



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

## The New Work of Environmentalism: Preparing College Students to Lead

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It's an honor to be here. Thanks to Rose Harvey and Brad Gentry for this invitation to be with you. And thanks to each of you for coming out.

It's a moment made poignant and serious by the responsibility I feel right now to share with you what my own teachers have shared with me: an understanding of service, of right relationship, of meaning and justice, and of the role of land and nature to all of that. Let me just say their names: Dana Meadows, Helen and Scott Nearing, Roberto Chene, Wendell Berry, Chuck Matthei, Bell Hooks, Bill Coperthwaite, Linda Hogan.

What they have helped me to see is this: the fundamental challenge of our time is not climate change, or hunger or public health; it is to nurture a culture of belonging and of meaning where we feel empathy for the world and for one another. The new work of environmentalism is to connect people to one another and to the earth itself. This is expressed so well by the writer and critic bell hooks: *"Can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about the appropriate care of the world's resources, but also the creation of meaning –the making of lives that we feel are worth living."*

First some thoughts on what has given me meaning.

This is who I am: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Dickinson's Reach, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Knoll Farm.

That's me. These words, these places, tell my story. These places are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up this body. I'm that alchemy of land, people and story. I didn't always understand this: frankly, I was

brought up thinking my story was about me: what college I went to, what positions I've held, my social status, how much money I made. The education that most transformed me began for me after college and is best described by this word *querencia*. Show of hands, how many of you have heard of this word?

It's a mestizo word, defined for me by Estavan Arrellano:

The place where the animal lives

The tendency of humans to return to where they were born

Affection, responsibility

The space where one feels secure

The place of one's memories

The tendency to love and be loved

This word, and many others like it in other languages, suggests that our affection and responsibility to one another has always been intimately connected to our relationship to place, to land, to nature. There have been many who have helped me to see this in life: for example, shortly after college, I worked as a photographer in rural Nepal where time was counted in the cycles of the moon and in the passing of seasons of rain and snow. Their currency was rice and one's labor, and their wealth was the neighbors who would come when something went wrong.

Or my friendship with the homesteader and social critic, Bill Coperthwaite. Bill's inspiration for his innovative architecture and principles of democracy-in-living come from his love of the land that has sustained his bold experiment in living. There are four miles of Down East Maine coastline and tidal estuary that Bill calls home and this land and he have gently shaped one another in a relationship that's lasted fifty *years*, that's described in the book that he and I collaborated on called *A Handmade Life*.

Or my alliance with Classie Parker, a third generation resident of 121st street in Central Harlem who took a vacant lot behind her house and turned it into Five Star garden, a place that grows people and community and relationships as much as it grows tomatoes. It was Classie who said to me on the first occasion that I met her, *'Peter Don't you feel that my Dad's your dad?'* Later, when the organization that Rose and I worked for – the Trust for Public Land - helped Classie and her neighbors to protect these gardens and 60 others in New York City, Classie recited to me the words of Lila Watson: *"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's work together."*

Classie, perhaps more than any other teacher, helped me to understand that my work in land conservation was fundamentally about healing relationships and making whole people.

And these unusual teachers brought out in me an eclectic career: five years as a political consultant, two years as a photojournalist in Southeast Asia, 15 years as a

“deal-maker” conservationist for the Trust for Public Land, the last eight years as a teacher and facilitator at Center for Whole Communities. What connects it all over 25 years, from Harlem to remote Nepal to the Rocky Mountain West, is that I have been a student of the relationship between people and the land.

This is what I’ve learned: What happens to the land and what happens to people is the same thing. Said another way, when our human lives and culture are suffering, for whatever reasons, that suffering will be made visible on the land itself - in the form of dead rivers, damaged atmosphere, destroyed mountains. The pain we feel inside of ourselves as individuals and as a culture will always manifest itself on the land. As Wendell Berry has written for decades, we are the land and the land is us.

Because of the relationship between our souls, our bodies, our cultures, and ultimately our planet, to heal the earth one must be concerned with the human heart and soul. Today, the only effective, long-term method for saving the planet I know of is to first heal our broken society.

The implications of this are massively provocative. It suggests that one cannot begin to meaningfully approach loss of biodiversity, destruction of our landscapes, climate change, without addressing the true causes of these problems which are human poverty, the destructive forces of race, class and privilege, and aspects of the American dream itself. I believe this to be true.

This is why the new president of Dartmouth College, Jim Kim, would controversially suggest that environmentalism, as it is practiced by many, is a lifestyle choice and not an act of social or political change. It also explains my own view that the values of environmentalism will never grow in America until they are shaped and embraced by people who would never call themselves environmentalists.

