

# Generosity and Gratitude

Public Lecture

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Honored to be here. I love Bellingham, and you'll be relieved to know that I'm not staying. I'll go home where I belong.

I want to dedicate our time together this evening to one of the most generous and grateful men I have ever met: Chuck Matthei. It is an example of my bond with you that Chuck inspired your work here in Bellingham, but also our work in Vermont.

Sit back and listen to these words: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Lion's Head, Sages Ravine, Bash Bish Falls, Spruce Knob, Dickinson's Reach, Moosilauke, Makalu, Arun Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Sunset Rocks, Mad River, Knoll Farm.

That's my biography. These words, these places, tell my story. These are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up my body. This is my alchemy of land, people, and story. And each of you has your own similar biography.

I can't speak of myself without speaking of these places, and I can't speak of these places without remembering something of my past. Our relationship to land, good, bad, and indifferent, is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we believe it or not. Even in 2006, few forces will have as much affect on the course of our lives and our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil. And if you doubt this, juts stand in front of your favorite mall and ask yourself, what does this place say about me and my community?

And I am a father, a farmer, and a writer. All of these things of me to speak the truth, to take the risks that I will take with you this evening. My commitment to my children, and to your children, is the source of my work, which means *I choose to act out of love*.

All of us participate daily in making those epic choices between fear and love and the different human behaviors that result: Hoarding and the building of walls, or generosity and acts of gratitude.

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.”

This is a powerful vision imbedded in the title of this lecture series that suggests a way of life, a certain health and wholeness about people and the land, and a prophecy about the nature of our own purpose as humans. The vision says that people can do good, as much as they can do bad. The vision says that as much as we need to earn a living, we also need the chance to make a life, and the quality of that life comes not from what we cling to and hoard, but from what we are willing and able to give away. I believe deeply in this vision, and my contribution to this series of thinking about Generosity and Gratitude will be to explore its role in our relationship to land.

My vision is that land, and our relationship to it, is foundation of our cultural house, and the course of our lives and the life of our communities, and is determined by our generosity and gratitude toward that land.

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, through their generosity and gratitude*. Laws exist for when generosity and gratitude have left us. And because this has happened so much in our country, from among the left and the right, 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 communities thrive when cared for not by laws alone but through the generosity and gratitude of people in their daily

lives. As a nation and as an environmental movement, we've spent too much time separating people and the land because we don't believe in people's capacity for generosity and gratitude.

Our country *is* a house divided, today, but which of the divisions really threatens us the most? There's the urban-rural divide, and there's also the divide between rich and poor, black and white, red state/blue state, and all of these divides are changing our land and our American culture.

Many of these divides have their origins in our capacity for generosity and gratitude. To quote Daniel Quinn, the author of *Ishmael*, we have become a nation of takers as opposed to a nation of givers. This epic choice between taking and giving is at the root of what concerns us this evening. 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.

On the other hand, generosity and gratitude helps to replace our culture of fear with a culture of care and attention. Paul Schissler calls this a culture of abundance and I agree.

What does a culture of abundance taste and feel like? It's a community where people are honored to serve one another, it's a community where safety is the number of people you can call when things go wrong, not the number of burglar alarms or police you have.

A culture of abundance is resilient because it honors diversity in people and places. And diverse systems, ecology tells us, is a strong system. A culture of abundance knows how much is enough and doesn't strive for growth at all times. Growth demands and creates homogeneity, to grow requires economies of scale that make people and places look the same. Growth is rarely generous or grateful to small places.

An abundant culture is always asking itself what matters most?, and is therefore able to protect and carry those things with it into the future. An abundant culture is not nostalgic, but is always looking to the needs of the future, particularly the not yet born.

Generosity and gratitude emerge also as the emotions that we express when we find our safe place in the world.

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

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

Vermont is quickly evolving from a land-based abundant 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 tribe of givers into a tribe of takers.

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.*

What's been called an "environmental crisis" is not only an external crisis about land and water and biodiversity. It is equally an internal crisis about our hearts and our diminished selves: our greed, our disconnection and isolation, our lack of imagination.

And one indication of this broken heart is that 42% of the private land in America 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.

That fundamental choice between connection and disconnection 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.

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.

Show of hands. How many of you could return to find the place that most inspired you as a child? For how many of you would it still be there?

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 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 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-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?

There’s a word 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. The ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan 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? It’s a powerful spell, woven into the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children each year, and that turns our hearts away from the land and away from one another. 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% 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.

That’s what wealth tastes like without some sense of shared humanity and shared relationship to the land.

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

“So it goes, on and on, the extinction of experience sucking the life from the land, the intimacy from our connection. This is how the passing of otherwise common species from our immediate vicinities can be as significant as the total loss of rarities. 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?

