An Invitation into the Abundant Stories of this Land
This is a working document intended to share stories about Knoll Farm from people who’ve both lived and visited here over the last 70 years. You can share on the blank pages at the back, or you can speak to any staff about sharing in other ways. Please let us know if we may include your offering in future editions.

2nd Edition
2022

Knoll Farm
700 Bragg Hill Rd.
Waitsfield, VT 05673
Table of Contents

The Fire Circle ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Looking for Indians.................................................................................................................................. 4
Excerpt from “To Human Skin” ............................................................................................................. 5
healing: land, the body, connection, and separation ............................................................................ 6
Painting of landscape ............................................................................................................................. 10
by Gee Wong, 2020 ............................................................................................................................... 10
The Making of a Place............................................................................................................................ 10
Sounds for Rest and Resilience ............................................................................................................. 12
The Cord ................................................................................................................................................ 13
Image of lambs in hay ............................................................................................................................. 16
Coyote at Night ....................................................................................................................................... 17
Keeping Silence at Knoll Farm ............................................................................................................. 18
Image of the Purebred Icelandic sheep in pasture ................................................................................ 19
by Helen Whybrow ................................................................................................................................ 19
Sheep Were Not the Real Problem ........................................................................................................ 20
Trees of Knoll Farm ................................................................................................................................ 26
Image of a spoon carver .......................................................................................................................... 26
Resilient Communities: An Ecological Perspective ............................................................................. 27
Image of the northern pasture and the hills beyond ........................................................................... 30
This Land Is Whose Land? ..................................................................................................................... 31
Indian Country and the Shortcomings of Settler Protest ...................................................................... 31
Courage called for ................................................................................................................................ 36
Painted Baldwin Quote ........................................................................................................................... 36
All the Names we Don't Know Drawing ............................................................................................... 37
1917 photo of the McLaughlin family on the farmhouse porch ............................................................ 38
The Apple Tree ....................................................................................................................................... 38
Image of Better Selves Fellows planting an apple tree ......................................................................... 41
When have you glimpsed your vision...? .............................................................................................. 42
Painted Shakur Quote ............................................................................................................................. 43
The State of Vermont currently recognizes these 4 Tribes: .................................................................. 44
Eight Sisters: Connection to Place through an Abenaki lens ............................................................... 44
Resources about Vermont Abenaki history and sovereignty ............................................................... 45
Modeling Anti-Oppression Work at Knoll Farm ................................................................................... 46
Radical Hospitality ............................................................................................................................... 46
On Race & Racism ............................................................................................................................... 47
Ode to a Country Inn ............................................................................................................................. 48
Who belongs to this land? ...................................................................................................................... 50
Letter of Reflection ............................................................................................................................... 54
Image of a Whole Thinking Retreat at the Story Circle .................................................................... 54
Gaia’s Library ....................................................................................................................................... 55
Swift River – Kancamagus ..................................................................................................................... 57
Pages for self-determination ................................................................................................................ 58
Painted Kimmerer Quote ....................................................................................................................... 62
History is too often told by an authoritative voice who decides where and how history was made. In these pages we’re setting out to tell a different story of the land than the story the victors would tell: one that involves more than buying and selling, taking and using, and naming property owners of the past. As the current stewards of what’s now known as Knoll Farm we’ve tried to play the role of history teller and have found that we’ll always tell less than a whole story. This place has long been richly populated by diverse memories, planted with seeds, and strewn with ashes over time. There is an abundance of meaning, story, and connection created on this land from perspectives that we are always catching up to, but never grasping.

For this reason we have set out, not to tell a fixed story with a tight beginning and end, but to collect a web of experiences from those who have walked and connected to this place. We are using a different process around telling the history of the land now known as Knoll Farm with the hope that it allows for greater self-determination for you. With the context of these stories we hope you will interpret and experience this land and add to the story of this place for the next visitor to appreciate.

At Knoll Farm we foster a practice of sharing a circle around a fire and telling stories. Sharing stories uplifts and connects us, and creates meaning in our lives. You can think of this booklet as a 2-D fire circle. In these pages we’ve gathered writing and art inspired by this land from people who have walked, tended to, and admired it. Each perspective we share makes a unique offering to the larger story of this place.

The stories shared here are part of this land's story, but are not ours to tell. They live here in the soil, hopefully nourishing others to speak out loud their stories here as well, to show up, to witness and to heal. To combat erasure of Indigenous perspectives, we selected stories that speak to relationship, displacement, and steps to reconciliation. We hope these narratives will widen your understanding of history, and pay respect to the Native communities who have walked and continue to walk this land.

Seeds + Ashes is incomplete and is undoubtedly missing many perspectives, but this collection will evolve endlessly with your contributions. Every season it will shift and grow as new creations and perspectives are added. In the hope that every guest will be able to identify with and feel connected to a story shared within these pages, we invite you to take part in our fire circle if you have an unexpressed experience or piece of history to share. You’ll notice there are blank pages at the end of this booklet and we encourage you to tell stories of your experience on this land.

We hope this collection will inspire you to look upon the places you live and walk with new depth and questions. Seeds and Ashes is an ongoing experiment in how to grow and document an understanding of where you live and the places you walk.

*Who are we? Peter Forbes and Helen Whybrow have lived on and stewarded this land since 2001; Ella McDonald was the First Edition editor in 2021, and Lauren Brady was the Second Edition editor in 2022.*
Looking for Indians
Cheryl Savageau, from *Dirt Road Home*, 1995

My head filled with tv images
of cowboys, warbonnets and renegades, I ask my father
what kind of Indian are we, anyway.
I want to hear Cheyenne, Apache, Sioux, words I know from television
but he says instead
Abenaki...

One night
my father brings in a book.
See, he says, Abenaki,
and shows me the map
here and here and here
he says, all this
is Abenaki country.
I remember asking him
what did they do
these grandparents
and my disappointment
when he said no buffalo
roamed the thick new england forest they hunted deer in winter
sometimes moose, but mostly
they were farmers and fishermen.

I didn't want to talk about it. Each night my father
came home from the factory to plant and gather,
to cast the line out
over the dark evening pond,
with me, walking behind him,
looking for Indians.
For her father…

His heart was green and growing as if he'd lived for centuries,
an old forest tree man
rooted in the rocky soil
now called new england, as if Gluscabe's arrow
had just pierced the bark
and turned it to human skin.
Ndakinna, I want to tell him now. Ndakinna. There is a name
for this place you call in English
the home country.
healing: land, the body, connection, and separation

lawrence barriner ii, 2022

“today, i believe there is nothing more subversive than helping to midwife a new evolutionary shift of the human species into an era where we will no longer be entranced with socioeconomic formations and ways of being and thinking that produce disconnection, domination, and devastation. instead, we can be present upon the earth in ways that bring healing, wholeness, and a sense of the sacred in our connection with one another and with all of creation.” — fania davis

heal (v): to connect that which has not yet been connected; to reconnect that which has been disconnected. — my personal dictionary

healing is the work of reconnecting that which has been disconnected. and since everything wants to be connected, in some ways, healing is the most natural work there is. that doesn't mean it isn't complex and hard at times. but it is what wants to happen. doing healing work means actually letting what wants to happen happen.

healing is perpetually on my mind because the world we live in creates a monumental amount of harm. my favorite metaphor for healing is the physical body. over the past few years, a few lessons, insights, and metaphors continue to ring true. i've learned these from listening, reading, watching, or having my own direct experiences. you may or may not agree with them.

- the physical body wants to heal. several of its systems are exclusively to promote healing and integrity. many injuries heal themselves if the conditions are right for the body to do what it does.
- some injuries are beyond the body's capacity to heal itself. in these cases, interventions can help the body do things it can't. after that, the body can take over and do the rest of the healing. ex: resetting a broken bone.
- if the conditions aren't set well, healing can go awry. ex: having to rebreak a bone that healed improperly or taking a round of antibiotics.
- collective bodies also want to heal and have the ability to do so naturally. oppressive systems (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) disrupt that work in countless ways.
- all healing is self-healing. people heal themselves. groups heal themselves. "healers" create the conditions for people to heal themselves. healers don't heal others.
- some wounds require boundaries to heal. ex: surface wounds on the body often create a scab to protect the healing flesh from infection from the air. in collective bodies, that scabbing can take many forms. but it is important to note that scabs are temporary; they are meant to fall off after the healing is complete.
- some wounds leave scars. some, but not all scars reduce mobility and range of motion.
- some wounds can transmit intergenerationally. ex: if i endure a knitting injury (it happens!) and lose my ability to knit, i may never teach my children how to knit, even if their bodies are fully capable of knitting.

at this moment, in these times (and maybe at all times), there’s a myriad of types and directions of healing needed. some of these include: healing within individual people, healing between individuals, healing between groups, healing between each of the these groups and the land, and healing of the land herself.

stories are one of the primary ways our species understands the world. i love stories and i'd like to share some that point to what i'm beginning to understand about the healing that has happened, is happening, or beginning on this land, this land currently known as knoll farm.
when i was little, my dad, brother, and i built a raised bed garden and grew food in our backyard. when i was a slightly older, i related to land as a place to exert energy. i ran, jumped, swam, and hid everywhere i could whenever i could. in my late teens, i related to land as a place to help other young men heal. i spent something like 30+ nights in the span of two years taking younger teens walking in beach moonlight to talk about what ailed them and releasing that to the ocean. and in my early 20s, i continued to relate to land as a source for sustenance and beauty. i gardened, farmed, researched, and photographed.

20-26 august 2017 was my week as a better selves fellow, as far as i can remember, it was my first experience of relating to land as a source for my own restoration. i took naps that week like i’d never taken as an adult. i slept in the hammock across from the barn and found myself staring at the valley. that valley, known to me as the mad river valley, opened my mind to new physical and metaphorical horizons. i sat under the tent and let insects crawl all over my first book draft, blessing it with their indifference. life: it's all relative(s). they taught me to release the pressure on myself and also acknowledge that i was, indeed, writing a book. as i reconnected with myself via rest, vision, and labor, i healed as i realized one epic paradoxical truth: everything matters and everything is falling away.

yes, it was true that i was pouring myself into words in a way and scale that i never had before. and in that process, i learned about and reconnected much of myself. the words on these bug-trodden pages were real and they were me. and yet, even as i did that work, i saw years and decades of connectedness unfold. as i looked into the valley, i saw the past and future of a who… who had been here and who would be here. i saw earlier generations in my own lineages on their lands and those who would come next. and in all of that, my moments matter, how i use my moments matters. but just as i know so little about those who came before me, here and elsewhere, my moments are not nearly as important as i think they are.

in addition to my own stories, i have witnessed many stories of individual healing, stories not my own. as a fellow and now co-facilitator of the better selves program, i have seen a black man find his way to the beauty of his blackness for the first time (rejecting the disconnection that is white supremacy). i have seen someone begin to recognize the true expansiveness of their sexuality (rejecting the disconnection that is homophobia). i have seen someone find their way to a new, more aligned work path (rejecting the disconnections of perfectionism and classism).

i have witnessed and heard of healing between many individuals. sometimes the healing happens on the land itself. other times the healing is initiated on the land and continues beyond it.

i have seen siblings find new parts of themselves individually and then be able to see each other with new eyes. i have seen two people, married for decades, each find themselves anew. from that place of newness, they then found each other anew. as they moved into the next part of their life and work together, their individual and collective healing seems to have opened new doors for them both. time will tell.
healing between groups

healing between groups of people has not been part of my personal experience on this land. yet from what i hear and feel, it is a critical part of what happens here.

stories i've heard about ann day's work sound like healing between groups. i hear of the work she did to support migrants and refugees from central america to get to canada, a veritable underground railroad. i hear of the spaces on this land she set up to provide refuge for people and i hear of the ways she organized town members to learn spanish to support their temporary visitors. in all of that relationship, i hear healing, even if it's healing in motion.

this story, though, marks where i begin to see places where the wounds are deep enough to require separation to heal. for these individuals and families fleeing, i hope that return home is possible. the context of their home became too dangerous to stay. separation was needed. but in the long run, i hope their descendants can find their way back to their homelands, to visit or to live. knoll farm has already been a place to help people gain some separation as an act of healing. i think more of that may be coming. i don't think that will ever be all or even most of what happens here. but given our unfolding collective history, i see space for more.

paradoxically, i have experienced this place as rooted in inclusivity. tales of this value abound. from ann's work on the farm and in town, to helen and peter's proposal to the vermont land trust to purchase the property, to helen and peter's wedding, to some of the farm's earliest programming in the farmer appreciation dinners and elder-focused storytelling nights, to the work of the center for whole communities, inclusion was front and center. even where that desire for inclusion fell short of the vision, acknowledgement and steps towards deeper alignment have followed.

some wounds, like papercuts, aren't deep enough to need protection to heal. but deeper wounds need a scab. just as the skin creates a barrier to protect itself when its integrity is broken in a significant way, some healing work, the deep work of long-term inclusivity, benefits from short-term separation. when the wound is generations deep, there is medicine in separation that supports healing on the way back to non-separation.

in 2021, an all black theatre company spent a month on the farm. in 2022, the first all-bipoc group of better selves fellows will take its maiden voyage with two bipoc facilitators. both of these are openings for the typically disconnected, dominated, and devastated (harkening back to fania davis' words) in this country to experience healing inside themselves as individuals and a group as well as between the group and the land.

yet, one curiosity about these two openings haunts me, as beautiful as they are: in the case of a deep wound, can an effective scab be created when the conditions of the wounding are present (even indirectly)?

what healing is possible for women and non-binary people when the container is held by a group of men? what healing is possible for people of color groups when the container is held by a group of white people? what healing is possible for immigrants and indigenous people when the container is held by settlers?
based on my lived experience, sometimes no healing is possible. sometimes, some healing is possible and is far better than no healing at all. sometimes, tremendous healing is possible.

but what are the criteria that help us discern which of those three outcomes is most likely? the answer to this question is not immediately clear to me. i believe part of the answer lies in how much healing the individuals present have done. and there are many parts of the answer that i remain deeply curious about.

what is clear to me, though, is that i am pursuing answers here on this land and beyond. as i continue to relate to knoll farm, i hear and feel this interest resonating louder by the year. my presence here is one embodiment of that interest and i sense there are others.

before closing, i want to engage with the "why" of healing. joy degruy says it well:

“certainly we need to heal from our historical injuries, and we need to do more. we need to become healthy. healing will take us only part of the way. working towards health and well-being will take us to our goal. it is important that we discuss this distinction. there is a significant difference between not being sick and being well. if we are to heal and become healthy we will do so by building upon our strengths. we will need to draw upon our inner fortitude, resilience and endurance.” — joy degruy, post traumatic slave syndrome: america’s legacy of enduring injury and healing

the purpose of healing is not just to be healed. the purpose of healing is to be well. my individual healing is so that i can show up, for myself and in groups, whole and able to contribute to wellness. group healing is so that groups can bring their strengths and wisdom to multi-group work. healing between groups and the land is so people can rely deeply on one of the largest sources of healing of all: the earth herself. this last healing is reciprocal: as the land is healed by people, it can continue to be a source of well being into the future. (maybe all of this healing is reciprocal…)

as the healing journeys for me and knoll farm and all those who relate to this place continue, may we remember that healing will only take us part of the way there. it is needed, but it’s not all that is needed. without it, we cannot get to where we are going. and as grace lee boggs reminds us, we must not forget that we are going somewhere.

