

Toward a New Relationship

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“As I went walking, I saw a sign there
On the sign it said ‘no trespassing’
But on the other side it didn’t say nothing
That side was made for you and me.”
-Woody Guthrie, 1940

Greg Brown took aim, slowed his breath, and gently squeezed the trigger. It was clear, 42 degrees, light wind, a fine morning in October to be in Glacier Bay. The shot hit the seal in the back of the head, forcing its mouth shut instantly, keeping it from taking in water and sinking in the deep waters around Garforth Island. The preferred weapon for hunting seals is the .22 Hornet because it’s light, accurate and can humanely kill a relatively small mammal, but Greg and his uncle were not there for sport. They were there to take a seal and to bring it back to Hoonah, a Tlingit community outside of the park, for a potlatch ceremony honoring Greg’s cousin who had died. Greg, whose Tlingit name is Shaaa-yakw-nook, was doing in 1992 exactly what his ancestors had done since time immemorial, gathering seal, eggs, and berries from a land so critical to their survival that they called it their Ice-box.¹

John Muir was the first publicist of Glacier Bay, arriving there by canoe with a Presbyterian minister in 1879. Muir was awed by the vast forces at work in this sweeping landscape of mountain, glacier and water. Being in Glacier Bay made Muir feel fully alive, and he translated his experiences in a series of popular articles sent in installments

to the San Francisco Bulletin even before he got back to California. Muir's writing led directly to the creation of Glacier Bay National Monument in 1925 and helped to establish the dominant theme of the early conservation movement: Keep safe what you find valuable by removing people and other species that may threaten it. We have a large and inspiring national park system because of these first efforts at forming a practice of conservation. No one, tourist or Tlingit, isn't grateful that Glacier Bay remains today a largely healthy and whole ecosystem. Muir had a powerful vision that served nature well, but his vision was incomplete: he saw the landscape and not the people.

On that first trip to Glacier Bay 125 years ago, as the story goes, Muir purposefully rocked the canoe so that his Tlingit guide would be unable to shoot and harvest a deer. Muir wrote this account to make clear his values, but today it seems a sad parable of two people unable to hear each other's stories about their different ways of being in relationship with a place they both needed and loved.

Greg Brown was arrested later that morning in 1992. His rifle and the hair seal were confiscated by park rangers and Brown was ordered to appear before a federal magistrate in Juneau on charges of taking a seal in a national park. The Hoonah Tribal Council quickly came to Brown's defense saying, "We were made criminals for our food."

This is not an essay about hunting, nor about the management of our national parks, but about the essential purpose of conservation today, which is to understand the role of land, and our relationship to it, in creating a culture of care and attention in our country. To

heal the land, as well as be healed by it, requires of all of us a deeper self-awareness and a willingness to honestly ask these questions: Is our current relationship to this place healthy? What about this land, and our relationship to it, might teach us about how to live differently today? Who do we allow – and not allow- to experience this land and why?

In 2007, with a growing human population and appetite felt everywhere on this planet, it is no longer possible to protect land and nature *from* people. No property boundary will survive a suffering, greedy humanity. Today's conservationists speak of protecting land through "landscape-scale conservation" but how do these bigger approaches "save" land from climate change or acid rain or a public that simply no longer cares? And when the human response to a park or wildlife refuge is to develop all the land around the "protected" land, what have we achieved? To be meaningful and enduring, the work of conservation must seek more than working on a larger scale or with tougher legal statutes, but to engage the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people. The massive, vital work of conservation today is to reweave this still spectacular landscape with the human experience, relating land to everyday human choice and life.

Conservationists have been enormously successful in protecting land, marshalling the money and skills to purchase more than 14 million acres of land across America in the last decade, but Americans are no closer, by and large, to that land or to the values that the land teaches. Conservation continues to be swept aside by the homogenizing and insulating effects of technology, electronic media, urban sprawl, and a culture of fear that contributes to the divorce between people and the land. Today, the purpose of land

conservation must be to create a balanced, healthy people who carry the land in their hearts, in their skills, and in their concerns.

An unintended result of the early efforts at conservation has been to exclude many Americans. Conservation must now be defined by the full awareness that our past efforts removed people from the land, primarily the rural poor, people of color, and native people. People have forever asserted their values over other people in politics, economics and, sadly, conservation too. At Yosemite, the Ahwahneechee were forced out of the valley but later brought back in to the park to change bed sheets, serve Coca-Cola, and dress up as the more recognizable Plains Indians. At Great Smokey Mountains National Park, almost 7,000 rural people were bought out through condemnation only to have their barns and cabins re-assembled in a Mountain Farm Museum where actors play at hill-country life. And more recently, to create the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve in Alaska, a 100- year practice of homesteading was stopped and people removed from their land.² Here's the result of this exclusion: Frank and Audrey Peterman could travel through 12 national parks in 3 months in 1995 and see only two other person of color.³ What have we lost as a nation and as a people when conservation became a segregated movement?

