

“A Conservation Eulogy”
Opening Plenary
for the
National Rally
of the
Land Trust Alliance
October 1, 2001
2001

It is a tremendous honor for me to be up here this morning.

I come to you as one of your own in that I grew up in this movement.

I do feel like I know many of you in this room. I am in awe of your courage, your good work, and your sheer numbers. It is inspiring to look out over this group and to know something of your history: your stories as individuals, your victories and your heartaches, the things that get you up in the morning and keep you at this work long into the night.

I still feel the aching pain that has been in my in my solar plexus for three weeks now. Like many of you, I have not been able to fill the hollow in my heart that was left when those two huge buildings came crumbling down. I grieve for the people who died that I have since come to know in the news. I grieve for the people who died whom I will never know, and I grieve for myself.

On September 11, I grieved over what felt like my privileged position in this world. On that Tuesday morning, I saw sunlight and blue skies and felt warm breezes and the hugs of my loved ones. *And my day went on.* And at the end of that day, I asked myself what was the significance of “saving land” in a world that seemed to be losing its mind?

Today, I believe land conservation can restore our sense of freely felt hope, our aliveness, in the face of a terror that threatens our lives and the hopes of others.

Many of us have said to ourselves this month “*The world I knew is gone.*” We have felt a breathtaking sense of loss. That loss is compounded by the memory of a different loss that gets played out every day across America: the loss of a cherished childhood

landscape, a family farm, a forest, the grizzly bear, the loss of ways of life, the loss of life itself.

“The world I knew is gone.” I hold these words as a talisman for our era. They are the single idea that land conservation most competes against.

Among the many messages that floated out on the internet was this one from Rabbi Michael Lerner: “What is it in the way that we are living, organizing our societies, and treating each other that makes violence seem plausible to so many people? This is a world so out of touch with itself, filled with people who have forgotten how to recognize and respond to the sacred in each other because we are so used to looking at others from the standpoint of what they can do for us.”

There is a gift buried in the rubble of September 11. It is this. If we choose, we will never be the same again. A Zen poet said, “The barn has burned to the ground. Now I can see the moon.”

Sorrow *can* create wisdom; great action *can* come out of profound loss. There is a chance for us to ask ourselves very hard questions that can elevate what it means to be human, and change the purpose of why we conserve land.

What is the relevance of land conservation in a world that produced September 11th?
What is our highest vision, our deepest wisdom, for our land trust movement?
What might we be ignoring today that will be the heartache of future generations?
Finally, and most painfully, Having watched people die, how do we now want to live?

Many of the answers to these questions relate directly to our human relationship with the land. Our relationship to land can be an awakening. It’s a re-kindling of what is most meaningful inside each of us. Conservation is a way for humans to re-engage with the world around us, a way of extending our best definitions of our humanity.

I'm not an expert on anything. I can only express my feelings, and these are the core messages I want to leave with you:

- 1) **Land and land conservation has the power to transform human lives, to create a more civil society.** Let's not be afraid of this because we don't yet fully understand it. Let's put that aspiration first.
- 2) **Our movement needs to change to reach this potential.** To be truly relevant to people today, we must add to our great technical skills, the ability to move the hearts and minds of our neighbors with the meaning of our work.
- 3) **We need new guiding principles.** For me, that new theme is relationship. I ask that that we re-think the promise of land conservation not as saving land, but as saving relationships between people and the land.

The difficulties we have faced this last month, and probably will face for the foreseeable future, really are not political or military. They are moral, which is to say that they concern the human heart and soul. This is truly not about war or retaliation. This is a crisis about personal and national integrity, autonomy and freedom, hope, awareness, and trust. How and where do we get these values today?

We get them from our families, from our beliefs, and I want to suggest to you, from our connection to all of life on this earth. I have seen how the act of conserving land has brought into people's moral universe a renewed sense of justice, meaning, respect, joy and love, and made people feel more complete. Terry Tempest Williams began her essay, *Testimony*, with this question: "What do we wish for? *To be whole. To be complete.*"

And, so, what is the role of land and place in making whole, complete people?

Our relationship to land is certainly not the only answer to all of our problems. It would be naive of me to suggest this, but it *must* be the first answer. Land is the foundation of our cultural house.

And place tells us a great deal about what is good and healthy about ourselves.

(•) Anyone who doubts that we still get our most fundamental cultural information from the land should drive out to your closest strip mall, stand in front of it, and ask themselves "what does this place say about me?" Or, as the Amish ask it, what will this place do to my family? What we choose to do with our landscape becomes, fundamentally, what we choose to do to ourselves.

How many farms and local forests can we lose before we lose ourselves? How much loss of human experience can we survive and still call ourselves human?

I want us to consider the act of land conservation as a proud form of civil disobedience that quietly but steadfastly opposes the prevailing cultural forces of our times.

