



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

Toward a New Land Movement

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I want to first express my thanks to Laurie Andrews and Adonia Ripple and the Jackson Hole Land Trust for bringing us together this evening. And I also want to thank the wonderful folks at the Murie Center who have been supporting my family, the staff of Center for Whole Communities, and our faculty from all over the country in a week long retreat in the embrace of these mountains. Thank you Brooke and Terry, Jacqueline, Molly, Madeline, Trevor, Callie and Lorna.

Every era matters, and every age probably thinks its time on earth is of the most consequence, so I want to reflect with humility on this moment of time. Certainly one can point to the invention of the steam engine(1725), the tractor (1854), the first extraction of oil (1892), the first nuclear explosion (1945) or the when the polar ice caps started to melt (1975) as events of great consequence. And they were. But today many of us fully understand that our collective actions, over one hundred fifty years, have made the planet very sick. The Christian Theologian Thomas Berry tells us that we can never be healthy people on a sick planet.

This is our coming of age moment when we walk the ridge between the evident destruction and the emerging creativity of our time.

Sit back and listen to these words: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Dickinson's Reach, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Knoll Farm.

That's my biography. These words, 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.

Here's a different biography, one of this place: Rendezvous Peak, Death Canyon, Antelope Flats, Teewinot, Sleeping Indian, Moose Creek, Signal Creek, Gros Ventre, Slide Lake, Nez Perce, Sioux.

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, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

The land is there waiting for us, for all of us. There's no special membership to join, and no required education before you start. It's open to bankers and farmers, people in business suits and people who can't afford decent clothes. It doesn't care if you're young or old, brown or white. What we need hasn't gone away, we have.

It's time to return. Our biology is hard-wired to it. We are always seeking its rhythms. The sounds of its heart beat calls to us every moment of every day. We answer this call when we dance. We answer this call when we stand in front of ocean waves and feel the power and grace. We answer this call whenever we merge our sense of awe with our sense of fairness; when we merge our love of land with our love of people.

Its voice is in the birds. Its care for us is the water that makes up our bodies. Some can taste it in ripe tomatoes; some can feel it in stones polished by the sea, or the kiss of a child. It is the voice of life; it is our intimate experience of moving wind, water and sky.

Some have wonder about what God created, and I have wonder about what nature created. But the wonder is what binds us together. That wonder is what we need. And it's not just there for

some of us; it's there for **all** of us. To care is not Republican or Democrat, conservative or radical. To care is simply human.

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

Twice, now, I've returned as an adult to the childhood landscapes that most inspired me only to find them obliterated. I remember a magical pond deep in the woods of southwestern Connecticut that I camped alongside many times as a thirteen year-old. I can still find inside of me the sense of awe and excitement of coming upon this hidden spot and realizing that human hands had created it perhaps a hundred years before. There were giant oaks on either side of a stone dam wide enough, perhaps, to drive a mule and wagon across. There was a gentle rise of land overlooking this half-acre pond and here my friends and I must have camped a dozen times in the summer of '74. The spot was so special to us that we did what young teenagers will do; we carved our names in the beech trees and called the place "The Kingdom".

I returned on a thanksgiving day twenty-five years later and wandered silently with my daughter for more than an hour through a sub-division, crossing cul-de-sacs back and forth, looking to find my pond. I was sure I was in the right place, but nothing around me was the same. The stream was gone, and the gentle ravine was gone. When I was about to give up and accept that this was no longer a place but now only a memory, I found myself oriented in just the right way so that everything clicked in place and even though the land had been transformed by bull-dozer beyond recognition, my body remembered. I reconnected 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 and it certainly wasn't a wilderness or a national park, but it 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?

Thanks to Richard Louv, there's a name for it today: nature-deficit disorder. And here's the result: Today, our culture produces more malls than high schools, more prisoners than farmers, and eats up the land with a similar appetite: 250 acres per hour. The ethno botanist 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 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. That's what wealth tastes like today without some sense of shared humanity and shared relationship to the land.

Let me go further. Many of the exact things that define the healthy human experience are threatened today: our ability to judge between what is real and what is artificial; our sense of our spiritual or metaphysical place in the "big picture;" our sense of belonging; our sense of tolerance/ acceptance of other life.

The writer and ecologist, Robert Michael Pyle, coined the phrase "extinction of 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 child who doesn’t know the wren is the child who is afraid of walking to school, the child who has already begun to feel boundaries surround her. And, of course, this child is a symbol of the disconnection that many of us feel which is why the topic of children in nature is such an important Trojan horse for talking with America about a set of modern pathologies that are increasingly felt by nearly all of us. Children are not *the only* way to initiate this dialogue in America’s homes about our failed relationships with the land. There’s a powerful three –legged stool on which our hopes for transformation rest: children, food and fairness. These three issues are the foundation of a new way to speak to urban and rural America alike about what matters most in their lives.

What we are witnessing today is a spectacular failure of the human imagination to recognize where we are. Where we are is facing the death of real human experience, and we have been blind to it most profoundly in our children. And, frankly, my beloved conservation movement has been blind as well.

