

To Have and To Hold: Sustainability and the Language of Love in Terry Tempest Williams, Pattiann Rogers and Aldo Leopold

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Abstract: This essay offers reflection on the question of what love has to do with sustainability and environmental awareness. Examining Terry Tempest Williams' *Desert Quartet*, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Pattiann Rogers' *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*, the article explores how and when environmental consciousness arises. The three selected authors offer insight on the roles played by environmental trauma, close and empathetic identification with animals and place, the power of close observation, and the constitutive power of praise. Finally, an etymological reading of the word, "sustain," suggests new definitions of what it means to have and to hold, to make a pledge to environmental awareness. The essay concludes that the vocabulary and emotional commitment prompted in acts of sustainability partakes in the language of love.

Keywords: Terry Tempest Williams, Aldo Leopold, Pattiann Rogers, sustainability, love, environment, land community, nature writing

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Inside the question posed by this issue of *The Journal of Sustainability Education* – ‘What’s love got to do with it?’ – there lurks yet another query: if love *does* have something to do with it, then just when and how does that love *start*; when and how is it prompted, inspired and created? We are right to ask these questions, which link personal affect and emotion to land and animals, because environmental awareness and commitment just may have a good deal to do with love – with vows, for better or worse; with the trauma and loss associated with injured affections; with vulnerability; with learning to notice another that remains separate from oneself; and with the ethical commitment to have and to hold another being as equal to and even above one’s own interests. It may turn out that to ‘sustain’ is, essentially, to partake in a vow of love. Terry Tempest Williams’ wilderness memoir *Desert Quartet*, Pattiann Rogers’ poetry collection, *Firekeeper*, and Aldo Leopold’s environmental classic, *Sand County Almanac*, while partaking in different genres, each have something to tell us about how, when and why environmental consciousness emerges and about how love remains central to that awakening and to that eventual commitment.

Crucial to each is an initial pledge or promise. In *Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold suggests that land communities involve “love[] and respect[]” (viii) and Terry Tempest Williams, in *Desert Quartet* (1995), tells us that, alone in the desert and without a compass, “only a pledge to love” can “orient” her (5). To “walk in this country,” she continues, “is always an act of faith” (7). Meeting the land on its own terms, Williams contentedly notes that “I have no map” (6). Leopold, as eager to dispense with “gadgetry” as Ahab was to toss away his quadrant and compass, wishes for an earlier era when maps and information sites were not available to those who sought the wilderness. Those “blank spaces” (149) beckon Leopold, less for the predictable allure of the open frontier than for the irreplaceable opportunity to learn humility: open land that we don’t yet know, Leopold suggests, offers the chance to build “receptivity into the still unlovely human mind” (177).

Williams, Rogers and Leopold can tell us something about this receptivity: about how a person can come to love nature, and about how love – be it Eros or agape, but always intimate – can help us understand the commitment to sustainability. Moreover, they narrate paths to this awareness through recognizable moments and steps. And each points, in the end, towards a passionate commitment to the life of other humans, to the lives of fellow travelers and species, and to the land that *holds* – in the sense of holding or ‘*tener-ing*’ – us all. The very etymology of the word sustain – with roots in *tener* and *tenere* – point us to a new understanding of what we might mean when we commit ourselves to the land and each other – when we vow to have, to hold and to honor the world around us.

Common to all three authors, in varying degrees, is some kind of environmental trauma, experienced directly or indirectly, but always taken in as personal and emotional. The speaker in Pattiann Rogers’ poem, “The Next Story,” in her *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems* (1994), watches “all morning long” in anguish as “strident and disruptive “ blue jays mourn the death of their companion. They “screamed/ with their whole bodies ... and swept across the lawn ... as they flew over the half-skull/ and beak, the blood-end of the one wing/ lying intact ... all that the cat had left.” They cried “singly, together, alternately,” creating a pattern of their “inconsolable fear, ... five wheeling spokes... of perfect lament ... [making] bird-shaped histories of grief.” The poem’s speaker, riveted at the window by the birds’ loss, feels that nothing could be enough

to “rouse me, to move me/ from this window where I have pressed/ my forehead hard against the unyielding pane,/ unyielding all morning long” (129-30).

