A Sense of Place: An Ecological Proposal

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[This presentation looks at] the disconnected relationships of our society, informed by the work of Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold, agrarian ethicists. I would like to move us beyond the sphere of critique, however, into constructive solutions. The primary holistic system of relationships I am advocating is Permaculture, which I will discuss at length later. I hope that by the end of this presentation we will be able to engage a sense of place on many levels, ecologically as well as socially and economically.

What are our emotional attachments to this thing called "place"? Initially we may think of a sense of place as our home—a building, perhaps tucked between many others, in a cozy bed of grass. Probably the people whom we love the most also live in it, and people that we dislike can't get in. It is our own place. Perhaps the neighbors are good friends, casual acquaintances, or complete strangers. Maybe it happens to be the same neighborhood where we grew up and the community support is vital and active, and the school system is great. These people share our culture in an open, meaningful way. The way we individually experience place can range from non-existent to conscientious, but there is something missing here, something we in the Heartland should especially notice. Our connection to place has deeper roots. We are members of a biotic system, and frankly not even the most fantastic or important members. Our livelihood in the most fundamental way relies directly on the soil of an actual place. The majority of crops grown here in Nebraska are not only not consumed by us; they are not consumed by any human. They are used to produce fuel and animal fodder. Are we really Nebraskans if we are not eating the food from our soil? We're more like transplanted Californians.

We as Americans sell subsidized crops to the other side of the world, forming a dependence that relies heavily on fossil fuel usage, which is unsustainable and damaging our environment almost irreparably. The chemicals used to fertilize soil, which currently allows the world to hold a very large population of humans [on the backs of] a very small amount of farmers, is also made with oil. The machines used in large scale farming also require it in large amounts.

How did growing plants become something bad for the environment? Can we afford to wait for the collapse of fossil fuel use and figure out a sustainable food system when we're forced to? According to Aldo Leopold, our foul treatment of the land is due to a lack of land ethic—treating land like a supply to be used rather than the center of our being. I am here not to simply stimulate intellect, but to ask each of us, including myself, to consider the fundamental ways we choose to live our lives as members of larger communities with the Earth and with other people.

The many illnesses of our society can be overwhelming. We cannot control population growth, we cannot keep ourselves from war, we cannot ration our resources, we cannot create equality for every human. Although these issues are increasingly in the consciousness of the American mind, the solutions we are offered seem to lack something. We'll fix it later, house the climate change refugees, de-salt the ocean water so it's drinkable, figure out a way to take the carbon out of the atmosphere. Within something called a "Green Revolution", we strive to find solutions that allow us to maintain our lifestyles of thoughtless consumerism. In the rapid progress of our times, important values get lost or replaced by so-called modern ones. We value efficiency, material wealth, and independence at the expense of beauty, enjoyment, and community.

Foremost among these altered principles, and widely encompassing, is the loss of a sense place. Belonging in a location and community has been exchanged for mobility and specialization. The higher educated a person becomes, the farther away they drift from being self-sufficient. We become addicted to our cardboard lives, and forget what it tastes like to engage people with all the rawness of emotion, to get dirty, to be wholesome, to worship unabashedly.

The so-called Green Revolution, this current movement to stop global warming and preserve endangered species among other things, is an exciting prospect for the new generation, but a true revolution requires more than working within an existing failing system. Why would we trust large corporations to fix our problems when they are largely responsible for them? Most corporations are constructed to have no value system but one: efficiency = money. This equation does not allow anything to have inherent value, especially things that have no economic input. This is precisely the moral code that has brought us to devalue relationships with other humans and nature; to treat them like commodities, not like living beings—with the elderly placed in homes, the handicapped at the margins of society, and wild land as unproductive toward human ends. We seek shortcuts to changing the way we live, different kinds of light bulbs, cloth shopping bags, lower thermostats, better insulating, more recycling. These developments in technology are wonderful and necessary, but they still come from the booming voice of consumerism. We can use the climate change crisis, peak oil, world hunger, economic crisis and food crisis to rethink our philosophy, and the way we interact in and with the world.