What’s the role of conservation, then, in turning around this situation? What you care about is powerful medicine for most ails our nation. Within the land and within the acts of restoration and conservation are the essential clues for how to live joyfully and responsibly. 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. In other words, the commonwealth’s relationship to land is a source of its wholeness and vitality.

The motivating questions today can no longer be how much land have we protected for how many bucks, but what is a whole community and how do we get there together? As conservationists, are we ready to rise to this challenge? What is our higher purpose? Who are our allies and what will it take of us to join their side? When did we replace wisdom with data and information? *What tastes like truth today?*

Let me try to answer some of these questions by introducing you to Classie Parker. Classie's a third generation resident of 121 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 the garden is their own piece of land to which they have developed a very deep personal attachment. These are Classie's words:

We think of ourselves as farmers, city farmers. Never environmentalists. Don't call me an environmentalist. We love people and plants; we love being with the earth, working with the earth. There is something here in this garden for everyone. And any race, creed, or color . . . now, can you explain that? This is one of the few places in Harlem where they can be free to be themselves. It's hard to put into words what moves people to come in this garden and tell us their life stories, but it happens every day. There's love here. People gonna go where they feel the flow of love.

There is a difference. You come in here and sit down, Peter— don't you feel comfortable with us? Don't you feel you're free to be you? That we're not going to judge you because you're a different color or because you're a male? Do you feel happy here? Do you feel intimidated? Don't you feel like my dad's your dad?

Classie boiled it all down: “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?” I remember laughing a bit nervously as Classie said this because I wasn’t prepared for her candor and hopefulness. I paused just a moment, and then looked up at her father, sitting ten feet across from me with his feet firmly planted on the earth, both hands resting on canes, eighty-seven years old, garden dirt on his face. “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?”

Passing one another on the street, our eyes might not have met long enough to see one another’s humanity. But there on that patch of earth, what we had in common at that moment was profound: it was the soil, that place, the love and hope that Classie held for us, and the awareness that my own pulse beat in his throat.

That’s the soul of the land. It’s the generosity, patience, respect and inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. It’s also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul of the 95% of Americans who aren’t members of conservation groups but who are still there, waiting to be spoken to by you.

Classie helped me to taste what a whole community is and to understand what the role of land is in nurturing one. What’s a whole community to you and why should conservationists care? Because this is the time of our becoming. The things we care about, as well as the things that we choose *not* to care about, define who we are. And Jackson Hole needs you to care about what makes a whole community, and needs you to understand how conservation contributes to *and detracts from* it. Saint Augustine said never fight evil as if it’s something that arose totally outside of yourself. And so I ask you the difficult question that begs for both our humility and our self-awareness, how has land conservation unintentionally contributed to create the world we live in?

In this mature place in the history of conservation a gap has opened between what we practice and what we imagine we can be. We are too often cavalier about the power we have and ethically unprepared to use it responsibly. Today’s challenges are far more complex. We see that there have been unintended consequences of our work, and we struggle to find a new path. We need to care about what a whole community is because the world is changing and conservationists risk being left behind.

For example, the Latino population in America has risen by 58 percent in the last decade and almost 80 percent of Americans now live in metropolitan areas. Wealth has consolidated further, the top 1% of our population now controls 1/3 of the nation's wealth, creating a more dangerous and immoral divide between haves and have-nots. The poverty rate for African Americans and Hispanics is now nearly three times as high as that for whites. These are the realities of American life, and as we aspire to speak to more Americans we must understand that they are waiting first for our response to these everyday realities.

There are political and strategic reasons to collaborate with new groups. All the polling data suggests that people of color are the strongest supporters of conservation measures. For example, the Black Congressional Caucus has the longest, strongest pro-environmental record of any congressional caucus, but how often do their constituents see the benefits of land conservation? And you have likely already recognized that wholeness can never occur for some at the expense of others. Wholeness and vitality grow stronger the more they are shared by the greatest diversity of people.

The community legitimately assigns to you responsibilities that go beyond your mission statement. When conservation groups have been as successful as they have here in Teton Valley, it shouldn't be the least bit surprising that the public expects you to have ethical positions on housing, growth, wealth and the future. This call to conservationists is to make visible the ethics of not only *how* you work but *why and for whom*.

Finally, we need to care about what a whole community is because no property boundary will ever survive a suffering humanity. We speak of "protecting" land through conservation easements or fee acquisitions but how do these tools "save" land from climate change or acid rain or a public that simply no longer cares? To be truly meaningful and enduring, the work of conservation must be grounded not just in law statutes, but in the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people.

Wallace Stegner said that no place is truly safe until it has a poet. Conserving land is a powerful act of culture, and our actions are bigger than managing scenery, bigger than creating recreational opportunities, and even bigger than protecting endangered species. We must also conserve land with the specific goal of creating a more virtuous and resilient community. Many conservation groups have risen to these challenges by inspiring conservation, not demanding it. They know that if they are not intentionally, explicitly building bridges then they are probably creating further divides. They are joining with all of the other groups connected to the land movement – community revitalizes, environmental justice activists, public health advocates – to start the march toward whole communities.

