

Nature's Voice—

T.A. Barron's blogs for the Earth

Life goes on. Or does it?

April 4, 2005

What's in a blog? (Apologies to Will Shakespeare.) In the next two weeks, thanks to the NRDC Action Fund, I plan to argue, question, rage, reflect, wonder, and also...dream some big dreams.

Today, though, I'd like to propose a new meaning for the term “pro-life.” Even before the Terry Schiavo case, the term had become more politically charged than Tom Delay's cell phone. But the word “life” is far too big, complex, and wondrous a term to be reduced to political shorthand. Life on our lonely planet is truly a miracle, whose diversity and beauty is simply stunning to behold. Whether or not life exists elsewhere in the universe, all we know now is that here on Earth, life is both utterly amazing—and utterly endangered.

That is why I believe that nobody is really more pro-life than an environmentalist. For ecologically aware people, true citizens of the planet, understand the subtle bonds that unite all living creatures. And are willing to fight hard to protect the air, water, and wilderness that sustains us all.

By the same token, the current U.S. administration has proven itself to be highly contemptuous of life. For short-term economic and political gain, the team of Bush, Cheney, and Norton (along with their allies in the oil, coal, chemical, timber, and snowmobile industries) have willfully ignored the constraints of science, longterm sustainability, ethics, and spirituality. They have aggressively pursued policies that are radically hostile to the environment. And to life.

That's the ultimate catch, you see. To destroy and devour our fragile Mother Earth is to destroy ourselves. And to save this planet, with all its wondrous creatures, is to save ourselves. The hummingbird, coral, monarch butterfly, salmon, tree frog, giraffe, gorilla, and mountain lion—to name but a few of our companions—may share very little of their daily lives with us. But they do share something incredibly precious: Life.

Tomorrow's topic: Which came first—Nature or Religion?

Which came first: Nature or Religion?

April 5, 2005

To some people, nature and religion are two entirely separate things. One of them had to come first, they'll tell you—the chicken and the egg, writ large.

I don't buy it. Nature and religion are, for me, part of the very same whole. A deeply wondrous, mysterious, interconnected, and inspirational whole.

One primary quality of both nature and religion is the gift of making us feel both very small and very large, at once. To be in the presence of God, however you choose to define God, is to feel both humbled (very good for us human beings) and enlarged. That's also just the way I feel when standing under the night sky up at our mountain cabin on the western slope of Colorado. When I look up at those stars, so bright that I almost need to squint my eyes, I feel both truly insignificant—and greatly magnified. For nature, like religion, enables us to understand our tininess and transience, while connecting us to all the rest of creation. We may sing alone, and only briefly, but we still have a part in the grand and glorious song of the stars.

Even so, some people argue that there is a necessary divide between folks of faith and folks of nature. Again—being both myself—I don't buy it. But those same people sometimes consider the Earth to be just some sort of great big cake that God has placed us here to devour as we choose. Former Secretary of the Interior James Watt (who mentored our current Secretary, Gale Norton) famously declared in Congressional testimony that protecting the environment is unimportant because “after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.”

That sort of thinking is grossly arrogant and short-sighted. And legions of deeply religious people—be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Shinto, Confucian, Taoist, or Native American—agree. How else can we understand texts such as the Bible's Genesis 2:15, in which God places humans in the Garden of Eden “to till and keep it”? The future of our tilling requires sustainable keeping.

And how else can we understand the story of Noah's ark? If God made Noah go to such great lengths to save all the kinds of creatures on Earth, how can we possibly do any less?

Tomorrow's topic: Why the environmental movement isn't dead.

Why the environmental movement isn't dead.

April 6, 2005

“The report of my death,” Mark Twain famously declared, “is greatly exaggerated.”

So, too, with reports of the death of the environmental movement. In fact, the movement is alive and vibrant, if also discouraged and disoriented. Now, the environmental movement can certainly improve—and I'll speak about one important way in a moment. But the essential truth is that money, greed, ignorance, and fear are powerful adversaries. Very powerful.

