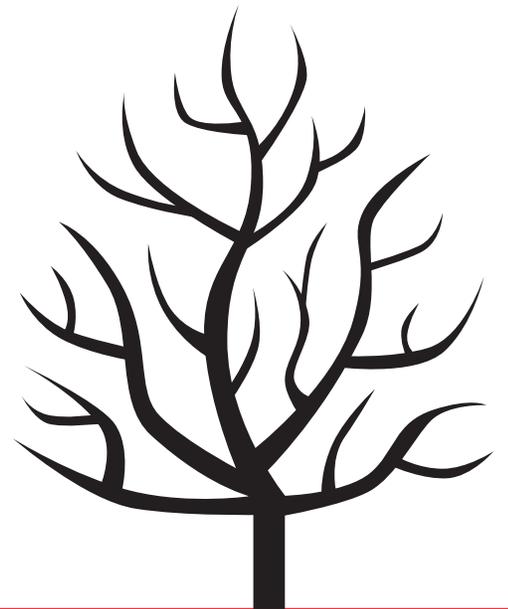


# **IS ENVIRON- MENTALISM DEAD?**

**BY ADAM WERBACH**



**A SPEECH PRESENTED TO  
THE COMMONWEALTH CLUB  
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“If something can’t be changed, it is a fact, not a problem.  
It’s what you’re doing about it that is the problem.”

Donald Rumsfeld



Is Environmentalism Dead?

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**- notes -**

We can't do this alone. That's the central point.

This speech was born out of a series of dinners, retreats and conversations with Michael Shellenberger, Peter Teague and Ted Nordhaus in the year before the 2004 election.

The day after this speech was delivered, my wife Lyn's oldest and dearest friend, Dan Bishop, died unexpectedly at age 35, leaving Ben and Luke without a father, Leslie without a husband and us without our friend. Despite Jerry Falwell's best efforts, Dan had been recently re-elected to the Missouri State House. We hoped that he would one day be our President. This speech is dedicated to him.

## - introduction -

I am here to perform an autopsy.

Autopsies begin with these words.

*Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae*

Translated from Latin, this means: “This is the place where death rejoices to teach those who live.”

I tremble at them, because this is not an easy speech for me to give.

I know in my mind that to forego the examination of death is to fail to honor the dead. But all I can think about right now is my love for what environmentalism was.

Nobody enjoys an autopsy, and yet its value to life is indisputable.

The word “autopsy” means to “see for yourself.” An autopsy is the key tool that doctors use to determine whether their diagnosis was correct, and to see if the treatment was effective. In the past, autopsies were common – in the 1950s, 50 percent of deaths had autopsies performed. Today, that number is barely 10 percent.

We will perform an autopsy tonight. We will question our diagnosis of the problem and prescribe a new treatment.

**With fond memories, a heavy heart and a desire for progress, I say to you tonight that...  
Environmentalism is dead.**

Every significant indicator of global environmental health is heading in the wrong direction.

Storms and draughts are increasing in frequency and severity.

Anti-environmental conservatives control all three branches of the federal government. And the governorships. And the statehouses. And the school boards.

Conservatives are destroying the very institutions – from the tax system to the United Nations to public schools – that hold the solution to our ecological crisis.

It is at moments like these that we need to take a hard look in the mirror.

The failure is not unique to environmentalism. Our death is a symptom of the exhaustion of the liberal project. Having achieved its goals of basic economic rights, liberalism and its special interests now fail to speak to the modern need for fulfillment of the American people.

I have spent the last eight years trying to communicate these basic indisputable facts to the leadership of the environmental movement. My face and name have been used to project the rebirth of the environmental movement. It has not been reborn.

Since deciding to give this speech, I have been attacked as naïve, arrogant and traitorous.

I am done pretending. The challenges we face are too serious; the opportunities too great to miss.

**I am done calling myself an environmentalist.**

**The structure of this speech tonight follows the seasons of environmentalism. We will celebrate the spring and summer of environmentalism, study its fall and suffer the winter. And finally, we will begin to imagine the birth of a new progressive movement.**

There is a famous saying in the Sierra Club dating back to when former Sierra Club Executive Director David Brower traded a dam at Glen Canyon for the protection of Dinosaur National Monument. It says that you should never give up a place you don't know for a place you know.

**We must not trade our fear of what will come next for our affection for environmentalism.**

## *The Death of David Brower*

“[I]n our unconscious mind we are all immortal, it is almost inconceivable for us to acknowledge that we too have to face death. Depending very much on how a patient is told, how much time he has to gradually acknowledge the inevitable happening, and how he has been prepared throughout life to cope with successful situations, he will gradually drop his denial and use less radical defense mechanisms.”

-- Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*

When I was 23, I was elected president of the Sierra Club. I was awkward, intimidated, overwhelmed, flattered, confused and manipulated.

Immediately after I was elected, I started hearing rumors that David Brower was disappointed in me. David was my mentor and he ran my campaign, so hearing of his disappointment in me was a crushing blow.

The phone rang a short while after I was elected. “Hello?”

“Yes, hello, this is Jane Kay from the San Francisco Examiner. David Brower just resigned from the Board. Was it something you did?”

This was only the first of many tests he put me through. He started telling random people that he thought I was timid and I didn’t challenge the environmental movement’s fictions. I didn’t appreciate the criticism.

But I know his intentions were to prepare me for the confrontation tonight.

David was referred to constantly as “the most important environmentalist alive,” yet the country’s most respected environmentalists mostly treated him like the walking dead. Not because of his age, but because of his ideas.

“That’s just David,” they would sigh. Their collective exasperation, though sometimes inaudible, was rarely invisible. It was usually triggered by his affection for Ralph Nader, his fondness for Tanqueray, and his persistent demands that the Sierra Club support his call for tearing down the Glen Canyon dam.

While this kind of treatment emboldened David, it intimidated me. The more drawn I was to his courage the more I feared I could not match it. He sensed my fears and revealed his own: that the day would come when I would face an important fight and I would fail to be bold enough to win it.

**Environmentalism is dead in no small part because it could never match the right’s power to narrate a compelling vision of America’s future. The argument I will make tonight is that every time environmentalists step outside the confines of the environmental discourse to articulate a more expansive, more inclusive and more compelling vision for the future, they cease being environmentalists and start becoming American progressives.**

This is what happened to David in the final years of his life. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly where it began, but we know that Paul Hawken’s 1993 *Ecology of Commerce* was hugely significant, for he referred to it incessantly.

During the last years of his life, David traveled the country with the United States Steelworkers and began to offer a forceful prophesy – a prophesy that transcended the environmentalism of his past by redefining the final term in the trinity he called CPR: conservation, preservation and restoration.

The late David's vision of restoration was a story about how America would come together to rebuild its industrial and transportation base through an alliance that would accelerate our transition to a clean energy future. It was a proposal for a New Deal on clean jobs. It was the most articulate, future-oriented vision he had ever offered. And it foreshadowed the emergence of the New Apollo Project for Energy Independence and Good Jobs, an initiative I was proud to co-found in 2003.

The more time he spent in sweaty union halls articulating shared American values, the less David felt compelled to name his project “environmentalist.” If taking America back from the fundamentalists and the oil monopolies means creating a new language and a new set of institutions more appropriate for our times, David would have been all for it.

