

Friday night talk

Thank you for your kindness, your patience and your humor. The humor, especially. I cannot pass up the opportunity to share some thoughts with you. But before I begin on those, let me first express my deep appreciation to GYC's staff, all those people who worked with me and provided all of us with their time and energy and humor, and their lives. Would they please stand with me now?

To Michael, GYC's superb strategist, advocate, and well-deserved leader who implemented our many schemes, to Anne who kept me straight and effective, to Jon who cleaned up my language and tried to teach me forethought, to Caroline who kept the money and good will flowing, to Val who kept our money safe and legal, to all the program staff and administrative and financial staff; you have my eternal gratitude and friendship.

To the board and former board members such as Albert Wells and Farwell Smith, and especially to the chairs during my tenure – Gretchen Long Glickman, Tim Swanson, Dwight Minton, Howard Davis, and finally the unflappable Steph Kessler, many thanks for your trust and friendship. And lastly, to my partner Barbara Rusmore who has lit my life with a golden glow and been my most effective friend and critic, I extend my gratitude, my admiration and my wonder.

Friday night

Thanks and acknowledgements to board, staff, etc. Then.

Seven years ago I came here to fight a mine. And to live life in a new way, as many of you have done when ~~we~~ ^{you} moved from somewhere else to be in and of this region.

In my own mind, I actually had moved to this region many years before when I had a series of experiences that changed my life and bonded me to this place. Many of you have shared with me similar stories and experiences. What I looked for was viable space - ^{and} a way in which I could put myself into this place and make it home. GYC gave me that space and the opportunity to make a home here, ~~and~~ I have been honored by that gift and that trust. It has been the most satisfying work of my life.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, most of our lives are dominated by myths or concepts that define us as individuals and as a people. These mental constructs are crucial to our ability to function in modern society. We think of ourselves as lone wolves or eagles, or as members of a community or an organization. We function as families, as teams, as tribes, as special interest groups, or political parties. As Americans, we primarily define ourselves not as raw, independent individuals, but in relationship to other people.

In this region, such identifications are not adequate to explain our home here and our responsibility to it. We live here on a frontier – six people or less per square mile, according to the Bureau of the Census, defines the modern frontier.

Here in Greater Yellowstone, the ratio is 9 residents to every square mile, but in reality it is much less -- most of us are clustered outside the 15 million acres of public lands that form the unique core of the region. Inside those public lands, the ratio of people living year-round on the land drops to about 7 square miles per person. Our lives are dominated by those wild spaces. Whether we actually spend time in them or look at them from afar, we focus primarily on the creatures and the plants and the water that emerges from these wild lands. Around the borders of the public lands we cluster our forts, our communities, our outposts, our gateways into the wild.

The tension between the wild land and the border land largely defines the modern struggle of Greater Yellowstone.

For too long, a certain kind of frontier mentality has dominated this region. Those ruthless days are over, both economically and politically, but the myths live on, and it is these myths that still dominate our political and cultural lives – in fact, it is these artifacts of the old frontier that GYC struggles with more than any thing else. We need to find new ways to define our relationship to the modern Yellowstone Frontier.

The old frontier myths are these:

The myth of the mining 49er's seeking easy wealth from the Western landscape.

The myth of the golden age and home of the American cowboy.

The myth of rugged individualism in a land that, in fact, is dominated by the need to work cooperatively in a tough climate and unforgiving landscape.

The myth of Smoky the Bear, fighting forest fires at whatever the cost.

The myth of the sacred rights of private property – the idea of unlimited rights usually sheathed in the concept: my home is my castle, to be defended at all costs.

And the developing myth of a noble, almost heroic, Fortress Yellowstone, where those who can afford to live and play here can escape the pressures and problems of modern life – the transportation gridlock, the crime, the urban scene, the unrelenting pressure of more people who want a better life.

Seven years ago, if asked to define the nature of threats, I would have told you this: the most serious threats to the long-term viability of this ecosystem are found within the mind-sets of public agencies that view the public lands as

resources to be exploited by a few individuals or companies. These agencies are the gatekeepers of the wildlands. *But our focus has shifted.*

Today I believe the most important battles are within ourselves and have to do with rates of consumption -- how we build our homes and live within the region's private lands. We fight these battles now lot by lot, road by road, affluent choice by affluent choice in the borderlands of Greater Yellowstone.

This region's future is not defined now by how it deals with waves of hungry landless people looking for a brighter future, but through the ripple effects of waves of affluent immigrants – you and me. We-uns. It's a new tribe. The We-uns of Yellowstone. And our footprints seem without end. Each road, each house, each subdivision is a comma or a phrase or a sentence in either a poem of praise or an obituary for this ecosystem. We write these words *with our individual* each day and night, but we know not whether we are writing a poem or an obituary. Our impact extends throughout every watershed in this region and now powerfully influences all of our institutions at a local, state and federal level. We have yet to come to terms with our impacts on the ecosystem.

I am not convinced that we have the political and moral will to do so.

GYC and its allies have the skills and knowledge to effectively fight whatever challenges might be thrown to us by a federal administration that right now seems intent on rolling back much of the progress of the last decade in protecting Greater Yellowstone. The conservation community can contain or limit most of these proposals.

What it cannot yet do is build a consensus among those of us who love Greater Yellowstone about how we can guide and change our individual actions into a movement that grapples seriously and effectively with our own choices about consumption of the region's lands and habitat.

This is our major challenge.

What is most unique about Greater Yellowstone is not its geysers—although they make up the last unaltered geyser basin on the face of the earth. The most unique part is the ability of our region to support great migrating herds of wildlife and their predators – the largest concentration of wild mammals within the temperate zones of the earth.

Can we find the political will and resources to keep this dynamic alive into the next generation?

On my watch this past seven years, that has been my charge. In doing so, I have not felt the need to personally see or experience the charge of a curious grizzly or the lope of the returning wolf, or the nervous pace of an elk cow with a young calf. It has been enough for me to know that they are there. It has been part of my responsibility to work to ensure that their homelands will be there in years to come. Forever.

The words "forever" and "never" have little meaning within the political context of the American system.

Conservation advocates have to maintain a perspective that reaches out for a hundred years, while dealing with the short-term political realities of today and tomorrow – dealing with the Congress, the agencies, the media, the public, the landowners.

As we see in the current national battle over wilderness and the term roadless we must fight each battle over & over.

In this democracy, GYC's role and place must be a permanent one. There is no end to the need and the life of a watch-dog group. ~~To lean on an icon of the activist Sixties,~~ Mother Jones once said, "There can be no peace because there is no justice". A lack of peace does not necessarily mean war. But Americans are a restless people. We find it hard to leave things along to let wild land be wild land. To let nature be natural. We do not always need to go to war to defend this ecosystem. But we need to keep the sentinels posted, to keep the scouts moving through the landscape, to keep the weapons oiled, and the body trim and in fighting shape.

the union organizer + social justice leader

We must have watchdogs that can use advocacy in the border lands and wildlands – the tools of scientific research, public education and issue campaigns, and litigation. We must have this institutional space to ensure that there will always be a Yellowstone. And as long as there is a place we can call Yellowstone, I believe there will be a need for a GYC. I hope you agree.

Here in this building –what I like to call “The Great Hall of Yellowstone’s People” -- we have heard many wise and provocative talks in these past seven years. There will be many more. I have been greatly honored to be part of this movement. I look forward to working more with all of you in the future as I now try to build a new institution that will compliment the wonderful work of GYC and its allies in conservation.

Thank you again for welcoming me into this community and to this ecosystem – this neighborhood that I now call my cherished home