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The Continent Indissoluble

Curt Meine

In one of the signature poems from *Leaves of Grass* (1892), "For You O Democracy," Walt Whitman bore witness to a land that in his day was both ripe with potential and riven with social discord:

"Come, I will make the continent indissoluble. . . ."

"I will make divine, magnetic lands. . . ."

"I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies. . . ."

How, more than a century later, shall we read Whitman? Should we yearn nostalgically for the young republic, so full of promise, that he knew? Should we scoff knowingly and ironically at his naiveté, his happy vision of a land characterized by the civil "companionship" and self-governing capacity of its citizens? Should we dare hope that such a democracy might yet emerge so apparently late in the national ball game? We may question even the notion of a national or continental poet: who, we may ask, is he to speak for me?

If, however, notions of responsible citizenship, general welfare, and national vision retain any currency, we can turn again, for perspective, to Whitman's democratic vistas, the landscapes where he found a sense of the unity and shared adventure of America. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," he gathered up the generations:

"It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,

"I am with you, men and women of a generation, or ever

so many generations hence. . . ."

"What is it then between us?"

"What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?"

While "Facing West from California's Shores," he gathered up the globe, and the mystery of our undetermined destiny:

"Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)"

Between the continental borders—the Atlantic and Pacific shores—Whitman saw a North America whose natural abundance was to give rise to a vigorous democracy. "All the vast materials of America" would produce a more robust body politic; the vivid landscapes of the New World would bring forth a "new society at last, proportionate to Nature." Those phrases come from "Song of the Redwood-Tree." In those preforestry, preconservation days, Whitman could rationalize the loss of the great redwoods under the "crackling blows of axes" and could accept the "Clearing of the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of the past so grand/To build a grander future."

Americans may still share (although seldom articulate) Whitman's perception that the vigor of this democracy is somehow tied to the state of the forests, waters, prairies. But they are no longer universally secure in their devotion to the formula: nature transformed = society fulfilled. Even as Whitman's great work was achieving its final form, that simplistic formula was coming into question. Whitman's last edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1892, as President Benjamin Harrison was establishing the nation's first forest reserves. The century since has witnessed the transformation of the North American landscape on a scale Whitman could not have envisioned, and the emergence of a conservation movement that has served, in essence, as mediator between the body politic and the landscape from which it springs and on which it rests. Conservation, through all its phases of development, has elaborated a key insight that even the visionary Whitman may have undervalued: that the landscape does not merely provide the setting and materials for our experiment in democracy, but is in fact the proving ground of that democracy's success.

The American political adventure is embedded deeply within an ecological and evolutionary context. As dwellers in this land, Americans are, in Wallace Stegner's words, "the unfinished product of a long becoming" (Stegner and Stegner 1981). In the process of becoming who and what they are, they have divided and bounded themselves and the land in ways that reflect the epochs in their history, the conflicting

values they have inherited, the varied goals to which they have aspired, the many forces that shape their individual and collective condition. The question we are now asking is: can we look across these boundaries in the effort to live respectfully with the land, the creatures that share it, and the processes that characterize it? That question leads inevitably to consideration of the oldest and most fundamental challenge that we as social creatures face: can we harmonize self-interest and the common good? Stated otherwise: can we successfully mesh the self-interest of free individuals and the well-being of those entities within which the individual exists—the family, tribe, neighborhood, town, state, nation, the salmon run, watershed, flyway, atmosphere? If so, what will it take?

Before seeking answers to such questions, we should try to define the core issue. Whitman wondered about this. What was it, he asked, that we "started for so long ago?" And "why is it yet unfound?"

Securing the Good

We would all frame our answers to those questions differently. But every answer revolves around, and sooner or later resolves itself in, matters of *security*. We draw boundaries to provide security and assume they will. But as doubts and contrary evidence grow, still more questions arise. What is it that we are trying to *secure*, in both senses of the word: what are we trying to gain, and what are we trying to safeguard? And how well have our boundaries served us in the effort?

