

Wilderness and Spirituality



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We are here because we love the Earth. We are gathered at this 35th anniversary dinner to celebrate our efforts to protect some of Nature's bounty from despoilation. It is important that we do this together – that we laugh – celebrate – rejoice that some parts of this unbelievably wonderful country have been protected by law. But when our party is over, most of us will leave here to a nagging sensation that we are not doing enough. That Nature's fabric is unravelling all over the world and that we work valiantly, but in a doomed cause. How can it be that the Pacific is in danger of losing some species of wild salmon? How can the Atlantic be almost out of cod? How could industrial pollutants be embedded in the ice of Bow Glacier in Banff National Park and present in Arctic ecosystems?

We fear we labour in a doomed cause because we do not see a change in the way society deals with Nature. We humans are now practicing what Stan Rowe described as "species selfishness" on a global scale, appropriating most of Nature's bounty to ourselves. We environmentalists continue to try out our arguments to protect nature and are stymied by the response that the economy is more important. And until humanity embraces Nature as something more than an object of greed, we will inflict on this Earth an extinction event equivalent to the death of the dinosaurs.

Many of us, in our hearts, fear this end. Is there a possible different end? The answer may lie in a return to the roots of the conservation movement and in embracing the spiritual community. We need to restore a sense of the sacred to Creation if we are to save it. To do this we need to reach beyond the traditional environmental community to the spiritual community. We must reach out to those who have religious and spiritual impulses and strive with them to protect the full diversity of life on Earth.

This is a scary thing to say to a room full of highly educated people, skilled in rational and analytical thought. Many great thinkers have looked at religious traditions in the context of the environment. Arguments have been made that the sky-God traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have lead to our environmental problems by detaching humanity from Nature. Doesn't Genesis say "Go forth to the Earth and subdue it"? Others have pointed out that environmental destruction is very prevalent in Hindu and Buddhist societies. Some have said all that must be rejected to pursue the earth-centered traditions of indigenous peoples or that we must create a new consciousness based on deep ecology or biocentrism. Still others are uncomfortable with the very concept of religion.

I think that instead of focusing on what is wrong with one tradition or another, we must look to what these traditions could bring to the protection of the Earth.

In this room there are no doubt devout Christians, Buddhists, followers of indigenous traditions, and atheists. What we have in common is a deep and abiding concern for the Earth. Whether we call it God's Creation, or Napi's work, or whether we see it the other way around – that Nature itself is our Creator – we share a sense that Nature is sacred and worthy of protection.

As a boy, I felt magic in Nature. I did not know what to call it. I knew the Canadian Rockies were special to my parents. Places like Mt. Assiniboine and Lake O'Hara, Shadow Lake and Skoki were spoken of in reverent tones in my house. When my Dad finally took me to Skoki Lodge in the back country of Banff National Park, it was a rite of passage. I was now worthy of a mountain pilgrimage. It moved me deeply. Yet it was not until I was an adult that I knew that other people felt the same deep resonance I did in the presence of natural beauty whether it be the seashore, a grassland or an ancient forest.

I came upon the writings of John Muir as a young adult. I was stunned to hear him state my feelings so profoundly – especially when I had never been any place Muir had been. He said "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings", and I knew what he meant. Muir founded the Sierra Club which was perhaps North America's first environmental activist group.

J.B. Harkin, Canada's first Commissioner of National Parks (whom we honour tonight) wrote many years before I was born of "wonder, reverence, the feeling that one is nearer the mystery of things – that is what one feels in places of such sublime beauty". He went further and deeper and described "silent wildernesses as 'holy places'".

These are remarkable words for a career public servant who established the world's first National Park Service. Harkin dared go even further. He wrote "People sometimes accuse me of being a mystic about the influences of the mountains. Perhaps I am. I devoutly believe there are emanations from them, intangible but very real, which elevate the mind and purify the spirit".

A.P. Coleman, a Canadian geologist and explorer of Western Canada in the 19th century said that in the mountains "There is a feeling of having caught Nature unawares at her work of creation. Here is dignity, purity, measureless peace. Here one can think high thoughts".

What are these long dead men going on about? Well, they are talking From the Heart. They are talking of their spiritual connection to wilderness, a religious feeling. And I'll bet not one in ten people in this room is here because the environment is an intellectually stimulating field. Few are excited by doing minimum population viability calculations. We are here because we feel a deep and awesome connection to Creation. Because we know in our cores that we would be immeasurably poorer if we could not feel Nature's power and receive it in our hearts and in our pores. And we feel a deep reciprocal duty to try to protect Her.

Those who came before us were not shy to discuss their true feelings about Nature, their spiritual connection to wild places. Yet somehow in the late 20th century, the modern conservation movement joined society as a whole in a retreat into rationalism and devaluation of the sacred. We put our faith in having our cake and eating it too – using as much of Nature as we wanted and setting a little bit aside for wildlife and recreation. We would manage this resource called Nature. We would rely on environmental impact assessments and like things to safeguard Nature. We argued for percentage targets for protecting Nature – at least 12% ought to be saved in parks and wilderness areas as a prerequisite to sustainable development. Then, to our horror, we realized that this had somehow been turned into a ceiling for the protection of what we hold dear just as conservation biologists discovered that island parks in a fragmented landscape were stepping stones to extinction. And while we have worked hard, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, we must accept that our efforts to date have not been adequate.

