Chapter 13

Earth Day

I believe environmentalism is dying and will be replaced within fifteen years by a resurgent agrarianism, focused on food, and led by youth.

Life takes curious twists.

I'm a former archaeologist and Sierra Club activist who in 2006 became a dues-paying member of the New Mexico Cattlemen's Association as a producer of local grassfed beef. Then last year, I was selected as an American delegate to Terra Madre, the biennial convening of the Slow Food movement in Turin, Italy, where I joined thousands of farmers from around the planet in a four-day festival of lectures, workshops and a mountain of unbelievably good food.

For a boy raised in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, during the heyday of sprawl, fast food, and disco music, this is still a bewildering sequence of events. I grew up with cars, concrete, transplanted cactus, and copious amounts of air conditioning. The closest I came to livestock were the horses my parents owned for trail-riding purposes.

Cattle? Local food? Sustainability? I had no clue. Like everyone else coming of age in a big American city during 1970s, I didn't give a second thought to anything related to what I ate. Geez, back then fast food was still considered a *good thing*. Even when I joined the Sierra Club, eventually becoming an activist during the 1990s, I rarely thought about the sources of my daily meals. It was all wilderness, wildlife, and outrage all the time. If I thought about food, it was only in the context of the bad things it did to the land, such as overgrazing by cattle.

But there I was at Terra Madre last fall, standing in the lunch line with Peruvian beekeepers, Russian herb farmers, African gourd-growers, Italian gastronomists, Scottish students, Indian seed-savers, American cooks, Mexican activists, and Chinese academics. Above my head in the cavernous hall – a former Winter Olympics venue – I could hear the steady beat of global music. On either side of me was a buzz of conversation in the sing-song of many languages.

But most amazing of all, everyone was *happy*.

Now, I'm generally an upbeat guy, but this was a new sensation for me professionally. That's because as the director of a nonprofit organization, I get a daily dose of sober headlines: global warming, rising energy costs, population pressures, food riots, wars, the biodiversity crisis, and most recently (bad news for nonprofits) the financial meltdown on Wall Street. Crisis management, it seems, had become part of my job description. That can make for long days and long faces. Some days, even the word "sustainability" sounded depressing.

That's why Terra Madre was such a pleasant surprise. Smiles were *everywher*e. At one point, I stood in the middle of the giant hall and turned circles in silence; every person I saw radiated

positive energy. Many had journeyed thousands of miles to get there, at their own expense, often tracing a personal odyssey. But hardship meant nothing. They were all smiles.

The reason, I realized, was simple: they were here to celebrate *food*. And in that moment, the curious twists in my life journey suddenly made sense.

Environmentalism has evolved dramatically over time, walking a long and eventful road in America from Henry Thoreau to John Muir to Aldo Leopold to David Brower and beyond. For most of the first half of the 20th century it went by the appellation of 'conservation' and focused on resource scarcity and nature preservation. Then with the publication of Rachel Carson's expose Silent Spring in 1963 it was replaced by environmentalism, which expanded the movement's work to include human as well as animal welfare, tackling important issues such as industrial pollution, urban sprawl, nuclear power, and, now, global warming.

But unlike the evolving labor movement, environmentalism must be judged today, despite its valiant and energetic efforts, to have come up short.

Take just two important metrics. The first is the condition of the planet. I won't go into a litany of distressing news here, but it is safe to say that the consensus among scientists, researchers and activists is that our global environment is deteriorating to the point where human and non-human well-being is in serious jeopardy. All important trend lines point downward for the good stuff, and sharply upward for the bad; and with climate change now underway, these trend lines will likely steepen.

Of course, environmentalism is not the cause of this situation, far from it. Furthermore, from the start it had to struggle uphill against mighty adversaries. But if the goal of the movement was the prevention of these global trends, then it has proven to be largely ineffectual.

In his most recent book, The Bridge at the End of the World, Gus Speth, the Dean of Yale University's School of Forestry and a well-known 'insider' environmentalist, writes: "Our efforts have not succeeded…the evidence is in. We have won many victories, but we are losing the planet."