“all over the planet more and more people are thinking beyond making a living to making a life—a life that respects earth and one another.” — grace lee boggs, the next american revolution

thank you to helen whybrow for editing this piece and to jarvis green, mohamad chakaki, and john elder for their time and insights via phone conversation as i wrote it.

Lawrence (he/him) is a Black Queer coach, facilitator, and liberation worker who most values love, justice, community, and transformation. His paid work includes coaching, training, consulting, and facilitation. His unpaid work includes visionary fiction, (r)evolutionary unclinging, community-focused healing, and creating post-patriarchal futures. He is working towards a world that includes liberation and right relationship for all beings. You can find his creations at the following urls: https://unleashingalternativefutures.wordpress.com/ for visionary fiction
http://lqb2.co/blog///2021/01/24/revolutionary-uncle/ for (r)evolutionary unclinging
https://www.faireconomy.org/healing_for_liberation for community-focused healing
https://infinitethings.rocks/classes/post-patriarchy-futures/ for post-patriarchal futures and https://lawrencebarrinerii.com/vision/ for his vision of liberation and right relationship
Imagine sitting at the fire circle 65 million years ago. Your view of the proto-Mad River Valley would be considerably different. In fact, it wouldn’t be much of a valley at all, but a steep-sided ravine cut by the swift course of an alpine stream. The surrounding peaks and ridges would stand many thousands of feet higher than their current elevation, their flanks the thrusted cliffs and slabs of an ancient sea floor. Far to the east, at the center of a younger, narrower Atlantic, hot mantle would be seeping from the mid-ocean ridge, shoving oceanic crust toward the great subducting trenches of the North American coast.

This was the dawn of the Cenozoic Era, the age of new life—the era in which we still live today. It began when the last non-feathered dinosaurs died off, and the proliferation of flowering plants and grasses began. Birds, primates and other warm-blooded mammals diverged from a few generalized life forms.
Diversity was born. Geologically, the Cenozoic was a time of continental drift and erosion. Today’s North America was part of the supercontinent Laurasia, which included most of the landmasses in the Northern Hemisphere. Magnetic shifts at the mid-ocean ridge split Laurasia in two, widening the ocean. Here, in what is now Vermont, rivers roughly shaped the land, etching their paths through layer after layer of metamorphic sediments, slowly breaking entire mountains into particles deposited at the edge of the sea. This process exposed the resistant rocks once embedded at the roots of an ancient Appalachian range dating back 375 million years—back to the crushing birth of Pangaea, the prehistoric landmass that once contained all Earth’s continents in a vast global puzzle. Meanwhile, the climate was beginning to cool, and in central Canada, massive accumulations of compacted snow and ice crept south, carving and grinding the land as they came.

There is no place in the Northeast that went untouched by the great ice sheets of the Pleistocene epoch. At least four of them advanced across the face of New England between 3 million and 10,000 years ago. The direction of their path, northwest to southeast, scars bedrock ledges throughout central Vermont. Spreading south from their birthing grounds near Hudson Bay, the glaciers scoured the Northeast clean, erasing all signs of life that came before. Forests died as the chill of the expanding sheet created tundra conditions. The steep-sided ravines of the early Cenozoic were polished into curving bowl-shaped valleys. Mountaintops were rounded off, including neighboring Camel’s Hump, while the highest peaks in the Adirondacks pierced the glacier’s thick hide. Above the site of the Knoll Farm fire circle stood a mile of solid ice.

Approximately 20,000 years ago, the most recent glacier, known as the Wisconsin, had pushed south to the present Ohio and Missouri River valleys and east as far as the ocean. During its final retreat 12,000 years ago, the erosional material that makes up Long Island, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket dropped from the glacier’s terminus. In Vermont, debris too bulky to be carried by rivers was dumped, helter skelter, across the state. At the western edge of the Knoll Farm meadow, the leavings of the Wisconsin glacier have been piled into a wall that follows a line of century-old maples. These rocks and boulders, insignificant in the path of a glacier, could wreak havoc on a horse-drawn plow. As the climate warmed, glacial meltwater pooled in the arcs of moraines and faulted basins, forming massive freshwater lakes. Lake Vermont, the progenitor of Lake Champlain, stretched from the Adirondacks to the western flank of the Greens. When the ice retreated as far as the Atlantic inlet now known as the St. Lawrence River, saltwater began seeping around the glacial toe, and rising sea levels backed saltwater into the Champlain Valley, transforming Lake Vermont into an inland sea. Marine life migrated inland for feeding and bearing their young. But as the earth’s crust rebounded from the weight of the Ice Age, outlets to the ocean were blocked and marine life died as freshwater again flooded the valley.

In the year 1848, railroad laborers in Charlotte unearthed the skeleton of a giant mammal. It was the remains of a whale, buried by limestone sediments carried off the mountains—a relic from the days of the Champlain Sea.

While the glacier made its final stand, the tundra teemed with life. Woolly mammoths, muskoxen, rhinos, mastodons, giant bears and beavers, dire wolves, ground sloths, sabertoothed tigers, caribou and tapirs inhabited this land. Not far in their wake the first human beings came in small extended family groups of mobile hunters and gatherers. They moved with the movements of their prey and gathered foods in season, leaving few tools or dwellings for modern interpretation. What they left instead were gaping holes in the mammalian food chain. Between 12,000 and 11,000 years ago—approximately the same time of the Wisconsin glacier’s retreat from Vermont—early North American megafauna populations were decimated, at least in part because of overhunting.
Centuries passed and the climate continued its gradual warming trend, altering plant and animal distribution regionwide. As the ice disappeared, tundra grasses, dwarf shrubs and sedges shifted into boreal forests of spruce and fir. Between 6,000 and 4,000 years ago—a period called the Hypsithermal Interval—the climate warmed significantly, supporting oak, black gum, sycamore, red cedar, dogwood, American chestnut and white pine communities, which are today found only in protected lowland areas of Vermont and farther to the south. At the end of this interval, a cooling trend made way for oak, beech, maple, ash, birch and other hardwoods, creating the forests described by the first Europeans in the early 1600s.

Caribou, deer, bear, fish and migrating birds remained stable food sources in post-glacial New England, but Indigenous hunters probably relied more heavily on foraging for tubers, acorns, beechnuts, blackberries, bark and ferns for survival. Family units localized their ranges and began storing food during the winter months. In the Mad River Valley, migrating ducks and geese as well as trout from rivers and glacial Lake Vermont may have been staples in the Native diet. Houses framed with branches and walled with skins or woven mats became common, as did cooking utensils, agricultural implements and vessels carved from stone. For northeastern Native peoples, the Archaic Period represented a time of settling in. Populations grew. Communication increased. Soon the radical practice of agriculture spread north from tribes living to the south and west. Though not as suited to Vermont’s stony soils, the concept of cultivation—the deliberate manipulation of the inhabited landscape—prompted the rise of social orders, chiefdoms, ceremonial rites and semi-permanent villages. Small tracts of forest were burned to grow temporary crops of corn, squash or beans. Wild plants, such as cattails and a variety of deciduous leaves, nuts and berries remained important sources of food and medicine. In spring, Native women gathered maple sap using containers made of bark and molded clay. After 10,000 years of adaptation, Vermont Abenaki had developed a natural pattern based on available resources and framed by the change of the seasons.

**Sounds for Rest and Resilience**
Recorded by HB Lobizo, Summer 2019

Enjoy this offering of abundance, a small piece of an incredible week, a full hour of sounds for rest & resilience from the land at Knoll Farm, to help us all live on to fight another day.

https://www.weareoutintheopen.org/radio-hour/episode-13-sounds-for-rest-resilience
I can feel a nose and two feet. The feet are soft and pointed, positioned just above what I think is the head, only I don’t know if they are back feet or front feet. I need to know, because the answer tells me if I have one lamb coming out more or less okay, or two lambs tangled together with the first lamb folding its feet back and its twin doing a sort of backward somersault over the top of it. This would be bad.

It’s Sunday morning, about 2 am I think. I’ve been out in the three-sided shed with my twenty pregnant ewes for a few hours, and I have that all-nighter feeling when time is suspended and you are hovering slightly outside of your body. Near the shed’s opening, I sit in the damp hay blown over by fine snow that shines in the moonlight, and lean my back against the cold stone of the wall. Some of the ewes lie around me, eyes closed, chewing their cuds rhythmically, like the circular lines of a lullaby. A black ewe, Bluestem, lying on her side in an awkward position against the far wall, is the only reason I’m awake. I’ve had my eye on her since about 10 pm when her water broke.

Usually if a ewe doesn’t deliver on her own a couple of hours after her water breaks, it’s a good idea to help her out. It often signals that something is wrong with the way the lamb is positioned in the birth canal. A ewe straining to deliver a lamb that has its legs or head bent back, or a lamb that’s tangled up with a twin coming out at the same time, can rupture her womb or end up delivering a dead lamb. I’ve waited to see what Blue can do on her own, but now she is exhausted, heaving on her side, her eyes wild.

I stand up and stretch my back, wash my arm with cold iodine water from a tin bucket, and roll my thick sleeve down. I’m suddenly bone-cold. I step out of the shed where I can look east to the Northfield range, collecting myself. The stars are glittering on the snow. A few sheep have made their beds in the drifts, and they look at me placidly; their puffs of white breath like question marks against the dark.

Blue is my favorite. A runt at birth, rejected, her own mothering instinct is so strong that she never lets her lambs out of her sight. This is my fourth season of being a solo shepherdess. I’ve had rejected lambs and stillborn ones. Worst of all, a ewe with a grotesque prolapsed uterus that required an emergency call to the vet. But mostly I’ve had the joy of seeing lambs come into the world without a hitch. I have never delivered a pair of tangled twins.

My husband, Peter, is away, and though he knows nothing of the art of birthing, at least he could hold Blue’s head. My vet isn’t on call this weekend and his sub lives over an hour away. I have only the crazy birthing stories that shepherds tell each other about all the things that can go wrong and how they saved the day. Or mostly, how they didn’t. I push the worst possibilities from my mind—lambsthat had to be dismembered to come out, wombs rupturing, emergency C-sections in the muck of the barn floor where the ewe was sacrificed for the lambs.

Strangely, as I come to the full realization that I have no choice but to work through this on my own, my fear subsides. Returning to Blue’s side, I roll up my sleeve and reach inside her, following logic as a caver without a light might feel her way, inch by inch along the wall to a passage that’s familiar. The mass of womb and placenta are warm and wet, like a jellyfish in a tropical sea, while the bony wall of the pelvis grinds against the back of my hand. I find the nose, rounded and soft. Then, above the nose, I feel the hard triangles of two feet. I try to lock my fingers around them to pull and they twitch back. I’ve lost them! Gently I reach farther in, find the feet and trace the legs back against the unforgiving pelvic wall to the second joint. I do this to determine if what I have is a knee (front foot) or hock (back foot). I am 51 percent sure they are back feet. If they are, there is no anatomical way they belong to this nose, unless the
lamb is a contortionist. To pull the first lamb out, I have to find its front feet, but they are folded back, out of my reach.

I step back from Blue, stand up, and rinse my arms. Her twins are jammed in the birth canal like tangled tree branches in a narrow stream during spring flood. The natural birthing position for a lamb is like a diver, head between front limbs, shoulders forward, and streamlined for the sprint to air. When the arms are back, the shoulders are too broad for the opening. This is the problem with the first lamb, I think. When they are breech, they can come out backwards, but there’s a high chance that the lamb will gulp in fluid on the way out as the umbilical cord is stretched and breaks. Then it’s unlikely to survive.

When our daughter Wren was born, the midwife lifted her to my chest and let Peter cut the cord near her belly. In my exhausted state where images took on a strangely supernatural intensity, I remember thinking how thick it looked, like a sinewy tree root you find while digging; the kind that resists every effort of the spade. Something muscular and undeniable.

A lamb’s umbilical is as translucent and soft as a bit of milkweed down. I’ve never had to break or cut a cord; it always happens on its own as the lamb slips out of its watery home and onto the hay, becoming a creature of the breathing world. This has always astonished me, that the cord that sustains life could be so thin. Perhaps it’s a function of being a creature that’s closer to the wild. A ewe would have to lick the birth membranes from the lamb and be on her way, to leave no trace of blood behind in case of predators. The lamb’s ability to get to its feet and follow its mom within a few minutes of being born is an evolutionary imperative.