The story of our relationship to land, defined by our sense of gratitude and generosity, becomes the story of our true wealth: the people, places and creatures in our lives.

There is no human gene for war or aggression, nor is there a human gene for greed; war and greed is not human nature.

We’re all admonished and brainwashed to believe these are inevitable simply because it serves the status quo. *The economic and political structures we create for ourselves give us the social clues to be our better selves or our worst selves.* If we believe in generosity and gratitude, we must only act gratefully and generously to the people and the land that surrounds us. Generous acts like saving land and creating affordable housing help us to be our better selves, and foster a culture of respect, forbearance, tolerance and peace.

The world is made up of molecules held together by story.

Stories change the way we act in the world. They help us imagine the future differently. Stories are easily understood by different people, so they help us to understand one another.

Stories entertain us, create community, and help us see through the eyes of other people. Stories open us to the claims of others. 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.

We tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one another.

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.*

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.

The people of India who have been trying to protect the Armada 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. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way.

There have been many who have helped me to see this: the people with whom I lived 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 great homesteader and social critic, Bill Coperthwaite.

Bill’s inspiration and strength come from his love of the land that has sustained his bold experiment in living. There are four miles of Down east coastline and tidal estuary that Bill calls

home and this land and he have gently shaped one another in a relationship that's lasted *forty years*, in which an enduring quality of care and attention has made him and the wilds inseparable.

In watching how Bill carries the land in his heart and mind, I have learned that the essential purpose of being alive is to be in relationship. I can't say it any other way: In just living his life, Bill has elevated for me what it means to be human. Bill shows us *by his life* that everything you pile up outside your heart is lost. And we desperately need his story, like we need oxygen, to show us the possibilities of another way of living.

Their form of genius is not limited to Maine or Nepal or any rural place and to make this point, let me introduce you to Classie Parker.

Classie's a third generation resident of 121 first street in Central Harlem, New York City. She grew up in the same building off Frederick Douglas 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—who, for the most part, never leave Harlem—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, patience, respect and inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. You know these stories, too, because they are your stories.

Within all the sets of relationships that we call the land are the essential clues for living a joyful, responsible life today. Our healthy relationship to land is the means by which humans generate, re-create, and renew transcendent values such as community, meaning, beauty, love and the sacred, on which both ethics and morality depend.

Our healthy relationship to land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits.

Let me tell one more story to make this point.

This is a story about restoring people to their land, which is to say it's about cultural and personal healing. Eight years ago, conservationists were about to close on a 10,000 acre ranch in eastern Oregon and convey it to BLM as winter habitat for elk. Just six weeks before the closing, the project manager got a call from the Nez Perce nation who said that piece of property contained the cave in which their ancestral leader, Chief Joseph, was born. The Nez Perce had no little money, but a whole lot of history and connection to that landscape. After much effort, a deal was struck that enabled the Nez Perce to buy that ranch and to return to Wallawa County 125 years after they were forcibly removed from that land by Federal troops.

One can quickly imagine the social value of this conservation effort to the Nez Perce people, but what did it ask of the white ranchers who had come to dominate this land since before the times of the Indian wars?

For a people who were forcefully removed from their land five generations ago, becoming a good neighbor requires a Herculean act of forgiveness. The return of the Nez Perce to their Precious Lands somehow helped to inspire that forgiveness.

The largely white community of Enterprise, Oregon, felt the same lessons and started thinking and acting differently because of the return of the Nez Perce. The community was deeply divided over the appropriateness of the high school's mascot, the Savages, when the Nez Perce became the new neighbors in town, and armed guards were required at the board of education hearings, but it was the kids in town who finally made their parents see that it was good that the Nez Perce had come home, and they did away with the Indian symbol.

Three years later, The Nez Perce had entered into a remarkable partnership with US Fish and Wildlife and the Cattleman's Association to re-introduce ... the wolf. And three years after that came the most amazing change of all: their ability to then deal morally and practically with one of the most difficult issues of the West: the control of water. The Nez Perce partnered with white ranchers and irrigators to voluntarily reduce the amount of water flowing to ranches so that salmon could be restored to the local rivers, an initiative that shares control of the river and makes neighbors out of salmon.

Land, People, wolves, salmon. Fairness. It had to happen in that order.

Some walls grow higher each year, it's true. But others crumble down.

It is our sense of generosity and gratitude, particularly a round the land, that encourages powerful process of reconciliation. It is generosity and gratitude that helps to crumble down the walls between us, and between us and the rest of life. This is the way we translate the soul of the land into the soul of our country.

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