

Stop Saving the Planet!—
and Other Tips via Rachel Carson for 21st-Century
Environmentalists

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Rachel Carson was a visionary. She's a towering figure in the modern environmental movement. She's widely considered to be its founding voice, and she has remained its conscience. In love with nature since she was a child, she went on to a career as an aquatic biologist with the Fish & Wildlife Service—and broke down many gender barriers to do so—and then to write best-selling science and natural history books about the sea. Her writing combined remarkable factual accuracy with remarkable lyricism. In 1962, her fearless book *Silent Spring*, which exposed the widespread dangers of DDT and other pesticides, and forthrightly attacked the chemical industry, helped ignite widespread environmental awareness, and in the ensuing decade not only led the EPA to ban the domestic use of DDT, but also led to the EPA itself, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and Earth Day. After she died, two years later, of breast cancer, her last, posthumous book *The Sense of Wonder*, about her nature outings with her grand-nephew Roger, would celebrate the importance of introducing children to the joys of nature to nourish their capacity for wonder.

But you already know that. This room is full of environmental historians, and I bet nine out of ten of you know everything I just said, and more. That in the wake of *Silent Spring*, the chemical industry attacks her as an hysteric, a spinster, a Communist. That President Kennedy directs his Science Advisory Committee to launch a report on pesticide safety. You know all that. There's a very sizable literature on Rachel Carson—biographies, children's books, commemorative anthologies, documentaries--by historians, as well as by scientists, writers, and activists. In 1980, Roger accepts the Presidential Medal of Freedom on her behalf. By 1996, she appears on *Time's* list of the hundred most influential people who shaped the century. In A&E *Biography's* TV special on the hundred most influential people of the millennium, which they count down in order of importance, she's #87--more significant, apparently, than Eleanor Roosevelt, Suleyman I, and Steven Spielberg and only eleven slots behind the Beatles. Though granted, she's way behind Mozart, Genghis Khan, Mao, Hitler, Dante, and Bill Gates—and, ironically, also James Watt, who, thankfully, isn't *that* James Watt but rather the inventor of the steam engine and father of the industrial revolution (which of course is almost as ironic). The catalog for the Los Angeles County library system includes 23 children's books about Rachel Carson, and she's in 12 anthologies about important environmentalists, Americans, scientists, or women. John Muir is the subject of a few more books—27--but he's in only 5 anthologies. Aldo Leopold: 2 and 4. Gandhi, 24 books but just 10 anthologies, and Mother Teresa, 25 books and just 2 anthologies – so basically she's maybe running a little ahead of Gandhi and Mother Teresa. And in the 1993 PBS *American Experience* documentary, Meryl Streep does Carson's voice—*Meryl Streep*—with an uncanny Rachel Carson accent.

Okay. Rachel Carson *is* a hero. I'm sure many of you agree with me on that. We've seen a lot of books since 1962 that have brilliantly exposed a lot of environmental messes, but *Silent Spring* still stands out. It blows me away for what it accomplished, but I'm a writer, and it also blows me away with its precision, its poetry—and, again, because it is just utterly without fear.

Still... Right now I've got a pile, more like five piles, of books about Rachel Carson on my coffee table at home. And when you read this literature, well, one of the things that really fascinates me is how consistently, or really wholly and entirely, hagiographic it is. Almost relentlessly hagiographic. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it. Certainly not for Muir or Leopold—or any other figure I can think of in environmental history. Not for Eleanor Roosevelt. And Mother Teresa? I did a quick google, and oh yes, there's a lot of criticism.

Yes, in the 1960s, the chemical industry and its many defenders attack her and say she wants the Russians to win and the insects to take over the world—or maybe both—and the industry, though it's gotten more polite, has continued to spew skepticism. And in the recent renewal of the debate over DDT, some self-appointed bloggers on the extreme right-wing end claim she's murdered 35 million Africans who have died of malaria, and Hitler killed a lot fewer people, and so forth. But among the environmentalists and historians and writers? The mainstream literature on her life and legacy? Well, this is the most G-rated biography I've ever seen—but what really intrigues me most is that there are almost no hard questions about her. I'm generalizing a bit, but the literature is almost all about what we might learn from her life and work. Granted, I haven't unearthed all the journal articles. But while the most prominent works ask questions about Rachel Carson, they don't, to my knowledge, really *question* her decisions, her writing, her beliefs, her motives.

