

Beyond Saving Places to Saving Relationships

Peter's presentation
to the
Quivira Coalition's
5th Annual Conference
Albuquerque, New Mexico
January 14, 2006

I am both a farmer and a witness, which is to say that my relationship with the land runs deep and wide. My family and I rely, for a humble portion of our livelihood, on our ability to care well for animals and to grow good food. I am also a photographer and writer, for these are the ways that I express what I feel for the world.

And I am a father. Having two daughters requires me to speak the truth, to take the risks that I will take with you this morning. My commitment to my children, and to your children, is the source of my work, which means *I choose to act out of love.*

And I'm also the very person you may feel divided from. I'm from the east coast, raised primarily in an urban context, and I spent 18 years working for a national conservation organization. I was once an urban person advocating for conserved lands in someone else's community, and now I'm farming in a state that is deeply impacted by urban values and ways of life. I come from both worlds, and this is well represented in the messages I got from two friends when they learned I was going to be speaking here at the Quivira Coalition's Annual gathering. One, a professor at the University of Oregon, begged me "not to let the romance of the story of ranchers take precedence over the profound losses created by their livestock grazing." She went on to say, "those of us who are in agony over the loss of native biodiversity somehow just don't

make it into their stories.” Another friend, a former cattleman in the Klamath Basin, said to me over the phone, “Wish I could be there with you, but since I was forced to give up my days of working the land to join the environmentalists the only relationship I have is with my computer.”

We are a house divided and full of contradictions. Courtney White calls these opposing voices “squabbling siblings” while noting that they utterly depend on one another. Indeed, and let us remember what Lincoln said in 1858: “a house divided against itself can not stand”

In *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt writes, “I think I have told, but if I have not you must have understood, that a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of that vision until he has performed the vision on earth for people to see.”

I recognize the elements of an important vision taking shape in the bone and muscle of what Quivira Coalition stands for, but you have the burden of making that vision real; not through words, but through performing it on the earth for people to see.

This is a vision about the health of the land, and it is a prophecy about the nature of our own purpose as humans. The vision says that the health of people and the health of land are inseparable. It says that people can do good, as much as they can do bad. It says that human care for the land can increase the diversity of life. The vision says that land is the foundation of our cultural house. Please be alert as you make these powerful assertions because they challenge the broken underbelly of our lives and, yet, there are many good and

thoughtful Americans whose experience of life says you are wrong. Because the stakes are so high there are many who deny, question, and attack. And this is exactly what they should be doing.

These are critical times, requiring our self-awareness, insight, and a steady hand. This is not a time to fight fire with fire; it's a time to fight fire with water. This is not a time to argue; it's a time to listen. This is not a time to speak of divides; it's a time to speak about bridges.

The environmental movement has not served the land well by assuming that conservation is more a legal act than a cultural act. By that I mean, assuming we can protect land *from people through laws as opposed to with people through relationships*. Laws exist for when relationships fail. And because so many of our relationships have failed, many have exchanged their faith in the notion of relationship for answers within the legal system. This is both tragic and fatal.

My life experience of land, community and politics suggests that places and diversity of life endure best when cared for by humans in their daily lives, and that human ways of life are best preserved by simply living them. As a nation and as an environmental movement, we've spent too much time separating people and the land and precious little time being in dialogue about what is a healthy relationship between the two.

My life is an attempt to answer this question for me personally in Vermont and for my native region of New England. I have watched the diversity of life on our Vermont hill farm increase as we have built topsoil, grown food in the fields, heated ourselves from trees in the forest, and returned the health of our

grasslands through our sheep grazing. I've committed my life to helping people and communities strengthen themselves through a healthy relationship to land in my own native region where we receive 38 inches of rain across four seasons. I feel confident about how, with that healthy human relationship, the land can also benefit. But I can't say what's healthy here.

