



Creating a New Land Movement with Children

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Sit back and listen to these words: 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 my biography. These words speak of the places and relationships that have created me. These are the waters, the mountains, the forests, the food, the dreams, the people, the memories that literally make up my body. Without these particular places in my life, I would not be who I am. And every person has their own biography of place.

This particular kind of biography is rarely talked about, though it is of equal importance in forming our character, our intellect, our sense of social obligation as the more typical biography about where you went to school and the career titles you've held. Our biography of place is fundamental to our personal success, and the health and success of our nation.

So here's the challenge, the reason why we are all here together today: day by day, the number of Americans with firsthand experience of nature dwindles. This allows us, as a culture, to destroy more and more, drifting further away from the anchor that has sustained us physically and emotionally for eons. We see the results everywhere: we have a harder time talking with one another, we have more fears, our physical and emotional health diminishes, and we become more easily manipulated. And soon we find to our amazement that we have become a nation addicted to things.

And these conditions impact our children most of all.

I bring to this gathering the strong and unequivocal belief that our relationship to land, *good, bad, and indifferent*, is ***still the enduring story of our lives*** whether we accept it or not. Even in

2007, few forces will have as much affect on the course of our lives, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

Pause for a second. Think back to when you were 8, 10 and 12 years old. Re-connect with that place that most inspired you as a young person. Perhaps it was your grandparents' farm, or a park, an urban garden, or a pond where you grew up, or a place that you visited just once. Now, show of hands, for how many of you would that place be impossible to go to today simply because it no longer exists?

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

I remember a magical pond deep in the woods of southwestern Connecticut that I camped alongside 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 half-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-dozers beyond recognition, my body re-remembered. I re-connected with a place.

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 didn’t contain any known threatened species of plant or animal, but they did have a profound impact on one little boy’s experience. I was that little boy. I can only remember how that land had helped me to learn, explore and use my imagination. The base-line of human experience has changed for today’s generation of children growing up in my old neighborhood of Connecticut. What will it mean for those kids for whom the natural places to play, explore and learn are smaller and smaller?

Thanks to Richard Louv, there’s a name for it today: nature-deficit disorder. And here’s the result: Today, our culture produces more malls than high schools, more prisoners than farmers, and eats up the land with a similar appetite: 250 acres per hour. David Orr tells us that the average American child today can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but can’t identify ten plants or animals native to his or her own region.

Tell me, what’s the spell we have fallen under to create this world we live in? Tom Wessels, the great educator, reminds us that our declaration of independence begins, “we the people”.

“We the people” was the original American story, but captains of industry said this story had to change to “me the consumer.”

And that powerful modern story is now woven into the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children each year. This spell says that the Earth is a warehouse for our use, that nature is inexhaustible, that we have rights to it but no responsibilities, that nothing has value that can’t be converted into money. This spell whispers to us hourly that the point of forests is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to be consumers.

This spell has fattened our pocketbooks and lengthened our lives, but it has also created a dangerous and deeply unfair world of haves and have-nots, and pathology of disconnection and

alienation. One evidence of this disconnection is that 25 percent of all Americans now experience serious clinical depression during their lifetime. And if your family income is over \$150,000 a year, the incidence of anxiety and depression is even higher. Is this American dream bringing us progress or extinction?

Today we are experiencing the site-effects of a failed story: namely our own greed, addictions, loss of relationships, loss of land and loss of other species of life.

Let me go further. Many of the exact things that define the healthy human experience are threatened today by this story.

- Our ability to judge between what is real and what is artificial
- Our sense of our spiritual or metaphysical place in the “big picture”
- Our sense of belonging
- Our sense of tolerance/ acceptance of other life

The writer and ecologist, Robert Michael Pyle, coined the phrase “extinction of experience” in his important book *The Thunder Tree*. He writes:

People who care conserve; people who don't know don't care. ***What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?”***

People who don't know don't care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?

And the child who doesn't know the wren is the child who is afraid of walking to school, the child who has already begun to fear and to put boundaries around herself. How will our children love and protect in the future what they do not know now?

And, of course, this child is merely a portrait of our decisions and lifestyles. As David Orr says, “Children have no voice that is not our voice and no power that is not our power.”

The massive, vital work of education and conservation today is to put the child and ourselves back into nature, and to reweave this still spectacular landscape with the human experience.

Conservation can be powerful medicine for what most ails our nation, because within our experience and relationship to nature are the essential clues for how to live joyfully and responsibly. Our healthy relationship to nature is the means by which we humans generate and renew the big transcendent values such as community, meaning, beauty, love and the sacred, on which both ethics and morality depend. Our healthy relationship to nature, therefore, is deeply and directly connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. In other words, our relationship to nature is a source of our health and wholeness.

