



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

“Land is Relationship”
for
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One very hot Saturday in July, I found myself on 121st Street in Central Harlem trying to get perspective. For an hour or more I sat on the corner of Frederick Douglass Boulevard eating peaches and taking in the neighborhood. There was constant motion everywhere: motorcycles racing each other down the boulevard, vendors selling sunglasses and old record albums, children playing games at my feet, an endless flow of people. But amid all the noise and pavement and broken glass, there was a quiet green garden. An eight-foot-high chain-link fence could barely keep the sunflowers from pouring out into 121st Street. With two large townhouses protecting either flank, the garden itself was just plain bold and beautiful. A dozen discarded lawn chairs had been retrieved and organized loosely around leaning tables and empty crates as if a card game or a good meal had just been finished. I could see rows of corn, plots of vegetables, climbing snap peas, grapevines, fruit trees, and a dogwood. I could hear birds. Men and women of all ages were hanging on the chain-link fence talking to friends on the street, and then quickly turning back into the garden with a hoe or a laugh.

Five Star Garden is breathtakingly beautiful and heavy with life. It is stewardship and wildness wrapped together and dropped down on 121st Street. Classie Parker, a third-generation resident of Harlem, got the idea to turn a vacant lot into a garden so her aging parents could have a place to work and be outside. And now Classie produces food, beauty, tolerance, and a relationship to land for people throughout her part of the city. Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, less than 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:

Once I started working with the earth, the love in people started coming out. People I didn't even know, strangers literally would come in and say, "Oh, I love this." And they started telling me their life stories . . . where they came from, how old they were when they first started. They were telling me things that they didn't even tell their own people. So it was like a healing for them, too. When they left they seemed changed.

We think of ourselves as farmers, city farmers. Never environmentalists. We love plants, we love being with the earth, working with the earth. But 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 is your dad?" I remember laughing as Classie said this, and I paused from our work to look 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. What we had in common at that moment was profound: it was that soil and that place and the love and hope that Classie

could wish for both of us.

This is the soul of the land. This is the sense of generosity, patience, respect, and inclusiveness that comes naturally to us when we have a connection to the land and to one another. Land is a physical place, of course. Land means the mountains, streams, forests of our lives. Land means soil, trees, plants and animals, gardens in Harlem, but it is also an idea for something much larger. Land is also a process, a manner of being in relationship. And by relationship I mean dependencies and reliances among people, among species, between the whole of the land community. Land is love, and land is reconciliation.

For a generation now, I have called myself a land conservationist. But now I understand that the conservation movement has past, and the land movement has been born. Conservation simply is no longer a relevant term. Frankly, I *do not* want to conserve the world we are in today. I am working for change, for relationships, for equity and fairness toward all of life, starting with our own. The root meaning of healing is to make whole. I want to make whole the land and the people. Today, to be a land conservationist is to translate the soul of the land back into the soul of our culture. It is to be a shepherd for reconciliation, to help our culture be healthy, and to preserve the possibility of peace.

To struggle for a relationship with the land, through what we eat, appreciate, touch or admire from a distance is transformational because it ultimately *is* about love and healing. And most people gets this, without having to know all the science, because we humans - at our core- are more tuned to relationship than to isolation. We are more nourished by meaning and connectivity than we are by anything else. We want the relationship.

And even though our 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 or in the numbers of troops stationed on others' land, but comes from the stories about the people and places in their lives; our true health and security comes from our relationships.

Looking to the land for health and meaning is not a nostalgic retreat. It does not mean going backwards, but is the act of going forward differently by taking advantage of the best things our culture has to offer and the best things that the earth has to offer. We are seeking to create a thoroughly new relationship with the land that fully reflects our modern lives. It is the act of confronting life and making real choices about what sustains and what diminishes us.

For some, looking to the land might mean planting a vegetable plot on a city lot. For another it will mean supporting an open space bond referendum in their town. For others, it might mean spending more time with their families hiking and camping. And for someone else, looking to the land might be a quiet act of civil disobedience: simply saying “not me” to the culture that wants us to work, to buy, to conform. Looking to the land is going forward to that new future where we know where our food comes from, where we each take responsibility for creating more health in the world, where we re-assert that our character and our joy come from our relationships to the people and creatures around us. Looking to the land, no matter where one lives, is the personal act of returning to the values that the land has always taught: resilience, continuity, reliability, honesty, patience, tolerance, diversity, awe, connectivity, beauty and love. Living by those values brings us back to the land, no matter where we live. Returning to them is our challenge, from our hearts and our bodies, to what this world would otherwise have us be.

