

## Creating a New Land Movement with Children

Peter Forbes Comments  
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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 speak of the places and relationships that have created me. These are the waters, the mountains, the forests, the food, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up my body. And each of you has your own biography of place.

Some of our biographies of place are powerfully deep, like those of the people honored at this institution: Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Olaus and Mardie Murie. And there are other biographies of place, like those of a whole generation of children in America that are unfulfilled and stunted. Your biography of place is as important to your health and your success, and the health and success of our nation, as the more typical biography about where you went to school and the titles you have held.

I bring to this gathering the strong and unequivocal belief that our relationship to land, *good, bad, and indifferent*, is ***still the enduring story of our lives*** whether we accept it or not. Even in 2006, no matter where you live, few forces will have as much affect on the course of your life, your family, your community as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

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, show of hands, for how many of you would that place be impossible to go to today simply because it 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?

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 businessman Paul Hawken 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 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 culture of isolation, destruction and narcissism. 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 and technology 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 or equity. 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?

Conservation can be powerful medicine for most ails our nation, because within our experience and relationship to the land are the essential clues for how to live joyfully and responsibly. Our

healthy relationship to land is the means by which we humans generate and renew the big 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 and directly connected to our sense of patriotism, citizenship, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. In other words, our relationship to land is a source of our wholeness.

Here's the rub. It's hard to say these words but I must: conservationists have been very good at protecting places and pretty lousy at protecting relationships. For example, a bit more than one-third (42%) of all the privately owned land in America is posted *No Trespassing* but 78% of all the privately protected land in America is posted *No Trespassing*. Conservationists are almost twice as likely to post their land. I know there are many good reasons to keep people off conserved land, but as we put up harder and harder boundaries between ourselves, eventually, we show both our love and our fear only by what we fence out and that is not, nor ever can be, the basis for a broad social movement.

Here's an even larger example. Conservationists have been enormously successful in protecting land, marshalling the money and skills to purchase more than fourteen million acres over the last decade, 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 American culture?*

I would answer, not enough. And 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. We must change our basic motivating question from How much land can we protect for how many bucks, to what is a healthy, whole community and how do we get there together?

Numbers don't reflect our values, but they control much of our lives. "Bucks and acres" don't effectively tell our story of re-uniting children and nature. They are the old story. The new story has to be more about our highest values, 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? This is not a time to play it safe.

A healthy, whole community is many things, but it starts with people in relationship to each other and to the land. I bring to this gathering the concept that our *relationship to place is as important as the place itself*, and I bring the challenge of making the restoration of our relationships to land the defining goal of a new land movement in America.

Are we ready to rise to this challenge? Do we accept that stopping the death of human experience is as important as stopping the death of an endangered species?

*Why should we care?* Because we will never replace the dominant culture of fear with a culture of care and attention until children, and all of us, have a relationship to nature.

The child in nature is the symbol of this moment in time, the time of our becoming. 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.

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. The true success of land conservation is our ability to remind every American of what is healthy, of what is fair opportunity, what is beautiful and meaningful, and what it means to be in relationship. Our challenge is to put the child and ourselves back into 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 Artic National Wildlife Refuge in 1976 have been challenged repeatedly by a different and competing set of values. Laws will not hold what has left the heart.

And so conservationists must focus on the human heart as much as the land itself. And what the human heart needs and craves today, and has through all through the ages, is relationship and connection to the larger, more meaningful diversity of life.

With relationships in mind, our language changes quickly for the better. First, we realize how strange and even humorous our selection of words has become over the years. For example, environmentalists use a word like *sustainable* to reflect our highest aspirations, but in terms of relationship it quite clearly means the lowest bearable standard. For example, would calling your marriage *sustainable* be a positive and inspiring description? When we view our work in terms of building relationships, we instead choose words like health, fairness, joy, resilience, and respect.

In keeping relationship in mind, we would see how our words can create hard boundaries and soft boundaries between people and the land. To protect or to save begs many people to ask of us, save and protect *from whom?* With relationships in mind, we would shy away from *saving, preserving* because we're not trying to pickle anything or anyone. We would use instead words like *nurturing and cultivating*. And all the words associated with restoration: renew, heal,

revive, the one I like the most is *repair*. We re-pair the land by bringing ourselves whole again with it.

Our second principle is to build bridges and understanding between organizations and movements so that childrens' health and well-being is clearly understood to be a land conservation issue. And also that endangered species and land protection is clearly seen to be a matter of public health.

Our work at whole communities is to help these very different groups, from community-development to public health to human rights to land conservation- 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 children, place and community to better describe, fulfill, and measure our different roles in creating healthy, whole communities.

Or 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 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 told a series of stories that many American’s easily understood and could identify with. What is today’s “I have a Dream speech” for land conservationists? It’s a story certainly about children, and it’s a story about where our food comes from and it’s a story about healing the divides that Charles Jordan spoke about earlier in this conference.

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. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way.

Let me go further with this idea 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 comes 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 us. It's what we all want our children to taste and to know.

Some walls grow higher and higher each year, it's true. But other walls crumble down. The example of our healthy lives in relationship to nature is what makes walls crumble down, and what we desperately need to resolve, rejoin, render whole and, finally, to reconcile.

Even though most relationships with the land are tenuous right now, most Americans know that their *true* wealth or security *isn't* in their bank accounts, but comes from the stories about the

people and places in their lives. Many Americans do understand that our true health and security comes from the strength and wisdom of our children. It is our children who will or will not translate the soul of this land back into the soul of our country.