expedite the dumping, and held enough air to make them appear like oversized fishing bobbers.

The intermittent July breezes moved against the stagnant mix of dead carp, gar, and the floating bags. The debris seemed to be baking on the sides that weren't submerged. Bacterial feasting and decomposition served up a putrid odor.

We heard a truck coming down the path along the levy above us, and saw a group of men jump out, and walk in our direction. They were carrying more of the mysterious black bags we had seen in the water. A couple of the workers were wrestling a metal barrel from the back bed of their vehicle. They dressed in protective

gear, gas masks, and spoke Spanish. I guessed them as maintenance workers, or landscapers that were involved in a clean-up. The boss of the crew walked up, and spoke in broken English.

He said, "Fishing no good here," and went back to his men.

They laughed, and proceeded to add more to the mess, as if polluting was part of the job. Right in front of us, dead fish were dumped from barrels, while bags were tossed into the water.

My dad wanted to leave from disgust, but I wanted to stay. It was my need to take sides with nature. I took an inventory on all they did because it made no sense that they could be cavalier about something so illegal. I had to get to the bottom of it.

I noticed a sign on the truck's door, and had to take a mental picture to remember it. It would have been easier with a camera, but my memory would have to do. I was afraid it was too late to save the waterway, and it would be another ecosystem destroyed. To make matters worse, a good rain would wash all the contaminants into the Missouri River if they weren't cleaned up.

This was not just a simple case of witnessing a crime on an insignificant little creek. It was blatant disregard for something that couldn't fight back.

We left the area dismayed, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to fix what we saw back there. I immediately got on the phone with the Bridgeton Police Department, and spoke to the captain. Being an avid outdoorsman himself, he took my report as being very serious, and promised to get on it immediately.

I went back to the same creek a week later to see if my vigilance paid off. It

wasn't a hopeful situation, but I had learned to expect the worse when it came to how people treat the environment.

A couple of Great Blue Herons were flying overhead when I first walked up, and I noticed the horrible smell didn't greet me walking up this time. I looked down from the bank, and felt like a miracle happened. All the waste and discoloring ooze had been completely removed from the water. The creek had been restored to its original beauty.

After a quick call to the police captain, I sat back in amazement to think that it was possible to get things to change. Sometimes for the better.

The Trappings Of Children

Like animals, mistreated children are equally suffering. I see the abused and neglected every day as their teacher. They are trapped in their surroundings, and struggle for freedom.

The Academy looks sterile. It sits in the suite at the end of an isolated new strip mall. It's not what you expect for an alternative school. It is a far from a home-like feel because the rooms are too sterile, but it is a better atmosphere than what most of the kids are coming from.

The front door leads through the main office where the principal and secretary sit. Just beyond is the high school room, and it sits next door to the middle school room. Across a narrow hallway is a classroom set up for GED students, and those kids who are put on in-school suspension. All are within about 1500 square feet of each other.

A vibrant black girl, fifteen years old, arrives at the front door. Shontell, known as Shanie, comes flying through like a fashion model, and comes into the main office. A corn row weave is held under a Do Rag, and she smiles and says hello to everyone..

Her mother died in prison a month ago, but you wouldn't know it from her upbeat style. She worried that she would go crazy, hearing the news about Mamma. Shaney had her ups and downs after the funeral.

She totes a couple of black ceramic angels in today to put in her personal space around a computer. Her dad is living either in Troy, or Columbia, but somewhere in Missouri. She, and her thirteen-year-old brother fend for themselves most of the time

now. He also attends the academy.

Shaney stays with a friend in a low-income apartment complex known as "The Projects." She prefers Cat's house down the street from school.

"It's cause she can cook real good," Shaney states, smiling. But it is also a shorter walk to school.

Her younger brother, Terry, a.k.a. Chilly Willy, is supposed to be staying with his cousin Josh, but half the time he is running the streets. Chilly Willy walks in smiling and breathing hard behind his sister. It would be nice to think that they walked to school together.

The wall clock reads 8:15 am on a bitter January morning, and Chilly just put his bike next to the brick wall outside the door. He's wearing just a light wind breaker, with no gloves, and no hat.

Chilly Willy says his eyes are red because of the cold, but he smells like a mix between cigar smoke and marijuana. He trots through the hallway into the middle school room, and all the time rapping.

Billie, a sixty-something secretary, looks up from her desk with everyone who passes by. She sees each student with the eyes of the grandmother figure there. Twinkling at Shanie, and Chilly, she expresses her love to both. The principal, Rich, nods with a shared affection.

Pushing through next is J.W.. He is only fourteen, and already weighs in at about three hundred pounds, so his ability to walk is labored. J.W. wears his beloved Cardinal baseball cap cocked slightly to the side. A reddening face shows his

discomfort from being on his feet too long, but he looks up long enough to nod his hello to Billie and Rich..

Rebecca is thirteen years old, and steps off the bus outside. The little girl looks like she'd rather be getting dropped off by a family member.

Her father is currently doing time, but after what he did to get locked up, it is assured that he will never be able to drive his daughter anywhere, much less to school. She walks through the front door like a mouse, and scurries toward the safety of her classroom.

It is as if the whole world went mad to need such a place. The Academy seems like a wildlife sanctuary for innocent children. It nurses the ones who come in broken, and provides safe haven for their recovery.

If it weren't for places such as this, we would never have realized what is allowed to go on. Whether it is the poacher's arrow that cripples a fawn, or a drunken father that molests his child, they all need to be stopped.

When we learn to stand up to all forms of mistreatment, there will be no need for alternatives.