**For 30 years American liberals have defined themselves according to a set of problem-categories that divide us, whether they be racial, gender, economic or environmental. We have spent far less time defining ourselves according to the values that unite us, such as shared prosperity, progress, interdependence, fairness, ecological restoration and equality. We can no longer afford the laundry list of “-isms” to define and divide our world and ourselves.**

David modeled, at the end of his life, the transition we now need to make.

I can think of no better tribute to David Brower, his astounding accomplishments, and the remarkable history of environmentalism, than to let each of these -isms rest in peace.

My wife Lyn normally makes fun of me for writing my speeches on a napkin right before I give them. I've been writing this speech for the past year – and in some ways, for my whole life. At Harvard University management seminars, they say that the most important thing a CEO can do is honestly assess the true state of affairs, and then share that honest assessment broadly.

That's what I hope to do tonight.

## - spring: 1952 – 1964 -

The great Argentinean storyteller, Jorge Borges, described a "Chinese encyclopaedia" in which "animals are divided into" the following categories: "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies."

-- Cited in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*

### *Conservation and the Thingification of the World*

Put yourself in their shoes. It was the 1950s. The era of the organization man. Of suburban conformity. Nuclear families and nuclear testing. To the few men and women in this period who identified as conservationists, modernity was a violent storm that converted wild rivers, forests and landscapes into the wreckage of industrial production.

And yet while – and because – nature was being destroyed, Americans were tasting the success of the liberal project. Liberalism helped deliver a middle-class to America.

For five years during the war, Americans had quietly subverted racial, gender and class norms, unleashing new forms of solidarity among women at home and men at war. But in the blink of an A-bomb, all of that was gone. In one blinding instant, America rolled back into the earlier dream for itself and embraced a future that promised unlimited prosperity.

Americans were working 40 hours a week. Families only needed one income. Energy was promised as too cheap to meter. Anything was possible.

And one word: plastics.

Both John Muir and David Brower are best remembered for saving great "things" by finding new ways to sell them to the politicians and directly to the people.

**Muir and the early Brower each innovated formulas to protect many of America's most beautiful places. They inspired a vision of these things – but not one for the country's future. It was a fray in the lifeline they extended to conservation. Focused so intently on what had been and what was being lost, conservationists did little to tell a story about the future, beyond that those special places would still be around.**

We can only speculate whether this lack of vision for the American people was connected to conservation's darkest side: its misanthropic nostalgia for a "natural" past that didn't include human beings. David Brower had no small amount of antipathy for humans – hikers who left their pitons on the rock – and it showed up in his unexpected anti-immigration advocacy.

The underside to Muir's famous observation that, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe," was his own flight from human community to the outdoors. There's an old fable in the Sierra Club that Muir didn't like talking about politics while on the trail. Supposedly he would hope that his guests would see that the sheep were destroying Yosemite Valley and take it upon themselves to do something.

Who among us hasn't hated all of humanity, at one time or another? Who hasn't wanted to smash the radio of one's loud and drunk neighbors while camping out in what we desperately had hoped would be "pristine wilderness"? Who hasn't longed for a time machine to experience life before telemarketers?

Within environmentalists and environmentalism reside both a love for and a hatred of humanity. Because misanthropy at a political level is suicidal, it merits remaining private. But over the years, ordinary Americans have sensed it, the media has magnified it, and during the springtime of the environmental movement, the keenest conservatives saw an opportunity to exploit it. Ayn Rand, for one, saw environmentalists' "ultimate motive [as a] hatred for achievement, for reason, for man, for life."

**Two movements were born in reaction to modernity: conservationists rebelled saying we need more nature, and conservatives rebelled and said we need more market.**

**And so it came to pass. An ideology born from efforts to see man in nature, and nature in man, came to pit nature against man. Conservatives were more than happy to participate in this effort. An ideology focused on the inter-relationship of all things came to be an ideology of things, for conservationists and all Americans.**

If environmentalism contains a sunny side and a dark side, a side of interdependence and a side of "things" that separated nature from man, there's little doubt that it's the things that the American people have been taught to associate with the words, "the environment": seal pups, redwoods, clean air, Yosemite, clean water and toxic waste.

Some of the things they have been taught not to think of when they think of the environment are AIDS in Africa, the tax code, highways, homeless people, asthma, good jobs and the war in Iraq. Each of those things – "environmental" or not – are stripped by American environmentalism and its sister ideology, liberalism, of their native habitat, their context and their web of connections. They are single "issues," each requiring its own movement and experts.

All categories and words should be understood as tools, not as symbols of real things. This was the simple and undeniable point made by Ferdinand de Saussure almost 50 years ago at the dawn of the semiotics movement. Categories – indeed, all of language – should be evaluated not for their timeless ability to represent a truth that, like the fiction of nature, is "out there," but rather for their ability to meet our present needs.

**A reasonable case can be made that environmentalism needed to package seal pups, redwoods, clean air, Yosemite, clean water, and toxic waste under the brand of "environmentalism" in order to pass a raft of environmental laws in the 1970s. But for at least 20 years and maybe longer, the basic categorical assumptions that underlie environmentalism have inhibited the environmental movement's ability to consider opportunities outside environmental boundaries that would allow American progressives to compete more effectively with conservatives.**

Conservatives, like environmentalists, were born as a reaction to the prosperity and the alienation of the post-war era. Two roads diverged.

They chose to go broad, we chose to go narrow.

## *An Angel of Light and the Insolent Spring*

“We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe.... [M]an is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. The rains have become an instrument to bring down from the atmosphere the deadly products of atomic explosions.”

- Rachel Carson (from a CBS radio interview, quoted from New York Times obituary)

In 1962, America heralded a new environmental voice. Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring* stood out from the cacophony of male voices and their fight for beautiful things.

*Silent Spring* was at first rejected by the major New York publishing houses that feared losing advertising from the food and chemical companies. The *New Yorker* magazine took a risk ran it anyway. Thank G-d, then and now, for the *New Yorker*.

It's hard to conceive how counterintuitive her thesis was at the time. Instead of protecting ourselves with chemicals, they were poisoning us. Carson, who was one of the first to play recordings of dolphins and whales for the public, challenged the assumptions that undergird both industrial and conservationist modernity.

Her description of how we were permanently altering ourselves and the world around us – “our” very nature – anticipated by more than a quarter-century the thesis of Bill McKibben's masterpiece that global warming had brought the End of Nature. “In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life.”

**Carson's narrative challenge to post-war America was so intellectually and morally coherent that, in retrospect, the sweeping regulatory regime *Silent Spring* inspired seems inevitable. Like Muir and Brower before her, Carson's strategy was to awaken the sleeping public by contrasting a dream of the present to the nightmare of the future. She proposed a set of solutions, but, like Muir's and the early Brower's, none of them added up to a vision for the country. And all were framed in the negative – a world **WITHOUT** pesticides, **WITHOUT** life-killing substances. She framed her solutions around technical policy fixes for regulating this poison and stopping that pollutant, without the benefit for a narrative grounded in core American values.**

The lack of a story about America's future was the soft underbelly of the regulatory paradigm that provided a political opening for anti-environmental predators on the right.

Pollution control efforts – from “command and control” to “polluter-pays” – swam against the current of America's aspirational culture. The implementation of the regulatory agenda demanded the strong hand of the state, and in a brilliant act of judo, the right gradually turned this legal disadvantage into a public relations opportunity.