The result, too, is that dispossessors are damaged along with the dispossessed. No conservationist will ever reach his or her goal without first gaining a broader sense of history and justice and embracing Saint Augustine's wisdom that one should never fight evil as if it is something that arose totally outside oneself. If you're the one being taken

from, it matters little if the taker is a robber-baron, a land speculator, or a conservationist. Today, we must acknowledge this dispossession of native people and others, such as Black family farmers, without whom some significant portion of conservation would not have been possible, and that to heal this wrong –and to heal ourselves- requires not guilt but awareness, humility, and the courage to go forward differently.

Our conservation movement has been guided for more than one hundred years by this question: How do we produce a landscape that is worthy of our culture? But when we say “our” culture, who do we include or leave out? The language of conservation is filled with words about “preserving,” “protecting,” and “saving” places because we know deep down that we are fencing someone out. What we should be fencing out is unhealthy behavior, but not a whole class and race of people.

Our Age of Becoming

Today is the environmental movement’s age of becoming. We may have started with a landscape-as-museum philosophy, and a focus on one set of cultural needs, but the truth today is that we have conserved vast expanses of land which hold the possibility of a return in whole way, in a manner never achieved before. This isn’t going back to the land, but going forward to the land in a new way. Writer and homesteader Hank Lentfer suggests that we need an entirely new relationship to the land at his home ground at Glacier Bay. “Looking at the clear-cut hillsides around Hoonah, I would be reluctant to return title to the Tlingit,” he writes. On the other hand, “watching the smoke billow from

the cruise ships idling in Glacier Bay while 2,000 tourists snap pictures with disposable cameras I have to question the wisdom of the ‘current owners.’”

Let us consider the possibility that Wendell Berry was right when he wrote more than thirty years ago that “we and our country create one another ... our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land ... therefore, our culture must be of response to our place.” Perhaps the motivating question is no longer how do we produce a landscape that is worthy of our culture, but how do we produce a culture that is worthy of our landscape?

Most conservationists believe that the land heals people, yes, but only a fraction embrace the alternative possibility that people heal the land. Humans are tuned to relationship. We’re healed by our love and our compassion. And one of the most influential relationships in our lives is with the land itself. We can make soil through composting as well as destroy it through over-grazing. Within some of us still are the skills of how to keep the land and ourselves healthy. This ancient knowledge lies in the daily traditions of the Popago Indians, of African farmers and hunters, and in the modern skills of range scientists, homesteaders, forest stewards and organic growers. What kind of new concept of the land might emerge if we could listen more carefully to one another’s stories of the land?

The Extinction of Experience

Day by day, the number of Americans with first hand experience of the land dwindles. This allows us, as a culture, to destroy more and more, drifting further away from the anchor that has sustained us physically and emotionally for eons. We see the results everywhere: we have a harder time talking with one another, we have more fears, our physical and emotional health diminishes, and we become more easily manipulated. And soon we find to our amazement that we have become a nation addicted to things, a nation that produces more prisoners than farmers and more shopping malls than high schools.

This divorce between people and the land can lead only to one place: a society in which it is no longer necessary for human beings to know who they are or where they live. And if no one knows where they live, then anyone with political power will control the land and the people. Barry Lopez tells us, “for as long as our records go back, we have held these two things dear, landscape and memory, each informing us with a different kind of life. The one feeds us figuratively and literally. The other protects us from lies and tyranny.”

Our experience and memory of the land, arising from scientific knowledge as well as our human sense of touch, taste and smell, is the knowledge on which a country must ultimately stand. Our relationship and memory of land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. 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.

The powerfully corrupting force of disconnection has become business as usual in America, and it is no wonder that conservationists have been afraid to confront it directly. The fact that there are now 7 billion people makes any talk of healthy human relationship to the earth a challenge. As population levels increase and technology amplifies our impact, our capacity for destruction increases. But increasingly the land is without intimates, people for who the land remains alive, those who have indispensable, practical knowledge. Our cultural understanding of land has shifted largely from personal and physical (farmers, hunters) to industrial and recreational. This is fine except in its extreme, where land simply becomes a form of commerce or entertainment, something to be consumed.

