

INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of the very first lecture in this series dedicated to my father, the great historian Bill Cronon reminisced about growing up in Madison. “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 shared values, is a quite extraordinary thing.”

Bill’s memory is not so different from my own. The greatest gift my father ever gave me was the gift of an idea, the idea that you could care about something and work with integrity and make a difference - make a lasting difference - and certainly my father did that. He dedicated himself this way everyday of his life, until he was too weak to go to the Wilderness Society where he had gone to work every day for 25 years. He was 89. He died a few months later, but what he left behind was quite remarkable.

A big part of his legacy are the special places he protected. My father always believed that saving wild places was important. His childhood was profoundly shaped by the natural world where he grew up. He was the boy from Clear Lake and he grew up to be the man from Clear Lake. He was always a homeboy at heart. When he was young, he’d go down to the edge of town where the turtles would migrate to Mud Lake every fall in preparation for the winter. He was awed by their sense of direction. He would try to confuse them by spinning them around and putting them in tall grass, hiding them behind trees – and he always marveled at how they found their way. His childhood experiences there, visiting the Apostle Islands with his father, exploring the St. Croix River, inspired him greatly. And protecting these magical places became one of his life’s passions.

Without these wild places, our children will not know what it means to have a sense of place. They will not have the experiences that tie them to nature. They will not understand the economic, or the spiritual, or the environmental value and importance that wild and natural systems have, nor their immeasurable benefits to society. This theme was foremost in my father’s work throughout his life, and it is a wonderful honor to my father that the University of Wisconsin, the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the Holstrom Environmental Endowment are sponsoring this lecture series in his name.

I hope you enjoy the manuscripts of the lectures from 2005-2006 and are able to attend the lectures scheduled for 2006-2007.

Tia Nelson