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### Fellow travelers: Cruising the globe in search of home community and hope for the future

Richard Michael Stern  
*The University of Montana*

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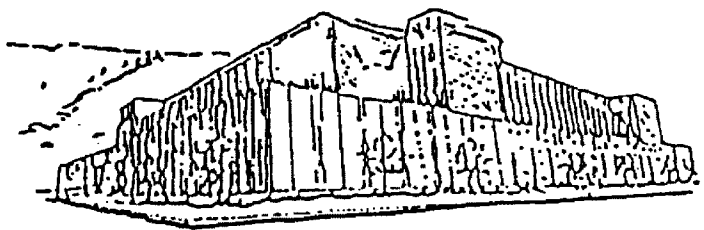
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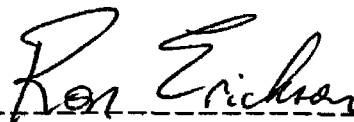
FELLOW TRAVELERS:  
CRUISING THE GLOBE IN SEARCH OF HOME,  
COMMUNITY, AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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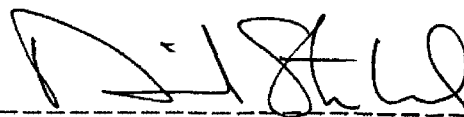
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B.A. The University of California, Berkeley, 1991  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Science  
The University of Montana  
1997

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## **Acknowledgments**

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### In Progress: Homing In

I had a dream last night about the house I grew up in. Actually, except for the unlikely part about my father sprucing up my noodle dish with ground beef and drinking my cheap chardonnay, the dream took place mostly in the backyard. Let me set the scene:

I'm out in the back part of our half-acre, near the olive trees that line the back fence and obscure our view of the neighbors. There's about a foot of snow on the ground, and I notice a well-traveled path worn down in it. This makes me very curious, since I'm usually the only one who spends much time back here. I trace the path towards the southwest corner of the yard; that mysterious section of our property where fallen tree branches, broken toys, and once-useful garden tools become piled, never to be seen again. As I near the yard's corner, I suddenly notice a large wooden statue of Abraham Lincoln piercing the sky majestically. I crane my neck to study good ol' Honest Abe—all forty wooden feet of him. His left arm is bent, hand grasping his coat up near the lapel, and the expression on his face seems borrowed from Mount Rushmore, stoic yet serene. That's all I remember of the dream.



I've been studying my dreams lately, trying to remember them, to write them down, and to ponder the significance of what my unconscious is telling me. Based on my studies, I can say conclusively that I have absolutely no idea what last night's dream means. I have no clue why there would be a statue of Abraham Lincoln in the backyard of the house where I grew up. I have no idea why my dad would drink cheap wine or why he would add beef to a perfectly good noodle dish to serve to me and a friend, both vegetarians (he was, I must admit, quite proud that he hadn't added any dairy products). And I have absolutely no explanation for the foot of snow covering a yard in suburban Los Angeles that never saw as much as a flake for the 18 years that I lived there.

I do know this: That dream has had me thinking all day about home. I've thought about that house, my home from the time I was three months old until I moved to Berkeley for college. I've thought about the many homes I've had since: four places in five years in Berkeley, the year abroad when I couldn't call any one place home for more than a few days, and the four homes I've lived in since coming to Missoula, Montana for graduate school. I can't help but think about the house I call home right now, a block from the Clark Fork river and a stone's throw from the mountains that serve as the river's gateway into the Missoula Valley. As I look out the window above my desk, I wonder if there's a path in the foot of snow on the ground that would lead me to a place where I truly feel at home.

“Never saw the morning  
til' I stayed up all night.  
Never saw the sunshine  
til' you turned out the light.

Never saw my hometown  
til' I stayed away too long.  
Never heard the melody  
until I needed the song."

- Tom Waits, *San Diego Serenade* from The Heart  
of Saturday Night.

I don't know if I had anticipated the significance of this song when I placed it onto one of the few tapes I made to take with me on the International Honors Program's Global Ecology course (IHP)—the aforementioned year abroad. Yet, as I listened to it repeatedly on long bus or plane rides to the next destination on our whirlwind tour of parts of eight countries, this song revealed its meaning to me. The experience of having my whole life constantly changing around me compelled me to agree with Tom Waits that the best way to appreciate anything—your friends, the sun, your home—is to be deprived of it.

Which I was, although it could be argued that traveling to foreign and exotic places, living with local people, and touring around to speak with local academics or activists about the state of their surroundings is hardly to be deprived. I recognize that there are much worse ways to spend eight months than to travel and study in Boston, England, India, Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand, Fiji, Mexico and Washington, DC.

Yet if something can be said to be a luxury and a necessity, then the Global Ecology course was both for me. If I was deprived of everything I found familiar, I was also provided with a reprieve from those things from which I sorely needed a break. The program came at a time when my life seemed to be stalled in neutral—revving high, but desperately yearning for a direction to travel in. I had graduated from Berkeley in June 1991 with a degree in

psychology, then spent six months each at two jobs which paid me generously for enduring some of the most tedious work I've ever performed.

A typical day at the first of those jobs saw me dress in slacks, a nice shirt, and a tie so I could sit alone in a room with two computers and fourteen fax machines. I'd collect the faxes pouring in, log them on one computer, then move to the other computer to begin processing the faxed requests for travel reservations. Then I'd put them in a box where they would be picked up by agents who called the customers to confirm their reservations. On a good day, I would get to call some of the customers myself, to enjoy the opportunity to interact with an actual living person. A bad day would be dominated by the piercing beeps of jammed fax machines and the gripes of supervisors unhappy with my lack of productivity.

The second job wasn't much better, although I did at least have coworkers to interact with. It was on the Berkeley campus, about a block from my apartment, so I didn't have to commute, and could go home for lunch or just sit on campus and watch the students. The mindless work of sorting and opening mail and answering phone inquiries, however, didn't help me feel any better about the direction my life was heading.

While I made more money during that year than I have in any other two-year period, it was the worst year of my life. I shouldn't complain so much about the work, but I hated that it got in the way of my desire to work to make the world a better place. I had gone to college armed with the selfish perspective that you get a degree in order to get a job so that you can make some money and live happily ever after. My perspective had clearly changed.

The seeds for that change of perspective had been planted during a sophomore sociology seminar in which we read Robert Heilbroner's An

Inquiry Into the Human Prospect. That book exposed me to the idea that humans have altered the Earth's ecology in drastic and potentially catastrophic ways. It described the depletion of the ozone layer and the "greenhouse effect" resulting from the pollution that people have been spewing into the atmosphere. Heilbroner suggested that both of these processes, as well as the planet's loss of topsoil, the poisoning of waterways, and other alarming trends, could threaten the very existence of human life on this planet.

At first I was appalled and bewildered by the idea that my species could be responsible for altering the Earth's atmosphere in such a way that would threaten our very survival. I guess I had always liked people, and thought them to be good at heart. I'd chosen to study psychology because I'd always been fascinated by the way people acted, and I wanted to understand them better. Suddenly I began envisioning the image of a group of people placing the Earth into a large oven, heating the planet up to the point that it became too hot for people to survive there anymore. I understood that other species were going to suffer as well, but was most concerned with the fate of humanity. At first, this newly acquired knowledge was depressing, But I soon moved past the feelings of helplessness and withdrawal, and decided that I had to do something to help slow or reverse these processes.

To be honest, I had no idea how. I read more about these issues and others that threaten the habitats of many organisms, from pollution to the paving over of natural landscapes. While my study of and concern for the state of the Earth's ecosystems deepened immensely, my actions tended more towards the preservation of my bank account than of biological diversity. If I

had learned anything from my study of psychology, it was that a rift between one's attitudes and behaviors is a recipe for distress.

So here I found myself, nine months after graduation, working in an office on the Berkeley campus at one of those thoroughly annoying paper-pushing jobs. To make matters worse, my relationship with Jen, my lover of almost four years, suffered as she endured a situation almost exactly like mine. Neither of us felt very good about ourselves, which strained our ability to appreciate our relationship, and made our home life less of the refreshing reprieve from work it should have been. I watched our friendship hurtle towards an ugly conclusion, which I felt powerless to avoid.

Fortunately, my life took a sudden turn for the better as I read *The Daily Californian* one day at work. I turned the page and the ad practically jumped out at me. "Do you have a spirit of adventure, intellectual curiosity, desire for change, a genuine interest in ecological issues and comparative international study?" it read. "If so, you should study and travel with Global Ecology: Nature, Society and Sustainability."

"Whoa!" I thought, "where do I sign up?"

Six months later, I was on my way to Boston, where my fellow travelers and I would start IHP. That summer breezed by as I tore through the 15 books on Global Ecology's required reading list. As an undergraduate, I just wanted college to be over and thought I'd never want to return to school, but my interest in learning had become so rejuvenated that I actually began researching graduate schools. So did Jen, knowing that she'd be ready for a change from her university job after I returned the following May.

Late in the summer, Jen and I hit the road with a friend, Mike, who was to start graduate school that fall at Michigan. We stopped to check out

graduate programs in Eugene, Oregon; Olympia, Washington; and Missoula, with an eye towards the following fall. Then it was time to part ways: Mike and I to Ann Arbor, and I beyond to Boston, while Jen would catch a plane from Missoula back to the Bay Area.

I still remember the scene in the Missoula airport as Jen prepared to return to Berkeley, and a life she disliked, while I hardly had any idea what lay before me. As the departure time of Jen's plane neared, she began to cry, yet I hardly felt sad. Earlier in our relationship, Jen's tears were sure to make me cry as well, but not this time. I never told her this until years later, but I had decided to go on IHP because I knew that being apart would be great for both Jen and me as individuals—and that could only benefit our relationship. We'd been together since our freshman year, our entire adult lives, and had learned how to prop each other up, providing each other with a crutch that left us each lacking in inner strength. We desperately needed some space. Despite my confidence, our parting was difficult. We hadn't been apart for more than a week for over four years. There was no doubt that we would miss each other, and I've always felt ashamed that I couldn't muster tears that day. I think that I was just too excited for what was to follow. A road trip across the country with an old buddy, then a program that I knew would change my life.

Soon I arrived in Boston and met my fellow travelers as IHP began. For eight months, those fellow students were the only constants as we were constantly transported to new places and experiences via plane, train, bus and boat. We became each others' family, and each others' furniture. No matter where we traveled, with each other we learned to feel at home.

I never thought much about what it meant to feel at home during my childhood in that house on Dearborn Street. I'd spend hours in that backyard: digging holes that I intended to turn into tunnels; playing with the many cats that comprised the lineage beginning with the lone, fertile matriarch we rescued from the humane society; throwing a tennis ball against the wall of our covered cement patio. Sometimes friends would come over and play baseball or football or join me on the swingset, but I often found myself alone. And while I didn't think much of the meaning of home, I sure did spend a lot of time just thinking.

A shy kid by nature, you could say that, if anyplace, I really only felt at home inside my head. I was smart enough to earn an invitation to San Jose Street School's "Highly Gifted Magnet Program" beginning in the third grade, but I had little confidence. So I often kept my thoughts to myself. I remember once walking through my yard, pondering the idea of atoms. I thought that if you could study any atom perfectly enough, it could tell you not only about its history, but about all of the other atoms that it had ever come into contact with. I had no way of knowing if that was true or not. My friends sure showed no signs of thinking about things like that. Maybe I knew that I was different from my friends. Maybe I just wanted to keep my little theory of atoms to myself.

Now I'm a graduate student, still shy but confident enough that many of my friends would probably laugh at me labeling myself so. I've been lucky enough in the last few years to learn about the sorts of connections that fascinated me as a child. In working towards my master's degree in environmental studies, I've learned something of ecology, of the way that

organisms and ecosystems are enmeshed and intertwined into the web of life that envelops our planet. I've also begun to read about Buddhism, which teaches about interconnectedness through the metaphor of Indra's net: an infinite web of jewels, each containing the perfect reflection of all of the other jewels in the web.

I've learned, in short, that we are all in this together. We humans, cockroaches, grizzly bears, ponderosa pines, the bacteria in our guts that help us break down our food, the birds, the bees, the bugs, and any and all other organisms you can think of—or that have never been thought of because they have not yet been “discovered.” Until we learn how to colonize other planets—which I'm not too confident of—we've only got this one to share. This Earth, the one I've pictured in the massive oven, is yet another thing that binds us. It is our shared home.

I recently took a trip back to Southern California, where most of my family still lives. I drove first across the Northwest to Seattle to visit Jen, who moved there from Missoula five months ago along with our friend Victor. She's still my best friend, although we haven't been lovers for three years. As I had suspected, we did grow a lot during our time apart, and that has allowed us to become even better friends. She moved with me to Missoula the fall after I returned from IHP, and we broke up that winter. After a year apart, we even lived together again, with Victor, during their final year in Missoula.

After a week in Seattle, Jen and I made our way down the coast as far as her mother's home in San Francisco, where we spent Christmas. I visited friends along the way—in Portland, San Francisco, Berkeley—then made it down to Southern California sometime just before the new year.



I spent some time with my grandfather in L.A., then visited the home of my aunt, uncle, and two cousins, maybe a mile from the house I where grew up in Northridge. I drove by my old house, as I do whenever I get a chance, and thought about my childhood there. It's strange to have people I don't even know living in the space that still holds memories of my childhood. After dreaming about the house, and the yard, I find it even more bizarre that there are details about that space that I can't quite remember. There are areas of that yard I can imagine quite clearly, such as the barren patch behind my parents' bedroom in which I tried unsuccessfully to grow vegetables one summer. Then there are other spaces, such as the dumping ground back in the corner where I saw the statue of Lincoln, which seem at best fuzzy, as if my memory has been partially erased or covered over.

I finally made it to Orange County, to the house where my parents moved when I was a sophomore at Berkeley. They live now about 70 miles south of where I grew up and close to the same distance from San Diego. When they moved, I ceased to have a home in Southern California. I've never felt at home in Orange County, although I go there fairly often to visit my parents, and my sister and brother-in-law and their year-old son, Brandon.

On this particular trip, I felt acutely just how far my life has come in the ten years I've lived away from Southern California. In just a couple of days, I became overwhelmed by the traffic, the polluted air, the difficult and time-consuming nature of performing even the simplest tasks such as shopping or mailing a letter, and the high stress levels of almost everybody I encountered. I shifted into hermit mode for a few days: hanging around my folks' house, reading, eating a lot, and watching a ton of sports on my dad's

big screen television. I'm sure I was pretty grouchy during this period, and probably not very good company.

Fortunately, that can't be said for a book I had with me. I pored through the anthology entitled The Soul Unearthed: Celebrating Wildness and Personal Renewal Through Nature, edited by Cass Adams. This book helped me to understand how much I had changed since growing up in the artificial landscapes of southern California. I especially relished the section about wilderness vision quests, including a piece by Brooke Medicine Eagle, who guides trips from her home in Montana's Flathead Valley, just north of Missoula. I made a note to contact her when I got back to Montana. I since have, and I just may join her out in the woods sometime this summer.

Thinking about the appreciation I've gained for less paved-over areas provided me some relief, but I still found myself having to endure Orange County for a while longer. The life there, you see, is very different from the one I have created for myself in Missoula. Except, that is, for the part about reading and eating a lot. While I love my time to myself—writing, working in my garden (whenever that snow melts), and playing with my cats—I'm also a fairly social person who enjoys the convenience of being able to walk or ride my bike downtown, and to run into friends unexpectedly. I also love to be able to get away from it all and into the woods, on skis or on foot, in much less time than it takes my parents to get to work. These are things that basically can't be done in Orange County, California, and that's a major reason why I feel like a stranger in a familiar land there.

The landscape of Southern California is actually quite beautiful, if you have the time or the opportunity to notice it. Fortunately, I was able to get out of town, to get my legs moving, and to bust out of the rut that seemed to

dominate my time in Orange County. I visited my old friend Jason Elias in Los Angeles, and he took me on a walk to a beautiful spot in the Santa Monica Mountains from where you can see the ocean, the L.A. basin, and over Mulholland pass into the San Fernando Valley where we both grew up. We encountered quite a few mountain bikers on the boulevard-width path as we hiked by sage and other sparse shrubs, but nothing like the traffic in town. Since it was a clear day—smoggy in L.A., but clear in “the Valley”—we could also see the surrounding mountains quite well.

I’ve been lucky enough to learn something about mountains since moving to western Montana. If the west to Wallace Stegner was “the native home of hope,” then western Montana might be called “the native home of mountains.” Of course the mountains here aren’t as impressive as, say, some of the high peaks of the Himalayas that I’ve also been lucky enough to glimpse. (I’m reminded of an IHP bus trip through the Himalayas, listening on my walkman to the Jayhawks’ Hollywood Town Hall—a tape that fellow traveler Jed Burkett shared with the whole group and one that became thick with meaning for me and a few others. “You brought me to/ the mother of mountains,” they sang, in *Crowded in the Wings*, as we ascended the world’s most magnificent mountain range. My spine simply tingled.)

So sure, they’re maybe not as high as the Himalayas—or the Colorado Rockies, or Alaska’s Denali—but the mountains in Montana are impressive nonetheless, and I believe that my time here has trained me to see mountains and to appreciate their beauty. If my dad has acquired a taste for fine wine and no longer is satisfied by the buzz offered by cheap chardonnay, then I have acquired an eye for mountains.

And I must admit, as I surveyed the Santa Monica Mountains winding to the north, the San Gabriels across the valley, the Santa Anas to the southeast, and the higher peaks beyond, I was impressed. The vantage point Jason and I shared as we stood atop a platform the United States military once used to detect invading aircraft or missiles over the Pacific offered me a whole new perspective on the region that I called home for the first 18 years of my life. It's a beautiful landscape, I thought, at least the parts that aren't paved over. I also realized that if I hoped to leave southern California with any kind of a good feeling about the area I grew up in, I'd have to get out into those mountains.

A couple days later, I set out for a camping trip into the northern edge of the Santa Monica Mountains with another old friend, Casey Walsh, and my brother-in-law Terry Horvath. Before that trip, I had spent exactly one night in a tent in Southern California, and that was in the backyard of a friend's house in Northridge as we celebrated his 11th birthday with an outdoor slumber party. We set out in the afternoon, stopping to buy food, a bottle of Evan Williams "old No. 1" Kentucky bourbon, and a last civilized meal at a Thai restaurant on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu.

Then we found the trailhead at Point Mugu State Park and set out into a "wilderness" complex that included the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. We hiked in about two miles and, owing to our late start, got into camp just in time to set up our tents, fire up a dinner of pasta with red sauce and pickled chili peppers, and dip into the Evan Williams.