Twenty years ago, the scientist and writer Robert Michael Pyle coined the phrase “extinction of experience” in his important book *The Thunder Tree*. He writes: *“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?”* The extinction of the condor is the slow, unspoken diminishment of ourselves. It is the damage that occurs when a part of our own capacity to think, feel and understand is lost because the world around us – the world that shapes us – is also lost. We lose the condor and we lose some of our capacity to be in relationship with anything other than ourselves and our kind. And the child who doesn’t know the wren is the child who is afraid of walking to school, who has already begun to feel boundaries surround her. How will our children love and protect what they do not know?

Here's evidence of the boundaries we make: today, 42 percent of the private land in America is posted *No Trespassing*.⁴ And conservationists, also, show both our love and our fear by what we fence out. Nearly 70 percent of land protected by private conservation organizations is posted *No Trespassing*. In the span of my lifetime that sign has become America's best known symbol of our disconnection from the land and a common reminder of our fear of one another. Seeing those signs reminds me of the extent to which we have all become children of a broken relationship.

Soft Boundaries and Hard Boundaries

Boundaries are essential in both ecology and society. Healthy systems of life require places of safety as well as places of transition. In ecology, the boundaries between different systems are often the richest ecotones: the edge between forest and pasture that supports so many mammals, or the edge between water and land where most marine life reproduces, or the edge between land and sky that is home to most bird life. When these boundaries are soft and permeable, for example a forest canopy between land and sky, or a coral reef between land and water, they are great ecological sources. When those boundaries are hard like the crashing waves on a beach, or as hard and violent as the boundary between Israel and Palestine, these are biological sinks where little life can thrive.

In human cultural systems, we need boundaries as well but there's an enormous qualitative difference when those boundaries are soft and permeable and when they are

hard and defining. Soft boundaries are where people come and go, where there is trust, openness and freedom. Hard boundaries are gated communities and the ubiquitous *No Trespassing* sign, the Berlin Wall and the triple wall that is now proposed for United States' boundary with Mexico. A soft boundary is Central Park in New York City, which divides very wealthy neighborhoods from very poor neighborhoods and is the ecotone where those different people rub shoulders and pass one another. Hard boundaries are created out of fear and become deeply symbolic of the process of "othering," calling some others because of differences in skin, wealth, politics, nationality, and even when they moved to town. Generally speaking, soft boundaries are celebrated as great achievements of human life and hard boundaries are pointed to as examples of our fear, our hoarding, our need to oppress. Of course, those on different sides of hard boundaries tend to see those boundaries very differently and use language that subtly represents those differences. This is exactly why it can be damaging for environmentalist to use defensive "border" terms like *to protect* and *to save* because these words prompt others to ask behind our backs *protecting it from whom?* And *saving it for whom?*

A defining characteristic of this era has been the turning of soft boundaries into hard boundaries. As a lover of land and people, I have great compassion of this instinct to cradle, literally to protect, and I also have come to clearly see how in its current advanced form this expression of love and holding tightly can contribute to our further separation, our alienation and loss of relationship. The great work, then, is about turning hard boundaries into soft boundaries and teaching the mature skill of gracefully navigating this new terrain.

A Lineage of Relationship

We have prospered from our collective memory of the land, a lineage of direct human experience of nature that has functioned for 160,000 years and which is now largely broken⁵. We're just beginning as a people to understand the consequences of that fracture. Until this isolation from the land, every human culture had specific words to express their fundamental relationship it. The Nguni of southern Africa speak of *Ubuntu* meaning connectedness and social responsibility. The mestizos of the northern Mexico and southwestern United States have *Querencia* which means the place and source of one's meaning and responsibility. The Russians have *Mir* which means both land and peace. And the Hawaiians have *Kuleana* which means personal sense of responsibility and one's homeland. Sociologists and psychologists have told us for more than a hundred years that the world we create for ourselves, the economic, social and environmental systems that surround us (or not) give us the social clues to be our better or worse selves. Conservation and restoration put into our everyday lives the social clues for how to live well, and thus, help us be our better selves, and to foster a culture of respect, forbearance, tolerance and peace. This is the extraordinary power of conservation: to help create healthy people and whole communities.

Conservationists have vital work to do. One in four Americans will suffer sufficiently from clinical depression to send them to a hospital at some point in their lives⁶. Wealth has consolidated the richest 1 percent of our population now controls one-third 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. As conservationists aspire to speak to a broader range of Americans we must understand that they are waiting first for our response to these everyday realities.

The Walk toward Whole Communities

With a spirit of humility and grace, we must ask ourselves the difficult questions that beg us to move beyond our memberships to serve a larger humanity. Can we expand upon the motivating questions of our movement from, how much land can we protect, how many laws can we pass, or how much money can we raise to: What relationships do we need to be whole again? What is a whole community and how do we get there together?

