



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

*Stories from the Land*

Peter Forbes

Presentation

To the

Connecticut Land Trust Convocation

March 25, 2006

Honored to be with you.

Sit back and listen to these words: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Lion's Head, Sages Ravine, Bish Bash 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 as the nature of that relationship. The relationship between soil and soul.

I'm an observer of how we live and an advocate for how we might live better. And having worked in many different cultures from the Himalaya to Central Harlem to rural Vermont, I continue to have great faith in the untold relationship between soul and soil.

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.

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 trees is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to consume. It tricks us into believing that the only person that matters is yourself, and that your legitimate hunger for love, belonging, and esteem can be met through buying things.

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

This truly is the era of unprecedented wealth, but it is also the era of unprecedented loss and diminishment. What does wealth taste like without some sense of relationship to the land and shared humanity? We have come to think of this loss as normal, as business as usual, but it is far from normal. The making *normal* of such loss is a form of slow Apocalypse. I ask you: is this progress or is this extinction? How can we carry on this American experiment under these terms?

It's hard to speak these words, but I must. What has been called an "environmental crisis" is not a crisis about the earth but a crisis about our hearts. The real challenge is our diminished selves: our greed, our disconnection and isolation, our lack of imagination. The spell tells us that progress pays no attention to the individual. The spell tells us that the dis-ease we feel is the inevitable cost of doing business, the unavoidable byproducts of creating wealth.

I call this spell The Big Lie.

To quote Dr. Martin Luther King, we need a stone of hope among these mountains of despair. The stone of hope is the ability all of us have to repair and to re-make ourselves whole again.

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?

Land conservation creates a different future, one that embodies what we really love and that inspires us beyond our individual needs. The story of land conservation is the story of our true wealth: the people, places and creatures in our lives.

Conservation’s real success is bigger than biological diversity, bigger than sustainable growth, bigger than farmland protection. It’s bigger than wilderness designations or food security. It’s even bigger even than the remarkable 120,000 acres conserved in Connecticut by land trusts.

The job of land conservation is to restore meaning to people’s lives, to defeat our shrinking into separateness, our becoming lost to the connections between ourselves and the rest of life.

Conservation’s real success is its ability to re-define for Americans their health, their relationships, and their sense of fairness. Our real success is the power of the all of the above to positively re-shape what it means to be a citizen of this country.

And this is important medicine for our nation, because the “who and what” of citizenship is being challenged. Are you a citizen today because you love and are loyal to this land, or only if you buy American and fly the flag? The demographics of every part of our nation are changing and conservation must change with it. Your bases of support are shifting and you need to know how to meet people and communities in new ways. There are powerful political reasons to collaborate with very different groups than you have in the past. And just as many conservationists yearn to be more engaged citizens, the bar of citizenship has been raised for you by others.

The work of Center for Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today’s land conservation. Our experience of land, community and politics has forged a mission based on three principles.

First, relationship is more fundamental than places or things.

Conservationists have made an error in assuming that your 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*. Laws exist for when relationships fail. And I see how we have exchanged our faith in relationship for a faith in legal structures called easements and fee acquisitions.

But what happens when people and communities lose that relationship with the land? Do the values stay? Can 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*. And the political proof of this is that the protections placed on Artic National Wildlife Refuge in 1976 have been challenged repeatedly by a different and competing set of values. Laws will not hold what has left the heart.

And so conservationists must focus on the human heart as much as 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 mystical, more meaningful story of life.

Some of you are rolling your eyes and saying “tell that to Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska.” But the Senator and others like him are no different than you and me; they are products of their culture.

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.* And this is the extraordinary power of land conservation to help create healthy people and whole communities. Conservation helps us to be our better selves, and fosters a culture of respect, forbearance, tolerance and peace.

Our second principle is the need to change their motivating questions of land conservation from how many acres have we protected to what is a whole community and how do we get there? The work of land conservationists is central to creating whole communities, but so is affordable housing, economic development and human rights. But not very often do these groups collaborate. Our work is to help these groups find shared meaning 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 are creating a powerful new tool, called Measures of Health, designed to help land conservation organizations to better describe and measure their own role in creating healthy, whole communities. Please visit [wholecommunities.org](http://wholecommunities.org) to learn about this work.

Our third principle is to ground land conservation in the power of story.

Stories are like oxygen; we need them to keep going. 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.*

One of the epic choices in our lives, a choice we make repeatedly every day, is the choice between fear and love. Politicians use fear and, quite honestly, so do conservationists. We use fear by focusing on the people will lose if they don't support us. This might be effective in the short term, but it caters to unsatisfying hopes of stopping change, a condition that rarely contributes to a positive future. Story helps us to replace *what do I fear?* With *how might I act out of respect, care and attention?*

When we work in an integrated way, and are truly open to then claims of others, conservationists will naturally begin to tell stories of empathy, stories about people coming to the aid of the land and one another, and this is the way you build long-term relationships.

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 only do that through empathy, compassion and love ... not fear.

Let me tell you a few stories about the journey that brought me here.