He blames the decline of the global environment on the systemic failure of capitalism to consider the long-term ecological costs embedded in its pro-growth ideology. But he has harsh words for his fellow environmentalists too. "My generation is a generation of great talkers, overly fond of conferences," he writes. "We have analyzed, debated, discussed and negotiated these global issues almost endlessly. But on action, we have fallen far short."

Of course, there has been plenty of action over the years, as Speth notes. His list includes: regulations of various stripes, positive and negative subsidies, cost-benefit analyses, citizen lawsuits, government enforcement, international treaties, parks and protected areas, species protection plans, ecolabeling, "sustainable development" strategies, green architecture, and even the marketplace.

But none of it, he writes, fundamentally altered those planetary trend lines.

The second metric is more qualitative, though some hard data is beginning to trickle in. I'm referring to the slow but steady dissolution of the bond between people and nature. This bond, once strong, has eroded over the years to the point where most Americans have just a fleeting relationship with the natural world today. Aldo Leopold fretted about this decades ago when wrote in the Sand County Almanac *that "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from a furnace."*

These dangers came true. There is little doubt today that Americans rarely think twice about where their food or their heat comes from.

The trend lines on our bond with nature point downward as well. Not only has the population of farmers and ranchers dwindled to 2% of the nation's total population (down from 40% in 1920), new research shows decreasing participation since the 1990s in outdoor pastimes, including hunting, fishing, and camping, particularly by young people. A recent report in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences *said these trends could curtail conservation efforts as a general appreciation for nature declines among the next generation.*

Recently, author Richard Louv raised this alarm to a new level by calling attention to a spreading malady he calls "nature deficit disorder," which he defines as the human cost of alienation from nature. He chronicles its consequences in his book Last Child in the Woods, *which begins with a quote by a fourth-grader who likes to play indoors because "that's where all the electrical outlets are."*

"A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rain forest," writes Louv, "but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move."

For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality, he says, something to watch, to consume and to ignore. As the young spend less time in nature, their experiences narrow, physiologically and psychologically, thus reducing the richness of their lives. This is important because the health of the planet will likely depend on how the young today respond to nature, how they will raise their own children to think about the natural world, and how each chooses to live their daily lives.

Louv likens the current situation to the passing of a frontier in which Americans romanticized, protected, and destroyed nature. "Now that frontier – which existed in the family farm, the woods at the end of the road, the national parks, and in our hearts – is itself disappearing or changing beyond recognition," he writes. "In the space of a century, the American experience of nature has gone from direct utilitarianism to romantic attachment to electronic detachment."

While environmentalism didn't cause this downward trend either, it obviously had little effect in stopping or reversing it. Therefore, taken together with the condition of the planet, these metrics

indicate to me that this particular movement, after fifty years of noble effort, missed its mark and is now dying.

It was not a surprise to learn that the Slow Food movement originated in Italy, where good food is as much a part of the culture as, well, fast food is in America. The two, of course, are connected.

Slow Food was founded by activist Carlo Petrini in the small town of Bra in 1986 as a deliberate push-back against the infiltration of fast food chain restaurants into Italy. His initial aim was to support and defend good food, good eating, and a slow pace of life. The quality of food, Petrini insisted, was intimately linked to quality of life. "By training our senses to understand and appreciate the pleasure of food," he wrote, "we also open our eyes to the world."

Over time, the Slow Food movement broadened its goals – arguing that diverse, healthy food is the foundation to overall human well-being and, as a consequence, the very survival of our imperiled planet.

Slow Food's official mission is to protect, conserve and defend traditional and sustainable foods, primary ingredients, methods of cultivation and processing, and the biodiversity of cultivated and wild food varieties. This mission is premised on the wisdom of local communities working in harmony with the ecosystems that surround them. Slow Food also protects places of historic, artistic, or social value that form a part of our global food heritage.

Its motto is "Good, Clean, and Fair."

