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SPEAKING FOR THE LAND: ALDO LEOPOLD AS A WRITER

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At the dedication ceremony for the Arboretum in June 1934, Aldo Leopold began his remarks by declaring: “For twenty centuries and longer, all civilized thought has rested upon one basic premise: that it is the destiny of man to exploit and enslave the earth. The biblical injunction to ‘go forth and multiply’ is merely one of many dogmas which imply this attitude of philosophical imperialism.”¹

Leopold was not shy about making such grand claims, especially when, as in this brief talk, he wished to distill a complex argument into a few words. One could cite many examples of “civilized thought,” including the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American cultures, that do not advocate enslavement of the earth. And one could cite biblical injunctions that urge us to be caretakers rather than exploiters of the creation. Still, there was ample evidence in Leopold’s time that the majority of his fellow citizens regarded the earth as purely a source of raw materials, to be mined, dammed, deforested, plowed, paved, and otherwise manipulated to suit human needs, without regard for the needs of other species and with scant regard for the needs of future generations. This attitude of “philosophical imperialism,” which wrought so much damage in the Dust Bowl years, remains powerful in our day, and is now wreaking havoc on a global scale.

In his remarks at the dedication ceremony, Leopold went on to say that the drive for human dominion over the earth had produced “ecological destruction on a scale almost geological in magnitude.”² For illustration, he pointed to the wildfires and dust storms that were afflicting Wisconsin and other prairie states, a disaster brought on by the clearing of forests, drainage of wetlands, overgrazing of rangelands, careless plowing, and drought. One of the most severe storms had swept the Great Plains the previous month, in May 1934, blackening the sky and blowing soil all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Crops were buried. Some roads had to be cleared with snowplows. In Chicago, motorists used headlights at midday. Before the drought broke, later in the decade, half a million people had been rendered homeless, several million had been forced to migrate in search of jobs, and a legacy of fertility built up on the prairie over thousands of years had been squandered.

It would be easy to compile a list of ecological disasters from our own day that are comparable in magnitude to the Dust Bowl. One recalls, for example, the devastation of New Orleans and other cities along the Gulf coast by Hurricane Katrina, a hurricane likely rendered more violent by ocean warming, and flood waters rendered more lethal by the dredging of coastal wetlands for oil production and by the channeling of the Mississippi River for shipping. One thinks of Prince William Sound in Alaska smeared with oil from the Exxon Valdez, and of the Great Lakes despoiled by sewage, industrial pollution, and invasive species. One thinks of the oxygen-starved region in the Gulf of

Mexico where no fish can survive, a dead zone the size of New Jersey caused by the runoff of agricultural fertilizer from the Mississippi basin. One thinks of mountains in Appalachia blasted open in the search for cheap coal, and the resulting debris sliding downhill to clog rivers and bury homes. One thinks of forests killed by acid rain, the fat of polar bears and the milk of nursing mothers laced with toxins, a thinning ozone layer allowing passage of more ultraviolet rays, the leaching and death of coral reefs from offshore pollution and rising water temperatures, the exhaustion of ocean fisheries, and the accelerating pace of species extinction. One thinks of global climate destabilization, which threatens to cause an order of suffering that will make the Dust Bowl seem mild by comparison. One thinks, alas, of all too many examples of what happens when a domineering attitude toward the earth, unconstrained by prudence or reverence, employs ever more powerful technology to serve the appetites of ever more people.

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Aldo Leopold remains a vital figure for us today because he analyzed the sources of ecological damage with unprecedented clarity, and he wrote about possible remedies as compellingly as any American ever has. Although he was among the earliest champions of wilderness protection, he thought and wrote mainly about land that has been turned to human use. Given that we must eat, how should we manage our farms? Given that we must build houses, how should we manage our forests? Given that we enjoy outdoor activities, how should we manage our parks? How can we gauge the health of land, and how can we restore land that is ailing?

