

What is a Whole Community? and Why Should We Care?

Peter Forbes' talk
to the
Bay Area Open Space Council
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Honored to be with you.

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

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

I can't speak of myself without speaking of these places, and I can't speak of these places without remembering something of my past. Our relationship to land, good, bad, and indifferent, is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we believe it or not. Even in 2006, few forces will have as much effect on the course of our lives, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

Gatherings like this become meaningful because of the questions they ask us to consider, and this gathering starts with one of the critical questions for our time: What is a whole community and why should we care?

I'll offer my own answers to this question through story, and through posing some questions of my own.

Who do we want to be? What is our purpose? Where are we on purpose and off 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?

Pause for a second. Think back to when you were 8, 10, 12 years old. Re-connect with that place that most inspired you as a young person. Perhaps it was your grandparents' farm, or a park, an urban garden, or a pond where you grew up, or a place that you visited just once. Now, show of hands, 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 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 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?

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 ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan tells us that the average American child today can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but can’t identify ten plants or animals native to his or her own region.

Tell me, what’s the spell we have fallen under to create this world we live in? It’s a powerful spell, woven into the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children each year, and that turns our hearts away from the land and away from one another. This spell says that the earth is a warehouse for our use, that nature is inexhaustible, that we have rights to it but no responsibilities, that nothing has value that can’t be converted into money. This spell whispers to us hourly that the point of forests is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to be consumers.

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

So, in light of these realities, a whole community is many things, but it starts with people in relationship to each other and to the land.

Let me go further with this idea by introducing you to Classie Parker.

Classie's a third generation resident of 121st 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 that I believe is 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? What’s the first word or idea that comes into your mind after hearing Classie’s story? Don’t edit yourself, just turn to the person to your right and tell them. Go ahead

Now, let’s try to answer the second part of this conference’s question, *why should we 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 the Bay area needs you to care about what makes a whole community, and needs you to understand how conservation contributes to and detracts from it.

In this mature place in the history of land 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.

What we care about is powerful medicine for what 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, recreate, 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 Bay area's relationship to land is a source of its wholeness and vitality.

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 work of conservation is bigger and more important than our smaller interests in easements, acres, plans, dollars, and tax benefits. What was once a movement guided by passion, vision and values is in the process of being reduced to a technology and even merely to a commercial enterprise. But the true benefit of land conservation is our ability to put on the table a feast of values that reminds every American of what is healthy, of what is fair opportunity, 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 regarding 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 cannot 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 one million acres of land in the Bay area. But are

Californians, by and large, closer to that land or to the values that the land teaches? *To what degree have our conservation efforts created a balanced and healthy American culture?*

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, too: the top 1% of our population now controls 1/3 of the nation's wealth, creating a 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 everyday 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 realities.

Every conservation organization in America today has both a moral and a strategic need to expand who is drawn to their work because their traditional bases of support are overwhelmingly white and rapidly aging. And in addition to attracting new supporters, there is the need to make new friends among developers, public health workers, politicians, housing advocates.

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?

Because of your success and visibility, the bar of citizenship is higher today for land conservationists than ever before. There's an ethical responsibility to address the needs of all Americans, and increasingly a diversity of people are challenging conservation to explain how you can control so much land and not look more like the community itself. Paint a mental picture of the full diversity of your community; now paint a mental picture of your land

conservation organization. How are they different? What would happen if those pictures were more alike?

The community legitimately assigns to you responsibilities that go beyond your mission statement. When conservation controls one million acres, 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.

Many conservation groups have risen to these challenges to become more mature public citizens, and they have done so by re-defining what matters most and learning how to lead with those values first. They are 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 revitalizers, environmental justice activists, public health advocates – to start the march toward whole communities.

Let me give you some very specific examples: There are land trusts 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 land trusts that are helping to bring locally grown food into their public school systems. There are land trusts that helping migrant labor to have healthier housing, and who are building wealth for low income people by selling restricted land to co-operatives. There are land trusts that are conserving biodiversity through encouraging urban gardening and land literacy. There are land trusts that are collaborating with

core city groups to bring farmers markets into lower income neighborhoods. There are land trusts who operate their own community supported farms. There are land trusts that have translated their newsletters and websites 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.

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 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 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 has already left the heart.*** And the political proof of this is that the protections placed on the 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 all through the ages, is relationship and connection to the larger, more mystical, more meaningful diversity of life.

Our second principle is the need to change the motivating questions of conservation and the most effective way to do this is to shift the question away from, "How much land and how many species can we protect, for how much money?" to a question that inspires, leader by

leader, a new approach to conservation: “What is a whole community and how do we get there?”

Conservation is critical to creating whole communities, but so is economic development and human rights. But rarely do community development, conservation and human rights groups collaborate. Our work at CWC 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 all of us who care about place and community to better describe, fulfill, and measure our different roles in creating healthy, whole communities. Please visit wholecommunities.org to learn about this work.

Our third principle is to ground our collective work for whole communities in the power of story.

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

Stories change the way we act in the world. They help us imagine the future differently.

Stories are easily understood by different people, so they help us to understand one another.

Stories open us to the claims of others.

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.

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 told a series of stories that many Americans easily understood and could identify with. What is today’s “I Have a Dream” speech for land conservationists?

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 cannot wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

Our stories *must* wake the people who are afraid and pretending to be asleep. And we can best do that through empathy, compassion and love ... not fear and pessimism. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way.

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 the 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.

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