

Giving and Receiving on the River of My Life

by Fred Tutman

Fred Tutman is the Patuxent Riverkeeper, the only African American Riverkeeper in America. Tutman will be a featured speaker at the 2018 Taking Nature Black Conference February 28, 2018 at ANS's Woodend Sanctuary. We hope you'll join us to hear Fred, Dr. Sacoby Wilson, Teri Brezner, Dr. Karen Wilson Ama-Echefu, Mustafa Ali, Randy Rowel and many other African American environmentalists, business owners, and scholars who will bring us stories and discussions full of wit, wisdom, insight, and great adventures involving the natural world. Please go to www.anshome.org/conferences for more information.

My sense of place has always had everything to do with my heartfelt connection to this work and to the natural resources I am charged with protecting. My upbringing in rural places and spaces has greatly influenced my work and my perspective on waterkeeping.

Growing up in a rural farming stretch of the Patuxent River Corridor, I giggered for frogs in placid ponds, hunted imaginary wolves in the forest with tobacco sticks and sold Japanese beetles harvested from garden plants to my great-grandfather at a penny a bug. Before my parents moved us to the ancestral home near Upper Marlboro, MD, I had lived until around age four in the cityscape of Baltimore. Eventually, my great-grandfather made a wedding present of some land to my parents, who built a split-level house.

From the start, the four corners of my world's playground were the wind, sky, forests, and, of course, the nearby river. This winding water body, with its murky green depths, sometimes flooded its banks and ran up into the marshes, where flapping fish were trapped in the shallows after a flood, and where my playmates and I could easily wade up to our knees and, crouching over the struggling fish, flip them with our bare hands into buckets, steel trash cans, or any other handy container we could find. There seemed to me endless and infinitely ingenuous ways to catch them.

The family farm (called Jones Farm) had been founded by my maternal great-grandfather, Carter Jones, in the 1920s. As a farm family, and as a community, we loved the earth in the way that anything or anyone indigenous is completely connected with the native environment. We did not think of ourselves as environmentalists, since the term was virtually unknown to us. But, rather, as those simply favored by nature in a special place all our own. Mother Earth was an ever-present force within the community, and a primal influence that held everything together. Oddly, I never looked at a map to figure out where the Patuxent came from or where it went until I became a riverkeeper. It was enough to know that it came to us from some magical upstream place, carrying with it all manner of debris, interesting marine life, alien to our locale. In storms, it brought massive trees, even runaway boats and bits and pieces of human habitation from upstream communities that we knew existed but which had little to do with our own daily existence. On my battered workhorse bicycle without gears, I would huff and puff up the hills on the windy country single lane roads and then coast at terrific speeds down the other side of those hills with the wind roaring past my ears.

I could ride my bicycle along those paths and visit with fishermen who set up ad hoc fishing stations next to tree stumps or by the remains of a former tire or wood fire. Half-formed in my mind was the general sense that the river belonged to nobody, and yet everybody, at the same time. And that in a world where people had state of the art machines and skills and ingenuity, the river remained a force independent of our will and technology.

When Brooke Watkins, an elder in my community, reached the venerable aged of 106, he described to me how, when he was a boy, he swam with 500-pound sturgeon in the Patuxent. Imagine that these huge fish were once plentiful and now have managed to disappear forever from my river, and all, within the span of one man's lifetime!

My great uncle, Henry Hall, was an eccentric collector of tropical fish who lined every available wall space in his row home on Baltimore's Dolphin Street with fish tanks. We called him by his youthful nickname, Chug. Uncle Chug was an enthusiast, with enormous energy and zest for many, many things: photography, gadgets, inventing and, of course, his beloved fish. On visits during my pre-adolescent years, I helped him with the daily and arduous task of feeding, cleaning and maintaining all of those many (many) tropical fish tanks.

Uncle Chug's lifelong dream was to have a permanent home for aquaculture in Baltimore. This dream later emerged at the National Aquarium, which now dominates the Baltimore Inner Harbor waterfront. One wing of this imposing modern structure is named after my uncle. A statue bearing his likeness greets people who enter the building and each year, the museum gives a marine studies scholarship in his name to Baltimore youth.