Address by Peter Forbes
to the
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I am equal parts conservationist, writer, and photographer. My home is a hill farm in the Mad River Valley of Vermont. I have a young daughter who will come of age when the earth is expected to experience more change than anytime since the ice age. I'm told the maple trees that we tap each spring to make syrup are among the last we will know; young ones are regenerating but will not likely grow to maturity in our forests due to climate change. How do I explain to my daughter that she, not me, will bear the burden of standing witness to that change? It's my love of her, and of this life, that shapes my view of the world and what it means to be a citizen of it.

I know all of you are searching for the ways to create a different world than the one we find ourselves in today. This is why your guild was created, and why each of you are here today.

I want to strengthen your faith in your work to teach us how we might create that different world. Most of you are in the forest every day, a fact alone that makes you unique, privileged as well as burdened with certain responsibilities. You make a living by what you earn, but you earn a life by the things you're willing to teach others. Your livelihood comes from wood in the forest, yes, but your purpose and meaning is in translating that forest for the rest of us. We are blind and need your help to see. That's your responsibility and burden. You speak a language of the woods, you read trees the way others of us read books, you know soils the way business people know venture capital. You pay attention to weather the way many other people pay attention to the stock market. Yours is such rare and important knowledge in this modern world. You, even more than my fellow farmers in Vermont, can help to reconnect us to the land because while we may eat food three times a time, we're likely to use wood dozens of times per day.

Show me that you can harvest wood in a way that sustains and even improves the life of the forest and you have elevated what it means for me to be a human. Tell me that my toothpick comes from the heart of old growth doug fir and my life is diminished.

Copywrite Peter Forbes 2003

As a lifelong conservationist, I can tell you with some authority that you make the land real for people **more than I do.** I may talk to people about recreation and human spirit, but you speak to them about work and livelihood. An most people work and have concerns about right livelihood far more than they do about recreation. You have the opportunity to reach more Americans, more directly and more profoundly.

I want to strengthen your faith in the power of land, but I also will be a loyal critic of our conservation movement and suggest, as strongly as I can, that we have a moral responsibility to do better and to do differently. I'm going to offer new guideposts to help us see how our work in conservation can lead to more of a change in our culture.

But I want to first say something about honest about grief. From many Americans, I hear the refrain, "*The world I knew is gone*." Indeed, this is the era of loss and diminishment. For me, this is most recently epitomized by the oil spill a month ago in Buzzards' Bay which caused catastrophic loss of life. But this is not unique, and there is a loss that 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.

There is, however, a positive, even hopeful meaning of apocalypse that we must instead turn to. In its Greek origin, Apocalypse meant *revelation, to reveal, or to lift the veil*. Imagine if everyone in America could lift a veil and suddenly see the world with new eyes, as it truly exists. Imagine if it was simply inconceivable to treat a forest as if it was a short-term commodity. We don't need more data, more reports, more oil spills, *we need new eyes*. The veil has to be lifted so the era of restoration and rehabitation can begin. We stand at the edge of that possibility. And there are glimmers of that restoration happening all around us. My favorite example being TPL's efforts several years ago to acquire and pull down Richfield Coliseum so that acres of asphalt could become acres of grassland once again.

So, let this be truly be a time of apocalypse: **not the end of the world**, but the moment that the veil was lifted.

This needs this to be a time of great revelation for the land community, as well. How do we apply our skills and resources to create the most good and the most change? We live with the awareness of all the problems, and we look at the tools we have at our disposal and, frankly, they don't always seem up to the job.

Virtually all of the so-called environmental problems our country faces are moral problems, which is to say that they concern the human heart and soul. This is true about sprawl, about the loss of wilderness, about the decline in biodiversity. Each is part of a crisis that every region of our country faces today: how do we live on this planet in ways that don't harm the rest of earthly life. How do we act out of respect, gratitude, responsibility, reliability, compassion? How and where do we get these values today?