Would Blue die in the wild, I wonder? No doubt all these thousands of years that humans have been shepherds and helped with births have tweaked the evolutionary arc so that not only the easy birthers pass on their genes. A nomadic shepherd would have helped a birth so that the whole flock could more quickly move out of the wind or away from predators, or to the first grass. Only in the worst cases would they have abandoned a laboring ewe and unborn lambs to the wolves. On a Vermont sheep farm, like most of these hill farms were in the 1800s, another live birth would have meant more food for a family that faced spring with little but potatoes and cabbage left in the cellar. The peaks surrounding our farm tell this story: Scrag, Stark, Hunger Mountain, while Shepherd’s Brook drains their slopes to the Mad River. Those are the practical reasons, but I know there were more important reasons shepherds would do everything to assist a birth; this ancient, primal thing of caring for a flock is ultimately about human attachment.

Blue’s eyes are weirdly white, her sides no longer heaving. She lies still, lets me probe again. Inside her womb, I trace shapes of the yet-to-be-born with my fingertips over and over, guessing their anatomy aloud—front foot, nose, back foot—a lock picker in the dark. I have to get it right before I pull.

A faint noise comes from the doorway where a dim light spills from the barn into the sheep shed. Wren, who is three, has padded out through the snow in her dinosaur pajamas to find me. Her cold hands find the warmth of my neck beneath my parka hood and her too-big boots dangle from her sockless feet. Since her father was away, at bedtime I had told her, “If you wake up in the night and I’m not in my bed, then look outside. If the barn lights are on, I’m out there and you can come out. I’ll leave your boots by the door.” I honestly wasn’t sure she would figure it out, but I hadn’t come up with any better options.

“Are there babies?” she whispers close to my ear.

“Yes, soon,” I say, and I put her on a hay bale so she can watch. I drape my huge coat around her.
I can’t take her back to bed. We are in this together now. The first time she saw a birth she was two months old, strapped to my chest under my down coat as I worked to deliver a lamb, her tiny head so close to my hands that I was afraid of hurting her. She is old enough now to observe more closely. I wonder if I should warn her about how seeing blood can be scary, and how when a lamb is born, it’s normal for it to be wet and limp, sometimes coated with a kind of yellow feces called meconium. And sometimes not alive.

But I say nothing. I’m certain now that I have found the missing feet that belong to this soft nose. I reach under the nose with two fingers, find the wrist joint, and unbend the folded-back legs, first one side and then the other. Then, I push the breech twin back. It will have to wait its turn. With my right hand locking the lamb’s feet together, I pull back hard while bracing my left palm hard on Blue’s side. I hear myself groan as I pull with all my strength to get the head through the opening, and the newborn slides into the world at last.

She is tiny, legs frail as icicles, white with black spots around her eyes. The thinnest of translucent membranes covers her body and nose. She lifts her head immediately. I towel her off, wiping the birth sac from her nose and mouth, rubbing her curly black coat vigorously to stimulate her to rise. She feels ephemeral, a ragdoll of bone and blood, water and air. Blue makes a soft throaty nickering sound that ewes make only when licking their newborns. I stand back to watch the lamb shakily rise on her front feet, fall, rise up, fall; her nose all the time butting against mom’s flank for milk. It reminds me of a sea turtle watch I went on years ago and wanting so much to help the hatchlings to the sea, but I was told they needed to struggle into the waves and be tossed violently back up the beach again and again to get their strength to swim.

As the little creature butts against my legs, trying to find a teat, and Blue stands to lick and nuzzle her, I kneel and gently reach a hand into Blue’s vulva one more time. I can feel the breech lamb now, pointy feet, no head. He seems impossibly long as I pull his back feet with both hands and he finally lands on the hay with a thud, wet and shining. His head is strangely huge, with horn buds already breaking the skin. He doesn’t stir. I move fast to clear his nose and mouth, swing him like a pendulum by the back legs to shoot out the phlegm from his airway. It doesn’t seem to help. No cry, no gasp. I can feel panic rising in my chest. I lay him down and palpate his heart with two fingers. I’m whispering, praying, working so fast I’m not sure what I’m doing or why. Aware of Wren on the bale beside me, miraculously asleep, I will myself not to cry out.

It takes only seconds for the light to die out of his eye. His cord, like a snail’s trace, gleams in the hay.

I think, “That was it, his whole life.”

Blue rubs her nose on him and cleans him, pawing at the ground for him to rise. Her sharp feet scrape urgently at his still-warm lifeless body, and he crumples under her hoof like a discarded strip of towel, streaks of blood and mucus staining his white fleece. Blue’s call to him becomes louder, more desperate. It’s more than I can bear. I go up the stairs to get a burlap sack, which I line with some hay from the floor. I slide him in, back to the dark, with the smell of clover fields he will never know.

The sky is a pale yellow over the range. The wind has picked up just before the dawn and I realize I can no longer feel my feet. I lift Wren and she is warm and heavy against my chest. I know she will ask about the lambs when she wakes, and I will tell her. “One is good. One didn’t make it.”
In case she wants to see it, as proof of what death looks like—toddlers being more curious than sentimental—I decide to leave the lamb in his burlap by the door. Later I’ll do a sky burial—an offering to the coyotes—since the ground is frozen solid. This is a heartless practicality, or perhaps an earthly spirituality, that I’ve made my peace with as a shepherd. Rather than feel hardened by it, I feel more and more gratitude—for the birthing, the offering back, this strong love.
Coyote at Night
Peter Forbes, August 2003

Like stars falling from the night sky,
the coyotes drop into my dream one by one.

They roll down through the woods, balls of
pure wildness, laughter, hunger.

They are this land.

Their yelps and cries free and unbridled,
awaken us with piercing beauty. Can
we be that alive?

They continue on, rolling rolling down
through the woods, across the pastures, screaming
their aliveness.

And then their laughter abruptly stops.
They have crossed a boundary. Tails between
their legs, grins still on their faces, they
head back into the deep woods, content
to let the night speak for them.
Keeping Silence at Knoll Farm
Scott Russell Sanders, 2005

The engines of our kind rumble on the road,
groan in the sky, snarl against wood and grass
Our ghostly messages permeate the air.
the mind’s radio never signs off.

Still, the twenty of us gathered on a hillside farm
above the Mad River in Vermont hold our tongues
from ten at night until ten each morning,
listening for voices not our own.

This morning in our hush we hear frogs grunt
beside the pond, lambs bleat and crickets ring
from the pasture, crows guffaw from the spires of pines,
and swallows chatter as they carve the air.

Wind rattles leaves on the farmhouse cottonwood,
shakes prayer flags above the garden fence,
flaps clothes on the line, sizzles in the tall grass.
fog rises from the river, and surly clouds coast our way
over the rim of the Northfield Range. Following our breath,
we pace towards breakfast in the barn, climb the wagon ramp,
scuff our bare feet against boards worn smooth by wheels
and hooves. From below, the cluck of hens, the moan
of dogs, the rasp of a file sharpening a blade.
As we eat cereal and scones from maple bowls,
our spoons clattering against the wood, keeping our peace,
rain begins drumming on the barn’s metal roof.

Here is a voice I could listen to forever, a tongue that wags
only when it chooses. The monologue in my head quiets down.
My breath mingles with the breeze, my pulse with the rain.
All of us who sit at the long table draw in and let go the same air,
along with chickens, ravens, butterflies, coneflowers, grass,
and the white birches gleaming from rock piles on the ridge.
The food I swallow was grown in this valley. I have grasped
some of the hands that planted it, and the hands that cooked it.
Filled, I carry my bowl outside to wash it in the rain.
I take a long drink from the spring that fills the pond,
whose black surface ripples like the skin of a horse
shooing flies. Water pours in steadily from the spring,
pours out through a pipe, murmuring as it comes and goes. And so, though its molecules constantly change, the pond is constantly replenished, like my own body, like yours, like all bodies that drink and eat and breathe.

Having heard these voices, having seen the pond shimmer with sky, having grown still, when the time comes this morning for us to break silence, we might find words to speak our love of the Earth.
Sheep Were Not the Real Problem
Helen Whybrow, 2021

"Never had a domesticated animal caused so much trouble, signified so much change, and freighted so much meaning about money and independence." -Steven Stoll, Larding the Lean Earth

1. Stand at what we call the Story Circle, a point of land in the center of Knoll Farm, and look east to the Northfield Range and south along the Mad River to the Granville Gulf - the river's headwaters and a place of dripping rocks and fir shadows, cool on the hottest August day. Look out on these forested hills and imagine that everywhere you now see trees are open fields, and that the few small fields across the valley are patches of forest. Imagine the ridgelines, too steep and wild to be cleared, holding onto a mullet of dark trees on an otherwise shaved dome that gleams in the sunlight. In the 1800s, Vermont's mosaic of forests and fields was reversed in proportion, thanks to the colonist's zeal for clearing trees. Lumber was profitable, and trees were sent by the billions down the rivers to points south. Our own Mad River and even its modest tributaries - Mill Brook and Shepherd's Brook - have the remains of numerous lumber mills. But more profitable still was what happened after the trees were gone and the land sprouted grass for sheep. The Merino sheep boom starting in 1810 was like a 60-year tsunami generated by greed that swept Vermont's hills bare and washed their thin soils downriver with their trees.

The change from Vermont's open-wooded matrix as it had been nurtured for thousands of years by Native peoples to the colonized landscape dominated by open pasture by the mid 1800s was rapid and monumental, on a smaller scale perhaps, but in impact probably akin to the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest today. "Never in its history had central New England experienced such a rapid or profound change in its landscape," writes Tom Wessels in his seminal book, Reading the Forested Landscape. The region's Native Abenaki were equally decimated by the colonists - through massacres like the one in the Wabanaki homeland of Narantsouk in 1724 - as well as through deadly epidemics of smallpox and other diseases brought from Europe. The Native population fell from hundreds of thousands to just a few thousand only two generations after English colonizers landed at Plymouth Rock. Survival meant becoming invisible, moving north to sister tribes in Canada, or assimilating.

2. Anna Bixby Bragg, whose family farmed the hillside above Knoll Farm long enough that this part of town became known as Bragg Hill - wrote down a story for the centennial celebration of the town of Fayston, in 1898. The story had happened some years before, in the heart and heat of Vermont's period of sheep fever, in 1826, when our town of Fayston had been a white settlement for less than 30 years. This is what she wrote:

"In 1826 a beautiful doe was run down Shepherd's Brook to an open eddy near Jason Carpenter's out of reach of the dogs. Judge Carpenter caught it in his arms, and seven or eight hunters coming up just then, he told them that they could not have the doe, but that each one of them might go and select a sheep from his flock. This did not satisfy the blood thirsty hunters, and seizing the deer by main force they killed it on the spot."

This poignant story illustrates a time when sheep were so plentiful and deer so few that no number of sheep could be traded for one sickly doe. Whether Judge Carpenter out of a sense of justice wanted to save the doe's life or have venison for dinner himself we will never know, but what is clear is that deer were precious, having been hunted almost to extinction in Vermont over a span of just a few years. If you saw a doe you wrapped your arms around her and made bargains with armed men. Wolves and mountain lions (also known locally as catamounts), as well as countless smaller mammals valued for their pelts, were
hunted and trapped to extinction here. The large predators in particular were central to the colonist's idea that everything living in the forest - including Native people - must be defined as threatening, sinister and savage. With open viewsheds and neat stone fences the white settlers felt protected. Their killing fields gave them peace. Note, below, the chosen painted backdrop of barren fields behind hunter Alexander Crowell posing with the last catamount shot in Vermont in 1881. This was American pastoral as eco-genocide.

3. Sheep fever in Vermont was inoculated from the start with the notion of plunder. In 1810, 6,000 Merino sheep were stolen in Spain as war loot while Napoleon invaded from France. The smuggler was Robert Livingston, member of the first Continental Congress and minister to France under Jefferson. He saw the Merino, known for its incredibly fine fiber, as a tool of empire in the colonies. He herded the stolen sheep to Portugal and packed them into boats bound for New York. Out of 6,000, only 610 survived the voyage. William Jarvis, American consul to Portugal at that time, also took advantage of the wartime chaos and acquired about 3,500 Merinos, with which he established a substantial sheep-raising operation in Weathersfield, Vermont. A few years later, the young America was caught up in the War of 1812 and the British embargo cut off all textile imports. Woolen mills throughout New England boomed, using young children and women as labor. The sheep themselves were burdened with tremendous hype, called "the national animal" promising great wealth and underpinning the nascent free economy. In this remarkable quote from Livingston's Essay on Sheep (published in 1809), we see ideas of imperialism, domestication and the industrial age all coming together, inextricably: "This little animal, then, in losing its own wild nature, has not only converted the savage into the man but has led him from one state of civilization to another; the fierce hunter it has changed into the mild shepherd, and the untutored shepherd into the more polished manufacturer." In this world view, no human or any other animal escapes oppression, with the industrialist at the top of the pyramid of the New World order. Merinos were ideal for Vermont's landscape, thriving on land of little value. By 1840 there were 1.7 million sheep in Vermont. But by 1870, woolen textiles from abroad were cheaper and the price of wool plummeted; farmers slaughtered their sheep by the thousands rather than feed them through another winter with no market for their wool.
George Perkins Marsh, whose 1863 book *Man and Nature* is often called the founding document of the conservation movement, was a Vermont farmer who keenly noticed what was going on with changes to the land. "Within a few years, sheep have been killed in New England by whole flocks, for their pelts and suet alone, the flesh being thrown away..." he wrote. And yet it was the land he mourned most in his remarkable book, and he was astonishingly prophetic in his naming of climate change as wrought by destructive land practices: "The felling of the woods has been attended with momentous consequences to the drainage of the soil, to the external configuration of its surface, and probably, also, to local climate," he wrote. Marsh also made what we think of as a modern argument about how the amount of land devoted to meat production - both grazing land and land used to grow animal feed - is an inefficient way to produce food for humans: "The 170,000,000 bushels of oats raised in the United States in 1860, and fed to the 6,000,000 horses, the potatoes, the turnips, and the maize employed in fattening the oxen, the sheep, and the swine slaughtered the same year, occupied an extent of ground which, cultivated would probably have produced a quantity of vegetable food equal in alimentary power to the flesh of the quadrupeds killed for domestic use. Hence, so far as the naked question of amount of aliment is concerned, the meadows and the pastures might as well have remained in the forest condition." But few heeded him. By 1894, few trees remained below 2000 feet in Vermont. Only on the most inaccessible and steepest mountain slopes were the forests intact. "The owners of timber lands in our State are pursuing a ruinous policy in the method used in harvesting their timber," Vermont Gov. Urban Woodbury declared in his 1894 inaugural address. "Some measure should be adopted to lessen the wanton destruction of our forest."