The next day, the three of us had barely set out upon the trail when we rounded a corner down into a wash and startled a red-tailed hawk not 15 feet

up the gully to our left. The hawk immediately bolted before having a chance to enjoy its breakfast of freshly-killed squirrel. We investigated the still-steaming rodent, apologized for our rudeness, and hoped that the hawk would return to claim its prey after our departure.

Our hike that day was punctuated by the periodic passing of mountain bikers, but fortunately we were in a collectively good mood and we didn't mind that our trip bore little resemblance to a pristine wilderness experience. Casey also grew up in the San Fernando Valley, and I knew that he had spent more time in the woods growing up than I had, so I questioned him about the natural history of the place. I wanted to know about these plants native to essentially the same place that I was. My desire for this knowledge was left unfulfilled as Casey simply didn't know. I don't fault him for it, and in fact I actually envy that Casey can so enjoy hiking around, appreciating the landscape while not obsessing over the names and stories of every plant, every place, every bird.

One name he did know, applying it to the turkey vultures that visited us quite often, was "zopilote"—a term he picked up during his anthropological field work in Mexico. After asking a few more questions that he couldn't answer, I decided that maybe I was the naturalist on this journey, and my eyes then seemed to adjust to see the flora and fauna in a way they hadn't earlier in the day. I realized that one of the shrubs that seemed almost as common as the ever-present sage was wild tarragon, which smelled marvelous and tasted great when we added it to that night's meal of pasta and red sauce and pickled chilies and Evan Williams.

I was pleasantly surprised to encounter wildflowers such as Indian paintbrush and shooting stars in full bloom. I think my vision of these

flowers had been obscured earlier in the day because they were so out of context for me, having learned them during my wanderings in the woods of western Montana. The time of year really threw me off as well—these flowers wouldn't bloom for several more months in Montana. A few friends have been jealous, since my return to Missoula, when I tell them that I observed these flowers blooming during the second week of January.

The zopilotes weren't the only birds to accompany us that day. We saw quite a few more red-tails, some raven, and a pair of white birds with black wing tips that hovered in the wind the way kestrels do. I consulted my field guide later and could only guess that they were black-shouldered kites. Despite my curiosity for the knowledge, I have to agree with Casey that the names don't matter nearly as much as the show these birds gave us as they soared, hovered, and chased each other, darting across the blue southern California sky.

The most striking part of that day's hike for me were the views of the surrounding mountains. We crested a rise not two miles from camp as we hiked east, away from the ocean, and were graced with the view of a nearby range of extremely steep, jagged peaks. The range reminded me very much of the Mission Mountains that range north from Missoula towards Flathead Lake and Brooke Medicine Eagle and Glacier National Park. As we continued our meandering hike, that range periodically captured my attention and I would simply stop and stare, as if waiting for something to happen.

We completed a grueling and thoroughly satisfying day of hiking by looping back past our camp towards the beach, stopping to visit the dead squirrel that remained where we had left it. We arrived at an overlook, some 800 feet above the ocean, and sat to watch the sunset. We dipped again into

the Evan Williams, ate apples, and lamented the presence of the hundreds of cars at the beach below and the literally millions of others whose drivers have unwittingly conspired to pave over and foul the air of a southern California landscape that could be as beautiful as any.

We decided to hike out the next day, thanks to the encroaching rain clouds and the pain in Terry's knee from a stumble during our epic hike. We stopped for some excellent Mexican food in the migrant farmworker-dominated town of Oxnard (I had nopales—a cactus that Casey had also taught me the name of during our hike). Then we went our separate ways: Casey returned to his parents' place in Northridge to continue his visit before returning to graduate school in New York; Terry rejoined my sister and nephew in Orange County; and I began my journey home, stopping that night to visit a friend in Oakland.

I've been back in Missoula for almost a month now, after a pleasant if uneventful trip back up the coast then east from Seattle. I've settled into a life much as I described earlier—writing, reading, socializing, dancing, and especially eating a lot to stave off the chill of the Montana winter. I've also made more of an effort to remember and think about my dreams, thus Abe Lincoln's emergence. I really hadn't thought much about when I might return to southern California until today, when I checked my mail and found an announcement for my 10-year high school reunion.

Mostly, though, I'm trying not to think too much about the future, about the places that I'll one day visit. Instead, I'm spending a lot of time pondering the past, reflecting on how out of touch I felt while in southern

California, and the satisfaction I sometimes allow myself to feel in and around Missoula. As I mentioned, I've begun a very basic study of Buddhism. I try for a short while every day to sit quietly and think only about my breath. This practice is very soothing, and really has helped me to appreciate things in the here-and-now: like the company of my cats, which isn't too difficult except when they decide to walk across my keyboard as my lovely sweetheart P.J. just did. I've also learned my lesson about appreciating the woods that are so close that I can see them when I take the time look up and out my window.

As the series of essays for which this piece serves as the prefatory note will attest, I'm also spending a lot of time thinking about my year on IHP, reflecting and writing about the people I met, the places I saw, the issues I learned about, and the experiences I had.

Those experiences, places, people, and issues, you will see if you read the accompanying essays, combined to teach me a lot about the world and about myself. They helped me to see myself as part of something larger; both as a member of a community of 30 people, and as a member of a planet of animals and plants trying to carry on the best way they know how. The IHP program was, to be perfectly melodramatic about it, something of a hero's journey for me—a venturing forth to circumnavigate the globe, and a return to my place of origin, somehow enriched. Although our journey had more of a set agenda than Odysseus' epic, the lessons we brought home may be similarly difficult to pinpoint. Believe me, I've spent much of my three-and-a-half years in Missoula trying. I have unearthed many more questions than I have answered; and hath vanquished nary an enemy.

What I have done, I think, is to share what I've learned about the complexities of certain issues, such as the fate of the Bengal Tiger and Siberian



Crane in India, and the plight of the southern Mexican Indians who call themselves the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. I've learned something of the meanings of the words "community", and "place", and "home." And I've written of my adventures and my knowledge in the hope that we can each find places in our lives for the meanings that these terms represent.

To break the melodrama for just a second, however, I also think I've succeeded at having a little fun. I don't pretend that these essays are the definitive words on their subjects, thanks to years of exhaustive research. Which is not to say that I haven't done my research. It just means that sometimes that research involves revisiting a pertinent book or breaking out one of my old tapes and reflecting on the tunes that meant so much to me at the time. Like Dave Pirner of the band Soul Asylum wailing away: "Oooooohhhh, I am so homesick." Believe me, at times on IHP, I understood that sentiment, as I did when he followed it up with: "but it ain't that bad, 'cause I'm homesick for the home I've never had."

Not to give away too much, but I hope these essays reflect the struggle that Pirner points to in that song, one that I still grapple with today. How do you appreciate the circumstances around you, feeling at home wherever you are, and at the same time work to create the ideal future, one that looks more like the world you'd like to live in than the one you presently live in does? How do you struggle to make the world a better place, and still carve out the space and time to love your life, your family, your home? For me, these essays have been both a way to grapple with these questions, and to response to them.

As for that image of Abe Lincoln, I've had some time to think about that. I actually have more of a connection with the ex-President than I let on earlier, having dressed as Lincoln this past Halloween after my horoscope suggested I masquerade as "an honest politician." What I've settled on is that, for me, Lincoln simply represents honesty and integrity. So, as I approached this task of recounting what remains the most influential year of my life, I believe that a part of me—my unconscious, my dream-self—was telling me to sit tall and just tell my stories the best, most honest way that I know how. To put a more contemporary spin on it, the singer/songwriter/poet/self-described-righteous-babe Ani DiFranco points out, "my life is a work in progress," and I believe that applies equally well to these pieces. With that in mind, and with my best Lincoln-esque grace, I welcome you and thank you for joining me on my ever-evolving journey around the globe—and on the path to a place that somehow resembles home.

### On the Brink of the Spirit World

A tiger emerges from the reeds, and rushes powerfully into the shallows of a lake as sambar deer scatter excitedly. Using its paws as paddles, the tiger focuses his gaze and pursuit in the direction of one unlucky sambar, closes, and pounces. He drags the deer below the water, then resurfaces, his teeth piercing the sambar's neck, jaws locked. A successful kill, the entire event takes no longer than 20 seconds—40 if you're viewing a slow motion replay, as I am.

I'm watching *Tiger Crisis* at the International Wildlife Film Festival, Missoula, Montana, and I glance away from the film long enough to observe a full house worth of eyes glued to the Wilma theater screen. Everybody seems as captivated by the images of the big cats as I am; by their agility, their intensity, their grace. Or maybe they're simply stunned, astounded as I am at the narrator's assertion that "the tiger is in crisis—it may not survive the century."

I wonder how many people in that crowd have been lucky enough to witness a tiger in the wild; or even prowling uncomfortably in the artificial

confines of some zoo? Am I the only one in the audience who's actually been to India's Ranthambhore National Park—the tiger preserve where most of the film's images were shot? The answers, I conclude at the end of the film, just don't matter. Nobody walks out of the theater that night without being touched by the power, the majesty, of the tiger—nor without feeling profound loss when imagining the extinction of the tiger in the wild.

I didn't realize that the tiger was facing such intense pressure from poachers when I visited Ranthambhore. Yet I'm not really surprised. As a graduate student in environmental studies who spent eight months traveling the world studying global ecological issues, very little news of species on the brink of extinction surprises me anymore. My memory refreshed by the film's images of Ranthambhore, I spend the rest of the evening recalling my visit to India, trying to remember what I learned there, and wondering if there's anything I can do to help save the tiger.

"It is important that all of you occasionally have space and time to yourselves as individuals," suggested the handout professor Doug Zook gave us back on September 21st, 1992—the first day of the International Honors Program's Global Ecology course (IHP). Three months later and half a world away, I couldn't help but heed the advice Zook gave that day in Boston: "Use that time to reflect on what you've seen and heard; to integrate what you've learned into who you've become."

What I'd become, unfortunately, was ill, which didn't help me to enjoy my first vacation from the program which had brought me and 30 other students to India, via England, to study issues affecting India's landscape, people, and wildlife. The course granted us a two-week hiatus to

enjoy Christmas and New Year's however we chose, and my friends Eric and Elaine and I decided to travel east from Delhi to the coastal tourist city of Puri. I should have rejoiced at my first break in months from the seven-day-a-week cycle of lectures, bus rides, field study sessions, and strange beds, but I got sick instead. A rather boring illness by Indian standards, I simply had no appetite nor any energy, so I spent the opening days of 1993 confined to bed in a guest house room and awaited periodic doses of Eric's or Elaine's perpetual good cheer.

A short, sturdy rural Virginian with strawberry-blonde hair, Elaine was sweet, but had a tenacious streak that manifested itself on the basketball court—where she'd invariably pull down as many rebounds as Eric, despite his being over a foot taller. Of course that also had something to do with Eric's demeanor—he was exceptionally gentle, especially for a six-foot-five entrepreneur with 14 years' experience peddling computers in Washington, DC. They couldn't do much for me, but their southern hospitality in checking on me often, bringing me water, and keeping my spirits up would have satisfied even my Jewish mother. Between their excited reports about Puri's temples, markets, and fishing village, I read Gandhi, swilled lemon soda, and made promises to some-God-or-another about how good I'd be if only he or she helped me feel a whole lot better.

So reflect I did, my companion a copy of *The Ecologist* magazine entitled "The Relevance of Gandhi," while my two friends rode rented bicycles to the windmills two miles down the coast, mingled with Puri's residents, and watched the sun set and rise over the ocean from the same beach. I too managed to do those things during our five day stay, but I spent the first three days lying on the wooden platform that served as a bed in our

four-dollar-a-night room and thought about all I had learned since the program began—and about what small part I could play in preserving the many threatened species we share this planet with.

After three months as a sometimes-less-than-diligent student of global environmental issues, you could ask me about nearly anything—Pepsi Cola, the World Bank, clotted cream—and I'd tell you how it harms the environment. If I didn't know the exact mechanism, I could certainly make up a plausible explanation. For example, Pepsi employs pesticide-intensive agriculture which degrades the vitality of soils in the agricultural land it owns in places like the Indian state of Punjab; the World Bank often loans countries money to pay for large-scale projects, such as dams, that benefit the coffers of the country's elite while destroying fertile river valleys, the organisms that inhabit them, and the way of life of the local people; and the production of clotted cream requires cows, whose rumination produces methane—a potent “greenhouse gas” which traps heat in the atmosphere and contributes to the warming of the planet. The Earth's ecosystems, I learned all too well, are being degraded by humanity's exploitative pattern of resource consumption, and I knew more specifics than most people ever want to hear.

What I hadn't figured out was how to live with the information that everything I did—every bite I took, soda I drank, picture I took—was contributing to the destruction of some ecosystem somewhere. Until, that is, I was introduced to Gandhi.

“Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward Himsa,” said Gandhi in his autobiography (as excerpted by *The Ecologist*). “The very fact of his living—eating, drinking and moving

about—necessarily involves some Himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of Ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of Himsa.”

I found in these words an answer about how to subsist while causing the least amount of harm to the Earth’s ecosystems. After all, modern India’s patron saint of simplicity had admitted that living involved inflicting some pain upon other beings—or, I extrapolated, ecological systems. The key was to try to minimize that impact wherever and whenever possible.

Gandhi offered me some useful tools to help do so, such as the concept of Swaraj, or self-rule. Yes, it made sense to me: All I had to do was consider each one of my actions, then apply self-restraint to limit those behaviors which I deemed unnecessary and undesirable.

I made a list—written, of course, in very tiny letters to conserve paper. I swore off of coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and that incredibly cheap bag of grass that Elaine and I had bought just days before (although I honestly could not tell you the ecological degradation caused by the cultivation of that substance). I stopped listening to my walkman, and had no problem not taking pictures since my camera had been stolen just a week before. Sure, I would eat, and drink bottled water or maybe even a soda, but not more than I felt I needed. I knew no medicine would cure me, nor did I want any. I simply wanted to rest, to just be, and to inflict no harm. I was striving to achieve status as the ecologically-pure being, and Gandhi would have been proud.

“Rick, you’re not going to be able to keep this up,” said Eric as we discussed my deliberations. Eric had come to know my affinity for most of the

substances on my list of taboos. "As soon as you feel better, you're going to forget all about this vow."

"I don't think so," I replied, focusing most of my diluted power into my newfound righteousness. "I'm serious about this."

I remained serious. I felt much better within a couple of days, and joined Eric and Elaine in gallivanting around Puri. We rented bicycles and rode to the city's renowned Jagganath temple, a massive structure of three carved conical towers guarded by brightly painted stone elephants and tigers. The gatekeeper denied us entry despite our pleadings. "But we're really Hindus," Eric implored, fighting back a smile. "Peel away our skin and we're all the same color underneath." We managed to get a view of the temple from the roof of the library across the street. "Damn that sucker's big," exclaimed Elaine, and I think Eric appreciated feeling small in a land where he mostly felt like a giant.

On the way to dinner that evening, I befriended a pauper. I can't recall how we began talking as we gazed side by side at a small Hindu shrine, but I do know that I was immediately attracted to the man's appearance of simplicity. Dressed only in white robes and fraying sandals, he looked very much to my eye like a holy man. His cane and graying hair clashed with his boyish face and stature. His name was Sambu, and I don't know why, but the adjective "lithe" comes to mind when I think about him—it could be applied equally to his walk, his shy smirk, maybe his very essence.

"I am 30 years old only," Sambu replied to my inquiry in a soft, slow, even voice. "My body is no good. Sometimes I cough blood. I no can work. I sleep on the beach."



"How do you eat?" I wondered, and he replied through a rotting mouth of teeth that he was a beggar, at the mercy of tourists and local business owners.

"That is very sad," I replied, noticing Elaine check her watch as Eric and three English tourists we had met at our "hotel" stared down Puri's beach front path towards the restaurant. Before I had time to consider it, I invited Sambu to join us for dinner—much to the dismay of our British friends and to the entertainment of Eric and Elaine.

We dined at the Peace restaurant—a tourist trap, like the nearby Mickey Mouse's, where the stereo blasted The Doors, The Police, or Bob Marley at all times. The interior seemed Mediterranean—a high ceiling supported by whitewashed walls decorated with album covers and a pastel drawing of a dove, complete with olive branch, in full flight. The menu included delicacies such as french fries, pancakes, milkshakes, and a dish called pizza that reminded me more of melted cheese on cardboard. We had eaten there several times—I should say that I had watched Eric and Elaine gorge themselves there while I drank water and picked at my rice and vegetables. Sambu and I spoke to no one else during that meal.

"How did you learn to speak English so well?" I asked in my best Indian-English accent, enunciating every syllable.

Sambu paused a moment, crafting his words carefully, and replied, "I have made many friends here. One friend from Australia was here for very long time. He taught me much English."

"That was nice of him," I said, and nodded towards the traditional Indian meal of dal (lentils), chapati (flat, round bread), curried vegetables and rice Sambu had ordered. "It seems people like to be nice to you."

"Yes, thank you," he answered. "But not everyone is nice to me. Some people call me names and hit me. They say I am worth nothing and I should go away. I do not listen to them."

"Is it better to spend time only with good people?" I inquired, sensing a rift between Sambu's thinking and Gandhi's. "Or should you try to show the evil people how to be nicer and kinder to others?"

"You cannot change those people," Sambu contended. "Some people are not like you and me. They think only of themselves."

"It makes me sad that you think so," I told him. "But maybe you are right. Maybe some people will just never be good."

Being the good person I was striving so hard to be, I rejected Elaine and Eric's offer to share the bill, and paid for Sambu's dinner. Of course that wasn't a problem, especially since he had ordered the cheapest meal on the menu, but it made me feel good anyway. He thanked me again and I told him that I was very glad to have met him. Then I pressed my hands together, bowed slightly, and offered the traditional Indian greeting, Namasté.

"Namasté," he replied as the corners of his mouth turned up gently.

