

Landscape and Home: A Sense of Place in Wisconsin
Gaylord Nelson Retrospective Lecture Series

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Thank you, thank you. I need to begin this talk, as I sometimes have to do, with an apology. This will be a fairly extended apology, as somebody who as a scholar and writer who does a lot of public speaking based on the writing that I do, I'm often asked to talk about topics that I've written about and that people have read about and often I work from the very same texts that people have read, and when Frances [Westley] and Lewis [Gilbert] asked if I would be willing to launch this lecture series on "Landscape and Home, a Sense of Place in Wisconsin," they were of course referring to an essay I wrote way back in the early 1990s, the very beginning of the 1990s on that topic. And what I'm going to be sharing with you tonight is that essay, which means that some of you will have read that essay before, and a few of you, not that many, but a few of you will have actually heard that essay before. And I want to explain why I'm doing that to you aside from the fact that in effect I was asked to speak on a topic that I've essentially said everything I've had to say on that topic, or most of what I have to say about, in this essay. One is that I think I have learned from doing this over the years that the ear hears very differently than the eye sees, and that hearing a text, particularly a text written by the person who produced the language and the prose, has a different kind of processing mechanism for the way you experience it, than if you've read it. And I hope those of you who have read the essay will hear it in a different way than you're seeing it. But I would also say about this essay that it plays a very peculiar role in my life. It is in some ways a benchmark in my life, like nothing else that I have ever written. And because this essay is very peculiar in its audience, it's an essay that I cannot give as a read text anywhere but in Madison, Wisconsin, or maybe in Wisconsin in general. It's not one that I get to share nearly as often as many other things that I have read, and yet it is arguably an essay that changed my life, and I need to share with you how it changed my life, so you'll see the frame, and I also then want to relate it, finally, to Gaylord Nelson before I ever launch in.

Way back in I think 1989 or thereabouts, I was asked by the Madison Civics Club to come back and speak in my hometown of Madison, Wisconsin, when I was a professor at Yale University, for a series based on the work of Wallace Stegner that was called *Sense of Place*. They wanted me to speak on sense of place in Wisconsin. And the person who asked me to this was Carol Toussaint, who will be known to many people in this room – truly extraordinary person who I've gone on to have many schemes with and partnerships in crime of one kind or another. She was very persuasive, she got me to come back, and I gave this talk, the kernel of what became this essay, for that situation, and what it became was a meditation not just on sense of place, but on *my* sense of place, a kind of autobiographical meditation on why I am where I am from and what I care about in ways that are very close to what Tia was just talking about. She and I really are both people

who left Wisconsin, but who had a Wisconsin hardwired into us and had a kind of homing beacon for coming back here to this place that we call home – and in a way the essay is a long meditation on *home*, and what home means. As such it points to a couple of themes that I didn't know I was to commit large chunks of my time and life writing about. This is the first time that I put the names of Frederick Jackson Turner, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold together in a set, and recognized that there was something interesting about that set.

A few years later I made the decision to write what will probably be the largest, most ambitious book I will ever write in my life, a history of a little town north of here called Portage. This essay is the kernel of that book; I think without this essay that book wouldn't have come into being, and the meditation on what those three people represent, that this is the beginning of, is what finally led to, a much more sprawling, much vaster project in that. It's also where I think I began to realize that I wanted to write about home. I have a book I'm now finished called *Saving Nature and Time: The Past and the Future of Environmentalism*, which will probably be out next fall, about a year from now or thereabouts. It has its kernel in this essay as well, but most importantly about a year after I gave this talk I was approached by the University of Wisconsin – Madison about the possibility of coming back to Madison and joining the faculty of this campus. And I'm sure many of my Yale colleagues couldn't imagine why anyone would even think about leaving Yale University. It was not a thinkable thought, actually, for them. That you would leave Mount Olympus for any other location, let alone somewhere in the Midwest, wherever that is – the great flyover zone of North America where people wave as they go over if they look out their window at all, on their way between New York and Los Angeles. But I have to say, it wasn't a very hard decision. The decision to move actually, when I finally realized that I wasn't having much trouble making up my mind, oddly happened on the Lakeshore Path, an attractive land that's very important to me and that I'm now very much involved in managing. But I think one of the reasons why it was an easy decision was this essay. I, in effect before I knew that I was going to be faced with the question of whether to come home or not, had already answered the question before I knew it was a question. Because this essay, this talk tonight, is a kind of love letter to the state of Wisconsin and to what I take to be a sense of my place in Wisconsin and one that as I look out across this room and recognize lots of people that I know, I'm quite certain that the number of emotions that I try to capture with this essay, are ones you share, so to the extent that some of you will experience déjà vu in this essay – “why is he reading something he's already written before,” “I've read this before” – forgive me for that because I don't often get to read this love letter, share this love letter in this particular way. But I have to say just a word about Gaylord Nelson.