A case study. My friend Thorsten lives in a neighborhood of tightly packed single-family homes in a midsize midwestern city. He enjoys city life, although he occasionally drops hints about a move to the country, where he might stretch out, indulge his aptitude for tinkering, and perhaps reconnect with his more rural childhood. That he has not yet felt the need to make such an ex-urban move is due in part to the glories of his backyard. Beneath the yard's dense tree canopy, the former owner of the house, a professor of botany at the nearby university, nurtured a rich mixture of native woodland wildflowers. For each of the twenty-odd years since he acquired the house, Thorsten has savored his seasonal inheritance of bluebells, trout lilies, dutchman's breeches, and trilliums.

One recent mid-winter day, Thorsten's neighbor removed several of the large trees whose shade he shared. The neighbor was building a new garage and widening the driveway between their houses. Having begun by removing just a couple trees, the neighbor eventually cleared the

entire side of his lot. Thorsten immediately realized that the collateral damage from the project would include his endowment of shade- and moisture-loving plants.

As the winter days began to lengthen, and the sun's daily arc expanded, the ecological status quo shifted incrementally, inexorably. Faced with the dilemma, and no place to transplant, Thorsten sadly and reluctantly made the best of a bad situation. An electrician, he has long needed more garage storage space himself. He is now thinking of building out into the former garden plots, but extending the garage's eaves to provide at least a thin wedge of shaded refuge to a remnant of the threatened wildflowers.

The final tally: one new garage; one planned expansion; a boon for contractors; a diminished diversity of plants, colors, connections; the further dwindling of a forgotten professor's legacy; a shaken sense of certainty in the spring. Even as Thorsten improves his local infrastructure, he regrets the loss of a modest, but reliable, wonder.

Just one of myriad backyard dramas, but it suggests the magnitude of the larger dilemma. If a shared sense of place, value, and expectation is so elusive at home, how can we expect to find it at even larger geographic scales, where an even broader spectrum of values is involved? Difficult as it is to be stewards in our own backyards, how shall we be so in our watersheds, our greater ecosystems, our continent, our earth? Can we even hope to "make the continent indissoluble"? Is there any hope, in truth, of securing common goods across the boundaries? Can we even agree, in fact, on what the common good is?

Scaling the Garden Walls

Increasingly we seek security not in "companionship" with our human and non-human neighbors, but in isolation, behind our boundaries. Analogously, we have rested secure in the knowledge that once the boundary of the public park or forest or wildlife refuge is declared, the life within it will dwell forever in comfort. But history, ecology, island biogeography, and hierarchy theory tell us that there can be no such security. As the essays in this volume attest, we have come to recognize that boundaries, if not understood in terms of the content they internalize, the context they externalize, and the processes they affect, can undermine security in any lasting sense.

For proof that security is indeed a core modern concern, and that we

understand it poorly, we need only look into the fearsome mirror of our television advertisements. Through a typical landscape of Western grandeur, a large and expensive four-wheel-drive vehicle successfully negotiates a series of obstacles—falling boulders, tumbling logs, slick waters—before arriving safe at home, behind the fence. Then the tag line: this vehicle provides "a little security in an insecure world." Hidden darkly beneath the modern words and images is the same old anxiety that Whitman identified: that despite our extravagant economic success (or maybe because of it), we are less secure than ever. The notion of security has shrunk to the mean dimensions of the sport utility vehicle's well-upholstered interior.

Modern though the expressions of anxiety are, our concern with security has deep biological roots, a long history, and a venerable place in our mythologies. In the Western tradition, we may trace it back to the expulsion from Eden, and the loss of security that came with self-awareness, curiosity, and the apprehension of mortality. There was security in that primeval paradise, but just one fruit from the wrong tree rendered it, one could say, unsustainable.