We said good-bye to Puri the next day, and boarded a train bound for Delhi. Once on the train, I climbed up to the third-tier bunk while Elaine and Eric played cards below. There I remained, my reading of the millenniums-old Hindu epic Mahabharata interrupted at nearly every stop by the piercing call of slender, toothless men carrying teapots down the aisle. "Chaaaiiii," they droned, advertising their milk and sugar laden tea. Eric and Elaine occasionally partook of the ten-cents-a-cup concoction, offering to buy me

some each time. “No thanks,” I’d reply, but I generally accepted their offers of water; green, seedy, apple-sized fruits called goas that are closely related to guavas; and sesame seed candy. Twice during the 38-hour journey from Puri to Delhi I climbed down from the bunk for a trip to the “toilet”—a little room with a hole in the floor through which I could watch the railroad ties whizzing by. Like most Indian toilets, the train’s was bordered by a set of raised ridges on which to stand, and there was no toilet paper to be found. We had learned to carry pocket packets of Kleenex, to avoid the toilet unless absolutely necessary, and to do our business quickly when it became unavoidable. I zipped back to the bunk each time, and dove right into the Mahabharata’s stories of the many gods of Hindu lore. The interwoven narratives generally followed a pattern wherein the evil actors eventually suffered for their unjust ways while those who followed the path of dharma—defined in the book’s glossary as “righteous course of conduct”—were always rewarded. The force of Gandhi reinforced itself within me.

We rejoined our group in Delhi during a lecture by one of India’s most famous environmental thinkers, Vandana Shiva. We had returned to the city at about 2:00 that morning, so we were a bit tardy to the morning lecture, and walked in just as Vandana was talking about the “evils of the Green Revolution.” I gazed around the room excitedly at the 28 friends I hadn’t seen in what seemed a lot longer than two weeks. Meanwhile Vandana explained how chemical-intensive agriculture was born out of a post-World War II desire by the chemical companies to create a demand for their surplus—and future—products. The result of the Green Revolution in India was the consolidation of agricultural land and production, driving small farmers from the land in favor of—in places like the Punjab—large companies such

as Pepsi. We found ourselves at the first post-vacation event of the program already being inundated with more stories of human and corporate greed leading to ecological and social decay, and Eric, Elaine and I hadn't yet had a chance to properly greet our classmates.

After the lecture, we hugged our friends and exchanged stories about the break. Most of them had had vacations similar to ours—or at least to Elaine and Eric's. They traveled to coastal tourist towns, ate in restaurants that served westernized food, partied a bit, saw some sights and had lots of fun.

"My vacation?" I'd respond to their inquiries. "Oh I was kind of sick. I had a good time, though." And then, came the inevitable moment of discomfort.

"No thanks, I stopped drinking coffee," I'd reply to their kind gestures towards the refreshment table. "No I don't want any tea, either. Thanks, though."

A few days later, we all arose early and—weaned from our recent freedom and back on itinerary-standard-time—boarded the bus for a week-long tour through the desert state of Rajasthan. I had contacted my first real tinge of "Delhi belly" while back in the city, so I moped past the bus' midsection where my companions bubbled with an enthusiasm reminiscent of a crowd of junior high kids en route to Disneyland. I passed the day-long drive to our first destination—Ranthambhore National Park—with my head dug firmly inside of some book, and scowled as most of the bus engaged in what had become a months-long conversation. People tirelessly reviewed the foods they missed most, and everybody would let out a collective groan after each selection, then try to think of something they missed even more.

"Real pizza," someone would say. "Not that crap they called pizza down at Covalum (or Trivandrum, or Puri)."

"Mmmmm," the crowd would respond.

"How about Mexican food," the next person would announce to the same chorus of replies.

"Can't they just appreciate the food we've been eating," I wondered to myself. I was pretty sick of the dal, chapatis, and curried cauliflower invariably served at every meal, but the brown, saucy masala dishes or other curry-type regional delicacies at most meals seemed delicious to me.

"A peanut-butter sandwich on whole wheat bread," someone nominated, and I leaned over to the person sitting next to me, mumbled "I'd just like to have a peach," and planted my nose more firmly in my book.

After a 12-hour bus ride, we arrived at a tent complex on the edge of the park that was to be our home for the next few nights and crashed out early in anticipation of our 6 a.m. departure into Ranthambhore—the crown jewel of India's tiger preserves. We awoke in the morning and the bus transported us to the park's entrance, where we all loaded into two large trucks which held about 20 people each. Our guides instructed us to keep silent at all times, and to point if we saw an animal of interest. Then we entered the park.

As the trucks followed a path that encircled the largest of Ranthambhore's three lakes, arms and fingers flew in recognition of the sambar grazing in the shallows. The large, light-brown sambar looked more like horses with distended bellies than the white-tailed deer I was familiar with, and they glanced slowly in our direction as the jeeps paused a while then passed by. They were joined in the lake by egrets perched between reeds

near the shore, and the jagged flight and dissonant songs of several small species of birds graced the air. I couldn't identify the hot-dog-bun sized birds, nor raise my voice to ask about them, but that didn't bother me much. The jeeps cruised the sparse forest of trees I also knew no names for, and we observed more sambar and flocks of birds that dispersed like confetti on New Year's Eve at the sound of the approaching jeeps. I knew I should have been impressed, and part of me was—especially when five wild pigs raced across the path of our vehicles with a grace I would have reserved for small ungulates in fear for their lives or the big cats on their tails. But part of my attention was elsewhere, although I'd like to think the sight of a tiger would have jarred me to become focused. I'll never know for sure.

As we motored through the park that morning, I still felt a little bit sick, I felt a little cold, and, for one of the few times since I'd made the acquaintance of my 30 companions back in September, I felt alone. The illness I knew was passing, and the emerging heat of the desert day began to take the chill off. And as Betsy Dickinson—who was perched on the seat behind me in the truck—reached up and put her hand on my shoulder, I could feel the loneliness begin to dissipate as well. Soft-spoken and even-tempered, Betsy had a keen eye and patience honed by many childhood hours spent observing the wonders of the Atlantic Ocean. Probably the most observant people-watcher in our group, Betsy later told me that I had seemed lonely and distant since the group reconvened after our vacation. I began to come to the same realization as I reached up and clasped her hand on my shoulder. No words needed to be exchanged for Betsy to express her concern for my welfare nor for me to show my appreciation.

I thought about the wall that I had constructed around me as we returned to the tent complex after our tour through Ranthambhore. Our schedule offered us some free time, and we relaxed in a grassy area, reading, writing letters or overdue papers, or playing frisbee. Some Indian tourists lounged there as well, and listened to Indian pop music—a surreal mix of droning sitars, high-pitched vocals, and electronic dance-club drum beats—on a portable stereo. After their tape ran out, a member of our group convinced them to let us choose the next one. They reluctantly agreed, and he popped in one of mine that he had poached from my bag the day before—since, heck, I wasn't listening to them anyway.

"With the help of Gaaawd and true friends," sang the Allman Brothers suddenly, "I've come to realize, I still have two strong legs, I need the wings to fly. No I ain't wastin' time no more."

At that moment, I realized that I had, in a sense, been wasting time for the last week or so. Sure, I had been as ecologically pure in my actions as I knew how, but I had also become miserable. I suddenly recognized that I desperately missed music, friends, and fun, and decided right then to remedy that situation. I tracked down Elaine, gave her a big, friendly hug, and secured that dwindling bag which I still had partial ownership of. Then I enlisted the help of some true friends to join me in the tent nearest to the stereo for a ritual intended to lift the funk that had caused me basically to ignore them since our return from vacation.

"BOOM SHIVA!" I exclaimed and clapped my hands forcefully as Elaine offered me the packed chilium—a conical, carved stone smoking implement inlaid with the face of Lord Shiva. A group of Indian locals and

German tourists sitting around a bonfire on the beach at Puri had taught Elaine and I this ritual on New Year's Eve.

"You must pray to Shiva before you smoke," demanded one Indian. "Or else he will become very mad." Shiva, I knew from the Mahabharata, is not only the creator in Hindu mythology, but also the destroyer, and I took it to be a bad idea to anger such a powerful deity. My prayer concluded, I took a long draw from the chilium and felt my head clear and my attention return to a state of engagement I hadn't felt in a while. I remembered that I enjoy smoking because it jolts my awareness out of whatever ruts my mindset might lapse into and helps me to see my surroundings anew. I concluded that afternoon that living by hard and fast rules only gets me in trouble; living imperfectly but happily was more important to me at that moment than living purely but miserably.

There are, I came to believe on my trip, two broad schools of environmental activism. I think of one as "damage control" which entails minimizing the impact of my actions upon the planet's natural systems. The other involves working to influence people, corporations, and governments to stop their ecologically destructive practices, and to alter the attitude of objectification that underlies their exploitation of the Earth's ecosystems.

I still believe in the importance of damage control as a strategy for minimizing environmental degradation, but taking it to an extreme level was doing me more harm than good. I realized that much of the strength I rely on to fuel my work as an environmental activist and writer comes from the joy I derive from people close to me. Our interactions are sometimes



facilitated by activities which can be seen as ecologically destructive, like taking a long drive or drinking alcohol made from non-organic grain. I realize now that there are other, more “pure” ways of achieving the sort of engagement that I used to rely on mind-altering substances to provide.

Yet sometimes, I still solicit the aid offered by alcohol or caffeine to break out of a foggy rut into a state of engagement—like I did that day at Ranthambhore. I somehow reestablished a solidarity with the outside world that day, and reaffirmed my commitment to learn and experience all I could and someday use what I saw to influence others to consider the ecological implications of their actions. Maybe that’s what I’m doing now.

That night, our hosts at the tent camp attempted to satisfy our desire to see the big cats by showing us a film entitled *Tigers of Ranthambhore*. The idea of watching a film about tigers we could have seen anywhere seemed particularly absurd while we were within 30 miles or so of the real thing. (I was reminded of a time back in high school when several of us took LSD and someone broke out a video camera. As if the idea of recording our hallucinogenic meanderings wasn’t weird enough, the others decided they wanted to watch the tape while we were still tripping. I couldn’t deal with that, and came back about an hour later, spouting some crap about having seen the lord while reclining on a lounge chair by the pool with Cream’s *Wheels of Fire* playing on my ghetto-blaster).

Having nothing better to do, we crowded around the TV and were captivated by the display of tigers playing, fighting, resting and preying on sambar in sections of Ranthambhore we had seen just that day. The video

explained that Indian efforts to rescue the tiger from near-extinction in the early 1970s had been fairly successful. India quickly established a series of tiger preserves, including Ranthambhore in 1974, and populations of the Bengal sub-species of tiger began to increase. But the tiger, the video indicated, competes with India's increasing human population for scarce sources of game and water, and its habitat is degraded when people gather firewood within. The video also warned of an increase in the poaching of Bengal tigers.

I absorbed this information while watching images of tiger cubs with their eyes looking ready to bulge from their heads. If the film's producers were trying to establish some visceral connection between the viewer and the fate of the tiger, they were doing a damn good job. I watched the little tigers at play and thought of kittens I had known as a child, of my two cats back home—and I felt a sense of kinship. It was a feeling I perceive much more often with people than non-human animals, although I had experienced it with another animal earlier that day.

During that afternoon, several of us had tried—post-ritual—to return to the park for one last chance at seeing a tiger. The regularly scheduled event was a visit to the neighboring Ranthambhore fort—a massive 10th century structure whose entrance adjoined the park's. As the rest of the group dawdled up the path to the fort, four of us emptied our pockets trying to convince some private jeep drivers at the park's entrance to take us inside. The jeep drivers bent from the waist with laughter as we excavated 100-rupee bills from our pockets. After a prolonged bout of pleading during which I even considered acting tough, we finally accepted that the drivers weren't going to budge, so we joined the rest of the group for a tour of the fort.

Once inside, Keith Perchemlides and I broke away from the larger group we encountered at the entrance, and headed towards a structure not too far away. We approached the large, pale stone covered platform and ascended the stairs on one side to the landing about 20 feet up. The stone columns were rough to the touch but managed to capably support arches, themselves buttressing what looked to be a weighty ceiling. The structure, we could tell despite having little knowledge of architecture, was *old*, and while the stones were clearly worn, they still featured carvings of flowering plants, vines, and tiger heads. The craftsmanship, we agreed, was spectacular, especially considering the fort and its structures have been standing about a thousand years.

From the platform, we were able to see over the top of the sparse Ranthambhore forest, and noticed another platform not 100 yards away. That one was also square, but had no ceiling and no columns. It did have a series of what appeared to be bases for pillars evenly spaced around its edges, and on one of these sat a small primate staring right back at us. He was perched with his knees to his chest, arms folded around his shins, gaze fixed to survey his guests. We decided to investigate.

As we approached the platform, I could make out the figure of a Hanuman langur—named after a deity I had read about in the Mahabharata who was known to appear to people in the form of a monkey. He was between two-and-a-half and three feet tall, with gray fur ranging from charcoal on his back to off-white on his belly, black hands, feet, ears and face, and a four foot long tail which draped down the side of the two foot high pillar and on to the stone base of the platform. We were concerned not to

disturb the langur, but he seemed undaunted by our presence as we neared the platform, so we scaled the steps to the landing.

The langur sure wasn't sweating our presence. Not being accustomed to langurs, we took our time moving closer. It was clear as my heart raced and Keith's eyes widened to resemble the baby tigers' from the film that we were a lot more worried about the threat of an unpleasant encounter than he was. Although the langur seemed calm, I parked myself behind the next base, maybe five feet away from the him, and moved no closer. The langur glanced at me with his deep black eyes, and I studied him while Keith snapped a few pictures. (Like me, Keith is a practitioner of damage control and so sacrifices his film sparingly. The few photos he took that day remain tacked to the bulletin board above my desk.)

I remain impressed that the langur didn't run away, as most animals would have, but sat calmly on his perch as we approached. Animals generally exist in a state of perpetual motion, constantly consumed by some purpose. They're either running, or eating, or playing. Even at rest they're often grooming. For the ten minutes we watched the langur, he did none of that. He was, in fact, so conspicuous in his lack of activity that I've become convinced that his purpose, his mission at that moment, was to just be—and maybe to be observed.

But—I continue to wonder—why? Did the langur somehow intuit we posed no threat to him? Did he *choose* to allow us to observe his being, his demeanor, his world? Could he have known that his reaction to our curiosity would impart upon us a sense of wonder, of communion, that scurrying away would not have? Whatever his motives, I have come to regard our encounter with that langur as a gift from a Ranthambhore ecosystem that was

compelled to protect the view of its sacred and scarce tigers, but wanted to bless us with a glimpse into the world of its wildlife. I left Ranthambhore the next day entirely satisfied with the gift it had bestowed upon me, and feeling pretty darn good about my place in the world.

**“Please, come here,” implored a khaki-clad Indian as he gestured gleefully towards a spotting scope which several others took turns peering through. “The Siberian cranes have arrived just today.”**

**My companion Josh Jaeger and I hopped off our rented bikes and stepped up to the tripod, eager for a glimpse of the birds we had learned of just the day before. I strained my eyes as Josh glimpsed through the scope, and was barely able to make out five thin, white figures about 200 yards across the marshy plain of Keoladeo National Park. I knew of the cranes from a handout given to us the day before by a member of the Ghana Keoladeo Natural History Society. He cautioned us that the Siberian crane population had dwindled in recent years and that they were past due to arrive at Keoladeo—their wintering grounds. “But if your luck is good,” he exclaimed with a characteristic Indian optimism, “you may have a chance to see the cranes during your stay at our park.”**

**“It is your turn,” said the excited Indian who had introduced himself as a park biologist. Josh stepped aside, and I moved forward, crouched, and squinted. The high-powered scope provided me momentary access to the world of the cranes—bright white save their red legs and beaks. The cranes bickered, flapping wings creating marshy waves as they spread their long beaks and bumped bellies like linebackers who’ve just sacked the quarterback.**

They stood for a long time, grooming themselves and sampling the swampy water. As I watched through the spotting scope for maybe a minute, the Siberian crane became much more than just a name on the list of endangered species catalogued somewhere in my memory.

Most of my group had left Ranthambhore just two days before feeling frustrated at not having seen a tiger. Now here we were at Keoladeo—as renowned for its birds as Ranthambhore for its tigers—observing much rarer animals on the very day they arrived to spend the winter. Two hundred Siberian cranes had wintered at Keoladeo in 1964, I knew from the handout, but just six showed in 1992. I borrowed Josh's binoculars for another look at the birds, and rejoiced that five cranes returned in 1993, and that I was there to see them.

Suddenly, prompted by some unseen cue, the five cranes simultaneously took flight slowly and gracefully. They elevated and flew towards us for just a moment, the black fringe at the edges of their seven-foot wingspan contrasting sharply with the cloudless blue sky. They landed again, as quickly and effortlessly as they had taken off, and returned to sunning themselves, bickering, and preening—unaware that they were the afternoon's entertainment for a growing crowd of human observers who were overjoyed to know that the birds had survived another 2500-mile migration from northern Siberia.

"This is a most auspicious day," said the park biologist with a combination of relief and reverence. "We feared the cranes would not arrive. They have never appeared this late before."

The Siberian cranes—I learned after returning to the United States—will probably never winter in Keoladeo again. I try to keep up-to-date on places I've been and species I've encountered, and a March 6, 1994 article in *The Missoulian* entitled "Cranes fail to show up at Indian wintering grounds" helped me to do so. I was amazed to see an article in my local paper about the Siberian cranes, and immensely saddened when I realized it meant the birds were probably gone forever. I later learned from an article in *National Geographic* that the five cranes I had seen made up just one of the three populations of Siberian cranes—the central population. While that population didn't complete its migration from just east of the Ural Mountains and just south of the Arctic Circle in 1994, the western population of 10 birds did reach its wintering grounds in Iran. The eastern population of 2,900 birds also reached its wintering grounds at Poyang Lake in eastern China.

The remaining Siberian cranes face many threats to their survival. Siberian cranes are hunted in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, which is probably as responsible as habitat destruction for the demise of the central population. The eastern population is severely threatened by agricultural encroachment upon Poyang Lake and the apparently imminent construction of the Three Gorges Dam upstream on the Yangtze River. The Siberian crane, like the tiger, may not last the century.

The fate of both species basically hinges upon China—a country emerging as the most powerful in the world in many regards. The Chinese and Taiwanese trade in animal parts highly values tiger products such as the bones to treat ailments such as rheumatism and "flagging" libidos. Whether these remedies actually work or not is hotly contested, but the Chinese

believe enough in them to have exterminated the South China Tiger in the early 1980s. Tiger part traders are now forced to look elsewhere for tiger products to supply the consumers' demand. India, with as many as 3,000 Bengal tigers and an impoverished population has been the logical source for the Chinese traders who can offer what is to Indians an incredible sum of money and still make a hefty profit.

According to another *National Geographic* article, an undercover operation in India in the summer of 1993 confiscated 1,000 pounds worth of tiger bones "representing the fate of at least 35 adult tigers." The bones "could have fetched smugglers hundreds of thousands of dollars" in the markets in China or Taiwan. "These are chilling numbers in a country where between 500 and 1,000 tigers have been killed during the past three years," the article goes on to say. More chilling is the claim by one of the smugglers "that he could procure another 2,000 pounds of tiger bones within a month."