(_ Suzuki quote) Land conservation can be a far better expression of our citizenship.

Our *true* wealth or security *isn't* in our bank accounts, but comes from the stories about the people and places in our lives; our health and security comes from our relationships.

And the act of conservation is the process of telling this story. Everyone in this room knows this story. It is why we do this work. But we rarely speak the words.

It is the mystery, the unexplainable love that brings people out of their homes to protect the farms, rivers, and mountains of their lives.

The favorite farm or local swimming hole doesn't necessarily contain any known threatened species of plant or animal, but its loss would mean *an extinction of human experience*. And people know it, even though it's not something that can be proven by science. Terry Tempest Williams told us at this Rally three years ago: "We are engaged in a dance of hope and sorrow and primary experience."

We have all seen strangers come to realize something greater for their neighbors and themselves. To save a piece of land, people re-think their future not in terms of what they could do for themselves but in terms of what they could do for others. They are building rootedness, based on their sense of service toward one another and the land. To act on such feelings is the essence of citizenship and moves us from isolation to community. It is the story, unfolding before our eyes, of how land conservation can tear down the walls that divide people from themselves, from one another, and from nature and thus become the starting point for a renewed community life. And in conservation's success, everyone feels joy and also responsibility, freedom as well as obligation.

Our determination to protect, and re-create when necessary, the places we love the most calls upon us to make sacrifices, to express our dissent and our hopes in ways that many of us have never before been asked to do. Aldo Leopold envisioned all of this. Writing more than fifty years ago he said, "conservation is one of the squirmings which foreshadow this act of self-liberation."

Let us begin to think of land conservation, then, truly as an act of self-liberation. Self-liberation from ways of living that deny us meaning, purpose and joy. Conservation is self-determination and the tangible, highly visible expression of our own *ethics of enough*.

Listen to the names of these land trusts: Androscoggin, Bear-Paw, Bitter Root, Black canyon, Catawba, Blue Ridge Foothills, Congaree, Elkhorn Slough, Frenchman Bay, Hollow Oak, Keweenaw, Gathering Waters, Lummi Island, Modanock, Otsego, Prickly Pear, Tecumseh, Wolf River.

These words, these places speak of our history. They are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up our bodies. They are our alchemy of land, people, and story. When we can protect these places that define us, we give ourselves the gift of pathos, memory and connection. (•) These places give us a hold in the world. These are the natural places that inspire our thinking, replenish our souls, and remind us that where we live is like no other place in the world.

The poet Edward Young asked of our era “Born originals, how comes it to pass that we all die copies?”

The terrifying story of our culture is that everything is beginning to look the same. This world of ours wants a monoculture: plantations of pines and people. For too many of us, this has become a world where the point of trees is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to be consumers. We learn that the only story that matters is the one playing in your head, that the only land that matters is what you own, that the only person that matters is yourself, and that the only time that matters is now. I think this is the source of the crisis that Rabbi Lerner is warning us about.

The work of saving land is tell a different story about America, that we value diversity, that we can show our restraint, that we seek to re-engage with the world around us on peaceful terms, that we have many definitions of our humanity, that our values as a people include sacrifice, humility, respect, joy and love.

To save land is to suggest how we might better live; where humans are not the only measure of things, where humans are defined more so by their fairness and compassion.

These are core values that most people want, but aren't easy to live by today. The values left in our hearts by land conservation are bigger and more important than we can imagine. They are bigger than we can possibly count in acres. They are bigger, even, than can be expressed in the saving the endangered lives of species other than our own.

These values given to us by a connection to land are so important that they stand to re-define what it means to be human in this century.

Land conservation is helping communities to address racial tensions, to plan more effectively, to learn more about one another, and to strengthen local economies. The struggle over land enables people to tackle other struggles. I call this the transformative power of land conservation: shining a light on the larger meaning of our forbearance and seeing how it can change who we are and how we live.

I now understand that land conservation is a community's process of telling a story about itself. And it often raises questions of mythic proportions. *How do we want to be?* Do we surrender fully to a culture defined by self-preservation and the expectation of rewards? Do we define ourselves by **apathy and self-interest, or by love, self-restraint and a sense of service?**

How do we get there?

Albert Einstein said, "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it." I hope our consciousness can evolve to re-think land conservation as the conservation of relationships.

Let's work toward a new radical center where the value of protecting the tiniest urban lot and the largest tract of wilderness are viewed together, through the lens of how well they build relationships: dependencies and reliances between people, between species, between the whole of the land community. This isn't saving land *without* people. And this isn't saving land *for* people. The radical center calls for saving land *and* people. We might call this "land and people conservation."