The argument that Leopold sought to distill into his remarks at the dedication ceremony was one he had begun articulating two decades earlier, as a young forester puzzling over the erosion of public lands in the Southwest, and one he would continue refining right up to his last hours, as he revised the book that would become *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. At the risk of oversimplifying the long and subtle development of Leopold's thought, I would summarize his main argument as follows:

- The soils, waters, and air, with all of the plants and animals that draw their life from them, form one integrated whole, which might be called, collectively, the land.
- We abuse the land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us rather than as a community to which we belong, and on which we depend entirely for our wellbeing.
- We do not understand the consequences of our actions because we are ignorant of the land's evolutionary history and its ecological functioning.
- Our ignorance of the land is compounded by our increasing alienation from nature, abetted by technology that allows us to dwell almost entirely within human artifacts.
- Government agencies and regulations can be helpful in protecting the land, but the only sure antidote to the exploitative view is the widespread cultivation among the citizenry of a land ethic, grounded in an ecological conscience.
- Such an ethic arises from intimate experience of nature, from an enlarged perception of land's non-economic values, and from a deep awareness of our membership in the land community.

Leopold was convinced that no combination of enlightened laws, clever technology, economic incentives, or patchwork fixes would rescue us from ecological ruin. What was required, he declared in his speech at the Arboretum, was “the reorganization of society,” a fundamental shift in values and conduct at all levels, from individuals and households to communities, nations, and ultimately the entire human species.³ That is a tall order. More than once he confessed his doubt that such a radical shift in worldview could come about any time soon, especially in a society, such as the United States, which is so thoroughly dominated by an industrial and materialistic mindset. But such doubts did not keep him from devoting his life to the effort.

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In striving to bring about the “reorganization of society” along ecological lines, Leopold relied as much on the art of writing as on the discipline of science. Writing was not an occasional sideline for him, but a sustained practice throughout his career. The list of his publications runs to over 500 items, ranging from technical reports to newspaper columns, from speeches for business groups and garden clubs to articles for farmers and essays for the general reader. In addition he wrote thousands of letters, and he left behind at his death numerous unpublished drafts, proposals, lectures, and notes. Anyone who has sampled this large body of work would be hard put to find a single dull page.

Rather than reporting findings in a neutral voice, as scientists are trained to do, Leopold wrote in a personal, often witty, always passionately engaged voice about the implications of ecological research, about his own outdoor experiences, about the faults he saw in American culture, and about the actions he deemed necessary for nurturing the health of the land. Despite his strong feelings, he was never dogmatic; he wrote in a spirit of inquiry rather than certainty. In this regard he was a true essayist, one who tries out ideas, who asks questions.

During his speech at the Arboretum, he raised a series of questions about the history of the land on which he and his audience were standing. How had the tamarack bog, which had occupied this spot from the melting of the most recent glacier until the days of the fur trade, given way in a few years to grass and brush? What role had humans played in the transition? What state of the land here would be “of greatest use to the animal community”? Such questions about the history and condition of land, he asserted, “are of national importance. They determine the future habitability of the earth, materially and spiritually.”⁴

The “habitability of the earth, materially and spiritually,” was Leopold’s overriding concern, already evident in the letters he sent home from boarding school as a teenager, and still evident in the book he was revising at the time of his death. How the prospects for human flourishing, or even survival, might be compromised by human actions would have been evident to his listeners on that June day in 1934. One quarter of the population was out of work, mainly because of reckless financial speculation and reckless land use. With Social Security not yet enacted, half of all elderly persons were living in poverty. Hundreds of banks were failing. Breadlines spread through cities from coast to coast. News of the Dust Bowl arrived by way of headlines and radio broadcasts and grit on the dining room table. As a result of this calamity and a century of land abuse, Leopold told his audience, “It can be stated as a sober fact that the iron-heel attitude has already reduced by half the ability of Wisconsin to support a cooperative community of men, animals, and plants during the next century. Moreover, it has saddled

us with a repair bill, the magnitude of which we are just beginning to appreciate.”⁵