The birds’ grief is the speaker’s own grief and she holds it close, as Williams so memorably does in *Desert Quartet*, when she finds a dead frog while hiking through the dry cliffs and red rocks near the Rio Colorado. She finds what might be a “small leather pouch” that turns out to be a “frog, dead and dried.” She slips the dried body onto a leather string and keeps it close, wearing it around her neck in tribute the life that had been. Its body prompts a childhood memory, a dark recollection of when her brothers hurled frogs against canyon walls when on vacation at Lake Powell – and of when they hurled those same frogs against her body, as if in fun. But it wasn’t fun of course:

[M]y cries only encouraged them, excited them, until I became the wall they would throw the frogs against.... The tiny canyon frogs, about the size of a ripe plum, ... would die on impact, hitting my body, the boys’ playing field. I would [walk the creek] and wash the splattered remains off of me. I would enter the water, ... and release the frog bodies downstream with my tears. I never forgave. (20-21)

Another creature’s death, which we witness or in which we play a role – these losses last a lifetime. And experiencing them can change a life. Leopold traces his environmental awakening to an animal’s death – one caused by his own hand. In *Sand County Almanac*, he looks back at his youth and famously recalls “eating lunch on a high rimrock” when he and his young companions thought they saw a doe but soon realized that it was a she-wolf. “In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf.” Young and “full of trigger-itch,” they “pump[] lead into the pack” -- a mother and cubs which, seconds before, had been a “melee of wagging tails and playful maulings.” The dying animals fall to the foot of the rimrock; “the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks” (129). It remains one of the most powerful moments in Leopold’s memoir, for it marks when the suffering and loss of another creature changes him forever:

[I] reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something known only to her and the mountain.... My own conviction on this score dates from th[at] day I saw a wolf die. (130, 129)

Leopold, here, recalls a moment of reckoning with loss and responsibility, a life-changing moment in which he knows that the creature he damaged and destroyed can never be brought back.

The powerful and intimate identification with an animals’ death and with personal grief constitutes not only a life-changing experience of loss but an emerging willingness – an openness – to identifying with another’s pain and struggle. No concern over the affective fallacy, here; the personal identification with another creature is front and center. Leopold offers no apologies for identifying with an animal’s being and with its plight. For Leopold, to look for some distancing mechanism would constitute, here, a “promiscui[ty] [that] depersonalize[s]” the intimacy of being in the wild (183). Williams also seeks out those moments of profound closeness where, for her, “there is no partition between my body and the body of Earth” (10). Or, elsewhere in the

river, she finds moments of immersion where she can joyously and mystically proclaim, “I am water” (23). On the Joint Trail, in the backcountry of Utah’s Canyonlands, she feels as if she were “walking through the inside of an animal” (8); and, later during this experience in the Utah desert, one of her vows is to “be engaged [and] to inhabit my animal body” (5). Connected, attached, free from any need to separate or depersonalize – Williams celebrates identification and merging with the land and world surrounding her.

Pattiann Rogers gives this identification with animals a turn with her poem, “Suppose Your Father Was a Redbird.” Suppose, she offers, you weren’t entirely human; suppose that the birds you see are part of you, related to you? Suppose, she continues, “before you could speak, you watched” his flights, studied and knew the “win-gloss tips” of his wings? You might, then, know different things than you do now. You might, in fact, be “obligated to try to understand” larger flights and performances in nature, and to understand, then, what “it is you recognize in the sun/ As you study it again this evening/Pulling itself and the sky in dark red/ Over the edge of the earth” (18-19). Suppose, Rogers poses elsewhere, in “Eating Death,” that “I had never distinguished myself/ to myself from the landscape/ so that reaching out to touch a leaf of chicksaw plum ... [was] no different to me from putting my hand on my knee.” Would it then be possible, she asks, for my “violet serenity” to be synonymous with “blue rain” on a hill, or my “opening into sex identical with the gold and russet/ revolution of the sun into dusk.” Could I recognize, she asks herself, “night and day” as “my own slow/ breathing in and slow breathing out/ of light.” Identified so closely and intimately with the creatures and with the light or the land directly present in her experience, whatever fears Rogers’ speaker has of death or human isolation seem to disappear. Moreover, she exclaims, she “notice[s]” more of the world around her and in her. She “notices[s] one evening,” for instance, that “the small ebony hobble” was a “further aspect of myself.” She wouldn’t be frightened by the passage of time, as it wheeled from markers of ancient geological eons to the seemingly present day. Seeing the continuum, she pays greater attention, “notices” more.

