



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

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Power of Story

Quivira Coalition Annual Conference, New Mexico

January 19, 2007

My family and I raise sheep, berries and row crops on a piece of land in the Mad River valley of Vermont. I am also a photographer and writer, for these are the ways that I express what I feel for the world. And I run an organization, Center for Whole Communities that is devoted to building healthier communities through stronger, more enduring relationships to the land.

That relationship, good, bad or ugly, is best told not through data, facts and figures, but through story. Some of the folks who have taught me the most about Story are here at this gathering, folks like Wendell Berry and Gary Nabhan.

Our culture has a fairly dysfunctional understanding of story. On the one hand, we value one type of story a great deal: we pay the best and the brightest 120 k right out of college to craft stories about what we should love, admire, desire, crave etc. Even in Vermont, the average six year old gets subjected to 30,000 of these stories. This is the “Coke adds Life” story. And yet on the other hand, we treat story as if it’s only something we tell our kids, like bedtime stories. Or story comes to mean things that just aren’t true as in “Don’t tell me a story”

I want us to think of a different, far more powerful meaning of story, as defined here by the Nigerian novelist Ben Okri.

So let me to begin telling my story. 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, 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 Story.

Our relationship to land, good, bad, and ugly, is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we believe it or not. Even in 2006, few forces will have as much affect on the course of

our lives, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil, and the story we choose to tell about it.

Story has always been the way we describe our relationships in the world, to the world.

Data and information is used to prove something, and story is what we employ when we need to describe what matters most to us. Story is the way I describe what I have faith in. Courtney calls this an age of consequence. So, in this age of consequence it seem most important not that we try to “prove” anything but that we show what we have faith in?

And what do I have faith in? I have faith in the power of land to create virtuous people, resilient communities, and democratic nations. I have faith in land healing people, and in people healing land. (I know people can also easily destroy the land and they, we all know that story!)

What we do Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today’s environmental movement. We welcome to Knoll Farm hundreds of very different leaders: urban gardeners, ranchers, wilderness advocates, tribal chiefs, human rights workers, teachers, writers, biologists, to find shared story and common courage. We teach that relationship is as fundamental as places and things.

We’ve 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 so those of us care about the land have to focus on the condition of 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.

And the best way to convey this is through story. Stories help us imagine the future differently. Stories create community, they us to see through the eyes of other people, and they open us to the claims of others. We tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one another. 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.

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?

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

There have been many who have helped me to see this: the people with whom I lived in rural Nepal where time was counted in the cycles of the moon and in the passing of seasons of rain and snow. Their currency was rice and one’s labor, and their wealth was the neighbors who would come when something went wrong.

Or my friendship with the great homesteader and social critic, Bill Coperthwaite. Bill’s inspiration and strength come from his love of the land that has sustained his bold experiment in living. There are four miles of Down east coastline and tidal estuary that Bill calls home and this land and he have gently shaped one another in a relationship that’s lasted *forty years*, in which an enduring quality of care and attention has made him and the wilds inseparable.

In watching how Bill carries the land in his heart and mind, I have learned that the essential purpose of being alive is to be in relationship. I can’t say it any other way: In just living his life, Bill has elevated for me what it means to be human. Bill shows us *by his life* that everything you pile up outside your heart is lost. And we desperately need his story, like we need oxygen, to show us the possibilities of another way of living. Bill taught me how to carve a spoon...

Their form of genius is not limited to Maine or Nepal or any rural place and to make this point, let me introduce you to Classie Parker.

Classie’s a third generation resident of 121 first 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—who, for the most part, never leave Harlem—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.

This is the soul of the land. It is also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul that I believe is there waiting to be spoken to. This is the generosity, patience, respect and

inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. You know these stories, too, because they are your stories.

Within all the sets of relationships that we call the land are the essential clues for living a joyful, responsible life today. 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. Our healthy relationship to land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. Our challenge is how best to convey that story