The economic fundamentalists would cagily tap into America's anti-statist values and, slowly but surely, through a web of think-tanks and strategic initiatives, attack environmentalism along the same lines that they attacked affirmative action, consumer protection, and gay marriage as the tyrannical infringement on our freedoms by elitist, activist judges. In the process, the right would conjure the old dyadic ghosts of man against nature, slowly naturalizing and conflating Adam Smith's notion of

the “invisible hand” of the market with the workings of G-d – a conjuring that would be picked up by James Watt a decade later.

Rachel Carson died from cancer just two years after *Silent Spring* was published, marking an end to the springtime of the environmental movement.

Few would disagree that 1964 also signaled the beginning of the end of traditional American conservatism. Its grim reaper came in the form of a Republican presidential candidate, the insolent Barry Goldwater, who in 1964 suffered a landslide defeat at the polls. Barry “extremism-in-defense-of-liberty-is-no-vice” Goldwater was buried by Lyndon Johnson, winning just 27 million votes against the emblem of big government liberalism’s 43 million.

Goldwater’s defeat further isolated conservatives from American mainstream and was the beginning of the end of the Republican Party’s position in favor of racial integration which set into motion a realignment of American politics around race so that exactly 40 years later, red America looks disturbingly like the old confederacy.

What looked in 1964 like the burial of Goldwater we can now see was in fact the burial of moribund Republicanism.

Forty years ago, things looked grim for conservatives. Their debates over conservatism foreshadowed our debates today over liberalism. Should conservatives moderate their views and become Democrat-lite? Should they embrace a kinder, gentler New Deal? Or did they need to declare the death of conservatism so they could build a neo-conservative movement? Like liberals today, conservatives wrung their hands over these debates, fretting that the “circular firing squads” would lead to permanent minority status.

For Goldwater’s true believers, the lesson from the ‘64 elections was that they needed to get intellectually and morally coherent before they could start winning again. In their sweeping portrait of the American right, *The Right Nation*, British reporters John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge observed that:

“In 1960 the Nixon campaign attracted fewer than 50,000 individual contributors; Goldwater attracted 650,000. Goldwater marched into his doomed election with 3.9 million party volunteers, twice as many as worked for Johnson.... Goldwater solidified the relationship between conservative foot soldiers and conservative intellectuals.... Goldwater’s speech was written by ... one of the first disciples of Leo Strauss. The *National Review* endorsed him, as did Ayn Rand ... William Baroody turned the American Enterprise Institute into Goldwater’s brain trust, persuading ... Milton Friedman, Robert Bork, William Rehnquist and the ominously named Warren Nutter to enlist in the Goldwater army.”

**And so it came to pass that modern American environmentalism would be born during the same era that traditional American conservatism died. It has become a staple of conventional wisdom: American conservatism, in all of its blue-bloodedness, its integrationism, and its warmed-over New Dealism, had to die so that something more vibrant, something more coherent, and something more powerful could be born.**

Nobody, not even the futuristic Ayn Rand could have predicted that just four years later Nixon would win on a Southern strategy aimed at winning over whites fearful of integration, nor that 16 years later Reagan would reshape American politics guided by the invisible hand of the Heritage Foundation, nor that 36 years later the Republicans would capture all three branches of government in an apocalyptic fury that included gay bashing at home and war in the Middle East, nor that liberals

would find themselves defeated on nearly every front simultaneously: environmentalism, education, AIDS, war, taxes, social programs and gay rights.

**Today, Barry Goldwater – with all of his crude and self-defeating outbursts – is indeed gone, but his spirit lives on in the carefully-molded and highly-scripted figure of ... George W. Bush.**

**- summer: 1964 – 1978 -**

Last year, on September 6th, I held Lyn's hand as we welcomed Mila into the world. It was the most incredible moment of my life.

Lyn and I decided to try natural childbirth – birth without epidural drugs. So we entered a Bradley Method Class and had 13 weeks of intensive lessons on anatomy and pain control and endless videos of births in other cultures.

I was struck by how different cultures treat birth, and how America is evolving into a new birthing culture, with women in control more than doctors, and with increasing respect for the sacred nature of birth. But it didn't come easy. My father, a doctor, was able to witness my birth because of his medical degree, but conscientious fathers across the country at that time were forced to challenge their banishment from hospital births by handcuffing themselves to the beds of their wives so that they could be there as their child entered the world.

One hundred years ago, most American births were at home; 40 years ago, most were in the hospital. Today, women have a choice.

Evolution happens in leaps and bounds. In the blink of a geologic eye our ancestors developed opposable thumbs.

Niles Eldredge and Stephen J. Gould coined the term “punctuated equilibrium,” or “punk eek” as evolutionary biologists refer to it, as a theory of evolution which postulates that changes can occur very quickly, with long periods of little change in between.

The sadness I have at accepting the death of environmentalism is tempered by the speed at which it was formed, and in the knowledge that we'll form the next progressive movement even faster.

## *The Birth of Environmentalism*

The year was 1970. The year of the Beatles' last album and the death of Jimi Hendrix.

Denis Hayes was an idealistic 19-year-old Harvard student who heard the call of Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson to create a national teach-in on the fate of the planet. By his own admission, he was not schmoozer. But, he spent six months spreading the word. For those of us who forget what things were like pre-Internet, this meant the old-fashioned method of traveling and talking and licking stamps to mail letters.

And then the day came.

On April 22nd, 20 million Americans celebrated the first Earth Day. That was one out of every ten Americans. They gathered in parks and schools, read Rachel Carson and John Muir, and demanded cleaner skies and air. They attacked the emptiness of materialism by burying a car. It was the dawn of a new, narrow movement.

On April 23rd, Denis might have turned those 20 million people into an interconnected, progressive movement that remade the liberal project. He dreamed of bringing the practice of ecology – the study of interdependence – to humanity.

But the world was attacking the Earth Day movement for not knowing enough science – and sure enough there was not a chemist among the early organizers. They felt like they didn't have the knowledge base they needed. This is the dark side of Rachel Carson's success.

It was at this point that the technocrats and lobbyists took the reins of the environmental movement.

Imagine you're on a desert island with a despotic king. There's plenty of food, but people are hungry. There's plenty of water, but it's being wasted. What do you need? A chemist?

Instead of a narrative for America, instead of a vision, we were preparing for maximum daily allowable loads of toxic chemicals.

Ten days after the first Earth Day, the US invaded Cambodia. Two weeks later, the tragedy at Kent State, and those 20 million aspirational activists, not finding that vision of interdependence, entered the anti-war movement or returned to their busy lives.

The environmental movement achieved its greatest success in the next decade – the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the EPA.

This was before we had hundreds of lobbyists, communications experts and policy wonks. This was before we had paid memberships of millions of people. The idea of cleaning the smoky skies and clearing the water was powerful, immediate and achievable. It was accomplished. And yet, it's insufficient.

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus wrote the following in their seminal paper, *Death of Environmentalism*.

“The three-part strategic framework for environmental policy-making hasn't changed in 40 years: first, define a problem (e.g. global warming) as 'environmental.' Second, craft a

technical remedy (e.g., cap-and-trade). Third, sell the technical proposal to legislators through a variety of tactics, such as lobbying, third-party allies, research reports, advertising, and public relations.”

By the American bicentennial, this kind of environmentalism had triumphed. Sweeping protections were now in place, and the focus was now as much on implementation through the courts as it was on new legislation in Congress.

These political reforms reflected the transformation of social values in the culture. With their basic needs met, middle-class Americans were becoming what sociologists dubbed “post-materialist,” simultaneously searching for greater leisure and deeper fulfillment that would free them from the political turmoil of the ‘60s. Environmentalism, the sociologist Denton Morrison suggests, “came as something of a relief to a movement-pummeled, white, middle-class America and its representatives in the power structure.” Environmentalism comforted the comfortable.