Knoll Farm's big red barn was built in 1923 as a dairy. By then, sheep fever had long-ago crashed, lumber barons had clear-cut the hills, and the traces of farm abandonment were everywhere - birch and maple seedlings growing over the stone walls, barns with collapsed rooflines housing only swallows. For a generation or more, farmers had headed West. The same ideas about the forceful domestication of the land and eradication of its original inhabitants that had made their mark on New England migrated West with the settlers, as practices of broken treaties and massacres and open policies of land stealing from
Native Americans opened up homesteads for colonists and overwrote the Indigenous kinship ways of living on the land with a practice of wanton exploitation. As the wave of destruction continued across the prairies, the land in New England began to heal. Those farmers who stayed behind like the McLaughlins who lived at Knoll Farm, turned from sheep to cows, with the new railroads aiding them in selling cream and butter to cities such as Boston. The McLaughlins would have found a dearth of timber to build their new dairy barn, given that the new growth on the hills was young and all the pine and hemlock had been harvested long ago. Instead, they took apart an abandoned barn on the Mad River, and piece by piece hauled the timbers on wagons up the steep and rutted dirt road to Bragg Hill. Someone with an organizational mind had marked them well enough for the notches and angles to fit back together again on this hillside, though if you look closely, you can see how there were changes, with some of the original timber frame joints not connecting to anything. Whether this was innovation or stupidity and cause for family argument, no one remembers. But it's safe to say that it would have been an ambitious and magnificent barn for its time, replicated by several across the valley - three storeys high with a wide "high-drive" ramp leading up the top floor. The top story was built as a partial floor, with open bays on each side that went all the way down to the floor below. Horses would pull loaded hay wagons up the ramp to the top floor, and workers would fork the loose aromatic summer grasses over the low wall until the entire top two storeys were full of food for the long winter. On the bottom level was the dairy, with about 40 cows in stanchions at milking time. All the milking would have been done by hand, the milk jugs set out in the small Milk House by the road where cool spring water was piped into the floor. A delivery wagon would pick it up daily and take it to the creamery in the village to be made into butter. Besides the sale of butter and maple syrup for some cash, it seems that our farm, like most hill farms in Vermont, was about subsistence rather than profit - growing all their own vegetables, small grains, and raising a little meat.

6. The time when the McLaughlins were dreaming of a bigger dairy on this hillside marked a low point in Vermont's cultural and ecological history. The degradation of the land led to farm abandonment, increasing poverty and declining population, and rising crime. The flu epidemic in 1918 deepened a child welfare crisis, followed by the worst flood in the state's history in 1927, and then came the Great Depression. Sadly, the response to such disintegration was the birth of the Eugenics movement - an attempt by white supremacists to gain control of an imagined utopian rural Anglo-Saxon society untainted by foreign blood. The nationwide Eugenics movement, though racist in origin, targeted anyone deemed "unfit," "mentally defective," "delinquent" or "dependent." These undefined terms were used to target Native Americans, dark-skinned immigrants, the mentally ill, handicapped, poor, and women primarily.

In Vermont, this movement was largely about the belief that science could be used to remake a European ideal of gentrified rural life, to uplift the farmer as the model of upstanding citizen, and attract white migrants to the country to rebuild the population. Ironically, it was this same population who had ruined the land in the first place, and it was Indigenous lifeways and kinship with the natural world that offered a balance they sorely needed. Instead, they lumped together their prejudice against anyone Other, misplacing the blame for their dismal track record on those they wished to exterminate. 253 sterilizations were performed in Vermont during the twentieth century, making it the 25th highest in the nation. About two thirds of the total sterilizations were performed on women. To give a sense of the rhetoric of the time, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Welfare argued in 1918 for female sterilization to prevent unwed mothers, whom he called "psychopaths," compared to animals, and faulted entirely for their pregnancy. In a public address he proposed "unremitting insistence upon the segregation (or sterilization if the public prefers to do it that way) of every unmistakably feeble-minded girl of child-bearing age--at least those of known defective heredity."
7. That the Vermont landscape looked like it did for a time was never the sheep's fault. It was greed, and sheep were the currency. How, in less than a hundred years, did "a great swarming" of white settlers in New England manage to deforest the hills, hunt nearly to extinction most of the wildlife and murder or chase out most of the Native peoples from their homeland? It wasn't as if these people didn't know from generations of farming in their home country that land could be wrecked and ruined if not carefully tended, so what happened? In "the New World" of America the idea of liberty without limits replaced any notion of responsibility. It was as if, without the parental and tribal/village constraints of where they came from, they went on a bender, despoiling each new place and moving on, the beautiful land both the drug and the sacrifice. The cultural story of America gave people license to abandon restraints they would have had in the old country. Here greed and recklessness had different names; they were called ambition, courage, success.

From 1804 to the end of the McLaughlins dairy days around 1940, Knoll Farm was a subsistence farm, a word that carries connotations of lacking ambition, scraping by, even failure. And yet in the way that success in America is often a close cousin to greed, subsistence farming is a close cousin to responsibility. Industrial farming is "successful" in the capitalist sense, but subsistence is much closer to a way of farming that doesn't consume the land in the process but rather regenerates and continually replenishes its life-giving potential. We don't use the word "subsistence" anymore: It conjures images of the farmhouse with no paint, a goat on a stake, a few chickens scratching in the dirt, laundry on the line. But to me, there's a wisdom in this peasant life, and not in a romantic sense, but an ecological one. The subsistence farmers were not the ones devastating the forests and joining Merino sheep fever. Their farms may have been small and feeding only themselves, but they were lighter on the land than their more ambitious neighbors, or any of us today. Nature was where they spent their time and they understood it. The land was their source of food, their burial ground, their long dark night and early dawn, their seasonal cycle by which they lived and died. This was how their ancestors had likely lived in the countries they came from, and how they knew to live here. The fact that this kind of living hasn't ever been respected by our culture has done great damage to the land and to people. The cultural myths we all live with in America - that more is better, that acquiring excess brings respect and power, that the best shepherd is in fact an industrialist - have done damage to our land and to all people.

"Farming is about 20 percent agriculture and 80 percent mending something that has gotten busted," wrote E. B. White. He meant, of course, that as a farmer one spends most of the day fixing broken equipment, and he's right. But if we expand this quote to the collective - the whole span of our history of farming this region - I would say that it's time we began mending, taking example from the maple forests that have grown over the tired fields and rebuilt soils and made homes again for a greater biodiversity of plants, mammals, birds, amphibians, insects and fungi. My dream is that how we collectively farm is less about profit and more about repaying our ecological and social debts - to the soil, to the water, to other species, and to all peoples who were and still are "othered," harmed, and made invisible.

8. Our ninety-odd Icelandic sheep graze the same fields cleared in 1804 and shelter under the eaves of the dairy barn raised in 1923. Ironically, now we keep sheep to bring back the health of the land. Alan Savory and others, studying large ruminants in migrating herds in Africa and the American West, observed that all the damage done by overgrazing can be reversed with grazing just the right amount, in intense bursts, with enough periods of rest in between for the grass to re-generate more biomass under the soil. In our twenty years moving sheep around this hillside, we've seen that to be true. As they graze, they spread fertility in the form of pelleted manure, and cloven hoofprints that hold pockets of rain. They are omnivorous grazers, browsing on brambles and bracken, milkweed, bedstraw and all but the noxious thistle. As sheep disturb the broad-leaved weeds and thatch, allowing sunlight and air to circulate, grass and legume seeds long dormant in the soil have sprouted up. Our pastures have improved without ever
having to plow or seed. Improvement means an increase in forage for the sheep but also increased
nutrients in the soil to support the whole ecosystem and even greater carbon sequestration.

Icelandic sheep, like Merino, are an ancient breed raised primarily for fiber that have been closely
guarded by the nation they come from. Our flock descends directly from the only live animals ever
released by the Icelandic government to North America in the 1990s. We have tracked their genetic lines
for twenty years and keep them from inbreeding by bringing in new rams each year. An Icelandic ram,
much like Merinos 150 years ago, can cost as much as $1,000. The price of wool hasn't changed much
since the 1800s and there is next to no profit in the meat. All the infrastructure for raising sheep that was
once everywhere - the mills to process wool, slaughterhouses and butcheries for meat, auctions to buy and
sell - have all dwindled almost to none. We have found our niche in breeding rugged local stock for other
small farms wanting to buy sheep to reclaim patches of brushy pasture, and to have some fiber and meat
for themselves. Over two decades we have dispersed around 600 lambs to small farms and initiated dozens
of families into the trials and distinct contentment of shepherding, mentored them through lambing
season and giving advice on best grazing practices.

Compared to the 1800s, there aren't many sheep in Vermont today. The dairy farms that replaced sheep
farming have been in steady decline since the mid twentieth century. The resurgence of farming in
Vermont has tended toward diverse, small-scale community-based enterprises, feeding their neighbors or
the region and is in many ways a more sophisticated, engaged version of the subsistence farms of our
agricultural history. A couple of dozen sheep farms like ours are raising uber-healthy grass-fed lamb for
their local communities and restaurants, and a greater number of small fiber flocks that are selling yarn
directly to knitters and weavers. A few sheep and goat dairies have done well with making cheese as the
local food culture has exploded, and several others raise halal meat for the Muslim community near
Burlington. This small-flock farming, which pays attention to the health of the land, cares about raising
healthy food for neighbors, and incorporates other values such as joy, community, conservation and
inclusion provides some potent answers as to how to live with less damage, and more healing.
Trees of Knoll Farm
Jeff Cook, July 2007

The trees took care of me during my retreat at Knoll Farm. They were with me morning, noon and night. On the first morning, I discovered a turkey in a tree, a wonderful sign of things to come. The trees sheltered me during the rains. They inspired me during my silent walks. They kept me warm and gave me substance for my spoon. They humbled me in understanding my place in the natural world. When it rained and thundered, the tree by the garden protected a swarm of bees. The trees healed me from my wounds and renewed me to continue my work and journey. They lead me to my heart. Trees are wise. I have so much to learn. All I need to do is listen.
Resilient Communities: An Ecological Perspective
Tom Wessels, 2011

Many times while walking from Knoll Farm’s “upper pasture” down to the barn, I have been stopped by the sheer beauty of the view that forces my eyes to rise to the crest of the Green Mountains. Within the many square miles encompassed by that view are species of organisms too numerous to count. Each of those organisms has their own specific way of living and yet somehow, through all their interactions, resilient ecosystems result. How does that happen? The very foundation for how those ecosystems thrive lies in the principle of self-organization.

Self-organization arose out of the development of complex systems science in the 1970s, as such it is a relatively young concept to science, but one, as we will see, that was clearly understood long before western science identified it.

Self-organization, the observation that as a system grows, it not only gets bigger, but also more complex, is the hallmark of all biological, ecological, and healthy human systems. The increasing complexity of a self-organized system is a result of the parts becoming ever more specialized and at the same time more and more tightly integrated. As each part does what it needs to do to sustain itself, it creates conditions that sustain the whole. As a result self-organized systems become increasingly resilient, stable, and energy efficient.

Each one of us is a perfect example of self-organization. We all started life as a single, microscopic cell. As we developed to adulthood that one cell multiplied itself into more than 30 trillion cells. However, not only did the number of cells geometrically increase in number, they also differentiated into 254 different cell types including skin, muscle, bone, and nerve cells. Yet the specialization didn’t stop there. Some nerve cells connect to muscle cells, others to sensory cells, and yet others connect motor neurons to sensory neurons. As each highly specialized cell functions to support itself, it creates conditions that serve the whole body. As a result the internal environment of our bodies is stable and resilient.

Self-organization also occurs in ecosystems through evolutionary time. In nature, the fundamental currency is energy. Since energy is finite, any individual or species that wastes energy has a reduced chance of survival, while populations that are energy efficient can increase their numbers as a finite amount of energy can support more individuals. Natural selection continually pushes species to become ever more energy efficient through a process called coevolution. As we will see cooperative interactions between species are far more energy efficient and integrative than harmful or competitive ones.

Whenever two species first begin to interact, the nature of their relationship is often very negative for both parties. A dramatic example of this is seen in the accidental introduction of the chestnut blight fungus into North America in 1904. The fungus was in Chinese chestnut trees planted at the Bronx Zoo and Botanical Garden. The Chinese chestnuts looked fine and healthy because they had coevolved with their fungus for tens of thousands, possibly millions of years. However, the American chestnut had no such relationship with the fungus.

At the time of introduction American chestnut was the most common forest tree east of the Mississippi River. In the heart of its range, in the forests of Tennessee and Kentucky, one out of every two forest trees were American chestnut. Within 30 years of the introduction of the fungus; however, the American chestnut was almost completely wiped out throughout its range. This was obviously a negative outcome for the chestnut; it was not good for the fungus either. If an organism is a parasite, the worst thing it can do is to kill off its host. That is an incredibly energy wasteful thing to do.
If two species survive their initial introduction, natural selection will force them to interact in less energy-wasteful, harmful ways. Over long periods of time through coevolution, relationships that begin disastrously like the American chestnut and the chestnut fungus can eventually develop into a mutualism where both parties not only benefit but also need one another to survive.