In Ranthambhore, this recent depredation has caused the park's population to dwindle from 45 tigers in the late 1980s to its current population, according to a recent *Audubon* article, of "no more than 25 tigers, and perhaps as few as 19." That estimate includes the addition of four cubs born during May of 1993, just a few months after my group's visit to the park. Worldwide, only 5,000 tigers remain, "a population decline of roughly 95% in this century," says a *Time Magazine* cover article entitled "Doomed: Why The Regal Tiger Is On The Brink Of Extinction."

"If we can't save the tiger, what can we save?" asks respected biologist George Schaller of New York's Wildlife Conservation Society in *Tiger Crisis*. Unfortunately, Schaller had an answer to that question when queried by *Time*. Schaller suggests that the tiger-bone trade, if it continues while the tiger



population dwindles, will eventually affect all large cats, including the endangered snow leopard and golden cat. "If the price keeps going up, the search for bone will start affecting cats in Africa." Watch out, your house cat could be next.

I recently watched *Tiger Crisis* again, along with a film called *Crane Hunters of Pakistan*. I looked carefully for clues about how the two animals may be saved from extinction. I found very little to go on. I do know this: The tiger and the Siberian crane, like many other species, have very little chance if more people don't start attaching importance to their survival. They must become real, which may require little more than seeing the magnificent animals on film and hearing from some of the many people who are passionate about the survival of these and all other animal species. I watched the images of the tigers and cranes on videotape and realized that for some reason—I'm not exactly sure why—these animals *mean* something to me. You don't have to have devoted your life to studying animals, like George Schaller has, to be greatly saddened by the knowledge they may not survive much longer.

I also know this, unless this essay is translated into Chinese, it may never do that much good. Our collective efforts at damage control will benefit other species, but the tiger and Siberian crane will only benefit if the Chinese and Taiwanese adopt the same approach. Swearing off of tiger-part medicines would be an inconsequential act for you or me. I wouldn't have taken a tiger-part medicine back in Puri even if it had been guaranteed to cure my illness and even though I'd not yet heard of Ranthambhore or knew the tiger was in

such trouble. I don't really know why the Chinese and Taiwanese peoples feel so differently. Nor do I know if there's anything we can do to get East Asians to join us in attaching meaning to the tiger or Siberian crane as living, surviving animals.

In the Mahabharata, Hanuman first appears when Bhima, a hero with amazing strength and one of the Pandava brothers—the most righteous of all the epic's heroes—goes in search of sweet-smelling flowers in the forest. Bhima approaches too closely to the spirit world, where he is sure to meet with certain doom, but his path is blocked by “a monkey.” The monkey, of course, is Hanuman, who reveals himself to Bhima only after the hero attempts to pass but is unable, despite his super-human strength, to move the monkey's tail even a touch. Bhima realizes that the monkey is the one in control of that situation and wisely throws himself at the mercy of the monkey. Hanuman then reveals himself as Bhima's brother (they were both fathered by the Wind God), and embraces Bhima. By that embrace, Bhima, says the Mahabharata, “felt completely refreshed and became much stronger than before.”

In a way, I felt embraced by the way the Hanuman langur received me into what was so very clearly his turf. As I stare at the picture of his tail dangling over the carved stone pillar, I wonder what might have happened had I tried to move it just a little. Probably he would have scampered off or rewarded me with a claw to the face. Maybe he would have spoken to me. Maybe he already had.

### **The Marriage of Mike and Roopali**

Picture, if you will, this scene: 20 or so twentysomething environmentalists, clad in the best clothes we could find after four months of traveling together, dancing and drinking and celebrating the birthday of one of our number in the dimly lit and loudly pulsating basement disco of the Asia Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand. Closing time arrives, and several televisions on the dormant stage come alive with visions of our nation's capital. It is January 21, 1993—still January 20th in the good ol' U.S. of A.—and the images being beamed into our eyes from the other side of the globe are the highlights of that day's inauguration of President Bill Clinton. We are four months and thousands of miles from the U.S., sweaty and exhausted from dancing, and severely buzzed. Mostly, as we watch the images on the television screens, we are mesmerized.

Also, we are excited. We have arrived just days earlier from India, where we spent two months deprived of news from home, save the occasional week-old *USA Today* or *International Herald Tribune*. We are, to varying degrees, political junkies: Most of us thoroughly enjoyed staying up

late to watch the BBC's coverage of Clinton's landslide victory over George Bush from the comfort of the English manor which housed us the previous November. We knew bloody well that Bush wasn't "The Environmental President" he claimed to be, and Clinton seemed somehow different, the rare politician who might actually follow through on his promises. As for his running-mate, some of us have even read Al Gore's environmental treatise, Earth in the Balance, and actually liked it despite its sometimes simple treatment of issues that we students of environmental politics feel to be much more complex. In short, we're thrilled to see Bush's reign come to an end, and we hope for better from Clinton and Gore.

Weary from excessive celebration, we are energized and blessed by the opportunity to share in the passing of the torch, even in this edited, tape-delayed format. We swoon and hug each other as Clinton's words miraculously wind their way through electronic circuitry and thousands of miles of airwaves—and straight into our hearts. In passages, it is as if our president is speaking directly to us, and we're bowled over, ready to heed the call of our fearless leader. Especially when he says: "I challenge a new generation of young Americans to a season of service; to act on your idealism by helping troubled children, keeping company with those in need, reconnecting our torn communities."

As I mentioned, we are young, and you can bet we're idealistic. Four countries and four months into an eight month program to study environmental issues in eight countries, we have heard enough horror stories to sense that the planet's life-support systems are going to hell in a handbasket thanks to the greedy, selfish, shortsighted actions of our species. But, if I can generalize about the 30 students in my group, we are not your

classic "doom-and-gloomers." Maybe we should know better, but we do not feel that the planet's ecosystems are so trashed that they can not recover, and we think we can contribute to preventing them from ever becoming so decimated. We know that our country is the Earth's most powerful, its worst polluter, and its largest consumer of resources, but we intend to influence our fellow citizens to limit these impacts when we return to the States.

So when our newly-inaugurated President tells us that "in serving, we recognize a simple but powerful truth: We need each other and we must care for one another," we want to know where to sign up. I, for one, am overjoyed to hear these words from the leader of a government that seems at times to care little about anyone who doesn't contribute heartily to political campaigns. And I am struck by the irony that my friends and I are in a massive hotel in a sprawling, quickly-growing, polluted city, and—thanks to the power of satellite television—are giggling, hugging, and brimming with the feeling that we can actually change the world for the better. The man from Hope, Arkansas, has become President of the United States of America, and I dare say his passion and promise have stimulated our growing hopefulness.

Fast forward four years and another Clinton inauguration. Here it is May, 1997, and much has changed. The not-quite-real year my fellow travelers and I shared ended four years ago, as we returned to the states to resume our lives. I moved to Montana to earn a graduate degree in environmental studies, while my friends scattered to their respective homes, universities, or uncertain futures. Informed by our study and first-hand experience of a global environment facing the pressures of pollution, resource depletion, and species extinction, most of us planned to find our niches within the

environmental movement—to settle into a place where we can do our little bit to improve the ecological health of some small part of the planet.

From where I sit, it's very difficult to make any generalizations about this group with whom I've had too little contact since we parted ways. Most of us, I think, have remained true to our idealism and tried to reconcile our need to support ourselves with our wish to make the world a healthier place for people and other species. Some of us have adhered to a more literal interpretation of President Clinton's call to serve our communities by signing up with Americorps, Clinton's national service program. I did, performing a "term of service" with the Montana Conservation Corps—an Americorps supported non-profit organization that conducts a combination of community service and resource conservation projects. My crew of six spent ten months of 1996 maintaining trails, planting trees, painting kids' rooms at the Missoula Youth Homes, building fences to keep cows out of streams, and performing a number of other projects in the Missoula area. I may be biased, but I reckon that paying young Americans to serve their communities and their country is about the best thing the Clinton administration has done.

In fact, as I meditate on the ideas that have emerged during the early days of the President's second term, I can't think of any policy measure of Clinton's that I've really supported besides Americorps. Sure, he has reduced unemployment while holding down inflation, supports health-care reform, and signed crime and welfare-reform bills into law. But these are not the sorts of issues (if I dare generalize again) that young, idealistic, environmentally-concerned people truly care about. Personally, I'm more concerned about how "free-trade" treaties such as GATT and NAFTA will increase the export of the American consumer culture to the rest of the world; how an appropriations

bill "rider" which suspends all environmental laws on "salvage" timber sales will impact the dwindling habitats of species barely hanging on in our National Forests; how Clinton's halfhearted attempts to reform grazing and mining practices have perpetuated resource-exploitation-as-usual in communities and ecosystems that should be shifting to more diverse and healthy activities.

Clinton, you see, just hasn't shown the type of leadership he seemed to promise during his first campaign and inauguration. Sure, he was clearly a brilliant speaker, but I and my friends truly believed in the things he chose to speak about, like renewing the pride that I understand Americans once felt in this great nation of ours. In four years of so-called leadership, Clinton has become a different person in my eyes. His still-hopeful rhetoric rings hollow in the face of his less-than-visionary policies, and his say-one-thing-while-practicing-another form of government has certainly given me little to feel proud of.

I've been similarly disappointed in Gore, who seemed primed to represent the environmental voice, but has essentially been silent. I can vividly recall the excitement I felt when I thought that the Clinton-Gore team was going to be the best thing for the environment since Jimmy Carter put solar panels on the White House. A first term full of disappointments and what I've perceived as broken promises has transformed my excitement and hopefulness into skepticism and cynicism. As he began his first term, I believed Clinton could energize America's interest in politics. I thought he could be the sort of leader who could get citizens who hadn't voted in years to once again become interested, and to return to the polls. I'd hoped he'd be able to restore people's faith in the power of the American government to

represent all of its citizens, not just those with money. Now I believe that Clinton is basically no different from most politicians. I don't know for sure, but I suspect the traveling companions with whom I shared the same hopes now feel the same frustrations.

Ultimately, however, this piece is not strictly about politics. Actually, if you can believe it, this is a piece about how we can maintain hope in a better future than the politicians of today seem to be steering us towards. This is a piece about what we can hold on to in a world where positive role models and hope for a healthy future seem all too elusive.

Return with me, if you will, to 1993, to the dance floor of the Asia Hotel, Bangkok. Sometime after consuming our two-drink minimum, Roopali Phadke—the birthday girl—pulled me aside and asked me one of those questions that rarely slides out without a little lubrication. “Rick, why are people, you know, saying things about me and Mike?”

I thought of times that I noticed Roopali with Mike Arquin, and smiled. I remembered sitting behind Mike and Roopali during a bus ride in India, and listening as they bickered and placed bets on who would be leading the more ecologically-conscious lifestyle in ten years. “You’ll probably be living with your rich husband in some big, energy-hog of a house in some suburb somewhere,” accused Mike as his dark, deep-set eyes peered out from below his Yankees’ cap, his stocky frame adorned with a blue t-shirt, paint-stained soccer shorts, and canvas Converse high-tops with no socks. “Oh yeah,” retorted Roopali, whose golden southern Indian complexion and round cheeks were complimented by her iridescent eyes and framed by her



wavy black hair. "Well at least I'm not going to be driving my gas-guzzling jeep off to some lake and torturing poor, defenseless fish by yanking them out of the water just for fun." The argument continued for some time in this fashion, which might have been more unpleasant for those of us subjected to it were the combatants not brandishing smiles and laughing heartily at each retort. I couldn't help but laugh with them.

Being an honest guy, and somebody who had participated in a conversation or two myself about how well Roop seemed to get along with the aforementioned fellow traveler, I answered her question the best I could.

"You're really surprised that people are talking about you and Mike?" I asked.

"Yeah!" she responded. "There's nothing going on, you know."

"What's going on," I replied, "is that you guys obviously get along well. Shit, we've all been together for four months. People get bored. They're going to find something to talk about. For right now, that may be you and Mike. I really don't see why that should bother you."

"I guess you're right," said Roopali. "But I wish they'd find something else to talk about."

What I didn't tell Roopali that night was that maybe more was going on than she knew. Sure, we all had only known each other a few months, but the bonds that form out of nearly constant companionship can run awfully deep. I know, you see, because I continue to be obsessed with the people with whom I shared eight months, even though that was four years ago. While I don't communicate with them much, I still consider some of my companions from that trip to be among my closest friends. I continue to tell stories such as

the one about ringing in Roopali's birthday by dancing, and talking, and sharing in the gift that the Clinton presidency promised to become.

Of course, the recollection of these memories is often catalyzed by events that take place in my current life. And this is where the story of what once was said about Roopali and Mike becomes the story of what people are currently saying about those two.

Last August, each of the 29 students who traveled on IHP with Mike and Roopali received an invitation to their wedding. None of us were surprised—by the end of IHP it was clear to everyone that something was definitely “going on” between Mike and Roopali. That became even more clear when she broke up with her boyfriend back home immediately upon the completion of IHP. The bond that my fellow students and I watched form has been strengthened in the past couple of years that Mike and Roopali have spent living together in Washington, DC. If not surprised, I was overjoyed to receive that invitation, and replied immediately that I would attend, even though I knew that I would have trouble financing the trip on the pittance of a stipend I was earning from the conservation corps.

Counting Mike and Roopali, 17 of the students from IHP's 1992-93 program converged on Cooperstown, New York last September to celebrate the consummation of their marital vows. The gathering was a reunion of sorts, as I hadn't seen any of my fellow students that attended the wedding in over two years. Some, I hadn't seen in the over three years that had elapsed since IHP ended. While most of us had a lot of catching up to do, the rapport that we had established during IHP seemed to re-emerge almost instantly. Back in the company of familiar friends, we shared stories of our lives since

we'd parted. Eric Gilchrist was there, and we explained to his fiancée Debbie (now his wife) about how we looked after each other when we each became sick while rooming together in India. Then there was Jed Burkett, who during IHP turned me on to probably ten different bands or solo artists who remain among my favorites. Now a law student in Minneapolis, Jed is still immersed in the music scene, and I made mental notes of the names of bands that he recommended. I also reminisced with Elaine Holeton about playing basketball on the courts of the world, and talked about her plans to turn a newly-purchased chunk of her native Virginia soil into an organic farm.

I'll spare boring you with the stories of the many others there, who each evoke IHP experiences and who have done interesting and positive things since we all went our separate ways. That weekend was also about expanding the IHP family, which we did by getting to know Erick, Dawn Sylvester's "significant other"; and Betsy Dickinson's "special friend" Jim; and Tom, Amy Sprague's fiancée; and Eric's Debbie. Aside from sharing stories about our time together, and our times apart in the interim, we also created some new stories to reminisce about at some point in the future.

I would guess that most of the stories we'll later tell about that weekend will center around the depth of sentiment—joy, beauty, sharing—that permeated the events of that weekend. The wedding was comprised of two ceremonies, Saturday evening's "Ring and Flower Ceremony," and Sunday's "Traditional Hindu Wedding." Both took place at Glimmerglass State Park, overlooking a very serene Lake Otsego. Saturday night's ceremony had the structure of a "traditional" wedding, without any of the religious connotations that usually accompany such ceremonies. Mike and Roopali read poetry, exchanged vows they had written themselves, placed rings on

each other's fingers and shared the traditional first public kiss of the marriage. They also performed a flower ceremony where they chose a flower to represent each member of their families, then collected the flowers into a vase signifying the merging of their respective families into a new and beautiful bouquet.

That evening's celebration was much like the many spontaneous gatherings my fellow travelers and I engaged in during IHP. We shared stories of the past, hopes for the future, and a good deal of beer that Mike and Roopali had brewed especially for this occasion. With so much catching up to do, several of my IHP friends and I extended the celebration late into the evening. In a scene reminiscent of many long nights during IHP, Jed and Elaine and a few others sat around a table in a cabin we had rented on the shores of Lake Otsego, drinking beer and talking and laughing. With the traditional Hindu ceremony to attend the next day, we finally shut the party down sometime well after two a.m.

The next day, we arose early, and squeezed in breakfast at a cute little inn while eagerly awaiting our first Hindu ceremony. (Actually, that's not entirely true: while in India, Eric and I and two other fellow travelers had been escorted to one evening of a traditional three-day Hindu wedding by the assistant manager of the "guest house" we were staying at. To our horror, we were greeted by the father of the bride, who put wreaths of flowers like Hawaiian leis around our necks and shook our hands proudly as if we were very important people. Later, we were led to the platform to be photographed with the bride and groom, who we had never met. While the attention we received was quite disconcerting, we were comforted with a fabulous meal,

and the rare opportunity to glimpse a side of Indian culture we wouldn't have otherwise experienced.)

Mike and Roopali's ceremony comprised a different segment of the three-day ordeal that is a Hindu wedding than the piece that my friends and I had witnessed in India. It was also the first Hindu wedding any of us had seen that consecrated the union of friends. The ceremony was conducted by a friend of Roopali's family, Dr. Madhukar Joshi. He was a slight man, with thick glasses, a Nehru-style jacket, and an Indian accent thick enough to evoke memories of India yet permeable enough to allow his wry sense of humor to shine through.

He led us through the ceremony, which required the participation of both families. Both Mike's and Roopali's mothers and sisters were clad in traditional Indian garb—bright saris flowing around their bodies and resting on one shoulder—and their fathers wore elegant Nehru-style suits as well. All fulfilled their roles perfectly, thanks to the guidance of Dr. Joshi, who seemed equal parts narrator, director, translator and holy man. Thanks to the handouts that Roopali and Mike provided us, we were able to follow the ceremony through the greetings, the sharing of the eight blessings, the fire ritual, the seven ritual steps, and the ending ceremony. Afterwards, we shared another celebration, including one of the most delicious Indian meals I've had since leaving the Indian sub-continent. We may have gotten sick of them during our two months in India, but these days a meal of lentils made into the stew called dal and the slightly risen bread called naan is a feast that I relish heartily.

That wedding weekend, as I remember it, was ideal: the happy couple at the center enshrouded by their families, their friends, and the first hints of

color of the approaching fall that is so different in the deciduous forests that envelop the lush north-east than it is in the dry evergreen forests of the Northern Rockies that I had left behind that long weekend.

