

I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again.

— William Penn



Introduction

MY PATH TO SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The deteriorating state of the environment was the last thing on my mind during the first twenty years of my life — in the 1950s and 1960s. First, environmental concerns were only just starting to make the front pages of American newspapers. Second, I was pretty oblivious to the issues of the day. I had my mind on other things like swimming in the creek that ran behind our house, taking care of my fancy pigeons, baseball, school, and farm work.

More than oblivious, I was clueless. Even at Scout camp, in the deep rich deciduous forests of the Adirondack Mountains in upper New York State, during my early teens I struggled through the soil and water conservation merit badge class. I was bored, frankly, and unaware of what all of the fuss was about. The merit badge counselor, who seemed so passionate about his subject, a guy we called “Nature Boy” behind his back (I’m ashamed to say), was the butt of our youthful snobbery. We couldn’t wait until class was over.

Those who know me realize that somewhere along the road from my oblivious youth to adulthood, something profound must have taken place, something that changed me so deeply that I turned my back on a potentially lucrative career in medicine (sorry Dad) in favor of a fulfilling, but clearly less financially profitable, and often disheartening environmental career.

What was it? What “lightning” bolt from the heavens struck me so compellingly that I devote nearly every waking minute of my days to the protection of this tiny piece of real estate in the vast expanse of space?

Actually, it was not a single high-voltage bolt of inspiration that rocked my world, but a series of seeds sown during my early life — various events and discoveries — that individually had little effect, but cumulatively conspired over a period of many years to create in me a deep and resolute devotion to environmental protection.

One of the first lightning bolts occurred when I was a teenager. The Scout troop I belonged to was hiking along a remote section of the Appalachian Trail. I'm not even sure where we were. I think we were in Connecticut.

As our troop trudged happily along, our homemade wooden pack frames creaking with each step, we suddenly entered an unusual patch of forest, a remnant of the eastern old-growth forest — miraculously spared from the saw. This part of the forest was unlike the younger forests that we had been tromping through all day. It consisted of trees so tall that I strained my neck to see their top branches. The leaves of these monstrous trees intercepted nearly all sunlight, creating a cool, dark environment.

Although I did not know that we were in an old-growth forest, I could feel the magnificence and grandeur of these stately trees that had stood for hundreds of years against all sorts of weather. I felt a stirring in me, the closest thing I've ever had to a religious experience. My spirit rose for a few minutes, and then plunged as we exited into the hot, sunny neighboring forests, no doubt harvested within the past forty years.

The experience was over in a flash, but I was changed forever.

Unbeknownst to me, a small seed had been sown in my heart and in my mind.

Our troop hiked on to our camping spot, several miles farther along the trail.

No one said a word about our brief encounter with that ancient remnant of the old-growth forest that once carpeted much of the nation's eastern half.

Deep inside, the seed remained, like the memory of a loved one's touch or a smile from a loving grandparent.

When I first heard the term old-growth forest in my twenties and read articles outlining the threats to them and the dire need to protect them from further clearcutting, I needed no convincing. My brief encounter left no doubt in my mind that the ancient forests were a treasure to be safeguarded, not an amenity to squander for short-term profit.

My love for this small remnant of ancient forest has translated into a lifetime of unyielding sympathy for venerable old-growth forests. Over the years, it has stirred me to write dozens of letters to congressional representatives, US presidents, and conservation groups, lobbying for their protection. It has also helped me learn to use wood wisely or avoid wood use entirely (hence the reason my

home is constructed largely from straw bales and rammed earth tires).

But truthfully, this experience did not convert me overnight to an environmental sympathizer.

There were other experiences and lessons I learned along the way that forged my devotion to and respect for the natural world. Years earlier, while I was in grade school for instance, I remember watching a television program with my family. The show was a biography of some great person. (I am embarrassed to say that I can't recall who it was now.) The narrator commented that throughout his life, this remarkably accomplished individual sought "to leave the woodpile a little fuller."

