

There is never a bad time to give thanks

Winter is around the corner and, for many of you, late fall is a time spent with family and friends. During this time of celebration and exchange, it isn't too uncommon for people to evaluate what they been doing and what path their life has taken. Ruminating about one's life (past, present, and future) can be challenging but it also can be rewarding and energizing. One particularly awe-inspiring thought generated during moments of self-reflection concerns the interconnectedness of all things. Reflecting on how we fit into social, political, and ecological communities allow us to connect with others and become empowered by our membership in the complex web of interconnections required for life.

At a time when there are so many visible zones of strife and turmoil (whether driven by greed, power, malice, or ignorance), it is very important that we find ways to energize ourselves for constructive peace-seeking activities. One way to do so is to focus on things for which we are grateful. This positive thinking can resurrect us from the despair and resignation that easily afflicts those that examine world geopolitics today and stimulate us to return to working and struggling for those things that we hold so dearly.

I must admit, I have been melancholic recently. The apparent reelection of (arguably) the worst environmental president in our nation's history doesn't bode well for the quality of our waterways, our air, our family farms, our native species, or our national parks. While Election 2000 should have alerted all of us to the many problems in our voting system, Election 2004 only saw more egregious violations of the law and people's rights. (If you want to find out about these violations, check out <www.blackboxvoting.org>, <www.helpamericarecount.org>, or <www.votersunite.org>. None of the mainstream media or the Democratic Party seems to want to touch these critical aspects of the election at all and we should be at least asking why this is. If you haven't heard, Ohio and New Hampshire are being recounted because third party candidates (and their supporters) raised over \$100,000 to make sure that they were; too many inconsistencies warranted a closer inspection. Keep posted on this story; it could become the most important story in our country's election history.) The horrors of Fallujah are at least minimally in the minds of the public, but other atrocities in Sudan, The Congo, Burma, and Indonesia (and many other regions) continue largely unabated and beyond our collective attention. Unfortunately, most of these skirmishes result from unsustainable and inhumane extraction of oil and other resources that are consumed in the "developed" world. (If you want to know about these matters, check out Amnesty International's website, <www.amnesty.com>, for their informative briefings.) See how easy it is to become frustrated and discouraged? So, in an attempt to combat my malaise, and return me (and perhaps others) to a place of optimism, hope and fulfillment, let me outline what it is that I am thankful for.

In my nearly thirty-six years on the planet, I have led a most fortunate existence. My privileged position took me overseas three times before I was even a voting member of society. These experiences transformed me in ways that could not have been foreseen. First, and foremost, I began to see myself as a member of the human race rather than merely a citizen of one nation. This realization convinced me of the importance of maintaining a global perspective on issues, which necessitates seeking sources from many lands and ideologies. I was able to meet other children from all over the

world and from this I concluded that the children of the world have similar desires for peace and happiness and similar fears for war and destruction. Second, I realized that people from "underdeveloped" countries such as Nicaragua, Cuba, South Africa, and Afghanistan are often much better informed and engaged with world's affairs than children from the United States, myself included. Therefore, they tend to be less arrogant and dismissive of the position of others as a result. Third, while in the Soviet Union in 1984, I learned that many Russians were cautious not to be too critical of their government for fear of being chastised, marginalized, or worse. This experience taught me how important it is to have and practice our freedom of speech and freedom of assembly regularly. I thank my parents for seeing to it that I had these wonderfully informative and transformative opportunities so early in my life.

More kudos is due my parents. From the early days of my existence to the present day, they surrounded me with people from such a rich and diverse array of backgrounds. Throughout my childhood, I was so fortunate to be exposed to and become friends with heterosexuals, homosexuals, Muslims, Catholics, Agnostics, Atheists, Republicans, Democrats, Progressives, Communists, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and people from nearly one hundred countries and ethnicities. My parents took me to multicultural events, "ethnic" restaurants, and encouraged me to try to understand and appreciate people and cultures that were different from mine. These early exposures allowed me to better understand the successes and horrors of people elsewhere. It also taught me that "there is more than one right way to live," a poignant revelation that the author Daniel Quinn also makes clear in his books, *Ishmael* and *My Ishmael*. Along the lines of diversity, I am also grateful to Knox College for making a demonstrative effort to ensure that our students come from a wide variety of cultures, economic classes, and regions. I promise you that such a student body makes for interesting and fruitful class discussions which greatly enrich my job as well as my life.

When I was in my early twenties, my father recommended a book to me, as he had done at least a hundred times throughout my youth. It was a book that would change my life. *Making Peace With the Planet*, written by Barry Commoner, taught me many lessons. The author, who is a biologist, former Presidential candidate of the Citizens' Party (in 1980), and honoree of the St. Louis Walk of Fame, outlines how important political and technological decisions have been (and can be) in the protection/despoilment of the environment, including human health. In particular, Commoner makes it clear that most poisons that we have on the planet are found in dangerous concentrations solely because humans either decided to extract them from the Earth in reckless ways, disseminated them thoughtlessly, or decided to synthetically create them with the tools and wisdom provided by chemistry run amok. As simple as this concept seems, it didn't dawn on me with sufficient depth and clarity until Commoner's work crossed my path. I am very grateful to Commoner and my father for making this book enter my world. My reading of it ultimately led me to a career in the environmental sciences.