Most environmentalists today think of sprawling suburbs as the antithesis of smart growth, but to millions of Americans they represented cleaner air, a quieter and greener space, and a generally healthier way of life.

## *Shallow Waters*

Support for environmental protection since the '70s has been notoriously shallow. Today, roughly three-quarters of all Americans identify as environmentalists, or pledge support for environmental goals and laws. At the same time, environmental issues – including the movement's much ballyhooed "clean air/clean water" category -- rarely make it into the top ten list of things voters worry about the most.

Environmental leaders freely acknowledge that their "issue" – this thing we call "the environment" – is not a major priority for Americans. When pressed to choose between two candidates, environmental concerns are rarely a deciding factor. This was especially apparent in the campaign leading up to last November's elections. Only a few organizations even entered the political arena. I hesitate to criticize them, for the environmental groups who stay out of politics and believe you can save the environment while one political party declares war upon it, are truly in lotus-land.

The more political environmental groups spent tens of millions of dollars in TV ads and grassroots mobilization. Yet they had little effect on the outcome of the election. Why? They largely focused on their "issues" rather than on techniques that would have had a greater effect. The National Rifle Association, for example, ran ads in pro gun control districts in Colorado on the issue of taxes.

**The lesson many environmental leaders are taking from the election is that we must talk louder and fight harder – with the same words and the same tools.**

**I disagree. I side instead with the philosopher Richard Rorty's axiom that the "talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change."**

**The lesson to take is this. The mental model from the '60s and '70s, however old, is still, at least for America's largest and most powerful environmental groups, the dominant way of thinking.**

## *Burying Separateness, Freeing Interdependence*

When thinking about the death of environmentalism, we must ask: what should be buried and what should be carried forward?

The modern world offered us a set of hierarchies: humans over nature, men over women, healthy over sick, reason over emotion, spirit over body, human over animal, and so on. Extreme forms of environmentalism inverted the terms, so that nature came before humans, while more moderate environmentalism set the terms on equal grounds. Both the inversion and the equalization of these terms did important work to challenge modern industrial civilization. Now, I believe, American progressives are ready to take the next step and move beyond these binaries, and this mode of reasoning, altogether.

**My thesis tonight is this: the ability of environmentalism, as a language, an ideology, a set of practices, and network of institutions, can not deal with the most pressing ecological challenges facing the planet because it is so tightly bound to a rationality that reduces our worlds into these kinds of dyads. The moment we free ourselves from this modern way of thinking by creating a new language, a new set of strategic initiatives, a new set of institutions, and a new metric for evaluating our success, we cease to be “environmentalists” in any meaningful sense of the term and open ourselves up to the possibility of becoming progressive Americans.**

What, then, can be borrowed from environmentalism’s past? Is there a way to name the world without separating ourselves from it? I believe that if he were alive today, Thoreau would be the first in line to sign up for creating a language and movement more appropriate to the age. He wouldn’t be alone in joiners from the past. Aldo Leopold, a founder of the Wilderness Society, described his land ethic as a way to change “the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”

Brower would be here too – at least the part of him who was committed to the concept of “Not Man Apart,” from his favorite poet Robinson Jeffers:

The greatest beauty is organic wholeness,  
the wholeness of life and things,  
the divine beauty of the universe.  
Love that, not man apart from that.

The irony is that these words could today appear quite uncontroversially on the front of any environmental greeting card. And we certainly make enough greetings cards and calendars.

The conventional eco-wisdom is that “We. Are. All. One.” And yet the concept of interconnectedness within mainstream environmental politics is today but a quaint relic, like an old Sierra Club cup.

It’s easy enough to deconstruct the concept of the “environment”: if humans are part of the environment, then how can some human problems be “environmental” and others not?

**This is the core point to consider. It will be easier to bring the spirit of interconnectedness to progressivism than to inject it into the popular understanding of environmentalism. Our**

**good intentions, energy, love, compassion and power will continue to dwindle so long as we remain trapped in this outdated identity.**

Environmentalists are not alone in their clinging to an identity separate from progressivism. Each of liberalism's special interests has its own experts, its own professionals, its own lobbyists, its own lawyers, its own funders, its own mailing lists and its journalistic beat. The more that each fights to establish itself as "above politics," the more each reinforces its special interest status. In seeking to distinguish the interest categories, each group looks askance at the other, as though any association – any interconnectedness – with other progressives would diminish their special powers.

Some of us might protest this description. Didn't we all come together to fight Bush? Indeed we did. We were all against Bush.

How many people here worked for Presidential candidate Kerry?

But what were we all for? "Anybody but Bush." It was a slogan substituting for a common vision.

Without a vision and a set of values to unite us, we showed our special interest colors. We divided up our country into demographic groups – "young people," "single women," "Latinos," – and aimed to turn them out through well-worn issue categories – "the environment," "choice" and "health care."

We told no common story about our past and created no progressive image of our future. After the rout of Democrats in 2002, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said, "Never again will the Democrats enter an election where the voters do not know what we stand for," and yet that's precisely what Democrats did in 2004.

**A friend recently asked, "Why death of environmentalism? Can't you just call it the 'evolution' of environmentalism?"**

**For many in the west, death has become code for "bad" because it signifies the end. But the notion of death as the end was alien to most of the world's native peoples. For many, death was and is a journey, not an end, one that demands wisdom and strength at the moment in which we are naked and vulnerable, just as we are at birth. It is as impossible to live without death, just as it is to exist outside of the environment.**

**We cannot evolve until we move beyond our denial of the death of environmentalism.**

- fall: 1978 – 1990 -

### *The Future's Dark Angel*

When I was eight years old, I made my first foray into environmental politics by circulating a petition among my schoolmates asking President Reagan to fire his religiously, anti-environmental Interior Secretary, James Watt.

**Tall, gaunt and dressed in mortician's clothing, Watt was a dark angel from the future, bearing a grim message for environmentalism. He appeared at our doorstep with a message that we environmentalists, blinded by confidence in our strength at the grassroots and in Congress, could not hear.**

Years earlier, Watt had founded the Mountain States Legal Foundation with the intention of helping corporations avoid compliance with environmental laws. But in the process, Watt and his colleagues helped develop a conservative, anti-environmental ideology. Like his environmental counterparts, Watt tapped into enlightenment mythologies to pit a supposedly "natural" marketplace against the "unnatural" laws of man.

Watt was both a Christian and an economic fundamentalist. He argued against conservation because, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.... After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

He was widely dismissed as a crank at the time, and the environmental movement, with its allies in Congress, pulled out all the stops to force his resignation. In the end, it was his Goldwater-esque lack of propriety, not his anti-environmentalism, which did him in.

A wave of outrage swept over Watt after he voiced opposition to allowing a radical, sinful band to sing at a Fourth of July event on the National Mall. Who were these Satanic souls? The Beach Boys. Watt then decided to attempt to save himself with an attempt to be politically correct. He boasted that his coal-advisory panel included "a black ... a woman, two Jews, and a cripple."

Watt tendered his resignation on November 8, 1983.

Watt is long gone but his ideas are alive and well. The new, improved model of this robot is Bush Administration Interior Secretary Gale Norton. She was crafted on the factory floor of the Mountain States Legal Foundation. Dressed in jeans, smiling, friend to children and small animals, she is pursuing all of Watts' dreams, with none of his rough edges. She is the next generation cyborg. James Watt is still here.

