

CARING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

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I am honored to have been asked to speak with you.

I am happy to be here. In fact I'm happy to be anywhere these days. Those of you who know of my dances with the Grim Reaper know what I mean.

I want to speak about a subject near and dear to my heart, and integral to my life: Environmental activism that is deeply rooted in an enlightened and enduring environmental ethic.

Environmentalism means different things to different people and is practiced in many ways. Its focus may be place-specific or topical, such as air and water quality. Its reach can be local, regional or global. It may involve frontline activism, academic inquiry or backroom support. Its philosophical underpinnings may be spiritual or secular. It is vocation for some and avocation for others.

More than anything, environmentalism is a way of thinking, a way of being and of doing. In its essence it is truly a matter of spirit, heart and mind. To me it matters less what form environmental engagement takes than that it is an integral part of who we are, that it is ethically grounded and enduring.

Mother Earth is being used, abused and severely wounded everywhere. On a global scale we live in a time of environmental catastrophe: accelerating habitat loss, widespread species extinctions, species invasions, pollution and devastating climate change. Environmental destruction is the greatest generational threat and challenge to the survival of civilizations and life as we know it.

There are many things we can and must do individually and collectively to slow the rate and reach of planetary destruction. I won't talk about what we can and are doing because you know that – you are already the doers doing what you can.

I want to touch on several themes woven into the fabric of environmental activism some of which advance while others impede our cause.

Everyone here is engaged and focused on one or more particular environmental struggle. While such focus is important, serving to marshal, concentrate and conserve limited resources, effort and energy, it also contains the seeds of discord because not everyone agrees on priorities or terms of engagement. Indeed, activists often have different agendas that play out at cross purposes.

That's the rub and the challenge: How can we ascend to high ground and harmonize our disparate passions, wants, needs, and agendas? What and where is

the commonality, the force that binds us to a shared sense of purpose and ameliorates attitudes and actions that are divisive and erosive of our effectiveness in defense of natural and human communities of life?

I believe the answer lies within each of us. We must search there for the way that empowers and sustains us in trying times and other seasons of our lives. If we cause to grow and nurture within us a life affirming, Earth centered spirituality it will enrich us with enduring inner peace and power. It will evolve an environmental ethos characterized by ethical integrity, moral dignity, equanimity, grace, courage and wisdom.

Environmental activism based upon a profound spiritual and philosophical foundation can guide us to common ground and harmonize differences. It gives us the makings of the moral compass and ethical keel we need to steer undeterred and unerringly toward the horizon of hope that is our vision of a better environmental future for generations to come.

Now more than ever, Gaia needs defenders at different levels of engagement everywhere – whether in neglected, polluted urban areas; threatened old growth forests; degraded skies, waters, and land; or at poles of the planet. Like other areas in need of human healing and attention, the cause of caring conservation can never have enough caregivers. It is incumbent on all of us to recruit new activists of all ages and diverse cultural, economic and social background.

Ignorance, Apathy and Greed

The greatest threat to our living home, Gaia, stems from ignorance, apathy and greed.

In this country seeds of greed are planted and pandered twenty-four- seven by our worship in the cathedral of profligate, conspicuous consumption. Mindless greed is perhaps the central driver of environmental destruction.

We suffer ignorance and apathy largely by design, including deliberate neglect. Studied and forced ignorance is a cynical strategy of ideological forces in power who don't want us to know or think we're in trouble. They don't want people to think critically and certainly don't want them rising up in resistance and agitating for regime change.

Ignorance and apathy are best addressed through education and activism.

Baba Dioum, a Senegalese minister, environmental activist and thinker, said:

“In the end, we will preserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we have been taught.”

That is one reason education is critical to the environmental well-being of the world.

In Al Gore's "*An Inconvenient Truth*", he says something that resonates strongly with me: "Too many people move from denial to despair without an intervening period of doing." That's where activism comes in.

I have been a social and environmental activist for more than forty years, beginning late because I was an eager, brainwashed disciple of the church of consumption when I came to this country as a war weary immigrant at the age of 8 in 1950. I soon wanted to be more American than American.

It was during my second year in law school that I began to see the other side of America: Poverty, ignorance, injustice, bigotry and environmental thuggery. But I also realized that in this country citizen activism is possible and imperative. I learned that one caring person can make a difference and that many joined in common cause can change the world. That's when another activist was born.

