

## Some Thoughts About

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 “Some Thoughts About . . . .”

**A** week of intensive gardening (a kind of wishy washy attempt to emulate *Candide*) following the George Wright Society conference in Portland, Oregon, across the river from my garden, offered some analogies to the social dynamics within which the conference played itself out.

Grass roots for starters. Anyone who has ever tried to clear a long-standing sodded area has experienced profound respect for the strength and tenacity of grass roots. Blistered hands, grimy fingernails, and an aching back later, I have had plenty of time to contemplate the nature of such “movements” in the human context. If they are deeply felt, believed, and embedded, then watch out ... they’ll be toughernhell to eradicate, harder than an aircraft carrier to turn around, and not at all responsive to a letters-to-the-editor campaign.

In this respect, I’ve had time to cogitate upon the vast differences between the recent Portland conference and the one a little over two years ago in Jacksonville, Florida . . . the atmosphere of hope and exhilaration vs. the depressing aura of uncertainty and doubt.

But that was then; this is now. What happened in Portland as the conference opened was distressing in that no one seemed willing to face up to the vastly changed social and political climate. I think I was hoping to hear discussion “up front” about the strategies and contingency plans that might help change the future or at least prepare us better to cope with a future that could unfold if the present direction of political and economic events are any indication.

The sessions were superb, informative, rich with “how-to” detail and anecdotal confirmation that the National Park Service and others are onto some rewarding techniques, building some solid partnerships, and generally proceeding with the work that needs so desperately to be done. That part of what happened was uplifting and promising.

What I missed was an articulated sense of a mission in peril. (I even alluded obliquely to it in the few words I spoke at the banquet, when I implored the Society to keep an eye on the rear-view

mirror—objects seen there may be closer and more dangerous than they appear.)

But then we came to the banquet address by NPS Director Roger Kennedy. He called it "Some Thoughts About. . . ." What he delivered was an overarching, philosophical sketch of not just who *he* is, but who we all are in relation to the world we try to serve as good stewards.

The words were inspiring, but beyond that the remarks revealed the Director as that rare combination—a thoughtful, scholarly, stalwart champion, able to discern all that is best in the Park Service, its people and its mission *and* determined to stand firm against the forces that had not been acknowledged, but had surrounded like a grim miasma the preceding conference deliberations. At that point, I felt reassured that our future direction had been noted, that excellent plans within current limitations had been laid, and that we had a leader determined to hold the line against the forces of despoliation and retreat that are knocking at the gates of stewardship.

Grass roots are tough, and there has been an attention-getting movement out there that signals a need for change. There is also the possibility that our baby could swirl down the drain along with the bathwater. Unfortunately, grass has roots but not a lot of brains. It tends notoriously to sway with the wind, and most of the winds today come from ovens of hot air that are generated by sophisticated blowers with hidden agendas—well-financed, grossly misleading, and standing well out of sight in the wings, looking for personal profits that the grass and its roots will pay dearly for in the end.

The current situation calls for extra effort on the part of park interpreters to incorporate the results of research and the wise applications of these results in park management into their messages to visitors. The public deserves the enlightenment this effort can produce. Visitor education is not a "side effect." It is a direct benefit to the parks in return for the sharing of park research and management with the public. It can also be characterized as "tending the grass roots." An informed public cannot be easily swayed by the hot winds of ignorant rhetoric.

So what is our best strategy for countering? One approach for which the National Park System is magnificently equipped is the arousal of a sense of wonder. As the late essayist Lewis Thomas once wrote, the word "wonder" contains a mixture of messages—"something like marvelous and miraculous, surprising, raising unanswerable questions about itself, making the observer wonder, even raising skeptical questions like 'I *wonder* about that'."

The National Park System is brimming with “wonder” as well as beauty and inspiration and information—all of which are wonderfully suited to raise questions in the minds of those who currently are buying the spoilers’ line.

As Director Kennedy told the George Wright Society banquet audience, “Parks contain more than beauty—there are also mysteries, profound mysteries. Parks are funds of fathomless truths, of life in unexpected forms. When microbes new to us, but known to themselves for millions of years, appear in densely visited Yellowstone . . . embedded in them is the mystery of life in its perpetually changing, infinitely various affirmations.”

These are wonder-provoking words. Without directly challenging the withering winds that prevail today, our interpretive messages can contain demonstrable truths that give the lie to much of what is being said so loudly and brazenly. The NPS leadership has recently been calling Congressional attention to the many ways that exist within today’s functional structure for citizens to join hands with the Park Service, with other agencies, and with one another, to improve the natural environment and the social atmosphere, toward the goal of living sustainably in the world and leaving it for our children as rich in biological diversity as it is today.

We can promote these partnerships wherever we see a chance for spreading stewardship and a park mentality. And we can use the parks in what may yet prove their highest capacity—to arouse in visitors the soul-stirring sense of wonder at what it means to be human in this increasingly incredible world.

*Vancouver, Washington  
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