Twenty years after its founding, the movement has grown to over 80,000 members in 132 countries. In 2004, its governing body organized the inaugural Terra Madre event in Turin with the goal of bringing together small-scale food producers from around the planet to discuss common issues and exchange points of view. In 2006, Terra Madre attracted 9300 participants, including 5000 food producers from 1600 food communities in 150 countries, 1000 cooks and chefs, more than 400 academics from 225 universities, 2300 nonprofit representatives, and 1000 (hungry) journalists.

In 2008, Terra Madre's emphasis was on youth – 1300 young farmers and students attended from 97 countries. The event included the official launch of the International Youth Network.

The opening ceremony – held in another former Olympic venue – featured an Olympics-style parade of nations, with each delegation dressed in traditional outfits and carrying a placard announcing their homeland. Plenary speakers included Sam Levin, a 15-year-old student from Vermont who described his successful effort to start an organic garden on the grounds of his high school. His (youthful) declaration captured the mood of the gathering: "It's a promise to all of you that we will finish what you started," he said. "It's a message to our parents that we will be the generation that will reunite mankind with the earth."

For the next three days, Gen and I wandered in and out of workshops, listened to lectures (courtesy of professional translators), browsed the global goods, and braved the jammed-packed 'Salon de Gusto' in an adjacent building, which featured local food from every part of Italy. We also attended media events, such as the official unveiling of the "Manifesto on Climate Change and the Future of Food Security" which was described as "an agro-ecological response to challenge posed by climate change."

Of course, through it all, we ate. Much of the food was new to me, and all of it was delicious.

Perhaps most impressive of all, besides the wide diversity of people (and the smiles), was the quantity of youth in attendance. This was a bit of a revelation to me. Youth, I've been told over and over, don't want to go into agriculture anymore. It's not profitable, it's too hard, the hours are too long, and so forth. They wanted a job in town instead, I was told. While I harbored doubts about this claim for years, it wasn't until Terra Madre that I realized that an opposite case could be made.

For example, I spoke to one young man who had recently graduated from a university in Montana with a degree in environmental studies. His plan? To become an organic farmer. He had found a farm and was ready to get to work. "Why farming?" I asked him. It was his way, he replied, of "doing something" about the global challenges confronting us.

"Doing something" was the watchword of Terra Madre. In fact, it could be the motto for the *new agrarianism* – the name being given to this diverse effort taking place around the planet to create an economic alternative to industrialism. Frankly, I find this movement very hopeful and exciting. I left Terra Madre fired up.

In my opinion, there are three primary reasons why environmentalism is dying:

The first is Wendell Berry's long-standing criticism that environmentalism never developed an economic program to go along with its preservation and health programs. It had no economic retort, in other words, for industrialism. It never truly confronted our economy, the source of most environmental ills. And without an effective alternative, the average American had no choice but to participate in a destructive model of economic growth. Wallace Stegner, Berry's mentor, voiced a similar complaint years ago when he wrote that westerners had not yet "created a society to match the scenery."

I saw this played out during my experience within the Sierra Club, where I learned that most activists considered environmental problems to have environmental solutions, ignoring their economic sources. This meant we spent too much time and energy on symptoms instead of causes. Aldo Leopold flagged this problem as well when he cautioned us against trying to "fix the pump without fixing the well." We didn't heed his advice, however, and for fifty years focused our attention on the pump while the well ran dry.

Many environmentalists might argue, in contrast, that they did have an economic agenda: tourism and recreation. This is true – and for a while the benefits of both looked generous. But

over time recreation and its associated side effects – congestion, exurban sprawl, transitory populations – began to take on darker hues, especially as it became clear they weren't doing much to reverse the trends mentioned earlier, and may have even made the situation worse in some places. And as the twenty-first century progresses, with its concerns about climate change, carbon footprints, peak oil (including $7-a-gallon gasoline), food-miles, and sustainability in general, an economy based on tourism looks rather shaky.

Second, environmentalism is dying because it left the land behind. The movement lost the feeling of "the soil between our toes," as Leopold put it, meaning it lost an intimate understanding of how land actually works. As a result it lost what Leopold described as the role of individual responsibility for the health of the land. "Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal," he wrote, and "conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity." But by losing the feel of soil between our toes, the movement lost the ability to understand, and thus preserve, land health – the foundation on which all health depends.