Like many Americans, urban and rural, I know very little about the health of land, water and people in the west. It defies my logic, and my sense of humanity, to destroy some land to protect others. As Wendell Berry puts it, it's like the famous three-legged pig that was too well loved to be eaten all at once. I see a connection between this joke and some cattle grazing in the arid west. To survive this impasse, all of us must have the courage to see freshly.

I came here from Vermont to tell you that America is listening to what you say, and watching what you do. We're hoping you have a true story, one that can help us make the long turn toward light. I have faith in the core of your story – that relationship is as important as place -- but this is not a time for blind faith alone.

Together –environmentalists, ranchers, and everyone in between- our objectives are quite simple: we want our country and our land to thrive. Our problem is also quite simple: we have not yet told a story that sticks. We have not yet told a story that speaks to everyone. We have not yet told a story that is about what we love, rather than what we fear. We have not yet performed that vision on earth for people to see.

Our need, today, for a true story that can be followed challenges Quivira Coalition to define your work not just in terms of relationships, but to acknowledge there are good and bad ones and to show that you know the difference between the two.

If you have read Dan Dagget's books, which I did for the first time in preparation for joining you here, there's not much I can add to your knowledge of relationship as a new paradigm for our healthy culture and for any movement toward healthy communities. What I would like to contribute to this conference is the knowledge that the divides may be different than you think, that you are not alone, that there are opportunities to connect across boundaries for greater health of the land and country.

Our country *is* a house divided, today, but which of the divisions really threatens most the land and a land-based culture? This conference describes the divide as "urban-rural" but there are many other divides in this country: rich and poor, black and white, red state/blue state, and all of these are changing our land and our American culture.

Here are some of the symptoms of the divide: today there are more malls in America than high schools. Since 2004, we have more prisoners in this country than farmers. And today the top 1% of the US population now controls 1/3 of the nation's wealth.

All of these statistics point to us being a nation of consumers rather than producers. This problem is at the root of much of what concerns us at this

gathering. No land boundary will survive a suffering humanity. Nor will any land survive a humanity whose goal is to consume more than it can restore.

I live in one of the most rural states in America – Vermont. Our largest city consists of 45,000 people and our capital has only 8,000; and yet a great divide is emerging in Vermont. ***Vermont is filling up with people living urban lives in a rural place.***

The history of Vermont's relationship to the land is revealing and helpful. 140 years ago, Vermonters lived extremely close to the land and that relationship became overbearing. Ultimately, both the land and the people collapsed under a bad marriage. The last mountain lion was shot in 1881. Around that same time, black bear, fisher cat, turkey and deer were virtually extinct due to overgrazing and the deforestation of our hills. The human population crashed in response, leaving tell-tale cellar holes in what is now forested land. Squirrel replaced venison in the dinner pot. The Norway rat, in 1900, became the most pervasive creature in Vermont.

Fast forward one hundred and twenty-five years and Vermont's human population has finally exceeded where it once was, and has created a more mutually beneficial relationship to the land. Biodiversity has also increased. Turkey, deer, bear are thriving. Nearly 80% of our landscape has returned to forest. The rivers are much cleaner than they were 50 years ago. There aren't as many farms, but those that are here are thriving. The most important evidence of Vermont's success is that we have the highest percentage of people who earn some of their livelihood from the land. More Vermonters are in the woods, in the fields, on the land than in almost any other state in America.

Back in the 1970's, the people of Vermont, then one of the poorest states in the nation, asked themselves a critical question: what is a whole community and how do we get there? We defined a new, healthier relationship to the land and, frankly, we did that through a set of environmental laws that set limits on people. Vermont has prospered under those limits, but also because those laws encouraged our chosen ways of life, and defined our community-on-the-land.

And now Vermont is changing again. There are fewer and fewer of us who hunt in the fall, who sugar in the spring, who earn some portion of their livelihood from the land. The average Vermont six-year-old receives 30,000 advertisements before they enter first grade telling them what they should love and who they should want to be. My children are growing up at a time when rural Vermonters *want* to live like folks in New York. More and more Vermonters' experience the land by admiring her beauty through the window of their car as they drive to work, or on weekends when they run, hike, or ski.