I am both farmer and wilderness advocate, which is to say that I work the land and also stand aside in awe of it. I can not separate my love of cultivated fields and orchards from my love of all things wild, for one informs the other and both make up who I am. 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. My two young daughters asks me to speak the truth, for they will come of age when the earth is expected to experience more change than anytime since the ice age. The maple trees that give our Vermont hillside it's fiery red glow in the fall and that are tapped each spring to make maple syrup are among the last they will know; young ones are regenerating but will not likely grow to maturity in our forests. The black bear that roam our woods leaving bits of their fur on our fence posts will not likely be there

with her when our girls are grown. Much of what lives and grows in the hills of Vermont, including us, will change dramatically over the next fifty years due to climate change. Our lives will be significantly diminished. How do I explain to my daughters that they, not me, will bear the burden of standing witness to that change?

It's my commitment to them, and to this earthly life, that is the source of my activism, which means *I choose to act out of love*. While love is my intent, I am reminded every day of my fears. And I acknowledge that most of my actions in life are choices made out of either love or fear, and result either in bringing people together or pushing people apart.

Our culture is dominated by that push of fear. We fear loss. We fear one another. We fear what might be done to us. We fear change. We fear knowing the truth. We fear truly feeling both the beauty and the dis-ease of the world. We fear what we can and cannot do. Our culture plays upon these fears, as has been amply demonstrated by the advent of National Security Warnings, which don't tell us what to be afraid of but just that we ought to be afraid. Fear motivates us to take action, it's true, but it ultimately diminishes us because it leads to anger, isolation, powerlessness and meaninglessness.

Human love offers a vital and yet complicated alternative. And, let's face it, not everyone is open to expressions of love. It is strange to me that love is such a powerful emotion in our lives, and yet anyone who speaks of it, especially in professional contexts, is often labeled "soft" as if love wasn't valid or rational enough. People express love in many different ways, not all of which is healthy. Love can be liberating and love can be possessive, but it is a more transformational emotion and starting point than fear.

Our culture has spent the last 500 years or more developing our rational minds, and that has brought us many advancements; what we need now is to develop our sympathetic minds so that the era of reconciliation can begin.

I hear from many Americans the refrain, "*The world I knew is gone.*" Indeed, this is the era of loss and diminishment. The loss in people's lives gets played out every day across

America: the loss of a cherished childhood landscape, the loss of a family farm, of a forest, the loss of ways of life, the loss of life itself. We have come to think of this loss as normal, but it is far from normal. The making normal of such loss is a form of slow Apocalypse. But focusing solely on that loss caters to fear and to unsatisfying hopes of stopping all change, both of which rarely contribute to a positive future. Instead, what do we want to carry forward with us? What do we hope our love will create? What matters most?

Our ability to identify with our sympathetic minds *what matters most*, to protect this and carry it forward with us, is the defining quality of our mature human existence.

The industrial growth society wants us to believe that our legitimate hunger for love, belonging, and esteem can be met through what we possess as opposed to how we relate with the world around us. We all recognize this personality of craving and desire, but few of us want it to be the vessel that 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.

The writer and ecologist, Robert Michael Pyle, reminds us how difficult this has become because of our own extinction of experience with the land. 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?"

I worry a great deal about our children not knowing the wren because it's another indication of the extinction of human experience, the diminishment of our lives, that many have felt at one time or another. ***How can we possibly conserve biodiversity while simultaneously allowing to become extinct our own human experience?***

For twenty-five years, the conservation movement has been guided by the principles of conservation biology, which have expanded our understanding of the natural world, made us less blind to the impacts of our actions, and have led to the protection of many species on the brink of extinction. However, that skill at observing and understanding the habitat needs of flora and fauna has never been focused on ourselves, the human species. Aldo Leopold spoke of this problem more than fifty years ago when he wrote, "One of the anomalies of modern ecology is the creation of two groups, each which seems barely aware of the existence of the other. The one studies the human community and calls its findings sociology, economics and history. The other studies plants and animals ... the inevitable fusion of these two lines of thought will constitute the outstanding advancement of our time.."

Leopold's "inevitable fusion" has proved elusive. Our movement has come to understand how the "web of life" extends through nature, but it has acted as if this web stopped at our door. Conservationists didn't create this problem; we are merely reflecting a larger fracture that exists in our culture. Sociologists are beginning to document what poets have always said: we hurt the land and we hurt ourselves. The evidence of this is now seen everywhere.

We live in a culture that now produces more malls than high schools, more prisoners than farmers, and devours the land at the warp speed of 363 acres per hour. Today, the average American can recognize one thousand corporate logos, but can't identify ten plants and animals native to their region. On the one hand, conservationists have been enormously successful in protecting land, marshalling the money and skills to purchase more than 14 million acres of land in the last decade. But are Americans, or is American culture, any closer to that land or to the values that the land teaches? On balance, despite important examples to the contrary, *neither the values of the land nor the creatures of the land are succeeding in America.*

The pathologies of isolation and alienation that characterize modern American life are sweeping biodiversity away. Most conservation biologists would agree, and are asking themselves how their work can have a greater impact on the way our culture behaves. Conservationists must begin to treat human alienation as a root cause of biological devastation.