Watt was a sign of things to come, but we environmentalists, in all of our confidence, were unable to comprehend it. Watt was still working out the kinks in his ideological operating system, but the signs of emerging coherence were all there. He told Congress that "failure to know our potential, to inventory our resources, intentionally forbidding proper access to needed resources, limits this nation, dooms us to shortages and damages our right as a people to dream heroic dreams."

Listen closely. Watt was attempting not just to mouth the right words; he was trying to tap into a deeper mythology about the American dream and our deeply held notions of individual freedom. He was dropping a raft in the stream of America's aspirational culture.

Watt had created a new institution, the Mountain States Legal Foundation, to work out his thinking about private property rights, environmentalism and the law, not in an abstract or academic way, but rather through the reflective practice of real-world fights with environmental power. In its first year, the Foundation received funding from more than 175 corporations. Joseph Coors, the beer scion, co-founded the Foundation and chaired the board. Coors was instrumental in cohering the Foundation to the rest of the conservative movement.

Today, when you click on the mission section of the Foundation's web site, what comes up is one of the clearest statements of organizational values you'll find anywhere:

- Individual Liberty
- The Right to Own and Use Property
- Limited and Ethical Government
- The Free Enterprise System

Those words put a particular gloss on American values, but nobody can deny that they are American values, as old as the ones identified by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.

There is a long-standing debate among historians about what was the fundamental driver of Spanish colonialism of the Americas: was it driven by greed in search of gold, slaves, spices and material wealth? Or was it driven by a missionary impulse to convert heathens into Christians?

I can't speak to Watt's motivations, but I suspect they were connected more to religious beliefs – inseparable from his economic beliefs – and his desire for power than to his desire for wealth. The same can be said of many of today's conservative leaders. Anti-tax strategist Grover Norquist, whose own gloss on the American dream is to “shrink government to the size that it can be drowned in a bathtub,” reportedly lives a modest, Nader-like existence.

Whether or not you believe that the conservatives' name-brand of values – “moral values” – played a role in George W.'s reelection, there's no question that Watt unleashed creative synergies between religious and economic fundamentalism so that both camps could see environmentalism as an obstacle in the way of progress.

This dark angel sent a message to us, but we couldn't hear it. His message was this: we are preparing to fight and win the war of ideas. You may have more allies in Congress. You may have more popular support. But we intend to OUT-THINK you.

And that's precisely what they did.

**It was then, during the fall of the environmental movement, from 1978 to 1990, that we began to lose the war of ideas. We thought we had a complete solution: more conservation and more regulation. But we were outflanked by Watt and his cohorts on the right, who infused corporate-driven anti-environmentalism with an anti-statist, populist energy.**

This skill with which the right has been able to use equal marriage for gays and lesbians, gun safety, motherhood rights and religion in schools as a way to tap anti-elitist values within red state cultures has been well documented, most recently by Tom Frank in *What's the Matter with Kansas*. Far less is remarked about the success of neo-Wattists in growing anti-environmental sentiment in the culture, even during the supposedly pro-environment years of President Clinton.

According to a survey of 2,500 Americans by the market research firm Environics, the number of Americans who agree with the statement, "To preserve people's jobs in this country, we must accept higher levels of pollution in the future," increased from 17 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 2004. The number of Americans who agreed that, "Most of the people actively involved in environmental groups are extremists, not reasonable people," leapt from 32 percent in 1996 to 43 percent in 2004.

And yet again, for the leadership of the environmental movement, these numbers are further proof that what we need is a bigger megaphone and not, for example, a new way of speaking to the aspirations of the American people.

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross became famous for her analysis of the stages individuals typically go through on learning of their impending death. Stage one is, rather famously now, denial. Ours has lasted for over 20 years. It's time to move on to anger.

- winter: 1990 – 2004 -

### *Trapped Angels*

“A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

-- Walter Benjamin

I have spoken at hundreds of colleges and high schools and started my speech like this:

(singing) If you're happy and you know it clap your hands

I'd then describe how environmentalists are always so sad, moping around like the world was going to end, and that we needed to be more optimistic because of our past successes. We brought back the bald eagle. We helped clear the skies over Los Angeles. We protected millions of acres of wilderness.

But that sadness that I was seeing was real – and I arrogantly thought it was because the students didn't know the facts. The truth is that all of those students knew that environmentalism was failing them, and they were hoping that this young kid would show them something new. Instead I told them jokes and sang them songs. I was like a hospice worker trying to make the last days of environmentalism as painless as possible.

This is my complicity in the denial of the death of environmentalism.

Now prepare yourself. The next part is going to get even darker.

**If we can acknowledge our fears without being consumed by them, we will survive and thrive in a post-crisis world as beautiful as anything yet attempted in the 200,000 years of our species.**

I have spent half of my life in this long, dark and cold winter. I believe it will only end when we acknowledge that a part of us – a beautiful, powerful and fantastic part of our selves – died in it.

The wreckage I want to pay most attention to is global warming, for it is literally and figuratively, physically and conceptually, radically altering our world and ourselves.

Let's review the report “Abrupt Climate Change Scenario,” authored by Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall.

No American reader can help but think back to another extreme scenario, one predicted in advance by many of the same people who raised the first alarms about global warming. Like global warming, those who predicted September 11th found their warnings ignored.

Before 9-11, the idea of terrorists taking down both World Trade Center buildings was considered “unthinkable” for most people. Here’s the “unthinkable” scenario for global warming:

Global warming will continue to cause the ice on the earth’s poles to melt, triggering the Gulf Stream to migrate several thousand miles to the south, lowering by five degrees the average temperature in Europe and much of North America in 10 years or less.

Global warming, under this scenario, will be the trigger for northern cooling. We could have colder winters and less rain, resulting in what scientists call a “megadrought” – not just in the Southwest but also in the Midwest and California’s Central Valley, America’s bread basket.

It could be like the 1930s dust bowl, Schwartz and Randall say, but far worse because the dustbowl was mitigated by groundwater reserves that today no longer exist. We would experience a mass migration northward from Mexico.

Meanwhile, this abrupt climate change would unleash a series of monster hurricanes and floods across Central America and the Caribbean, making the 2000 Haitians killed this September in a single storm seem like a minor event.

Our country could face two refugee crises simultaneously. We would have to decide whether to stop these refugees, essentially leaving them to die, or bring them to safer shores.

The authors write, “As famine, disease, and weather-related disasters strike due to the abrupt climate change, many countries’ needs will exceed their carrying capacity. This will create a sense of desperation, which is likely to lead to offensive aggression in order to reclaim balance.”

“Envision Pakistan, India and China – all armed with nuclear weapons – skirmishing at their borders over refugees, access to shared rivers, and arable land....” Nuclear states going nuclear over food, water and space.

And all of this is just in the Northern Hemisphere. I have neither the time nor the stomach to tell you what the authors say would happen to the southern half of the planet.

Now, who commissioned this nightmare, this fantasy? What liberal think tank? What great advocate of environmental protection?

The Pentagon. Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon.

## *The Death of Denial*

The environmental movement's understanding of global warming mirrors its understanding of other environmental problems, if not in degree than at least in type.

The leaders of America's largest environmental organizations – the individuals who decide how to frame environmental issues in the press and what policy solutions to propose – believe the winning strategy is to approach global warming as a problem of pollution. Make polluters pay, they reason, and show the public how dirty air and global warming are public health problems. This, they say, will increase the saliency of the problem and build more support for its solution.

