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The Role of Emotion and Values in the Environmental Movement
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I am eager to talk with you this evening about the role of emotion and values in today's conservation movement, and I want to have that discussion by talking about the impact that Rachel Carson has had on our lives and our perceptions of the world around us.

In September 1962 *Silent Spring* first appeared as a book after causing a sensation a year before in shortened form in *The New Yorker*. Rachel Carson's writing brought forth a critical change in our culture. Her words exposing the dangers of DDT and other human technologies demanded that more Americans than ever before choose sides. One could not hear the issue without choosing to show their allegiance to the earth, or not. Thus, she also helped to create the modern environmental movement.

She asked us to understand that what we do to the world around us is, ultimately, what we do to ourselves. She expanded notions of caring for the earth out of the distant mountains and national parks and into our homes and our daily lives. Her greatest impact is that she found the way to combine science and values to make a case for a justice between species no less than a justice between people. And she presented it as simple a story as a bird song on a spring morning. She made the most complex scientific problems boil down to moral issues.

Rachel Carson sought whole solutions. Her environmentalism could not be reduced to saving endangered species, or reducing the amount of pesticides in our air, soil and water, or to stopping the destruction of wilderness areas, or curtailing the spread of sprawl – though all of these things are critical to do. For Rachel Carson, the point of environmentalism was to end suffering and to elevate what it means to be human. Like all important and lasting notions, it is still radical.

She made crystal clear, through the application of her scientific knowledge and human values, that our environmental crisis was a moral crisis, to which there can only be a moral response. The title of her most famous book is ultimately a poetic and deeply moral question about our desires as humans: can we live with a silent spring? How much of a silent spring can we endure and still call ourselves human? By asking that question of us as humans, she shows a fundamental respect for her reader and a deeply positive ethical conscience.

Let me explain why Rachel Carson's message to us is still so very important today.

Telling stories helps the soul of the land become the soul of our culture. Thomas Berry wrote, “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we don’t have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story is no longer effective.”

I have come to love a small farm that sits above a shallow cove on Penobscot Bay in Maine. I don’t own this piece of land, but I walk its perimeter with Walt Whitman in mind when he wrote, “the press of my foot to this earth springs a hundred affections”. Just down the dirt road from this () farm are two blueberry barrens that span both sides of the road and afford everyone a spectacular view out across the islands of Penobscot Bay. I’ve walked across those barrens dozens of times enjoying the view, the sun, and the fog.

Several years ago, I had been asked to meet with neighbors in this community in order to help them determine what was “*important*” enough to be protected. I realized that in using the word “important”, the townspeople most likely meant what was rare and endangered species and therefore “worthy” of saving. I knew, however, that what the people of this town really loved was the blueberry barrens and that there weren’t any endangered species there. (•) People hiked there in the summer, picnicked there in the fall, and enjoyed the view across them every day of the year. (•) There probably wasn’t a single person living in that community who didn’t know these steep hills or didn’t have their own personal story about them. And certainly, at one time or another, everyone had enjoyed eating berries from those barrens. The nutrients that gave life to their passions came from the land under their own feet. Those blueberry barrens enabled the people to be *of that place*.

Why is it then that they needed someone else to tell them that they could protect what they loved? Why is it that they needed the excuse of it being home to an endangered species to protect it? How do we measure, or even explain, what is important if it isn’t about other species? These people did see the loss of those barrens as endangering something in themselves and in the vitality of their community, but they just didn’t know that that was enough.

Why is it that we have so few words to describe the shades of love that most farmers feel for their land? Or, why is it that we have so few words to describe the love that a biologist feels for her subject matter in the natural world?

Wendell Berry writes in his new book “we know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they *defend what they love*.”

(•) How true. I noticed on my last trip to Maine that an 8,000 square foot mansion had been built right at the height of land in the middle of the blueberry barren. A real estate developer told me a new expression: 2/2/8. Two people, two weeks, eight thousand sq. feet. Locally, there is only talk of sorrow for what has been lost. But what were we thinking? We didn’t have the words to express our love.

Rachel Carson put the issue of pesticide contamination as a deep challenge to what people love. And this is why *Silent Spring* ultimately had the enormous impact that it had. This is why the bestseller won awards from animal's rights groups, hunting and fishing groups, a medical college and women's associations, and ended up being a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. What other scientific or environmental book has ever achieved a similar depth and diversity of readership? An editorial eight years after the publication of *Silent Spring* said: "A few thousand words from her, and the world took a new direction." Can we say the same about any other writer or activists today? How did she reach people so profoundly?