We get them from our families, from our beliefs, and I want to suggest to you, from our connection to other life. In the sense of reconnecting us with the rest of life, land conservation is an awakening. It's a re-kindling of what is most meaningful inside each of us. I have seen how the act of conservation has brought into people's moral universe a renewed sense of justice, meaning, respect. This is a powerful, transformative part of land conservation that we rarely talk about, but within it is a way of creating greater change that we might have thought possible.

We conserve land 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, or osprey. We conserve land because land is where our relationship with the rest of life, our fundamental value and security, is proven.

The two core ideas to help us re-think the promise of land conservation are this:

1) We can't save land through our separation from it, but only through our integration and our sense of belonging ***to*** it.

2) The focus of conservation ought to be on the restoration of enduring relationships --human and nonhuman—to create a land that is a unified whole.

Re-thinking land conservation as the promise of more enduring relationships is like seeing our world with new eyes. And this new worldview can create changes in our culture as important as any in the history of our species. That's a big statement, I know. I wouldn't be so emphatic if I hadn't seen, dozens of times, how land conservation can have an affect on people way beyond the property line. And when we see this, it becomes our moral obligation to conserve land in a manner that helps people to live and imagine their lives differently.

And to do so will make it possible to live on this earth without destroying it and to know what is really possible for the human spirit.

Listen to these places where you work: Keewenah, Moosilauke, Greenleaf, Running Creek Cove, Goose Creek, Wolf River, Homewood, Ghost Dancer, Big Creek, Little Tennessee, Pleasant Gap, Yampa River, Fort Defiance, Black Mountain.

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 our alchemy of land, people, and story. When we show our care for these places that define us, we give ourselves the gift of memory and connection. These are the places that inspire our belonging, replenish our souls, and remind us that where we live is like no other place in the world.

The power of these places is *intimately* tied with the story of people, and a long history of human relationships to these places. And so, as we care for these landscapes, we must also care for the people who have lived there. This means confronting the complexity and messiness of culture, economics, and of relationships. It means asking conservation to lead with a bigger vision: to offer an integrated philosophy *of how to live well*. To "live well" means to care for the land as the only enduring way to care for ourselves.

Of course, the "good life" in America has come to mean something almost exactly the opposite: that our security and wealth and happiness come primarily from our bank accounts and not from our relationship with the world around us.

Without some new stories about our positive relationship with the life around us, there is only one story to hear and one story to tell. This is the story that is told in the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children every year. It is 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. We learn that the only person that matters is ourselves, and that the only time that matters is now.

This from Robert Michael Pyle:

> "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 each of us in this room has felt at one time or another. How can we possibly conserve biodiversity –the topic of your annual meeting- while simultaneously allowing to become extinct our own human experience?

This is a question about what we allow the world *to take from us*. How many farms and local forests can we lose before we lose ourselves?

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 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-dozers 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 children who now live where I once grew up, who don’t have these natural places?

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

Anyone who doubts that we still get our most fundamental cultural information from the land should drive out to your closest strip mall, stand in front of it, and ask yourself "what does this place say about me?" Or, as the Amish ask it, what will a change in this place do to my family?

It’s crucial, and smart, to look around us and to see that the world is not exactly the way we would have it.
(2 slides)

The land trust movement has saved 6.8 million acres of land, but I fear Americans are less connected to the land than ever before. In light of these realities, it’s important that we ask ourselves the tough questions: what is the role of land conservation or good forestry in a culture that has largely abandoned the land?

What is the meaning of conservation to a people who are building more malls than high schools?

Let me tell you a story can will answer those questions better than I can.

Classie Parker is a third-generation resident of Central Harlem in New York where she produces food, beauty, tolerance, neighborliness, and a relationship to land for people, all on less than one-quarter of an acre. 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.

Classie had a vision for a place where the old and young could work together. Next to her building was a 3,600 sf foot vacant lot that was crowded with crack vials, needles, abandoned cars, and garbage of every kind. Classie got the idea to create a garden on that lot for her dad to work on, and she recruited her brother, and a Spanish couple who lived nearby and their five children to help her.

Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, 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. 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.