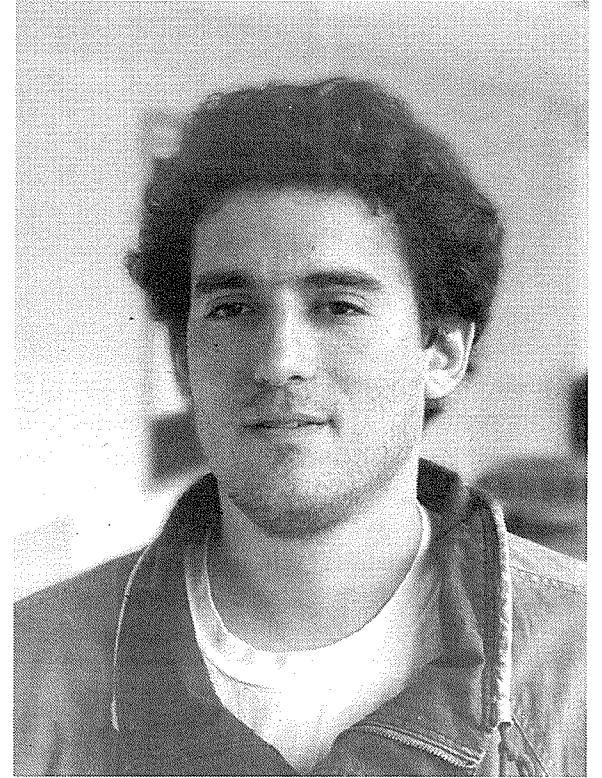
My mother is definitely the person most responsible for making me who I am. For my first eighteen years, she fed me warm meals, provided me a household that was conducive to social and academic growth, and encouraged me at every turn.

Even though she continues to be exuberant with her praise, I know deep inside how much she has contributed to any achievements that I may have had.

The last six years of my life have been fulfilled through my activities in Galesburg and Knox College. I am tremendously thankful for all that the citizens of this fine community have provided me and my family. Knox College has given me an opportunity to fulfill some of my greatest dreams. The administration, faculty, and students have challenged me to my limits while supporting me physically, emotionally, and monetarily, all the while. My experiences with the community, often through my involvement in the schools my wife has taught, makes me very proud to be a member of this community. In the future, I look forward to working with its many talented members on environmental projects that will improve our collective health (such as, lead and pesticide abatement, radon reductions, enhanced energy choices and efficiency, and improved dietary options, to name just a few) and provide future inhabitants of this great city with increased access to nature's wonderful offerings.

Given current world affairs and the increased concentration and consolidation of our mass media in the hands of multinational corporations, I am compelled to give a well-deserved "thank you" to those who speak up despite having their voices marginalized. We have all been told at one point in our lives that we should speak up for what we believe in. Unfortunately, too few take this most precious advice to heart. Fortunately, despite the risks, many do. Consider the contributions that the following people have made: Wingari Maathai (Kenya), Rodolfo Montiel & Teodoro Cabrera (Mexico), Julia Butterfly Hill (United States), Herbert Needleman (United States), Ken Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria), Alexander Nikitin (Russia), Rashida Bee & Champa Devi Shukla (India) and Sam LaBudde (United States). This short list of names represents people from around the world that have contributed mightily to environmental protection and justice. While their names might not ring many bells with most of us, even a cursory review of what they have endured (beatings, torture, imprisonment, death threats, hanging, etc) and sacrificed in their attempt to speak for the forests, the wetlands, the children, and the citizens in their respective communities substantiates their dedication to make this world a healthier and livable place for all. Several of them are recipients of one of the most prestigious environmental awards—the Goldman Environmental Prize—and a look at past winners of this award (at <www.goldmanprize.org/recipients/byissue.html>) reveals just how many people have dedicated their lives so that we can all live in healthy and just environments. I thank them for speaking up and setting an example for others to follow. May we all gather the strength, courage and fortitude to speak up for our communities as well.

My nineteen month old daughter Camellia reminds me that we are all connected to past as well as future generations. The toxic materials I involuntarily ingested as an infant in the heavily polluted city of Providence, Rhode Island in the late 1960s were a result of decisions made by industries and government officials that preceded me. Similarly, the household and neighborhood contaminants that my daughter breathes and swallows are a result of my generation's



lack of regard for her, other children, and future generations as well. Environmental toxicologist Sandra Steingraber, another one of my heroes, fed her two children her toxic breast milk (toxic as a result of years of living nearby the factories along the Illinois River in Peoria County) rather than formula because of essential nutrients and antibodies contained only in mother's milk; read her fabulous book, *Having Faith*, for more information on this subject. Similarly, my mother's milk gave me life and sustenance while undoubtedly, and unwittingly, poisoning me as well. It is tragic that all of our bodily fluids are seeped in unnatural, synthetic chemicals or biologically toxic elements (such as lead, mercury, and uranium) which we will pass on directly to our progeny, their progeny, and all future generations. Every time I look at my daughter, I realize how important it is that I do what I can to leave her and her sons and daughters a world much less noxious to humans and other living things than the one I inherited.

And last, but certain not least, the past fourteen years of my environmental journey couldn't have been possible without the multidimensional support of my wife, Huong. She has taught me that food and affection are important components in any crusade. She has also taught me that it is all too easy to take advantage of the ones closest to you when it is they that make it possible for you to be fulfilled and actualized. I often wonder if our relationships with our environments aren't analogous to human relationships in this way. Do we pollute our air and our waters excessively because we know they will do their best to dispose of our waste while still giving us sustenance? And if so, how do we remedy this apparent dysfunctional arrangement? Thanks, Huong, for putting up with my garbage while still providing me nourishment and love.

I hope all of you have a wonderful Thursday. May you be fortunate to spend it with people whom you love and care for. May you have a chance to thank them for their contributions to making your life fulfilled and our shared environment healthy and respected.

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