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Response to Worster

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Response

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First I would like to say that it is a great pleasure to be sharing the same podium as Donald Worster, to be commenting on his paper, and to have the chance to reflect on the rather impossible question of how the environment, citizenship, and the public good fit together. As a professor in Macalester's Department of Environmental Studies, I encounter these questions almost every day in forms that are not just academic, or even largely academic. My students are constantly asking themselves—and me, and each other—about the links between studying environmental problems in the classroom and addressing them as citizens in their everyday lives.

My remarks are directly informed not only by the essay provided by Professor Worster, but also by an e-mail I received last week from a recent Macalester graduate that contained what might be called tonight's million-dollar question. It is worth quoting at length:

I have to admit, though, as I've had lots of time to think in the last months that I feel a bit of an inner struggle. There are things that I want to do—I am thinking about medical school—but I also feel a real obligation to speak out and actively work against global climate change. I mean, it's not the sort of thing that I can choose to take on later. I really feel like it's now or never with reversing our consumption and emissions trends. I'm just not sure what it would look like for me personally to be working against global warming, though. Any thoughts on that?

Now, how in the world do you answer a question like that? Here is a newly graduated student—and I suspect she is not the only one—who is wrestling on a deeply personal level with the abstract issues at the heart of this year's forum. This is, in many ways, *the* question for many of us. Reframed slightly, we might choose to put the question as Professor Worster phrased it at the end of his talk: "How should we humans meet our moral obligations to the earth?"

There are many ways to seek answers. For those of us who are historians, we may look to the past, and especially to people like John Muir, as models for very successful forms of engagement. John Muir, in particular, offers an intriguing example in part because his life and work raise such important questions, as Professor Worster has just outlined,

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and in part because he developed some compelling answers. He has a lot to teach us about how we, too, might succeed.

For some, however, John Muir remains a distant and perhaps even intimidating figure because he gave himself *entirely* to this cause. The environment became his food and drink, his religion, his very reason for being. But like my student who wrote me that worried but thoughtful e-mail, not everyone feels able to devote themselves so utterly, so completely, so fully to environmental issues. Given this truth, where does this leave us? There is a real danger, I think, in posing our options as a set of either-or alternatives: either we emulate John Muir and do it all, or we throw caution to the wind and ignore everything he hoped to teach us. Given the magnitude of our problems, the latter option in particular strikes me as impractical.

If we look for answers to the larger culture of which we are a part—in which environmental issues, and especially climate change, have lately enjoyed a certain vogue—we find clear instructions: reform our consumption patterns by buying “Green.” Look for the eco-friendly label, we are told, and everything will be fine. There are meritorious arguments that can be made on this subject, and we all need to be aware of them, particularly as the Green marketing hype gets stronger. For example, some of you might be familiar, after reading Michael Pollan’s best-seller, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, with the example of Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farms. (If you have not yet read this book, I highly recommend it.) Along with a handful of other important works, Pollan’s book has dramatized the environmental benefits of eating locally and added a new dimension to how many Americans understand their relationship with food.

An excellent article in the *Washington Post* informed readers that the same Joel Salatin described by Pollan has been working with Chipotle, a fast-food chain, to supply its Charlottesville, Virginia, restaurant with pork from his farm.¹ Easy narrative explanations of what is going on here do not seem to apply. We do not expect a paragon of sustainable agriculture to partner with a fast-food restaurant. Reflexive critics might dismiss Polyface Farms for “selling out.” But Salatin’s arrangements with Chipotle have not changed his farming practices; instead, they reflect the new purchasing strategies of the fast-food chain. “My hat is off to Chipotle,” says Salatin. “I’m honored to be part of an aggressive attempt to rewrite the food model.” This sort of change is something that consumers can actually support with their expenditures.