(Slide: this is what land conservation teaches)

Our struggle over land is particularly transformational because it’s ultimately about love and loss and healing. It’s about relationships. 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 commerce and competitiveness. We want the relationship.

The far majority of Americans know that their *true* wealth or security ***isn’t*** in their bank accounts or retirement plans, but comes from the stories about the people and places in their lives; our health and security comes from our relationships.

And the act of land conservation is the telling of this story on a larger scale. Land conservation is the process of re-connecting people to the land, to the diversity of life and-by extension- to the values that the land teaches. The soul of the land is the sense of generosity, patience, respect, and inclusiveness that we feel when we have a deep connection to the land and to one another. The real job of land conservation is to more courageously and creatively bring these values into our culture. Many people are so compelled by this desire for connectivity and to do “what’s right” that it brings them out of their homes and private lives to protect the rivers, oceans and mountains of their lives.

And land conservation is no longer the work of a narrow subset of do-gooder Americans. Let me offer some concrete evidence: In the 2000 general election, there were 207 open space bond referendum around the country. These are elections were people are voting to put themselves into debt in order to save land. 87% of these referenda passed, and yet that same year we struggled to choose a president. Our country was terribly divided on politics, but resoundly clear about a love of the land.

We all want the relationship and connectivity to something good, because that's the primary thing that's been taken away from us by the industrial growth society. To better understand the threshold at which we stand, let's remember how humanity has already experienced two all encompassing revolutions, both of which were fundamentally about relationships. Ten thousand years ago, the agricultural revolution changed forever how we organized ourselves from hunter/gatherers into nation/states. And, roughly two hundred years ago, the industrial revolution greatly accelerated this same change to take us from citizens of nation/states to laborers or consumers of a global capitalism. Each of these revolutions changed the way we view ourselves and the world around us. Each of these revolutions contributed enormously important advancements to our quality of life. But each also has had a dark result: our further separation from the world of life and a resulting set of pathologies. The psychologist Thom Hartmann explains this human transition as "the breaking of the intimate bond with the world around us, the separating of ourselves into increasingly isolated 'boxes.'" Another psychologist, Theodore Rorzak, put it this way, "the earth hurts, and we hurt with it." I

One can view the last ten thousand years of human evolution as the process of burning the bridges to the world around us, the process of creating our own human-made culture at the expense of our relationships with the rest of life.

It's that severed relationship that we've got to heal. To do that, we've got to help people feel connected to the land, not removed from it. It is simply not possible, with today's far-reaching problems, to assume that any place on our planet can be protected***from*** people. It can only be protected ***with*** people. We must not throw out the people-land relationship; we must struggle to improve it.

What I'm saying is that *all land needs to be carried in people's hearts and minds* or all land will be abused.

How will people know what is sacred and essential to a whole life with out a strong connection to the land? It is our relationship to land, in fact, which gives us our highest hope of survival because it’s from that relationship that we develop our highest values: our sense of patience, commitment, and generosity.

The rate of clinical depression in America is ten times what it was before 1945 and this reflects our suffering for the world and for ourselves. So, this is the radical idea: the job of land conservation is to restore meaning to people’s lives, to defeats our shrinking into separateness, our becoming lost to the connections between ourselves and the rest of life.

Let me tell you another story, this one about land, family and what defines us.

Gil Griggs is 75 years old and has farmed the same piece of land in Billerica, Ma for the last forty years. Farming goes back over 200 years in Gil’s family. But the land around him has really, really changed. Billerica was once Boston’s breadbasket, but has now been sprawled almost to death. There were 8 big box stores over 200,000 sq feet in Billerica when a developer came to town looking to open yet another one.

Gil’s 25-acre vegetable farm was surrounded on two sides by big box stores. Two of them were empty and had weeds growing up out of the asphalt, but the developer decided to buy Gil’s farm, which he only leased.