This noticing and *looking*, in *Desert Quartet*, beckons the seeker to “get down on hands and knees for a closer look” at the ancient “minutia” of geologic forms and fossils or, here, the creatures of sandstone ponds; it prompts and focuses the intimate eye and “mind of the lover” (13). Here, the geological and natural eros of being present at this “tiny body of water in the desert” reminds Williams that the miracle of personal, emotional and erotic experience in nature needn’t be merely an uncommon or “rare event” (14). As Emerson and Thoreau knew well as they redefined miracles for a generation of Transcendentalists, Williams immerses herself joyfully and physically in the waves of the tiny pool and in the spread of the over-arching red rock and blue sky. Nature – not even seemingly inert rock – is never lifeless; and, if we’re up to it, might invite us to look, notice and feel what we have never before experienced.

In her close noticing and looking in “Synthesizing the Word,” Pattiann Roger’s speaker watches intently in order to know names of creatures around her. She observes the “speckled wood butterfly” in his “spiral[s],” the “comb-footed spider” and the “pinecrickets. I am trying/ To recall your name. I am watching.” Noticing the “underwater worm” sliding along the reeds in a pond, she tries to “feel[] its presence”: “I am/ Next to where you are. I will use my fingertips. I will use/ My belly. I will study long enough to remember your name” (43). The “hair of each [wheat] seed deserves the watcher’s and the lover’s attention.

Moreover, this *attention* leads to new awareness – to an awareness that the observed creature or land, itself, ‘knows’ a great deal. It may know something that you don’t. The realization, admittedly mystical, yields what Leopold called “intellectual humility” (200). After all, it shouldn’t be just about we humans or about the state of mind we might gain from observation of nature. In the night, in *Desert Quartet*, for instance, “free-tailed bats circle the [campfire’s] flames” and Williams opens herself to their knowledge. Their “ears [are] wide open. What do they hear that I am missing?” “Gifted” because they depend on echoes, “they listen twice to all that is spoken in the desert. They are the dark angels who register our longings and pinpoint the cries lodged within our throats” (43).

Surrounding Leopold’s famous moment with the dying she-wolf and cubs is, of course, the mountain itself in his chapter, “Thinking Like a Mountain.” The mountain itself does not refer merely to the geological mass, with its centuries of sediment and eons of unseen history, but also to what it “knows.” Feels. Has felt. What it hears that we cannot. The mount hears a

[d]eep chesty bawl [that] echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world. (129)

That “bawl,” the she-wolf’s cry, can be heard by man’s ears. And certainly the shiver Leopold feels upon hearing that distant wail has its corresponding reaction in the deer, coyote, the hunter, and the rancher. “Yet beyond these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning,” Leopold concludes, “known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.” The rest of us remain “unable to decipher the hidden meaning,” but we “know nevertheless that it is there” (129).

“What do they hear that I don’t?” Williams wonders. What does the mountain know, Leopold asks. Nature’s unspoken, undeciphered knowledge leaves us uncertain and, thus, vulnerable. And the fear and sometime suffering of land or animals reminds us further not only of our but also of their vulnerability. Perhaps, like Job, we are not intended to understand; and perhaps we might learn more from that very place of not knowing. Perhaps that vulnerability affords us greater humility; and perhaps that is a gift. Wandering alone in the Canyonlands of Utah, Williams sees eroded, upended and seemingly “tortured rock pulled apart by internal tensions and stresses that form fractures,” erosion, and “deep slots between fins of sandstone” (10). The upended land recalls inner, human fractures that leave us similarly exposed and torn: “Through the weathering of our spirit, the erosion of our soul, we are vulnerable. Isn’t that what passion is – bodies broken open through change?” (11).

Animal vulnerability also hits hard, as Rogers reminds us in “The Verification of Vulnerability: Bog Turtle.” The turtle has hard armor to protect the soft places within. Whatever is at the heart of that little body is “[g]uarded by horned beak and nails,” surrounded and protected by “mahogany carapace molded in tiles,” hidden far under the impenetrable, ancient shell. Yet “there it exists, /As it must, that particle of vulnerability,/ As definite in its place as if it were a brief glint/ Of steel, buried inside the body of the bog turtle.” This soft heart is “carried in that body daily,” kept safe and then divided in moments of vulnerability, as when the female lays eggs in June. The turtle’s shell may have taken shape around this vulnerability, around the “possibility of its own death.” And that likelihood allows Rogers to reflect on our own similar positions (75-76).