It was a cold wintry night, which somehow contributed to the power of this analogy. What a novel idea, I thought. It was as if that notion became imprinted on my consciousness. Life isn't just about what we get; it's about what we do for others, what we leave behind.

Years of being a Boy Scout brought that lesson home over and over again. I saw grown men giving their time to take us camping or hiking or to teach us canoeing. My dad volunteered at the district level. I can still see him trotting off in his Boy Scout uniform. He looked a little silly, well very silly, to be truthful, but I was proud of him for giving his time so generously, and still am. He set a good example for a lifetime of giving to others for which I am eternally grateful.

A few years later, as a member of a Scout troop, I found an immediate outlet to give to others by assuming the role of teacher and leader. I taught many a boy how to tie his knots and perform dozens of other skills we learned in Scouts. Teaching has been a role I've assumed ever since, not for financial gain, but to satisfy a deep desire to give back, to leave the woodpile a little fuller, and to share my love and enthusiasm for knowledge.

Another profound influence occurred in high school, quite a few years after my brief encounter with the old-growth forests of the Appalachian Trail. At my father's insistence, my family was living in rural upstate New York on a 13-acre (5.2 hectare) site in the country. (He was adamant about bringing us up in the country, a fact for which I remain eternally grateful.)

Our property was bordered by a dense, wide marsh that crackled with the cacophony of red-winged black birds. Through the marsh ran a slow-moving creek that was our playground. We fished for bluegills, bullheads, and carp, rowed our boat in search of turtles, and swam in the warm waters day after glorious summer day. We never experienced boredom.

Several years after we moved in, though, the creek that meandered toward our property and through deciduous forests and lush farm fields of beans and wheat upstream from us, turned foul almost overnight.

Why?

Many miles away upstream, a Duffy-Mott factory that ground apples into applesauce had, for reasons we never discovered, decided to discharge huge amounts of organic waste into the stream all at once.

The organic detritus from the factory migrated downstream, rotting in the shallow waterway, depleting oxygen, and choking out all fish life. It put an abrupt end to our summer afternoons on the “crick” — as the local farmers called it. The creek became so odoriferous that year, we had to hold our noses as we passed by the smelly waterway on the school bus.

In the years that followed the initial release the stench gradually subsided, but the plant nutrients the company had released into the creek stimulated massive growth of algae and aquatic vegetation. In short order, the creek became choked with tangles of vegetation so thick that it was difficult to row our boat. Each time we tried to row through the creek, or fish — reeling in balls of weeds with our line along with bluegills and sunfish — we cursed the factory that created this disaster.

The pollution of the stream upset me, but not enough to make me do anything. I was pretty easygoing about things over which I had no control. Unlike my boyhood friend John Bower, who wrote a poem to memorialize the event and read it at an assembly to crucify the perpetrators, I simply shrugged my shoulders in youthful resignation.

Still, another seed was planted.

This one serves as a personal reminder of how one thoughtless act can have devastating consequences on the environment, and how it can upset the lives of many for years to come. Today, when I hear about a stream being polluted, it is not some abstract event. I think about the fish that perished in our stream when the plant matter rotted in the fall, using up all the oxygen. I think about the rancid smell that pervaded our nostrils, and the many people affected by this event. This indelible event lingers in my mind, so that stories of stream pollution in distant rivers are painfully real to me, dredging up old memories and old anger.

In 1968, at the age of 17, I left for college in the Midwest. Tucked away in the quaint and quiet town of Manhattan, Kansas, at Kansas State University, a hotbed of political apathy, I remained sheltered from the real world for four years. I spent my time studying organic chemistry, zoology, cell biology, embryology, human anatomy, and the like to prepare for a career in medicine. While I pored over my notes and reading assignments, memorizing everything I could in the library, protests over the war in Vietnam reached a fevered pitch. If the truth be known, I did follow the war, but political activism did not suit my studious nature. Even though concerns over the state of the environment were stirring among the general public, I was pretty oblivious to the world around me. I was eyeing a career in medicine.