



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

Generosity and Gratitude

a talk given by Peter Forbes
at Choral for World Peace
Shelburne Farms, Shelburne Vermont
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This is who I am: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Point Reyes, Dickinson's Reach, Knoll Farm.

That's me. These places tell my story. They are the waters, the soils, the wood, the food, the relationships, the dreams, the memories that literally make up this body. I am an alchemy of land, people and story.

Tell me what you love and I will tell you who you are.

I love a place called Knoll Farm... There is mystery in how my family and I have come to know that place that is not unlike the mystery of falling in love with someone. Eight years ago, we barely knew the boundaries of our farm or the source of our affections for it. We spent those first years putting our feet on its trails and our fingers in its soils, confident of its beauty and naive about its quality. Then there have been times when being there has felt entirely overwhelming, when we worried about our abilities and lost our sense of purpose, or when the land felt uncomfortable, like clothes that don't yet fit. We have been slowly growing into this land.

My relationship to that hillside is transforming me. It is teaching me how to pay closer attention, to go beyond what I see on the surface, to be more patient. I see that all we need is already at hand. I am slowly cultivating myself by attending to the particulars of the soil, the flow of water, the diversity of life, and the burden this land and we can carry. This land is filled with both seeds and ashes, and my struggle to understand both has made for a more mature love. Our relationship to this farm is about health and well being: the land's, our neighbors', and ours.

My love and deep respect for Vermont comes from my experience of its enduring resilience; its health and wholeness and relationship between the people and the land. In Vermont, we earn a living, but we also have the chance to make a life, and the quality of

that life comes not from what we cling to and hoard, but from what we are willing and able to give to others.

I believe that what happens to the people is what happens to the land. We grow too smart, too self-assured, too greedy, and soon we forget our relationships to the land and to one another. We forget how much we need one another and this land.

The course of our lives and the life of our communities is determined largely by our generosity and gratitude. My life experience of land, community and politics suggests that places and communities thrive when cared for not by laws alone, but through the generosity and gratitude of people in their daily lives.

Generosity and gratitude.

Without generosity and gratitude in our lives, all we have left is our strivings, our sense of scarcity, our need to hoard. And soon, there are so many things that divide us from one another and from the land itself.

To quote Daniel Quinn, we have become a nation of takers as opposed to a nation of givers. This epic choice between taking and giving is at the root of what concerns us in Vermont and across this earth. No land boundary will survive a suffering humanity. Nor will any land survive a humanity whose desperation is to consume more than it can restore.

On the other hand, generosity and gratitude help to replace our culture of fear with a culture of care and attention. What does a culture of abundance taste and feel like? It's a community where people are honored to serve one another, where safety is the number of people you can call when things go wrong, not the number of burglar alarms or police you have.

A culture of abundance is resilient because it honors diversity in people and places. And diverse systems, ecology tells us, are strong systems. A culture of abundance knows how much is enough and doesn't strive for growth at all times. An abundant culture is always asking itself what matters most, and is therefore able to protect and carry those things with it into the future. An abundant culture is not nostalgic, but is always looking to the needs of the future, particularly to the not-yet born.

Generosity and gratitude is the emotions that we feel when we find our safe place in the world.

Most importantly, an abundant culture is a fair and equitable culture.

A culture of abundance is created slowly through those everyday choices that we make between fear and love.

I hold a prayer, because prayers are needed, for Vermont's land-based culture of abundance, where we are capable of caring for one another and producing what we need to feed and shelter ourselves. I witness how our strivings and yearnings are making us into a consumer-based culture, one that makes money from our scarcity, that makes money from the things that people have forgotten how to do and how to be. I want us to be a tribe of givers, not a tribe of takers.

Imagine a small village in Vermont. Imagine if that small village of 100 people were representative of the world's population¹.

50 would be female

50 would be male

20 would be children

80 would be adults (14 of whom would be older than 65)

There would be 61 Asians in this village, 12 Europeans, 13 Africans, 14 people from the western hemisphere.

In this village, there would be 21 Christians

21 Muslims

14 Hindus

6 Buddhists

12 people who believe in other religions

16 people not aligned with a religion

17 would speak Chinese

8 would speak Hindustani

8 would speak English

7 would speak Spanish

4 would speak Arabic

4 would speak Russian

52 would speak other languages

82 would be able to read and write, 18 would not

1 would have a college education

1 would own a computer

¹ Sources: Fritz Erickson, University of Wisconsin - Green Bay and John A. Vonk, University of Northern Colorado, 2006; Returning Peace Corps Volunteers of Madison Wisconsin, *Unheard Voices: Celebrating Cultures from the Developing World*, 1992; Donella H. Meadows, *The Global Citizen*, May 31, 1990.

75 people would have some supply of food and a place to shelter them from the wind and rain but 25 would not

1 would be dying of starvation

17 would be malnourished

15 would be overweight

83 would have access to clean drinking water and 17 would not.

We are privileged beyond words to live the way we do, and the hope of future abundance depends upon of awareness and response toward this difference, not out of charity but out of deep awareness that my children will live in a diminished world if your children, that I can not see, live in a diminished life today.

Trying to cross these differences is the act of truly seeing one another and responding with all the courage we have.

A woman in a garden in central Harlem once told me, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come here because your liberation is bound up in my liberation then let us work together.”

The longest journey is the journey each of us must make from our head to our hearts.

No one captures this better than Donella Meadows in her essay *Lines in the Mind*:

“Between you and me there I certainly a line. No other line feels more certain that that one. Sometimes it seems not a line but a canyon, a yawning empty space across which I cannot reach.

Yet you keep appearing in my awareness. Even when you are far way, something of you surfaces constantly in my wandering thoughts. When you are nearby, I feel your presence, I sense your mood. Even when I try not to. Especially when I try not to.

If you are on the other side of the planet, if I don’t know your name, if you speak a language I don’t understand, even then, when I see a picture of your face, full of joy, I feel your joy. When your face shows suffering, I feel that too. Even when I try not to. Especially then.

I have to work hard not to pay attention to you. When I succeed, when I close my mind to you with walls of indifference, then the presence of those walls, which constrain my own aliveness, are reminders of the you to whom I would rather not pay attention.

When I do pay attention, very close attention, when I open myself fully to your humanity, your complexity, your reality, then I find, always, under every other feeling and judgment and emotion, that I love you.

Even between you and me, even there, the lines are only of our own making.”

And from the poet Gary Snyder:

For the Children

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

Stay together
Learn the flowers
Go light.

And this from the poet William Stafford:

You Reading This, Be Ready.

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world
than the breathing respect that you carry

wherever you go right now? Are you waiting for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this
new glimpse that you found: carry into the evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life—
What can anyone give you greater than now,
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

And, finally, from the poet laureate Robert Hayden:

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays, too, my father got up early
and put his clothes on in they blueback cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake to hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call.
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house.

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well,
what did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

At the presidential inaugural, I felt a nation crying with one voice. I heard a renewed American prayer captured best in these words from our new, young president, "The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

Each of us has a big role to play in that vision.
Thank you. `

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