There's nothing wrong with that relationship. It's good, but it's probably insufficient to engender the level of care and attention *that the land needs in return*. It hasn't become a mature relationship where both parties rely on one another, giving mutually to one another.

Vermont is quickly evolving from a land-based culture, one capable of producing what it needs to feed and shelter itself, into a consumer-based culture, one that is largely dependent on someone else's land and labor. For example, although I live in a fertile agricultural valley dotted with farms, most folks eat food transported from thousands of miles away and purchased in a

chain store with little connection to our community. Another way to describe this is that we're evolving from a whole community into a large collection of disconnected individuals. Writ large, we're evolving from a nation of citizens into a nation of consumers.

A colleague once said that rural communities are organized for production and urban communities are organized for consumption. But now we see our rural communities becoming consumers as they lose their relationship to the land. The urban/rural divide may not be so sharp after all.

What happens when people and communities lose that relationship with the land? Do the values stay? Do laws protect what's already left the heart? ***I think not.*** And that's the great misunderstanding of the conservation movement. ***Laws can not protect what's already left the heart.***

All of our so-called environmental problems are people problems, which is to say that they concern the yearnings of the human heart and soul. This is true about sprawl, about the loss of wilderness, about the decline in biodiversity. These very real problems are reflections of our own diminished selves: our isolation, our greed, our impatience, our lack of hope.

And one indication of this broken heart is that 42% of the private land in Vermont is now posted no trespassing. I don't believe this is protecting that land; I believe it is encouraging the disconnection and further isolation that drives our people to become care-less, to slowly close their hearts to the land and to one another. Our Vermont landscape is being fragmented by good

people wanting second homes to fulfill what is often a fantasy about living in a rural place.

Sound familiar? And what is it that threatens us? It's not urban thinking or city people. What threatens us is this competing story of what it means today to be an American.

And what is it that we're asked to give up in this new story of being an American?

In our pursuit of more of everything, we're asked to leave the land and much of what the land has to teach us about being human and living in community. Without the land to remind us of what is true, the story we follow is not the most honest or helpful one but simply the one that is told the loudest. It's the story where the only point of trees is board feet, the only point of farms is money, and the only point of people is to be consumers. In that story, we learn that the only person that matters is ourselves, and that the only time that matters is now.

We are told this smaller, isolated world is sufficient; yet we are rarely satisfied by it. *So much of our lives seem to be about having more, but feeling less.* We all recognize this personality of craving and desire, but few of us want it to be what carries our soul and spirit through the world. We want instead to be defined by our sense of compassion and justice and wholeness with the rest of life.

We want to be defined by our relationships; and the most important, the most fundamental relationship is our connection to the land.

That fundamental choice between connection and disconnection is both epic and largely unspoken in our lives today. Every moment of every day the choice is made and the results play out. No one is left untouched, and the results are seen everywhere. This is the struggle for the soul of our country.

How can we carry on this American experiment under these terms? What does success look like without some sense of relationship to the land and shared humanity? When one stops to look, it's not a pretty picture.

In this struggle, our sense of personal identity -- who we are and what we want to become -- shifts from a focus on land, community and relationship to a focus on commodities, individual interests, and the size of our wallets. I had one of the largest landowners in Maine, the owner of a forest products company and a pillar of the business community tell me this summer, "When the market is king, the land is toast. And when the land is toast our communities dissolve. When our communities dissolve, what's the point of doing business?"

Richard Louv's book is important for our era because he names the divide as our capacity for direct human experience, our willingness to struggle for a relationship with land and with one another. It's a divide most provocatively stated in the health of our children, but a divide felt none the less by many Americans. So many of us, today, are children of a broken lineage.

Twice, now, I've returned as an adult to the childhood landscapes that most inspired me only to find them obliterated.