The word *paradise* derives from the ancient Persian term for the walled gardens of kings and noblemen—segregated islands of blessed and beautiful space, embedded within, but differentiated from, a wild and profane nature. In some connotations, the Oxford dictionary tells us, "paradise" referred to an oriental park or pleasure ground, "esp. one enclosing wild beasts for the chase" (Onions 1973). Within the garden walls, wild nature, from which the garden emerged, and upon which the garden yet depended, became symbol, separated from the larger reality yet intended to provide connection to it.

It is not so great a leap from the walled gardens of Persian estates, with their imported and impounded lions, oryx, and bustards, to the backyard plot of trilliums and bluebells. Expelled from paradise, bearing the burden of the original sin, Westerners have ventured forth seeking security and freedom in Edens new. The notion found literally fertile ground on the shores of the New World. In the democratic American context, the search for Eden has been, in historian Donald Worster's words (1993), "the key environmental idea, and at once the most destructive and most creative": "America, we have believed, is literally the Garden of Eden restored. It is the paradise once lost but now happily regained. . . . That mythic belief in Eden restored lies at the very core of our peculiar national identity. It is the primary source of our self-confidence and our

legendary, indefatigable optimism. . . . We are still a people in love with our prolific Garden."

Love is all bound up in the matter of borders. Loving the Garden, but wanting a piece of it for their own, the latest settlers soon divided and bounded it, altering profoundly the landscape of the prior human and nonhuman inhabitants (H. Johnson 1976, Jackson 1994, Meine 1997). Much was gained—for some—in the process. The bounding of private property afforded the newly arrived owners security against the arbitrary authority of states and sovereigns. The land survey and distribution system offered an alternative to concentrated land ownership and the endowment of a land-rich elite. Corporations gained the opportunity to maximize private wealth. Conversely, the boundaries of reserved public lands provided at least temporary respite from the impacts of both unfettered greed and hubristic resource management.

Through it all, much has been sacrificed. The deprivation has fallen not just the native people, but also on the newly arrived. In Worster's words, "Confident of having regained paradise, complacent and blissful in its midst, we have lost much of what we have most loved" (Worster 1993). And the search continues. Perhaps it began with Whitman, standing there at the far edge of the continent, asking on behalf of all those who "having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd. . . . Where is what I started for so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?" Where might one finally find security, freedom, paradise—if not in California, then where?

A century later, many still seek paradise according to the old model. In the domestic spheres, we seek security by creating enclaves. The sign of our times may be the one that stands at the entrance to yet another "gated community" for those who can afford to purchase their share of freedom and refuge. Building walls against the profane and uncontrollable threats of crime, poverty, congestion, pollution, noise, ugliness, new ideas, and new realities, we flee not west into the Pacific, but back inward to the open land at the edge of town, the subdivision with a view, the planned community, the clean place of security "in an insecure world" (Rymer 1996, Knight 1997, Romme 1997).

What of the larger sphere of the natural? Many environmentalists have proceeded on the assumption that wildness segregated is wildness saved. Sometimes this strategy has been followed in full confidence of its effectiveness; sometimes because it was simply the best or only strategy available at the time; and sometimes because it was and remains neces-

sary. But (as other essays in this volume attest) there is no ultimate security for wild things and wild places behind boundaries. In a strictly biological sense, that illusion was suspect at least as long ago as the 1940s, when Aldo Leopold in the essay "Wilderness" in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), noted that "many animal species, for reasons unknown, do not seem to thrive as detached islands of population." We now have a better grasp of the reasons why populations respond as they do to changes in their ranges and habitats, and the assumption that the walls of the garden can provide sufficient security is no longer so widely accepted (Noss and Cooperrider 1994, Quammen 1996).

So we have come to the time when both conservation biology and sociology, as well as the testimony of our own eyes and ears, inform us of a deficiency in the landscape. The age-old yearnings for security have come up against modern ecological realities. Wendell Berry (1989) has defined clearly these connections among security, conservation, and community:

There are two ways by which individual success and security can be made (within mortal limits) successful and secure: they must rest on a sound understanding and practice of economic justice; and they must involve and be involved in the success and security of the community. . . . If we were sincerely looking for a place of safety, for real security and success, then we would begin to turn to our communities—and not the communities simply of our human neighbors, but also of the water, earth, and air, the plants and animals, all the creatures with whom our local life is shared.

