



Video Story Transcript

Soul Food in a Southern Swamp: Bumming Fish and Crossing Boundaries

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8ONGI6f0fc>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name's Doug Elliott and I'm a freelance naturalist and herbalist and storyteller and I'm interested in cultural diversity. I'm interested in how different people relate to the natural world and different cultures. But, you know, sometimes it's a challenge to tell a story that celebrates cultural diversity without being culturally insensitive even though that's not what I want to do.

Well, I want to tell you a kind of a fishing story. And, uh, and then, I'll tell ya how I came to tell it the way I did.

Well, I was down in the Okefenokee Swamp. And I'm, I'm a kind of naturalist. I love to get out in the swamp and I'm always kind of sc... foraging and scavenging and trying to, and trying to keep my budget low. And, and, you know, I'm not always that good at fishing.

But, but, um, but I love to talk to the fishermen and, inadvertently, over the years, I've learned, uh, that I can often get a fish dinner if I just kind of lay a few hints out there, and just sort of say, say, "You know, if you get too many fish, let me know." And a lot of times fishermen are glad to share a little of their catch with them, eh.

And so, one day, we were out there. We were, we were paddling out in the Okefenokee swamp. And it's this mysterious watery wilderness, you know, swamps and cypress trees and water and wading birds. And a lot of people fish there; you know, we were paddling out. We'd paddled out all day and I was coming back. And I see these two, these two, two white guys sittin' in a boat. And they're, uh... they looked like they were local boys. And they looked like they knew what they were doin'. They were dropping their fishin' lines in among the bonnet waterlilies there.

And I said, “You fellers catchin’ any fish?”

And they, “Wo, we gittin’ a few.

“Well, now, if you git too many now, lemme know.”

And these, one of these fellers says, “Well, we got these old mud fish. Now, you know, you don’t want dem, do ya?”

“Mud fish? Are they any good to eat?”

He said, “Well, a black folks eat them but we don’t.”

I thought to myself, “Soul food? You know, we’re talking about cornbread, collard greens, fish, chicken. I, I eat soul food all the time. I thought, “Well, yeah, I’ll, I’ll take those fish!”

And so, I pulled the canoe up there and let me tell you. He flopped these two fish in there. One... the biggest one was about a foot and a half long.

And, let me tell you, this was a beast to be reckoned with. It looked like the, it looked like the essence of swamp, congealed and personified, right there. I mean, this fish had a big fan shaped tail. It had, it had this, this, this shaped like a, like a wood splitting wedge. And it had, had thick armor-like scales and a huge mouth – big, wide mouth like a catfish ’cept this, uh, this mouth had just jaggly, snaggly teeth in it. Had these two little tentacles sticking out, from out of his nose. I mean, this was a creature to be reckoned with.

I said, “Oh, it is quite a fish here.” I said, I said, “You guys don’t know how to cook them?”

“No, black folks eat them but, but, but now we, we, we don’t, we don’t.” And then the guy out in the back of the boat says, “Well, actually, you know, Daddy had a recipe for mudfish.”

And the guy looked around, he says, “He did?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

I said, “Can you tell me?”

He said, “Yeah, but it’s kind of complicated. C... You got a good memory?”

I said, “Here, I’ll write it down.” I reached in my, in my backpack there and I pulled out my sched... my, my notebook and I started, I started writin’.

And he said, “Well, now what ya do is you get ya a nice, soft pine board. And ya just cover it with barbecue sauce and ya lay a bunch of onion rings all over the top of it. Sprinkle it with some garlic and some herbs. And take that fish, you split that fish open. You lay ’im out there on the board, and you put some, put some more barbecue sauce on top of that. More onions, more garlic, pick some herbs. Oregano is really a good herb to put on there, and then, and then some... and a little mustard, a little ketchup. And you put ’im right there against the fire and then you just cook it. And, and you just let it cook ’im ’til he’s really crisp. Then you scrape that fish off and eat the board.”

“Oh, ha, you guys!”

They started laughing.

I said, “Ha, well, thank you, gentlemen. I appreciate that recipe. I’m a go hunt me a board. I’ll go see if I can cook these fish, you know.”

And I'm paddling off, down in a canoe, down there, kinda embarrassed, you know.

I hear them guys. They're just still laughing. "Ha, ha, did ya see that? He's writin' it down, ah, ha, ha!"