Gloomy as that assessment may seem, the notion of a repair bill coming due implies that the healing of damaged land is possible, a possibility that Leopold and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin hoped to demonstrate in the new Arboretum, where they would pioneer the discipline that has come to be known as restoration ecology. In his speech, Leopold outlined the rationale for such a project:

If civilization consists of cooperation with plants, animals, soil, and men, then a university which attempts to define that cooperation must have, for the use of its faculty and students, places which show what the land was, what it is, and what it ought to be. This Arboretum may be regarded as a place where, in the course of time, we will build up an exhibit of what was, as well as an exhibit of what ought to be. It is with this dim vision of its future destiny that we have dedicated the greater part of the Arboretum to a reconstruction of original Wisconsin, rather than to a ‘collection’ of imported trees.⁶

He knew well that “original Wisconsin” could not be wholly reconstructed here. Wolves and bears, for example, could not be relocated to a few hundred acres on the shores of Lake Wingra, even if the citizens of Madison could have been persuaded to put up with such wily neighbors. The restoration plan faced other challenges, such as how to establish in southern Wisconsin a sample of boreal forest native to the far northern reaches of the state. And what habitat types and what stage in their history should be identified as representative of “original Wisconsin”? Once those exemplary habitats were identified, should they be artificially maintained in a more or less static condition, even though wild landscapes change over time? How should invasive species be dealt with? Since the use of fire would be risky in an area surrounded by city, how could fire-dependent biomes be managed? How could fragile plant communities be protected from admirers as well as vandals? No doubt members of the Arboretum staff are still wrestling with these problems today.

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The greatest challenge to the restoration scheme was one that Leopold confronted over and over in his career—namely, how to move from *is* to *ought*, from ecological knowledge to ethical imperative. The Arboretum might provide samples of the way Wisconsin’s prairies, savannas, forests, and marshes used to be in the past; but how, from such glimpses, could one decide on the proper treatment of any piece of land in the present, or the ideal condition to aim for in the future? Philosophers from David Hume onward have demonstrated that there is no logical way of arguing from descriptive statements about the way things *are* to prescriptive statements about the way things *ought to be*.

Let me illustrate the point by recounting an analogous dilemma from the current debate over health care reform. During a recent public meeting in my hometown, our Congressman explained to an overflow crowd that some fifty million Americans lack health insurance, and another fifty million or so are hesitant to use the insurance they do have for fear of losing coverage. At this point a woman in the audience stood up and shouted, “I work hard for my money and I’ve got good insurance through my job. Why should I pay to help other people?” Her words won loud applause. Setting aside the question of whether she is already unwittingly paying to help other people through inflated insurance premiums, and setting aside the question of what she would do if she

lost her job, the challenge she poses is not a factual one. She is not disputing the data about how many Americans are uninsured or precariously insured. She is demanding to know why she should make any concessions, suffer any inconvenience, pay any taxes, to aid those who lack access to health care. That is not an empirical question, which could be answered by diligent study, scientific or otherwise. It is an ethical question, which could be answered only by conscience or compassion.

Again and again, Leopold encountered similar challenges. How could he persuade ranchers to stop shooting wolves or poisoning hawks; how could he persuade farmers to quit draining wetlands and pasturing cows in their woodlots; how could he persuade road crews not to mow the last remnants of wildflowers along the highways; how could he persuade motorists to climb out of their cars and experience the land at a walking pace rather than glimpsing it through a windshield at sixty miles per hour; how could he convince state game boards to value wildlife that hunters wouldn't pay to shoot; how could he move public land managers to see forests as more than timber, grasslands as more than pasture, rivers as more than sources of irrigation and electricity?