Here’s the rub. It’s hard to say these words but I must: conservationists have been very good at protecting places and have largely failed at protecting relationships. Today, 42 percent of the private land in America is posted *No Trespassing*. Nearly 70 percent of land protected by private conservation organizations is posted *No Trespassing*. In the span of my lifetime that sign has become America’s best-known symbol of our disconnection from the land and a common reminder of our fear of one another. Seeing those signs reminds me of the extent to which we have all become children of a broken lineage.

Imagine if everyone understood that the No Trespassing signs simply didn’t apply to our children?

Here’s an even larger example of where this problem takes us: Conservationists have been enormously successful in protecting land, marshalling the money and skills to purchase more than 30 million acres but are Americans, by and large, closer to that land or to the values that the land teaches? *To what degree have our conservation efforts brought people and the land closer*

together? To what degree have our conservation efforts created a more balanced and healthy American culture?

I would answer, not enough.

How do we – *as a movement of people who care deeply about children and the earth* – make a kind of conceptual revolution from saving places and species to saving ourselves? My experience from 20 years of working in land conservation is that today there are three topics, or doorway issues, that allow us to enter many more American homes with a compelling story around which we might create a healthier culture:

- 1) the health of our children
- 2) the health of our food
- 3) the growing divide between those who have these things and those who do not.

These three issues are the foundation of a new way to engage with Americans about what matters most in their lives. Imagine how different today's environmental movement would be, in message, practice and supporters if its focus was children, food and fairness?

The work of Center for Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today's movements for change. We welcome to Knoll Farm hundreds of very different leaders: urban gardeners, ranchers, wilderness advocates, native activists, human rights workers, politicians, teachers, journalists, biologists, to find shared language and story and to learn how to collaborate together in very powerful ways. In a world filled with divides, we help groups to look across those canyons and to recognize new allies.

We teach that relationship is as fundamental as places and things. Conservationists have made an error in assuming that their work is more a legal act than a cultural act. By that I mean assuming one can protect land *from people through laws as opposed to with people through relationships*.

And so conservationists must focus on the human heart as much as on the land itself. And what the human heart needs and craves today, and has through all through the ages, is relationship and connection to the larger, more meaningful diversity of life.

I bring to this conference a challenge to my brothers and sisters in conservation to redefine our work as the restoration of our relationships to land, beginning with our children.

Why should we care? Because we will never replace the dominant culture of fear with a culture of care and attention until children, and all of us, have a relationship to nature.

The child not in nature is the symbol of this moment in time, the time of our becoming a new movement for change.

We also teach that no one can ever effectively demand change, but only strive to inspire it. Today's most important work is not about making manifestos and demanding change, but revealing in the population what's already there.

Finally, we teach the need for a new story that helps people to find their way out of the old story.

Stories change the way we act in the world. They help us imagine the future differently.

Stories entertain us, create community, and help us see through the eyes of other people. Stories help us dwell in time, and help us to deal with suffering, loss and death. Stories teach us empathy, and how to be human.

As Alison Deming said, we tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one another. Stories open us to the claims of others.

Story is ultimately about relationship. The soul of the land becomes the soul of our culture not through information or data alone, but through the metaphor and analogy of story.

And the best evidence I have is this: Martin Luther King did not say, “I have a *plan*”. He said I have a *dream*, and he told a series of stories that many American’s easily understood and could identify with. I do have a dream for this conference.

I have a dream that one day our nation will have a cabinet level position called, The Office of Future Generations.

I have a dream that two children growing up in Chelsea will have the same privilege of my two children growing up in Vermont: that is to see the Milky Way at night and therefore know where they are and who they are.

I have a dream that no child in America will live further than a ten minute walk away from a park or natural place.

I have a dream that every child in America appreciates the beauty of this (moth) better than the power of this (Nike swoosh).

The people of India who have been trying to protect the Narmada River have a saying that goes “You can wake someone who is asleep, but you can not wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

Our stories must wake the people who are afraid and pretending to be asleep. And we can best do that through empathy, compassion and love ... not fear and pessimism or even logic. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way.

Let me go further with this idea by introducing you to Classie Parker.

Classie’s a third generation resident of 121st Street in Central Harlem, New York City. She grew up in the same building off Frederick Douglass Boulevard where her mother was born. Classie

didn't aspire to be an activist and didn't have a grand vision about running a community program. She was flipping hamburgers at White Castle and thinking about her mom and dad who were growing old and needed a way to work and be outside. 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.

That's the soul of the land. It's the generosity, patience, respect and inclusiveness that comes naturally to many Americans. It's also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul that I believe is there waiting to be spoken to by us. It's what we all want our children to taste and to know.

Some walls grow higher and higher each year, it's true. But other walls crumble down. The example of our healthy lives in relationship to nature is what makes walls crumble down, and what we desperately need to resolve, rejoin, render whole and, finally, to reconcile.

Even though most relationships with the land are tenuous right now, most 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. Many Americans do understand that our true health and security comes from the strength and wisdom of our children. It is our children who will or will not translate the soul of this land back into the soul of our country.

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