Ultimately, for us in our social lives, but also for our prized protected places and for biodiversity generally, security cannot be found in simple sequestration, but only in good relations. The content of all gardens, no matter how well walled, no matter how successfully isolated, managed, and fortified, is influenced by their context: obviously, by elemental processes involving sunlight, temperature, topography, bedrock, soil, air, fire, water, and plant, animal, and microbial life; but also by human political, economic, and demographic forces. There is no security for biodiversity or in the long run for people, if our own interests, especially our spiritual and economic lives, are harshly segregated. In the words of Paul Johnson, former chief of the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, "a nation that ends up with urban islands on one side, and islands

of wildland on another side, and a vast sea of food and fiber factories in between, is not a geography of hope" (Johnson 1997).

Our boundaries, especially the boundaries of public lands, present a complex paradox. Many of our bounded lands were originally established to promote the possibility of better *integration* of the public and private spheres. As Donald Worster (1993) notes, "The conservation movement emerged out of discontent with an intensely private approach to land ownership and rights. It has been an effort to define and assert broader communitarian values, some idea of a public interest transcending the wants and desires of a strictly individualistic calculus." Americans as a democratic people chose to draw boundaries, to delineate public parks, forests, refuges, grasslands, and wilderness areas, to conserve their natural features and the opportunity to better integrate public and private interests and values.

Now, a century into the conservation movement, we are asked to resolve this paradox and to embark on a new conservation strategy. Boundaries have served historically (and still can serve) to conserve the wild; now, for different reasons but toward the same goal, we need to reconnect the spaces. We need to strengthen linkages not only in the landscape, but also between the landscape and ourselves. To secure nature's legacy of beauty and biodiversity for the future, we must address the impact of both external boundaries and of our individual "wants and desires."

Can we overcome boundaries in pursuit of the common good? We should first recognize that the question can be read in two diametrically opposite ways. On the one hand, it seems hopelessly idealistic to consider the possibility. The question might as well be rephrased: Can we become better people, more cooperative, more visionary, more considerate—better "companions" in Whitman's sense, better dwellers of the commons in Garrett Hardin's (1968) sense? On the other hand the question can be read as coldly realistic: given the fact that people will *always* be too shortsighted, too ornery and individualistic, too oblivious of nature's complexity, too unwilling to check self-interest, are there nonetheless steps we can take to minimize our unintended consequences and maximize our shared benefits?

However read, the question revolves around the same basic ecological fact of life: we, ourselves, are surrounded, and we are permeable. We exist *in situ*. Self-interest and common interest are bound together in complicated ways, and in the long run we can be secure only to the degree that those bonds are respected. Self and surrounding cannot be severed or

reduced to base economics (Ayn Rand and her ilk notwithstanding). The clarification and definition of individuality not only does not negate, but positively requires, a *context*, a world with which to interact. Thoreau and Whitman, champions of American individualism, understood this. So did Aldo Leopold: "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for)" (Leopold 1949).

Prospects for Progress

How, then, do we proceed? The best answer may be: directly, but cautiously. The boundaries cannot be dimmed, however convincing the need, until several prerequisites are met. Many of these are obvious, but it is important to state them, to hear them, to weigh them, to roll the ideas around. A beginning list might include the following:

- An awareness of history, of the processes, forces, trends, pressures, events, people, and motives that have bounded the land. We cannot achieve any resolution of boundary issues without a more complete understanding of the "who, how, when, where, and why" of boundary establishment. If we are to build even a rudimentary sense of a common future, then we shall need basic consensus on at least some lessons from the past.
- Science that better defines how to conserve and restore lands and waters and biotas, and communicates its findings in a clear, relevant, and accessible manner to the public and its representatives.
- An increased degree of trust, slowly and steadily nurtured, that can begin to overcome an inherited and shared burden of distrust. Many of the most exciting and innovative experiments in conservation-land trusts, watershed restoration programs, community conservation projects, collaborative ecosystem management plans—can be seen as tentative steps toward this end.
- Development of new procedures and methods of cross-boundary communication to foster that trust. This presumes that we can span the boundaries which separate us only if we can strengthen the ties that bind us.