In a sense, I left much more than geography, topography, and ecology behind when I traveled east for that wedding. I also left behind the years between the completion of IHP and this lovely reunion: three long years of studying and practicing environmental advocacy; of working “in the trenches” and “fighting battles” on behalf of the endangered species, habitats, and ecological systems of the American West. I put aside my obsession with the largely unsuccessful attempts of environmental groups in the Northern Rockies to coerce the government to uphold its environmental laws in managing public lands, and to pass even more stringent environmental legislation. I took a vacation from what some might call “the real world” of American environmental advocacy and became reunited with a group of friends with whom I’d become so close thanks to their constant company during our travels together.

Many of my IHP friends took a similar vacation that week from their lives of some form of environmental advocacy. Some, like Mike and Roopali, have worked in Washington, DC, trying to effect their little chunk of change from within the halls of non-profit environmental organizations. Others are working on law degrees, starting their own organic farms, running businesses marketing “eco-friendly” products, or working in other fields entirely. All of us, I learned that weekend, are engaged in some form of the good work that we looked forward to during our eight months together. We all—I realized as I gained a larger perspective by stepping away from my life—have settled in to some endeavor with a fairly narrow focus. At varying levels, we may have

needed that weekend to regain the larger perspective that was drilled into us during our eight months of studying global environmental issues on a place-by-place, case-by-case basis.

To think about matters in those terms, I realize that this lack of perspective is also what I find to be wrong with American politics. It focuses so much on the political flavor of the month—lately it's been Clinton's caving in to the Republicans on the importance of balancing the budget—without enough perspective on how that minuscule part of this country's politics affects the larger whole. Of course the fact that the political agenda is set by those who've helped our "leaders" gain office—those with the money to make large campaign contributions—is equally disconcerting.

Add to that the fact that American politics, environmental politics or otherwise, is extremely divisive, and I think I truly have begun to understand the cynicism that pervades the American public's attitudes about the political system. This cynicism is fueled, of course, by politicians like our President who try to keep the people happy by talking about representing their needs, while endorsing legislation that panders only to the large corporations that they are indebted to for their office. The rich get richer while most of the people just become frustrated, or worse, apathetic.

To read this piece, you might get the impression that I'm a pessimistic guy, and sometimes I am—especially about politics. I qualify that by hearkening back to a speech that my group heard by economist and writer Herman Daly at the Schumacher Lectures, Bristol, England, in October, 1992. Daly argued that pessimism may be the only reasonable response to an honest

assessment of the ecological problems facing the Earth's ecosystems. Daly suggested, however, that there exists a continuum more pertinent to the attitude and psychological health of an environmentalist than that of optimism vs. pessimism. The two poles on this continuum, said Daly, are hope and despair, and you can probably guess which one he suggested was the greater motivator. "I'm hopefully pessimistic that we can avert major environmental catastrophe," said Daly, "and that we can find a way to live more in tune with the ecological realities of the planet."

So I'll tell you that I accept the suggestion that I am, realistically, a pessimist—but only if you are willing to accept that I, like Herman Daly, am hopefully pessimistic about the future of life as we know it on this planet. I'll also tell you that my hope is greatly fueled by the steps that many people around me have taken to embrace the possibility of a brighter future.

My faith in national politics might be irreparably shaken, but all around me I see inspiring examples of a grass-roots movement of hope. As a writer and a student, I am nourished by the exchange of ideas about how people can together create a more fulfilling, sustaining, and ecologically healthy future on this planet. Yet these ideas can only carry one so far. To be worth the time and energy given to fueling them, these ideas must be backed by actions that support the creation and realization of such an ideal future.

Fortunately, my life has been surrounded recently by these sorts of actions—people pledging their commitment to one another and to the creation of a better future. Mike and Roopali's wedding was but one example, and it was also the fourth wedding I attended last year. An earlier wedding, which brought together local friends Paul Rosen and Sheehan Ednie (now Rosen), was attended by their months old son Jeb. Almost a year ago, my



sister Julie and her husband Terry Horvath had a baby as well—my godson, Brandon Joseph. My sister is now pregnant again. Just yesterday she informed me that a recent ultrasound examination showed that I am soon to be the proud uncle of a second nephew. It's hard for me to tell you how excited this makes me, and how eager I am to again get the chance to visit nephew number one.

If national politics seems hopeless to me right now, it is because it is rife with the lack of such sorts of commitments. A politician isn't even wedded to his or her job in the way that most people have to commit to their vocation. They're only in office for a few years, after which many of them fade into a lucrative career in law, or as a "consultant" (whatever that means). In fact, it seems that the only thing politicians are committed to is their willingness to abandon any policy that doesn't prove politically expedient. Clinton, for example, seemed truly committed to reforming this country's health-care system until his proposal was met with a luke-warm reaction from congress. His reaction? Rather than remain committed to his vision of health-care reform, he abandoned his position and shifted the dialogue to the next policy measure.

In other words, most politicians don't even seem particularly committed to pushing policy issues that they think will be best for the majority of their constituency. Nor do they need to. The vast majority come from the elite classes, and can ease back into a comfortable life when they leave the public sector. They don't have to remain committed to their positions because very few people will remember them after they've left office.

The act of having a baby, on the other hand, or of getting married, embraces commitment—the opposite of abandonment. These acts say “whatever else happens, I’m pledging my life to creating a healthy, nurturing relationship with this other person, with this child.” These acts, to me, represent the celebration of a beauty in this world that is more powerful than any cynicism.

The seeds for this sort of beauty are sown in nights like the one my friends and I shared at the Asia Hotel. If you had asked me the next day, I would have told you that the beauty of that night lied in the renewed belief in American politics that seemed bestowed upon us by those images of Clinton’s inauguration. Even now, when four years of unfulfilled promise has soured me on the Clinton presidency, I remain thankful for that evening’s renewal of my faith.

Yet the truly touching element of that evening, I see now, lies in the germination of the seeds of Roopali and Mike’s bond. Roopali may not have understood then why people were whispering about her and Mike. It’s only appropriate that she’d in some ways be the last to know. Most of the rest of us had sure sensed something, however. By learning that others had observed a chemistry evolving between her and Mike, Roopali might have begun to acknowledge that their relationship could be thought of in romantic terms, even if she then denied it vehemently.

Now, almost exactly one-half year into their marriage, it’s clear that Roopali carries with her a different perspective. She and Mike have explicitly committed to caring for each other forever, and this ethic will undoubtedly emanate out from their relationship to their families, their friends, and the

world around them. This sort of bond is but one step in the creation of a more nurturing and fulfilling world, but I believe that it is a much more significant, hopeful, and powerful step than can be achieved in the arena of American national politics today.

Of course by choosing to commit their futures to each other, Mike and Roopali have also nullified the wager they made on the bus that one day in India. If memory serves me correctly, I volunteered at that time to help judge the outcome of their bet as to which one would be living the more ecologically-benign lifestyle in ten years. A married couple now, they are one unit, and it might be impossible to differentiate their ecological impacts when the period of their bet expires some six years from now. But you know what? I'm going to note the appropriate date on my calendar, contact them to announce the tie, and rule that they should reward each other by sharing in the preparation or purchase of a fabulous meal, preferably Indian food. Maybe I'll treat myself that night as well. Maybe I'll even invite myself to join them. If all goes well, we could even make an IHP reunion out of it, a party, a celebration.

After all, we can never have too many such reasons to dance, and celebrate, and dream about the future that we together can create.

### Viva la Revolución

On January 1, 1997, several dozen people clad in ski masks and carrying fake guns marched into the central square of the south-eastern Mexican city of Las Margaritas and pretended to take the town over. This performance—a fine example of “Guerilla Theater”—was an attempt by these representatives of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, or “Zapatistas”) to nonviolently commemorate the third anniversary of their actual takeover of Las Margaritas and three other cities in the Mexican state of Chiapas.

Not much of an army really, the Zapatistas are a coalition of people, mostly indigenous Chiapans, struggling to maintain a simple way of life that has become increasingly elusive during the past half-century in Chiapas. They took over Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, San Cristobal de las Casas and Altamirano on January 1, 1994, not to start an actual war with the Mexican army, but to call attention to the plight of indigenous people in south-eastern Mexico.

The struggle of these people is a study in the contradictions that haunt modern Mexico. The people of Chiapas are among the country’s poorest,

despite their state's abundance of the natural resources that have helped Mexico along the path to economic modernization. As Mexico struggles to become a "modern" country, many people—businessmen, government officials, lawyers—are becoming rich in places like Mexico City, while the peasants in places like Chiapas become poorer. The Zapatistas' main goal seems to be to make Mexico and the rest of the world aware of that fact, and to not let anyone forget it until the poverty that threatens their very survival is relieved.

I traveled to Chiapas as a student on the International Honors Program's Global Ecology course in the spring of 1993, eight months before the Zapatistas gained international prominence by invading the four Chiapas cities. While my fellow students and I couldn't have known anything about the revolt brewing in the Zapatistas' secret jungle camps, we did learn about the conditions that made the lives of poor Chiapans increasingly difficult. We also learned a great deal about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada which took effect on January 1, 1994. Not coincidentally, that was the day that the Zapatistas chose to descend from Chiapas' forests and make their presence known to four Chiapas cities and an international audience.

The initial reports of the Zapatista uprising were extremely surprising to me, as I remembered San Cristobal de las Casas as a comfortable, relaxed city. That perception was replaced by images of armed insurgents in ski masks patrolling the town square, or *el Zócalo*, and later clashing with the Mexican army. I was immediately interested in the conflict and was amazed at how well-organized, well-timed, and covert the EZLN's takeover of the four

Chiapas towns was. Having paid attention to the efforts of the Zapatistas ever since, my amazement at their military accomplishment has been dwarfed by my awe at the sophistication of their political philosophy and organization, their ability to engage the Mexican and international public and the Mexican government, and the sheer righteousness of their demands.

One criticism of many armed revolts is that they are carried out by people simply hungry for power. The revolutionaries haven't been dished what they see as their fair share of their country's pie by the people in power, so they attempt to gain control so they can slice themselves a much bigger wedge. The Zapatistas don't seem to be like that. As subsistence farmers in the hills and valleys of Chiapas, they were used to sharing a pretty small slice of Mexico's pie. Due to the increase of industry in recent years in Chiapas, the native peoples' slice of the pie has dwindled, leaving them with barely enough to survive. Their coalition thus seems focused simply on allowing the indigenous people of Chiapas the opportunity to provide themselves with just enough to live a tolerable lifestyle.

In their First General Declaration issued on January 1, 1994—the day they invaded the four Chiapas cities—the Zapatistas asked anybody who would listen “to support this plan that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace.” Who doesn't deserve these things?

Chiapas and the Zapatistas became common topics in the pages of newspapers and political publications immediately after the Zapatista takeover of the four Chiapas towns in early 1994. I happened to be at my family's home in southern California at the time, and followed the news of

the Zapatista rebellion on the television news and in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. Since that time, there have been many essays written on the Zapatista movement, and increased attention has been paid by the American press to events in Chiapas and Mexico in general. In the three-plus years since the Zapatista rebellion, I have received literally thousands of news clippings and essays via an electronic mailing list organized to distribute information about the Zapatista movement. My e-mail-box is still loaded with these postings every time I log on.

Four years ago, the only references you'd have been likely to find on Chiapas in even the best of libraries would have talked about the culture or agricultural practices of the indigenous population. Melissa Johnson, my group's anthropology professor, gave us one such article, entitled The Evolutionary Potential of Lacandón Maya Sustained-Yield Tropical Forest Agriculture, in preparation for our visit to Chiapas. The article, published by James Nations and Ronald Nigh in the *Journal of Anthropological Research* in the spring of 1980, discussed the Mayas' sophisticated system of managing land in the Lacandón rainforest—which stretches from eastern Chiapas over the border into Guatemala.

Nations and Nigh painted a picture of life for the Lacandón Maya: "for a thousand years, a large and civilized population intelligently managed the energy and resources of the tropical forest." Not only was the Maya system of land-use complex—harvesting food from cultivated plots, primary forest, and secondary forest—but it sounds as if it yielded a pretty tasty diet, as well. A Lacandón Maya's cultivated plot, his *milpa*, can be roughly translated as his cornfield, but that name doesn't do justice to the diversity of crops grown there. According to Nations and Nigh, at least 43 different food crops could be

found in the milpa of the Lacandón; including onions, garlic, chiles, squash, pineapple, tomatoes, rice, and two different varieties of avocado. Many of these and other crops such as oranges and peanuts were also found in the secondary forest, or *acahual*, that emerged when the Maya shifted the location of their milpa and allowed their previous field to return to forest. Still other food crops such as passion fruit, breadnut, and guava were found in the untouched, primary forests. The Maya supplemented their diets with the meat of many forest animals and aquatic species found in the forests' streams.

The specifics of Nations and Nigh's study apply only to the Lacandón Maya who occupied about one-eighth of the area that is now Chiapas. But the general picture is probably not that different for the indigenous people who occupied the rest of the state: the Tzeltals, Tzotzils, and Choles, among others. Given enough land, the indigenous people of Chiapas seemed to know how to feed themselves in a manner that didn't deplete their fairly poor forest soils. They had an extensive knowledge of the medicines available to them in the plants of the forest, and seemed to live a stable lifestyle for over a thousand years. While the population of the area almost certainly declined due to the still-mysterious event that caused the disintegration of the Classic Maya civilization, many thousands of Maya carried on in what is now Chiapas.

It's inaccurate to paint the history of the region as anything approaching stable. Certainly, since the decline of the Mayan civilization, many events have created vast changes in the patterns of population and land use in Chiapas. The area was especially shaped by the Spanish invasion and its accompanying diseases and outright slaughters of the native people.



This period was followed by a series of migrations that saw people from all over southern Mexico and Central America pick up and relocate in other areas. For all of its turmoil, however, the main form of activity in Chiapas was subsistence agriculture until well into the 20th century. In the last 50 years, however, Chiapas has changed probably more than it did during the thousand years of Mayan domination.

Like every other country, Mexico has seen profound changes in the 20th century. It began the 1900s under the strong arm of a dictatorial regime in Mexico City, then erupted in a violent revolution.

The Zapatistas borrowed their name from Emiliano Zapata, an illiterate peasant who has been characterized as "the heart and soul" of the 1910 Mexican Revolution that overthrew the tyrannical regime of Porfirio Diaz. Zapata helped to establish Mexico's present constitutional form of government and fought for an equitable distribution of the country's land that had become concentrated in *haciendas* owned by just a few hundred landowners. Zapata convinced the new government of the value of the *ejido*, an indigenous system of communal land-management, to the rural population of Mexico. Despite officially granting land title to many ejidos, the government stopped far short of equitably redistributing the country's land, and Zapata became disillusioned with the potential for true reform to take place within the capital. He soon left for his home just south of Mexico City.

The history of Mexico since, according to Susan Hahnel and Robin Fleck in *Z Magazine*, has been a cycle of ever-decreasing concern for the country's indigenous population:

While indigenous peasants in Mexico fared better than those in Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, and

Nicaragua from 1920 through the 1970s, the commitment to an egalitarian, communal, indigenous agrarian system died with Zapata. The revival of the ejido system and protection for small scale agriculture under Lazaro Cárdenas in the 1930s gave way to successively more corrupt Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) governments, culminating in the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Salinas' rule has since given way to that of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, a Harvard-educated economist. Once a very independent country, Mexico has become ever more responsive to the economic superpower that is its neighbor to the north, bending over backwards to allow United States' businesses in to help exploit the country's abundant natural resources and cheap labor force. This activity has slowly crept its way south, emerging in Chiapas in the 1940s and maintaining a stranglehold over the state's peasant labor and bountiful resources ever since.

This pattern is especially apparent in the Lacandón region. A relatively pristine area less than 50 years ago, the Lacandón forest has been decimated, as described by a *New York Times* article:

Despite official decrees of protection, the great Lacandón rain forest has been shorn—for highways, farms, oil drilling, resettlement, even airstrips for drug traffickers—to the bare minimum necessary to keep its ecosystems from collapsing. Just 30 percent of the original 5,000 square miles remains. What once took 50 years to destroy can now be destroyed in a year. And with the disappearance of the forest, the Indian populations have been despoiled, losing their traditions and native land, they have become pariahs. There were 12,000 people in the Lacandón in 1960, now there are more than 300,000.

The story of the economic absorption of the Lacandón is, thanks to the lack of much written history, a confusing and often contradictory one. Many of the Lacandón's residents never established title to their land—some may have never heard of the concept of land title. Even having title to their land has proven no guarantee of security for many ejidos, as timber companies have won a large percentage of the land-title disputes that make it to the Mexican federal courts.

Despite their successes in the courts, the timber companies don't always resort to legal means to settle their disputes. As I read about the terrorism they sometimes employ to gain control of the forests, I'm reminded of a scene I once saw in a movie about Chico Mendes and his rubber tappers' union in Brazil. I see Chico and the rubber tappers confronting a group of men with chainsaws clearing an area of rainforest. As the tappers disperse to put themselves between the chainsaws and the trees, Chico confronts the crew's foreman.

"How can you cut these trees," Chico implores. "This is our home. We need these trees to survive."

"Get out of the way," responds the foreman. "We have a job to do. Your interference is going to cost us money. The boss won't like that."

In the movie, the scene ends peacefully as the workers decide to leave rather than use their chainsaws against the rubber tappers. I imagine the same scene has occurred in the forests of Chiapas, as ejido members try to protect the forests that are their homes from timber corporation lackeys. But the result in both cases is anything but peaceful. Chico Mendes, you may know, was eventually killed by cattlemen infuriated by the official protection he was able to secure for the forest where he lived. The same thing has happened in

Chiapas—indigenous people have been shot and whole villages have been bulldozed by timber companies that view trees as potential profits and the people who rely on forests as competition that must be eliminated.

I doubt many of the Zapatistas have seen this movie, but they sure seem aware of the pattern of indigenous people being forced from their land. They know what happened to Zapotecs and Mixtecs dispossessed of their land in the neighboring state of Oaxaca, and the Tzeltals and Tzotzils have decided to fight rather than compete with these Indians for jobs which pay next-to-nothing in the factories and fields of central and northern Mexico. They seem acutely aware of their choices: to accept slave wages to contribute to the exploitation of their own land—if they can even get a job—or to resist. Thankfully, to those of us who like to think that there are places and people that can't be bought for the price of a television and a lifetime supply of Coca-Cola, the Zapatistas have chosen the latter course of action.

Also fortunate is the fact that the Zapatistas know how stupid it would be to engage in a military battle with the Mexican army. Their initial "rebellion" lasted just 12 days as the Mexican military swarmed the area and the Zapatistas retreated into the hills. Less than two hundred people died during those twelve days of conflict, and the Zapatistas have fought their battles since then through negotiators with the Mexican government; and courting the media with press releases; and eloquent communications from their leader among equals, Subcommandante Marcos.