My favorite example of mutualism involves the bull’s horn acacia tree and its resident acacia ant. Both species exist in Mexico and Central America. The acacia has evolved three features to service its ants. These include: huge, pliable, swollen thorns that no longer ward off herbivores, but are hollowed out by the ants who live within them, open sap wells on the leaf stems where ants get their water and carbohydrates, and Beltian bodies that are packed with protein and lipids that the ants harvest from the Acacia’s leaf margins. If acacia ants are removed from their host tree they will die within 24 hours since they can only survive on acacia sap and Beltian bodies.

In return the acacia ants give their host tree the most advanced plant defense system in the world. Acacia ants have very venomous bites that will drive off all herbivores. Additionally if vines attempt to grow up an acacia tree, the ants will chop them down. Or if a neighboring tree attempts to encroach on the acacia’s space the ants will climb that tree and defoliate it. Acacia trees lacking ants will perish within a month.

The most intriguing thing about this relationship is that acacia ants are derived from leaf cutter ants. When the ancestral ants first came upon the ancestral acacia trees they probably defoliated and killed them. However, that was a very energy wasteful thing to do, so natural selection forced the ants and acacia to adjust their ecologies that eventually resulted in the tight mutualism they exhibit today.

Competition between species is another interaction that coevolves. In competition, individuals lose energy making these struggles an inefficient endeavor. If species can specialize to reduce the nature of their competition, all benefit through energy gains. In the forest adjacent to my home I frequently encounter black-capped chickadees and white-breasted nuthatches. Each bird species feeds on the same insects that live on the bark of trees, but due to specialization in the way they feed they avoid competition. The chickadees are specialized to forage on branches while the nuthatches have evolved to walk down the steep trunks of trees and only forage there. In this way competition forces innovation, allowing species to coexist without wasteful energy losses.

In Vermont, where I live, mid-summer meadows host a huge array of pollinators. Multiple species of bees, bumblebees, wasps, hornets, moths, butterflies, flies, beetles and ants each pollinate flowers in their own specialized way. If any one species of pollinator should go extinct, the meadow will be fine since the other pollinators will fill the gap of service. Coevolution, forcing species to become ever more specialized, allows all these many pollinators to coexist creating a high level of redundancy with respect to pollination. It is exactly this redundancy—that occurs in all functional roles within ecosystems from numerous species of photosynthetic plants to untold numbers of decomposers—that gives ecosystems their resiliency. Due to this redundancy the extinction of any species does not threaten the integrity of the whole ecosystem. Coevolution fosters specialization that gives rise to redundancy of function that creates resilient and stable ecosystems.

Self-organization is apparent not only in the human body but also in successful non-living human systems such as our economy. Two centuries before western science would recognize this principle Adam Smith articulated how self-organization occurs through “the invisible hand” of the marketplace. In his 1776 classic, The Wealth of Nations, the kind of economic system Smith wrote about was a village economy.
with specialized merchants—butchers, bakers, blacksmiths, brewers. Being specialized, the merchants were not in competition with each other and were tightly integrated together. Each did what they did for reasons of self-interest and at the same time provided services that supported the whole without anyone directing it. That was Smith’s “invisible hand.”

For more than a century our economic system has consistently moved away from the type of self-organization Smith described. Corporations have grown into huge, trans-national giants that are no longer specialists integrated with others in their sector, but generalists that work to monopolize many sectors through competitive exclusion, mergers, and acquisitions. As a result the global economy has lost redundancy and resiliency.

A critical reason for the collapse of the financial sector during the fall of 2008 was not solely related to risky investments, but also due to the fact that the financial sector lacked self-organization. At that time 40% of the investment capital in the United States was held in just 10 gargantuan banks. These firms were not specialists and were all invested in the same kinds of instruments. As soon as one of those banks started to falter the whole sector, and the global economy as well, would have toppled in a chain reaction unless governments stepped in to shore up the system. If in 2008 America had thousands of smaller, more specialized banks rather than just ten huge ones, like the meadow, the financial system would have been just fine. As Janine Benyus writes in Biomimicry, “The more our world functions like the natural world, the more likely we are to endure…” I would add, the more likely we are to thrive.

Just as in an economy, self-organization should also be fostered within and between organizations. Within organizations self-organization is accomplished by having a clear sense of what each individual is good at and enjoys doing and having them serve in those capacities. Ideally, this would determine each individual’s specialized role. The critical thing is that all of these individuals need to be integrated so that each one has a sense of their essential purpose in the larger system. Specialization on its own is of little value.

For people like me who love trees, going to an arboretum can be a wonderful experience. There is so much diversity! Yet the forest out my back door with only a dozen tree species has a much higher level of self-organization because everything in that forest has coevolved together and is all tightly integrated. This integration is often hidden from view since so much of it occurs below ground. In my forest, white ash that is specialized to grow in rich, moist soils stands next to yellow birch a tree that also is specialized to grow in moist soils, but underground both are connected by the mycelium of numerous mycorhizal fungi that allows nutrients, and possibly energy to flow between these two different species of trees. The arboretum by comparison is just a mixture, since it lacks the integration fostered by self-organization. Diversity of any kind brings forth benefits to the degree that those diverse entities interrelate in ways that are mutually supportive.

Of course, organizations need to not only be conscious of the nature of their internal self-organization but also how well they are self-organized within their sector and even with other sectors. This is probably a more difficult task for any leader of an organization and yet it is critical in movements for social change. It is in fact one of those things that defines grassroots—a tightly knit web—in contrast to the isolating-approach taken by multi-national corporations. It is critical for each organization in a partnership or movement to be clear about its specific role and strengths. Leaders of organizations should always be looking for opportunities to partner with other organizations in ways that not only benefit the sector they are working in but also mutually benefit each organization.

At first creating these partnerships can take a lot of time since organizational cultures may be different resulting in differing approaches to how they work. But just as in coevolution, as organizations learn more
about each other’s work and how it is approached, they will find ways to more effectively interrelate. Even though there may be a heavy investment of time at the beginning, as the organizations learn to partner, beneficial adjustments will occur in more and more timely fashions. If we are ever really going to be effective in the organizational work we do or in larger social change movements, we all need to make efforts to self-organize within and between the sectors where we work. Just as these interrelationships bring benefits to organisms in ecosystems, organizations will benefit from their attempts to partner with each other.

Life has cloaked this planet for at least 3.5 billion years and during that time it has not only sustained itself, it has thrived. This amount of time is a little easier to comprehend using an analogy of a stack of paper. Imagine that the thickness of a standard sheet of paper equals a century. Two sheets would represent the tenure of industrial culture. Two hundred sheets, or a two-inch tall stack of paper, would represent the time it is believed that humans have lived in the Americas. How tall would the stack need to be to represent the tenure of life on Earth? It would be a stack of paper over three miles in height, each sheet representing 100 years. Self-organization is the foundation for that long tenure. It is a model to which we need to pay close attention and that we should consciously weave into the work of our organizations.

Image of the northern pasture and the hills beyond
by Caleb Kenna, 2018
This Land Is Whose Land?

Indian Country and the Shortcomings of Settler Protest

Mali Obomsawin, Written for Folklife Magazine in June 2019 *

This land is your land,
This land is my land,
From California to the New York island,
From the redwood forest to the gulf stream waters,
This land was made for you and me.

These lyrics shake me up like a soda can every time I hear them. As an activist, folk musician, and songwriter (in Lula Wiles), and recent label-mate of Woody Guthrie on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, my social circles tend to worship Guthrie as the father of all musical protest. But as a Native person, I believe “This Land Is Your Land” falls flat.

I come from a political family. My parents met in a Vermont courtroom in the late ’80s, a time of political organizing and sovereignty battles for the Missisquoi Band of Abenaki. My father was one of many tribal members applying legal arguments on a range of issues dealing with “unextinguished aboriginal title,” the concept that a tribe retains its inherent right to occupy and use its traditional territory for sustenance. America’s founders often sought to smother these inherent rights, and Native tribes have been fighting to protect them ever since. My mother, an activist and nursing student at the time, was following and supporting the tribe’s initiatives as a demonstrator.

In short, their efforts took them to the Vermont Supreme Court, after a district court had held that the Missisquoi Abenaki were a tribe and retained aboriginal rights to hunt and fish for sustenance in State v. Saint Francis (1989). This case provided an inroads to obtaining federal recognition and a land claim, both of which can be crucial to a tribe’s cultural survival and ability to organize as a community. Because Native cultures (our languages, ceremonies, ancestral knowledge and oral histories) are land-based, protecting tribes’ access to traditional territory for future generations is of critical importance.

At that particular time and place, the question really was “Whose land is this land?” Everyone in the courtroom knew that the disputed land “was originally” Abenaki country, but exactly when and how did our sovereignty end? Our traditional territory spans Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and southern Quebec, wherein many of the colonial boundaries are well documented. But in the Highgate Springs/Missisquoi region of Vermont, the only specific paper trail to determine sovereignty was a land lease of ninety-one years, from the Missisquoi to Vermont settlers, written in the eighteenth century. The “James Robertson Lease” had long expired.

I’ll spare you the legal analysis, but State v. Elliot (1991) found that sovereignty had been “extinguished by the increasing weight of history.” In other words, Abenaki sovereignty never ended, but was always (and without any plain and unambiguous action to terminate it) in the process of ending. This reasoning was without precedent in Federal Indian Law. If the mere passage of time can overturn a Native nation’s right to exist, of what significance are the laws put in place to protect our communities?

Although it may have been easy to prove that the “weight of history” is a made-up and nonsensical legal reasoning, the Supreme Court never addressed the appeal of State v. Elliot. The Abenakis soon ran out of money for legal action, and the community began to fall apart internally. With a newborn child and me on the way, my parents moved to New Hampshire and later Maine, remaining within traditional
Wôbanaki, and turned their efforts from the courtroom to raising six political, creative Abenaki children. Needless to say, I feel squarely at home in the argument I’m about to make.

In the context of America, a nation-state built by settler colonialism, Woody Guthrie’s protest anthem exemplifies the particular blind spot that Americans have in regard to Natives: American patriotism erases us, even if it comes in the form of a leftist protest song. Why? Because this land “was” our land. Through genocide, broken treaties, and a legal system created by and for the colonial interest, this land “became” American land. But to question the legitimacy of American land control today instantly makes one the most radical person in the room—even in leftist circles. And because Indigenous critiques of this country are so fundamental, our voices are often marginalized to the point of invisibility.

This article is about improving allyship. In order to dismantle this nation’s blind spot for Native struggles, we must examine how ignorance about Indian Country and anti-Nativism are disseminated. Ignorance regarding Native people permeates all of American society—it cuts across income brackets and partisan lines, age and racial demographics, and elite and non-elite spheres at all levels of education. If this is your first encounter with concepts like Native sovereignty, aboriginal title, and federal recognition, this article is for you.

Since its original release on Folkways Records in 1951, Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” has been a galvanizing force, inspiring peace-lovers and change-seekers across the country in times of political unrest. It has been studied extensively by music critics and academics, tracked over time as it evolved from protest song to sing-along, and heralded as an “alternative national anthem.” But since its conception, the song’s more radical verses critiquing American capitalism and exclusionism have fallen by the wayside. Most messages tend to be distorted or selectively (re)interpreted as they travel through time—but without Guthrie’s self-awareness, the song’s provocative gesture becomes merely patriotic. If social justice activism aims to include Native peoples, it must be open to the critique of patriotic rhetoric.

As black and brown activists frequently remind us, white nationalism is the legacy of this country. Quite literally, the founding structure of the United States relied on an enslaved class of blacks, a ruling class of whites, and the intended extermination of the continent’s Indigenous population (“the vanishing race”). America’s founding mission envisioned a white Christian nation, and its settlers believed they had a divine purpose to expand hemispherically. Pope Alexander VI’s 1493 Doctrine of Discovery gave them the legal right to do so: it was incorporated into U.S. law in 1823 in Johnson v. M’Intosh, the founding case in Federal Indian Law, and was even cited in State v. Elliot, 1991. The separation of church and state, curiously, does not apply within Indian law (Establishment Clause). The ideologies of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery encouraged Europeans to convert the “pagan” peoples of the “New World” to Christianity. When hundreds of millions of Indigenous peoples resisted, the doctrines provided legal and moral justification for their subjugation and genocide.

By critiquing “This Land Is Your Land,” I don’t mean to imply that Guthrie himself promoted conquest, but the song is indicative of American leftists’ role in Native invisibility. The lyrics as they are embraced today evoke Manifest Destiny and expansionism (“this land was made for you and me”). When sung as a political act, the gathering or demonstration is infused with anti-Nativism and reinforces the blind spot. Moreover, my critique is aimed at the nation-state of America, which teaches ignorances about American history so robust and deep-seated that even our society’s most inclusion-oriented activists struggle to transcend them. Just as when Americans call this country a “nation of immigrants,” the proclamation erases Native peoples’ right to exist in the collective consciousness. True allyship—specifically, transcending the anti-Nativism integral to American society—requires first interrogating one’s own ignorances.
As Indigenous author and political activist Ward Churchill theorizes, “[American] Indians are either demonized or romanticized.” From childhood, Americans are fed distorted images and narratives about Natives—from the barely human “savages” in Disney’s Peter Pan and Pocahontas, to the whooping and leather-fringed sports team mascots and holiday costumes. The media and entertainment industries promote stereotypes and a lack of representation. Mythical tales of noble savages and pilgrims are shared at Thanksgiving, and conquest is celebrated on Columbus Day. Even the Declaration of Independence includes a clause about “merciless Indian savages.” Discussions of racism toward Natives do not make it into grade school curricula. In the best cases, students emerge with a vague awareness of bygone massacres of primitive peoples and the notion that, from the ashes of colonial conflict, a nation committed to equitable justice was born.

Put bluntly, this nation’s history is not really taught. Students do not graduate with a realistic sense of the national legacy they inherit, nor an understanding of the complex relationships between the U.S. government and tribes today. Few Americans know that Indian tribes have a legal status unique among America’s racial and ethnic groups: tribal nations are sovereign governments that engage in nation-to-nation relations with the federal government. The U.S. Constitution expressly states that Congress has the power to “regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes,” placing tribal nations somewhere among foreign and domestic state governments in their status as political entities.