So. So, finally, finally, I get down, I get down. and I'm thinking, "Well, man, I've got these fish. I want to cook these fish but th... I gotta figure, I gotta find someone who will know how to cook these fish. And I'm going into the dock there and there's boats going in and out. And there's people in the concession there selling tickets and things.

And I'm thinking, thinking, "Wha...who is going to know how to cook these fish? Who would tell me, you know?"

And then, all of a sudden, I look. An over on this little, this little spot of land there, there, she is, that wise woman we've all been wanting to talk to - a large African-American woman. She's sittin' there in a folding chair. She had her fish bucket on one side and her cooler on the other side. She had three fishing poles, I think. Oh, there she is, that wise woman! She has been way... been sitting there in solid, focused contemplation all day. Been contemplatin' this vast, watery wilderness before her. Those fishing poles, like sensitive antennas, reaching down, probing the depths, bringing home food and sustenance for her family. Oh, she is that wise woman! She would know how to cook a f... a mudfish but can I get her to tell me?

Well, only thing I do is just go over and ask, you know. And she's a fair distance away there, you know. I start walkin' over and this... I just go over and talk to her and see what, see what she will tell me, you know.

I see her lookin' over at me, ya know, kinda lookin' like, I can almost hear her thinking, "Uh, what's this white boy want with me?"

Ha...and, ha...and I just kept walkin' over there and then I see her look back.

"Oh, Lord, he's still coming."

She's adjustin' her fishing poles, you know, adjustin' her fish... I came up to her respectfully as I could and I said, "Scuse me, ma'am. Can you tell me how to cook a mudfish?"

She looked up from under that broad-brimmed straw hat of hers, ah, ha, ha, kinda suspiciously, and she says, "How? Ha, ha, huh, huh, huh, huh, ah, huh! huh, huh, huh!"

I can just see her thinkin', "This white boy wants a tell ya how to cook a, cook a mudfish."

You just laugh. Let him tell ya, ya know."

I said, "No, ma'am. Uh, these fellers gave me mud fish and I don't know how to cook them. I thought you might tell me."

And she warmed right up. She said, "Well, honey lamb, they aren't hard to cook. Now you can't scale 'em. You have to skin 'em like a catfish. And you take 'em, you put 'em in a pot and you steam 'em for a while and that meat'll come off the bones. You take yo fork and you take de meat off de bones. She said, "And then you take and git you some, git you some corn meal and some aig, a little bit a pepper, a little bit a onion. Ya chop 'em up. You make fish balls, fish patties outa 'em and you fry 'em." She says, "They good!" She said, "They good as a mullet."

And I thanked her so much. And, you know, we went back to camp. We did that, you know; we made these fish cakes. They were better than any sa... salmon croquettes, better than any crab, fancy crab cakes, I ever had. It was some of the best fish I ever had.

And I was so glad that I had just been brave enough to just go talk and... to this wise woman. And she gave me that good advice. And, you know, I got ta... and I'm thinkin' about tellin' this story. And I'm thinking about how some people, you know, these, these white guys, they were, they was, they really kinda thought that this food was, like, beneath them, you know. And of course, of course, that's, uh, interesting because different cultures have different relationships on that.

And, um, we... later on, that same trip, you know, I was down on the, down on the coast. And I see these two guys fishin' and they, they had the big, the big surf castin' rods. Two young black guys. And, and I see 'em castin' out there and, and these guys knew what they were doin'. Now, I...well, I gotta go talk to the fishermen. So, I went over and talked to 'em and, ha, one a 'em catches a fish.

Oh! I love to be there when someone catches the fish. And he starts, he starts winding this fish in and in comes a big ole catfish, big ocean catfish. Big elegant, long, long fins and, and, uh, long whiskers. And he takes it, takes it off there. Just tosses it down there in the surf like... it, it starts swimmin' back.

I said, "Don't you want your catfish?"

He says, "No, we're fishin' for sea trout."

And, uh, and then next he'll catch another fish. "

"Yes, see that! That's what we're looking for."

And he took that up, put it in his cooler. And he catches another one, another catfish.

"Ah, can I have your catfish?"

"Yeah."

You know, and I took those catfish back and I was cooking them. And as we ate those catfish, I kept thinking what if someone asked those, asked those black guys, "You know, are those, those catfish any good ta eat?"