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Another popular answer from our culture to the question of what we should do is to recycle. This answer has a long history, running back not just to the first Earth Day in 1970, which substantially elevated its status in American political discourse, but also running back into the longer and deeper tradition of conservation politics, with additional strong connections to the ideal of industrial efficiency. Recycling is now dismissed by many critics as being of dubious economic—and even environmental—benefit. One critic has even gone so far as to describe recycling as a quasi-religious exercise, designed to absolve us of the sin of overconsumption. “While our Christian ancestors may have comforted themselves thinking they had dominion over the birds that fly and the fish that swim,” he writes, “we can find surcease consuming what we want as long as we are sure that the little blue box—the eponymous Big Blue—is properly filled each week.”²

There are, of course, very powerful arguments to be made in favor of recycling, just as there are persuasive arguments in favor of buying organic local produce. The challenging question is not whether there are tangible benefits to these behaviors, for clearly there are; the question, instead, is whether they constitute—especially by themselves—adequate environmental citizenship. Do they, as Professor Worster has asked, meet our moral obligations to the earth?

For the rest of my essay, I would like to focus not on that trailblazer John Muir, but on how various students here at Macalester are modeling environmental citizenship—all while being good students and, I hope, living full and varied lives. In the process, I would also like to reflect on how their actions embody the liberal principles and sense of stewardship of the earth that Professor Worster described as the guiding principles behind John Muir’s life and work. Individually, each of the various projects that I will describe is manageable. Taken collectively, they add up to an impressive and far-reaching answer to the question of what it means to be an environmental citizen. And here, I think, we can begin to understand part of what makes John Muir such an outstanding example for us to consider. It was not any single thing that he did that makes him stand out, but rather the sheer breadth and depth of his various activities. We may not be able to match the magnitude of Muir’s activities as individuals, but working together we very well may.

One of the activities of note here at Macalester is the creation of the campus’s new EcoHouse, where students are exploring and experimenting with what it means to live sustainably. The term *sustainability*

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has been bandied about quite a bit of late, but it is a word much easier said than lived. The students who live in the EcoHouse are doing the difficult work of trying to figure out just what sustainable living might look like. Their example underscores their willingness to experiment with changes in lifestyle, and to think about the connections between lifestyle and the ideals of citizenship. How do our basic, everyday activities inform our participation in the larger society? That is a deeper question than which product we should grab from the shelf at the grocery store, or where we might find a recycling bin for our can of Coca-Cola.

Another example is the Macalester Energy Leadership Team (MELT), which has a short but significant history here on campus. MELT's design helps illustrate something important about the connections between citizenship and our moral obligations to the earth. This group's purpose is to encourage people to take responsibility for the ways they use energy. It does so by drawing a direct link between carbon-based energy – with all the concrete benefits its use generates – and the challenges of climate change. Taking responsibility for behaviors that needlessly waste energy, and encouraging fellow students to see those behaviors as civically irresponsible, is an ambitious task. Its ambition lies precisely in the fact that it asks us to reflect upon the broader meanings and implications of activities that most of us regard as absolutely normal, and thus unworthy of careful thought.

Another example can be found in the Clean Energy Revolving Fund (CERF). If MELT is trying to get students to take responsibility for certain *behaviors* with negative environmental implications, then CERF is trying to get the campus to take responsibility for the basic *technologies* that all of us here depend upon. Look at the light bulbs above our heads: Do they use more energy than they need to? This is a question that one of your classmates thought to ask, and the result has been a large-scale project to replace all of the 4-foot-long fluorescent light bulbs on the Macalester campus with newer, more efficient bulbs. Once installed, the new bulbs will use approximately \$28,000 less electricity on an annual basis at current prices, and will reduce the campus's overall carbon footprint by roughly four percent. Asking a simple question about technologies that blend into the background—things that we depend upon but rarely question—can make a powerful difference. Have we chosen the basic technologies we rely upon as wisely as possible, so that our everyday activities do not put an unnecessary burden on the earth?

