People and the Land: A Fierce Green Fire

Aldo Leopold and the Land Ethic

Unitarian Universalist Church In The Pines
February 28, 2016

On April 21, 1948, while helping fight a neighbor's grass fire that had escaped and threatened his and surrounding farms outside Baraboo, Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold suffered a heart attack and died. He was sixty-one years old. Poignantly, it was one week after he had received word that his manuscript – conceived to be a book for general audiences – had been accepted for publication.

A little more than a year after Leopold's death *A Sand County Almanac* was released. The American environmental movement was graced with one of its most enduring resources.

More than fifty years later, we Unitarian Universalists proclaim ourselves to be inextricably woven into the web of life, wisdom embedded in our 7th Principle. When we are aware of it, we voice our awe and gratitude for the air, water, earth, sunlight, and nourishing life forms that both accompany and sustain our world. We cherish and respect all that lives, and hold ourselves deeply responsible for those who are voiceless.

When we are aware of it.

Our principles call us to explore the spiritual dimensions of our lives, to appreciate the wisdom often found in various religious traditions, and to act in love for the indigenous, the poor, and the disenfranchised peoples who need us most. They also call us to work for the protection of the abundant diversity of lakes and rivers, plants and animals who feed and clothe us, turn sunlight into food and energy that both nurtures and warms us, provide us with life-giving waters, and sustains the living, balanced system which we all together labor to maintain. We understand that to live in this interdependent web is to be called to act to nurture and protect it, to gently and wisely nudge the whole web ever forward.

When we are aware of it.

In *A Sand County Almanac,* Leopold wrote:

"It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.

Above all we should, in the century since Darwin, have come to know that man, while now captain of the adventuring ship, is hardly the sole subject of its quest, and that his prior assumptions to this effect arose from the simple necessity of whistling in the dark.

These things, I say, should have come to us. I fear they have not come to many."

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So, how ***far*** have we progressed since 1948? What do ***we*** do about our Earthly home? And this morning, "whistling in the dark" is not an option.

When we are aware of it.

At first glance, activism appears up. Well-known conservation groups count more numbers than at any time in history, and their growth seems to be continuing. Financially, some of these organizations boast annual budgets of more than one hundred million dollars. Coupled with the number and quality of public exposures to environmental issues, it would seem that we are riding a wave of growing awareness.

Yet, has real change taken place? Do numbers testify to growing vision and commitment? On the surface, really good things seem to be happening, but is this true in terms of depth and effect? With growth in membership and finances, and heightened public awareness and advertisement of natural spots around the world, we're headed the right way – aren't we?

Well, I'm not entirely sure. Let me tell you a story that stirs my emotions – and might get you to wonder. And remember, this is a true story.

A few years back two male campers in North Cascades National Park in Washington State were awakened by a bear late one night. They had left both climbing gear and food on the ground outside their tent, which they set up in an area clearly identified on park maps as a "NO CAMPING" zone. In the dark, stirred by sounds of their stuff being rustled, they rushed out of their tent determined to deal with whoever it was. The first suffered 147 stitches encircling his right rib cage and chest area, the other a large bruise on his neck and a broken collarbone caused by a collision with his friend when the bear took that one good swipe. In the ensuing hysteria, the bear fled down the mountain into a wooded area.

Two days later, she was hunted down and killed by park personnel acting under the directions of an agency policy that <u>requires</u> such action when a camper is attacked to such a degree by an animal. Never mind that these two were where they were not supposed to be, that they had left food outside at night, that they had rushed out bent on some kind of confrontation, and that they had pointedly ignored park regulations.

But the real telling moment of this story came when Park Rangers held a meeting and safety class two days later. At a point in this session, an individual clad in a Sierra Club sweat shirt stood up and said, ***"I'm from Seattle, and my husband and I love to come up here with our kids to camp, but frankly, these bears scare the heck out of us. Wouldn't it be better if we just went ahead and killed all of them and created some kind of museum where people could see what they used to look like? It***

would make the park much safer." As the Rangers stared at one another in utter amazement, a smattering of applause for the suggestion came from the audience.

This story has burned in my brain since first I read it. Like so many members of environmental groups, this individual lives in a world of her own with little resemblance to reality. When such people go to national parks, they're physically there, but they neither really know nor appreciate where they are, and if they did, it might scare them back to town. For myself, I think we should give the bears a national week of feasting. If we did, we might be able to get some camping gear at pretty good prices.