Why do so few Americans know about Indian Country? Because the government continues to fight Native nations for land. Because American patriotism would be compromised by a full picture of American history. Because there is no one to hold patriotic historians accountable for writing Native people out of history books. The legal and moral foundation of this country is fragile, and by erasing Native people from the public consciousness, the slippery topic of “whose land is whose land,” (and why and how?), can be sidestepped altogether.

Ignorance is an accessible popular tool: it doesn’t require citizens to take up arms, acknowledge or interact with the intended target, leave their comfort zones, or jeopardize their status. As a weapon, ignorance is cheap, deniable, and nearly impossible to trace. Finally, ignorance is passively consumed and passively reproduced, cinching Native invisibility.

That is not to say it is the only weapon used to disempower Native nations. When physical confrontations do occur, like the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests, sovereign tribal nations defending their bilaterally negotiated treaties—which are U.S. law—have been met with violent, militarized suppression and counterterrorism tactics. The geographic remoteness of Indian reservations further reinforces invisibility and emboldens racial violence.

Ultimately, the lack of understanding between citizens, Native and American, is so deep that Indigenous claims to sovereignty across the continent appear outlandish, because the very existence of Indigenous Peoples is bewildering to many Americans. There is little organized power to counteract the invisible hand of anti-Nativism in instances of outright injustice. Thus, the weapon of public ignorance can be wielded against Native people when advantageous for the wielder—whether they take the form of oil pipeline companies like Dakota Access, or in the case of the Missisquoi Abenaki, the Vermont Supreme Court.

Without confronting America’s foundations, continued injustice toward Native peoples only seems inevitable. Furthermore, many policies and institutions constructed by the U.S. government which intended to undermine tribal sovereignty or eradicate Native peoples continue to impact Indian Country. Here are a few examples between 1776 and 2019:
Indian Removal and Reservations (1776–present)

For roughly the first century after independence, Congress engaged with Native Nations through “Treaty Federalism,” recognizing tribal nations as political entities similar to foreign nations. Concurrently, tribes were herded onto reservations and concentration camps, and forced or coerced into signing self-dispossessing treaties throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, the government has shown contempt and duplicity toward reservations and sovereign territories it has previously recognized. Natives living on or near reservations are the most likely demographic to be killed by law enforcement.

Indian Boarding Schools (1870s–2000s)

In the 1870s, an army officer named Richard Pratt opened the first American Indian Boarding Schools. Describing his vision for the institutions, he wrote: “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. […] In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

Both the Canadian and U.S. governments funded Indian boarding schools, intending to forcibly assimilate and Christianize Indigenous children, separating them from their communities and cultures. Students were punished for speaking Native languages, practicing Native religions, or trying to escape (see “cultural genocide”). They were forced to cut their hair and strip their traditional clothing. Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on residential schools found that fifty percent of students died during or shortly after their attendance due to malnourishment, disease, and inhumane living conditions (America has not done a TRC). Some schools were reported to have remarkably high admittance of sick children, suggesting that spreading disease among students may have been intentional.

Survivors of the institutions were severely traumatized and estranged from their communities, and many were unable to communicate with their own families who spoke Native languages. American boarding schools persisted into the twenty-first century, Canadian schools until the 1990s.

The Allotment Act (1887–1934) and Blood Quantum

Instead of forced assimilation or removal, the General Allotment (Dawes) Act aimed to break up Native communities by targeting their geographic autonomy. The statute parcelled up previously communal Indian lands and allocated it to individual tribal members. Then it opened “surplus land” to settler homesteading. The government institutionalized a policy called “blood quantum,” in this case requiring Natives to “prove one-fourth Indian blood in a given group” in order to inherit their families’ land. This system, in turn, set Natives up to eventually breed themselves out of existence through intermarriage, which would ultimately relieve the government of upholding treaty promises. Although the Dawes Act was replaced by the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, blood quantum continues to be widely used to determine citizenship— and how blood quantum is used varies from tribe to tribe. In many cases, blood quantum has the continued effect of shrinking enrollment, burdening and complicating Native identity and relationships, and, in the company of dogs and horses, reducing Natives to our blood measurements.

Eugenics (1900s–present)

Advocated by “public health” professionals throughout the twentieth century, eugenics practices were ubiquitous across the United States and Canada. From 1913 to 1957, the state of Vermont issued a “eugenical-sociological” survey called the Vermont Commission on Country Life to identify and
exterminate the state’s “undesirables” to ensure a “superior stock” of citizens for the state’s future. The commission specifically targeted Abenaki people resisting assimilation, along with African Americans, recent immigrants, and paupers. The term “mental defectives” was broadly applied to those that commissioners wanted to target. Fast-forwarding to the 1970s, researchers brought to light ongoing projects of forced sterilization of southwestern Native women, performed by physicians and Indian Health Service workers. Eugenics has played a sustained role in American “public health” practice throughout the previous century, and cases of forced sterilization of Native women in North America continue today.

**Foster Care and Adoption (1800s–present)**

For the last three centuries, government agents across the country have been responsible for forcibly removing Native children from their homes and putting them up for adoption or in foster care. Native children enter the Child Welfare System at rates nineteen times those of non-Native children. The Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), a federal law erected to curtail this unconscionable phenomenon and protect Native children, is currently being challenged in the Supreme Court.

These are just a few of the state-sanctioned ethnic cleansing tactics that were erected to solve the “Indian Problem,” the unanticipated survival of Indigenous populations as American nation-building progressed, from which Adolf Hitler drew inspiration during the Third Reich. However difficult to face, this legacy cannot be divorced from today’s America.

The means of allyship—and dismantling culturally systemic ignorance—starts with “passing the mic” to marginalized people, who know our communities’ experiences, needs, and struggles better than anyone else. But this opportunity only arises if activists make room for Native experiences of America: our less patriotic accounts of America’s history and legal system derive from centuries of hypocrisy, broken treaties, and systematic genocidal policies. Confronting the experiential gap between Natives and Americans will take determined self-education, listening, absolute humility on behalf of settlers, and vast improvements in institutional education.

But the need for effective activism is dire. Real, organized change requires allyship and the recognition that ignorance is a privilege. It requires those who consider themselves dedicated to justice to question the accuracy of their own education, read and listen to thinkers, artists, and activists from marginalized communities, and accept every opportunity to pass the mic. Finally, it requires that Americans let go of the elements of American culture that silence and erase the marginalized, even if those elements have been treasured.

If activists continue to sing protest songs that unwittingly reinforce Native oppression, they communicate that the social justice envisioned does not include Native Peoples. You can’t have social justice without regular old justice. And to set the record straight, this land is not “your land.”

*Permission to reprint granted by the author.*
Courage called for
Whole Thinking Journal, 2005

Courage to talk about the really difficult issues of race and class.
Courage to talk about difficult things with kindness.
Courage to lose my membership.
Courage to meet power with detachment.
Courage to engage power with my own power.
Courage to lose, and experience loss.
Courage to know we can't do it alone.
Courage to see that all we need is already at hand.
Courage to simply be present, engaging fully.
Courage to have the conversations that create new opportunities.
Courage to tell the stories that reflect our real values.
Courage to earn more influence and courage to give it away.
Courage to not always put the function or the future of the group ahead of speaking the truth.
Courage to work with others and trust something will get done.
Courage to ask myself, “Am I really doing it?”
Courage to come from the core.
Courage to resist, with my heart, business as usual.
Courage to live more modestly and fairly.
Courage to speak of a different American dream.
Courage to go toward, not from.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."
-James Baldwin

Painted Baldwin Quote
by a Better Selves Fellow, 2020
All the Names we Don’t Know Drawing
by Anita Virmani, 2020
“That tree is everywhere; I love how it lives on in our community.”
My neighbor speaks of a 150-year-old apple tree that hundreds of people have picnicked beside, countless children climbed, at least two people got married under, and which produced hundreds of gallons of cider until an ice-storm split her in two and brought her crashing to the ground. Then I spent three years slowly making 120 thick presentation boards and dozens of spoons and small pieces of furniture from her. My wife and daughter’s necklaces hang from hooks I made of her wood, all of my hats hang from her beautiful wood, my tools now have handles made from her. Though the stickered pile of her lumber is now completely gone, people still stop by our farm and ask if there’s any of her left. “I have a niece who is getting married next month, could you make one last...”

It must have been one of the McLaughlin women who planted that Tolman Sweet around 1850, a practical and hopeful way forward after a life-and-death voyage fleeing the Great Hunger of Ireland. I imagine her with two buckets of water hauled in balance by a wooden yoke watering this young apple tree while her husband and son were fighting in the civil war. It would be hot, the grass deep, and the walk...
from the spring slow and sweaty, but she did it every day, making peace with the torn world around her, unaware of what the future would bring, but still doing what her instincts told her to do.

I want to be the sort of ancestor that plants apple trees for somebody else. I want to create beauty and health on the land that someone may recognize 150 years from now and be inspired, no matter what’s happening in their world, to do the same. I hope to leave behind a key to true wealth: a set of relationships, knowledge and access to places that enable someone I don’t know to make a good, fair life.

I wonder what it means, today, to be knowledgeable, and what is the raw material of our knowledge? We seem to believe we know it all right now, that we are experts, but even in our certainty we destroy so much. I believe that we are in a never-ending process of slowly becoming knowledgeable through direct human experience. But what, today, do most of us have direct experience of? What unlearning must happen for us to experience it?

I imagine that a “modern era” begins when subsequent generations look back on the one before with some version of the question, “How could we have possibly lived that way?” How could we have openly, legally created an economy based upon human enslavement? More recently, what were the conditions that allowed more than 4,000 men and women of color to be lynched in public spectacles in our country? How are we perpetuating those conditions today? What are we doing now that will be judged by our descendants as morally bankrupt?

The wisdom to confront these questions arises from a courage to see myself from a different perspective, which I get from nature and from people. Cultures, whether we label them good or bad, are never trivial because they are ways of seeing the world. When I see myself through a different lens, I may not like what I see but I’m liberated to be something better. It’s from my own working relationship with nature that I’ve made mistakes and reconciled them, made a huge effort and been cared for, learned respect by seeing how much bigger the world is than me. My heart has been touched by beauty; my head reached by the power of cultural and natural diversity; both have deepened my sense of humility, belonging, and fairness. This knowledge of what I don’t know has made it more possible for me to stand beside people who are different than me.

It is my direct experience of nature that has helped me to climb out of the blindness of my own isolated culture and opened me to the claims of others; I credit my contact with difference in nature and people as what has enabled me to evolve and grow.

The soul of our country is borne from epic choices about our relationship to land and to one another. The relationship is good when it’s about respect, care and equity. It’s bad when it shows us stealing from our children for ourselves, and it’s ugly when it alienates anyone from the genius of place on their own terms. To seek a healthy relationship with the land through how one lives, eats, and who we welcome to the table or not, is transformational because it ultimately is about love and healing. It’s about relationship. And most people get this because we humans -at our core- are more tuned to relationship than to isolation.

What does it mean for a life to go well? What does it mean to have a life of significance … a life well lived? The deeper my relationships with other human beings and with physical places, the fuller have become my answers to those questions. This has never been easy and the questions keep getting harder and more personal. The toughest ones I don’t have answers for today. What aspects of settler culture, to which I’m a part, need to change and evolve for everyone’s wellbeing? How do I come to be welcome on land that I have stewarded well for decades but was stolen from someone else? I know the name of the
European immigrant who first built a cabin on this land in 1804 but I don’t know the name of the Abenaki mother, father and daughter who were forcefully displaced from the land they also loved. With this knowledge, how do I bring my gifts and meet my responsibilities? Wrestling with these questions because they matter is not about guilt or shame, it’s about my journey to become a whole human being through knowing history, understanding my privilege, and using that privilege to not repeat history.

While I’m a grateful product of institutions like National Outdoor Leadership school, places that introduced me to wild beauty and nature, I no longer believe that the world needs me to “recreate” myself in nature; the world needs me to get to work. Today, the world does not need me to “leave no trace;” but to leave a beautiful trace: the demonstration that I can create beauty and lasting things through my relationships with nature and people. Let my trace also be my voice, expressing why it’s not ethical or practical to love nature but to disrespect people, how doing either alone leads to the destruction of both.

I want my descendants and yours to have cultivated and wild places where they are welcome to work, to hunt, to grow, to share, to learn a relationship with nature where they are not consumerists (recreating themselves) but producing things that are real and beautiful. When I consider our world’s challenges of disconnection and alienation, what our culture needs as much as democratic institutions like our national parks and public open spaces – is a renewed belief in long-term familial relationship to place; which is to say direct human relationship to the land and waters of our planet through the generations. We cannot rely on institutions to protect land and nature; we must learn how to do that ourselves.

You can’t take anything from a national park but memories, because we don’t trust ourselves anymore. We abdicate our fundamental responsibilities to a federal agency or a nonprofit corporation, when we personally need to develop the skill for how to dwell on this earth, to see ourselves, always-already, as ancestors. To go into the forest or into the ocean and to bring out of it wood, protein or energy for your family, leads to love and fierce care of that place. Yes, of course, it’s true that we humans become greedy too often and turn nature into things to be bought and sold and that ideology--capitalism--can hurt us and nature badly. Run amok, capitalism contributes to another ideology called conservation which says you can destroy that over there as long as we save this over here. And that separation of deed and creed leads to the easy temptation of living largely outside an experience of nature, but believing you are respecting nature by sending an annual check to your favorite, well-branded, environmental group. How do we ask more of ourselves?