While we have justly celebrated the protection of the Tatshenshini and the Northern Rockies or the end of clear-cut logging in Wood Buffalo National Park, and Quetico Provincial Park, we have watched as some species of wild salmon disappear from the Pacific Ocean. We have watched horrified as provincial governments have been giving logging companies the right to liquidate much of the boreal forest of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. Perverse processes like Ontario's Lands for Life have been spun to the public as land use planning efforts that show concern for life when they are really about giving away public land to private companies for exploitation. Those things have happened because our society still does not enjoy an ethical relationship with Nature. We still do not have the land ethic that Aldo Leopold called for over 50 years ago.

In the 1990's greed has become socially acceptable due to its positive impact on the economy. This glorification of greed leads to the destruction of both ecosystems and civil society. This selfish arrogance and lack of humility is appalling. It is no less deplored by the religious community than it is by us. William Wordsworth diagnosed this condition in a powerful poem, written over 150 years ago, at the beginning of the industrial revolution. He wrote:

*The world is too much with us, late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon;
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not – Great God!*

The advanced state of greed reached its highest expression when a new breed of Republican swept to power in the 1994 Congressional elections in the United States. Through what they called the "Contract with America" they threatened to disestablish National Parks and unravel the Endangered Species Act, the most important piece of environmental legislation on this continent. All the while they asserted a religious basis for their views. The environmental community fought valiantly but in what appeared to be a losing cause. Then a new group emerged, expressing its values unashamedly. A group of evangelical Christians went to Washington. They said simply to Republican legislators that it was a sin to destroy God's Creation. They invoked Noah's Ark. And they saved the Endangered Species Act. A happy story with a real life *Deus ex machina* ending.

As the American example shows, there is a fertile and yet largely unexplored confluence of values between organized religion and we who love Nature. Virtually every major world religion deplores greed and urges reverence for the sacred. So do indigenous spiritual traditions. McLeans 1997 year end poll showed 75% of Canadians have an unsatisfied spiritual hunger. We in the environmental community have been shy to speak like Harkin, or to refer to God's Creation or to describe Nature as object of reverence in our efforts to justify protecting life on Earth. We have hidden our values behind rational arguments. Surely it is time for the environmental community to reach out at the level of values to the religious community, to First Nations, and other spiritualists and to engage in charting a brighter future for Creation. We need to find a common story in which Creation is exalted rather than an object to be exploited for material gain – a new story by which human life can be made more satisfying and meaningful as part of the broader community of life.

Outreach initiatives between environmentalists and religious groups are underway across the U.S. In British Columbia the Visions for the Earth Initiative has begun as a grassroots effort to bring environmentalists and the religious community together. At our long range

visioning meeting this past June, CPAWS National Board determined that in addition to focusing our conservation work on connected parks and wilderness areas to protect all species through initiatives like Yellowstone to Yukon in the manner of the Wildlands Project (Dave Foreman will talk more about this on Saturday night) we must take active steps to engage with all communities of faith and all spiritually oriented people if we are to succeed in our quest to save Nature. Encapsulating our thoughts and feelings in the expression "Wild at Heart", we agreed to strive to find the common values which will create an active societal majority who believes in the sacredness of life on earth. In doing so, we must be cross denominational, be respectful, and be alert to avoid zealotry. And to be genuine we must do this work with deep awe and respect – for it is no light matter to invoke the sacred. But it is no light matter to work for the survival of the holy places we know as wilderness or the survival of Creation.

As we broaden our engagement, we know we will stub our toes. We know we will have set-backs. But we will remember we are working in a worthy cause. We can remember the success of the Christians who were fed to the lions by the Romans only to persevere and have the entire Roman Empire convert to Christianity. We can remember the Jews of the Diaspora, who, scattered all over the globe and persecuted horribly, said to one another for over 1000 years "Next year in Jerusalem" and finally made it there. We can remember the perseverance of First Nations in Canada, who despite years of state imposed repression, are now re-establishing their cultural and religious traditions. We can remember that poll after poll shows a majority of Canadians care deeply about the environment. And we can draw inspiration from those who went before like William Wordsworth who wrote:

*Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege
Through all the years of our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With gladness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall ever prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we
Behold is full of blessings.*

Let our hearts who love her not betray Nature. Let us reach out to and embrace all others who believe that Nature is sacred.

Let us dream a world full of wild salmon and cod, a world full of cathedrals of old growth forests, of grasslands carrying the music of the meadowlark and of streams of clear, cool water.

Let us dream a world lit by the green fire in a wolf's eyes, where thousands of caribou thunder across the arctic tundra, where the grizzly infuses the landscape with its power and where the songbird sings forevermore. Let us have the courage to be *Wild at Heart*, to keep faith with Nature by joining hands with the spiritual community to work for the protection and restoration of Nature's full glory. It is time for us to say the next millennium is about the love of Creation and to strive to make it so.