Let me give you some very specific examples: There are conservation groups who are processing sustainably harvested wood from their land for affordable housing, and making their easements addresses the long term affordability of the land. There are conservation groups that are helping to bring locally grown food into their public school systems. There are conservation groups helping migrant labor to have healthier housing. There are conservation groups that are collaborating to bring farmers markets into lower income neighborhoods. There are conservation groups who have translated their newsletter and website into Spanish and other languages. All of these groups have discovered that this is not mission creep, but the exciting process of creeping into their missions, a process of becoming leaders by helping people to understand their relationship with the land.

Your work of conservation is bigger and more important than your smaller interests in easements, acres, plans, dollars, and tax benefits. What was once a movement guided by passion, vision and values risks being reduced to a technology. But the true benefit of conservation is our ability to put on the table a feast of values that reminds every one in Jackson Hole what is healthy, of what are fair, what is beautiful and meaningful, and what it means to be in relationship.

This moment of becoming asks something entirely different of us. This call is not to do more, not to do bigger, but instead to pause just long enough to reconsider the very questions that have motivated us and to allow fresh answers to evolve from why and for whom we do our

work. By asking ourselves what matters most and then being courageous enough to follow what our hearts tell us, we are elevating conservation from a technology to a life affirming wisdom.

One thing is certain, we can not possibly restore or conserve all the lands that need our attention or even that meet *our own stated goals*. Our old technology is simply not up to the job. 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 across America. But are Americans, by and large, closer to that land or to the values that the land teaches? *To what degree have our conservation efforts brought people and the land closer together? To what degree have our conservation efforts created a balanced and healthy culture?*

Conservation and wilderness and species preservation *has* strengthened our people and our nation. I would even argue that the most important thing our country has ever exported is the concept of national parks. But, today, we conservationists aren't going to positively influence more of our culture until we shift our attention from protecting places to nurturing human relationships with those places.

Numbers alone don't reflect our values, but they do control much of our lives. "Bucks and acres" don't effectively tell our story of reuniting people and the land. Numbers alone reflect the old story. The new story has to be about what we care about most, our desire to bring people closer to nature. But, it's hard to lead with our values because that's often leading with our chin. And, yet, didn't Rachel Carson lead with her chin? And didn't David Brower and Aldo Leopold lead with their chins? And Mardie and Olaus Murie? They did not play it safe, and this is not a time for you to play it safe either.

Why should we care? Because we will never replace the dominant culture of fear and emptiness with a culture of care and attention until more Americans, of all colors and privilege, carry the land in their hearts and minds. Powerful scenery and inspiring recreation are vitally important, and we will never be whole as a culture without wilderness, but the most direct way we will

reconnect Americans to the land is through healthy food, through children who roam outside, and through a daily experience of nature.

The work of Center for Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today's conservation movement. Our experience of land, community and changing demographics has forged a mission based on three principles. First, relationship is as fundamental as places and things. Conservationists have made an error in assuming that our 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. 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 Arctic 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 meaningful diversity of life.

We want all who care about the land to remember the possibilities found in our history. In 1964, we had a democrat president and a republican congress and we passed both a major civil rights bill and a major wilderness bill. These were issues which commanded similar sympathies from the far majority of the American public because they represented in our national conscience two halves of one whole. In a world filled with divides, we help groups to look across those canyons and to recognize new allies.

Our third principle is to ground our collective work for whole communities in the power of story. Stories change the way we act in the world. They help us imagine the future differently. Stories entertain us, create community, and help us see through the eyes of other people. Stories help us dwell in time, and help us to deal with suffering, loss and death. Stories teach us empathy, and how to be human. We tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one

another. Stories open us to the claims of others. Story is ultimately about relationship. The soul of the land becomes the soul of our culture not through information or data alone, but through the metaphor and analogy of story.

Martin Luther King did not say, “I have a *plan*”. He said I have a *dream*, and he spoke of his deepest values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might get to his dream. He knew that if he could reach people with shared values then he could respect them to move in the right directions of their own accord. What is today’s “I have a Dream speech” for conservationists? It’s a story certainly about children, and it’s a story about wholeness and respect of other life, and it’s a story about where our food comes from, and it’s a story about healing divides.

The people of India who have been trying to protect the Narmada River have a saying that goes “You can wake someone who is asleep, but you can not wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.” Our stories must wake the people who are afraid and pretending to be asleep. And we can best do that through empathy, compassion and love not fear and pessimism or even logic. And probably not plans. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way.

Let me tell one last 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 week before the closing, the project manager got a call from a member of 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 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 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 and higher each year, it's true. But others crumble down. Your work in land conservation helps to create whole communities by tearing down the walls that separate us from one another and from the land itself. Your conservation efforts can remind people what is healthy, what is fair, what is resilient, and what it feels like to be in relationship. This is the way you will translate the soul of the land into the soul of our country.