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CHIEF SEATTLE AND THE LONG VIEW

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Trumpeter

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Introduction

I recently met my 16-year-old son, Erik, whom I had not seen since he was four. It was a humbling experience to meet someone I had known since birth but no longer knew, to look into the eyes of a youth and know that what I do in the world makes a difference to his future.

I am my son's prophet because, through my behavior, I am responsible, as best I am able, for the morality of the world he will inherit. I am my son's prophet because what I do foretells the options of his future. I am my son's prophet because what I think or say will either unfold his wings or weigh him down with an anchor.

Three things occurred to me when I realized that I am my son's prophet. The first was an overwhelming feeling of responsibility. The second was a feeling of humility because of the little I know. The third was a feeling of freedom because the world is always in a state of change, of becoming, so I can pass the baton to my son when he is ready and I have done all I can. This is as it should be, because one must learn to follow before one can lead. Thus each generation is the prophet for those who follow.

Chief Seattle

As my son's prophet, I will tell him that prophets come in many guises and often foretell what we do not wish to hear, and that a prophet is therefore seldom accepted in his or her own land. Native Americans, among the most dignified and spiritual of people, have traditionally respected the land, as exemplified by the prophetic speech of Chief Seattle sent in translation to President Franklin Pierce in 1885:

The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. How can you buy or sell the sky — the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people.

We know that white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The Earth is not his brother but his enemy, and when he has conquered it he moves on. He leaves his father's graves, and his children's birthright is forgotten.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps because I am savage and do not understand — the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frog around the pond at night?

The whites too, shall pass — perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival?

When Europeans came to the New World, they brought their values with them. Their views of dignity and spirituality were different from those of the Native Americans. The Native Americans lived with the land and considered themselves part of its spiritual harmony. Europeans, on the other hand, sought to conquer, harness, and own the land. And, with some exceptions, they probably neither understood nor cared about the Native Americans' values or point of view.

Native Americans had lived on and with the land more than 10,000 years. Europeans arrived in the New World and saw the land as a vast, unlimited commodity to be exploited for short-term profits. They dominated the land, squandered its resources, and polluted its soil, water, and air in less than 400 years because they lacked a spiritual connection with Nature. Unlike the Native Americans, Europeans saw not the land but only the commodities it produced.

Science and Technology

The Europeans brought science and technology to the New World and relied on them, as in the past, to solve social problems. I will tell my son that what they failed to understand is that science and technology are human tools that are as constructive or destructive, as conservative or exploitive as their users. Science and technology have no sensitivity, make no judgements, have no conscience.

It is neither scientific endeavors nor technological advances that affect the land; it is the degree of consciousness, and consequent thought processes with which we humans use the fruits of these endeavors, which tip the ecological balance. Visionaries, those rare individuals for whom time is at once a link with the past and a telescope into the future, have told us throughout history that we cannot survive in intellectual isolation. Either we have not listened, or we have not understood that the notion of scientific and technological neutrality is a dangerous fantasy because no endeavor can be isolated from its effects on personal, social and environmental reality.

Albert Einstein struggled with scientific neutrality and social responsibility, when his theoretical formulation $E=MC^2$ opened the door for nuclear weapons. Following World War II, he wrote of the grave dangers of intellectual isolation. The peril of which Einstein wrote is the notion that a single component of the universe can be studied in isolation from any other component and be understood. In other words, Einstein learned that intellectual understanding is not sufficient unto itself. I will tell my son that without the awareness of and responsibility for consequences that evolve out of relationships between the mind and its environment, intellectual understanding is simplistic and often proves destructive, even unto desolation of the land that sustains us.

Killing in the Short-Term

Last year, for example, I talked to the Christmas Tree Growers Association about the role of below-ground biological processes in the sustainability of our coniferous forests. Before I spoke, however, a gentleman from a leading chemical company gave an impassioned speech about the necessity and, indeed, virtues of herbicides that kill all "competing" vegetation on Christmas tree farms by chemically sterilizing the soil to a depth of seven inches for one year. That such treatment also kills the soil that grows the trees did not appear to be part of the speaker's thought processes.

The chemical company representative gave the impression that he saw plants, other than Christmas trees, only as isolated targets for herbicides just as President Reagan gave the impression that he saw Muammar Qaddafi only as an isolated target for the military. I will tell my son that such short-term, simplistic views almost inevitably have unexpected, long-term, negative consequences,

as illustrated by this excerpt from a 1987 article.

Scientists say we've lost the war with insects. The human race, packing more pesticides than common sense, has lost the war with the insect kingdom and inadvertently created armies of superbugs 'nothing can kill,' top insect experts warn. 'The short- sighted and irresponsible use of pesticides...is producing strains of monster bugs. There are now about 30 species that nothing can kill....'
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Cumulative Impacts

As Chief Seattle tried to tell us, the consciousness with which we act determines the outcome through the cumulative effects we cause on the land. Cumulative effects are not well understood; in fact, most people do not understand the concept. Let's consider cumulative effects in terms of vintage wine. In my earlier youth, I held the illusion that by keeping careful track of the number of swallows I took of a good wine, I would know the limits of sobriety before I crossed the threshold of no return. I could always find the limits of sobriety, but only after I crossed the threshold and knew I had taken one swallow too many. That is a cumulative effect.

We only learn about cumulative effects when we see the outcome of our actions on the land, when we cross the threshold of no return. The price I paid for crossing the threshold of sobriety was always a horrible hangover that impaired my ability to function, until the pollutant was purged and my system was healed. Cumulative effects also impair the land's ability to function until it is healed, which in some cases is proving to take a century or more.

I will tell my son that ecological relationships are far more complex and far less predictable than our statistical models lead us to believe, so we cannot foresee the moment when cumulative effects become irreversible.

We make two serious, fundamental errors in our view of the land. First, we only manage what we see above-ground. We do not manage, or even think about or plan for, below-ground processes. Second, we assume that the depth, fertility, and health of the soil; the quality and quantity of the water; the quality of the air; and the quality of the sunlight are constants. Because we assume they are constants, we omit them from our economic models and our planning modes. Each, however, is a variable of which we have only so much working capital. We erode our soil physically, and we degrade it chemically. We pollute our waters and our air with chemicals. Air pollution has a direct effect on soil and water, and in turn affects the quality and quantity of sunlight that our land has available as energy. I will tell my son that nothing in Nature is static; Nature has given us only variables that are constantly changing.

There are those who say that we can intensify land management, and have

more of everything simultaneously, because science and technology will find the answers. But as we simplify the above-ground portion of the ecosystem for short-term profits, we simultaneously simplify the below-ground portion of the ecosystem, which alters how the soil, roots, nutrient cycling, and nutrient uptake processes function and consequently how the land produces.

Is Chief Seattle's prediction of 133 years ago coming true? Are we suffocating in our own waste? Are we now beginning to fight for environmental survival because we have had too a little environmental consciousness?

Choices for the Long Term

So long as we have a commodity consciousness, we will view the land as a commodity, exploit it as a commodity, and destroy it as a commodity. As we elevate our consciousness, the constant human struggle, we begin to take our rightful place in the universe: not as conquerors, for we have conquered nothing, but as universal custodians.

Humanity stands today at the crossroad between the end of living and the beginning of survival. It is imperative that we heed Chief Seattle's words, and there is still time because today's choices belong to us. Tomorrow's consequences, however, belong both to us and to the future. The scale is poised in the balance; the difference is the level of our consciousness that determines our actions.

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