For example, I learned that while activists and others could recognize poor land use, and rightly worked to correct it, they lost an understanding of good land use, particularly those for-profit activities such as logging and ranching that could be conducted sustainably. Instead, as the movement drifted away from land, it began to equate non-use with the highest and best use of land, especially on the public domain. The exception was recreation, of course, though as historian Richard White has written in reference to our global environmental predicament, it has become clear that "play can't handle the weight."

Third, the environmental movement never really walked the talk of a land ethic. While trumpeting Leopold's famous call to enlarge our ethical sphere to include plants and animals, environmentalists ignored his insistence that people and their economic activities be included too. "There is only one soil, one flora, one fauna, and one people, and hence only one conservation problem," Leopold wrote in the Sand County Almanac. "Economic and esthetic land uses can and must be integrated, usually on the same acre." Or this from his essay The Ecological Conscience: "A thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, and the community includes the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people."

A land ethic encompassed it all. But environmentalists didn't listen. Instead, they engaged in a form of environmental isolationism. Work was segregated from nature, and nature was largely put off-limits in parks, wildernesses, refuges, and other types of "protected areas." Not only was there no attempt to integrate people into nature economically under this preservationist paradigm, an energetic effort was made by some activists to curtail certain land uses, such as ranching, whether they preserved the integrity, stability and beauty of the community or not. The land, in their mind, had to be "saved" apart from the

people, and their pitch to the public emphasized dehumanized landscapes – pretty pictures of wild country and images of charismatic wildlife. In general, while activists were quick to invoke Leopold in their campaigns to 'save' this or that, they ignored his holistic view that "bread and beauty grow best together."

This led environmentalists, from mid-century on, to take a colossal gamble: that a vision of a peopleless wilderness could motivate the public to save the natural world.

A classic example is the recent BBC documentary series Planet Earth. It is a stunningly beautiful look at wild animals in their wilderness homes, including snow leopards, Bactrian camels, African dogs, and polar bears, many of which teeter on the edge of extinction. Naturally, at the end came an impassioned plea from the filmmakers to help save these magnificent species. However, there were no people in the series (other than the filmmakers themselves), and barely any sign of human activity. In other words, the series offered no clues about coexistence, about integration, about how bread and beauty might grow together. Instead, nature was presented, as it has been for decades now, in isolation from the dominant species on the planet. The plea aimed at our hearts, not our daily lives.

It didn't work. The jury is in: isolationism didn't significantly alter the downward spiral of ecological degradation and loss. The colossal gamble came up short. And now with the onset of global warming – a consequence of bad economic behavior by the dominant species – the mid-20th century idea of "protection" has lost its punch. A national park won't save the pika or the polar bear.

In retrospect, Leopold was right all along – we need to find a place for people in nature, not outside of it.

If life is like a labyrinth, full of unexpected twists and turns, baffling dead ends, promising passages, and aha! moments of discovery (without a Minotaur to fight, hopefully), then I suspect most of us sooner or later look for a thread that can lead us back to our beginning. As our lives unspool, finding and following a 'through-line' becomes increasingly important to our sense of accomplishment, especially in these complex and bewildering times.

More than once, I was certain that I had found the right thread. For a while I considered my 'through-line' to be the American West – I wanted to explore, document and contemplate the huge, inspiring land that was my home. But the more I investigated, the more I began to notice trouble. I saw a wounded country, pillaged by various types of industry, causing me to get involved in the effort to push back against the pillagers. The struggle to protect nature from human avarice became the thread, I thought.

But my journey through the labyrinth took an unexpected turn. I met a rancher who was not a pillager – quite the opposite in fact – and suddenly I became a peace-maker. Deciding to leave the Sierra Club, I set out to explore a completely different chamber of the labyrinth. As more twists, dead ends, and promising passages followed, I began to see that as one spool of colored

thread ran out I was tying another to its end as I made my way through the maze of life. Documentarian. Activist. Writer. Conservationist. Restorationist. Peace-Maker. Rancher. It was all one thread. Still, I had no clear idea of where I was heading.