It was four years ago today, as I write this, that my IHP group set foot in Mexico. At that time, we'd spent almost seven months together in six different countries. If Mexico seemed somewhat serene, if not downright

pleasant, during our three-week stay, that's because we were sick of learning about the complexity and sheer enormity of the world's ecological problems—so we paid less attention to the gloomy details and more on enjoying each others' company before we parted ways a month later.

That outlook certainly colored my impression of Mexico City, which I'll admit is a polluted and congested place. Yet more than smog, Mexico City's air felt thick with a sense of history and tradition that only rarely rears its head in Los Angeles—the polluted and congested city of my childhood. Several of my classmates and I took the opportunity to explore, riding the city's extensive subway across town for the equivalent of 16 cents, and managing to entertain ourselves by visiting the old section of Mexico City and the extremely large city park, Chapultepec. We walked the old city's uneven, cobbled streets, noticing beautiful, old, cut stone cathedrals tilting under the gradual subsidence of the city into the muck of prior civilizations below. The local people didn't seem much in a hurry, so neither were we: leisurely enjoying the sights, ducking into a bar to enjoy a *cerveza*, and lounging on a park bench, talking about whether we would be fortunate enough to share a conversation on another park bench 50 years into the future.

Our pleasantly positive experience during my group's first few days in Mexico City seemed to prove the adage that if you're looking for fun, you can find it pretty much anywhere. That continued to be true as we traveled by bus south, to San Cristobal de las Casas and the heart of Zapatista country.

We spent many fun-filled days on that road trip, some of which I talk about in the concluding essay to this series: [Serving up a Better Future](#). Our emphasis on having fun at that point in our trip unfortunately clouded our

learning about the conditions and events in Chiapas that motivated the Zapatista movement to fight for better conditions.

I and a few others chose to abandon the program's scheduled learning experiences during the first day of our visit to San Cristobal de las Casas, one of the towns the Zapatistas invaded. That day began with a bus ride from our stuccoed, sparsely decorated hotel to a complex of newer and larger buildings that looked like a cross between a prison and a hospital. This turned out to be the Southeast Ecological Research Center (CIES). We unloaded and filed inside, where a professorial man in a brown corduroy suit escorted us to a large discussion hall. We took our places at tables that lined the walls of the room. The standard academic paraphernalia was neatly organized throughout—a podium perched aside slide and overhead projectors in the center pointed at a screen lowered from the ceiling in the front. The presentation, "Succession and Biodiversity Loss in Fragmented Temperate Forests of Chiapan Highlands," reminded me even more of countless forgettable lectures than the layout of the room did.

My mates stirred restlessly as the lecturer displayed charts, tables, and graphs on the overhead screen. "In the areas of the Chiapan highlands where economic activity has seen a dramatic increase in the last twenty years," he droned, "we have observed a marked decrease in biological diversity. We have not observed this trend in areas which have not been subject to the influence of extractive industry or cattle grazing."

The lecturer concluded that the diverse Chiapan forest was "giving way" to the invasion of pines as "economic activity" had increased in the area. At that moment, I felt dizzy with *deja vu*. Was it just my imagination, or had I really heard the same lecture delivered by a man in the same suit in a

very similar classroom in Thailand? "If space aliens have studied recent population increases of species on Earth," the Thai professor had concluded, "they would be convinced that cows and pines are the dominant species on the planet." Cows and pines. Chiapas, it seems, has become a place where cows and pines, as well as dams and oilfields, are treated better than the native people are.

"Haven't we heard all this stuff before?" Eric Gilchrist asked me as we boarded the bus to head back to town for lunch, and he laughed as I flashed him a revealing grin. Our itinerary for the next several days suddenly seemed wide open despite a full schedule of lectures planned for us at CIES. Lectures about a region's ecological decline as a result of economic activity had slowly lost their power to really affect me. Fortunately, I had also discovered that a self-guided adventure was always a "learning experience" if the scheduled event figured to be a bore.

We spent that afternoon blowing off a lecture—"Natural Resource Management in the Indian Regions of Mexico"—and exploring the city. The bus dropped us off for lunch at San Cristobal's Zocalo, and we ventured out from there. Walking down what seemed a semi-main street, we opened a wooden door with a sign which read "Open, please come in" to reveal a courtyard bordered by crafts shops, a cafe, and a bookstore. The shops were full of obsidian carvings of Mayan gods, brightly-painted pottery and wood carvings, and jewelry adorned with feathers from who-knows-what kinds of birds. We made sure to mentally note the location so we could return to buy gifts, then continued down the cobble street. Within hours, we had discovered many cute little restaurants and local craft boutiques. Near el

Zocalo we found a cafe with deep black coffee about twenty times stronger than the Nescafe served in most places the trip had taken us; chocolate cheesecake so delicious we couldn't resist a second helping; televisions displaying American country music videos; and a friendly orange cat who would jump on your lap and slobber all over your hands if you petted him enough. I don't know how long we stayed in that cafe, but I sure wasn't in any hurry to get anywhere else.

On the way back to our hotel, next to a large 17th-century cathedral, we encountered a vibrant crafts market with an amazing selection of friendship bracelets, sombrero-clad marionettes, worry dolls, and brightly-colored Guatemalan fabric sewn into shorts, long-sleeved shirts, and backpacks. And the prices were right. For just ten bucks you could buy the groovy sort of Guatemalan shirt that'd put you back 25 or more at a flea market in the States.

Eric and I explored the area on the other side of the cathedral, and discovered (don't we gringos just love to use that word?) an open-air produce market with the finest assortment of tropical fruit I'd ever seen in my life; red, yellow, and green mangoes the size of one-liter bottles, tomatoes, avocados, papaya, and little, fat bananas. Many of the merchants had sunken, deep-brown eyes and the distinctively-humped nose that attested to their indian heritage. They seemed ambivalent to our presence, probably used to having tourists in their midst. But it wasn't difficult, even with my broken *español*, to get their attention, and I'm convinced that their standard reply was a price approximately double the quote a fellow Chiapan would receive.

But we wizened travelers were prepared, having practiced that ritual on the streets of Delhi and Bangkok earlier on in our journey, so we made



sure to haggle just to show the merchants that we knew they were ripping us off.

"¿Cuanto cuesta?" I'd ask, then scoff when the merchant indicated she wanted something like 20 cents for a bunch of bananas. With Eric hovering over my shoulder, I'd offer the equivalent of 15 cents while handing over the change.

"Si," she would nod, as Eric smiled.

"Gracias."

"Gracias."

Eric and I proceeded to accumulate more food than any two people could possibly consume in one sitting, so we returned to our hotel, found some friends who had also ditched the afternoon lecture, and delved in to our stocks of mangoes, bread, boiled cheese that reminded me of mozzarella but with a tangier taste, and bananas. With the appeal of sitting through some lecture waning by the second, our stay in San Cristobal was shaping up to be one long session of consumptive bliss.

It seems ironic to me now that our major concern during that period of our trip was how we were going to keep our spirits up. In a way, the Zapatistas were having the same dilemma, but theirs was in response to their inability to put food on their table and to provide for their children. Just miles away, the Zapatistas prepared themselves for a campaign to address their grievances, while we, amazingly well provided for, complained about having to sit through sometimes-boring lectures and enduring long rides on a swanky bus. Some people are just never happy.

According to their First General Declaration, the Zapatistas see themselves as “a product of 500 years of struggle: first against slavery, then during the War of Independence against Spain led by insurgents, then to avoid being absorbed by North American imperialism.” The Zapatistas took up arms on the very day that struggle slipped away from them and the rest of Mexico’s rural population. Rather than sit back and accept the enactment of NAFTA, they chose to make their military presence known the day that agreement took effect. Officially, NAFTA is an agreement between the United States, Mexico, and Canada to remove most trade barriers and allow open access to each country’s markets, natural resources, and labor.

The Zapatistas see it differently. In their First General Declaration released on January first, 1994, the Zapatistas termed NAFTA a “death sentence” because it justifies the continued exploitation of their area’s natural resources in the interests of creating a “favorable climate for foreign investment.” Members of the EZLN are acutely aware that the agreement will encourage even more logging and clearing of land for livestock in the forest they thought was their home.

Their uprising was not simply a response to NAFTA, however, but to the way the agreement represents the continuing commitment of Mexico’s ruling elite to exploiting the country’s natural resources, cheap labor, and lax environmental policies. According to their First General Declaration, the rebels revolted in protest of “the insatiable ambition of a 70 year dictatorship led by a clique of traitors that represent the most conservative and sell-out groups.” That dictatorship is the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), whose government under then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was

not kind to Mexico's rural residents—especially in the extremely poor southeastern part of the country.

NAFTA was seen by many as the crowning achievement of President Salinas' incarnation of the PRI—the government so proudly responsible for the “modernization” of Mexico. This modernization has occurred at the expense of Mexico's rural population, according to Noam Chomsky in an essay entitled “Time bombs: Why the new global economy will trigger more explosions like Chiapas”:

In the past decade of economic reform, the number of people in rural areas of Mexico living in extreme poverty has increased by almost a third. Half of the country's total population lacks resources to meet basic needs, a dramatic increase since 1980.

The situation is even more dire in Chiapas, where over one-half of the adults are illiterate, eighty percent of families earn less than \$245 per month, and seventy percent of households have no electricity. Ironically, neither money nor electricity would solve the ills of the landless people of Chiapas, but they are widely used as indicators of the poverty of ordinary Chiapans. Not only have these people been stripped of their traditional way of life, but such measures indicate that they have also been denied a decent living under the regime of the global market economy.

The benefits of “free trade” may be felt by those within Mexico's cities—or at least within the upper-class suburbs—but despite the best intentions of neo-liberal economists throughout the hemisphere, there's no way they'll trickle down to the indigenous population of Chiapas. And nobody is more aware of this fact than the members of the EZLN, who claim that the PRI government does not “care that we have nothing, absolutely nothing, not

even a roof over our heads, no land, no work, no health care, no food nor education.”

After returning to Mexico City, our group had the good fortune to meet with a representative of the Mexican government and discuss the implications of NAFTA, which had yet to be ratified by the legislatures of any of the countries involved. Having heard numerous lectures about the ecological evils of free trade, and armed with a couple of economics students and an anthropology professor who had provided us with a little background in Marxist theory, we were primed and eager to take on the Mexican establishment.

We entered the Federal Building in downtown Mexico City to a chorus of snickers from soldiers with semi-automatic rifles slung loosely over their shoulders. Apparently they weren't accustomed to hosting large groups of American students dressed as if they had just completed a three-month field test of the contents of the REI catalog. If our torn "Save Penang Hill" t-shirts, discolored shorts, and Texas weren't the appropriate attire for such a meeting, nobody had informed us—and it's a good thing they hadn't because we probably would have excavated our even grubbier attire from the depths of our backpacks.

We took our places in a room with amphitheater-style curved desks adorned with individual microphones and carafes of water, and waited for one of the three officious-looking gentlemen seated at the head of the room to discontinue their discussion and address us. The man in the middle, with the Eric Estrada haircut and pricey three-piece suit, finally introduced himself as Luis Miguel Diaz, legal counsel to Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

Diaz began the session by lecturing about NAFTA, making sure to point out the inevitable benefits of the treaty to all Mexicans, as well as Americans and Canadians. In his Harvard-educated English, he made sure to focus on the side-agreement to the treaty which covered environmental issues, making it obvious that he had been briefed about our eco-friendly perspective.

After his spiel, Diaz opened the floor to questions, and it became apparent to me, as at least seven people shot their hands in the air, that we were primed to try our hands at blowing holes in this guy's way of thinking. The first question was a mild one about the way the three countries would harmonize their environmental regulations, and I found the response—"There won't be harmonization because the regulations of one country do not apply to the ecology of the other two"—to be less interesting than the fact that the microphone in front of the questioner seemed to spontaneously activate as she began to speak and disengaged the moment she completed the question. I wondered if the technician perched behind the two-way mirror over my left shoulder was also video-taping the session to include in our files at the headquarters of the North American Secret Police. (If that thought strikes fear in your hearts, it should. I don't honestly know of the existence of such an organization, but would it surprise you?)

"Why does the Mexican government want to open its borders so that American companies can just come in and exploit your natural resources and cheap labor?" asked one of the members of our group.

"The goal," Diaz articulated, "is the creation of wealth, which implies an elevation of the standard of living of the poor in each country."

"Have you ever been to Berkeley, Mr. Diaz?" I asked. "There's plenty of wealth there. If the creation of wealth necessarily leads to benefits to the

poor, then why is it that I've been asked many times each day for the five years that I've lived there if I can spare some change?"

"No, I've never been there," Diaz shot back. "We *are* taking steps to ensure that the benefits of NAFTA are shared by as many Mexican citizens as possible."

"Really?" Piped up Melissa Johnson, our anthropology professor and a self-proclaimed Marxist. "And what exactly are those steps?"

"Look, all international agreements are decided by the people who have the power to represent their countries," replied Diaz in a flustered fit of honesty. "We are trying to do the best we can to improve the lives of the citizens of Mexico. What you are talking about is not a problem of NAFTA, it is a problem of humankind. Nobody has yet discovered how to equitably distribute wealth. When you figure it out, let us know."

For the rest of the session, we followed an unwritten rule of our group to let everyone who has a question or comment be heard rather than allowing one person to dominate. On several occasions, this policy has allowed a weak-kneed respondent just the room he needed to dance his way out of a corner. Mr. Diaz was fortunate to be saved by the bell of our fully-booked itinerary when we had to cut the questions off and board the bus for our next destination. But nobody left that room with anything resembling a good feeling about the role of the Mexican government in protecting the chronically under-represented sectors of society from being chewed up and spit out by the global economy. Of course the government spin doctors would probably just term such a turn of events "a favorable reconstitution of the rural population."

Thanks to years of reflection, I find Mr. Diaz' question now to be a good one. I mean, I really have no idea how to go about redistributing wealth. Yet I would criticize Diaz' claim that lack of technical know-how is what is holding Mexico back from redistributing its wealth so that the poor can get a large enough slice of the pie to maintain a decent lifestyle. Sure, maybe few people have that technical knowledge, but what's holding countries such as Mexico and the United States back from distributing their wealth so that every citizen can have a decent lifestyle is not a lack of know-how: it's a lack of desire.

Unfortunately, the Mexican people haven't yet jumped on the bandwagon of the Zapatistas' grassroots movement for a redistribution of the country's wealth. They elected Zedillo to replace Salinas on August 21, 1994, maintaining the PRI stranglehold on political power in Mexico. Zedillo may talk a good ballgame, claiming in his December 1, 1994 inaugural address that "economic progress only makes sense if it reaches every household," but he is a Harvard-educated economist, a neo-liberal to the core. Anyone truly committed to political and social change in Mexico and especially Chiapas would be wise not to wait for Zedillo to take up the Zapatista platform. Despite the rhetoric, Zedillo leads the same PRI-dominated government that assassinated Emiliano Zapata in 1919 and still represents Mexico's elites while making idle promises to improve the plight of the rest of the country's population.

In a sense, the PRI of today is even more powerful than at anytime in its tenure, thanks to the pro-business success of the Salinas administration. During Salinas' six-year term (1988-94), 27 Mexicans became billionaires while 40 million dropped below the poverty level. The rich get richer while the country becomes more impoverished, both ecologically and economically.

Of course there's also the small consideration of the influence of Mexico's neighbor to the north, which has shown even a firmer commitment to open markets than it has to closed borders. Much to the detriment of Mexico's rural population, the United States and its freely-flowing currency have had a profound effect on the development of Mexico. The Mexican economy faced an economic crisis in early 1995, and the government devalued the peso to prevent runaway inflation. The United States promised billions of dollars in loan guarantees to support the PRI government, while Wall Street called for Zedillo to quickly resolve the political situation in Chiapas. He seemed to be listening, sending Mexican troops quickly to Chiapas to round up the "leaders" of the EZLN. They managed to arrest a few before Zedillo called off the dogs thanks to the pressure of outraged Mexicans and people from around the world.

As Diaz pointed out, the people in his social class—the urban, educated elite—have the power to forge Mexico's greater policy decisions. Raised and educated under the influence of a system that rewards self-interest over the desire to benefit one's community, these people and their families have ascended to positions of influence, wealth, and power. Under those circumstances, who could rightfully be expected to give up such power and wealth to poor, landless, powerless peasants in some far off, backwater state? It's reasonable to expect that no one would do so willingly, but only when they were absolutely forced to.

It is from this perspective that the Zapatista movement seems so inspiring. With disparities in wealth in Mexico rivaling those of any other country on the planet, the Zapatistas are forcing all Mexicans to question the



legitimacy of the elite's hoarding of the country's riches. Is it fair, the Zapatistas make one ask, for the elites to have so much when the indigenous people have nothing? Dispossessed of their land and their traditional life, the Zapatistas have resorted to the use of all that they have left: their dignity, their sense of shared purpose, their guile, and the righteous simplicity of their demands.

In the interests of their survival as a people, the Zapatistas have demanded the immediate resignation of "the maximum and illegitimate federal executive that today holds power," and have declared war on the very government that pretends to represent them. The Zapatistas have made a deliberate decision to fight rather than allow their culture to be absorbed by the larger culture of consumption that exploits the resources of the world's "Lacandóns" without much concern for the people who actually live in these areas.

For that reason, the scope of the Zapatista revolt is hard to visualize—especially for people who get their news from a media that pays more attention to debates over prayer in schools than it does to bloody revolutions around the globe. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article, the Zapatista uprising was "the first sign of organized guerrilla activity in Mexico since the 1970s." And according to Arturo Santamaria Gomez, "it is certain that since the Mexican Revolution in 1910, there have never been so many insurgents under arms." In other words, the Zapatista revolt is a big deal.

Despite being virtually unknown before the New Year's Day uprising, the EZLN is large and well-organized, and has actually existed for many years. The locals have been attempting to preserve the Lacandón and the rest of Chiapas for almost as long as there have been people working to destroy it.

Jeffrey Rubin described the history of resistance in Chiapas in a January 7, 1994 article in the New York Times:

In response to this impoverishment, peasants have become active in nonviolent grass-roots political movements. Supported by Chiapas' Roman Catholic bishops, these organizations fought to defend people's land and livelihood, develop innovative economic projects and secure democratic political rights. But as the government has encouraged deregulation and rapid economic transformation in Chiapas, state officials have stepped up repression of peasants' organizations that have resisted these policies. Preoccupied with furthering the free trade agenda (and with convincing other nations that ordinary Mexicans supported NAFTA), the authorities failed to address local grievances, disrupted political meetings and jailed and tortured peasant leaders. The nonviolent movements that had grown in the 1980s stalled, and armed forms of opposition increased—finally, to the point of rebellion. In Chiapas, moves toward economic expansion were accompanied by increased repression, and now brutal military violence.