But frankly, this is a serious challenge in the environmental movement. Many people think they have become members of the community, when in fact all they've done is pay the dues. They have no real clue as to what their commitment means. Traveling and camping is only a minute part of the truth for which an environmental organization stands. As Leopold wrote in an early article entitled Wilderness: ***"In short, all available wild areas, large or small, are likely to have value as norms for land science. Recreation is not their only, or even their principal utility."***

Our dilemma is that the vast majority of people who call themselves environmentally aware could not tell you the real breadth of the principles that their organizations uphold, and frankly, there are things that they might be opposed to – if they paid attention. From Leopold's work Oregon and Utah: ***"There is as yet, no sense of pride in the husbandry of wild plants and animals, no sense of shame in the proprietorship of a sick landscape. We tilt windmills in belief of conservation in convention halls and editorial offices, but on the back forty we disclaim ever owning a lance."***

So let's be honest with one another: we bear a deep responsibility to understand – and reckon with – the nature of our commitment to the Earth. To move us further down this path, let me tell you another, more moving story: Aldo Leopold's own conversion fell on a fateful encounter with a wolf and her cubs. Sitting above a stream early one morning, he saw something frolicking in the river and mistakenly assumed it to be a deer. To his surprise, it was a female wolf with several pups. Giving into a self-proclaimed and deeply learned instinct of hunting wolves, he wildly shot into the pack. When the smoke cleared, the female wolf and three of her cubs lay dying, and the fourth limped away. Approaching her, he was suddenly struck by a brutal imagery. As the ***"fierce green fire died in her eyes. I realized, and have now known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."***

As tremors ran down his spine, Leopold understood that shooting an animal because it does not fit into man's construction of an ideal wilderness is blatantly wrong. No longer could he see them as prizes for

himself. He movingly understood them for the distinct and independent beings they are. He would **never** forget this moment; his journey to the crossroads of appreciation and integration had begun.

Given my past as someone who grew up in Central Florida, a similar experience lies at the root of what I have come to understand as the riddle of fishing: if there is something spiritual in every being who stands, walks, flies or swims on this Earth, then I am not an intrinsically superior specie, and living as if I were is a form of deep spiritual arrogance. In everyday terms, it means that I am called to refrain from imposing suffering or death on any other living being without good, just, irrefutable reason. And this bridge is one that all of us must cross. The natural world is its own entity, with its own pulse that mysteriously reverberates through all living organisms. Nature must become alive to us in new ways, and we must acknowledge the soul of the natural world, of which we are a part.

Leopold understood that when we, human visitors from an industrial world, venture into the natural realm, we need to be reminded of the ways of the land and of life. We have so distanced ourselves from nature that we need to relearn her rules. We are disrespectful and unthinking believing we can waltz into the natural world, establish our rules, and remake Earth to fit us – though this is how we continually act. We should carefully step into the cycle, and run along with nature's beat. As Leopold writes, ***"The Land Ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.***

In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics"

Look, it is time we stopped whistling in the dark. We must recognize and grow our commitment to the Unitarian Universalist convictions that speak to these issues. Rooted in our 7th Principle – "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," we begin simply with a statement of our "kinship with all our fellow-creatures.

Some days, I am convinced that, other than this statement of Principle, which is largely hidden in the first pages of our hymnals, we have not contributed to a Land Ethic. The time since Leopold's death has seen things that should have fostered this dream – from the growth of mainstream environmental groups to philosophical and ideological explorations that have defined such movements as deep ecology. At the same time, our progress has been stymied by divergences within both the environmental and theological communities. As with religious groups arguing over whether man is saved by works or faith, ecological groups treasure their independence and seem determined to protect their respective little territories to the death. Meanwhile, schools for the Ministry have so focused on social questions that they are only beginning to understand that environmental values should be an intrinsic part of their work.

When they are aware of it.

And there are more threatening forces. For one thing, there is the accelerating evolution, worldwide, of a self-centered, consumer-driven culture living in the midst of climate change. Second, strongly entrenched religious forces absolutely committed to opposing any kind of land ethic notion. And third, a deep-seated belief in the absolute superiority and value of the human over any other species, crossing cultural and religious lines. These forces have led to a willingness and desire to utilize other Earth inhabitants for any desired purpose, respecting neither their condition nor their life. Struggling with them is a significant part of our challenge; standing up to them is a question of commitment **NOW**.

In the end, perhaps trying is all we can do. In UU Ministry for Earth, of which I am a member, we believe that today we live amidst a moral and spiritual crisis of utmost ecological importance. What Thomas Berry dubbed **"The Great Work"** has called us to put forth our best effort one step at a time, one place at a time, one day at a time – working unflinchingly to build an enduring community. I take Rosemarie and this congregation's work on fracking in Florida as a beautiful example: it calls us to stand for this state's incredibly subtle and fragile landscape, which could be permanently damaged by such disrespectful and destructive land use.

The alternative is like closing a door forever, giving up on matters very close to the heart. Such awareness is something Leopold recognized well: ***"Relegating grizzlies to Alaska is about like relegating happiness to heaven: one may never get there."***

We can change the world when we are aware of it – and when we want to. We can recognize and honor the species with which we share this world, or become a lost form of life living in a disappearing community. The choice is ours.

May our hearts always burn deeply with that fierce green fire, and may it never go out.

Amen and blessed be.