Eight years ago, my partner, Helen Whybrow, and I began our own experiment in service-living by founding Center for Whole Communities. Our vision then remains the same today: to create a place to re-weave isolated and divided sectors to enable more courageous, innovative action to save the planet. We observed how often movements for change in the United States are deeply disconnected from the land (even while seeking to protect it) but also isolated from one another. In short, there was little belonging and empathy in practice, even though these values may be written in mission statements.

We create safe places where very different leaders can dialogue together, understand what is different and what is shared, and create new alliances. At the core of this work – and at the core of sustainability--is relationship: relationship between people and between people and the land, and we see every week in our residential retreats how these experiences of land soften and open people and help them to see themselves and one another anew. We see how an experience of the wholeness of nature can

help to heal the relationships that have gone bad and, writ large, are destroying our democracy.

We bring different worlds together. We work very hard to demonstrate the role of land and nature to social justice, and the role of fairness and equity to conservation. Through this work, I have come to understand why sense of place has much less meaning without sense of identity and sense of justice.

This is what we believe in:

We believe in Intention: we help leaders and organizations to bring head and heart together, which is very difficult. Chief Joseph said the longest journey a person will ever make is from their head to their heart. We have observed countless times how this leads to courage.

We believe in building power. We build power from the soil up helping individual to take their next best steps toward one another. We help organizations conspire together. Literally to breathe together. This is less about movement building and more about making allies, being a good ally.

We believe in transformational leadership. Personal transformation ain't enough today. Our goal is for our alumni and us to understand how and why their success is bound up entirely in someone else's success. As we have engaged more with our alumni we have changed as an organization.

We believe in Emergence. Emergence is what happens in any community that is able to clearly hear its own diverse voices. What emerges is more visionary, more inclusive, more dynamic and more creative than any individual part. We see this happen most weeks at Knoll Farm.

To wrestle with these ideas provokes very big questions:

What kind of world do we want to live in and how are we going to get there? Who is missing from the table that we set? What separates us from one another?

How is it that those of us who care about people and those who care about the land have often ended up today divided from one another? Why is it getting harder and harder in our communities to talk with one another?

How can we paint a picture of the world that people will want to go toward?

I will express in a moment what these ideas may mean for your lives at Yale University, but first I ask you to consider the bigger picture.

Here are two dates that I'm thinking about right now: 2050 and 2042. Who knows the significance of these dates?

These demographic changes should be celebrated, assuming environmentalists can adapt and evolve along with them. I embrace these shifts in our population because they represent new ideas and energy and because all the information I have says that people of color are stronger supporters of environmental legislation than are white voters.

According to Fairbanks, Maslin, Maullin and Associates, voters of color are significantly more concerned than white voters about a wide range of conservation issues: global warming, water and air pollution, loss of working farms, loss of habitat for fish. And not only are they more concerned, they're more willing to spend their tax dollars on these issues.

What does it mean when the world's largest biodiversity conservation organization — The Nature Conservancy — talks about its role in alleviating human poverty? Is this a moral, strategic, or marketing dialogue, or all three? What does it mean for conservationists when a regional land trust in California decides to collaborate with farm workers to create housing? What can we learn from an environmental group in Oregon guaranteeing health care to independent loggers?

This is evidence of what I'm calling Conservation 2.0. In this new era of American demographics and global politics, a new form of action *and* leadership is being asked of conservationists.

The language and skills of Conservation 1.0 have been technical, transactional, financial and legal, and its goals have often been grounded in science and in counting bucks and acres as the measure of success. We are deeply indebted to this period in conservation for giving us our systems of national parks, wildlife refuges and conserved land all across the country. This first version of conservation saw the land, but not always the people. In fact, many of our most revered national parks — Yosemite, Great Smoky, Glacier Bay, Yellowstone and others — were created by forcibly removing the people who lived there.

Conservation 2.0 builds upon what was achieved over the last 100 years, and it is predominantly concerned with how, as a nation, we *relate to that land and to one another*.

Conservation 2.0 is about conserving land with a new set of tools on a much larger scale; from landscape-scale to culture-scale. The skills needed in this practice of conservation include story, dialogue across divides, cultural competency, dismantling racism, political agility and building movements. The opportunities for success in version 2.0 are a greatly expanded membership, greater public understanding, deeper collaborations, more funding, more legislative victories, and the chance to move beyond saving landscapes to creating healthy whole communities.

Why this fundamental shift? First, the challenges created by climate change and to biodiversity are too complex and far outpace what can be accomplished by laws or buying land.