And that should jolt any historian awake. First of all, no one lives a G-rated life. What really seems odd here, though, is that Rachel Carson was born in 1907—105 years ago. That's twelve years before my father, who was forty years old when I was born, and I'm now profoundly middle-aged (which I'm actually not allowed to say in L.A.). *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, and her first book *Under the Sea-Wind* appeared in 1941. In the ensuing 50 to 70 years, has there been *anything*—anything at all—that we might have determined we *shouldn't* learn from her?

History—to paraphrase my favorite quote—is the art of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. That's our power, right? We recognize the past as strange, and then we try to understand its logic. We thereby render the present—the things *we* take for granted—fully historical, a little bit strange, and then we can question the present, and make it seem not so inevitable, and thereby know that we can shape the future. It seems to me, though, especially as I read about Rachel Carson's beliefs and ideas, that we're making the familiar familiar. Rachel Carson herself, and especially I think her ideas, aren't quite *in history*.

Here's my Dad. *He's* my hero, to be honest. He had as much integrity as anyone I'll ever know—or will ever know *of*--and I like to think that anything that's right about my ideas and values comes from my father.



As a lawyer, my father, Elmer Price, defended people on the blacklist during the McCarthy era, and he fought hard for desegregation. But did I find any of his ideas problematic?—say, about capitalism—which were forged through his experiences in the Depression, World War II, and the postwar middle-class expansion? *Oh, yeah.* I used to tell him that my politics were the same as his, but just if you took his politics to their logical conclusion—and my Dad, of



course, who was born in 1919, thought that pronouncement from his beloved baby-boomer daughter was...well... that it was a load of crap.

My guess is that almost everyone in this room is both an historian and an environmentalist. So tonight, I want to take a stab at making Carson's ideas not so timelessly right, and not so inevitably *ours*. Not to debunk Carson--not at all--and not to deconstruct because it's so fun or I just can. Rather, I'll try to use the powers of history to ask questions about contemporary environmentalism and the things we most deeply believe in.

And when I read the literature about Carson, along with Carson's work itself, I find that I keep asking a few questions. There are three questions, really, that I keep wanting more on, and that just nag at me. The first is--Why the sea? Actually, this question has been asked a lot, but I think we can ask more questions about the answers. So my first question is--Why the sea? And after that--What did *Roger* think? And finally--Why no criticism?

My own attempt to interpret Rachel Carson, in history, comes from trying to answer these three questions. I'll hazard my own emerging interpretation quickly, at least initially—I'll confess I'm a little scared to do this--but my own stab might go something like this:

Rachel Carson has a difficult childhood—a solitary and often painful childhood..and her only close relationship is with her mother, who in the early 1900s, when Carson was born, was a disciple of the nature-study movement...and as a child, Carson finds, in the wilds of nature, much beauty and wonder, and also great solace, a refuge...especially from very painful and frequent twists of fate in her family...and this will continue into what will in many ways become a painful adulthood, marked by a degree of social isolation along with frequent crises in her career and especially at home...and will lead, above all, to Carson's great love of the sea...and to Carson, the ocean becomes the part of the natural world where she finds the *most* solace—that's *least* human, that's outside human control and governed instead by timeless eternal rhythms, and that's so vast that humans can't possibly change it...and when she writes *Silent Spring*, her only political book, and the only one that's *not* about the sea, she does do it in real part out of concern for people and other living things and the

ecosystems they share...but her real, fundamental motive is that after World War II, with the one-two punch of one, the bomb and nuclear fallout, and two, the dangerous spread of toxic pesticides, she concludes that in fact no part of nature is outside our control or the power of humans to alter or degrade or outright destroy it, and she in fact mostly writes *Silent Spring* out of the depths of heartbreaking disappointment and real anger that even her beloved sea is not inviolable...and then, after the publication of *Silent Spring*, the specific circumstances of her personal and professional life as a woman stir up a kind of perfect storm of the intertwined meanings of women, nature, virtue, authenticity, and history...in which Rachel Carson is the perfect apostle for the idea of nature as authentic and timeless...an idea that has so often rendered the idea itself outside of history and also resistant to critique...and which, in turn, can render its perfect apostle resistant to historicization and immune to criticism.