The work of Center for Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today's efforts to make whole the land and the people. We teach that relationship is as fundamental as places and things. Conservationists have made a strategic error in assuming that our work is more a legal act than a cultural act, assuming we can protect land *from people through laws as opposed to with people through relationships*.

Laws codify values, not create them. If the people in a democracy no longer care about the land, the laws that protect that land will not hold. Imagine, alternatively, how conservation grounded in an ethos of relationship might be different from conservation grounded in law. In order to protect land we would need to involve as many different

people as possible: hunters, biologists, artists, ranchers, loggers, hikers, urban gardeners. We would need a new quality of dialogue, and the ability to hear and respect each other's stories and to make mature choices between types of relationships.

Today, who has right relationship to the land? To know this, we will need to initiate inside our organizations and coalitions, and outside among our neighbors, an ongoing dialogue that will ask us to live with considerable tension and uncertainty as we learn from one another. Also, we will need to balance the rational, legal mindset needed to protect land with the more empathetic, relational mindset needed to connect people and the land. Let's start with the controversial and difficult work of envisioning a hierarchy of relationships, an understanding that some types of relationship with the land are more important today than others. Resilient relationships, those that have succeeded in place over long periods of time --say more than 500 years-- deserve our respect. Second, healthy relationship is defined by use of land more than by ownership of land. Third, right relationship seeks balance and continuity and would see the destruction of other species as ultimately destabilizing. Right relationship might be defined, in part, through the degree that the human is invested and the land is not depleted. Work and livelihood, as long as the land is not depleted, are higher, more valued relationships with the land than recreation because a nation of people living on the land, growing their food and fiber, is more valuable today to the long-term health of the planet than is nurturing a nation of consumers. Similarly, a whole community is resilient and endures not just because of its quantity of protected land but because of the variety and depths of its relationships to all of its land. Finally, our definitions of right relationship must include

encouraging people to experiment today by living on the land. Ways of life are best preserved by living them. Museums are critical places to store our knowledge, but they should never replace opportunities for people to continue to evolve on the land. The walk toward whole communities sees the conservation of land as a cultural act to sustain our democratic traditions, to help people become native to a place, to nurture respect and forbearance, independence, and the source of our sustenance.

At Center for Whole Communities we also teach that all people deserve a relationship to the land. The social foundations that enable conservation to happen in this country, namely the wealth of many of our organizations, the access we have to political and social power, the ability we have to evolve a legal system to our benefit, even our ability to own land and to work effectively with other land-owners, reflect a very privileged position. If we use that privilege primarily for ourselves then we ultimately squander the opportunity to create a whole community and we diminish ourselves. If we use that power and privilege to make meaningful relationships with land available to all people, we have taken what was never really ours in the beginning and turned it into something of value for everyone. The core challenge to conservation today is our capacity to create trust and dialogue among a diverse people. A whole community is built upon a *moral landscape* where people are treated fairly and where other species of life are respected.

Lastly, we teach the power of story. We tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one another and to help us imagine the world –past, present, future-- differently. Story enables us to see through the eyes of other people, and open us to the claims of

others. Stories help us dwell in time; teach us empathy and how to be human. Story is the way we *carry the land inside of us*. Stories of the land awaken and rekindle these experiences of wholeness inside each and every one of us. Wallace Stegner meant just this when he wrote that no place is truly safe until it has a poet.

Story helps us find the different renderings of what is valuable. The shades of love that people feel for the land, whether they are new to that place or have been there for generations, are adequately expressed only in terms of human emotion: the expression of our deepest felt values. Telling these stories about our values helps conservationists to explain the role that land plays in shaping healthy human lives. When I tell you who I am and you tell me who you are, our isolation as people and leaders comes to an end; the reweaving of our conservation movement begins anew.

The most important work that can be done today is to create the safe harbors where different people can have honest and sustained dialogue with one another about the land: its meaning, what we value, our vision about it, and our capacity for shared leadership. We need places where people can ask reciprocal questions: Why do I need you and why do you need me? Why does the health of the land and people need us working together? Wayne Howell, of the National Park Service, is doing this at Glacier Bay by investing years in creating a new relationship with the Hoonah people through hearing their stories and re-connecting them with that landscape by organizing trips to pick berries, harvest eggs, and perhaps one day, even hunt seals again.