Aware of loss and grateful to frogs, wolves and turtles for their ability to remind us of our own exposure and fallibility, Williams, Leopold and Rogers are inspired to sing praise and offer tribute – what Rogers calls “proper praise” (79). Leopold’s careful drawings, with their details of feather and beak, stalk and leaf, offer visual tribute and praise to the creatures and plant life of Sand County. Williams passionately praises the four elements in her desert pilgrimage in Utah, and Rogers, in the two poems to follow, suggests that praise is not only warranted but may also be necessary. In “Eulogy for a Hermit Crab,” Rogers pays sweet tribute to the hermit crab’s ability to hang on to the rocks and thrive in the midst of the ocean’s crashing waves: “You were consistently brave ... [in] a tangle of blinding spume and spray/ ... [a]nd pistol-shot collisions your whole life long./ You stayed... You were here.” And by the determined grip of claws, “by the unrelieved wonder/ of your black pea eyes,” and the “swing and swing of your touching antennae/ You maintained your name meticulously... [i]n the hermitage of your crabness.” Addressing the crab directly, Rogers offers up her request as she sits by the “incomprehensible racket” of the sea and watches its “great girth” toss and toss over the tiny creature who has held on and held on: “Please let the words of this proper praise I speak/ Become the identical and proper sound/ Of my mourning” (79).

Rogers’ offering of this “proper praise,” however, might not only constitute a worthy and moving tribute, it might also be necessary to the universe. In “Supposition,” she reflects on this very constitutive possibility in language that praises, wondering if, perhaps, others around us and even the world itself might not need our words of praise – as the void needed God’s voice – to come into being. “Suppose praise had physical properties [that] actually endured?” Wonder if “the molecular changes taking place/ In the mind during the act of praise/ Resulted in an emanation rising into space”: “What if praise and its emanations/ Were necessary catalysts to the harmonious/ Expansion of the void? Suppose, for the prosperous/ Welfare of the universe, there were an element/ Of need involved” (35).

That uttered praise – like the first utterance that created light out of an original darkness – might help constitute or call new forces into being. That the hermit crab hung on with the “gritty orange curve of [its] claws” matters. Like Leopold’s mountain and Williams’ beloved desert, these praise-inspiring creatures – bog turtles, wolves, frogs, jays, hermit crabs -- hang on and endure despite their vulnerability to loss and even extinction. They bear the marks of their struggle to endure, for better and for worse. They can teach us something, in their ancient way, as Rogers suggests in “The Power of Toads,” where witnessing animal-love in nature seems to inspire, validate and expand that same desire and love in humans.

In a wild twilight, “spring rain, calling and calling [and] breeding,” the “oak toad and the red-spotted toad love their love” as they are “clasped atop their mates.” In their tiny “loin-shaking thunder,” they may even believe – as humans are meant to believe – that “when they sing/ They sing more than songs,” and even “initiat[e] the union of water and dusk.” Perhaps they are entitled to think that “they have forced/ The heavens to twist and moan by the continual expansion/ Of their lung sacs pushing against the dusk... And they might be right” (63). We, too, are entitled to reach these conclusions through the “longing in [our] loins” (63), and we, too, are entitled to take part in the glories of love underneath spring rains. We “could investigate the causal relationship/ Between rainstorm and love-by-pondside ... [and] watch to see exactly how the heavens were moved” (64):

Thinking hard of thunder, imagining all the courses

That slow, clean waters might take across our bodies,
Believing completely in the rolling and pressing power
Of heavens and thighs. And in the end, we might be glad
Even if all we discovered for certain was the slick, sweet
Promise of good love beneath dark skies and warm rains. (64).

Not on the cool banks of a rain-soaked stream, but in the presence of fire in the Utah desert, Williams breaks kindling wood, holding “every detail of love in her body” as the flames “flare and flicker ... [and] become rubies” before her. Sitting back, she is “pleased that the fire is growing in the desert, in me, so that I can dream, remember how it is that I have come to love” (37).

So, in talking of animals and nature, we are talking, here, too, about love. And certainly, so far, we can make the link to eros and to what Thoreau celebrated with his chant of “Contact!” We can, as well, see the connection to a love of God and spirit. But what about another, related mode of love: the kind that we express in vows, promises and commitments to another person? Can we speak, when we are thinking of animals and land, of an ethics of love that illuminates our connections to others on this planet? Here, I believe, Leopold gives us a fitting and appropriate language. His “land ethic” encompasses the “duration of [our] biotic enterprise” (109) and seeks a “kinship with [the] fellow-creatures” who are our “fellow travelers” on this planet. Leopold’s credo rejects the “conqueror” model and seeks, instead, a “community of interdependent parts” (203). It enlarges – as Rogers’ poems and Williams’ desert memoir enlarge -- the “boundaries of [human] community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (204). And it asks us to shift from the role of ruler of the “land community to plain member and citizen of it” (204).