- A policy environment that supports cohesion and collaboration rather than speculation, contention, and desperation in land use. Altruism may motivate, but public policy must coordinate and reinforce. New policies, affecting both sides of boundaries, need to provide incentives, or at least remove existing disincentives.
- Revision of our economic philosophy and priorities. There is no ignoring this mega-issue. Conservation and economic justice are bound together in increasingly important ways. Greater concentrations of wealth will foster the illusion that security is just another consumer good, rather than something that can emerge only from individual conviction and community life.
- A strengthened general level of local responsibility (as opposed to mere local control). If boundaries are to become more flexible, the process must involve not relaxation toward the lowest common denominator of provincial self-interest, but steady movement toward the highest assumption locally of long-term responsibility.
- Greater opportunities in basic education and professional training to cross disciplinary lines. As we aspire to better cross-boundary stewardship on the landscape, we must support efforts to think through the boundaries separating the domains of knowledge.

In the end, the search for solutions comes around again to the question of our sense of ourselves, our sense of identity. We can come to identify not merely with the safe cultural spaces we build for ourselves, but also with all the places that provide us with our livelihood and our context, including especially the remnant, unwallled wild places. In this more expansive place we can seek not just security, but vitality for ourselves and for wildness, in ways of living that do not strain but strengthen connections and companionship.

Why now? Because it is necessary for our own good and for the good of the life around us. Because both science and history are telling us that we need to think and plan in new ways for the future. Because many conservationists are weary and hope that the work of "saving all the pieces" can be made more enjoyable, more humanizing, if we don't have to holler across the boundaries (or hire the lawyers to holler for us). Because we may, in the process, help to revive the neglected arts of democracy: fairness, reasoned debate, honed thought and open inquiry, tolerance for difference, built-in resistance to demagoguery, a living sense of history.

Conservation operates under both ecological and social mandates. We

might once have accepted the fallacy that activities promoting the human good could be pursued and secured with no reference to context. But the garden walls no longer suffice, and the illusion is plain. We risk continuing losses of both biodiversity and community, and those losses are connected. When it comes to the good of life, and of people as a subset of life, we learn that we have a lot in common. In her novel *Ceremony* (1977) Leslie Marmon Silko bore witness to this confluence:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid.

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C h a p t e r 1 6

Integration: A Beginning for Landscape-Scale Stewardship

Peter B. Landres

This book has discussed the origins of boundaries from several different perspectives and pointed out the many ecological, social, and administrative problems caused by these boundaries. Many of the chapters have discussed different solutions to these problems. In this concluding chapter, these various perspectives are integrated to begin establish some general premises and required actions for achieving stewardship across boundaries.

It seems that all boundaries have dual and contrasting qualities, positive and negative effects. At their most general, boundaries both separate and bind: they separate one thing from another, but these elements also are linked by their common boundary. Boundaries have positive and negative effects on ecological and social systems. Boundaries aid understanding by classifying and simplifying complex phenomena but they prevent complete understanding by artificially fragmenting the whole. Boundaries define exclusive limits and responsibilities for individuals, while clearly showing the inclusive lines of the broader community to which the individual belongs. Because many boundaries have a long and rich history and are now relatively fixed, stewardship across landscapes requires working within the framework of existing boundaries to maximize their positive aspects while minimizing negative effects.

Premises and Actions

The premises and actions that emerged from this book are summarized here. Premises are the cross-cutting and underlying assumptions which stewardship across boundaries depends. Under each premise, one or more actions are listed that must be taken for effective cross-boundary