Early in my activist years I realized most of us were amateur intellectual anarchists who wanted to do good but didn't quite know how. We had difficulty compromising strongly held personal opinions about issues and actions to achieve collective agreement on strategies for success. It became essential that we learn new skills like mindful listening, controlling egos, working with conflict and using mediation techniques, growing thick skins, not to take criticism personally, and ways to foster staying power and avoid burn-out.

I am a child of the 60's and proud I never grew up. I have worked consciously and continuously at maintaining and maturing my idealism and commitment to service on behalf of people and Nature. I regularly remind myself to step away to renew my resolve and check the calibration of my moral compass. I don't do this alone, and welcome friends alerting me when I stray off course.

Having worked with many activist groups and on many causes, including poverty law, public education, health care, civil liberties, civil rights, consumer protection, and environmental conservation, I have learned several fundamental and enduring lessons.

Foremost, is the importance of evolving a spiritual and philosophical ethos grounded in rectitude and moral imperatives. This ethos entails a profound philosophy of life that constitutes the unshakeable foundation of our being. Seasoned by hope, humility, reverence and wisdom it is the rudder that guides us in our life journey.

Life is about many things; certainly survival, change, choices and relationships. All life strives to survive. Change is constant in life. The ability to make choices is a precious gift and privilege we must cherish and not take for granted. And

relationships among people and between people and Nature are vital to harmony, health and happiness.

The choices we make and the relationships we embrace, nurture and appreciate are among the most important dynamics of effective activism.

Another fundamental lesson inheres in the human condition: Each person is unique and has a personal story. We each have our own dreams, wants, needs and fears. We have different degrees of relative knowledge, experience, skills, strengths and weaknesses. And we each have an ego, personal opinions and ideological agendas.

These dynamics present significant challenges to environmental activist recruiters, organizers and leaders. It is akin to herding intellectual and temperamental cats. Effective leadership requires developing skills in mindful listening and communication, mediating conflict, and bridge building to common, higher ground. Also required are patience, sensitivity, tolerance, humor, and lots of good will.

Environmental activism is costly in terms of personal investment of time, energy, and coin. It invariably involves conflict and is emotionally and intellectually wearing. Staying power is not easy to sustain. That's why it is important for each of us, in our own way, to cultivate techniques that alleviate stress and promote physical, spiritual and emotional renewal.

Personally, I have learned not to become overly emotionally invested in the outcome of a particular environmental struggle. This practice prepares me for battle on another day on other issues. I also regularly seek refuge and renewal in remote places in Nature.

CHOICES

I can think of no better job than mine and am grateful there is no mandatory retirement age in our work of environmental activism.

People do occasionally ask when I plan to retire - hinting I might be over the hill. I remind them that it's better to be over the hill than under it. Every day above ground, upright and active is a good day.

I consider my work both vocation and avocation. I choose to stay with it so long as I can do it well, have the confidence of those for whom and with whom I work, and can remember where my office is.

I count my blessings for the many gifts placed in my care. Among them is my freedom to make choices. The ability to choose is one of humankind's greatest liberties, because in the end each of us, no matter our station or condition in life,

has the power to determine the attitude we bring into the light of every day, to every circumstance and challenge we face. We can choose to choose our own way. It is our responsibility to make the most of this freedom and never take it for granted. Sometimes we choose wisely and sometimes not. Choices involve our personal, social and political lives. Some are spiritual in nature, others temporal. Some have immediate consequences, others consequences delayed. Notwithstanding the influence of external forces, every choice we make reflects who we are as individuals – they reflect our ethics and attitude.

As activists, we are judged by the choices we make, or don't make relative to environmental issues and actions. Choices are usually personal, private affairs, except to the extent they affect others or the world community in which we live. Then our choices become the touchstone by which others come to know us.

Whether I agree or not, I personally try to avoid judgments about choices others make. Instead, when I consider choices environmental activists make I look for ethical integrity and moral dignity. It is unfortunate when either is missing.

Choices are obviously influenced by outside forces – some petty others serious. Integrity of choice circles back to the profundity of the environmental ethic rooted and nurtured at the core of an individual's being. A well calibrated moral compass renders the right choice nearly intuitive. The integrity of choices we make affects our credibility, moral standing in the public square, and our ability to enlist support and recruit new colleagues to the cause.