The EZLN had organized and trained in the Chiapan forests for nearly ten years, according to press reports, before making their military presence felt. The enactment of NAFTA and its implications for the forests they depend on for their livelihood finally pushed the Zapatistas over the edge and into the streets of San Cristobal and other major communities in Chiapas. According to Gomez, the fact that the Zapatistas could even consider taking over settlements as large as San Cristobal (population of about 80,000) and Ocosingo (about 100,000) distinguishes their revolt from political movements that were a major thorn in the Mexican government's side in the late 1960s and 1970s in the coastal state of Guerrero. And the fact that 17,000

troops—about a third of Mexico's army—were deployed to Chiapas to counter the Zapatistas indicates that the government takes the movement very seriously.

Yet much more important than their military muscle, the Zapatistas have proven to possess an extremely sophisticated political structure. The rebellions in Guerrero were essentially quashed when their leaders were hunted down by the Mexican army and executed. The EZLN hopes to avoid such an end by operating under the direction of a central committee. The government, in an attempt to define its enemy, tabbed a particularly visible ski-masked Subcommandante Marcos as the EZLN's leader, but Marcos has disavowed his leadership while remaining the Zapatistas' spokesman. According to Paco Ignacio Taibo II in an essay in The Nation, Marcos often points out that "he is only a *Subcommandante*, and he warns that the name 'Marcos' is interchangeable—anyone can put on a ski mask and say 'I am Marcos.' He invites people to do so."

Yet, in his regular communiqués and media interviews such as the one broadcast on *60 Minutes*, Marcos displays a brilliance that leads one to think that he has had a great influence on the Zapatistas. He seems to be the type of a leader who can bring out the leadership qualities of those with whom he works, producing a movement that operates by consensus. In their negotiations with the Mexican government, the EZLN's representatives have repeatedly had to take the government's proposals back to their people to be ratified, since no Zapatistas hold the authority to speak for the whole group.

The brilliance of the Zapatistas' movement lies also in the fact that they have avoided further armed clashes with the Mexican army, while keeping

their movement present in the consciousness of Mexicans and others the world over, and in their negotiations with the Mexican government.

Progress has been slow, however. Negotiations have broken off several times when the Zapatistas have perceived the government's role as simply paying lip-service to their grievances rather than actually attempting to address them. Yet the Mexican government wants to avoid the negative press that would accompany further military intervention, and has managed to coax the Zapatistas back to the bargaining table to forge out a plan to address their demands. Only time will tell if this process will lead to any improvement in the lives of the rural peasants of Chiapas.

The Mexico of the 1917 Constitution was founded on the shoulders of rural revolt. The U.S. university-educated elite of Mexico have no more than paid lip service to this history, while Salinas' government has indeed succeeded in building a Mexico that resembles its neighbor to the north more now than at any time in the country's history. Mexico is in many ways a modern country, as anyone who has avoided the traffic, department stores, and Dunkin' Donuts on the way to el Zocalo in Mexico City could attest. But Mexico's edifice of modernity rests on the base of its traditional past as precariously as the original sixteen blocks of Mexico City sit on the ruins of the Aztec empire's capital of Tenochtitlan. Most Americans understand—and care about—Mexico's indigenous tradition about as well as the conquistador Hernan Cortes did when he stormed that mythical city and massacred the followers of the great chief Montezuma.

For their part, the Zapatistas are still prepared to fight if they must because they are ready to die for their cause. "Perhaps we will not win because our troops are poor and our weapons aren't so great," said Marcos. "But what is certain is that we will not lose. To avoid fighting, the Zapatistas will try other methods to keep their movement in the faces and the hearts of people in Mexico and the world over. They'll do so by using the internet to distribute Marcos' eloquent communiqués, by keeping their names in the newspapers, and by staging mock takeovers of Mexico City if they have to.

If you believe Gomez' Z Magazine essay, the EZLN will always find a sympathetic audience. In his piece, Gomez asserts that the Zapatista movement "speaks to the desire of many Mexicans to preserve their independence and culture, proving the attraction of what the brilliant anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla calls 'el Mexico Profundo'—'Deep Mexico.' "

I'm not sure that I fully understand this concept of el Mexico Profundo—probably no gringo can. I guess I would have a better grasp of it had I been in the crowd in el Zocalo in Mexico City on January 13th, 1994. There, 150,000 people demonstrated against the government's policy of pursuing economic modernity by chanting "First World, ha ha ha." These protesters will not forget the Zapatistas, for it is that small band of indigenous "guerrillas" that is primarily responsible for kindling their hopes for a better future for all Mexican citizens—not just the ones with Ivy League degrees.

### Serving Up A Better Future

Right now, I feel a little like Leo Auffmann in Ray Bradbury's Dandelion Wine. By occupation, Leo was the jeweler of the novel's fictional Green Town, but he was also something much more important. The town's inventor, Leo was a key character in Dandelion Wine because, thanks to the prodding of a twelve-year-old Douglas Spaulding, he tried to construct a "Happiness Machine."

Leo Auffmann's life wasn't particularly sad before he began working on the Happiness Machine. He had a loving wife, adoring children and a successful occupation in a place Bradbury paints as almost too pleasant to be true. Auffmann just couldn't resist the challenge; you could say his inventor's curiosity and a desire to serve his community obscured his better judgment. Given the proper inspiration and the confidence in one's abilities, who wouldn't try to build a machine that could make one's family, friends, and neighbors feel joyful, satisfied, exhilarated, fulfilled?

I understand Leo's sentiments, although I haven't the skills, interest, manual dexterity or technical know-how to invent a machine. What I do have is the desire to create something. The raw materials I've chosen to work

with are the experiences, images, and information that I collected while a student on the International Honors Program's Global Ecology course (IHP). The product? Not a machine, but this piece of writing you hold in your hands, an attempt to make some sense of the year I spent abroad and the four years since of pondering the meaning of that program. In trying to develop this piece, the concluding work in this series of essays, I sympathize deeply with Green Town's inventor when, on the first day he set to work on the Happiness Machine, "Leo Auffmann moved slowly through his garage, expecting some wood, a curl of wire, a hammer or wrench to leap up crying, 'Start here!' But nothing leaped, nothing cried for a beginning."

Thankfully, Leo Auffmann may have helped me get my foot in the door on this piece. Thinking about his desire to provide happiness for everyone in Green Town—and the results of this endeavor—has focused my ideas about what I'm trying to do with these essays. As you might have guessed, Leo eventually constructed a Happiness Machine that failed to bring happiness to anyone. An impressive invention nonetheless, Leo's machine bestowed upon its users visual images of the wonders of the world; sounds of exotic animals, and fragrances of flowers that were simply not found in Green Town. Rather than produce the instantaneous happiness that Leo had anticipated, these sensory stimulations evoked longings, yearnings, in people who previously seemed satisfied with their simple, Green Town lives. Leo's wife, Lena Auffmann summed it up best:

"Leo, the mistake you made is you forgot some hour, some day, we all got to climb out of that thing and go back to dirty dishes and the beds not made. While you're in that thing, sure, a sunset lasts forever almost, the air smells good, the temperature is fine. All the things you want to last, last. But outside, the children wait on lunch, the

clothes need buttons. And then let's be frank, Leo, how long can you *look* at a sunset? Who *wants* a sunset to last? Who wants perfect temperature? Who wants air smelling good always? So after awhile, who would notice? Better, for a minute or two, a sunset. After that, let's have something else. People are like that, Leo."

With the lesson of Leo's mistake in mind, I'll take the liberty to admit right off that these essays will probably have very little impact indeed. These pieces probably won't have much influence on the long-term survival of the tiger or the Siberian crane, or on the Zapatistas' struggle for justice and democracy. They probably won't encourage many people to live more simply, minimizing their impacts upon the billions of other beings we share this planet with. Heck, while I hope the reader cracks a smile every now and then, I'm aware that these essays most likely won't even make anybody who reads them truly happy.

Thus relieved of that burden, I turn again to the lesson of Leo Auffmann, who wanted so desperately to serve the people of Green Town. I also want to reflect upon some stories of my IHP experiences, and discuss the obsession I share with Leo about how a person can best serve one's community, and humanity.

I first encountered Dandelion Wine while at breakfast with Jed Burkett and Mike Arquin in a cafe in the southern Mexican town of San Mateo del Mar. Jed and Mike, you might have already gleaned from earlier essays, were regular companions of mine on a quest for fun. This quest took many forms, and on this particular morning it started with large servings of huevos rancheros, repeated refills of strong coffee, and a reading from a copy of



Dandelion Wine that Mike or Jed had recently acquired. I sipped my coffee and listened as Jed regaled us with Bradbury's introduction of the novel's main character:

"Douglas Spaulding, twelve, freshly wakened, let summer idle him on its early-morning stream. Lying in this third-story cupola bedroom, he felt the tall power it gave him, riding high in the June wind, the grandest tower in town. At night, when the trees washed together, he flashed his gaze like a beacon from this lighthouse in all directions over swarming seas of elm and oak and maple."

Having read and enjoyed Fahrenheit 451 and The Martian Chronicles, I was amazed and surprised at the nostalgic and innocent prose of Dandelion Wine. Bradbury's page one comparison of Douglas Spaulding to the Indian deity Shiva helped to hook me quickly, as those of you who've read my On the Brink of the Spirit World essay will understand. Basically, I immediately became engrossed in this book that I didn't even know existed just an hour earlier. After our public reading, I asked if I could be the first to read it, and Jed and Mike agreed.

This breakfast took place near the beginning of a two-week bus trip to southern Mexico. Nearing the end of our eight-month program, most of my fellow students and I were restless and burnt out. The constant travel that had been our lives for months was intensified as the coordinator of our Mexico program seemed intent on covering too many miles and too much material during this trip from Mexico City to the south-eastern Mexican state of Chiapas and back to the capital. We had already traveled together through seven different countries and had learned first hand how the "economic development" of a region often spelled disaster for that area's native species and peoples. Although the vehicle of IHP had been a Happiness Machine at

times for us—carting us through a series of interesting and exhilarating experiences—in Mexico it had become a Burnout Machine.

Early in that road trip, we learned about the impacts of economic development on a region called the Chimalapas—a forested area on the border of Oaxaca and Chiapas, claimed by both states. This area has been called “the last great rainforest of Mexico,” probably because it has been disturbed less than the Lacandón forest in eastern Chiapas. Our group was hosted by large families of local people who live in small, wooden houses with dirt floors and aluminum roofs. Their village lies near a large creek where the forest opens out into a clearing. We slept for two nights in a large pole building with a wooden roof and no walls that reminded me of a picnic area you’d find at a city park. At mealtimes, we broke up into groups of five or six and were led to the houses of the local people. There, our hosts made us tortillas fresh daily, and we sat with the local families, eating tortillas and beans, some of us trying through our broken Spanish to get a sense of these people’s lives.

Several men of the village led us on walks through the forest, pointing out some of the plants and discussing their uses. One man, in blue jeans, a short-sleeved polyester shirt and a cowboy hat, raised a machete and slashed a vine which he said produced cool, clear water, even in the dry season. The men showed us their fields, where they interplant beans and corn and squash in a manner that probably has been practiced for thousands of years. They explained to us that they are not entirely subsistence farmers, as some of the men travel to the cities or the fields of northern Mexico to find work so that they can send back money for their families. Still, they explained, the forest

and their fields provide for most of their needs, and they in turn try to care for this landscape.

According to Michael Angel García, the Coordinator of the Forest and Rainforest Commission of Mexico's Pact of Ecological Groups, it is a special landscape indeed. García says the Chimalapas is "perhaps the only site in Mexico where one can find integrated ecosystems as diverse as the pine forests, the live-oak forests, the high rainforests, the middle and low subtropical forests and the cloudforests." He goes on to say:

"Inhabiting all this vegetation is a great variety of fauna which having been practically exterminated from other tropical regions of Mexico, finds in Chimalapas one of its last retreats. Examples of this fauna are the jaguar, the quetzal, the turkey, tapir, spider monkey, howler monkey, the harp eagle, puma, macaw, pheasant, ocelot and an ample variety of other mammals, reptiles, birds, and fish...Thus, it can be estimated that a single hectare of undisturbed vegetation of the Chimalapas houses up to 900 plant and over 200 animal species. This means that on one mountainside of this region a greater variety of trees can be found than in all of the territory of the U.S. and Canada together."

Unfortunately, this wealth of trees has brought problems for the people of the Chimalapas, as timber companies have set their sights on the abundance of tropical hardwood. One night, the people of the village gave a presentation. They spoke to us about their encounters with men who have come into their village to cut timber. With much of the land ownership under dispute—remember, two states can't even decide which one holds the Chimalapas—timber companies have apparently tried to just come in and cut

the trees without compensating the landowners. Of course the local people counter by trying to protect the forests that are their homes.

Apparently, several people of the village we stayed in have been killed in disputes with timber companies, including children. These companies have tried to drive the local people out through the worst form of intimidation imaginable, but the locals have vowed to stay and fight for their lives and their livelihoods.

The shock of hearing that timber companies had resorted to killing children in their quests for profits was almost too much to bear. Having a decent command of Spanish, I listened to the local speaker's version rather than the English translation, and I remember asking the our translator to repeat herself because I was sure I must have heard that part wrong. "The timber companies really killed their children?" I asked, dumbfounded. "Si," the local speaker replied, maybe not understanding my words but perfectly reading the confusion on my face.

In many ways, I think our visit to the Chimalapas was the last straw for some members of our group. I know it was for me. With the most depressing story we'd heard yet piled on top of the many discouraging stories we had already been told, I just couldn't take it anymore. One of the most frustrating aspects of our program was that we really couldn't do much about the horror stories we learned of. We rarely had enough time in any one place—especially during our hurried tour of Mexico—to feel like we could make any sort of positive contribution. All we could do was ask more questions, immerse ourselves deeper into the issues we learned about, but we couldn't *do* anything to try to help solve them. We were helpless, hostages to our

schedule of bus rides, depressing stories, lunch, more depressing stories, dinner, and time for bed. With no creative outlet for our frustrations, some of us took to escaping them however we could: A walk around a new city, a hike in the woods, a six-pack of Tecate.

After our visit to the Chimalapas, we went to San Mateo del Mar, and actually had some free time as our planned events fell through. We took the opportunity to unwind a bit, walking around the town and downing our fair share of the local cervezas. Then came the day that Jed and Mike brought to breakfast the book that would carry me through as we resumed our whirlwind tour of southern Mexico. With Dandelion Wine in hand, I was able to take refuge in our bus—described as “the fifth-best bus in *all* of Mexico” by its driver, Mario, when we boarded in Mexico City. I took advantage of the long, comfortable bus rides to tear through Dandelion Wine, embracing the romantic images of what the book’s subtitle labels “The captivating novel of a boy’s magical summer.”

The subtitle seemed apt. I escaped captivity in the bus by seeking refuge in Bradbury’s romantic description of a boy’s experience of a Green Town summer thick with adventure. As my body was being carted about, my imagination was with Douglas Spaulding as he reveled in the glory of his new tennis shoes; shared stories of the past with a home-bound Civil War Colonel; and convinced Leo Auffmann to try to build a machine that would bestow happiness upon anyone who wanted it.

That Green Town summer seemed to exist solely to provide adventure for a wide-eyed Douglas Spaulding. He and his ten-year-old brother Tom made copious lists of everything they did or saw; feasted on

their grandmother's superb dinners; and uncovered buried treasures in the junkman's wagon. The novel's most enduring image came in the boys' appreciation of their grandfather's special brew. As grandpa stashed away bottle after bottle of dandelion wine throughout the summer, Douglas and Tom reflected on the memories of summer stored in the bottles that could be rekindled all winter as the dandelion wine was uncorked.

"There's the first day of summer," Tom chimed, pointing at one bottle.

"There's the new tennis shoes day," Douglas replied, and the boys celebrated that they and grandpa could at any time pierce the Green Town winter by uncorking a bottle and remembering anew their magical summer.

Not that the boys' summer was all sweetness and light. Douglas endured many hardships that summer: the Colonel whose stories he had become so fond of listening to died; one of his best friends moved away; a serial killer murdered several of Green Town's young, single women; an annoying aunt came for a visit and cleaned up grandmother's kitchen, robbing their nightly feasts of their spontaneity, and their flavor; and Douglas came down with a terrible fever near the end of the summer.

Somehow, Douglas Spaulding managed to roll with the punches, rebounding and learning from each adversity. These bumps in the road of Douglas' summer seemed to elevate his appreciation of the high points, just as Lena Auffmann suggested that people appreciate sunsets because they display themselves for only a short while. Douglas even seemed to admirably absorb the blow that was the failure of Leo Auffmann's Happiness Machine.

I should be careful not to paint Leo Auffmann as too naive. While he eagerly embraced the task of building the happiness machine, he did so after displaying an awareness that machines have not always served the best

interests of humanity. After Douglas Spaulding's suggestion that Leo invent a Happiness Machine was greeted with a chorus of men laughing, Leo responded:

“Don't,' said Leo Auffmann. 'How have we used machines so far, to make people cry? Yes! Every time man and the machine look like they will get on all right—boom! Someone adds a cog, airplanes drop bombs on us, cars run off cliffs. So is the boy wrong to ask? No! No...’”

This begs the question, was Leo wrong to honor Douglas Spaulding's request? Knowing the sordid history of man and the machine, should Leo have left well enough alone and gone about his life, abandoning his desire to invent a Happiness Machine?

If you truly believe that everything happens for a reason, which I do, then you'd have to say no. You'd have to conclude that Leo needed to build the happiness machine to learn that people in Green Town were already happy enough. Somehow, Leo had lost sight of what was marvelous about his seemingly mundane life, and needed the experience of building the Happiness Machine to reconnect with the contentment of his wife and family.

Unfortunately, it's not like modern man (or postmodern, for that matter) to leave well enough alone. I'm not sure how we came to believe ourselves so clever, but we always seem to think that we can improve things. If we just tinker a little bit with the system, we can operate more efficiently so that everybody can have more cool stuff and more leisure time and all of our ever-mounting desires can be fulfilled into eternity.