In the late 1980's I lived a completely different way of life and came to deeply understand the possibilities of what Wendell Berry calls "the gift of good land." I lived and worked in a subsistence-farming village in the Arun valley of eastern Nepal, a hard seven-day walk from the nearest road.

Everything in this community –from their clothes, to their tools, to their food, to their homes– was grown there and fashioned by hand, or brought in on someone’s back over high treacherous passes.

The terraced fields where rice and millet were grown were built by hand so long ago no one could say when for sure.

Time was counted in the cycles of the moon and in the passing of seasons of rain and snow.

Days and nights were spent outside, often in the fields or the jungle.

Their currency was rice and one’s labor, and their wealth was the neighbors who would come when something went wrong.

Life was hard and tedious, but there was always time for festivals, for rituals, and for ceremony to mark all the stages of life. The evidence of their skill and creativity was seen everywhere. No one went without food.

What I loved most was their sense of time. For them, time was life, not money. And life was not to be parceled out in minutes, or exchanged for money to be stored away for another day. Time to live was a gift from the ancestors. And so, speed was rarely an objective. They might work longer, but *not faster*. When more work needed to get done, more hands were invited in to do it. Community, not efficiency, was the result. Because there were no roads, they never, ever, went further or faster than their feet could carry them.

For them, the idea of *life* was inseparable from the idea of work. This meant that life certainly required work, but also that work afforded abundant time for life: for conversation, for debate, or for nothing at all. Those were the occasions I learned the most from .... when we would be a group and come to particular view, or to a moment in our work, and silence would overtake us knowing that it was better to let the land speak for us. I can still hear that land today. The voice is soft, expansive, filled with flowing water, swaying stalks of rice, children’s laughter, the caw, caw, caw of birds, the clunky handmade bells on the necks of water buffalo.

I want to remember this village *without nostalgia* for the way it truly was. Children died young, neighbors fought, women were often treated badly, harvests failed. The young wanted out. When the night grew quite around the fire, they wanted to talk about America and how much better our lives were, and yet this American had never before experienced the kind of authentic wealth they had.

All of us understand the need for people to have opportunity for better health, education and prosperity. But that evolution required that a bargain be struck to give up something equally valuable, perhaps, in the future, just like the Grimm's fairy tale of the Princess who must give up her first born in exchange for having straw turned into gold. Would as many of us have accepted that deal if the bargain was so clearly understood? And what is it exactly that we have given up? I'll try to answer that question in a moment.

The heart of the matter is not stopping change, but considering very carefully what matters most to us, and figuring out how we bring that with us into the future.

There have been many people who have helped me to answer these questions. One of those teachers is Bill Coperthwaite who I met a dozen years ago, just as my time in Nepal was coming to an end.

As a young man in the 1940's, Bill had enough smarts and creativity to be the first person in his family to go to college, and from Bowdoin to get a doctorate in education from Harvard. Bill's opportunities in life were unlimited, and at every turn he made the hardest choices: to be a conscientious objector during the Korean war, to study under Gandhi and later Scot Nearing, and to create his own singular life crafted out of his values and in opposition to the world around him.

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 Downeast 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. They live together. He's built osprey nests, gathered his water from hand-dug springs, and harvested mussels. He's made footpaths through the woods, where after years of pulling fir saplings by hand, he now walks through glades of birch and maple. He's transplanted the smallest of flowers and the heaviest of stone to make his place complete. He chiseled rock to create a landing for his canoes, and he's built a beautiful home by hand from wood and sun.

Bill and I have crossed miles of open water to explore a stretch of beach that might yield rope, or whalebone, or a revealing conversation about abundance and fairness. Bill's life has quietly offered me the proof that an individual, in our country and in this age, can still create a unique and authentic life, and that the *art of that life* is in its wholeness with its place. 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. And I desperately needed his story, like I need oxygen, to show me the possibilities of another way of living. Bill has showed me that everything you pile up outside your heart is lost.

And though Bill's life is hard, it is not about hardship. It's about love. It's the pull of his love of land that drew others and me to him, that draws so many people to places like Nepal. There is an intense yearning for the skills, but also for the pleasure of these people. People, who have not forgotten the old ways, which still feel the past in the wind, touch it in stones polished by the ocean, recognize its taste in the leaves of wild plants. This voice of life in them is made up of intimate knowledge, of moving wind and water.

(Classie Parker)

Let me introduce you to another friend, Classie Parker.

Classie's a third generation resident of 121 first street. 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. If we believe in these relationships, then we can see more clearly how the act of conserving land is also an act of conserving human values. Land is soil, of course, but land is also soul. Relationship to land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. The march toward whole communities sees the conservation of land as a cultural act to sustain our democratic traditions, to conserve the role of the citizen, to nurture respect and forbearance, independence, and the source of our sustenance.

This is a much more complete picture of the values that arise from our connection to the land: health, relationship, and fairness. These speak to our true wealth as a people and as a nation even though they are hard to describe and harder still to measure.

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

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 we tell about good relationships with the land resonate with all humans more loudly, more courageously, and more joyfully than 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 the way we translate the soul of the land into the soul of our country.

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