Many, if not most, of the problems facing today's environmental movement did not arise from the movement itself. They stem from the tragic fact that in the year 2000, we happened to end up on the losing side of a disputed election that ushered in the most virulently anti-environmental administration in U.S. history. (And, deepening the tragedy, that administration would most likely have been scornfully forced out of office after one term, but for the terrible events of September 11, 2001.) Thus, in a fundamental sense, the worst mistake environmentalists have ever made was not working hard enough for Al Gore in 2000.

But we have also made another big mistake: We haven't reached out nearly enough to diverse groups of people who could be natural allies. People of color, people whose first language is Spanish, ranchers, farmers, folks who hunt and fish, small business people, Native Americans, inner city residents, rural Americans, and people of religious faiths—all these groups could be leading the parade for protecting our fragile planet. For all these groups have a great deal to lose if the environment is trashed, resources are devoured, sprawl is unchecked, and pollution is tolerated. Anti-environmental policies, such as the Bush administration has relentlessly pursued, undermine basic American values of freedom and opportunity, as well as fundamental religious principles of the sanctity of life and the importance of stewardship.

We must communicate better! We must explain our goals using the languages of basic values, patriotism, local communities, traditional cultures, and our highest hopes for our children.

Take, for example, people who enjoy fishing. Myself, I've never been much of a fisherman; whenever it's my turn to land a few trout for supper, my camping partners end up eating macaroni and cheese. But many avid fishermen I know are increasingly upset by the Bush administration's permissiveness toward polluters, their ruination of watersheds by aggressive lumbering, and their destruction of wetlands. Just last week, the senate of New Hampshire (not exactly a Democratic stronghold) voted to limit mercury pollutants in the state waters—because they realized that Bush EPA policies could turn the Granite State into a mercury hot spot.

Cast a wide net. That's what fishing people have done for thousands of years to survive. But it's not just a good rule for fishing. It's a good rule for politics—especially the politics of the environment.

Tomorrow's topic: Cranes take flight—and lift the soul.

Cranes take flight—and lift the soul.

April 7, 2005

Two weeks ago, my wife and I drove, with our nine-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son, from our Colorado home to the hills of central Nebraska. Our goal: to witness the migration of the sandhill cranes who fly over the Platte River at this time of year. And not only cranes are involved—ten to fourteen million water birds also fly through. That's right, ten to fourteen million.

A lot of wings. And a lot of sounds, too. I can still hear the swelling cacophony at dawn—all those birds honking, chattering, hooting, splashing, and singing. As I watched, I remembered that some of those birds begin their annual migration as far south as Central America. And some of them, including sandhill cranes, continue northward across western Canada, into the Arctic, and across the Bering Sea to Siberia.

I realized that, by their enormous journey, those cranes were connecting some of the most sacred places on our planet. And that, by watching them, I too was connected to those places. And so, by the very beating of their wings, the sandhill cranes had given me a renewed sense of connection to the Earth.

And something more. With all the terrible ways that humanity is harming our planet—crimes against the environment that sometimes make me wake up in the middle of night in a sweat-drenched rage—here was important testimony to the power of nature's patterns. I found myself surprisingly moved by the simple fact of this natural migration that has continued for many thousands of years.

Will it continue for thousands more? That, in part, is up to us—whether we can learn to conserve water, control sprawl, and live sustainably on this planet that we share with the cranes. Yet despite all my worries, I found it deeply heartening to see all those birds in flight, doing what they have done for so many seasons and so many centuries.

Migrations—whether sandhill cranes, Pacific salmon, gray whales, or monarch butterflies—are more than a journey of bodies. More than a flight of wings. They are also a spectacular flight of the soul.

Tomorrow's topic: The war you haven't heard about.

The war you haven't heard about.

April 8, 2005

A war is raging—right now. The fighting is brutal, the damage horrendous.