I remember a magical pond deep in the woods of Connecticut that I camped along many times as a thirteen year-old. I can still find inside of me the sense of awe and excitement of coming upon this hidden spot and realizing that human hands had created it perhaps a hundred years before. There were giant oaks on either side of a stone dam wide enough, perhaps, to drive a mule and wagon across. There was a gentle rise of land overlooking this tiny quarter acre pond and here my friends and I must have camped a dozen times in the summer of '74. The spot was so special to us that we did what young teenagers will do; we carved our names in the beech trees and called the place "The Kingdom".

I returned on a thanksgiving day twenty-five years later and wandered silently with my daughter for more than an hour through a sub-division, crossing cul-de-sacs back and forth, looking to find my pond. I was sure I was in the right place, but nothing around me was the same. The stream was gone, and the gentle ravine was gone. When I was about to give up and accept that this was no longer a place but now only a memory, I found myself oriented in just the right way so that everything clicked in place and even though the land had been transformed by bull-dozer beyond recognition, my body re-membered. I re-connected with a place that had died.

Across a stretch of pavement and immediately adjacent to a two-car garage was an old beech tree with "the Kingdom" carved in it.

The woods behind Bull Run Farm did not contain any known threatened species of plant or animal, but they did have a profound impact on one little boy's experience of growing up. I was that little boy. I can only remember how that land had helped me explore, learn, and use my imagination. What will it mean for the child who now live where I once grew up, who don't have these natural places?

Many more Americans love the land than would call themselves environmentalists, and they feel this loss. To care about the land in this way is neither conservative nor radical; it is a form of consciousness. People who care conserve; people who don't know, don't care.

Where does one take a stand? Those who believe in the market more than the relationship are not kind to small places. I take my stand with all those who still understand the power of relationship, and in fact there are urban people who crave that relationship (I'll introduce you to one in a moment) and who are our allies, just as there are many rural people whom we have lost.

How do we then bridge this divide?

A new model of environmentalism is taking hold in the east and in the west that is intentionally and successfully bridging divides by showing that people, land and community matter most. This new land movement treats relationship as important as place, inspires action rather than demands it, and is linked by values rather than divided by geographies and strategies.

This new land movement speaks to urban and rural people and asks them alike, what is a whole community and how do we get there?

Doesn't matter if you call this work "finding that radical center" as they do in the west or "building whole communities" as we do in the east, we're held together by three common approaches:

- 1) Commitment to see the problem with fresh eyes
- 2) Commitment to think and act with the big picture in mind, in terms of how whole systems work.
- 3) Commitment to practical solutions that work on the ground

Seeing the problem with fresh eyes requires re-thinking who the opposition is. Wendell Berry writes recently, "Mere opposition finally blinds us to the good of the things we are trying to save. And it divides us hopelessly from our opponents, who are no doubt caricaturing us while we are demonizing them. We lose, in short, the sense of shared humanity that would permit us to say even to our worst enemies, we are working after all in your interest and your children's. Ours is a common effort for a common good. Come and join us."

Just before coming here I received a message from an old friend, someone I trust, who wrote passionately, "What I really disagree with, Peter, is the characterization of those of us who want to see native systems functioning on lands where those native systems CANNOT function with cattle and sheep, as somehow unable to be graceful about the harmony of land with people. I'm a person, too."

Indeed, she is. And we need her voice in this room. She is not against the relationship, she is merely asking us to see it from her perspective. To her, the

question is not who loves this land more, but what is this land needing? She asks us, how do we restore our integrity by allowing the land's integrity to be restored?

She is *not* the opposition, although it might not always feel that way. We share a love of the land; but when we argue with biologists and conservationists we're squabbling about the terms of the relationship. There's a much tougher force out there that wants the relationship gone altogether, that doesn't care about land, period..

Our work is about putting these pieces back together again, and not just for us but for every one else, and for the land itself. That means working the contradictions and holding the tensions. Your truths are too important to be undermined by not being inclusive at this critical moment in time. Our strength comes not from the hardness of our positions but from our ability to see across the divide to recognize allies.

Some of the most important work that can be done is to create the safe harbors where different people can have honest and sustained dialogue with one another, where people can ask reciprocal questions. Why do I need you and why do you need me? Why does the health of the land need us working together?