How many of you are thinking...well, that's a load of crap? And how many of you are thinking, but what about Roger? What happens to Roger?—and I'll get back to him later.

Was Rachel Carson a superb scientist? Yes. Was she a singularly gifted writer? Yes. Was *Silent Spring* important? We might not have the EPA, or bald eagles for that matter, without it. Do I admire Rachel Carson? OMG, she *rocks*. This is the rather slight woman who says, "I can offer no excuse for not being what people expect"—in response to people who assume that any woman who writes a book like that must be absolutely huge. The woman who *knows*, as she's writing *Silent Spring*, that she'll be viciously attacked for being emotional and hysterical and a female know-nothing, and who, in the pre-feminist era of the early 1960s, when the agricultural scientist who's the major spokesman for the chemical industry gives 28 speeches in the 3 months after *Silent Spring* is published and essentially froths at the mouth, well, she, calmly and coolly, while she's dying of cancer, grants CBS one interview and blows the other guy out of the water by coming off as a clearly knowledgeable scientist and as the quintessential voice of reason.

Was Rachel Carson a saint, or a prophet? No. She was human. And fifty to a hundred years later, her legacy is, and must be inevitably, mixed.

I'll step away from Rachel Carson for now—and I'll come back...

Maybe a few years ago, I started to think about a new project, about what seems to be a new, 21st-century brand of environmentalism—the green this, green that, green everything explosion. On one hand, this Green Revolution seemed to move in a direction that many of us (including historian William Cronon and writer Michael Pollan, who have in particular influenced my own thinking) had been arguing for. The 20th-century focus on the preservation of wilderness as the real, authentic counterpoint to the artifice of modern life doesn't seem to define the heart and soul of this environmentalism. Rather, it pays a lot of attention to everyday life—to what we do in our everyday environments. And yet, it seemed to inherit, at least to a frustrating degree, the 20th-century persistent blindness to environmental inequities—to the dramatic inequities in the distribution of environmental problems, and also in the distribution of the solutions. And also, some of it just seems *weird*. I kept reading newspaper and magazine articles about the great things people were doing to achieve ultimate Green-itude, and a lot of it just felt somehow wacky. It just felt kind of *off*—such as replacing all five of your cars with Priuses (though I do live in

L.A., where we specialize in 17,000-square-foot LEED-certified houses). Or throwing out all your old light bulbs and buying new ones. Or refusing to let your son play on a baseball team because the nearest one is twenty miles away and that's too much global warming entirely. *Really?* Or becoming a devout locavore and blogging and twittering about it all the time on an iPad and iPhone made in China. I mean, *seriously?* Your kid can't play baseball? *That's* how you want to stop global warming?

All this stuff sounded vaguely wacky, and I wanted to understand why. And to my dismay, my new project led me back to my old project on 20th-century environmentalism. I'm dismayed partly because I'm apparently right in line to become one of those people who has one idea in an entire career. Still also, *seriously?*—because these wacky Green acts, as well as the persistent blindness to inequities, still, again, for God's sake, seemed to me, as I kept pushing at the logics behind them, to be rooted in this persistent, powerful American definition of nature as a place that's separate from humans, and as the real world and the authentic counterpoint to modern life.

And while historians have tracked this idea through the heart and soul of 20th-century environmentalism, I think, and I'm dismayed to suggest, that we now really need to track it through the 21st-century movement—when we're all, apparently, trying to save the planet. And when we all, I think, desperately need to stop saving the planet.

I think there are two really big, common rhetorics that lie right at the heart of much of the Green Revolution—and that both are rooted squarely in this definition of nature. I think they play out in both action and policy in very real ways. I think they're at the heart of a lot of the wackiness, as well as the class divide--and that the class divide is itself connected to the wackiness. And I'll call these two big rhetorics the I Problem and the We Problem. (And I should be clear that I'm not critiquing all of environmentalism—every solar panel, every local food market, every wetlands regulation. I'm just tracking these particular, powerful cultural currents.)