Moral dignity involves the rectitude, courage and honor we bring to our choices. It enables us to persevere and resist the siren's song. It brings us closer to the harmony, peace and power nesting in our soul.

Activists should guard against parochialism and politics of fear, opportunism, convenience and accommodation. We need remind ourselves that while access to the powerful is helpful it is not real power itself. Trappings of power are but empty echoes of an impoverished existence. At the end of the day, "making the deal" is not the real deal. Ethical integrity is. Dealmakers are plentiful and everywhere. They flash on the scene and are gone. Most people know them for what they are and don't trust them.

I have a saying in my office: *Be Bold - Eschew Pusillanimity!*

People honor and respect activists who manifest the courage of their convictions. That is our strength as environmental advocates and conservationists: Resolve, intellectual and ethical integrity, and unwavering commitment to caring conservation.

RELATIONSHIPS

Happiness and environmental well-being depend largely on the quality of relationships between people and between humans and Nature.

In my ongoing quest for meaning in my life, I have concluded that meaning is not found in some esoteric, abstract formulation, but in a rather pedestrian existentialist focus on relationships and interactions with living others and animate Nature. While the meaning of life generally remains illusive and mysterious, meaning in my life manifests itself in the attitude, positive energy and good will I bring to my daily doings and to every interaction I have with people and Nature.

When I think about what often gets in the way of effective collective environmental action, it usually comes down to individual attitude, agendas, egos and relationships. Because the psychology and dynamics of relationships are complex and perplexing, it is not easy to achieve harmonious, constructive, collaborative alliances.

Unfortunately, we in the environmental field often become victims of the *Kronos syndrome* – that is, tending to devour our own. Gaia does not benefit from defenders who squander energy and capital bickering among themselves. Her despoilers welcome and are quick to fan flames of division in our ranks. We must do better to guard against such divisiveness and work harder to reach common ground.

REVERANCE

Reflecting on human relationship to Nature, I am reminded we are not merely on the Earth but of the Earth – indeed, of the cosmos. Being in Nature is the pathway to the sacred. It is where time, space, life, soul and spirit merge. It is where words will not go and where the soothing sense of oneness with the universe and the infinite is all.

Each of us has experienced an overwhelming, ineffable, feeling of awe, humility, respect and wonder walking among majestic redwoods, searching a crystalline desert night sky, sensing mystery and magic in the dark depths beyond land's end, moved by the beauty of rainbows and shadows dancing across red rock canyon walls, and stilled by the grandeur of snow crowned mountain heights resplendent in a setting sun.

Anyone with an open heart who has been touched by Nature will respect and revere Her. It is important that environmental activists bring spirituality to the table and own it. We ought not shy away from admitting to a spiritual essence animating our activism because we worry about possibly being marginalized if we embrace publicly our reverence for and spiritual bond to Nature.

CONCLUSION

Despair and capitulation are not options in the struggle to conserve, protect and restore our environment.

A PCL motto I heard several years ago, is knowing the difference between the principle of compromise and the compromise of principle. Easier said than done, but nevertheless important to understand.

When I think of principles not subject to negotiation or compromise I think of those fundamental values and virtues seated at the core of one's moral and ethical guiding beliefs.

Values more easily compromised are those that do not rise to the level of primary importance that would cause you to question your personal moral and ethical integrity. Obviously, the judgments and choices are ours to make. When in doubt, listen to your heart.

We are all in this struggle together and our lives, as well as those of living others depend on how well we do working together. We must remind ourselves of what we share. Our cause of caring conservation requires that we strive for common ground: High ground marked by good will, respect, harmony and moral dignity. Ours is not an easy labor, but it is a labor of love - at once noble and ennobling.

When shadows of doubt and cynicism creep over the edges of our will to go on, think of the children and life not yet born, and remember our work is never done.

Look within for inspiration and strength to renew resolve. It is there that spiritual peace and clarity reside. It is there that life-affirming, Earth-centered values and virtues evolve to give expression to the moral dignity and ethical integrity we bring to our cause.

I am convinced because we are of good will, believe in our work and do our best, we must never give up and cannot fail.

Thank you for doing what you do!