HEAR THE ECO-SPEAK?

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It was 1978 and I was eight and a half months pregnant as I sat, uncomfortably, listening to a professor at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities tell my class that for every non-inclusive, sexist term in our papers, we would be marked down one whole grade. Half my class was female, unheard of in 1978, and I felt totally liberated - until my paper came back, marked with red ink, and lacking any grade at all. It didn't take long to liberate my language as well.

But when I moved to Louisiana in 1980, the inclusive language of a Minnesota seminary became Yankee feminist language, aggressive and unwanted. As a student in the Graduate School of Social Work at Louisiana State University I was told that my diligence in language was neither appreciated nor appropriate to the culture. Unfortunately for my adjustment to a new town, I never did learn to hold my tongue, or to again construct blinders for my eyes. Instead I started examining other words and images for the perceptions that they created.

In 1985 I moved back to Minnesota and told the realtor I wanted a home overlooking a wetland area. Her response was, "Nobody wants to live by a swamp - You'll never sell it - Bad investment. How about a nice lake or river house surrounded by a grassy yard?"

Remember when we all thought that way? Living back in the swamp was the country equivalent of living on the wrong side of the tracks. When the perception of the swamp changed from a wild, foreboding, mosquito infested wasteland to an area rich in wildlife, where surface waters become c1eansed and recharged, it was necessary to call it by a new name, "wetland" or "marsh". The increased value of the swamp is reflected in its new name, and that name continues to educate the public on this changed perception of the swamp/wetland.

The question then becomes: Where else is this value-charged language occurring, and is it used to manipulate as well as liberate? The answer is that it does both. Propagandists have always used the language for their purposes. When the U.S. War Department changed its name to the Department of Defense as the immense military - industrial build-up took place, the American public was asked to put a greater value on its worth. (It also made it more palatable to fund defense rather than war, especially to women who were voting in ever greater numbers.) When William Cody was given the affectionate name of Buffalo Bill, it was clear that the value of the wild buffalo was nil, and the value of the buffalo hunter had taken its place, along with the railroads that would develop (and tame) the Wild West.

I write this essay as a conservationist who has been, and is currently involved in local conservation issues. During that time I have noticed many words change meaning, and I have also discovered the power involved in the choice of one word over another. One example is the word "environment," a very powerful word, new since my childhood. It suggests the words "clean," "protect," "save," "part - of," not the old words that were associated with the concept of manifest destiny of the land, such as "control," "clear," "use," "dominate." "Ecology" and all the eco - words are so value-laden now that lawmakers are trying to legislate limits to their use in the selling of products.

But at the same time the words "growth" and "development" have not lost their value, and in fact often come into direct conflict with the words and values of the conservation movement. A while ago I heard the head of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul) Metropolitan Council on a call-in talk show lauding the healthy growth of the metro area. When I asked him over the air his opinions about urban sprawl, specifically about new super-bridges into Wisconsin which would enable that sprawl, he quickly changed his story. He waxed eloquently about the importance of limiting sprawl, as if it had nothing what-so-ever to do with growth and development.

When you hear the term "metropolitan growth," try replacing it with terms such as "urban sprawl," "overpopulation," "crowding." In my experience most people want to see growth occurring in their communities, but they do not want urban sprawl. If the talk is of

"development," I ask about "sustainability." If the debate gets down to the bottom line, I say, "You bet! If the bottom line is cost, then what is the cost to our future? Can our children and grandchildren pay the price?"

When companies threaten to shut down and move because of environmental regulations, the knee-jerk reaction from locals is advisedly concern about loss of jobs. If environmental damage is figured into the equation against the salaries of the lost jobs, the jobs fall far behind, except in human terms. But who else besides humans are capable of understanding the responsibility of a sustainable earth we owe to our children? Like the natives of the South American rainforests who are learning that they lose their own resources by cutting the trees, and so have begun to grow nuts and silk as sustainable products from the forests, our communities too must find jobs that do not rob the future. In this process "jungles" become "rainforests" as their value evolves upward.

Closer to home, a "dry run" becomes a "protected natural area ravine." Take for example the story of my grandmother's farm. When I was young she used to tell me how her father cleared his land in Miesville, Minnesota for their farm. It had been wooded and it took him years to clear the acreage by hand. When she and Grandpa finally sold the farm in 1957, she didn't charge a dime for the dry run which ran through the middle of the farm. It was useless land, never cultivated. Now the farmer who bought that land has sold it to the state of Minnesota, because that useless ravine is a home to rare, prairie, wildflower habitat. Grandma never understood why the state, with her tax dollars, paid "more than a pretty penny" for it. I've seen it, and I call it a "treasure."