But this war isn't in Iraq. It's right here at home: The Bush administration is waging an aggressive, yet stealthy, war against America's wilderness and public lands.

Our national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and other public lands total 623 million acres—14 times the size of New England, or almost 6 times the size of California. They are the lands whose scenery inspired the song America the Beautiful. And they also constitute a natural engine that cleans our drinking water, purifies the air we breathe, produces medicines, provides renewable resources, and enhances our quality of life in countless ways. Most important of all, they offer all of us the chance to experience directly, in moments of silence, the wonders of creation.

They are also, thanks to the Bush administration, a battlefield.

Fueled by zealous anti-environmentalism and corporate special interests, the Bush team has pursued a relentless attack on these precious public lands. Instead of honoring the public trust that requires protecting such national assets for our children and grandchildren, they have aggressively pushed exploitation by the mining, timber, oil and gas, and snowmobile industries. And they've been terribly clever about it, pursuing this war with stealth and deception.

If I were to list just the examples on the top of my mind, this entry would stretch on way too long. This is, after all, the same administration that has summarily withdrawn from the Kyoto protocol, turned valuable wetlands into parking lots, proposed mixing raw sewage with treated drinking water, and so much more. And now, without any honest justification, Bush & Company is pushing to turn the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—calving grounds of the caribou for time beyond memory—into a maze of drill rigs, roads, pipelines, air strips, and gravel mines. This sacred landscape, and all the people and creatures who cherish it, deserve far better. After all, what is the word, “refuge” supposed to mean, if not a place that is truly safe? But a refuge is only as safe as its guardian is wise.

Allow me to name just one more example: With a single bureaucratic maneuver in 2003, Interior Secretary Gale Norton removed 262 million acres from possible wilderness protection. By renouncing all federal authority to study or conserve wilderness on these lands, she removed even the possibility that future generations of Americans might choose to protect them. Not by chance, her action paved the way—literally—for the extractive industries.

Note this, however. This colossal land grab took place after no public hearings, no open debate, and no Congressional oversight. It wasn't even announced on the Interior Department's website. It was simply revealed in a legal settlement with the state of Utah,

which was released on a Friday night after reporters' 5 o'clock deadlines, just after Congress had left for spring recess.

Bush's war on our wilderness and public lands is taking a horrendous toll. It is wasteful, short-sighted, arrogant, and greedy. It can still be stopped, but only by a new kind of peace movement—one that unites true patriotism, love of our wildest places, and the hallowed ground of the human heart.

Next topic: That bitter Arctic wind.

That bitter Arctic wind.

April 11, 2005

Heartbroken. Outraged. And outraged some more. That's how I feel today, almost a month after the Senate voted to defile the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Fifty-one senators bowed to pressure from special interests and backward leadership, sending drill rigs into one of the most pristine places on Earth.

What is the greatest tragedy here? It's not that the relentless pursuit of oil does nothing to reduce our nation's debilitating dependence on fossil fuels. It's not that the only way the Republican Senate leadership could do this was through a budget bill—a sneaky, backdoor trick to avoid open debate on this critical issue. It's not even that the biggest losers are our children and grandchildren, who now will never know the grandeur and beauty of that unspoiled wilderness.

No, the greatest tragedy here is what this says about who we are. As a people, we can either be defined by what we consume, wear, and drive—or by what we honor, value, and save.

Put differently: Are our nation's assets best measured in barrels of oil, tons of coal, and board feet of timber? Or in our commitments to future generations; our ideals such as freedom, generosity, courage, compassion, and peace; and our wisdom to conserve and protect the natural world that sustains us?

The fight to save the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is far from over. Groups such as NRDC and The Wilderness Society continue to do heroic work that could still prevail. All of us can support them in every possible way by speaking out, donating time and money, and tying a few green ribbons wherever we go. Like the proud people of the Gwich'in tribe, for whom this land is sacred, let us seize this opportunity to live our highest ideals!

In the end, the fight to save the Arctic is about more than wilderness and wildlife, clean air and clean water. For the wellspring of our water is also the wellspring of our soul.

