

Roger Kennedy

## The Human Element

*Ed. note: These remarks were delivered at the close of the National Park Service conference Cultural Resources 2000: Managing for the Future, held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, December 2000.*

**M**y text for this morning's sermon is drawn from the gospel according to Henry David Thoreau and Wendell Berry. First, the familiar verse from Thoreau: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." And then the gloss put on it by Berry: "In human *culture* is the preservation of wildness."

With those texts in mind, let's talk about why your work is especially important at this moment to American society, and will always be important to this ravished yet still magnificent continent upon which we live.

Berry defines the work of the National Park Service, though without quite saying so, situating its role in society at the frontier between what is frequently stated to be "civilized," or "civic," or "urban," "urbane," or "cultural" activity—the adjectives all mean roughly the same thing—and what is often presented as essentially unaffected by humans—or "wild." Our qualities, as humans, are "cultivated." The quality of nature, while affected by human activity, is that which has not been so altered by that deliberate activity as to lose its essential "wildness." We all know that there isn't a square mile of this continent that hasn't been affected by humans, nor will there be one unaffected by what humans do hencefor-

ward. Nonetheless, let's stick with the artificial construct of a division between cultural and natural life just long enough to look up the word "culture" in the dictionary and see what it implies. Then we can get on to the moral consequences of re-defining it as Wendell Berry urges us to do.

The first usage is that which gives dignity to you as professionals—we use culture to mean "development of the intellect through *hard work*—training and development." From which comes the verb "to cultivate," as in: to *cultivate* a singer's voice, a teacher's skill, a rock climber's balance, a dancer's grace, the skill of a preserver of adobe buildings or the competency of an analyst of changes in the minnow population of a stream. You are cultivated people. You have worked hard to learn your professions. You spend years sharpening your skills. If you are superintendents, you derive from your own cultivation a profound

commitment to helping the people who work for you to improve their competency. You rejoice that the National Park Service has heeded E.O. Wilson's admonition to make use of the Advanced Studies Program, and such implements as the Bearss Fellowship, to go back to school and get better. You will of course see to it that these implements are used in the parks where you work, and maybe by yourselves. Because you respect yourselves, and revere your teachers, you want to make it easier for those who work around you to get better at theirs—to cultivate their competency.

You do this in the context of the knowledge, painfully gained, that there are people who want a *weakened* set of stewards for our parks, because they have designs upon those parks that are incompatible with high standards of stewardship. They want you either to be frail—inept, insufficiently trained, and therefore easily dismissed—or out of the way. They don't want you to cultivate your skills and help others to cultivate theirs.

These are not necessarily evil people. They are just impatient. They want what they want—and they do not hold stewardship to be very important if it gets in their way. Besides, you are professionals, and professionalism, cultivation, is insufficiently honored in this society. Because your adversaries do not revere the things you revere, and do not respect your work very much, whenever they increase in power you are

required to show courage in demonstrating your faith in that work and in yourselves as professionals. Complacency is even less appropriate at this meeting, here in Santa Fe, than it was a few months back in St. Louis [at the Discovery 2000 Conference].

My theme is cultivation and professionalism; my conviction is that the National Park Service must be fully professional so that it may be continue to be a credible steward. The watchword *is* and *ought to be*: you can trust the National Park Service. To merit that trust, we must develop in greater numbers experienced and competent people who know they are the first line of defense of resource protection and of good science. Already, the people of NPS are the first teachers many Americans encounter on the ground—as soon as they leave home—to learn about biology and history.

Every person in this hall knows that competent resource protection begins with knowing what you're doing—doing with and to the resources for which you are the steward. Protectors are also expositors of applied science and applied history. Competent resource protection requires constant interaction with academic institutions and with "applied science"—science on the ground, tested and made useful. And explained to the public through effective education.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: resource protection has to walk out of the park in the heart of the visitor. Resource protection only

has staying power if it is also education.