This is the work of Center for Whole Communities. Each summer, we gather hundreds of diverse leaders in the new land movement—ranchers, urban gardeners, food security advocates, wilderness advocates, politicians- to find

shared values, better ways to collaborate and new tools for measuring our success.

The second defining characteristic of this new land movement is its commitment to re-think problems in the context of the larger systems in which they exist, and to see the sum of the parts. We call this whole thinking, and it's a radical departure from how the environmental movement has self-organized with specialists working on narrowly defined problems and with few who are able to see root causes or the big picture.

Quivira's focus on land health is a great example of whole thinking. You make a profoundly straightforward proposition: from the health of the soil come the health of our people and the health of our communities. Going from the small to the big helps people to see the connections and relationships between things. And by grasping those connections, we find the possibility of new ways of describing the values we place on land.

When viewed in its parts --the biota and hydraulic functions—the importance of soil can be lost to even well-intentioned people. But viewed through whole thinking, we begin to see soil for what it is: the foundation of our cultural house. When one absorbs this powerful map of interconnected relationships, one can not miss the truth that the connections between things are as important as the things being connected. And from this awareness comes the hallmark of the new land movement, that conservation is about restoring healthy relationships --human and nonhuman—to create a land community that is a healthy whole. We might be able to fence people out, but we can not fence out the effects of people. It follows then that we can't save land through

our separation from it, but only through our integration and our sense of belonging *to* it.

With relationships in mind, our vocabulary changes for the best. We drop *sustainable* and start using *healthy*. Would you want your marriage described as sustainable? We shy away from *saving, preserving* because we're not trying to pickle anything or anyone. We use instead words like *nurturing and cultivating*. And all the words associated with restoration: renew, heal, revive, the one I like the most is Repair. We re-pair the land by bringing ourselves whole again with it.

Re-thinking conservation as the promise of more enduring relationships is seeing the world with new eyes. And this new worldview can create changes in our culture as important as any in the history of our species. Because within all the sets of relationships that we call the land are the essential clues for living a responsible and joyful life today.

If we believe in these relationships, then we can see more clearly how the act of conserving land is also an act of conserving human values. Land is soil, of course, but land is also soul.

Relationship to land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. This new land movement sees the conservation of land as a cultural act to sustain our democratic traditions, to conserve the role of the citizen, to nurture respect and forbearance, independence, and the source of our sustenance.

We can't do this by buying food at a national grocery store chain any more than we can do this by destroying the integrity of our soil.

Listen to these names. Rowe Mesa, Pecos Valley, Black Willow, Amigos Bravos, Ute Creek, Valles Calderas, Wallawa Valley, Great basin, Star Creek, Chico Basin.

These places speak of your history. They are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up your bodies. They are your alchemy of land, people, and story. These are the places that define you, inspire your belonging, replenish your souls, and remind you that where you live is like no other place in the world. These places give us our citizenship, our joy, our sense of responsibility. And there is no end to these connections. To conserve land, then is to conserve the possibility of health and peace.

This new land movement is also defined by its commitment to find practical solutions on the ground and to share the stories of people going forward to the land in a different way. And we've found that the most effective lever is food: proving our human relationship to the land three times per day.

Almost unbelievably, there are more than 2,000 community-supported farms in this country today when there were almost none just 15 years ago. There's one CSA operating in New York City that connects 120 farmers with 40,000 urban food subscribers.

The number of farmers markets has grown tenfold in the last decade.

Or what about the more than 1,200 public and private schools that have started their own school gardens.

And what about the last presidential campaign that divided our country into red states and blue states? That same election, 161 different communities across this country, conservative and liberal, passed bond campaigns to protect local landscapes. This is average people, with very different politics, going forward to the land to re-connect.

This desire to re-connect is seen in the growth of local land trusts: more than 1,600 land trusts created over the last twenty years. Now we have to help these good folks to understand that relationship is as important as place, that they can best “protect” this land by helping people to love and understand it. There are now 100 land trust in America who have working farms on the land they steward.