And he goin' say, "Oh, them ole, white hippies, they eat 'em but they ain't no good. Ha, ha"

So, okay, so, I've been trying to tell that story and I'm been trying to just figure out, figure out how to tell it in the most culturally sensitive way, you know. And I remember one time asking an African-American buddy of mine (he was, he was a storyteller) and asked him what... I was just trying the story out.

And I just said there's these two guys sitting in a boat when I describe the first two guys. And later on, he said, he said, "Well, you know, you white folks seem to think of yourselves as normal, you know. And that anybody you describe, unless you describe them with an adjective, we just assume is normal, you know, and as white." "And, uh, and," he said, "You know, you know, that's really, you know you just have, to have to think about that. You didn't give those first guys accents."

Well, you know, when I tell the story now I give 'em an accent because they were southern. They were southern, southern Georgia good ole boys.

And, and, and um, and, and, um. And so. So, I thought, "Well, how... you know, I don't want to describe them just southern rural white guys sittin' in a boat. Uh, you know, it just, it just doesn't seem like a natural way to talk, you know."

So, so, I was thinking, "I was just remembering talkin' to one, one ole b... one ye...one ole fa... ole Georgia, Georgia guy and he was saying, 'Well, you know, I bone 'n raised 'round here.' He says, 'My granddaddy came

down here with a mule and a ba... and a wagon. Law, he's crackin' a whip the whole way. You know, I'm jus' a ole Georgia cracker.' And lot of people from so... north Georgia, and south Georgia, and north Florida, they call themselves "crackers" because that's how their... that's with their ancestry.

And so, the next time I told the story, I said, "Well, there's these two Georgia crackers; they're sittin' in their boats there, you know."

And, and I always kind of check out the audience and, particularly, if I'm going to tell racially based stories. I want to just make sure I'm not offending anybody. I see. I see this, uh, this one, one black woman in the crowd and I sought her out later on.

And I said, I said, "Did anything, put... anything bothering you about that story? Is that all right?"

And she said, "We need to talk."

And I said, "Oh, yeah?"

And she said, "Yeah. Yeah." She said, you call those white guys "crackers."

"Um, uh, uh."

She, she said, "Well, you know when I realized it, in the north "crackers" kind of like a, like an, like a racial epithet used by blacks against whites."

And she didn't like me callin', callin' anyone by a racial epithet.

And, uh, I thought, "Well, uh."

So, we talked about it a little bit and she said... I said, "What can I call 'em? I just don't want to say white guys, and, you know."

And she... I... She... well...

I said, "Well, how about good ole boys."

She said, "Yeah, I think good old boys would work.

So, next time I told it, I told it, you know... "These two good ole boys sitting there, uh, and in the boat and, uh..."

And then some people say, "Well, good ole boys sort of, sort of implies that these are southerners, sort of a stereotype that applies to certain southerners that has kind of racist overtones."

Now I don't know if I agree with that but you know it's one of those processes that we're just trying to work on, you know. And so, so, um, so, so, you know, and, and, one of the, one of the things that kinda, kinda gets me sorta realizin', realizin' in the course of following this thing, how much privilege I have because I'm white.

And I realized, I realized, sp... especially the kind of livin'... the way I make my, make my livin' and, you know, I'm always kinda sneakin' around somewhere, you know. And I look for some fruit trees or, or going someplace I'm not exactly sure.

"Oh, sorry, Officer! I didn't realize that the fruit orchard there was posted. I didn't realize there's no trespassing there. You know, I'm sorry, uh, you know, uh."

And I realize I can get away with that. What if I was black or what if I was Hispanic and I was caught somewhere like that? It would be a whole different experience. And so, you know, and I realize even, even, like, like when my son, my teenaged son, he's going, "I'm going to go out," with one of his black buddies and goin' out at night, you know.

I said, "Well, just be careful. It's a whole 'nother level of prejudice you've got to deal with."

And, uh, and so, so, um, so I've been trying to work on this all the time and sometimes I'll mess the story up.

And, and, uh, and, and, you know, it...but what I realize is that, is that, is that...one, one, one of my, one of my, my African-American coaches says to me, he says, "Look, the main things, man, is that you care."

And, you know, that's where everybody's at. Just the main thing is that we care. So that's what I'd like to leave you with. So, thanks.