So: the Green Revolution's I Problem, and the Green Revolution's We Problem. I'll leave my script—I'd like to do a medium-sized and kind of more informal sidebar--and then I want to return to Rachel Carson.

What's the I Problem? It's the rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of individual virtuous acts. You see the I-centered rhetoric *everywhere*. It's the conviction that I, personally, can save the earth. That if only each of us, individually, can possibly find it in our hearts to care, and to do the right thing, well, then, couldn't we save the world? It's the “change your light bulbs *now*” approach—and in fact, I think the humble compact fluorescent light bulb has come to shine as one of the chief icons for this way of thinking.

And what do energy-efficient light bulbs have to do with the historically powerful definition of nature as a place that's separate from humans? As the estimable critical theorist Raymond Williams has helped us understand, there's a long western tradition of seeing nature as a realm that's separate from corrupt human society. And once you set a natural world apart from the human world, it can then become a realm above and outside human judgment. It becomes the ultimate source of moral authority—the “natural,” and not relative, source of truth and virtue. (In fact, Williams's great insight is to show how the concept of what's “natural”—say, as applied to human values such as gender norms—draws its authority from this concept of nature.) And if nature is the real and absolute source of truth and virtue, then what could be more virtuous than protecting it? In fact, there's been a long association of

American environmentalism with personal virtuous acts. Which is why I give myself a little pat on the back every single time I throw something into the recycling bin—about 7-8 times a day--and think I'm queen for the day when I screw in a weird-looking light bulb.

Individual virtue, I think, plays out in the Green Revolution very concretely. You can track it very tangibly, I'll argue, through the common acts of wackiness--and also through the class divide—in a few different disturbing ways.

Here's the first way—which is that acts of Greenitude to protect nature have commonly become acts of Ultimate Virtue. Green acts, in other words, can trump other values and other kinds of virtuous acts—say, such as making your child happy by letting him or her play baseball. You can't do that because you absolutely have to stop global warming?—even though you could reduce your energy use in a thousand other ways (such as not living in an exurb in the first place).

Green acts can commonly shine as the *most* virtuous acts—and this, of course, is the logic behind greenwashing, right? Greenwashing has generally referred to the use of green acts (say, printing iTunes cards on recycled paper) to cover up much larger environmental sins (say, spewing air pollution from factories in China). It can rightly, though, refer as well to using green acts to cover up much grander social and economic sins (say, slave-labor-like conditions in those factories).

Green Me Up, JJ

Jenny Price • February 25 2010 6:09 PM

"Advice for Greenies in a Complicated World"

Dear JJ:

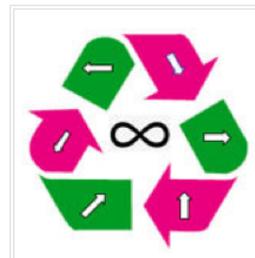
I've been trying in vain to locate guns and ammunition with less toxic materials, to use at work. Can you help me? I can't tell you what I do exactly (or I might have to kill you), but I can say that I work alone, that I use guns in a lethal manner on a regular basis, and that despite my commitment to "reduce, reuse, and recycle," I often have to discard a gun after I've used it.

J.N.

No home address

Dear J.N.:

Wow. Seriously, wow. A hit man?



Here's the second way that the obsession with personal virtue plays out in very concrete ways—which is that in a society in which we readily identify ourselves and our values by what we consume, and in which we consume to be virtuous, well, we consume to be virtuous Greenies. And consume and consume. So we buy the new light bulbs and throw out the old ones. We junk or trade the old car (or the three old cars) and buy Priuses—and if you buy five Priuses, you'll save five times as much energy as if you buy one Prius. As if the more energy you use, the more you can save. As if all Priuses sail into the sky at night, under cover of darkness, to gobble up carbon whenever President Obama, or maybe Al Gore, flashes the green bat signal. Obviously, some of these virtuous acts of consumerism actually create more environmental problems than they solve. If you junk your perfectly good Toyota Corolla for a new Prius, for example, you'll have to drive 41,630 miles just to erase the carbon debt that manufacturing that Prius creates. Or to quote the surprisingly honest slogan in the recent ads for the Chevy Volt: “Electric when you want it, Gas when you need it.” The light bulb or the energy-efficient car can actually be a marker of *virtue* as much as or more than a purchase that will actually make a real difference.