Because of the help of first lady Lady Bird Johnson, we now call "weeds" "wildflowers." The Chicago Tribune even ran an article about the change in perception by many who now regard dandelions as bright, fuzzy wildflowers instead of noxious weeds.

Lying between my former Minnesota house and a birch and pine woods was a velvet green blanket of Creeping Charlie which each spring sprouted thousands of tiny purple blooms. Everyone asked what the wonderful "ground cover" was, everyone except my

mother. She knew Creeping Charlie, and had been fighting to keep it out of her lawn for decades. To her it was the worst of "weeds." But at nurseries in the Twin Cities it is now being sold as "ground cove." Grass, having lost some of its attraction in the past decade, is being increasingly replaced by more native plants that thrive in Minnesota's severe climate.

My relatives are mostly southern Minnesota farmers. They started getting angry when their gardens died. Someone called it "drift." That meant that the herbicides being sprayed onto the fields to kill broad-leafed weeds also killed broad-leafed garden plants. Next they heard about neighbors whose farm wells became contaminated by the same chemicals and fertilizers.

Now they are concerned because they can eat only limited numbers of fish from Minnesota's once pristine lakes and rivers without fearing contamination. My uncle says he should have known. They told him that if it didn't rain soon after application, the chemicals would evaporate into the air. He never guessed they would come back to earth in the form of rain to pollute the lakes and streams. He says they call them by fancy names, those herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, but they should have called them what they really are - POISON. "They keep bringing new and different ones onto the market - with new, fancy names - but they're no different. They're all just deadly chemicals."

The names we choose have power. I am Cynthia - "reflector of light." My musician son's middle name is Samuel, meaning "hearing the sound of God"; my daughter is named for a beloved grandmother and aunt, my husband named after two grandfathers and a deceased uncle. But names can also belittle, such as when women are called "girls" or an African-American man is called "boy." The St. Croix River is given added power and status when it is addressed as the "federally designated wild and scenic St. Croix River." And an area touching the St. Croix's Wisconsin shore is devalued by a term originated by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDoT) when they call it the "St. Croix Valley commutershed."

An ongoing controversy in the Twin City metro area concerns the farms and residents on the far eastern edges of that area. An eighty million dollar super-highway bridge has been proposed to cross the federally designated wild and scenic St. Croix River at Stillwater. Conservation groups oppose the proposed bridge which would, among other things, blast out a new corridor in the Wisconsin bluffs. MNDoT, in charge of the project, labeled St. Croix County, on the Wisconsin side of the river, the "St. Croix County Commutershed." MNDoT found this term useful in terms of its land planning, but when they used it in their slideshow to convince residents of the necessity of the new bridge, it backfired. Residents had chosen to live in the Wisconsin countryside for its rural flavor, and to a certain extent, its separateness from the metropolitan area. When it was labeled as a means for city folk to buy up land in the far suburbs, it angered many residents. Viewing pristine Wisconsin hills and farmland as dormitory space for city workers was too much of a leap for many of its long time rural residents.

Ecology has something to do with becoming part of the earth, not seeing it as our domain. If in fact there is a "commutershed," then new rules and terms apply, not the least being the concept of "urban sprawl." The topic of commuting brings to mind other words which have changed meaning. Not long ago if someone owned a large, V-8 engine car it was jokingly referred to as a "limousine." Now it's called a "gas guzzler." Small cars, I was told as a child, were for small people. Now they're "economical," "fuel-efficient." Hybrids were for nerdy scientists and tree-huggers. Now they are in demand and take months to obtain. Subways always had a New York nightmarish quality about them, but now new systems are called "mass transit," "light rail," and can be tourist attractions in themselves.

One other term I have repeatedly come across in my environmental battles takes the name of our forebears in vain. "Grandfathered-in" means "Ha! Ha! You can't stop this one!" It's time our legal system took another look at this "old" term and called it by another name. "Previous use" needs to be examined and challenged just as proposed use is. Sustainability has more to do with grandchildren than grandfathers.

Our words tell others what is important. When an old family friend, Oliver Charlie, bought his land on the St. Croix River in the early 1900's (the area that is now Afton State Park,) he was thought to be a fool by his friends. They asked him why he wanted that land. "A river's only good for drowning," they said. And they could have added that a swamp's only good for mosquitoes, a buffalo's only good for a rug, lush Wisconsin bluffs are only good for a bridge, and Creeping Charlie's only good for kicking - but then we've learned that sometimes a little kicking is good for the soul.