When I know how to do something practical, I’m more able to share myself. Whether you live in a megacity or a village, making and doing is a type of currency that when given freely enables us to participate in a world of relations, human and more than human. Helen, my partner, made this clear to me last night when she told me how she has learned over time that the very beautiful Swallowtail caterpillar with its breathtaking orange dots loves to eat our parsley so she moves these caterpillars out of our garden into the field to eat wild carrots and Queen Anne Lace, which is in the same family. It’s knowledge that enables life, ours and theirs, to grow. I was fortunate enough to go to high school and college and those places taught me very important things about how to be a writer and a photographer and a student, but mostly they positioned me, not prepared, me for life. The wild and cultivated places in my life have taught me the most, they have prepared me to live my own unique life and they’ve given me useful knowledge to share with others. There are days when I doubt the scale of my service and wonder am I being nostalgic, what difference can this apple wood make in a world of bits and bytes? And then fellow travelers on the front lines of change come wearily to our place to renew themselves, to heal and to re-member, I forget my doubt.
What will she look like, that great, great, great grand-daughter of mine? She will be browner than me, and stronger than me. I have no fears for her other than the fears I have for myself: sliding into the disconnection and alienation of any culture that consumes more than it produces and protects. I do my days in a certain way so that my descendants will know place-making: how to make soils healthier and more productive, how to grow enough food for themselves and others, how to make art and beauty from our world, how and why to share the complex story of a life lived in place, how and why to welcome strangers. I want my great, great granddaughter to know how to do practical things for her own benefit but also to earn and to convey respect. I hope she carries the deep intuition that her presence creates beauty in the world, that she has the skills, the humility, the knowledge and the relationships to do that.

All beings take different trails, and that’s good. I want to leave on the land, and in my descendants’ hearts, a trail to follow that helps them to find themselves. I want my life to be a reminder of where to find those trails when they are needed, especially when hidden by the world we have created, when the more than human world is less and less. These are the trails to follow to remain connected to ourselves and to life itself. My intentions and wealth are in the placement of stones, the willingness to plant apple trees for the future, to love land and people well, to share it all, and to learn how to return it to those yet born.

Image of Better Selves Fellows planting an apple tree
by Peter Forbes, 2021
When have you glimpsed your vision…?
Adrienne Maree Brown, 2012

when I can crack a joke
and they feel the respect?
yeah

around folks like y'all
it becomes easier

the fire lights up:
grown-ups in mud puddles get cheered

the first interspecies space I saw
felt genuinely whole

at our brown lady dinners
we got together
and talked about what we are doing

the tools to heal ourselves

we reached out
in a space not normally seen
we came together

family on the land
for generations
science
and healing
and music
I could embrace that place

stand up to say
I am the one

strangers sharing visions from all over

we get together
and ask
‘what's good?’

five years of wonderful
relish in the pops of freedom

with young people
glimpses are regular
I can and will be doing something

we never would have survived
without the kids
we don't lock our doors
who wouldn’t be amazing?
meditating
I’ll have your back

I just got more sensitive
I can actually feel

speak truth
be whole
feel

Collected from the voices of the Next Generation Retreat Fellows
The State of Vermont currently recognizes these 4 Tribes:

Elnu Abenaki Tribe

Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe

Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation

Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi

You can read more about them on their Tribal websites by using a search engine.

Eight Sisters: Connection to Place through an Abenaki lens
Keynote Speech by Melody Walker Brook, 2019 For NOFA VT

https://archive.org/details/NOFAVTWC19MelodyWalkerBrookKeynote

“Becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your family matters, that your future matters, that you have a role in it and the simple fact that loving the place you’re on is all that’s necessary to make a more beautiful place. We can all do this together, but we (the Abenaki) have been loving this place for 10,000 years and the broken pieces are the people who mistreat it. We’re asking you to come back to the circle of creation because at some point in your own history you were there too.”
Resources about Vermont Abenaki history and sovereignty

Ndakinna’s Abenaki history must be understood through the policy of eugenics which created an atmosphere of fear and violence that led many to hide their Indigenous identities and assimilate into non-native cultures for safety. Below are resources about these policies which contributed to the erasure of Abenaki people, and their current struggles for recognition and sovereignty.

UVM created the “Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History” website. “This site offers the story of how eugenics emerged and flourished in Vermont during the first half of the twentieth century, as told in the voices of those involved.” and “…provides an illustrated historical guide and orientation to the materials; a search engine facilitates independent searches…”
http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/

The Vermont Digger published “90 years after Vermont eugenics survey, lawmakers propose apology to those affected” by Amanda Gokee on the value of the apology

Rep. Stevens of Waterbury reads the General Assembly’s apology for the Vermont Eugenics Survey in this video of the March 31 ‘21 State House session. His time begins at 8:26 and continues to 1:00:26.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhrmKVRZF0c

Rep. Stevens read from “Segregation or Sterilization”: Eugenics in the 1912 Vermont State Legislature Session which is on the Vermont History Journal’s site.
https://vermonthistory.org/volume-87-2019

Modeling Anti-Oppression Work at Knoll Farm

Staff Document since 2010, last updated 2022

Our goal is for every guest at Knoll Farm to feel welcomed into a safe environment so they can share themselves, learn and to grow. The intention we practice – toward helping our guests to arrive, to feel safe, to get rest, to be well cared for, and to return home safely – is modeling the very best practices of multiculturalism. Through our hospitality, we create the conditions for change before we speak of it. “Prophetic Hospitality” are the words used by the new sanctuary movement to describe the critical role played by basic human kindness in creating broad-scale social change.

Our belief is that by practicing gracious hospitality we create the atmosphere and conditions for change to occur within every person and every group. Through our radical hospitality to every guest, we are modeling the change we wish to see in the world. Genuine warmth and hospitality to each guest reduces the inherent bias between insiders and outsiders. Radical hospitality is the way that we can model anti-oppression work.

Radical Hospitality:
An Effort to Make Amends on a History of Exclusion
Ella McDonald, 2021

We aspire to create a space at Knoll Farm where everyone can feel they belong and are encouraged to self-determine. Land allows for the exploration of self: it offers us fields to play, to dance, forests to string up our hammock and rest, materials to make cherished objects and art. It gives us medicines and nutrients (with no packaging!) to support our health. Land is the basis for life. But land has not been accessible to everyone: treaties and property grabs dispossessed Abenaki people of land, the price of land in this valley prevents most from making home here, and there is a long history of cultural exclusion of non-white people in Vermont. This history calls us to radically welcome people to this place and insist on their belonging.

We maintain that every visitor to or steward of this place can use the land for self-determination, within the bounds of community accountability. To welcome people into a space where they can share themselves, learn and feel comfortable, we strive to practice “radical hospitality” as a community. This means withholding assumptions and offering genuine warmth and welcome to all. It also means making sure that everyone is offered light, warmth, and food that meets their needs during their stay on this land. We’re immersed in a culture in Vermont that does not always greet and accept people as they are, but we’re setting our intentions down a new path: one of genuine welcoming.
On Race & Racism:  
Why We Believe in Affinity Spaces and in Mixed Spaces  
Staff Document, 2022

We seek to create pathways for any person to feel welcome and belonging here at Knoll Farm.

Knoll Farm is a white space, a farm and one of the earliest places of colonization (settlement) in our valley. Because of this, we choose to be responsible for understanding the distinctions between tenure on the land and belonging to the land. To us, tenure means presence and extends out to multi-generational love and commitment to this specific place; Belonging refers to the inalienable right that humans have to nature and to live on the land of their ancestors. Knoll Farm’s work includes multi-generational caring for this land plus a commitment to foster belonging to it for others. We seek to honor tenure and belonging and we do that by recognizing that there are experiences and rituals of this land that can be interrupted by any non-indigenous bodies, including white bodies and non-indigenous Black and Brown bodies.”

Achieving our goals of belonging for all requires intentional creation of affinity or “BIPOC” spaces as well as mixed or multi-racial spaces. We know that the dominant culture in America is rooted in creating belonging for white people. We know that specific intention and purpose is needed within that dominant white culture to create belonging and safety for Black, Brown and Indigenous people. These are different approaches to sharing space and sharing land that we believe are essential to a future of non-separation and true belonging for all.

Racial affinity spaces are where any racial identity group can discover what’s possible when they don’t need to create safety for themselves. Affinity spaces deepen and clarify how a group’s experiences in the world “can be eerily similar and drastically different.”* This is beautiful and necessary work. Affinity spaces help people in their racial identity group show up in mixed or multi-racial spaces whole, clear, and fully in their power. Affinity spaces are bonding spaces.**

Mixed spaces help groups to re-access different dimensions of diversity. Access to cross-cultural diversity in nature and in moments of rest and reflection can be helpful to Black, Brown and Indigenous people to experience parallel needs and joys with white people. White people are afforded awareness of human experience that their privilege often denies them. These are bridging spaces.

We believe there’s a power in being apart, and there’s a power in being together. There are real benefits to both spaces. Affinity spaces help us clarify similarities and differences in our seemingly similar experiences; they can also help us heal.* Mixed spaces help us to learn across different experiences and make requests of each other. There are some types of racial healing that can only happen in affinity spaces, and there are some types of healing that can only happen in mixed spaces. At Knoll Farm, we aspire to non-separation. Affinity spaces are a way to get there. They help us to learn about the opportunities and limitations of creating refuge in a white space.

* https://www.compasspoint.org/blog/race-caucusing-organizational-context-poc%E2%80%99s-experience  
Ode to a Country Inn
Ann Day, 1974

Whether surrounded by pastures
High on a hill,
Or by the bend of a river
That flows deep and still,
Or in a small village
Near an old grist mill,
An Inn in the Country
Is where I find peace,
Where life is less hectic
And pressures decrease.

It is there among people
who are helpful and nice
I discover the richness
That friendships entice.
I dine at the table
With my amiable hosts
Who serve home-prepared food
From bread to meat roasts.
I meet guests who have come
From all over the world,
For a Country Inn's welcome
is always unfurled.

We walk in the mountains
And swim in the lake;
We sniff the aroma
Of an applesauce cake;
We ride horses through woods
And over the knoll;
We sip hot mulled cider
By a stove, wood or coal;
We witness the birth
Of a calf or a foal;
We stroll through the fields
Where the wildflowers sway;
In winter we ski
Of ride in a sleigh.

We discover the magic
Of sharing ideas,
As thoughts blend together
And banish all fears.
These are the treasures
An Inn has for you;
It's a place for the spirit
To refresh and renew.
Ann and Frank Day cared for Knoll Farm from 1957 to 2001. Under their watch the property became an inn and a refuge for those in search of community and hungry for connection to the land. They also transformed the space into a place for learning: Ann Day taught horseback riding, Frank taught woodworking, and they frequently hosted workshops about liberation theology, the Spanish language, feminism, and yoga. In the 1980s and 90s, Ann took in refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Lebanon through the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program.
Who belongs to this land?
Peter Forbes, 2021

You are welcome here, and we are grateful you have arrived.

One of the most important ways to help you fully arrive here, to feel safe and welcomed here, is to tell you some of what we know about this place. We are the current keepers of the stories of Knoll Farm which is as serious a responsibility as caring for her soils.

Every human being belongs to the land. But not every human being can access that privilege. No Trespassing signs show up nearly everywhere; land has been stolen, privatized or made culturally inaccessible. The goal for Knoll Farm has been to create a place where many can belong. All the stories of this place are worth knowing.

Knoll Farm is not a program run by an organization, nor is it a “property” or a real estate transaction. What you have come upon is more akin to a marriage between a family, a community and a place. We make ourselves from the materials available to us. I am made by this place and by my family. Here you will see our physical acts of poetry as well as our biases and limitations.

We have lived here now for 20 years and we followed a woman who had given Knoll Farm 50 years of her life. Our awareness of who belongs here and whose story is worth saving have changed. When we arrived, our understandings were limited and so were the stories we knew and the people we could help to belong. Today, I could welcome you here with stories of diaspora or of resilience or of imagination, but this moment I choose reconciliation.

What is asked of us to reconcile?

I can tell you the names of every Western settler on this land from Rufus Barrett to Ann Day, but I cannot tell you the name of the Abenaki family Rufus Barrett most certainly displaced. The beginning of reconciliation is the telling of a more true story of what happened.

Rufus Barrett arrived here in the spring of 1804 from Connecticut along New England’s waterways. Most who settled the Valley through the nineteenth century walked on an Abenaki foot trail over the Appalachian Gap from Lake Champlain. The ascent up the Appalachian Gap would have been a well-worn and very steep footpath, and the Mad River Valley, once they could see and hear it, would have been roadless, remote and wild, a deep forest valley crisscrossed with footpaths that came to human clearings, places that let the light in from a dense forest canopy.

I don’t know anything about Rufus Barrett, the individual, but I know something about human culture. Few people leave their homelands without a good reason. I suspect Rufus knew trauma, famine, war as well as he knew anything. And I suspect he brought those things with him to a world that seemed limitless with potential. What was he trained to do with all that potential?

He could have settled anywhere in this valley and most colonists arriving here chose the flat valley floor, not a patch of rocky earth at 1,200 feet on the side of a mountain. It’s true that what we call Knoll Farm is an unusual south-facing geography in a valley whose slopes face east and west, but it makes more sense that Rufus Barrett settled here because this place was already cleared of trees.
People were almost certainly already here. People who had enough experience of the land to know that a south facing hillside, even exposed to the wind of higher elevations, has a longer growing season than the foggy, frost-prone valley floor. I don't know how long the Abenaki family’s interaction with Barrett lasted, but his name survives and theirs does not. Did he scare them off or kill them? Or did he occupy something that was only seasonally used? Did the Abenaki family quietly return one summer to see that a stranger had destroyed their gardens and built a crude cabin atop their home?

We once said that Knoll Farm was among the first farms in Fayston, Vermont and now we understand it more fully as a place where colonization began. This makes the work of reconciliation here more important.

This land is filled with seeds and ashes. Being in relationship with these stories means holding both. Organic farmers like us don’t like to talk about this history of removing Indigenous people to create our farms and our national parks because it goes against our perception of ourselves as good. But we can’t actually become “good” without engaging this history.

This history deserves to be reconciled.