Second, the past successes will be challenged more and more until conservationists can effectively make the case that their mission of healthy land and biodiversity is relevant to someone like this man:

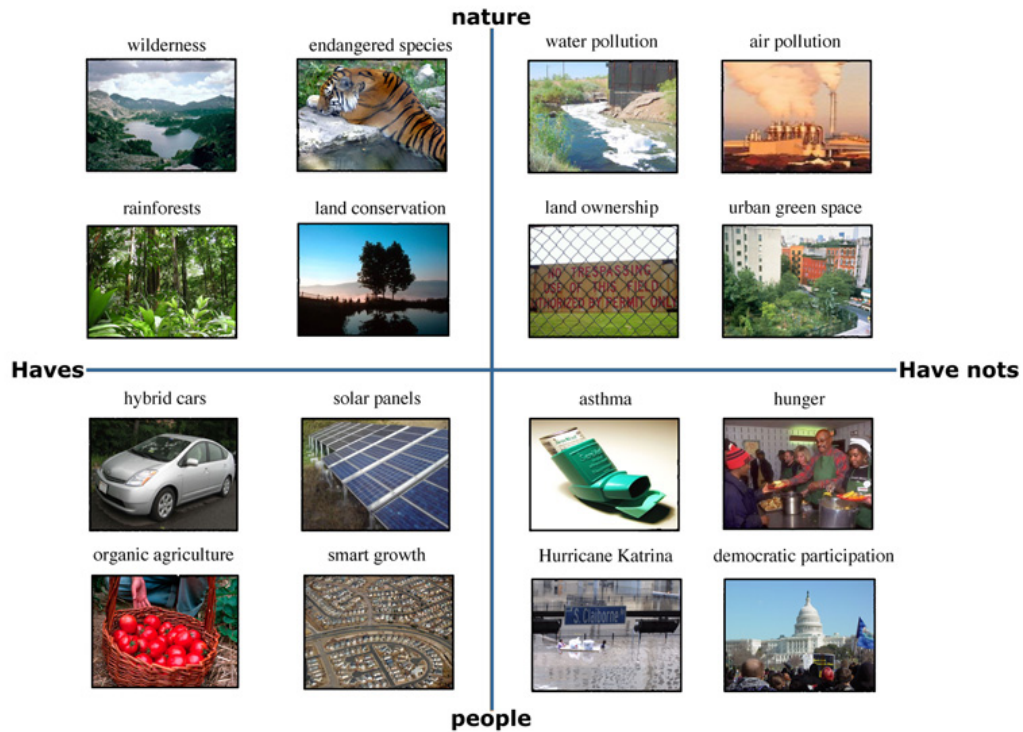
Brahm Ahmadi of Oakland who founded Peoples Grocery to bring healthy food to urban neighborhoods where liquor stores stand in place of grocery stores.

Or this woman: LaDonna Redmond of Chicago, who is blending public health, land conservation and food security on the west side.

Or Paula Garcia of New Mexico, who is conserving culture through conservation of traditional waterways.

They care deeply about the land, and about biodiversity too, but, to be honest, they do not see themselves in the work of conservation. And they would never call themselves environmentalists.

Let me share with you how these divides play out in the larger environmental movement.



We call this the Whole Communities framework. This is not a map of the way we would like the world to be, but a map of the way the world is.

First, there is the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature. This divide is worsened by the fracture between those who have privilege and those who do not.

If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in these types of issues: endangered species, acid rain, land conservation.

If you're privileged and focused on people, these very well may be your concerns: alternative energy, fuel-efficient cars, fair trade and organic agriculture.

If you have little privilege and care most about people, perhaps you are interested in public health, structural racism, democratic participation, and hunger.

Lastly, if you have little privilege and care most about nature, you may be interested in clean air, access to parks and urban greening.

Our point is this: all of these concerns are critically important, and none will succeed without the other.

The *New York Times* op-ed writer Thomas Friedman wrote in July, 09: "We are trying to deal with a whole array of integrated problems –climate change, energy,

biodiversity, poverty alleviation and the need to grow enough food to feed the nation –*separately*. The poverty fighters resent the climate change folks; climate change folks hold summits without reference to biodiversity; the food advocates resist the biodiversity protectors. We need to stop working on these issues in isolation.”

Those who care about endangered species will not make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina. Here’s why: without real alliances across the quadrants, each quadrant is diminished and not able to reach its full potential. Conservationists risk being left behind by a changing public that doesn’t know them. Those who care about public health will not make enduring progress without those who care about sense of place. Environmental justice advocates risk forgetting the role of land in their own healing. Bell hooks puts it this way in *Belonging*: “Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously on the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns.”

