



THE IVORY-BILLED TRUTH (June/July 2005)

They're still doing it, enviro outfits consulting consultants. The latest attack of this ailment is described in a column by Amanda G. Little. (1) A year ago about 20 "national" varmental groups got together at a conference center in Maryland to listen to George Lakoff instruct them in the art of "framing." This framing specialty is, according to Little: "purposeful use of concepts and language to recontextualize debates and change the way the public views an issue, or the world." Translation: How to change citizens' minds about something.

Or, as American Rivers president Rebecka Wodder puts it, "We hired George to help us develop a methodology for communicating more effectively." The down payment for this service: "roughly" \$ 350,000. The ultimate goal is envisioned as a "reframing initiative designed to positively change public perception of the environmental movement."

Well, if you've read this far I'm tempted to bet you have a certain fleeting thought: "Why didn't they ask me. I'd give them an earful." Same question crossed my mind, and that \$350,000 is tempting, but I'd not want to be greedy. Besides, we varmentalists have to beware of getting sucked into the buying and selling vortex. It's death, in there. I mean it. So, I'd do it for free, a page or two, at most.

First thing, I'd advise them, get rid of this framing thing. It's not a lack of cleverness in communicating with the citizens that's the problem. There's already too much clever rhetoric out there, hyped up by offers of tote bags, coffee mugs, multipurpose carabiners, etc. Over-communicating, I'd say. So, sit back and take another run at the situation. The message is wrong, that's the problem. A wrong message can be framed and re-framed, but it will still be the same pathetic old tote bag.

That's for starters. Solution? Use the 350 thou as travel money. Take a tour, all of you green CEOs. Poke around cancer alley down in Louisiana, talk to people who live there, get their views. Listen to how they "conceptualize" their efforts to fight the likes of ExxonMobil and Shell and the other spewers of toxics into places where people live. Travel west, listen to ranchers, listen to oil and coal bed methane workers, loggers, miners. No, wait, hold on; we don't want any of you to even think these people have nothing to do with saving nature, letting rivers run free. Don't even breathe that weird mantra that saving the spotted owl and other denizens of old growth will have no effect on employment of humans in the forests, or the rights of workers or the health of people. Just listen, okay?

And so on, maybe one more page, and that's it. All right, I'll take a dollar for the service, with this reminder: Before inventing new ways of communicating you have to have something interesting to communicate, a goal worth a fight. Bashing the Bushies is defensive foreplay; it's okay to do it, but by itself it's just more blah blah and we've had enough of that. Way more than enough. We're up to here. We're getting to the place where there will be shouting. "We're not going to take it any more." There, put that on the wall where you see it every day.

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Have a good trip, and please, don't arrive at the oil patch in SUVs.

Will they give the above a moment's thought. Course not. Maybe a minute to frame a dismissal, then back to a meeting with power people. Never mind, there's spectacular good news: the ivory billed woodpecker lives! During all those decades on the extinct list the great birds hung on, in an old growth swamp in Arkansas. The Department of Interior and the Nature Conservancy have already announced a big effort to protect and enhance their habitat.

There's a dark side too. Adventure tours will be formed and they will clamor for access, probably doing it right now, as we speak. Can Safari trophy hunters be far behind? Can you imagine a worse time for Ivory-bills to be rediscovered? An anti-environmental president sits at the helm; his entourage and handlers are, if anything, even more disdainful of nature. But I have to be optimistic.

That swamp can be given a fighting chance; we can be civilized about it, we can be alert and insistent. Civilized, just what could that mean? Here's my red rock/granite mountain/free-flowing rivers suggestion: A civilization would back off from putting a price on every thing, on every animal, on every experience. Let's dare to say that our world has an infinite multitude of intrinsic values, meaning, in this discussion, not for sale, can't be bought. Such as blue whales and ivory-billed woodpeckers, such as planting a garden, a walk in the desert.

This suggestion looks simple-minded, but just think, if we don't draw some kind of firm line like that, marketers will bring in some miserable cost/benefit study (dollar quantities, oh yes, always) and, believe you me, it will always tip toward development, toward more control, toward profit.