In these and numerous other instances, Leopold's view of how the land should be treated came up against the deep-seated desire for money, convenience, and comfort. In every case he was in effect being asked: Why shouldn't I exploit and enslave the earth, if doing so benefits me? Why should I make any concessions from what I regard as my self-interest in order to care for dirt, trees, swamps, flowers, or animals?

He knew a range of answers to that question, most of them variations on the argument that if you despoil the land, if you drive other species to extinction, you and your descendants will suffer dire consequences. That answer happens to be true. But it appeals primarily to fear, and fear is an exhausting emotion. We can bear it for only so long before we grow numb. Besides, we tend to discount the future, so that a catastrophe predicted for a decade or a century hence, such as the likely disruption of living systems due to continued heating of the atmosphere, matters less to us than the cost of this month's electricity bill. Likewise, Leopold knew from observing the effects of New Deal conservation programs that changes in behavior prompted solely by government rules and handouts ended abruptly when the law looked the other way or the payments ceased.

The only durable way of moving people to treat the land responsibly, Leopold came to realize, was by appealing not to fear, greed, or duty, but to intellect, imagination, and love. His most concise statement of this view appears in the final essay of *A Sand County Almanac*: "We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in."⁷ Here he is cataloguing the ways in which something becomes *present* to us—through our senses, through our emotions, through reason, affection, and trust. By *faith*, here, I suspect he does not mean the sort of belief we commonly associate with religion, one based on scriptures, revelation, creeds, or the pronouncements of gurus and priests. I suspect he is thinking rather of *keeping faith*—as in the trust that arises between lovers or friends, or the loyalty of a person to a place or a craft or a cause—the enduring commitment we call fidelity.

Leopold's life work, as conservationist and scientist and writer, was devoted to making the soils, waters, atmosphere, plants, and animals vividly present to us, and thereby a focus of our care. So he championed the protection of land which had not been wholly subdued to human purposes, whether remote wilderness or a patch of prairie in a cemetery. In the name of democracy, he defended parks, state and national forests,

wildlife refuges, and other public lands against those who sought to privatize every acre. He called for the provision of wild margins in cultivated regions, such as hedgerows between plowed fields and ponds fenced off from livestock and riparian borders along streams. He helped organize cooperative endeavors among farmers who wished to increase the abundance of wildlife on their property. He advocated the preservation or reconstruction of natural biomes within reach of city dwellers, as here in the Arboretum. He promoted the restoration of degraded habitats, such as the eroded farm along the Wisconsin River, where he and his family planted thousands of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. His goal in all of these efforts was to provide places where people of every age and condition could experience the land directly, as a living presence.

Through his writing, Leopold sought to make the land a living presence by appealing to imagination as well as to reason, offering a host of metaphors to communicate ecological ideas. And so you will find him describing the land as a round river, a biotic pyramid, a machine made up of cogs and wheels, a food chain, a fountain of energy, an electrical circuit, a hydraulic system, a symphony, a play, a web, an organism, a community, and a variety of other things. Likewise you will find anecdotes from history and mythology, literary allusions, stories of his nature excursions, and lyrical portraits of mountains, rivers, animals, and plants. In *A Sand County Almanac*, for example, you will read of bur oaks withstanding fire and tamaracks turning smoky gold in the fall, a chickadee enduring six Wisconsin winters, a wolf dying from gunshot, a rare compass plant blooming in the corner of a graveyard, the last grizzly bear on an Arizona mountain being killed in the name of progress, and woodcocks performing their sky dance, along with many other memorable stories.

By dealing in stories and metaphors, Leopold ventured beyond the realm of science into art. Using every device that a poet, novelist, or essayist might use, he sought to convey a sense of the land as an unfolding drama, radiant with beauty, and endlessly fascinating. Here, for example, is a passage from *A Sand County Almanac* describing the return of sandhill cranes to a Wisconsin marsh in spring:

A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh. With almost imperceptible slowness it rolls a bank of fog across the wide morass. Like the white ghost of a glacier the mists advance, riding over phalanxes of tamarack, sliding across bog-meadows heavy with dew. A single silence hangs from horizon to horizon.