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Yet another approach is to engage directly in the political process. This might not seem like an area in which college students can make a major difference, but that is not true. The recent Governor's Youth Forum, which had several Macalester student participants, is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the number and kinds of interactions that Macalester students are already taking to engage in the political process. One of our students, for example, is interning with State Senator Ellen Anderson's office, where she is helping to build bridges between that office and the youth climate movement—and in particular is helping them figure out how to use online tools and forums as part of this work.

People are also taking extraordinary steps to get educated about environmental issues, to live the life of the mind, and to figure out as much as they possibly can about their place in the world around them. This, I would argue, is part of the beating heart of environmental stewardship and citizenship. One recent example is January's Focus the Nation teach-in on global warming. The Macalester event brought together people both from campus and the surrounding community to spend a day learning more about the challenges of global climate change. Yet this was but one of more than a thousand teach-ins that attracted more than a million participants nationwide. This Second Annual Civic Forum, too, illustrates the links between critical inquiry and citizenship, highlighting the significance of asking difficult questions and listening carefully to other people's answers. The same thing occurs in educational courses. In many ways, this is the central principle operating here on campus, but by no means is it the only one.

One final example highlights existing opportunities to rethink basic economic patterns, which often seem so entrenched as to be impossible to overturn. Here, I am thinking of ARISE (Alliance to Re-Industrialize for a Sustainable Economy). A number of students have been interning at the St. Paul Ford plant, where they have been trying to re-imagine industrial society as an environmentally sustainable enterprise. This is, to put it mildly, an ambitious task, but the students who are involved see real potential to achieve their lofty goals. If you listen to the stories they tell, if you entertain the questions they ask, if you inspect the same problems they are examining, then it quickly becomes apparent that these students are operating on the cutting edge of a dramatic set of new ideas. Through hard work and extensive research, they are positioning themselves to influence the process of redeveloping the Ford

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site—and their work has the potential to stand as a powerful paradigm of what re-industrialization along sustainable lines might look like.

In closing, and in keeping with the spirit of John Muir, I would like to offer three brief admonitions. First, I encourage you not to make the mistake of confusing engagement with ease. The “50 simple things” approach to saving the environment or to averting global climate change is a welcome start, but it is anemic compared to the kinds of activities I have outlined. Please, if you are looking for models of engagement, consider some of the ones that are already right here on campus. They may not be easy, and at times their ambition might outstrip their accomplishments, but individually they are important and collectively they add up to something significant. They are thoughtful and they are engaged.

Admonition number two: think about the role that values played in guiding John Muir. The Enlightenment’s conviction that humanity is the measure of all things has had a profound influence on Western thought. In our society, for better or for worse, we too often reduce this conviction to the corollary that humanity’s economic self-interest is the measure of all things. Muir rejected this idea with his entire being. Economic growth is important and is a powerful indicator of the ways that we have chosen to make our way in this world. Why, then, should we fail to ask what values we want to guide our economic activities?

My third and final admonition: please do not to fall into the trap of thinking that Green living—no matter how trendy it becomes, no matter how many multinational corporations capitalize on it as a marketing slogan—is incompatible with your desire to fight for human rights, personal liberty, or social equality. As Professor Worster has already argued, these things are inextricably linked, and we would do well to pay more attention to the nature of these linkages.

In the commissioned essays from the students, you will hear some of the arguments I have made here tonight in various forms. These papers will sometimes be much more ambitious than I have just been in my remarks, and you will hear strong arguments advocating that we change numerous deeply entrenched ways of thinking and behaving that heretofore have proved remarkably resistant to reform. Consider these issues carefully, knowing that tackling them will take many devoted people making them their life’s work. They will require people devoting themselves utterly, as did John Muir, to these causes. If you are not one of those people, however, I would like to encourage you not to take the easy way out. Being good environmental citi-

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zens demands more of us than just recycling an old bottle or making responsible consumer purchases. These are good places to start, but we can, and must, do better.

Notes

1. Jane Black, "In Trial Run, Chipotle Heads to the Farm: For Chains, Buying Locally Still Means a Long Journey," *Washington Post* (26 March 2008): F1.
2. James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 6.

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