So, this is the radical idea: the job of land conservation is to defeat our shrinking into separateness, our becoming lost to the connections between ourselves and the rest of life. The big work is to nurture the process of reconciliation, The vast majority of Americans, I truly believe, want a wild and healthy heart, but today their hearts are buried underneath layers and layers of a different story.

How can we possibly re-invent the conservation movement to value reconciliation and relationship as much as it values place and biodiversity? For that critically important evolution, we have turned to our brothers and sisters in the Vipassana community.

Five years ago, one of the country's largest and most successful conservation organizations, the Trust for Public Land (TPL), engaged in a journey of exploring its greater purpose. This has been a path of becoming more self-aware, and finding our greater wisdom as an organization of people. The process began simply enough, by inviting open discussions about our mission, by exploring motivations, by bringing into our community the best thinkers and social critics. Early on, we recognized the need to break out of our self-imposed boxes if we were to go deeper in our thinking. In 1999, our president and twenty other leaders of the organization journeyed to Vallecitos Mountain Refuge in New Mexico for six days of meditation, silence, and facilitated dialogue. Five years later, more than 120 of our staff have been to Vallecitos and the lessons learned there, tested by discipline of our everyday work, have birthed the new future.

Albert Einstein said, "You cannot solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it." Embracing meditation and silence as a tool for our discovery, we are searching for our greater wisdom as an organization, and we are creating the possibility of a more sympathetic mind for TPL. Together, these forces might just enable us to overcome the inevitable obstacles that keep any organization from acting on its highest values. TPL includes over 500 highly skilled staff from

all walks of life and spirituality. TPL's teachers --Grove Burnett, Wendy Johnson-Rudnick, Mark Coleman and Steven Smith-- have helped us to use meditation and silence as the most effective way to go beyond our divisions to find what binds us together. In our case, it is a fundamental belief in the capacity of the land to heal. They have helped us to develop the humility, sense of fairness, and wider view of the world necessary to create the magnitude of change that we aspire to. TPL sees this as a time for reflection and absolute boldness, a time to experiment without sacrificing any discipline, a time when we must allow what we care about most to guide everything we do. It is also a time to challenge ourselves with the hardest questions.

For example, when the Buddha said "my teaching is a raft whereon men may reach the far shore. The sad fact is that so many mistake the raft for the shore" we at TPL asked ourselves, What is our raft and what is our shore? And when Lao Tzu writes about superior and inferior virtue, we at TPL have asked ourselves What is real virtue in the context of land conservation?

One reason why more Americans don't vote or act more consistently the way conservationists would hope is that we are always talking about the raft as opposed to the shore. And, frankly, that raft is a scary place to be. Rowing it is hard work: it's out in the middle of the rough seas without a clear destination. How many people are likely to buy a ticket on that raft?

Many more people share environmental values than want to be called environmentalists. Why not, then, avoid the labels and stick with the values? We use the labels so often because we can't express the values. Using labels is further evidence of our confusing the raft for the shore.

The marketers of our consumer culture do not suffer these confusions. They feed Americans a very simple story about 30,000 times a year in the form of commercial advertisements: buy this product and you will be healthier, wealthier, sexier, more secure, have more fun, and be more successful. The distant shore is made to sound very close and alluring. No wonder our heartfelt pleas to live differently so often fall on deaf ears.

What is land conservation's larger purpose, what is the distant shore to which we are rowing? We might have many different answers and here are some of mine: we save land in order to slow the diminishment of our human lives and the lives of all other things on this planet. We conserve land because we do not accept the illusion that the fate of humans is in any way separated from the fate of salmon, or bald eagle, mollusks or liverwort. We conserve land because land is where our relationship with the rest of life, our fundamental happiness and security, is proven. We save land to make real for people the respect we feel for one another. We save land because it is in our relationship with the rest of life that we find enduring meaning and joy. We save land because it's far more fun, healthy, sensual, and enriching to live in a whole world.

Meditation is helping us to keep this wisdom closer to the surface of our work. Meditation is helping us to see the big picture connections between our efforts and to defeat the specialization of our organizations that makes it so hard to think and act in an integrated way. Specialization has enabled us to pass many critical laws and to protect millions of acres of land, but hasn't helped average Americans to trust one another enough to dwell and imagine their lives differently. It hasn't given us an integrated philosophy of how to live well. *To live well* means to care for the land as the only enduring way to care of ourselves.