The pride of Park Service people in their work as professionals must radiate outside the parks. Only if it is radiant, in that way, will it educate the public about the values that led to the establishment of the parks themselves.

There are calls to remove wilderness designation from many areas now protected. The best defense against these pressures are: unassailable professionalism in protecting resources, education, and constituency building. In a democratic system, that is where resource protection begins.

This leads me to the second primary meaning of the word “cultural” and to that interaction to which Wendell Berry calls our attention—an interaction among humans and non-human species, between human activity and natural processes. When he writes that “in human *culture* is the preservation of wildness,” what does he mean by “human culture?” The dictionary says he must mean “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human *work* and thought.”

We’ve talked a little about human *work*—recognizing how much hard work there is in becoming and sustaining one’s right to be heeded as a professional. Let’s talk for the rest of our time together about how *beliefs* and *thoughts* may preserve “wildness.”

First let’s be clear about a fact so obvious and fundamental that it is seldom a subject of remark: wilderness does not know that it is wilderness. Humans know it is wilderness. Few eagles cogitate much about being wild. They are wild. We think about their wildness, and when they fly they carry our metaphors as additional weight upon their pinions. But they show little resentment, perhaps because they know that we are the concept-making species.

We may not make wilderness, but we have made up the concept of wilderness. Every natural phenomenon—from the soaring of an eagle to the reproduction of an amoeba, from the explosion of a volcano to the erosion of a granite outcrop, is seen by us through some kind of lens of our own creation. Microscopes and telescopes, cosmologies and chaos theories are our contrivances through which we observe nature. And here is my primary point: because we possess such contrivances as the tool-makers and concept-makers we are, because we have memory and are capable of anticipation—we are the responsible species.

We have moral obligations arising from competencies. What we have learned as we became professionals directs what we do with and to the other species with which we co-inhabit this earth—and to the inanimate earth itself. And as people who share a set of beliefs, as people who spring from a continuous culture, we have strong judgments upon what is mined, grazed, timbered, or pre-

served.

The job of the National Park Service is to stand between the eager visitor-learner—and we are all, wherever we are, visitors to this earth for our allotted span—and learners—and the natural world. We see that natural world through the lenses of our culture—through lenses ground and shaped by that “totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human *work* and thought.” And we can decide to preserve “wildness,” by which we mean nature on its own terms, because we believe in certain fundamental principles, which are also cultural.

May I once again suggest that included in that “totality”—indeed, at its core, around which all else constellates and nucleates—is our religion—a *cultural* reality. We believe that we humans are not masters of the universe; we are not even masters of this *earth*. We are, instead, *co-inhabitants* of the earth with a multitude of other creatures. We are not masters, though we try to be good stewards of some portions of it which fall within our specific responsibilities. Of course from time to time nature brings us fire and flood and great winds to remind us of a central attribute of wildness which is more widely diffused outside of what we call wilderness than we in our pride like to admit—it is essentially beyond control. We do manage the way people act upon wildness, and when it has been too obviously ravaged we attempt to restore it to health. When

the damage can be repaired without much intervention from us, or when that damage is imperceptible to us, we leave place alone.

When we were enduring, together, the last set of assaults upon wilderness and upon the parks, I suggested that among our caring allies were explicitly religious people. The central concept of religious life is the same as the central concept of wilderness preservation. That concept is a sense of scale, of human scale. We humans believe ourselves to be important, but not *all*-important. Religious people speak of ourselves as humbled in the presence of God; even the most secular of conservationists would admit, I think, that they often feel humbled in the presence of wilderness—a feeling that is deeper than *awe*—it can truly be said to be *reverence*. Most religious people think of the universe as intentional, as a creation—not necessarily all at once, nor necessarily taking only a week’s time—but intentional. Therefore, all its parts have value, all its species, all its mountains, waters, fields, and oceans. Humans, in the religious tradition, are not the only significant species on this earth. *Our* orchards, farms, and woodlots are not the only places worthy of respect. All creation is worthy of respect.