The idea of framing global warming as a public health problem is as old as Rachel Carson. It was an approach that worked beautifully to pass the Clean Air Act and its amendments. It is failing miserably today. After a decade of framing global warming as a problem of pollution and future disasters, we are in a weaker place than we were when we started.

The environmental movement spent much of the last twenty years publicizing the latest scientific evidence and engaging in a debate about whether global warming is real, whether it's being caused by the burning of fossil fuels, and whether anything should be done about it. These debates went on for too long and ultimately fueled skepticism that environmentalists were exaggerating. The fossil fuel industry used the debate as an excuse to delay action.

Facing this political reality, most of my colleagues have committed to arguing better, yelling louder and organizing more people. But no amount of public relations or grassroots organizing will move problems like global warming up the list of issues Americans worry about. The problem is not our failure to communicate.

Frustrated with the failure of environmentalists to penetrate public consciousness, Ted Turner's foundation gave Susan Bales and the FrameWorks Institute several hundred thousand dollars to conduct a series of focus groups, polls, and interviews with Americans about global warming. The result was a guidebook for "Talking About Global Warming" that has been used by many if not most of the larger organizations working on global warming.

FrameWorks concluded that the nightmarish scenarios environmentalists were telling about global warming – such as the one I laid out above – so terrifies and repels ordinary Americans that they retreat from engagement. She found that the more you scared people about global warming, the more they want to buy SUV's to protect themselves. Miniature Arcs.

FrameWorks also concluded that the public was confused about what global warming was. To help them understand it better, FrameWorks recommended the use of metaphor. Call it a "heat-trapping blanket," they suggested.

Not all linguists agree. Berkeley Cognitive Scientist, George Lakoff, who's here with us tonight, points out that we shouldn't call it "global warming" because warming sounds nice – the same point, I suppose, could be made about blankets. Lakoff also objects to the frequent insistence that environmentalists not criticize anyone, as making criticisms alienates ordinary Americans, especially swing voters. This was the same reasoning used by Kerry advisor Bob Shrum to justify their fatal decision not to respond to the Swift Boat attacks in August.

There is still much to like about FrameWorks' Susan Bales, who took to holding up two famous children's books, *Chicken Little* and *The Little Engine that Could*, and asking audiences which they wanted as their narrative for global warming.

My problem with the FrameWorks research, and all the efforts to rename or reframe global warming, is that none of it challenges the basic assumption that global warming is an environmental problem that can only be solved by talking about global warming. Remember the name of the briefing book, "Talking About Global Warming."

What if we stopped defining global warming as an environmental problem and instead spoke of the economic opportunities it will create?

At the beginning of my talk I mentioned that, in the last years of his life, David Brower began articulating a vision to rebuild America, not in any contorted effort to avoid the words "global warming," but rather because he was drawn to the vision and started seeing that audiences of ordinary Americans were drawn to it as well.

**I have come to believe, after a decade's work on this issue, that saving ourselves depends not on our ability to shock but rather to inspire.**

I hesitate to raise any potential solutions tonight, because I believe that we need to collectively rethink almost everything about our institutions before we move on to action. But let's examine the Apollo Project as a possibility of a new approach.

The call for a New Apollo Project for jobs and energy independence is a political solution to the problem of global warming that attempts to break from modern environmental thinking. The idea is simple: invest a massive amount of public and private capital in our clean-energy infrastructure, creating millions of new American jobs, ending our dependence on foreign oil, and reducing our contribution to global warming. We can follow the model of the original Apollo Project to reach the moon or the manner in which built the highways, or supported the development of micro-chips, or created the Internet.

We have tried to define a vision around the values of prosperity, freedom and opportunity – as well as ecological restoration and interdependence – out of the belief that this vision is more welcoming of the American people, businesses and labor unions than more talk of "polluter pays," "fuel efficiency" and "carbon caps."

This kind of thinking has resonated least with the leaders of America's largest environmental organizations and most with ordinary Americans.

No wonder the public doesn't want to hear the truth about global warming: nobody's offering them a vision for the future that matches the magnitude of the problem.

In 2003, in Erie, Penn. and Akron, Ohio, the Apollo Alliance did focus groups among undecided, working-class, swing voters – the very people who would determine the outcome of the 2004 election. I had the luck to observe the focus groups from the other side of a one-way mirror.

Instead of starting the focus groups by asking people what they thought of global warming, our pollster Ted Nordhaus simply asked them how things were going. This open-ended question led, invariably, to focus group participants describing the collapse of the local economy. They would list, in depressing detail, the shutting of Hoover Vacuum and Timken Ball-bearing factories; gone to Mexico. They explained that the jobs that had been created in their wake -- mostly service sector jobs

in places like Wal-Mart – paid half as much and offered no health care or retirement benefits. Many said they were working two jobs to make ends meet.

We then asked them what they thought of the idea of a major federal investment program to accelerate America's transition to the clean energy economy of the future: research and development, manufacturing of wind turbines and solar, energy efficiency. We didn't have to prove to them that such a program would pay for itself; they knew it would intuitively. Hadn't a similar program succeeded in the post-war period? Of course it had.

What had been a roomful of tired and semi-depressed working folks transformed itself into a roomful of excited, optimistic Americans in a period of just 20 minutes. The energy emanating from the room was palpable.

And then something extraordinary happened. Nearly every single person in the room started to sound like Sierra Club members. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. They waxed poetic about solar panels. They spoke of their children's future – their future – and the planet's future. They remembered episodes from the area's local history – like when thousands of jobs were created to retrofit smokestacks after the passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendment – things that James Watt and Rush Limbaugh want them to forget. But more than that, Apollo tells a narrative about American greatness, our history of shared investment and prosperity, of our ingenuity, and how we build a better future.

When our pollster left the room, several of the women participants speculated excitedly about who was sponsoring the focus groups. Was it a corporation seeking to open up a factory? Perhaps a car maker? The more excited they got, the sadder I felt; we were years from getting Congress to pass the kind of legislation that would create these jobs in Akron.

Ted was insistent about his method. "We're just going to start by listening," he'd say. "Let's figure out where they're at."

Previous focus groups I had attended got defined upfront by moderators in a hurry to test environmentalist messages and slogans. As a matter of principal, environmentalists don't hire pollsters to tell them not to talk about the environment.

"Tonight," these moderators would often say, "we want to hear what you think about a few environmental issues." You could almost see the air leave the room. Here we were, interviewing people worried about how they could afford to pay an increase in the health care premiums, whether their children were learning anything at school, and how they could go another night on four hours of sleep, and we were asking them about issues that only three to five percent of them would volunteer as the most important issues facing their community.

Invariably, these folks would voice support for environmental laws, for clean air and clean water, and higher fuel economy standards, though hardly ever with much enthusiasm.

What was different in the focus groups we did for Apollo? It wasn't just that we addressed concerns like jobs and economic development that are of a far higher priority. It was also that we spoke to their aspirations, their families, their communities, and their country. We activated a set of ecological values that, ironically, cannot be activated through environmental rhetoric that is now more than three decades old.

We did a poll and found that more than 70 percent of voters in Ohio and Pennsylvania supported a \$30 billion annual investment in energy efficiency and clean energy. Having never seen such high

numbers supporting any government program, the pollster to the Steelworkers, an Apollo ally, stressed in a poll question he asked that the \$30 billion annual investment would come from TAXPAYER money. A funny thing happened: support for Apollo went up.