Out of some far recess of the sky a tinkling of little bells falls soft upon the listening land. Then again silence. Now comes a baying of some sweet-throated hound, soon the clamor of a responding pack. Then a far clear blast of hunting horns, out of the sky into the fog.

High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes. At last a glint of sun reveals the approach of a great echelon of birds. On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh.⁸

These birds have flown thousands of miles to reach this place, and they have been doing so, generation after generation, since the retreat of the glaciers. But the day may come, and soon, Leopold warns us, when the last marshes and bogs will be drained for the growing of crops, and the cranes will return no more. By making us feel the allure of

their ancient lineage, their graceful movements, their clamorous voices, he clearly hoped we might be moved to treasure cranes and therefore to defend the wetlands they need for survival. Elsewhere in *A Sand County Almanac*, lamenting the loss of a rare prairie plant, he remarked, “We grieve only for what we know.”⁹ And so he wrote of many species and habitats, some of them rare, others commonplace, all of them, in his eyes, worthy of our attention and concern.

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In spite of his considerable powers as a writer, Leopold despaired of ever fully conveying what captivated him about the greater-than-human world. After describing the sandhill cranes so eloquently, he observed: “Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words.”¹⁰

The limitations of language did not keep Leopold from trying to evoke these elusive qualities. In another essay from *A Sand County Almanac*, for instance, he recounted a journey on the Rio Gavilan, in Mexico’s Sierra Madre Mountains, a river so unsullied, so brimming with life, that it made the rivers on the American side of the border appear sick by comparison. Here is how he described the aura of the Gavilan:

This song of the waters is audible to every ear, but there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it you must first live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers. Then on a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it—a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries.¹¹

At times, in seeking to communicate a sense of the land’s wholeness, he could sound like Thoreau or Emerson in their most transcendental moments, as in this passage from a 1923 essay:

Possibly, in our intuitive perceptions, which may be truer than our science and less impeded by words than our philosophies, we realize the indivisibility of the earth—its soil, mountains, rivers, forests, climate, plants, and animals, and respect it collectively not only as a useful servant but as a living being, vastly less alive than ourselves in degree, but vastly greater than ourselves in time and space—a being that was old when the morning stars sang together, and, when the last of us has been gathered unto his fathers, will still be young.¹²

More often, and especially in the later essays, Leopold avoided transcendental language and pointed toward the “higher gamut” of values in nature by speaking of health, integrity, resilience, and beauty, all shorthand terms for qualities that could never be adequately named. Here is an example from 1944:

The land consists of soil, water, plants, and animals, but health is more than a sufficiency of these components. It is a state of vigorous self-renewal in each of them, and in all collectively. Such collective functioning of interdependent parts for the maintenance of the whole is characteristic of an organism. In this sense land is an organism, and conservation deals with its functional integrity, or health.¹³

You will find similar passages scattered throughout Leopold's writings, from early to late, each one pointing toward the ineffable qualities in nature that inspired him with a sense of respect bordering on reverence. He was not a religious man in any church-going, creed-embracing sense. Nor did he treat nature as divine. But he was imbued with a mystic's feeling for the unity of all things, human and nonhuman. In speaking of this unity as an "organism," a "living being" or "a vast pulsing harmony," he could only gesture with a metaphor toward a mystery, yet such writing might awaken readers to the possibility of experiencing this unity for themselves.

Of course I cannot pretend to say clearly what Leopold declared to be unsayable, nor can I presume to know exactly what he felt on the crane marsh or the Rio Gavilan. But I have a hunch. I suspect that anyone who has spent much time in wild country has experienced such moments of communion, when the ordinary sense of self dissolves. One might be watching a bird, or listening to a creek, or feeling the brush of wind, or smelling the approach of rain, and for a spell there is only pure awareness. Such moments strip away the illusion that we are separate from and superior to the rest of nature. They humble us. They place our lives in perspective. They reveal what Buddhists call interdependence, an insight which is also key to the science of ecology.

