

A PLACE FOR ETHICS by CURT MEINE

Like the air we breathe, ethics are pervasive in our lives. Yet we rarely stop to consider how they shape our lives, our communities, and our landscapes. Ethics are the guidelines we follow in our relationships with one another, the rules that we develop for living together, the ways we understand our rights and responsibilities as individuals and as members of communities. Our understanding of ethics has changed throughout human history as we have confronted new realities, gained new knowledge, and continued our search for justice, freedom, and human well-being.

Out of Sauk County came an important variation on this ancient theme. Beginning in the 1930s, conservationist Aldo Leopold and his family worked to rehabilitate a derelict farm along the Wisconsin River outside Baraboo. The farm, "first worn out and then abandoned by our bigger-and-better-society," became the focus of Leopold's pioneering work in ecological restoration, and of his ideas about the changing relationship between people and nature. In planting thousands of pines and hardwoods, restoring native prairies and wetlands, encouraging wildlife, and making a garden, Leopold and his family put their ethic into action.

"There are two things that interest me," Leopold once wrote, "The relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land." For most of Western history, ethics worked in the realm of the former: our human social relationships. Leopold proposed a "land ethic" to take into account our relationships to the land that supports and sustains us. "All ethics



TRUTH in the Driftless Region, by Cathi Schwalbe, 2011 D'Tour, Photo by Donna Neuwirth

so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." This concept challenged conventional approaches to ethics. Leopold was also putting ethics into place.

In some ways this resonated closely with ancient wisdom from varied Western, Native American, and other cultural traditions. In other ways this was fresh thinking, reflecting the latest scientific information and difficult lessons in land and resource degradation as America developed. Leopold's own view was that "nothing so important as an ethic is ever

written...It evolves in the minds of a thinking community." He continues to challenge us to see our "thinking community" embedded with the land community, to make our own contributions to our places and to our ethics within them.

Curt Meine, Ph.D., is a conservation biologist, historian, and writer. He wrote the definitive biography of Aldo Leopold. In addition to his work with the Center for Humans and Nature, Meine serves as Senior Fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Baraboo, and as Research Associate with the International Crane Foundation. He is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

"We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

—Aldo Leopold

Serving Reedsburg Community for 43 Years
Greenwood's
CAFE

608-524-6203
116 S. Walnut St., Downtown Reedsburg

Home Cooked
MEALS
Homemade
PIES

Monday to Friday 6:00 am – 3:00 pm
Saturday and Sunday 6:00 am – 2:00 pm