Why? Because Americans see the problems facing their communities and their country as big problems and they want big solutions.

We shared the results of our research to everyone who would listen: John Kerry, Karl Rove, and all the major environmental groups.

Carl Pope of the Sierra Club and Leo Gerard of the Steelworkers were on board from the beginning. They, along with Senator Maria Cantwell and Representative Jesse Jackson Jr., signed up as co-chairs of the Apollo Alliance. Every major union in the country, including the United Mineworkers and the United Autoworkers, along with every major environmental group, endorsed the Apollo vision.

We had Apollo ground troops in Iowa. In reaction to the Apollo youth activists, Kerry gave the most inspirational extemporaneous rap on his vision all year. “We can’t drill our way out of this crisis, we have to invent our way out of it,” he said.

Kerry won the nomination.

I had hope.

We quickly learned that Kerry would divide his campaign into four silos: the economy, foreign policy, health care and energy independence. Apollo was to be put in the box called “energy independence.” We protested that Apollo was a narrative vision, not an issue category, and that it more effectively sold his vision for the economy, foreign policy and energy independence than keeping them in separate categories would.

Kerry’s economic advisers objected to our investment plan. “The country wants to see deficit reduction,” they said. We showed them our economic modeling, done by a leading corporate economist known for his work for the Federal Reserve Board, demonstrating that Apollo’s investments would pay for themselves through increased tax returns to the federal treasury. As for the political argument, Ted Nordhaus analyzed 15 years of polling data and found that deficit reduction has never made it into the top 10 list of concerns; he also found that jobs has hovered consistently in the top three.

Kerry’s pollster, Mark Mellman, objected to our linkage of jobs to energy independence. Separate issues, he grumbled. What he was really saying was that the campaign didn’t need a single narrative.

None of it mattered: our facts didn’t fit their frame. It wasn’t so much a strategic difference as a conceptual one: everyone treated energy independence, the economy, foreign policy and the environment as inviolable, unquestionably useful categories.

Kerry narrowly lost Ohio, home to our focus group participants, and the election. The next day, James Carville, a consultant to the Kerry campaign, went on television to describe the Democrats’ problem as the lack of a narrative – a vision we want for the future.

I almost slugged a wall.

I still wonder about the laid-off Hoover Vacuum assembly plant workers who are waiting for that great American company to come to Akron and put them to work.

Apollo was no unique victim of the Kerry campaign. I don't blame Kerry for the campaign he ran. I've come to realize that the election was lost years ago. We are now in a minority position, with a minority party as our advocate.

The obstacles we face are the same obstacles any progressive faces when trying to explain the need to think differently about problems and solutions to liberals who insist on putting all problems and solutions in traditional, single-issue categories.

What the American people want more than anything is a compelling vision of the future and candidates who know what they believe in. Great candidates, like great companies, stick to their core values but are opportunistic when it comes to their strategies. For too long liberals have stuck to their strategies and been opportunistic about their values.

**Before November 2nd, I felt strongly that the Kerry campaign, the environmental movement and liberalism generally were in a downward spiral. I was a good soldier and obeyed the unwritten rule that liberals don't criticize Democratic candidates during the election.**

**It's been a month since the elections, and there is still no real debate among liberals and Democrats about what went wrong, not just with Kerry's campaign, but with liberalism and all of its sister -isms.**

**Many in our movements preach the value of free speech, open dialogue and debate, yet as soon as somebody challenges our most basic assumptions, or dares to level a public criticism at the liberal powers-that-be, they are barked down and accused of creating a "circular firing squad." It seems to me that when you're simultaneously losing on nearly every one of our so-called "issues" – abortion, civil rights, the environment, the economy, foreign policy – questioning everything should no longer be our right, it should be our responsibility.**

Most of us are averting our eyes from the dead body of liberalism in the room. We get nostalgic about all that we have accomplished. We point to our growing membership rolls and our swelling bank accounts. We boast of our exceptional access to the press, the Congress, the White House, and corporate America. Golden calves – all, produced by a dead religion.

**We have to reject the politics of denial. In 1997, EJ Dionne wrote a book about liberals called "They Only Look Dead." I'm still waiting for him to write, "Okay, now they're dead."**

In mid-November, a group of friends and I tried to move past the denial. We wrote a set of theses on the failure of the Democratic Party that we posted on the doors of the Democratic National Committee in Washington. In the next 100 hours, Democrats in 30 states and 45 cities across the country signed up to do the same. Since then, thousands of people have gone to [www.3nov.com](http://www.3nov.com) and downloaded the theses. There has been only one glitch. Seventy-eight-year-old Dorli Rainey was attacked in Seattle as she posted the theses on the door of the Democratic Party – her assailant breaking her wrist.

This only makes me more committed to moving out of the denial.

**The signs of environmentalism's death are all around us: we speak in terms of technical policies, not vision and values; we propose 20th century solutions to 21st century problems; we are failing to attract young people, the physical embodiment of the future, to our cause; we are failing to attract the disenfranchised, the disempowered, the dispossessed and the disengaged; we treat our mental categories, ourselves and other elements of nature, as**

**things; most of all, environmentalism is no longer capable of generating the power it needs to deal with the world's most serious ecological problems.**

The problem is not that environmentalism and the moral intellectual framework we call liberalism are dead. The problem is that we have been in denial about it for 20 years too long. The sooner we acknowledge its death, the sooner we can give birth to something more powerful and relevant.

## *The Dead Becomes a Host*

A sure sign of death is when you start attracting parasites.

I once asked organic farmer Eliot Coleman how he kept bugs from making his plants sick. He explained, “Only sick plants attract bugs.”

For years we have treated the anti-immigrant attacks on the Sierra Club as the inevitable result of its democratic nature. Anyone can try to take it over. But to an outsider looking in, it seems there’s nothing consistent with aligning environmentalism with keeping people yearning for opportunity and freedom out of the US.

The fate of a poor farmer in Mexico connects to my health. There can be no planet where only half of it is saved.

Enter activists whose entire lives are driven by the desire to keep immigrants, most of whom are Latino, out of the United States.

Since 1997, the Club’s argument has been that the anti-immigrant attack hurts our political efficacy. The Club insists on a position of neutrality.

Neutrality? This is our bold statement of justice?

One doesn’t stay neutral on immigration to America.

Immigration is America.

Who here did not descend from immigrants?

Immigration is at the heart of our aspirational culture.

Are the attacks from anti-immigrant activists a sign that we are a healthy, living organism, or the sign that we, as a moribund organism, have become a host to parasites?

Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope recently wrote that “environmentalism is part of a broader progressive movement.” If that were true, then we would:

1. Hold ourselves, not immigrants, accountable for the problems we create;
2. End the environmental movement’s population program;
3. Start a new campaign to enhance women’s right globally – for that is the only ethical, causal way we know to slow the growth of the human population.

I proposed this in 1997, in 1998, and then stepped down from the presidency, frustrated that the organization would continue to invite these attacks until they let die the overpopulation fantasies within the Club.

These attacks continue to grow in strength and frequency because this cancer demands a host. To aspire to neutrality is to accept your own death.