Tomorrow's topic: The wisdom of trees.

The wisdom of trees.

April 12, 2005

As a youth, I roamed our Colorado ranch with my eyes aimed upward: at the tall ponderosas, the gleaming mountains, and—most often—the sky. Somehow, that wide blue sky made me feel that any goal was possible. And it still does—even if that goal, in these days of global warming, is saving the sky itself.

Short-lived, mobile, and often uncentered creatures that we are, it's awfully hard for us to wrap our minds around some of the Earth's most pressing problems. Global warming, the decline of boreal forests, the mass extinction of species—all these can seem overwhelmingly vast, beyond our normal reference points of time and space.

What we need, I think, is the perspective of trees. When I was a kid on the ranch, I would sometimes hike to an ancient ponderosa pine that grew beside our creek. Although it leaned precariously, its contorted roots made an ideal place to sit—and to dream. Sometimes I would wonder just what that old tree had seen in its centuries: the passing of Utes, the raging of forest fires, the silent gathering of snow, the birthing of a meadowlark.

What stories it could tell! And what perspective it could convey to us transient human beings. An ancient, sentient tree would be truly centered in a way that we can hardly grasp: It would be able to sink roots deeply in one spot, to witness the cycle of seasons and centuries, to be fully alive and utterly aware. It would be wholly in the present, yet equally tied to past and future. This would require an absolute sense of place—one that is both physical and spiritual. For such a being would connect body and soul, even as it connected earth and sky.

A tree would not wait around for global warming to fry us all, instead of investing in solutions. A tree would not carve up our last remaining wilderness in search of more oil, instead of developing alternative sources of energy. A tree would not destroy the habitats needed by our fellow species, instead of finding ways for all creatures to live sustainably.

A tree would sink deep roots—and also reach for the sky.

Tomorrow's topic: Heroes, not celebrities.

Heroes, not celebrities.

April 13, 2005

When it comes to knowing the difference between a hero and a celebrity, our society is massively and profoundly confused. While celebrity is just about fame, heroism is about qualities of character. One is transient and superficial; the other, enduring and deep.

And yet, in our media-obsessed culture, we spend far more time discussing the latest celebrity scandal than the crucial values and events that shape our planet. We hear much more about the future of American Idol than about the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The truth is, on this grand hike that we all take, called Life, our heroes are our trail guides. They remind us just how far we've come; they show us how much higher we can climb. Best of all, heroes come in all ages, genders, colors, cultures, and economic conditions. And every single one of us—including every child—has a potential hero down inside.

But many kids today don't know that. A new national survey of American teenagers revealed a startling truth: Only half of the kids questioned had a hero at all. And of those who did respond that they had a well-known hero, more than three quarters chose a movie star, musician, or athlete. More than twice as many kids cited Spiderman as their hero than cited Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr. And nobody at all cited John Muir, Mardy Murie, Henry David Thoreau, Jane Goodall, or Rachel Carson.

Or take another example: A recent issue of Seventeen magazine, which touted a rare focus on young heroes, gave far more space to promoting fashion and beauty bargains (“you can be supercute”), Ashton (“his most personal interview ever!”) and Chad and Sophia (“their love secrets”).

This is why, about five years ago, I did two things that I hoped might make a small difference: wrote a book about truly heroic young people, called *The Hero's Trail*; and founded a national award for public-spirited kids who have made a genuine impact on the world. Now, each year, the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes (which I named after my mother) recognizes ten kids who have done spectacular projects for their communities and the environment. Their passion, energy, creativity—and diversity—is truly inspiring.

Recent examples include: Barbara Brown, who organizes crude oil recycling in Texas; Ryan Hreljac, who promotes clean drinking water in Africa; and Gina Gallant, who designs ecologically better roadways. (For more examples, visit www.barronprize.org) My greatest hope is that their examples will inspire more young people to do the same. For we need our heroes—and so does the planet.