I believe that Rachel Carson's success came from three themes that were core to her worldview, and which sadly are still not yet fully embraced by our environmental movement. Her ability to touch and compel people came from her use of sympathy and moral arguments, from her obvious regard and respect for her fellow humans beings, and from her belief in the power of positive human relationships with the web of life.

I must pause to point out that here was a woman secretly dying of breast cancer writing a book about the human technologies that probably contributed to her own rapidly declining life. Carson was literally *writing for her life*, and she was able to express her wisdom in terms of love and sympathy for her fellow human beings.

Carson wanted people to extend their human ethics to the entire living world much as Aldo Leopold did, but I believe that Carson was more sympathetic to her readers, and the reader can sense her belief in them. Carson was a scientist who saw science as a means, not an end. She believed that the average American could use science, as she herself used science, as the foundation that enables one to express and exercise skills, awareness, and vital curiosity as humans. We need science because so much of the damage we do is invisible to our eye. Science, therefore, enables us to better understand the more-than-human world and our obligations within it. Rachel Carson championed with her writing that science is critical to expanding our human ethical vision, *but must not replace it*.

Our emotions tell us, even faster than science does, what is wrong with the picture. Because our emotions are the immediate expressions of our values they deserve as much attention as does science. It is our human values – not science-- that make the initial cry for justice, meaning, respect, joy and love.

Rachel Carson wrote to her dear friend Dorothy Freeman about the balance between science and a human value such as beauty: "I myself never thought the ugly facts would dominate, and I hope they don't. The beauty of the world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind – that, in anger at the senseless, brutish things we have done. I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could – if I didn't at least try I could never again be happy in nature."

Carson had a profound respect for her readers. She knew they would make the right moral arguments if she could help them to see, through science, what was actually

happening to the world. There was a trust and bond between her and her readers that could not ultimately be broken even by the intensively lobbying and personal attacks of the chemical industry. She employed science and emotion to help her readers reach an ethical understanding. For example, her description of dead squirrels that “exhibited a characteristic attitude in death. The back was bowed, and the forelegs with the toes of the feet tightly clenched were drawn close to the thorax ... the head and neck were outstretched and the mouth often contained dirt, suggesting that the dying animal had been biting at the ground.” Later, Carson writes “ the question is whether any civilization can wage a relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized.”

Most of Carson’s writing, it seems to me, is not about death but about life, and beauty and being human in awe at the world around oneself. Indeed, Carson’s longtime editor Paul Brooks put it this way: “ In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson transformed a topic of death into a celebration of life.” She didn’t always talk about what humans were doing wrong but also about what humans were doing right. Carson expresses an essential optimism and respect that suggests that people may go back into nature when they realize that humans can have a positive type of change on the environment.

Rachel Carson still asks us today whether or not we can be brave enough to consider larger human values such as justice, meaning, beauty, joy and love as the highest aspiration for the environmental movement. How would our work be different if our primary goal was to end all suffering? What would happen if the whole point of land conservation were to advance values such as justice, belonging, respect, self-determination joy and love? Our training in the biological and earth sciences makes us very uneasy about these questions. How can one quantify meaning? What does one mean by justice? Human needs should not be the measure of the world. What’s love got to do with land conservation?

Let me speak for a moment about land conservation. The American countryside is being transformed by sprawl at 365 acres per hour. Our own federal government tells us that almost 3 million acres of forests, farms and open space will be developed this year. Hardly a single place in our country will be spared. New Hampshire is being developed at a rate of 15,000 acres a year. Maricopa County (Phoenix) loses 17 acres of pristine desert to development every 24 hours. Atlanta’s growth pressures cause clear cutting at the rate of thirty acres each day, giving Atlanta the distinction of consuming land faster than any settlement in human history. California, already the world’s seventh largest economy, is still growing at the risk to one of America’s largest concentrations of endangered plants and animals. Americans living in the West have watched their beloved mountain backdrops -- the Boise foothills, the Rockies, the Wasatch Range, the Sangre de Cristo mountains -- all be developed at levels unprecedented in our land use history. TPL is justifiably proud of being able to say that we save a piece of land every business day, but one company in one state (St. Joe Land Development Company in Florida) buys a piece of land for development every five minutes.

The crisis of losing a beloved forest to strip development is no different than the crisis of losing a human being to a heart attack. The true cure for saving the forest is rebuilding a culture of sympathy and reliance on the land, just as the true cure for heart attack is changing the patient's way of life. There is something painfully unsuccessful in our work if we can accomplish so much conservation of land without also equally influencing the choices people make in their daily lives. It is fundamental to land conservation that our work not only changes public life but change private life as well. Fighting the loss of wilderness, saving endangered species, controlling growth and sprawl, protecting special places are all critical things to do, but they may not be significantly affecting the source of the problem. The source of the problem is how we humans live each day.

