



Everything New Orleans

A good dog's last morning and the comforting power of nature: Oliver Houck

The Mighty Mississippi

Water from the Mississippi River is diverted toward the Atchafalaya River Basin through the Old River Auxiliary Structure north of Morganza on May 4, 2011. (*Ted Jackson, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune archive*)

Contributing Op-Ed columnist By **Contributing Op-Ed columnist**

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"Looking back on it, Ms. Bear had told me it was time to go. And we found the perfect place to wait it out, under the morning sky."

My dog died Thursday morning. We'd found her 17 years ago on the side of a dirt road, coming out of the Atchafalaya swamp. The vet said that she was 5 or 6 weeks old. She was the size of a squirrel and all scab and mange.

I tucked her in my lap behind the steering wheel figuring I'd give her to one of my students, who were waiting at another landing. But in the period of that short drive, maybe 20 minutes, I became aware that I wasn't going to give her to anyone at all.

We'd since done many things together, **roaming the batture**, me looking for berries and she the sign of rabbit. Once paddling out of the Pearl, Ms. Bear up in the bow like a hood ornament, we passed a fisherman who looked over at us and asked, absolutely straight faced, "don' he paddle?" There is a lot to remember.

Thursday morning was something of a miracle, indeed two of them. They say that a dog will tell you when it's time to go, and we had been getting signals through the week. At this point she'd lost motion at the rear end, and her eyes were vague.

Still, I held out hope. But her last night was turbulent. The dog who never complained whined for hours, nothing was comfortable, so around 4:30 we got up, and I took her out onto the grass. Miracle No. 1, she quieted right down, and I held her, and we saw the dawn together in peace.

The first cardinal, a crow flew over, a mockingbird started up, my neighbor David dragged his trash container to the street, a junker car chugged right through the stop sign, the driver drinking coffee at the wheel.

Looking back on it, Ms. Bear had told me it was time to go. And we found the perfect place to wait it out, under the morning sky. What she was thinking out there I cannot say, but I'd say she felt wired to something huge and beautiful and that was enough. It is also enough for kids in trouble, for adults in pain, for all those folks walking along Bayou St. John and the oval at Audubon Park. There doesn't have to be much nature. But it can do so much.

The vet came later in the morning, and we put her down. It was the kindest thing we could do.

Then the second miracle happened. Lisa and I went back inside to gather ourselves for the day. Neither of us had gotten much sleep. Lisa was still on the porch when I heard her calling to me. When I arrived, she was pointing to the neighboring yard where a tall white egret was stalking the grass. It went very carefully, a slow ballet, cocking the head, leaning the long neck

down, zapping something, a quick swallow and then on.

It is still out there, as I write. I have never seen a white egret hunting in this neighborhood, ever, and it's been nearly 30 years. It came this one morning.

My mother died a few years ago. She was 101, and it was her time too. We took her ashes to a field she had loved as a girl and stood in a line, facing the trees, while a minister said a prayer. As the minister was finishing, behind his back, a large falcon darted out from the woods and flew the entire tree line, wheeled, flew it the other way, and then was gone. I saw my mother leaving.

I am not a spiritualist. I do not worship birds and trees. But there is a connection between the peace Ms. Bear and I found early Thursday morning outside in the dawn, and the egret, and the falcon. I do not know exactly what it is, but it is.

Oliver A. Houck is a professor of law at Tulane University. He is the author of "Down on the Batture."

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