Today, most of America is saying "just protect us" and I understand that fear. But our prosperity and security as people and as members of the natural world can *only* be

determined by the quality of our relationships with the world around us, and not by any other measure of wealth or security. *This is true for every species of life on this planet.*

But there is no single science or philosophy to help us protect the relationships between people and the land. Unlike conservation biology, this work of protecting ways of life, or habitats for people, has no highly defined project selection criteria even though many of us in this room are doing it right now. It includes growing healthy food, having safe parks and clean rivers accessible to people, building relationships with the land that inspire our sense of ethics and art, maintaining a culture of mutual-aid and an appreciation of local beauty, defining our limits as responsible creatures, protecting our cultural and ethnic diversity --all of which contribute immeasurably to the health and well-being of all species on this planet.

We need new guiding principles for land conservation.

Imagine, for a moment, that the purpose of conserving land is to help *create a new kind of people*. Imagine that the human being as it was meant to be – fully expressed, joyful, innately responsible- is an endangered species that truly needs a healthy natural habitat.

This vision for land conservation suggests that our highest goal might just be *to help people think and act differently*.

“Land and people” conservation gives us hope of finding a way for all of us to be at home on the land no matter where we live or how long we’ve lived there. It gives us a powerful new benchmark for land conservation, where the alchemy of human cooperation, activism, and the wild leads people to dwell and imagine differently, to find their own souls.

And it will also be a force in helping us to find the soul of our nation.

Thankfully, there are hundreds of examples where land conservation is bringing people together with the earth and restoring a sense of empathy for all of life.

Classie Parker organized her neighbors in Central Harlem to take better care of one another by creating community gardens on vacant lots. On a quarter-acre, they produce food, tolerance, beauty, and a powerful relationship to the land. Classie told me “There’s love here. Don’t you feel comfortable with us? That we’re not going to judge you because you’re a different color or because you’re a male? Do you feel intimidated? Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?”

Glenn and Kathy Davis are learning Hawaiian traditions and rebuilding Hawaiian culture by bring young Hawaiians back to the Taro fields. Glen told me “now that we’ve really come back and are committed to the taro again, there are more birds singing in the jungle. The water is flowing again. We have come home.”

The Nez Perce are using land and the natural world as a source of cultural and personal healing. It’s direct evidence, also, of the power of land conservation to create social change. They are proving that the best way for the Nez Perce to fight drug-abuse and alcoholism is to restore the salmon, and to bring back the wolves, and to ride across the land on their own Appaloosa.

Miguel Chavez is healing the deep ethnic divisions in his native Santa Fe through the creation of a new downtown park and farmer’s market. Miguel explained to me “Without a sense of place, people become criminal to one another. We lose a sense of loyalty to one another. Our ethics arise from a sense of belonging here. Our ethics will arise from this exact piece of land”

These stories challenge us to think and speak differently about the work of land conservation, and also offer the promise of much greater impact than our work has had to date.

I have heard others say that we are on the brink of a Great Forgetting, a point where our relationships are so fractured that we have almost forgotten why they were important in the first place. We have nearly said the final good-bye, having long since shaken hands, and are just now waiting to shut the door. But not quite. We hear a piece of music and feel a deep unexplained stirring inside of us. We climb a mountain in the fall and are swept away by the beauty. Our love for this land, this life—all life—has us by the throat even when we don't have the words to speak.

Our ties with the land are so fragile right now that we can hardly even speak of the pain we feel in the broken places. Until we can speak, as a culture, of that loss, we will continue to lose more land than we could ever possibly save.

I prefer to believe that we are on the brink of a Great Remembering, a time when America's prosperity allows us to reconsider what matters most to us, when we are punished enough by "The world I know is gone" that we can find the bravery to show self-restraint and self-love. The path to the great remembering is through the healing of land conservation and the healing of ourselves, through a million different ways to show our forbearance and to reconnect with the life that is around us.

My appeal to you is to consider the health and well being of your place in the world in terms of the quality of the relationships between the land and the people who are there.

This is not nostalgic. We must go forward to nature, not back to it. The future of the conservation movement rests on our ability to understand and explain this statement.

This might best be described as the effort of conservationists to change culture as efficiently and effectively as we learned to change title.

We are entrusted with exceedingly important work. Our chosen path is to help rebuild the broken relationships on this earth, the first one being between people and the land.

I believe we can. That you can.

September 11th required that we listen and be aware, and it is helping us today to develop the humility, sense of fairness, and wider view of the world necessary to create the magnitude of change that we aspire to. This is a time for reflection and absolute boldness. It's a time to experiment without sacrificing any discipline. It's a time when we must allow what we care about most to guide everything we do. To be wild, they say, is to be bold, untamed, and free. This is a time for us to practice our wildness.

Our greatest achievement is not being able to say "we saved this place," but being able to say, instead, "You belong here. You are home" Land conservation can become the story of how the soul of the land became the soul of our culture, signaling over and over our place in the world.

Thank you.