Neither Gil nor the town had two nickels to rub together and so it was pretty clear that his farm would get developed. But his farm is where local folks bought their tomato plants in the spring and their pumpkins in the fall. The farm wasn’t spectacular; in fact, it was sandwiched between two existing malls. But somehow, people knew—even though it wasn’t something that could be proved by science—that the destruction of the farm would have meant a great loss to their community.

A small handful of dedicated people said they cared enough about Griggs Farm to leave their private lives behind and say to themselves: enough is enough! They took out ads in the local newspaper attacking the proposed development by saying “There’s more to life than cheap underwear!”

They got TPL to step in to buy the farm to protect it. They called a special town meeting. TPL's conservation efforts had given the community a last-minute chance to keep the farm, as it had always been, a place to buy locally grown food and to meet neighbors. The developer had plans to build a 300,000-square-foot mall on Gil Griggs's corn and vegetable fields. There was very little money to do the former, and the promise of great financial reward if the community allowed the latter.

It was a choice of mythic proportions: a small, working-class town already beaten up hard by sprawl taking on well-financed developers who were suing TPL and threatening the same action on the community itself. The town meeting had already turned down a request for funds to repair the high school roof, and yet this single act of conservation would cost the community over $1 million. It seemed inevitable who would win that night.

At the special town meeting, people were holding their children on their hips while they waited in long lines behind the microphones. They debated the alternatives as if the future of their own families was at stake. They were passionate, and angry, and alive. I heard in their voices the vulnerability and determination of people fully engaged in life. I saw in how they looked at one another that caring for the land went hand in hand with caring for their community.

David Suzuki wrote recently "consumerism has taken the place of citizenship as the chief way we contribute to the health of our society." While there is plenty of evidence to support this comment, *I saw something very different going on in Billerica*. Neighbors were expressing their allegiance to ideals, to one another, and to the land. I understood what this process was enabling them to affirm: citizenship in a specific place.

Conserving a small farm in the midst of asphalt was their own Great Remembering. I saw people thinking about a healthy future not in terms of what they could do for themselves but in terms of what they could do for others. They were seeing a solution not in terms of economic growth but in terms of relationships. They responded to that farm in a way that changed them and their community forever.

It was a wonderful victory for land and community, but that year this same developer bought $575 million worth of farms and forests *somewhere else* in America. During the hour that we took to celebrate the conservation of Grigg's Farm, they had likely bought two other farms. We can't compete acre-by-acre. Instead, we must appeal more boldly and directly to the soul of this country.

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." What's vitally important about this statement is that Leopold was thinking deeply about ***BOTH*** people and the land.   He was part biologist and part sociologist. He cared deeply about both the land and the people. He never separated them.   He understood the nutrient cycles of the soil and the integrated, wholistic nature 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.

And why talk about this relationship at all? Wouldn't it be easier and better, many say, if people just left nature alone? Much of nature does need to be completely self-willed, but to do that we must carry *all of nature* in our hearts and minds. Remember what Robert Michael Pyle said, "People who care conserve; people who don't know, don't care."

There's a world out there that both *doesn't know and doesn't care*.

Your lifework in the forest helps to make people whole by connecting them responsibly to al landscape and to a story bigger then themselves. This asks that you engender knowledge as well as affection, that we allow our love of the land to become a wildness inside of us, saving us and saving the land.

To sing, we must have a song in our heart but having lost our song, we pursue instead the singer. The real purpose of conservation is about helping people to find that authentic song within themselves. Conservation and a connection to the forest helps people to feel and taste what really matters most, by giving them a new story about themselves: one about mercy not might, one about generosity not greed.

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

It is our relationship to the land that helps a great deal to crumble down the walls between us and between us and the rest of life. The stories you create about good relationships with the land resonate with all humans more loudly, more courageously, and more joyfully that anything else we conservationists could ever legislate, negotiate or protect.   A relationship to the land is the way we free ourselves from this culture of isolation to create an alternative culture of meaning and connection.

This is a time when we must allow what we care about most to guide everything we do. To be wild, they say, is to be bold, untamed, and free. This is a time for us to practice our wildness.

This is the way we might help translate the soul of the land into the soul of our country.