The root of many of these problems seems to be the scale on which they work. Sending food halfway across the country makes us believe our food comes from a grocery store. Sending food halfway around the world creates dependence and poverty for the people unable to compete. Large corporations don't care about people because a corporation is not a person. Working with people on a large scale doesn't work because there is no human-to-human or human-to-place relationship involved. It may not bother us that hungry children made our clothes because we don't think of them as people. We don't have to see them; don't have to have a relationship with those children. It may not bother us that the food we

eat is soaked with chemicals because there is no natural fertility in its soil, because we don't have to maintain an active relationship with that land, or for that matter even with our bodies. We may think we're doing the right thing by sending food to hungry nations wracked with disease and famine without having to face that we are responsible for those conditions.

Confronting these realities is painful, but necessary to move forward. If we pause at the problems, we may get sucked in by despair, so we must move on to solutions. Solutions must be readily applicable, realistic and small-scale, so that at the end of the day you and I can go home and change the way we live, not rely on a business to sell us the right product or a political leader to fix it. We must restore the missing relationships. I will present three specific topics to address through the lens of Permaculture: care for the land, the transaction of goods and services known as economy, and community.

When speaking about care for land, I would like to look at a model known as Permaculture that moves beyond simply the end of chemical use and monocultures, but a model that asks us to connect with the elements of our environment. I do not think Permaculture is the only philosophy that will lead to a better way of living, but I do think it is a comprehensive one. Permaculture is a system of thinking, observing, and doing that moves beyond the model of sustainable living to regenerate the abundance of Earth that has been lost by poor treatment, not only of land but of each other. Permaculture began as a "sustainable agricultural system based on a multi-crop of perennial trees, shrubs, herbs, fungi, and root systems" developed by David Holmgren and Bill Mollison at the University of Tasmania in Australia.

To say it more concisely, Permaculture models the diversity and organization of natural systems to create abundance. It is a combination of sustainable agriculture and conservation, caring for the Earth and maintaining wilderness, while still able to feed and nourish ourselves. Permaculture comes from the fusion of the terms Permanent and Agriculture, but has come to also represent the phrase Permanent Culture. Holmgren and Mollison developed Permaculture as a positive alternative "that would allow us to exist without the wholesale collapse of biological systems. Permaculture at its foundation consists of three principles: Earth care, people care and fair share. Sandy Cruz describes it this way: "The strategy is to design and implement a system that takes on a life of its own, thereby maximizing natural productivity and enhancing the environment, while minimizing pollution, human intervention, and labor."

When we think of agriculture, permanence might not be the first word that comes to mind. Most agriculture tends to be cyclical: plow, sow, weed, harvest, rinse, repeat. The use of resources as unlimited also doesn't ring as permanent. For the continuation of the human species, however, we will continue to rely on agriculture. There are only so many naturally occurring edible seeds and berries in the world—but the seeds and berries image leads us into the right direction. If we plant edible seeds and berries where they would naturally grow, so that we may eat more of them, we start moving into perennial agriculture that doesn't start from scratch every spring. Ecologists are currently attempting to develop perennial grain

crops like rice, wheat and sunflowers, which would hopefully reduce erosion, and according to Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, "substantially reduce greenhouse gases, fossil-fuel use and toxic pollution."

Current widespread farming practices carry another risk that Permaculture works to address: the lack of diversity in monocultures. "Monoculture" refers to the planting of only one crop, such as corn, over a large area of land. *Conscientious* use of this method, although rare, can involve animal foraging to produce natural fertilizer, and crop rotation, generally alternating with cover crops to reduce erosion and nitrogen fixing plants like alfalfa. Permaculture would take us, however, a step farther. No natural system is a monoculture: in fact, more commonly understood is the greater the diversity, the healthier the ecological system.