Why does environmentalism in our country include many fewer people of color? Who will care about the environment in 2042 if they don’t see themselves in it today? Our observation is that there are three key doorway issues that provide conservationists will the chance to entire more Americans homes with your message. This isn’t polling data about how people will vote. These are the frames of your work that would enable you to join a larger movement:

**Children:** Today’s children are the first to grow up without a relationship to nature. They spend 45 hours per week with electronic media, and they can identify 1,000 corporate logos but not ten plants or animals native to their own home ground. This is not good for either the land or for democracy. How will you flourish when these children have grown into adults and our elected officials?

**Food:** Americans of all incomes are deeply concerned with the quality and cost of food and how we produce food has an enormous impact on biodiversity. So, one of the most effective levers for protecting biodiversity will be your ability to ally with the rapidly growing food justice and sustainable agriculture movements in the United States.

**Faith:** I aspire for the day when conservationists can freely acknowledge that our work is both scientific *and* spiritual. The central theme of our work is *life* and that is deeply spiritual. And you have tremendous faith. You are faithful to your dreams and to the diversity of life. I sense so much faith and spirituality within you. But most conservation groups are unwilling to speak of spirituality and faith because you confuse these things for religion, which is traditionally at odds with science.

According to Pew study on Religious Attitudes of Americans, 92 percent of Americans believe in God. 63 percent of Americans pray and read scripture with their children.

What does this map suggest to conservationists?

It begs what Dr. King said long ago: "we can not walk alone." If you want to go fast then go alone, but if you want to go far then go together. To do this, one must constantly be asking oneself how must I change to meet others, to hear them and to know them? What do we need to do, ourselves, to join others?

Concretely, this means the very difficult leadership act of sharing power and influence with the emerging majority so that an inclusive vision might emerge that has the support of far more community members.

And let's be real: no property boundary or act of law will survive a public that no longer cares and no longer supports it. To endure and sustain, the work of conservation must be grounded not just in law statutes, but in the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people. That means that those who love nature need to fully engage people, all people.

That's hard. As a conservationist, I was never trained or equipped to move across this map and create new alliances. Honestly, a lot of my friends in conservation got into conservation because, frankly, they preferred nature to people.

What does this map say to Yale University?

It says that Yale University, because of its stature, must not just position the next generation to lead but prepare them to lead. And the most important preparation is understanding how to ally with others, and how to move authentically across these quadrants.

This summer, I met a remarkable young woman who recently graduated from University Of Vermont. Her name is Kesha Ram and she is the youngest member of the Vermont legislature and its only woman of color. When I asked Kesha Ram how she got elected to the state legislature she told me: "The most important thing I did was to find the courage to sit down with someone I was afraid of and listen to their story."

Today, every one of us in this room needs to set out from our safe harbors to meet someone we don't know and hear their story. This is the work of transformation, not only of our own lives but of the planet itself. This is the way we join other movements for change, and the way positive change is accelerated.

And I believe this is the only way we will be able to speak in a more compelling voice, a voice that doesn't demand change but actually inspires it, a voice expressed not just in facts, and parts-per-million, but also in dreams. May I remind you that Dr. Martin Luther did not say "I have a plan." No, he said "I have a dream." Our failure to dream, today, has given us the era of small thinking, the loss of our own prophetic voice, and no effective way to compete with the dominant cultural story.

I was 8 or 10 when I first heard Dr. King's *I have a Dream* speech. I was living in affluent Fairfield County, CT and I still remember that part of the speech where he says "I have a dream that one day in our nation my four children will be judged not for the color of their skin but for the content of their character." This was my first experience of race because I said to myself, do you mean that's not the way it is? Dr. King enabled this young white boy to see the world differently, and I've never gone back.

That's the power of story. And that's the power of inclusiveness.

What is your story of sustainability that you are trying to draw other Yale students toward? Can all Yale students see themselves in that story?

As I reflect on these questions myself, I am drawn back to the lived example of one of my own professors, Dana Meadows, who fifteen years ago wrote an essay called *Lines in the Mind*:

This fresh apple, still cold and crisp from the morning dew, is not-me only until I eat it. When I eat, I eat the soil that nourished the apple. When I drink, the waters of the earth become me. With every breath I take in I draw in not-me and make it me. With every breath out I exhale me into not-me.

If the air and the waters and the soils are poisoned, I am poisoned. Only if I believe the fiction of the lines more than the truth of the lineless planet, will I poison the earth, which is myself.

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

Yet you keep appearing in my awareness. Even when you are far away, 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."

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