None of this was probable or even possible ten years ago.

The very best aspects of the American spirit – our sense of community, generosity, dependability – came from the traditions of how we lived on the land. The opposite is also true: our intolerance, our capacity for greed and inhumanity has been played out on the land. All of these possibilities are in us, and get written on the land to form our memory and our morality.

The soul of our country is borne from those epic choices around our relationship to land and to one another. And that relationship can be good, bad or plain ugly. It’s good when the relationship is about respect, joy and

limitations. It's bad when it shows us stealing from our children for ourselves, and it's ugly when it alienates anyone from their rights as humans.

To struggle for a healthy relationship with the land through how we live, what we eat, and who we welcome at the table, is transformational because it ultimately *is* about love and healing. It's about relationship. And most people get this, without having to know all the science, because we humans -at our core- are more tuned to relationship than to isolation.

Let me end with a story about this possibility. I want you to meet my friend, Classie Parker. She's a third-generation resident of Central Harlem in New York where she lives in the same building off Frederick Douglas Boulevard where her mother was born. Ten years ago she was flipping hamburgers at White Castle, barely able to keep her family together. She felt stuck on a street where no body knew one another and where the drug dealers ran everything. Classie especially feared for the future of her father who was growing old and needed some way to spend more time being active and outside.

She didn't aspire to be an activist and didn't have a grand vision about running a community program. But Classie got the radical idea to turn the vacant lot alongside her apartment building into a garden. That was almost ten years ago and today Classie produces food, beauty, tolerance, and a relationship to land for more than 500 families in central Harlem. Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, just a quarter acre, but for the people of 121st Street the garden is their own piece of land to which they have developed a very deep personal attachment. These are Classie's words:

*We think of ourselves as farmers, city farmers. Never environmentalists.
Don't call me an environmentalist. We love people and plants; we love being with the
earth, working with the earth. There is something here in this garden for everyone.
And any race, creed, or color . . . now, can you explain that? This is one of the few
places in Harlem where they can be free to be themselves. It's hard to put into words
what moves people to come in this garden and tell us their life stories, but it happens
every day. There's love here. People gonna go where they feel the flow of love.
There is a difference. You come in here and sit down, Peter— don't you feel
comfortable with us? Don't you feel you're free to be you? That we're not going to
judge you because you're a different color or because you're a male? Do you feel happy
here? Do you feel intimidated? Don't you feel like my dad's your dad?*

Classie boiled it all down: “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?” I remember laughing a bit nervously as Classie said this because I wasn’t prepared for her candor and hopefulness. I paused just a moment, and then looked up at her father, sitting ten feet across from me with his feet firmly planted on the earth, both hands resting on canes, eighty-seven years old, garden dirt on his face. “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?”

Passing one another on the street, our eyes might not have met long enough to see one another’s humanity. But there on that patch of earth, what we had in common at that moment was profound: it was the soil, that place, the love and hope that Classie held for us, and the awareness that my own pulse beat in his throat.

This is the soul of the land. It is also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul that I believe is there waiting to be spoken to. This is the generosity,

respect and inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. You know these stories, too, because they are your stories.

Patty Limerick told us yesterday, “The world’s most powerful symbols system is in your possession.” And I don’t think it’s just the cowboy; It think it’s the land itself that is the powerful symbol.

Our relationship to land is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we accept this truth or not. Few forces will have as much effect on the course of our lives as that relationship. The relationship between soul and soil.

Some walls grow higher each year, it’s true. But others crumble down. The example of our healthy lives in relationship to land is what our world desperately needs to resolve, rejoin, render whole and, finally, to reconcile

Even though most relationships with the land are tenuous right now, the far majority of Americans know that their *true* wealth or security *isn’t* in their bank accounts, but comes from the stories about the people and places in their lives; our true health and security comes from our relationships.

This is the way we will translate the soul of this land back into the soul of our country.

(###)