Which plays out very concretely in policy as well. In 2009, for example--hard on the heels of the economic crash--the federal Cash for Clunkers program offered a rebate of up to \$4500 to trade in any car that got 18 miles per gallon or less for any new car that got at least 22 mpg. Or, if you traded in an SUV, the new one had to get at least 2 mpg or more than the old one. *Two miles per gallon*. The program almost certainly increased emissions overall. It was really an economic recovery measure, but it was packaged as an environmental measure. And while it likely didn't do a thing to reduce energy consumption—in fact, very much the opposite--it assured stressed-out Americans that this particular way to spend money would be particularly virtuous.

Here's a third way that the I Problem, or the obsession with personal virtue, plays out—which is, in fact, that it just flat-out encourages an overemphasis on the actual importance of individual action, especially compared to systemic or regulatory action. It emphasizes changing your light bulbs versus transforming the national energy grid. It focuses on buying nontoxic paints and carpets versus banning toxic paints and carpets. Not that individual action can't be important—but there's a lopsided faith in its effectiveness, and in personal versus more collective kinds of virtue. While you see the “50 simple things (or 10 things, or 24 things) you can do to save the earth (or the planet)” lists all the time, none of them ever says, Vote!, or Pay your taxes!, or Stop fudging your deductions, for goodness sake!--which would likely be a lot more effective than changing your light bulbs--much less, Hold Apple accountable! Or, Buy low-VOC paint for the people who work for you! Or, especially, Pay more to the people who clean and paint your houses, so that they can buy low-VOC paint!

In fact, if you look at what all three of these concrete manifestations of the I Problem share--whether praising Green acts as über-virtuous, or consuming to save the planet, or overemphasizing the importance of individual acts—well, what they all have in common is that all three of them encourage the underlying assumption that every individual enjoys the equal or same ability to do all of this stuff. In other words, what the I problem makes invisible is that not all individuals can afford to buy new light bulbs or green up their houses--and, in general, and more important, that not all individuals contribute equally to environmental messes, and also that not all individuals suffer the consequences equally.

At the same time, the notion of green Virtue really and actively relies on these differences. We say, “if everyone would just change their light bulbs.” Yet if everyone *did*—which is what we need to happen, and why we need regulation---then using the energy-efficient light bulbs wouldn’t be virtuous. I wouldn’t be queen for the day. It’d just be what everyone *does*—just as, for example, we don’t really think about how our cars adhere to federal emissions standards. The culture of individual green virtue--which is often about virtue as much or more than environment--really depends on everyone *not* engaging in green acts.

All in all, what tends to happen is that the people who can least afford the low-VOC paints and organic foods get, well, how should I put it...triple screwed. As an example, consider the most basic problem of air pollution. On average, the folks with the lowest incomes contribute least to air pollution. They breathe the worst air both at home and at work. And they have the fewest resources to green up their houses and yards--and thereby to become virtuous environmentalists.

And we wonder why there’s a cultural class divide in environmentalism—and why there’s so much cross-class resentment.

Not that you shouldn’t use the new light bulbs if you can—but rather, the cultural association with virtue gets extremely problematic.

What is the We Problem? It’s captured by the mantra, We are all in this together. It’s the incredibly powerful Man and Nature rhetoric. Man screwed up the planet, and now Man has to save it. You see this rhetoric *everywhere*. Al Gore, after all, named his initial campaign against climate change the We Campaign.

The We Problem, too, is very obviously rooted in the vision of nature as separate from the human world. Man has screwed up *that* world, the *Real* world. If you think about *the* environmentalist mantra--Save the Planet—what does it really mean? It doesn’t mean the *whole* planet. If it did, we wouldn’t be recycling; we’d be building a very large machine that can fight off asteroids. The Planet, or the Earth, really means Nature—the Real and enduring part of the World. It means the World that’s not us.

