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John Elder Strikes a Key Note with Housing and Conservation Advocates

“Setting the Cornerstones of Community: Housing and Conservation in Vermont” was the title of a conference on June 13, 2000 sponsored by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition. John Elder, Professor of English and Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, set the stage for the events of the day with the following keynote address.

MY sense is that the American conservation movement has come to a critical juncture—an opportunity for us to take the next step in our growth—one of those spikes that the evolutionists now are referring to as “punctuated equilibrium,” when we move to a new level under, perhaps, stress.

The stress that leads to biological evolution is often related to climate or to sudden changes in the physical environment. Perhaps the stress in Vermont is related in part to the recent period of national prosperity that’s making it difficult, both to allot affordable housing to our entire community and to preserve open space. It encourages us to rise to a new level of creativity.

At this moment, both the housing and conservation communities are trying to factor in each other’s missions. The conservationists are trying to learn to think more creatively about matters of social equity and people involved in social justice and housing are trying to understand the way in which a beautiful and healthy natural environment is part of the right of every member of a civil society.

Rather than falling into the false dichotomy between jobs and the environment that have torn so many rural communities in two, we have an opportunity today to seek wholeness. It’s a chance to renew the promise of our roots. I’d like to organize my remarks around three images, to speak to my sense of how this connectedness might work. They are the images of a tree, a house, and a garden.

Tree: The Mysterious Affinity

Economists will point to the motivating power of individual acquisitiveness or of the desire to seek a relative competitive advantage within the marketplace. But there’s another level of motivation, perhaps a deeper level, represented by images such as those I just mentioned. We’re motivated by the pictures we form of a beautiful way for the world to be.

The decisions we make in our family lives, our religious lives, our participation in community, our philanthropies, I think are motivated on this level in ways that the marketplace alone cannot fully account for. And this is where that image of the tree comes in.

For me, housing and conservation are not simply a juxtaposition. There’s a mysterious affinity that is registered in that image of a tree. I think one beautiful picture of a way for the world to be is of dwelling beneath or beside a beautiful tree—living, as it were, under the auspices of a beautiful tree.

It’s not a simple connection, but housing and conservation—like the house we dwell in, with a tree beside it—goes deep. There’s something here that we’re moving toward, that has to do in my mind with a civil society.

There’s an inclusive sense of community here in Vermont that’s very inspiring. A sense not that our community is adequately inclusive, but that it needs to be, that we are drawn to make it so. Unless we can define community so that it includes nature, and unless we can define the natural environment so that it includes human beings, we have only got a partial picture. And I think that as with that image of the tree, this question takes us down to the roots—in this case, to the linguistic roots.

I am struck by the fact that the word economy and the word ecology have the same Greek root: oikos, which means “house” or “household.” This takes me to that second image, as we try to understand the wholeness within this compound mission.

The House: Bringing Us Together

A house is a very serviceable and inclusive image, it seems to me. And very attractive, just as the image of a tree is. Houses certainly exist in the marketplace, as anyone carrying a mortgage knows all too well. And so do the farm, the open spaces, and the other properties that people in the Vermont conservation community seek to preserve.

In order to do our work, we have to learn about economic viability. We have to practice careful accounting. But within a house, there's an order of wholeness that can exist, that transcends the marketplace alone.

In a shared meal, or a conversation around a table, something happens that transcends the struggle for individual competitive advantage. And so I think the sense that houses have outsides and insides can take us further in this sense of affinity.

Both VHCB and the other inspiring organizations represented in this room I think attempt to cultivate this delicate balance—trying to pursue economic viability, to seek political consensus, as with building the house or renovating the house, and at the same time to remember that really the purpose of such a structure is a community that transcends the structure—which the structure fosters. Which brings together, in an inclusive way, entities that can go beyond individuality, to be expressed as an ecosystem, or as a family.

I use the word cultivate for this balance that our organizations are trying to achieve. And this leads to the third and final image through which I try to understand affinity between housing and conservation, between social justice and environmental preservation, that motivates us to come together this morning. This is the image of a garden.

Garden: The Messy Middle

Garden is that sunny patch behind the comradeship of house and tree. It's a beautiful image, to be sure, one that many of us in this state love—but also one, as we know, of incessant labour.

To have a garden, that mediation between house and trees, is not a work of magic. It's more like getting down on your knees in the mud, into the messy middle, cultivating something that otherwise might not flower to the same extent.

This image of a gardener, down there in the messy middle, trying to cultivate something that's never been done—trying to participate through our mortality in the effort and the diligence required of the world's work—seems to me to have something to do with the organizations represented by all of us in this room.

Housing and conservation, social justice and environmental preservation feel like an oxymoron. They feel like the oddest of odd couples. Yet in our hearts, we know there's a deeper affinity here to be sought—and one that from time to time, in the circle of the year, we see bursting into flower.

Up and down the streets of Vermont's 251 towns right about now, every year, are people mulching around their trees, scraping and painting their houses, turning over their gardens, weeding, weeding, weeding. We give ourselves to the seasons of this place, and in doing so, we may remember and enact the rhythms of community."

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