The Bound Paw

I looked into the eyes of the wild animal, and saw the tears. It seemed childlike, and reminded me of one of the students I teach. I could swear it was crying for help.

Kayaking a river alone offers the opportunity to reflect, and gain insight from what nature has to offer. Something spur-of-the-moment, like spotting a raccoon on the riverbank, evoked emotions in me that transcended the event. It taught me a few lessons.

I was fruitlessly tossing a green jig along the water's edge the day after Thanksgiving with the knowledge that fishing was pointless during the cold months. It didn't matter because the excursion was simply the chance to take advantage of a beautiful and unseasonably warm November day.

Beyond the view of the rippling current and my lure I spotted him wallowing in the dirt midway up the bank. The full-coated raccoon seemed to be lounging and playing in the dirt and unconcerned with my intrusion. I pretended to be one of those famous outdoorsmen you see on TV, thinking how lucky I was to be witnessing an animal doing what animal's do in the wild. It felt like one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments as I fumbled with my camera to snap off a few pictures.

Moving closer to the animal, I couldn't figure out why he wasn't more skittish. Why didn't he run away?

It was just about then that I saw a chain along the ground. One end was anchored, and the other was attached to the paw of the poor animal. The beautiful moment turned quickly into a nightmare.

The raccoon didn't allow me into his world by choice. He seemed to be pleading for help, while I sat helplessly watching from the kayak. Freeing him would put me in harm's way. It would be instinctive for the animal to lash out at me while I freed him, and that was a concern. But I was also worried that I would be breaking the law in doing so. The contraption could be legally there, and a legitimate trapper could be running it.

I turned my craft away from the scene, and drifted back down the river. It was too hard to watch behind me. It spoiled the beauty of the day, and I left the water to induce my amnesia. But helplessness seemed more like an excuse.

I might as well have trapped him myself.

Promise In The Damage

I got the assignment to work with alternative children, but didn't know it would be the career move I started early in life. I wanted to be a conservationist, and defend all forms of struggling wildlife. There was no way to know I would protect the parts that looked so human.

I was reluctant to teach at-risk students before the school year started in August. It was easy to figure out I would be teaching the toughest of kids, and I was afraid to make the switch.

I didn't think there were enough miracles left in me to help them. I was over fifty, and thinking down the road to retirement. How would I motivate kids who come from parents not motivated enough to raise them?

I had to shift my lessons from a science teacher's perspective to that of an alternative teacher. Classes on how to protect the environment, would have to change to how to protect kids from their environments. If they were animals in the wild, my new students would be put on the endangered list.

Shaney came to me as part of a brother and sister act, but the younger brother was not as much of a handful as his sister. Mom was in prison for dealing crack from their home, and Dad was drinking himself to a slow death. Alcohol and drugs were more important to the parents than raising the kids.

There were highs and lows to working especially with Shaney, but they were nothing compared to what hit before Christmas. Another tragedy for a life that had always known heartache.

Her mom suffered a major stroke behind bars, and died just a couple of days after she got the news. I attended the funeral, and thought things couldn't get worse.

Dad couldn't take care of himself, much less them. He decided to let a distant cousin take care of Chilly, but. I was shocked to find out that Shaney was left to fend for herself. After finding out later she was homeless for a while, she told me that a friend's mother decided to take her in.

It was normal for Shaney to have bad days concerning her behavior, but it moved her toward a breaking point in the days that followed her mother's death.

In class, she would pick fights, curse, throw things across the room, and acted like an untamed animal. I had to do everything I could to not call the police on several occasions.

My hands were tied. She had no school that would take her if she got kicked out of ours, so I didn't want to report the behavior to the principal. If I reported that she lived with someone else's family, then she might end up in worse conditions.

My only goal was to get Shaney through the school year without hurting anyone, or herself. I would see to it that she made it to school every day, and did the things she was supposed to do. I vowed not to give up on her, no matter what it took.

If I could just get her settled down enough to do her work, she would graduate from the middle school status, and be allowed to move on to high school. It would be her first grade advancement in three years. Various expulsions had her going in and out of school, and hurt any chance she had in passing.

At sixteen, she struggled just to do what most fourteen-year-olds could easily

do. It was hard not to blame Shaney for some of her problems, but I knew who to blame for most of them. One could be found outside the liquor store in the heart of town, and the other could only be visited at the cemetery.

Push came to shove, but I knew that her failure meant more than repeating a grade. I worried that it would cause her to follow a family pattern. If I didn't help her through, her life expectancy was likely to diminish.

We battled right up to the end of May, and it was similar to trying to tame a wild mare. Breaking her of old ways almost broke me, but Shaney finally completed her last requirement, and officially became a high school freshman.

Were it not for the environment she grew up in, she could have easily been at the top of any class. She had enough potential to receive scholarships in her future, but I was content just getting her to the next level.

I prayed, and hoped Shaney would have a better life from there on. It was hard to dismiss the science in my background, and knowing she might have imprinted a lifetime of failure from watching her parents. All I could do was to keep having hope for her.

The last I heard from Shaney, she was looking forward to going to the senior high. She wanted to try cosmetology school after graduating. It may not have been medical school, but it sounded just as good in her case.

Things do change for the better. I saw eight bald eagles in flight over the Mississippi River this past year. Shortly after, Shaney was heading out of the door. Her name came off the endangered list.

I am beginning to recognize that revivals are going on all around me. Nature is even starting to rebound.

Things are changing, and it finally comes into focus. People are paying attention to the important things in life again, and it allows me comfort in miracles.

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