Tomorrow's topic: Let's be creators, not consumers.

Let's be creators, not consumers.

April 14, 2005

Today, kids (as well as adults) are bombarded with commercial messages from the media. We're told: Eat this, wear that, drive one of these. And then, of course, throw it away and get a new one.

The message underlying this commercial blitz is all too clear. We're being told that our identity, and our worth, is defined by what we eat, wear, and drive—not by who we really are down inside ourselves.

We're told all the time that we're a nation of “consumers”. The term is used by politicians, journalists, business leaders—so often that it has become a substitute for the word “citizen”. And yet, even in my years in business, I've never liked the term. For if you call people consumers, you're implying that the most important thing they do is to consume things, devour products, and use up resources. Now, each of us, even the most conservation-minded and frugal, does some of that. But is that really all we are?

People don't just consume things. We also create things, build things, and share things with others. And we do plenty of activities that need no things at all: We love, strive, celebrate, protect, explore, hope, nurture, and cherish. On rare and beautiful occasions, we even save something—just because it's far too precious to be consumed.

The truth is, we are more than what we buy, use, and discard. Much, much more. Let's think of ourselves—and teach our children to think of themselves—not as consumers, but as creators! Of our own lives. Our own communities. And yes, our own world.

Tomorrow's topic (which will be my last): Reasons for hope.

Reasons for hope.

April 15, 2005

This is my last entry. During this blog, we've talked about lots of weighty issues—the Bush administration's aggressive war on our environment, the cult of consumerism, the spirituality of crane migration, and the connection between nature and faith, among others. Many of these issues raise troubling questions about who we really are as people, where we want to go, and whether we have the wisdom to get there.

That's why I'd like to end by naming three genuine, solid reasons for hope.

The enduring power of nature to heal and inspire: That's the first cause for hope. So long as there remain some places where we can freely interact with the natural world, we can always be renewed and reminded of our connection to the community of life. Whether standing under a great redwood tree, watching a pod of dolphins in the ocean, or gazing up at the stars—we can feel both insignificantly small and meaningfully large. And that's an infinitely precious gift.

People of heroic dimension: the second reason for hope. All around us, people are showing quiet heroism, digging deep in themselves to find courage, perseverance, honesty, compassion, hope, humor, and wisdom. And if we are ever going to save our fragile planet—as well as ourselves—those are essential qualities that we're going to need.

If you doubt such genuine, unsung heroes exist, think of those remarkable kids I mentioned earlier. There's young Barbara Brown, who convinced the ranchers of west Texas that dumping old crude oil on the ground was wasteful and foolish, and that recycling was a better way to go. The name of her project? “Don't Be Crude.” Then there's Ryan Hreljac who, at the ripe old age of seven, was so upset to hear about African kids dying from contaminated drinking water that he decided to do something about it. He raised enough money to build a clean water well for one village in Uganda. And since then, he's done the same for dozens more. And these are just two of the many examples of kids who have won the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

Our power to make choices: the third cause for hope. No matter how much our political leaders try to frighten us or fool us into thinking we have no choices, we always do. We have God's gift of free will; the only question is how well we use it. Just as we may choose whether to waste resources or conserve them, we may choose whether to accept a shallow destiny or something deeper, a destiny that is whole and wise and true to our best selves.

There's a story I've always loved about a girl who was walking along an ocean beach—and found that the tide had washed ashore thousands of sea stars. Knowing that they would die if not returned to the water, decided to start throwing them back. Just as she picked up the very first one, however, someone came over and sneered, “There's too

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many of them! You'll never make a difference.” She threw that first one into the sea, then declared: “I just made a difference to that one.”

If our choices matter, then we ourselves matter. That's a crucial insight. For if we really do believe it, we have the power to change the world.

And yes—to save it.

My deepest thanks to all of you who have participated in this blog, which has renewed my hope that we can, in fact, save our planet. And I would also like to thank the wonderful people at NRDC who made this whole experience possible.