That respect requires a moral focus, and a determination, culturally, that we resist the current and recurrent tendency of people living in market economies to become fascinated—obsessed indeed—with money, with reducing all values to money

values. Thomas Jefferson warned us of that; looking toward us, his posterity, he feared lest “the people will forget themselves in ... making money,” losing sight of larger and longer values. It is a noble endeavor to keep a check-book, but that is not the only Good Book. There are other applications for the human brain than counting. We should be good accountants, but we should also be good stewards.

We may recall that Daniel Boorstin, America’s greatest living conservative historian, helped us understand that Jefferson was the philosophical father of the Endangered Species Act: “in his writings, we frequently come upon the appropriate verses of the Psalmist, ‘O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.’” And Jefferson himself wrote that “if one link in nature’s chain might be lost, another and another might be lost, till this whole system of things should vanish by piece-meal.”

When Boorstin or Jefferson write in that way, they recall to us the cultural tradition that unites them, Thoreau, Wendell Berry, and John Donne, a tradition that provides us with lenses with which to scrutinize the natural world. When we take off our glasses, remove those lenses, and hold them in our hands, we see in their inner surfaces ourselves reflected. We see ourselves as nature sees *us*. And we are reminded of that reciprocity of which Thoreau and Berry wrote, a reciprocity between

the observer and the observed, between wildness, preserving us, and us preserving wildness.

With that interchange in mind, we may recall a passage from a sermon of Donne’s. It provided to Ernest Hemingway a book title. It provides us with a text to set beside those of Thoreau and Wendell Berry, recalling to us the moral basis for our professional lives: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.... Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” And, looming beyond John Donne, are the great figures of an older and broader tradition, Saints Patrick and Francis, and Buddha among them, who remind us of other endangered species beyond our descendants: The tolling of the bell is for the death of any living thing; we are “involved” in all life.

Our “involvement” with other species of living things arises in part because we share with those species—indeed with earth, air, water and fire—a place in an intentional and not an accidental universe, in which all these, all animate species and all inanimate objects from stars to starfish, have a place.

“...if one link in nature’s chain might be lost, another and another might be lost, till this whole system of things should vanish by piece-meal.”

And so they might, friends, and so they might, one species after another.

Unless we rally round each other, and join with all others who acknowledge with us that the bell is tolling constantly now, tolling all day and all night without surcease, as species after species dies, creation after creation, friend in the earth after friend in the earth.

I urge, therefore, that we cultivate our competence the better to serve the cultural values we bring to this work, in order that we may serve all nature and some portion of humankind. It is true that the Organic Act of the National Park Service only requires that the people in its service sustain "unimpaired" the places put into their trust, but that Act is merely one expression of a cultural tradition requiring us to give heed to the seamless, coherent fabric of God's creation, in all its interlinked parts. Each of those parts is of ultimate value, each is essential, each cardinal, each indispensable. There is no surplus in God's creation.

All of us are conservationists; we would not be in our line of work if we were not. Some are secular conservationists. Others are religious conservationists, unabashedly affirming that our obligation arises from a due

respect for this *created* universe. We are preservationists because we are in awe of the accomplishments of our predecessors in the American tradition and do not wish to lose a single cubic foot of the ground they hallowed.

The dictionary has helped us define our task—and our role as good stewards—by providing two meanings of the word "cultural." One reminds us that we are professionals. The other reminds us that we are citizens—standing in a great tradition.

Let us get on with our work—respectful of each other, as fellow-laborers toward a moral end, courteous even to those who bore us, or infuriate us, or who don't seem to "get it." We are fellow voyagers on a vessel which is heading into rough seas—we will need each other to man the oars and the pumps, and, if necessary, to repel the boarding parties. Indeed, we will require all the help we can get.

Much of that help will come from within, from our religious convictions, from our cultural values. They are the values that led us into this line of work.

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