This Man-&-Nature rhetoric of course encourages us to think of the environment as one unitary thing--the major icon for this way of thinking and seeing, of course, being the image of Earth from Space.

And seeing nature as one, unitary thing plays out, too, in everyday culture and in policy in very concrete ways. To begin with, it, too, encourages the association of virtue with environmentalism. The Earth from Space icon suggests a small, fragile Planet, which you can hold in your palms—and in environmentalist iconography, one of the most recurrent images is, in fact, of human hands cradling the earth.

What I mostly want to talk about here, though, is that the We rhetoric—or seeing nature as unitary--encourages a decidedly weird fungibility. In other words, it can encourage us to see all Green acts--no matter what you do or where you do it—as accomplishing the same goal. So perhaps I own an SUV (I need it for the kids!--and I just kinda like Range Rovers, they’re sleek), but I recycle, and I’ve got an energy star DVR, and I eat local broccoli. These actions may all address very different sets of problems--but they all save the planet. Again, this, too, is how greenwashing works, right?—which is to say, we’re screwing things up *there* but we’re madly saving the planet *over there*. So Apple screws up the environment all around China, but the company redeems itself with its new data

center in North Carolina that's LEED-certified platinum--and after all, they do print the iTunes gift cards on 100% recycled paper.



..... Have you considered that for every person you shoot, you might make a substantial donation to the [Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence](#)? When one family grieves anywhere, it's enormously important that another should be spared anywhere else. Your personal actions in one place should in no way increase the total number of homicides across the globe. And more, if you donate enough to prevent more than one homicide for each one you commit, then you can actually even save lives every time you carry out a contract....

The acts you engage in to save the planet, then, become weirdly interchangeable-- but also exactly *where* you do them becomes not very important. There's a kind of geographic cluelessness to the Save the Planet environmentalism--by which anything you do here or there benefits absolutely the whole planet everywhere. And again, the geographic cluelessness in this rhetoric plays out in very real ways in policy--most obviously perhaps in the enduring enchantment with offsets and trading programs. Such programs tend not to be geographically specific. And the many critics of offsets and trading have made trenchant economic and political arguments--but what we've missed, I think, is that these programs at once are rooted so powerfully in enduring cultural assumptions. We've missed the cultural and rhetorical power of the idea, rooted in our Man-&-Nature definitions of nature, that you can trade an environmental mess here for a clean-up there.

The We rhetoric, then, entirely ignores that not all environmentalist acts accomplish the same thing, and also that they don't clean up environmental messes to the same degree. Even more important, though, I think, is that, again, the rhetoric almost entirely makes invisible that some people are more responsible for those messes than others. And it also makes invisible that some places are a lot dirtier than other places. *A whole lot*. The Man-&-Nature way of thinking blinds us to the extreme, dramatic inequities in where environmental problems *are*, specifically. It also then inevitably blinds us to dramatic inequities in the solutions, which so often fail spectacularly to address the geography of where the messes actually are (and who creates them).

Environmental justice activists, not surprisingly, almost universally object to trading programs. While advocates of carbon trading argue that carbon itself is not toxic, most carbon emissions come with other emissions that *are*--and if a program allows industries to pollute as much or more in some places if they pay to reduce pollution elsewhere, then it's just not that difficult to predict that these "some places" will most likely be the low-income areas that already suffer the worst industrial pollution. Historically, we know, the lower-income communities in this country--those with the least economic and political power--have borne the brunt of the

consequences of environmental problems. Horrible air, and tainted water, and toxic working conditions, and no green space: We have consistently sacrificed these communities. And yet, in 2009, California's cutting-edge plan to reduce carbon emissions, widely hailed as the model for a federal plan, relied on cap-and-trade to make the largest share of the cuts--despite vehement objections from a parade of health professionals, community activists, and, stunningly to no avail, the Air Resources Board's own internal environmental justice advisory committee.

Again, no wonder environmentalism—both in everyday culture and often in sanctioned environmental policy--alienates and fosters resentment in lower-income communities.