Meanwhile, storm clouds gathered over the labyrinth. The relatively straightforward challenges of the 1960s and 1970s – communism, stagflation, wilderness protection, disco music – gave way to a steady downpour of trouble as the 21st century approached. The maze became more complex and harder to navigate as questions of climate change, limits to growth, population pressures, and economic uncertainty rained down on all our heads.

For a while, I felt lost in my little maze. I wasn't *really* a rancher – so what was my organization doing running livestock? I wasn't a land manager by training – so why did we own a 36,000-acre ranch? I wasn't a scientist – so why were we directing riparian restoration projects?

I knew why: because these things had to be done – and if not by us, then by someone. Creeks need to be fixed because we need to heal the land for planetary well-being; grass needs a chance to recover so that we can renew the biota on which we all depend; grassfed beef needs to be produced because we need an alternative to a destructive industrial food system; relationships need to be strengthened so that we can labor together in the downpour.

Still, where was my thread leading?

At Terra Madre, I found out. Suddenly, I felt like I burst into a bright, sunny, large space. There were many people in this large sunny place – and they were all *smiling*. If there were storm clouds above their heads, they were ignored; if the journeys through their own mazes had been difficult or depressing, it didn't show. Optimism filled the space. Everyone, no matter where they came from, what they did, or how they got there, shared a similar outlook.

The thread, I saw, was called *food*.

Food binds us together. It is who we are. What we eat, where our food comes from, how it's produced, who grows it and when it arrives on our table tell us pretty much everything we need to know about ourselves. Our culture is the sum of its edible parts. How we treat the animals that we eat, for example, tells us – or ought to anyway – a great deal about the state of our nation. Overgrazed range is a food issue. Population is a food issue. Climate change is a food issue – as was highlighted at Terra Madre.

Food ties urban to rural, eater to grower, people to land, our past to our future, one nation to another, our children to ourselves. There is no such thing as a "post-agricultural" society, as author Wendell Berry has noted. We're all eaters. We're in this together.

Which brings me to the new agrarianism. Indisputably, it's on the rise. Across America, there is a resurgent interest in local, family-scale, sustainable food, fiber, and fuel production. It began slowly in the 1980s, but has gathered a great deal of speed recently. Local food is the focus and

key to this new movement, but it's more than food systems – it's collaborative watershed groups focused on restoring health to riparian areas, it's the innovative use of livestock to combat noxious weed infestations, it's the carbon-sequestering practices of good land stewardship, and much more.

Agrarianism is on the rise for a simple reason: it effectively corrects the three shortcomings of environmentalism that I described, and thus addresses the challenges of the 21st century. First, it's economic. By implementing sustainable profit and work at local scales, it creates a viable alternative to the industrial economy. It's not theoretical either – it exists and it works. Second, by definition it puts our toes back into contact with the soil again. The new agrarianism's emphasis on stewardship, coexistence, and resilience requires daily contact with the earth, digging, planting, herding, sawing, working. Third, it walks the talk of a land ethic. It encompasses soil plants, animals, and people and strives for a harmonious balance between all. Perhaps just as importantly, a new agrarianism sparks joy and laughter. It requires care and affection and love to succeed, including affection for one another. It gives, not merely takes.

The new agrarians practice what Aldo Leopold called a unifying force, something, as he put it, "more universal than profit, less awkward than government, less ephemeral than sport; something that reaches into all times and places, where men live on land, something that brackets everything from rivers to raindrops, from whales to hummingbirds, from land estates to window-boxes. I can see only one such force: a respect for land as a living organism; a voluntary decency in land-use exercised by every citizen and every land-owner out of a sense for and obligation to that great biota we call America."

A new agrarianism is that decency. And as we begin to tip over on the other side of the bell-shaped curve called Industrialism, the issues of decency, food, hope, joy and good land use couldn't be more important.