Well I don't believe it, and the evidence gathered through my travels is certainly on my side. Humanity has no doubt done some incredible things:

splitting the atom, putting men on the moon, supersonic travel, instantaneous global information exchange, the 55 cent Big Mac Meal Deal...We've also managed to do something that most people would probably find hard to believe. Our species has succeeded in targeting almost every out-of-the-way place on the planet for economic exploitation. If there are resources there—oil, wood, soil to be mined by commercial agriculture, poor people who can perform cheap labor—then you can bet that some arm of the global economic system has conducted an initial exploration into the feasibility of converting those resources into capital. The out-of-the-way corner of Mexico that is Chiapas is just one example.

Now I'm not going to go out on such a Buddhist limb as to suggest that we need to abandon all desires in order to live a satisfying and fulfilling and ecologically sane lifestyle. But, I will claim that our desires need to be reined in. We need to carve out some room in the clutter of our lives to contain our contentment, to find satisfaction in a simpler lifestyle, like the people of Green Town, or of the Chimalapas.

At this point, I must admit that I'm guilty of romanticizing the lives of people like those in the Chimalapas, or the Zapatistas. Their agrarian lifestyles are probably a lot harder than I acknowledge, and I don't want to make light of that fact. If I romanticize their lives, however, that's only because I am, at heart, a romantic. I reserve the right to yearn for a better way of life, for an existence that fulfills people's needs for community, for affection, for a sense of belonging, as well as for food and water and shelter. While it seems that most people on the planet have some needs that are unfulfilled, I don't believe this *has* to be the case. To grossly oversimplify: If



people in the “developed” world had a better sense of how to fulfill our desires for a sense of belonging, for community, we’d probably expend less energy trying to fill the holes in our lives with the accumulation of “things” that requires the use of resources and threatens the access to food and water and shelter of people in the “less-developed” world.

One lesson that I think was adequately hammered home during IHP was that you can spin your wheels talking about these sorts of issues endlessly, but that isn’t going to get you anywhere except maybe seeking treatment for an ulcer. To avoid frustration, you’ve got to find some way to act to support what you believe. I also came to believe that there are as many ways to act as there are people, and that I’m better off concentrating on how I can make my own contribution than trying to suggest to others what they should be doing. In other words, please don’t think I’m suggesting that you should act a certain way: I see this work simply as a discussion of what’s possible, of some ways to serve up a better future for the inhabitants of this planet.

In an attempt to serve a group of friends who seemed increasingly gloomy as we pushed further into southern Mexico, Eric Gilchrist and I came up with the idea of hosting “happy days.” Every once in a while, we would select a fellow member of our group, designate that day her happy day (women made up two-thirds of our group), and buy her ice cream, lose to her in chess, pamper her with hugs, or do just about anything in our power to ensure that she had a smile on her face that entire day. It wasn’t always an easy task, as some of our colleagues were so fed up with seeing each other’s faces, anything having to do with ecology, and especially the long bus rides,

that only teleportation to their beds at home would be guaranteed to bring a smile. At times, it would have been much easier to avoid the more disgruntled members of our group and just hang out with those who could manage to find the humor in even the worst of days.

Eric and I stuck with our plan, however, and on the third day of our stay in San Cristobal de las Casas, we chose Julia Hobson as the proud recipient of one day of sheer, unadulterated bliss. Okay, so maybe it wasn't *that* great, but a bouquet of a dozen ruby-red roses brought a smile to Julia's face that I hadn't seen for what seemed like several months. Julia had seemed depressed and distant, but we found that her condition wasn't so dire that it couldn't be cured by several games of bridge and heaping doses of red wine. To tell you the truth, seeing Julia's spirits lifted did a lot for Eric's and my morale as well.

As I discussed in the essay Viva la Revolución, San Cristobal de las Casas was one of the towns that the Zapatistas took over on January 1, 1994. The Zapatistas, of course, were and are anything but happy over the way that they, the indigenous people of southern Mexico have been affected by the increase in oil exploration, timber harvesting, cattle grazing and dam building in Chiapas. While they have shown an awareness of the increase of such activity across the globe, they are basically concerned with preserving their way of life and their home in their region which falls in the Mexican state of Chiapas.

They drew their name and their inspiration from Emiliano Zapata, a peasant who carried the idea of revolution from rural southern Mexico into the halls of government in Mexico City. Zapata's life was celebrated in a fairly

mediocre film starring Marlon Brando entitled Viva Zapata. In that film, as in real life, Zapata (Brando) manages to infuriate the Mexican establishment because he just won't go away until his demands for land to be redistributed to the landless peasants are met. One of the Mexican government officials shows his respect and dislike for Zapata, suggesting that, "Zapata's a tiger. You have to kill a tiger."

Unfortunately, this world has been about as successful in squashing revolutionaries like Zapata as it has in exterminating the majestic tiger. There seems to be little tolerance for beings as fiercely independent as the tiger or Emiliano Zapata (or Marlon Brando, for that matter).

Yet revolutionaries, like the tiger, have managed somehow to hold on. In Viva Zapata, one of the Mexican revolutionaries suggests that "Zapata's out there in the hills somewhere. He'll be back when we need him." Surely, he has returned as the inspiration for the Zapatistas.

These Mexican rebels may be the most well-publicized, but I don't think that they're the only people working right now to revolutionize the way people live on this planet. I think there's plenty of room in this world for revolutionaries, and I also believe that a new wave of revolutionaries is emerging. To see them, you'll have to look very carefully, however, because you won't see these folks wearing ski masks and carrying guns. You probably won't even hear them on the street corner spewing Marxist rhetoric or calling you comrade. Keep looking, though, because they're there, and they just might be creating more profound changes in the world than the Bolsheviks or the framers of the U.S. Constitution.

The people I'm talking about are folks who recognize the bankruptcy of the human institutions that have long held power on this planet. I think they

know that you can't go head-to-head with the power mongers of the global capitalist system who have long practiced the use of power and money and influence and, if need be, violence. To confront that system head on would be suicide. What you'll find—again, look closely—are people who have learned to employ much more subtle means to try to revolutionize a system that is predicated on the continual creation and exportation of desires. You'll find people who just aren't willing any longer to dive headlong into the Happiness Machine.

On one early journey on our quest for fun, Mike and Jed and I went to a concert in London with our classmates Jonathan Raichart, Chandra Sivakumaran, and Keith Perchemlides (try saying that list of names five times fast). We abandoned our group in Oxford, and journeyed to hear an American band called The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy. Although they were from San Francisco, and I'd spent the previous five years right across the bay in Berkeley, I'd never seen them live. I'm glad I got the chance to experience their uniquely powerful blend of politically and environmentally astute, hard driving, hip-hop rap music. I bring that event up, because in one song, their singer, Michael Franti, discusses revolutions. "The personal revolution is the first and most difficult step in any revolution," says Franti, and I tend to agree.

So what does this new brand of revolutionary look like? Well, as I suggested earlier, I think we all have our own way of approaching our service to the world, so the new brand of revolutionary comes in all shapes, sizes, occupations, colors and flavors. I think they share a few things, however, such as the fact that they've chosen to devote themselves to the creation of

good in the world, as opposed to fighting against the bad. This is a crucial distinction, I think, as focusing on negatives seems to be an uphill battle, and one that leads to a high degree of burnout. Focusing on the good, however, seems infectious, replacing hopelessness with the slow, self-perpetuating spread of infinitely positive possibility.

In my home of Missoula, this new brand of revolutionary includes the people who build houses for low-income families, who create community gardens for people to grow food and to gather in, who provide bicycles for people in the community to ride instead of driving their cars. They are the Montana Conservation Corps, an organization for which I served last year, painting kids' rooms at the Missoula Youth Homes, raking the yards of Missoula's elderly, and building trails for people to walk into nature upon. In other places, they are the IHP students trying to funnel the power of the experiences we shared around the globe into their particular brand of positive change. The new revolutionaries are these and many more people who have decided to add meaning to their lives by working to serve the best of all possible futures.

Haven't there always been some people who do this sort of work? What makes these peoples' approach so new? I think that for the first time in history, people have an awareness that their actions have global impacts. People know that Nike shoes are made by laborers in southeast Asia making what amounts to slave wages. Here in the United States, we know that our government fights wars in the middle east to ensure our oil supply, and that McDonalds has expanded across the globe. Kids in our schools learn very early about the destruction of the rainforest and about global warming.

These new revolutionaries have absorbed this information, and taken the "think globally, act locally" slogan to a whole new level. They have begun the "personal revolution" that Franti calls for; recognizing that if all of our actions have global implications, and if we choose to care for the world around us, then we must begin with ourselves. As singer Ani DiFranco puts it: "I don't need to tell you, just what this is about, you just start on the inside and work your way out." If we imagine the world as a giant lake, then we can see our actions as a series of concentric waves that begin from within us and emanate out to create a ripple throughout the universe. The new revolutionary has found a way to deflect the waves of selfishness and greed they are bombarded with and respond by sending out ripples of compassion to the world around them

I'd like to suggest that these new revolutionaries are penetrating deeper than the level of economics, of politics, to the level of the spirit. They have recognized their longings, their ever-increasing desires, as the result not of not enough accumulation, but of a much deeper emptiness that can't be fulfilled by consuming even the finest foods or drink, by buying the nicest cars to drive to the best homes in the most beautiful locations. At the same time, the truly revolutionary are those who haven't cut themselves off from the world. They recognize that these things play a role in our lives. We must eat, and drink, and have shelter, but we must also recognize that considering our food and drinks and house and car to be the finest is a matter of perception. The new revolutionary longs not for the good life that's only available in his or her romantic visions of someplace else, but appreciates the real life that exists in his or her particular Green Town.

Aah, but there I go again, romanticizing the lives of a group of people who live on only in the gross generalizations of my grandiose visions. Or do they? Maybe I've made these people up, but have you looked hard enough, long enough, done enough study to prove that they don't exist? I understand that you're skeptical, I am too, but isn't there a part of you that wants to believe? Isn't there a part of you that wants to think of yourself as committed to revolutionizing the world for the better?

Another IHP reflection: after spending two months in India, our group left New Delhi (on my 24th birthday) and landed the next day in Bangkok, Thailand. At the time, India's economy had severe restrictions that limited the influence of outside corporations. The only familiar logo I saw was that of Pepsi, which had an agreement with an Indian company called Lehar to produce soft drinks. Oh yeah, there was an American Express office and you could use a Visa card in a lot of places. Mostly, there wasn't the influence of multinational corporations that you could find just about anywhere else, and I was proud of India for that. Of course, India has its own set of ecological problems that would support the argument that multinational corporations are not the only culprits responsible for the worlds' ecological problems. All the same, we didn't see many symbols of American capitalist culture in India.

That all changed when we reached Bangkok. Within a half-mile of the Christian Student Center where we stayed in Bangkok, there were two mega-malls that each had two Dunkin' Donuts and two Baskin-Robbins' 31 Flavors. Walk for ten minutes and you could be at McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Shakey's Pizza, Swensen's Ice Cream, or the Hard Rock Cafe. A huge

mural of Whitney Houston and Kevin Costner advertised the screening of "The Bodyguard." Big Nike billboards implied that to be like Michael Jordan or Bo Jackson one should "just do it," and stores sold authentic American leather jackets with Harley-Davidson insignias and Levi's 501s and chrome belt buckles—all for prices that were simply outrageous.

As you might have guessed, most of my group took the opportunity to binge on the familiar junk foods during our first few days in Bangkok. One night, Josh Jaeger and I decided we'd have a progressive dinner, and started out with some donut holes at Dunkin' Donuts. Then we went to Shakey's for pizza and MoJo potatoes. We followed that with some french fries at McDonalds, and a scoop of ice cream at Baskin Robbins. You can bet we felt pretty good after that, and were probably pretty proud of ourselves.

After spending two months in a country that was in most ways utterly foreign, I guess I can understand our desire to indulge ourselves in the familiar foods suddenly available. I'm proud to say that some of us came to our senses rather quickly. We soon realized that we were spending twice as much for unhealthy American junk food as we could pay to eat delicious Thai food in a charming courtyard cafe that sat between the mega-malls and our temporary abode. Our junk food binges aside, we soon settled down and took the opportunity to appreciate the local flavor. Right now, I'd trade the Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Burger King and McDonald's that sit within two blocks of my house for a plate of pad thai and a Thai iced tea in a heartbeat.



During that trip I became absorbed in a quest for a way of acting that would reflect my knowledge of the rampant destruction of the Earth's native habitats. In Thailand, I became interested in Buddhism. This eastern way of being in the world is a direct descendent of Hinduism, the influence of which I discuss in the essay On the Brink of the Spirit World. I didn't know much about either "religion" at the time—still don't, really—but I learned about and was attracted to the Buddhist concept of "the middle path." I'd learned that I was prone to extreme behavior: from an unhealthy over-indulgence in alcohol, caffeine, and other consumables, to an extreme asceticism, equally unhealthy because it caused me to disengage from my friends and my experiences of the world around me.

The middle path, as I understood and still understand it, is a way of being that splits the difference between these two extremes. It acknowledges our reliance on consuming to sustain ourselves, and encourages us to cultivate an awareness of the impacts of our actions which will help to curb our desires to indulge unnecessarily.

After my little Dunkin' Donuts binge in Bangkok, I wanted to find a concrete way to express my appreciation of this concept of the middle path. I wanted to find a way to remind myself of my tendency towards extreme behavior, a symbol I could hold on to that would encourage me to walk the middle path whenever I strayed towards one unhealthy extreme or the other. I mulled the idea over for a while, then one day decided to act. I walked over to one of the mini malls, cruised right past the Dunkin' Donuts to a little jewelry store, plunked down the equivalent of four dollars, and had my left ear pierced and in it placed a silver earring bearing the Buddhist symbol of

yin/yang. That earring, with its spiral of black with a white dot in it flowing into the white spiral with a black dot in it, remains in my ear today.

I've since learned a lot more about Buddhism, and have acquired an even greater appreciation for the Buddhist way of looking at and acting in the world. To be honest, I don't know if I'd call myself a practicing Buddhist, nor do I think that really matters—to the Buddha or to me. What does matter is that I've embraced a way of looking at the world that involves maintaining a calm, clear head, and appreciating that all beings are interconnected in such a way that any of our actions will have an influence on every being alive as well as those not yet living. The ripples we're all sending out now will travel far and wide.

In a way, the practice of Buddhism is simply a way of cultivating the childish wonder that Douglas Spaulding embodied in the pages of Dandelion Wine. It's a way to unpack the spirit from its captivity in the walls of cynicism and selfishness and skepticism that build up too easily in people raised in this modern world. Buddhism is just one way for people to learn how to care for ourselves and each other.

"Where's the compassion, to make your tired heart sing?" asks a band called the American Music Club. If you make the effort to look, I think it can be found in Buddhism. I'm sure that compassion can be found in other ways as well, it may be enough to make the effort to search for it.

Every year, the yard in front of my house in Missoula grows a bumper crop of dandelions. Last year, inspired by Bradbury's book, I tracked down a

recipe, picked enough dandelion flowers to fill a large stock pot, and brewed up a batch of dandelion wine. To honor the solace that Dandelion Wine offered me during my travels in Mexico, I flavored the brew with a hint of mango. To offer the wine a little bit of local flavor, I added a sprig of sage that I had gathered near the shores of the Missouri river during a canoe trip I took with my co-workers from the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) last May.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the patience that Douglas Spaulding and his family had in socking away the brew to rekindle their experiences of summer during the long Green Town winter. I imbibed much of it during a Fourth of July jaunt up Missoula's Mount Jumbo to watch the town's fireworks with Keith Friedland, my supervisor from the conservation corps, and a couple of other friends. The rest of it was gone long before the calendar turned to August. I wish I could have made more dandelion wine last year—my yard certainly provided the flowers to do so—but I was just too busy with my work for MCC.

The Montana Conservation Corps is affiliated with Americorps, President Clinton's national service program that provides people with a living stipend and some money to apply towards school in exchange for a year of service. My term began at the start of last February and ended just before Thanksgiving. It was similar to my IHP experience in that I spent a great deal of a year with one group of people, my work crew, and was very different in that it was concentrated in and around Missoula and included almost constant activity in service of this community and this region.

In a sense, my service as a member of MCC was a perfect antidote for the frustration and helplessness that built up during my travels and studies around the globe. Our intent was to undertake projects to protect our area's

natural resources and to serve our community, and we succeeded by building fences to keep cows out of local streams, by updating files on the conditions of abandoned mines around the region, and by working with local schoolkids to install park benches in a city park, among other projects.

The ethic of service that permeated the MCC and Americorps experience is one that sits well with me as I reflect on what I learned during IHP, as does the Conservation Corps' emphasis on serving the region in which one lives. In the four years that I've spent in Missoula, learning about this area and reflecting upon and writing about my experiences of IHP, I've come to believe that my way of trying to confront the world's problems is to try to appreciate and preserve what is beautiful and good in my immediate surroundings. Another quote from the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy helps to keep me on course: "Water pistol man, full of ammunition, squirting out fires on a worldwide mission, but did you ever think to stop and squirt the flowers in your own backyard?"

Spring has slowly reared its head again in Missoula, and with it has come those cute little yellow flowers that most people tend to overlook or detest. Maybe they're not as pretty as the pansies I've planted in my flowerboxes, or the three yellow tulips that blossomed in front of my house just days ago. Yet dandelions are more useful to me now, both as a symbol of my connection to my community, and as the crucial ingredient to the wine I hope to begin brewing soon.

A couple of days ago, I was sitting on my couch reading when my doorbell rang repeatedly. "Take it easy," I thought, as I stomped towards the door, "one ring will do." Then I wiped the scowl from my face, realizing it

wouldn't do any good to answer the door wearing that expression. To my surprise, there was nobody there when I opened the door, and I looked around, puzzled. Then I glanced down, and saw a piece of paper, wrapped into the shape of a cone. I reached down and picked it up, and found inside a large handful of dandelion flowers. As I looked up, I saw the face of a little girl who lives two houses down peering out from behind the huge maple tree in my front yard. I walked around the tree, and as I reached the other side, she and her brother saw me, and ran away to their house, giggling.

In the year-and-a-half I've lived in this house, I've never really interacted with those kids, although I see them all the time. It's not that I'm unfriendly, just that I'm usually too busy to hang out with the kids in the neighborhood. As they presented me with this gift, I realized that I've been making a big mistake. What could be more important than getting to know the people, the kids who share the very piece of land that I call home?

They don't know it, but those kids provided me that day with something more than the ingredients for the season's first batch of dandelion wine. I don't know how, but I intend to recall the lessons of the grown-ups like Leo Auffmann who helped make Douglas Spaulding's summer so magical. Somehow, I will repay the neighbor kids for their precious gift.