Permaculture is a philosophy of global principles about how we interact with each other and the Earth, but it moves beyond preaching to concrete practices that are grounded in a specific location. Deep connection to place is absolutely essential in implementing Permaculture practices. Protracted observation and knowledge of the land is the only way a site can be developed. It is not, however, elitist; Permaculture can be implemented by any person, in any climate, with miniscule amounts of land, or large farmsteads, yet relies fully on knowledge of these specific factors and passionate creativity to be successful. Specific practices and strategies incorporated in Permaculture vary widely, depending on local dynamics, and include: planting for low-water needs, called Xeriscaping; natural building, like straw bale houses and adobe; layering food forests to receive optimal productivity; collecting rainwater; planning for natural disasters; reusing dirty house water from sinks and showers; composting and regenerating soils; intensive small-scale gardening; natural fences; beekeeping; incorporating livestock as fertilizer, insecticide, and product; and even utilizing that precious substance fondly dubbed humanure—as in human..ure. In Permaculture, as in nature, waste is non-existent; leftover "product" is used by another part of the system.

The importance of knowing a place goes deeper than not locating a building on a fault line and slapping solar panels on the *south* side of your house. It is not about knowing any one of these strategies, but rather knowing the connections between them, and their purpose in a larger system. Native Americans planted beans, corn, and squash together, for example—the squash to shade the baby corn, beans to fix nitrogen, corn to provide a trellis for the beans, and ground cover to encourage beneficial insects and keep the soil moist. This is a simple way to describe the infinitely complex relationships of elements in an ecosystem. When adding a component, others are affected. By protracted observation, we can intervene and insert an element that has multiple positive functions in our system.

The classic Permaculture example is that of a chicken. Chickens require shelter, air, water, food; also dust, grit and chicken friends. They scratch, forage, fly and fight. And, chickens offer eggs, meat, feathers, manure, methane and Co2. Knowing all of these things about chickens, then, enables us to use them not just for one purpose, such as the succulence of a deviled egg, but rather toward many ends, like

naturally tilling soil, eating unwanted insects, providing fertilizer, eating kitchen scraps, heating buildings, and others. Every element in a Permaculture design should have at least three functions. As we place more and more components into our design, we eventually create an ecosystem, hopefully reflecting the relationships found in nature.

A Permaculture site doesn't need to be just one ecosystem, however, but rather microclimates which interact with each other, creating even more diversity at the edges. Microclimates can be created in many ways; in Nebraska, the most obvious is a windbreak. Bodies of water, sunscoops, rock walls and other items can also create them. Keeping energy sources within the ecosystem is also essential. A drop of water can be reused many times before leaving a system; it contributes to a body of water, drunk by an animal, soaked into a plant, eaten by a deer, and exhaled to return again. The current treatment of water, especially in cities, is to move it out as quickly as possible; shortages of water turn into flooded paved streets, where water has nowhere to go but up.

Permaculture began its focus on agriculture and quickly became applicable to the webs of relationships between human beings. I find this most readily applicable in the subject of Economics. My knowledge of economics is admittedly limited, but I think most Americans are ready to admit that the way things are currently done have not been working for us. The way we transact goods has come to neglect the presence of people as people, but rather as commodities or even burdens. Re-establishing relationships within the economy requires what may seem like a regression—back to a local economy. This would necessitate a return also to craftspersonship, rather than the current trend of specialization. I think this argument makes a liberal-arts education especially essential. We should all be well-versed in many disciplines, enabling our minds to comprehend the complexity and necessity of relationships, and especially in economics to realize the true price we pay in more than just money. Was bartering such a bad idea? How much more valuable is a service or good offered by a neighbor? We need to know how to take care of ourselves. With a sense of place intact, we need no longer rely on foreign markets and factories to produce our goods.

If we return to our original concept of place as a house in a neighborhood with these thoughts in mind, the emptiness of it is stark in comparison to a life full of relationship. Our society is crippled with mere shadows of "place," built to keep ownership separate, to keep some people out, to accumulate goods with which we have no personal bond. We can see that fostering a sense of place is really just the realization of a web of relationships that connects everything and creates a sense of responsibility and accountability, through the ever-present connection to an actual place, culture, and community; to a wider arena of basic human dignity, and Earth as one interdependent ecological system.

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