The sheep boom of the 1800s created great wealth based on greed and ruin. The beautiful red brick homes on Main Street in Waitsfield were built from that greed. It is said that a merino ram sold in 1840 in Waitsfield for $400, an enormous sum of money, the frenzy for which led men to cut down almost every tree to make pasture. In less than 100 years, the Mad River Valley was almost completely deforested. If you were standing at the fire circle looking out across at the Northfield Range in 1890, you would have seen a moonscape of stumps, rock, eroded stream beds. Only the very top of the mountains had any trees. Bear, deer, turkey, catamount all went extinct. By 1900, the most prevalent animal in the Mad River Valley was the Norway rat.

Fathers and sons returning from the civil war would have found more tragedy here. We had destroyed the land and our human culture began to crash as well. Many Vermonters needed to medicate themselves to survive these conditions. Following the invention of the hypodermic syringe in 1853, and with the return of soldiers exposed to opium during the Civil War, the problem only escalated. Substantial amounts of the drug were consumed in the next decades and many addictions arose. There were 18 licensed opium “druggists” in the Mad River Valley by 1890.

Finally, in 1900, University of Vermont researcher and dean of the medical school, Dr. Ashbel Grinnell, provided conclusive evidence of the opium problem, determining that in a month's time the state's druggists sold, conservatively, some 3,300,000 doses each and every month. It was enough to provide one and one-half doses to each man and woman for an entire year. There was more morphine, chloral, opium and kindred drugs consumed in Vermont per capita than in any other state in the Union. In 1902, the Governor Percival W. Clement wrote to all the legislators telling them that he needed them to be sober when they arrived at the capital.

This impoverishment of the land and then of ourselves created the conditions of fear and othering that called for self-medication and which led directly to the Eugenics movement.

If you were a poor white woman, or an Abenaki who had not already fled to Canada to the north or to Wabanaki communities to the east, the onset of eugenics must have been an added terror of such enormity to cause one to completely hide one's identity and lifeways. For the Abenaki this often meant adopting French Canadian culture and names.
For one hundred years from 1870 to 1970 Vermont’s population remained tiny (to today) and stagnant, a culture barely holding on.

The back-to-the-land movement of the 1950s to 1970s changed all that, again bringing seeds and leaving ashes. Disgusted by what they saw as an immoral society based on war, greed and unearned income, Helen and Scott Nearing decided to leave that world behind. Having fled New York City, they declared they would create their own world here in Vermont, one based on the freedom of the subsistence farmer, cooperation with neighbors and bartered transactions instead of financial ones whenever possible. If there is any movement that I can say I belong to, it would be this. I read Helen and Scott Nearing book Living the Good Life while in college and went to work alongside her for 3 years in my 20s. Helen Nearing introduced me to Bill Coperthwaite who also influenced so much of what we do at Knoll Farm. Today, we give out wooden bowls to honor the Nearing’s role in our lives. The yurts and spoon carving that are synonymous with our work came to us from Bill Coperthwaite.

Millions of young people in the 1960s and 1970s felt the same as us and found purpose and meaning by fleeing their urban and suburban upbringing in Connecticut, New Jersey and Massachusetts and trying to flee their privilege by moving to Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. These young immigrants moving into rural communities were strong on ideals and the privilege to exert them and quickly created conservation commissions, Bottle Bills, land trusts, and environmental commissions. When done with reading the Nearings, they picked up the books of Wendell Berry who helped to make small-scale family farming popular again.

The forests returned and were now often protected by new laws. Black bear, turkey, moose, deer all returned slowly. The beauty of abundant and healthy nature that you see at Knoll Farm today and throughout most of Vermont arose from ashes of an earlier time. The population of Vermont started to grow again after 100 years.

Ann Day was certainly influenced greatly by the back-to-the-land movement and its choices, and so were we. She came to the Mad River Valley in the late 1940s and bought Knoll Farm in 1957 for $13,500. She gave fifty years of life energy to raising her family, raising her own consciousness and bringing other people here to do the same. She did as much as she could to reconcile her history with other people’s, particularly those in the civil war zones of central America, and to make Knoll Farm a refuge for others.

As respectful as I am of Ann Day, Helen and Scott Nearing and Bill Coperthwaite, I wonder what they taught me not to see, what blindness I might repair in myself and not pass down to my daughters? About five years ago, I was talking with a Wabanaki colleague in Maine and the topic of the Nearings came up and I proudly told him that I had once worked for Helen Nearing. He didn’t let a second pass before saying, “I knew them, and they were worse than the settlers.”

From the vantage of people who were here before, the Nearings may have also been just another example of people arriving with money and a moral superiority, and who acted as if there hadn’t ever before been people living lightly on the land. They claimed these concepts of permaculture and organic farming as their own ideas, made careers and money off those ideas. Worse, their books brought many other settlers into rural places causing property values and taxes to rise.

The settlers may have taken their land, but the back-to-the-landers took their lifeways.
Why does any of this history matter? Why is it worth knowing? How do we learn to stop putting our cabins atop of others? How do we show respect?

All conversations in our country about belonging, well-being and even soil health are also necessarily conversations about race, power, and land. The core of the story I’ve shared so far is about power, who has the power to stay in relationship with the land. In a world of winners and losers where the winner puts his home atop the vanquished, so much knowledge and wisdom is lost to humanity as a whole. Rufus Barret may have won the land, but the destruction and great loss that spun out from him for more than a century took a toll on every living being in our valley. “Survival of the fittest” led directly to the eugenics movement.

So even if you believe that evolution means survival of the fittest rather than survival of the most adaptive and cooperative, this “winner takes all” philosophy continues to stunt our culture and haunt our future.

At this point in our human evolution, and America’s experiment in democracy, we need to bring our best minds together to understand how to live here. Our lives as caregivers and sustainers of Knoll Farm would be so advanced over where they are today if the Abenaki lifeway and knowledge was still here on this land. Just as I offer gratitude to the European farmers who pulled stones from our fields and dug swails to carry away water, I wish the land was continuously improving in health fed by the wisdom and experience of so many different generations. We would all have more true wealth if we could somehow build stories together rather than have the most powerful story prevail.

To reconcile is to restore relationships between. I believe that we all have the potential to be better than our worst actions. This is also true for our American culture, that evolution for us is to recognize the true story of our origins and to learn how to become something better than our worst actions. This is not about anyone’s guilt or shame, but about a collective journey of my culture to relearn history, understand privilege, and use that privilege to not repeat history but to be in relationship with those who came before us on this land.

These re-memberings – fond, sad, horrific – make the land sacred. We are not alone with our aspirations or our fears. Sharing these stories is an invitation to you to belong here but also to hold us accountable to our values for the future.
Letter of Reflection
GloJean Todacheene, 2013

It’s amazing to me how people so diverse can be brought back to experience humanity, community, respect and lasting friendships. Our bowls and handmade spoons showed me how life can be simple. We can become so wrapped up in consumerism. I lived in a tend and breathed the mountain air, saw the mist, walked in the clouds and as Martin Luther King expressed, “I’ve ben to the Mountain Top!”

I thought of my people, the Dineh (Navajo) and realize even more that I have so much to do. Yes I am one but I can do what I can to lead, support, IMAGINE, and DO!
Maybe it’s the unseasonably sultry March winds rampaging down the steep vales turning the winter of Vermont’s Mad River Valley ski country from snowy opulence to the grey muck of mud season in the space of hours. Maybe it’s the reports of climate change extinctions, a never ceasing martial drumbeat, vague but insubstantial threats of nuclear destruction. Yet somewhat hopefully I have convened a personal environmental writing retreat, meant to be a time for concentrated attendance on the task of putting words into digital documents. Or onto paper as the case may be since I still do write by hand with thick black gel ink on silky yellow, green or white faintly ruled legal pads. Maybe it is this language of disasters that is causing me to lose my words.

Instead of writing I am surrendering to exhaustion and vacant staring. Yielding to long unrefreshing naps and goalless cups of butter coffee. Perhaps it’s the simultaneous parades of hostile psychopathic dictators, apocalyptic fires, drowning seas, agriculturally devastating droughts, a seemingly endless pandemic, and the sociopathic bass line of white supremacy, accompanied by unfettered, apathetic capitalism. Perhaps it is this unholy thrum of humanity’s empathy deficit disorder that leaves me in a state of fatigue, despair, ennui, weariness. I want to write about trees. Instead I sit here struggling to transform the music of rustling leaves into coherent syllables.

Perched in a cozy farmhouse near the top of my mountain I am somewhat sheltered against the bleak everyday memoranda of my customary employment leading a small university’s tiny environmental studies department. Yet, I am highly vulnerable. I find myself agitated trying to reveal the words - old tales that arise from Earth’s wisdom, new texts that create an urgent message of inspiration regardless of these evidently declensionist environmental and social challenges. The same urgent message that I obstinately engage every day, every classroom appearance in front of my equally restless but minimally attentive 19-year-old students. I acknowledge they do not possess the privileged choice of disengagement from ecological catastrophes, what with having their entire lives of this madness in front of them, so I decide to meet their obligation with my own. At best my responsibility is an attempt to explain how we ended up here. How we found ourselves “unprepared and not adapted” to an environmental crisis of our own making.

My hope rests on words, that when they finally arise they will create stories that heal, and the healing will create further stories until eventually a manual materializes, a careworn still useful guidebook for our emergence from what the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres describes as “the atlas of human suffering” and the “damning indictment of failed leadership” that is this moment. A manual for overcoming this climate change evident, unseasonably warm New England day in early March. I want to write optimistic stories, a handbook formed from the whispering needles of these towering evergreens. I am on an environmental writing retreat in late winter under the shadowy, serene presence of Mt Abraham, yet I am anxiously searching for words.

The rain stops, the sun appears against a washed out blue, the blustery day pushes cumulus fractus across the sky just a fingertip’s distance above me, changing shapes so quickly I can barely engage with the empty headed meditative game of looking for shapes in the clouds. I think I see a human baby but it becomes a praying mantis, then a sea horse (Hippocampus hippocampus), then dissipates quickly into tendrils. I imagine an angel about to spread wings over the grey-green mountain tops but shortly she is a curled-up puppy, then a shape that looks like a common map turtle (Graptemys geographica), blowing into nothingness faster than I can keep track. A woman’s face appears wearing a bountiful headdress of flowers rapidly becoming
a crouching raptor, next, la calavera de azucar, then a formless puff of cotton disappearing into the pale blue.

I am gazing out the window from a neat but slightly haphazard library, both ordered and disordered with books and magazines about nature, gardening, earth science, spirituality and consciousness. I am sitting at the library’s hand-hewn wood plank table waiting for inspiration. I start wondering about the equivalent archives of the planet. These books are our human stories, and suddenly I realize I want to know about the library of the Earth. Our planet has a language. She has rhythm, songs, dreams and fables, so there must be a site where these stories are collected, where the guidebooks are already written, where the reference materials for our healing already exist. I want to unearth the library of Gaia.

Some say that the archives, the repositories of the wisdom of The Living Earth, the Earth as a Sacred Being, are to be found in the network of trees that simultaneously hold up the blue sky and hold fast together the muddy grey-brown soil. The plant world, their roots, their webs of mycelia, the plants comprise the gloriously dreadlocked hair of The Mother Earth. Their abodes in forests, their connected wisdom, their enviously efficient communication networks that function as the original predictive algorithms, that are structured both like the internet and the human brain. A structure that makes them the mirror image of the synapses of the starry, vast universe.

The trees and their roots survived at Ground Zero. Hibakujumoku, The Survivor Trees. After the burning, the shame of the human-made devastation, the roots sprouted into new growth. Camphor, Gingko, Sago plum, Japanese persimmon, Plane trees, Eucalyptus, Thorny elaeagunus, Kurogane holly, *Platanus orientalis*, *Pinus thunbergii*, and of course a weeping willow, *L. Salix babylonica*. I was intimate with *Diospyros kaki*, Nagasaki’s atomic bomb surviving kaki tree, because its homeopathic remedy was used to heal my entanglement with complex post-traumatic stress syndrome when I emerged psychologically scarred, emotionally burned, and soul damaged from my work in the wars and troubles of Guatemala, Cambodia, Rwanda, South Africa and my childhood legacy of Jim Crow.

My indigenous elders, native to the continents of Africa, North America, Europe, South America and Asia, all of our indigenous elders, provide us with a common Earth wisdom, in different ways, in different languages, with distinct music, supported by unique practices. They gift us the knowledge that the Earth’s stories are waiting for us, but that we humans have the responsibility to listen to these tales, to learn them, to dream, sing, dance, and tell Gaia’s wisdom into existence. The archives, the library, is co-created from this responsibility, from our relationship with ourselves, each other, and the natural world. Knowing this wisdom, I am aware that in current times, when we are blindly nonresponsive to the importance of these relationships, when we stubbornly refuse to bear these responsibilities, our Earth knowledge dissipates, and the planetary library is as difficult to locate and focus on as cottony wisps of shifting clouds.

It is the trees who hold the libraries of the Earth, sharing the molecular information of multiple species, building the soil all beings need for our sustenance, producing the air all species require to breath, whispering their stories to any who will listen,buffeting every one of us against our existential, human-created crises, over and over and over again.
...for Lisa

we pull off the road
to this place
where in summer
swimmers
loll on the rocks
like otters
grandmothers
and grandbabies
wade in the icy
shallows where
sand has been pounded
soft and teenagers
dive into deeper
pools and come
out shining
beaded with water
today it is just us
and we walk out
over the boulders
find one mid-river
and sit, back to back
we have just driven
down the Kancamagus
from the high spot
that separates
the watersheds
one flowing east,
the other west and south
the directions of her
people and mine

We laugh to realize
she is facing west
I am facing east
we've done this without
thinking
someday someone will
find two women in rock
back to back
on this mountain
facing sunset, facing dawn
Pages for self-determination
In this space you can share drawings, video or audio links, articles, poems, experiences that would add to the story of this land for the next visitor. We’re grateful for your contributions.
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“A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world of, I can scent it coming like fragrance of ripening strawberries rising up on the breeze.”

- Ramin Wall
Kimmerer

Painted Kimmerer Quote
by a Better Selves Fellow