Gaylord Nelson I came to know late in his life. We were both heavily involved, I'm still involved, with an organization called the Wilderness Society, on whose governing council I sat and for whom Gaylord Nelson worked after he left the United States Senate and was of council to the Wilderness Society until the day he died – a very important player in wilderness politics in the United States. Getting to know him, for those of you, and there are many of you in this room who did know him, know that he was an extraordinary man, who made a great many contributions to the world as we know it

today, not all of which are environmental I would remind you. Not all of you probably know or remember, that at the time Gaylord Nelson became involved in state politics in the state of Wisconsin, at the time he began to move toward the governorship that eventually became his seat in the Senate, this was a one-party state. The Republican Party had essentially owned Wisconsin politics since the Civil War. This was a state in which in effect the party of Lincoln was where all of Wisconsin politics played out. We are in some of our identities a very liberal state, we're also a very conservative state, but up until the 1950s, our liberal and conservative struggles in the state all happened within the Republican Party. Bob LaFollette was a Republican, Joe McCarthy was a Republican. Gaylord Nelson was one of a very small group of people in the 1950s who remade the Democratic Party in the state of Wisconsin and who made Wisconsin again a two-party state, as it had not been arguably since its founding. That is an achievement of his that changed the political culture of this state forever, and I want to pay homage, as somebody who believes in bipartisanship, that role that he played was very important.

Tia [Nelson] mentioned Gaylord's contributions to wilderness not just in the nation of the United States, but in the state of Wisconsin. Notice along the way in this essay that there is very little designated wilderness in the state of Wisconsin, and to the extent that there is any at all, it is entirely due to Gaylord Nelson, whether we're talking about the wild river called the St. Croix, or whether we're talking about the Apostle Islands which we were very grateful to finally be able to designate as wilderness last summer and designate as such in Gaylord's honor. In fact, much of the success that we had in designating wilderness in the Apostle Islands at a time when you might not think wilderness would find much bipartisan support in the United States Congress or in Washington, was in part owed to the fact that this wilderness would be named for Gaylord Nelson and there were very conservative members of Congress who might not ordinarily sponsor wilderness legislation who stepped up enthusiastically to the idea that *this* wilderness would be named for *this* extraordinary man, who many remembered as someone they played poker with and drunk beers with and who had been part of an earlier Washington when there were actually friendships across the aisle, that are harder, in this Washington, to achieve in the way that Gaylord made possible in extraordinary ways.

Gaylord touched my life all along. I will never forget the very first letter to the editor that I ever wrote to Madison newspaper, the first letter to the editor that was ever published was something that I wrote after watching Gaylord Nelson speak on television, across the street at Memorial Union at the height of the Vietnam War protests when this very liberal, very effective leader who I admired in so many ways had essentially been shot down by a student audience at UW-Madison that refused to let him speak, that was unwilling to hear what he had to say, even though in many way he was in line with the views of at least a sizable number in that room. I was so outraged that people were unwilling to let him speak, whatever it was that he had to say, that I found myself as a high school student writing a letter protesting the fact that his speech had been violated in that way on this campus, of all campuses, with its sifting and winnowing plaque on Bascom Hall defending free speech as a principle of this institution. So in a way I've been linked to Gaylord Nelson since that letter.

And the other thing I'll mention: I will allude in this essay to a remarkable high school experience I had here, where I went to James Madison Memorial High School on the west side. I was in the seventh grade class that opened that building – it was the only class I think that went from seven to twelve within that building, which is today the high school, Memorial High School. I was much influenced in high school by an extraordinary biology teacher named Leroy Lee, known to some people in this room, I'm sure. He went on to be the head of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. There was a group of us in that high school involved in a group called the Biology Honors Society. There are actually former members of that group in this room, I know, who were touched by that group as much as I was, and what's remarkable about that group of people is that they went on to do a great many things, in a great many different ways, that all had something to do with the environment. It's a very eclectic list; one is a maintenance worker at Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park, one works for the Public Service Commission here in Wisconsin, one does energy consulting, one teaches the history of geology at Cambridge University in England, one teaches ecology at Colorado State – I could go on and on. My wife, who I met in that club, is the head of the Madison Plan Commission. I teach environmental history. All of us, in one way or another, committed our lives to something about people's relationship with nature. And I would attribute that to many things; it was a remarkable group of people, it was a remarkable time, but we were all in a sense children of Earth Day. Tia is Gaylord's biological child, but people of my generation, who grew up in Madison, who grew up in this state are Gaylord Nelson's symbolic children, if you will. And Earth Day was a moment, when a lot of people in that moment, in 1970, thought that it was possible to make a difference, thought that it was possible to commit our lives to something that would make the world a better place. And Gaylord was the person who realized that creating a lightning rod for that kind of idealism, and this thing called Earth Day, which on the one hand is just a date on a calendar and in another way is a moment when people can come together and declare share values, is a quite extraordinary thing. And to recognize the importance of that is one of the things I want to honor, by speaking in this Gaylord Nelson Lecture series in this way. So with that very long apology and apologia for words that some of you know already, let me tell you about landscape and home, and why I came home.

The remainder of this lecture appears in PDF format on Bill Cronon's Web site at http://history.wisc.edu/cronon/free%20writings/Cronon_Landscape_and_Home.pdf