The presence of each organization within the environmental movement focusing on individual pieces of the drama, making its own arguments to its own audiences, is why we collectively have not been able thus far to offer a compelling new story for how to be an American. It is also why our movement places a much greater emphasis on strategies and tactics than on story. The former are perceived as “hard” and the latter are perceived as “soft.” But without both in equal measure our movement can never flourish. Martin Luther King did not say, “I have a *plan*”. He said “I have a *dream*”, and he spoke of his values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might achieve them. 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. Today’s “I Have a Dream” speech for conservationist would be a story about children, about a return to healthy, local food, and about healing the isolation and divides between us all. Healthy food and healthy children are today’s most important “doorway issues” to enter more American’s homes with a new story about land, people and health. Imagine how many millions of Americans would take conservation seriously if its focus was the protection of our children and our food.

Inviting People In

Six years ago, in coming to Knoll Farm, we realized from our observations of the land and people in this valley, and from science, that the health of the place we loved was completely tied to health of the human community we had joined. No sign keeping people away would protect this land; instead, our only choice was to invite people in, to play and buy some of their food here, to let them discover this place and, perhaps, to love

it the way we did. This act of making room for others on our land has never been easy and didn't start out successfully. In the early days, when people thought us naive, there were vandals and disruptions of our privacy and challenges to our ethics. Through dialogue and practice, our community has come to understand our intention is to include them in our view of how best to create a healthy place. Though we have dozens of buildings, hundreds of acres, miles of trail, there are no acts of disrespect and, indeed, we have come to learn much about this land from others, like where the best hunting is and where one finds the chanterelles. Through their stories, we understand that this land is filled with both seeds and ashes and is much more meaningful to us. And by fostering more of a culture of care and attention in our neighbors, we believe we are protecting our land for the bear, fisher cat, deer and turkey at a much larger and enduring scale. And by showing this possibility to many others within the conservation movement, we are re-weaving those leaders with their most powerful visions for how to nurture both the land and the people.

Thinking like a Mountain, not like a Business

There is a new breed of leaders who run their organizations not like businesses but like an ecosystem. Their organizations have their own specialized niche, but they also collaborate, adapt and act interdependently. They know their own success is dependent on those with whom they once competed. For these leaders, "survival of the fittest" doesn't mean survival of the toughest, or survival of the one with the best messaging campaign, or the closest funding relationships, but those that cooperate and adapt. These successful organizations are able to quickly form new alliances, share resources, pick up

new tools, and adapt to changing conditions. Today's fashionable Resilience Theory says that ecosystems work best when there are strong feedback loops helping organizations and the system as a whole to learn through *experience of current conditions*. These new conservation leaders have moved beyond "staying on mission" to lead by responding to what's actually happening in the world right now. They are regularly speaking their vision for the future, finding the language and story that reaches more Americans, recognizing and speaking aloud past mistakes and injustices.

And when leaders and their organizations work in this manner, new life flows to them. They become less brittle, more flexible and better collaborators. They are putting the fragmented pieces of their lives and of our movement back together again. These leaders are using their land for food production and buying new land to create permanent locations for farmers markets. They are processing sustainably harvested wood from conserved land for affordable housing. They are conservationists committed to building wealth for people with low incomes by selling their own restricted land to co-ops, and they are translating their newsletters and websites into Spanish. They committed to making a meaningful response to global issues like climate change and scarcity of water.

Future generations will look back at the creation of very different parks like Glacier Bay in Alaska and Central Park in New York City with the same gratitude: they remind us of what it means to be human in healthy relationship to the world. We have been right to act quickly and to save these places from the grinding, numbing wheel of the industrial revolution. The vital work today is to re-weave people and the land with the specific

intention of creating a more resilient community, one that can not be achieved through fencing people out but only through the far more challenging work of inviting people in. 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 class, carry the land in their hearts and minds.

¹ See Goldsith and Haas, *Haa Aani, Our Land: Tlingit and Haida Land Rights and Use*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

² For a complete account of the Yukon-Charley National Preserve as well as other valuable ideas on the role of homesteading in wilderness see Dan O'Neill, *A Land Gone Lonesome* (New York: Counterpoint, 2006).

³ See Peterman, Frank and Audrey, "Hidden in Plain View: A black couple reveal secrets of our National Parks, Public Lands and Environment" Atlanta, GA: Earthwise Productions, 2006.

⁴ National Private Landowners Survey produced by the Environmental Resource Assessment Group, Athens, Georgia, 1997.

⁵ Two of the most helpful books I've read recently on this topic are Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *The Old Way* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2006) and Hugh Brody's *The Other Side of Eden* (New York: North Point Press, 2006).

⁶ Whybrow, Peter C, *American Mania*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2005).