## - the new spring: achieving our country -

“In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation – if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.... If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

-- James Baldwin

On a blustery day in New York City two years ago, I sat across the table at a noodle shop from Peter Teague, the director of the Environment Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation. It was a restaurant that only New York could produce with perfect, spicy food on the table and a strange stickiness on the walls. I was just getting to know Peter, in the way that grant-seekers get to know grant-makers. These are always surreal encounters. You are expected to pretend to be the program officer’s friend and make small talk, tell them how smart they are for their other grants, which you’ve researched, and then show them how your program fits into their narrow grant guidelines. I call it the bingo gigolo experience. After having gone five years and raising a lot of money since I left the Sierra Club, I decided to finally just be honest.

“Peter,” I said, “Environmentalism is dead. There won’t be environmental programs at foundations in five years. I have some ideas of where we should go, but truthfully I don’t think anyone knows what to do right now.”

It seemed like the silence lasted for an hour; Peter, a lawyer, veteran foundation officer, former congressional policy maker, just looked at me. And – I kid you not -- a cockroach fell onto the table from somewhere above. It looked at me.

I looked down into my soup immediately, feeling guilty that I had told the truth out loud – and even worse, to a funder. I can tell you from all of my grant training, that telling someone that what they’re doing is irrelevant doesn’t generally get you many grants. Lyn and I had just gotten married, and we were talking about having a kid. This was not the time to attack the customer – and that’s what foundations and donors and direct mail consultants are, the customers that pay the salaries of the environmental elite.

I looked back up at Peter, and he was smiling. “I agree,” he said. “I’ve been thinking the same thing.” Perhaps because it’s a new foundation, perhaps because they fund the arts and Jewish spirituality as well, perhaps because their staff and board have just been honest with themselves, the Nathan Cummings Foundation has not only supported efforts to question the status quo, they’ve demanded them.

That was an amazing moment for me. I finally understood what Brower was trying to teach me. Since that time I’ve just been honest about the problems as I see them, culminating in tonight.

**NO ONE has told me that they disagree with my most central critique – that the environmental movement is not prepared, nor does it have a plan, to fight the enormous battles we face. They also agree that it must evolve into something else.**

People feel attacked.

But my critique is not with those of us who have put our hearts into this thing we love – it's with those who want to freeze environmentalism in the 1970s and not let it evolve.

We are moving toward becoming progressives. We are bringing along our love of nature. We are bringing along our knowledge of interdependence. This is our gift to the world. Will we be bold enough to present it?

It's time to say what we now need to do.

Some will say that the expansive role I propose is not the job of the environmental movement, that our job is to protect THINGS, like redwoods and parks. If you are one of those people, you have missed the point of my speech tonight. Our role is to bring our core belief – interdependence – to every man, woman, child, politician, institution, investor, corporation, funder, regulator and bureaucrat.

I was taught by my grandfather, a deeply religious man, that to be Jewish was to be chosen. Not chosen as in more special, or more important than anyone else, but chosen for the responsibility of tikkun olam – the repair of the world. Likewise, I say to you tonight, that the environmental movement is chosen as well. Our founding principle requires that we break out of our narrowness and inspire the world, the Democratic Party, and every citizen in America with our call to recognize our collective interdependence.

Here are some first steps for us to take:

**Choose your side:** Are you a progressive or a conservative? If you're a conservative, and believe in dismantling our government, selling off our common assets, and endless war, but you still love nature, we wish you well, but we need you to leave this movement. We invite you to attack the conservatives, but don't try to make us ignore the plight of immigrants, stay out of gay rights or stay silent on the war. You are making us weak. If you think you're a conservative and you don't believe in these destructive ideas – you are not. Join us if you're willing to question everything.

**Dismantle Environmental Programs in Foundations:** Easy money reinforces bad behavior. If our end goal is to change the way Americans think, we need to fund strategic initiatives that move the public's values. It's time for the rest of the philanthropic world to start funding long-term strategic initiatives that are measured by their effectiveness at changing the public's values, not by protecting a particular thing.

**Create a Culture of Learning:** Our institutions need feedback mechanisms. They need to become what Peter Senge calls "learning institutions." In the words of columnist Richard Luov , environmentalism has become a tradition, not a movement. The ad hominem attacks that I've witnessed on my friends and colleagues Michael Shellenberger, Ted Nordhaus and Peter Teague for writing the paper *Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World*, have made me embarrassed for the environmental movement. I welcome the thoughtful critiques of that paper and this speech. Movements want to move forward; traditions hold on to the past for a sense of security. We need to move forward.

**Fire our Lobbyists and Policy-Makers:** Our task is not to affect the current Congress – they know what they think, and no amount of nifty policy language will convince them to reduce our carbon output by 70 percent. Leave a few troops to play defense. But, when your R&D department turns out 20 years of losing ideas, it's time to fire them. Watch *The Apprentice* if you need some help. Every board should also put their executive director up for review. My board has done it to me.

Make executive directors go to a red state and try to explain environmentalism to the average American. If they don't have a plan to activate the values we share in the majority of Americans, then they need to move on.

**Take over the Democratic Party:** We have been deluding ourselves into believing that “everyone” supports the environment. The Republican Party – as an institution – has declared war on us. The Democratic Party claims to be our ally, yet fails us. It's time for us to drop our veil of bi-partisanship and fight to fix the deeply broken Democratic Party.

### ***Conclusion: It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn***

David Brower's awareness of his impending death never much got in the way of his humor. "I just renewed my passport," he called one day out of the blue in 1998 to announce, rather archly, "so I guess I have at least another ten years."

By my calculation, David has another four years left on his passport. Time is short now. We need to recognize our death in order to start something new.

I don't claim to have all of the answers. I don't even claim to know all of the questions. But I know in my heart that we can do this together.

This path of questioning will not be easy. It will be hard. It will be a long road, paved with heart-aching losses before the dawn. Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Church at Wittenberg and it led to the Council of Trent and the Thirty Years' War. But no one now questions whether he was right.

**Some of you may be asking, "So where do we go now?" "If environmentalism is dead, and liberalism is dead, does that mean we're through?" No. This great moment also presents an amazing opportunity.**

We WILL get to the Spring – and I will come back and give a more uplifting speech then, I promise – but now it's time for a pause to consider how much we've lost. There's a famous saying on the left, "Don't Mourn, Organize." It's time for us to mourn, not organize.

We will get to where we want to go, but we can't get there on the road we've been on. It's our task to start asking questions about why Democrats and all liberal movements are not connecting with America's need for fulfillment.

We will be attacked for asking these questions.

But, for every person who attacks us, I believe that there are two more people who agree.

For every person who sends a copy of this speech to their list, there will be two more people who commit to a new form of political action.

For every organization that takes up the call to evolve, there will be two more who follow their lead.

For every person who asks WHY CAN'T WE DO BETTER at dinner tonight, there will be two more who will lead tomorrow.

For every person who admits to young leaders that we've broken their world, and we need their help to fix it, we'll have two more young leaders to take us to that new day.

For every movement that breaks out of their –isms, they will find two more true allies that they did not know they had.

For every current leader who shares their hurt, their pain, their anguish at their own failure -- and their desire to change – you will have two invitations from me – and from all of us – to join in.

Imagine knowing that:  
Every dollar you give,  
Every letter you write,  
Every hour you spend  
Helps the Homeless on the street a hundred feet here,  
the Kids locked in prison a hundred miles from here,  
the Salmon in the rivers five hundred miles from here,  
the Family surviving HIV five thousand miles from here  
and the Soldiers dying eight thousand miles from here.

Imagine our strength coming not from our separate movements, but from our interconnections.

I don't want to have to talk about death anymore.

I want to build a better world.

THE END/THE BEGINNING



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