David Orr has given us this analogy: imagine a bathroom with an overflowing sink at one end and a mop and bucket at the other. The technological solution is to use the mop and bucket to clean up the spilled water. The ecological solution is to turn off the water faucet. Trying to solve our environmental problems by conserving land or passing laws is a great technological solution, **but** we are failing to keep the bathroom floor dry. The ecological solution is to rethink land conservation as the conservation of culture.

When Aldo Leopold was formulating his seminal thinking about ethics and the land, he wrote to his friend Doug Wade and said, "Nothing can be done without creating a new kind of people." When this thinking would emerge six years later as the primary theme of *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold was even more emphatic that the purpose of land conservation was to teach about right and wrong living.

Imagine, for a moment, that the purpose of land conservation is to help *create a new kind of people*. Imagine that the human being as it was meant to be – fully expressed, joyful, innately responsible- is an endangered species. Imagine that the point of land conservation is to conserve the whole of the land community, the human and the more-than-human. Imagine that it is not possible to be fully human without that relationship with the more-than-human.

There are now 1,250 private, nonprofit land trusts working at a local and regional level in America. This does not include the enormous conservation work conducted by national organizations like The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy. By 1998, land trusts had conserved 4.7 million acres of land which is a 135% increase over the decade before. By and large, these are local organizations run mostly by volunteers or small staffs. They are born more often than not from a very local story of love and loss between land and people. TPL has helped to create a land trust in Hawaii that protects taro fields and teaches about Hawaiian culture, a trust in the Bay Area that promotes local agriculture, a trust in the Bronx that grows food and good neighbors on urban gardens, and a trust in Maine that perpetuates the lifework of Helen and Scott Nearing. They all have a wealth of land, stories, and metaphors about how we might alternatively live each unique to their region. More than national organizations, it is the land trusts that are communicating directly with people and participating in decisions about their lives.

Choices over right and wrong living, and the restraint required to protect what one loves the most, get played out everyday for land trusts as growth and change put pressures on the land.

But very few land trusts talk about ethics, values, and ways of being human. When asked today what are their primary reasons for saving land, most conservation organizations would give no clear philosophy beyond the critical motivation of preserving biodiversity. One would hear explanations ranging from farmland protection, to local self-reliance, to wilderness protection, to stewardship, to ecopsychology but we have no guiding principles to gather up those valid explanations into anything that resembles a well-articulated philosophy or practice.

Those conservation organizations devoted to preserving the earth's endangered species have, through conservation biology, a very clear set of objectives for how and why they do their work. There is nothing comparable to guide the majority of conservation organizations who are interested in protecting a way of life that includes growing healthy food, having safe parks and clean rivers accessible to people, maintaining a culture of mutual-aid and an appreciation of local beauty, protecting our cultural history, and conserving local sacred places all of which contribute immeasurably to the human experience.

The contemporary conservation movement, born in era immediately following Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, has proven its great technological prowess but has largely failed to make the same arguments that were so compelling for Rachel Carson. Somehow, we must add to conservation's great technical achievements, the ability to persuasively and humbly make moral arguments as well. In saving land, we must learn to speak a language that engages and challenges the heart and soul of our neighbors as *Silent Spring* did.

Can we evolve from a technical movement into a social movement?

In a world without a moral bottom-line about how we should treat the earth, how to live, we can only rely on laws that define what we can't do. What, then, tells us what we should do? *Only an evolved and shared sense of love; only a shared sense of evolving and maturing relationship.* The problems we face are not technical or political or even environmental, they are moral. And though we must reply with all of our best technical means –the saving of land and the passing of laws- we can't forget that the only real viable response is a moral approach.

I have heard others say that we are on the brink of a Great Forgetting, a point where our relationships are so fractured that we have almost forgotten why they were important in the first place. We have nearly said the final good-bye, having long since shaken hands, and now just waiting to shut the door. But not quite. We hear a piece of music, and feel a deep unexplained stirring inside of us. We climb a mountain in the fall, and are swept away by the beauty. Our love for this life, all life, has us by the throat even when we don't have the words to speak of it.

I prefer to believe that we are on the brink of the Great Remembering, a time when our prosperity allows us to re-consider what matters most to us, when we are punished enough by sprawl and the loss of life that we can find the bravery to show self-restraint and self-love. The path to the great remembering is through the healing of conserving land and the healing of ourselves, through a million different ways to show our forbearance and to re-connect with the life that is around us.