Thus we can see why, for Leopold, healthy land is vital for our spiritual as well as our material wellbeing. When forests are leveled, when farmland is paved, when the waters and soils and atmosphere are poisoned, when other species are driven to extinction by our actions, we lose not only the emotional richness of all that vanished beauty; we lose our bearings. We stop hearing voices other than our own. Swaddled in the artificial world that humans have made, we forget that we depend entirely on the original world, the one that made us. We succumb to the illusion that we are masters rather than members of Earth.

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The greatest theme in American literature is the search for right relations between humankind and nature, between civilization and wildness. Leopold's writing belongs squarely in this tradition, which runs from Audubon, Emerson, and Thoreau, up through Melville, Muir, Faulkner, Carson, and such contemporaries as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. This lineage continues to inspire those of us who seek to articulate a conservation ethic for our own time.

The challenges to the health of the land in our day are even more severe than those that troubled Leopold. Since his death in 1948, the human population has more than doubled; the power of technology has dramatically increased, and so has the rate of habitat disturbance and resource exhaustion. We know in greater detail than Leopold could have known that human activities are polluting the waters and atmosphere, depleting the life of the oceans, accelerating the extinction of species, and upsetting the climate. Deserts are spreading, forests are dwindling, aquifers are drying up. The amount of human suffering—from poverty, epidemics, and wars, as well as from environmental degradation—has increased decade by decade, along with population. The attitude of "philosophical imperialism" that Leopold spoke of during the Dust Bowl era has become even more firmly entrenched in our current economic system, which pursues consumption rather than stewardship and profit rather than health. The largest corporations now surpass all but a few nations in the amount of wealth they control, and they wield ever greater power over governments and the mass media. Citizens of

industrialized countries have less and less direct contact with nature, and young people in particular spend more and more of their waking hours inside an electronic cocoon.

In hopeful counterpoint to these disturbing trends, the fields of conservation biology and ecology, which Leopold pioneered, have become steadily more sophisticated, and our capacity for gauging the condition of the Earth has become more robust. Just at the moment in our evolutionary history when humans have begun to degrade living systems on a planetary scale, we have developed the capacity to monitor and model the biosphere, and to communicate our findings everywhere on Earth at the speed of light. We are an exceedingly clever species; it remains to be seen whether we are also wise. We understand in some detail how we ought to conduct our lives, generate energy, produce food, manufacture commodities, and care for the land. And we possess much of the technology we need to move toward a sustainable way of life. What we lack is a culture of conservation, which would guide individuals, households, communities, nations, and our entire species to live in a durable fashion.

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Recalling his journey into Mexico's Sierra Madres, Leopold speculated that these mountains could still offer "so lovely a picture of ecological health" because the Apache had kept settlers from moving there in large numbers.¹⁴ Once the Apache were subdued, however, and settlers moved in, what could keep this pristine land from suffering the fate of mountains just across the border in Arizona and New Mexico, mountains which had lost much of their vegetation, topsoil, wildlife, and beauty to the onslaught of axes, plows, and livestock? His answer was "...that we seem ultimately always thrown back on individual ethics as the basis of conservation policy. It is hard to make a man, by pressure of law or money, do a thing which does not spring naturally from his own personal sense of right and wrong."¹⁵

He elaborated on this insight in his justly famous essay, "The Land Ethic," the final piece in *A Sand County Almanac*. There he argued that over the centuries we have gradually enlarged our sense of the human community, and therefore our sphere of moral concern, to encompass not only the members of our tribe, our sex, our race, class, nation, or religion, but all people. Dismayed by two world wars, with their concentration camps and wholesale slaughter, he knew that humans still fell far short of treating all members of our species with respect and care. Nonetheless, he foresaw the possibility, and indeed the necessity, of extending our sphere of moral concern beyond our species to embrace fields and forests, rivers and mountains, animals and plants. "Obligations have no meaning without conscience," he wrote, "and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land."¹⁶