Meditation has helped us to create a new set of Guiding Principles for land conservation, called Measures of Health (see www.wholecommunities.org) that gives the conservation movement its first ever values-based ethical standard, honors the habitat needs of people, and reforms how and why land is conserved. Through the insights of meditation, we have come to see the need to change how success is measured from acres, dollars and endangered species to a more complex understanding of our movement's ability to restore a sense of commonwealth, for humans and the other-than-human, in a world increasingly made up of haves and have-nots.

Meditation has helped TPL to understand that we can't compete our way into an ecological revolution. But we can offer people, through each and every one of our protected lands, a different view of the world that is simply healthier, happier and more realistic than the one our dominant culture would have us believe in.

Meditation has developed our sympathetic minds and given us the gift of whole thinking: viewing our work through the lens of kinship and integration. We are more able to speak of ecological truths, that the world of life is connected not separated. We are more able to take responsibility for the whole: linking cultural diversity and natural diversity, fusing civil rights and environmental rights, showing that the health of big wilderness is directly connected to the health of our core cities.

Viewing land as reconciliation requires that conservationists firmly put their work in a context of time and history. What we are "saving" is not so much the piece of land but the quality and integrity of our relationship to the land so that what we will and will not do is preserved in perpetuity. If we're lucky, the land will evolve and change forever, but it's our human attitude — our values — that most need to be "protected." Our laws protect land from us when we are at our worst rather than keep us together when we are at our best. Meditation has helped us to express what we are for, as opposed to what we are against.

Fifty years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote "there are two things that interest me: the relationship of people to each other, and the relationship of people to the land." Leopold was thinking deeply about both people and the land. He was part biologist and part sociologist or, more likely, he saw little distinction between biology and sociology. He understood the nutrient cycles of the soil and the integrated, holistic nature of the ecology of life. And he knew that people need a natural habitat in order to maintain healthy bodies, hearts and souls. Leopold saw the health of people and the health of the land as inextricably linked in a dance of hope and sorrow.

Whether you work in the forest, in the fields, in an office building, with a hammer, or with a hoe, or a pen, or a microscope, this life asks you to be awake. This life asks that you engender affection as well as knowledge and wealth. This is the way we might free ourselves from this culture of isolation to create an alternative culture of meaning and connection.

The desire to pull down those walls and to be in relationship is the single most important and defining motivation in human life. And yet we also know that relationships of all kinds are under assault in our culture: unions, management, families, public values are all falling apart. Our disconnections with the land has become the pattern of how we live with one another. There is just enough time for everything we need to do. Land and our relationship to it can be the most important thread that helps our culture become more aware of itself.

If 100 years from now there still survive grizzly, mountain lions, salmon, right whales, honey bees, healthy human communities, it will be because the land was protected *and* we helped nurture a more connected and sympathetic culture.

We will be better suited to meet people where they are as opposed to where we would like them to be. We will be better equipped to listen to different voices. Those who love the land in this country will feel more included in what we do. We will replace words like elitist, special interest, radical, extremist, big government with *community, tradition, restoration, fairness, freedom, love, the commons, democracy, patriotism*. Because we are more grounded in fairness, the stories of our connecting land and people will ring more authentically to much larger numbers of people. Because we will be speaking the truth, we will be respected for our courage. We will be hard on the problem and soft on ourselves. We will work out of love, not out of fear.

We will educate, convert, transform. We will heal, and be able make new sacrifices, and people will respect our integrity for these sacrifices. We will address root problems as opposed to always treating the symptoms.

Some walls grow higher, its' true. But others crumble down.

In 1997, TPL helped the Nez Perce return to their ancestral grounds in eastern Oregon from which they were removed more than 125 years ago. 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.

Allen Pinkham, former chairman of the Nez Perce tribal council, spoke for his tribe when he said: "Returning to this land allows us to practice being good neighbors again. Our neighbors are the salmon and the eagle and the wolves and, yes, particularly the white ranchers and even their ancestors who killed our ancestors and drove us off our land. The land teaches how we must all live together as good neighbors."

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. Many debated the appropriateness of the high school's mascot, the Savages, when the Nez Perce became the new neighbors in town, and they eventually decided to do away with the Indian caricature that adorned their building and basketball floor. The school board initiated a six-month community discussion about race, civility, and community life. Most remarkable, though, was their ability to then deal morally with one of the most difficult issues of the West: the control of water. The Nez Perce partnered with white ranchers and irrigators to reduce the amount of water flowing to farms so that salmon could be restored to the local rivers, an initiative that shares control of the river and makes neighbors out of salmon.

People, land, water, salmon. Reconciliation.

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