Leopold’s tributes to the dying wolf and to the mountain, and his “Monument to the Pigeon” – like Rogers’ praise of so many tiny, seldom-seen creatures and Williams’ praise of frogs and desert life – take part in the language of love in part because they ask for the lover’s commitment. They call for the language through which we promise to ‘*have and to hold.*’ However, these requests or vows are not about simply *having* in a possessive or grasping sense. They are not about *holding* in the sense of seizing or owning a thing, but, rather, in a deeper sense embedded in the word, to sustain. Etymologically, the word sustain is defined by the prefix, “sus,” which is related to “sub,” meaning up from below or underneath. “Tain” derives from *tener* and *tenere*, meaning to hold up, to hold, to suffer, to endure and to support. Perhaps in our relationship to ‘owning’ or ‘having’ land – to land tenure -- we needn’t be thinking about deeded ownership. Instead, perhaps, a true form of loving land is to have and hold it in this sense of sustain – to promise to have and hold it, to endure with it, to support it, through better and through worse.

“It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love.” Aldo Leopold,
Sand County Almanac (223)

“This is what love looks like”
Terry Tempest Williams, People’s Climate March, September 2014 (Web)

For Leopold, commitment to a larger biotic community is made difficult by a couple of obstacles. Too often, self-interest prevents ethical and loving commitment to land – and this is made worse because we have, for too long, seen the land community primarily in terms of economic value. Moreover, even our well-intentioned attempts to broaden this value – when we value wilderness, for instance, for recreation or aesthetics -- haven't necessarily brought on a larger or truer awareness of the real land community. In addition, even when people do try to broaden their definitions of land's value, they don't often recognize the daunting scope of their yet-unseen obligations. As Leopold rightly notes, "no important change in ethics was even accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions." An ethical relationship to land can only exist with "love, respect and admiration for land.... The evolution of a land-ethic is an intellectual as well as [an] emotional process" (223,225).

Holding the land community sacred – committing to, having and holding with reverence, attention, intelligence, and commitment – is something Terry Tempest Williams has fought and marched for. On September 21, 2014, over 300,000 people demonstrated in New York City for the Peoples' Climate March – an event duplicated throughout the country and elsewhere in the world. The gathering brought together and transcended lines of race, class and gender and sought to give the world inspiration to change. Williams' piece, "River Walkers," posted on the *Orion* website, actively reflects back on that day when committed people walked the "canyons of Manhattan" and stood "in the center of this [global and environmental] crisis with love." Williams – like a latter-day Whitman or even like Bruce, in Stegner's *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, when he's driving across the plains, and making up poems from the western billboards -- democratically and poetically fuses voices and lines from the marchers' signs into a tribute poem. Among them:

Care now, you might be back...
Protect me/ I can't swim....
Our planet has a fever...
The facts are in...
Why not?

And the final lines:

We are the people
Walk with the river
This is what love looks like.

Love and commitment, here, go hand in hand. We are asked to have and to hold ourselves, the land and our fellow creatures. To do our part to sustain the land community -- tender, land tenure. Commit to holding this land sacred, these marchers plead. Attendees of the March, in their recollections and in their responses to Williams' piece on the *Orion* website, echoed the commitment they asked for that day in New York: The "moments of silence" that day, one wrote, "and the following wave of grief, fury, joy and commitment all at once – have changed me.... [We must commit ourselves to] the ones yet to come." Even if, as her comments

conclude, “we are as salmon fighting upstream to our deaths doing it.” Another marcher writes that she has committed herself, in the coming year, to environmental education programs, and yet another simply ends her comments by citing Williams’ own line: “This is what love looks like.” (Williams, Web).

When it comes to the internal changes necessary to our ability to see ourselves in a larger land community; when it comes to the “intellectual humility” necessary to seeing our own role in the earth’s traumas and to seeing the larger community to which we are ethically obligated and emotionally connected; and when it comes to our commitment to empathizing with our fellow creatures in our immediate and our broader worlds, it turns out that having and holding mean a great deal. When it comes to sustaining ourselves and the planet to which we belong, it turns out that love has everything to do with it.

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