Some argue that we should endeavor to take good care of our fellow humans before we fret about how we treat the land. But that is a false dichotomy. The wellbeing of people is inseparable from the wellbeing of Earth. Moreover, if we treat with indifference or contempt one portion of the living world, such as trees or topsoil, we are likely to treat other portions in the same way, including humans. The willingness to exterminate another species by destroying its habitat may translate into the willingness to exterminate another people. Conversely, if we embrace the land ethic, an attitude of generosity, fellow-feeling, and stewardship may come to permeate all our actions.

But how do we develop a sense of right and wrong in our treatment of the land? Although philosophers may reason their way to an ethic, most of us must feel our way

there. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that some of what we label as conscience may be inborn, an evolutionary inheritance—our tendency to cooperate, for example, to value fairness, to empathize with the pain of others. But surely the greater part of conscience is learned; it is a product of culture.

So how do we cultivate an ecological conscience in ourselves and how do we nurture it in society? As individuals, we spend more time outdoors, free from electronic devices. If we are parents we take our children outside with us. We learn the names and habits of local animals and plants, and we support organizations that are devoted to their protection. We patronize farmers' markets and agricultural coops. We grow vegetables and native plants in our yards. We learn where our water comes from, where our trash goes. We vote for politicians who understand ecology and who care about the health of the land. We inquire about the true cost, to the earth and its creatures, of our purchases, our travels, our pastimes, and our jobs.

As a society, we provide natural areas within reach of everyone, the poor as well as the rich, through gardens in schoolyards, parks in neighborhoods, green belts along rivers, through land trusts and community forests. We embody ecological principles in legislation and in the curriculum of our schools. We hold corporations responsible for their impact on the land. We ask of our religious traditions what they can teach us about taking care of the earth and not merely of individual souls. We protect wilderness and the roadless areas of our national forests, so as to place a limit on human dominion, to preserve habitat for other species, and to provide a standard for healthy land.

Leopold saw this Arboretum as a means of providing within a populated area, and in miniature, what wilderness provides on a grander scale. Visitors could glimpse in these tended acres the possibility of a more benign relationship between humans and the rest of nature. In his speech at the dedication ceremony, the only time he used the first person singular was when he declared, "I am here to say that the invention of a harmonious relationship between men and land is a more exacting task than the invention of machines, and that its accomplishment is impossible without a visual knowledge of the land's history."¹⁷

Since those words were spoken in June of 1934, we have invented countless new machines, but we have made only halting progress toward achieving a harmonious relationship between ourselves and the land. This remains our great task. The need to envision a way of life that harmonizes with the way of nature, and to set about creating such a life, has never been more urgent. If we do create a culture of conservation, it will be in no small measure thanks to Aldo Leopold, for helping us to imagine and to relish our proper place on Earth.

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¹ "The Arboretum and the University," in J. Baird Callicott and Susan Flader, eds., *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 209.

² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³ Ibid., p. 210.

⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

⁶ Ibid., p. 210.

⁷ "The Land Ethic" in Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949; reprinted 1989), p. 214.

⁸ "Marshland Elegy," *Sand County Almanac*, p. 95.

⁹ "Prairie Birthday," *Sand County Almanac*, p. 49.

¹⁰ "Marshland Elegy," *Sand County Almanac*, p. 96.

¹¹ "Song of the Gavilan," *Sand County Almanac*, p. 149.

¹² "Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest," *River of the Mother of God*, p. 95.

¹³ "Conservation: In Whole or Part?" *River of the Mother of God*, p. 310.

¹⁴ "Conservationist in Mexico," *River of the Mother of God*, p. 239.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 243-244.

¹⁶ "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 209.

¹⁷ "The Arboretum and the University," *River of the Mother of God*, p. 210.