Addendum, on value: "We come from nature. We aren't simply a part of it, as a fixture. Because nature is a story --evolution of earth ... Nature is enemy, but more than that because of the complex intertwining of human enterprise with all the rest--the story. Therefore, it is a very narrow view that attributes value only to what humans choose to be compelled to bestow. Value can't be segregated that way ... It's a bit top down." (2) Recently, Alison and I have heard an unusual number of sad tales of talented, politically sophisticated people suddenly "going over" to the consumer culture. Why? Searching for security in this hell-bent world. But isn't there more to it than that? I think so. Imagine standing firm, defending the earth while an elevated express rushes by, day and night, making a great racket year after year. Nearly everybody seems to be on board. Your raggedy activist minority status doesn't look as interesting, as glamorous as it used to. In spite of all the rugged individualism you grew up with, that you consider a birthright, firmly you ... there is that yearning to be a part of society. Suddenly ... apparently these moves can happen almost overnight ... you jump on the elevated.

It doesn't have to be that way. We have not only a full right to citizenship, our full participation in our tribe is needed. I would say it is necessary, to insure the full panoply of views in the coming grand coalition of change. All it takes is a realization that there are many and diverse groups of citizens who think of themselves as sideliners. It's probably our own arrogance that keeps us from seeing them. We are not the only ones suffering from loneliness, alienation, a conviction that the elevated is leaving us behind, in limbo. Besides, where is our hard won evidence showing the contrary, that the elevated itself is in deep trouble?

Have we forgotten that no one can walk a straight line through an ecosystem? Too much interplay there, its made of curvaceous secrets, interconnections we don't even know about yet, and the ones we do know about are apt to change in unexpected ways. Chance seems to enter in, final certainty is beyond our powers. We are not in charge, we do not dominate the earth, we never will. Therefore, surprises: Ivory billed woodpeckers. Exotic diseases. Global warming. Tsunamis. Drought. Earth rumbling, spewing lava. Glaciers melting. Ocean currents at risk. And the sun still rises.

I think this view of nature is pure gold. The best part is that just about everybody possesses it. I think we varmentalists ought to be among those who bring it forward, keeping it there, for thought or meditation, insisting upon it. Or, at the very least as a humble goal,. What do you think? Sixty four years ago

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a president of the United States presided with a different style of power, one that had responded to a fought-for and uneasy compromise between corporate insistence and mass movements in the heartlands. It created Social Security, for one thing. And genuine environmental victories were possible.

"Please tell Major General Adams or whoever is in charge of this business that Henry Lake, Idaho is to immediately be struck from the Army planning list for any purposes. The verdict is for the trumpeter swan and against the Army. The Army must find a different nesting place." Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Memo for the Secretary of War, 1941. But we can't sit on our butts waiting for an environmental president, no matter how cheering it might be to look back

to an era when we came close. Nor can we depend on green organizations that have such a poor hold on their reason for being that they have to go to the market and buy reasons. And the "greening" of corporations is most definitely a weak reed. Witness: Exxon (now Exxon-Mobil) still fielding lawyers to dispute the damage award for the Exxon Valdez disaster. So many ideas and movements floating around now, we flounder in a sea of relativity, and perpetual war, and record profits for the few.

Henry Thoreau, wandering around Concord, literally framed views of nature, shapes of pines against a sky, their composition, things like that. He noticed, of course, that he could shift the frames, bring into being a new view. Common-place enough, we all do it, but Henry came upon an audacious thought.

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"Can I not by expectation affect the revolutions of nature -- make a day to bring forth something new?" (3)

I interpret this as a claim that walking, expecting, observing, are more than outsider work, they are integral parts of the workings of nature. We are inside, totally, whether we admit it or not. And yet we are also able to stand aside from nature, and society too, conceive of them as from a distance, from outside. That doubleness is perfectly natural, not a curse; tensions and contradictions are simply the way life evolved, the way things turned out, on this planet, very different from perfect harmony laid out in boring straight lines or standardized, permanent windings.

Thinking along these lines and stirred up by that sentence from Thoreau, I've come to believe in a certain kind of humility that accepts some responsibility for my insider status, by reducing consumption of trivial stuff and by shedding oppressive notions of behaviors and body care that come at us every night on the screen. We can create refusals, decline silly excuses for buying a station wagon. reject herbicides and pesticides for lawn and garden; plot ways to reduce the lawn to reel mower size. Much can be done in these individual decision arenas. Our moves there will not shake the world, but they might prepare the way. They will at the least highlight the deep ditch between what humans

need and what we actually consume of the world.

Good, but not good enough; won't get us off the endangered species list. For that we need a little nameless nag in the back of our mind that keeps insisting that individual lives can't come to full flower without involvement with others for substantial change. The nag can be comforting, too, reminding that changes are normal parts of the earth's workings. The nag can do great service, breaking this silly idea that we have to live in a totalized, totalitarian buying-and-selling regime masquerading as democracy, for ever. No, the nag says, we can break out. The process will be hard, requiring step-by-step inquiry, action, mutual confidence and consultation and weathering of disagreements. There will be surprises. This just in from The Land Institute: "Imagine if in the 21st century we could see the end of the idea that knowledge is adequate to run the world. This would cause us to feature questions that go beyond the available answers. We would learn patience, and we would enjoy a kind of yeastiness for thought. I think this also would do the absolutely necessary job of driving knowledge out of its categories." (4)

(1) Amanda Little, "Muckraker," in /Progressive Populist/, May 1, 2005. (2) Holmes Rolston III, /Philosophy Gone Wild. Essays in Environmental Ethics/. Prometheus Books, 1986. (3) Henry Thoreau, Journal, 1852. (4) Wes Jackson, from a talk at The Land Institute's 2004 Prairie Festival. (www.landinstitute.org).

MARTIN MURIE died in January 2012 but we will continue to post his wonderful words for as long we The Zephyr is around...JS

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Where ARE those ivory-billed woodpeckers, Martin?

I wonder, Jim. ...I wonder.



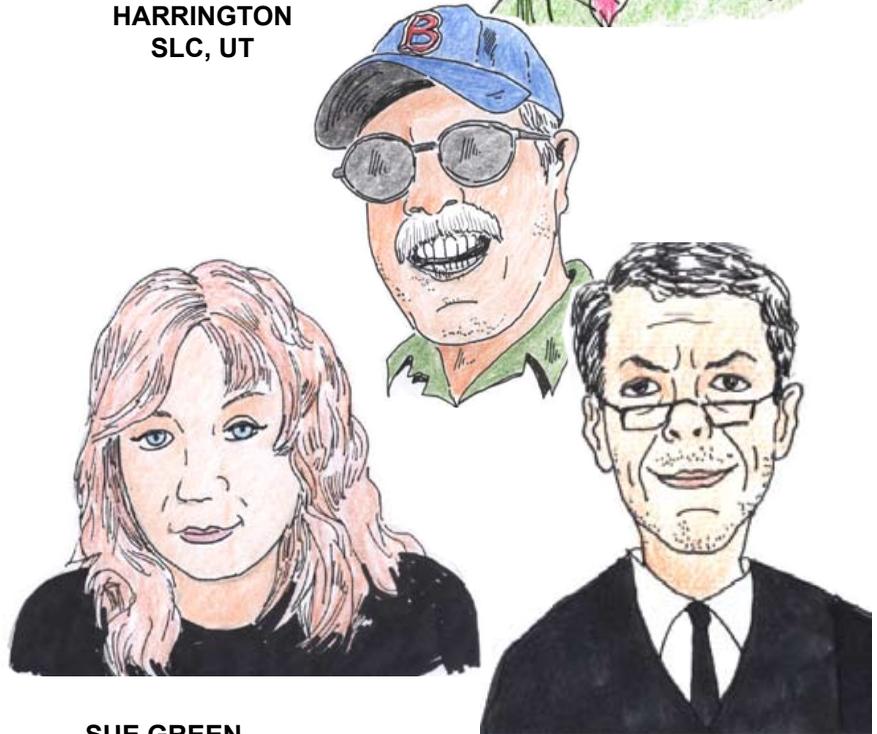


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