Yet one can argue that one of the great perpetuating factors of these environmental messes (just one) has been the sacrifice of some communities to benefit others. In other words, if you really want to clean up the whole planet, well, wouldn't it make a lot more sense to clean up the biggest messes *preferentially*? Shouldn't we now *focus* on the sacrifice zones? Again, I'm generalizing, and yet, environmentalism, I think, too often historically has been about making the cleanest places cleaner. It's shown a stubborn blindness to inequities, and too often has encouraged a kind of trickle-down environmentalism—which works about as well as you would expect. Addressing environmental inequities is important for reasons of justice—which is what the environmental justice movement has focused such a bright light on—and clean air should in fact be a basic right. *And also*, we will never—*ever*--clean up the air in Los Angeles, or any other mess, as long as we tolerate sacrifice zones. Similarly, everyone should have the basic right to parks and green space—and at the same time, you can't create a healthy urban watershed, *or* clean up the air anywhere, if you only have parks and green space in affluent communities.

Environmental justice has to be about justice—but I'd argue vociferously that it has to be about environment too. If you really want to address the ways in which we really *are* all in this together, on just this one big planet, then you have to fundamentally understand and take seriously—and your solutions have to address---the ways in which we are decidedly not all in this together.

In sum, these two rhetorics—the I Problem and the We problem—are rooted deeply in the historically powerful vision of nature as separate from humans. They commonly play out in everyday action and in policies. And they encourage a blindness to inequities that not only alienates essential public support for environmentalism, and also often works actively against the health and interest of people, but also often works against the health of the environment.

I've come to believe that the tenacious cultural class divide in environmentalism is the biggest barrier that environmentalism faces—to achieve such essential goals as slowing climate change, revitalizing watersheds, preserving park space, eating healthy foods, breathing clean air, and drinking clean water. And that to break down the class divide, we have to stop saving the planet and start inhabiting it. We have to start using and altering and transforming *and* preserving it, with each other, sustainably and equitably, for the health of people, communities, and ecosystems. And that to do that, we have to dislodge these rhetorics.

So... Why the sea? What did Roger think? And why no criticism? And what do these three questions tell us about Rachel Carson's legacy?

To stand at the sea...is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be. These things were before man ever stood on the shore of the ocean...they continue year in, year out, through the centuries...while man's kingdoms rise and fall.

-- Rachel Carson, *Under the Sea-Wind*, 1941

Why the sea?—and I'll slow down a bit this time for these questions.

Rachel Carson has a difficult childhood—a solitary and often painful childhood..and her only close relationship is with her mother, who in the early 1900s, when Carson was born, was a disciple of the nature-study movement...and as a child, Carson finds, in the wilds of nature, much beauty and wonder, and also great solace, a refuge...especially from very painful and frequent twists of fate in her family...and this will continue into what will in many ways become a painful adulthood, marked by a degree of social isolation along with frequent crises in her career and especially at home...and will lead, above all, to Carson's great love of the sea...and to Carson, the ocean becomes the part of the natural world where she finds the *most* solace—that's *least* human, that's outside human control and governed instead by timeless eternal rhythms, and that's so vast that humans can't possibly change it...and when she writes *Silent Spring*, her only political book, and the only one that's *not* about the sea, she does do it in real part out of concern for people and other living things and the ecosystems they share, but her real, fundamental motive is that after World War II, with the one-two punch of one, the bomb and nuclear fallout, and two, the dangerous spread of toxic pesticides, she concludes that in fact no part of nature is outside our control or the power of humans to alter or degrade or outright destroy it, and she in fact mostly writes *Silent Spring* out of the depths of heartbreaking disappointment and real anger that even her beloved sea is not inviolable...

...in the days before Hiroshima I used to wonder whether nature...actually needed protection from man. Surely the sea was inviolate and forever beyond man's power to change it.... But I was wrong

--- Rachel Carson, from *Scripps College Bulletin*, July 1962 (3 months before the publication of *Silent Spring*)

Carson wrote her first book *Under the Sea-Wind*—said to be her favorite—entirely from the point of view of the sea and its creatures, with no human presence. In her second book *The Sea Around Us*—the book that made her famous—a few scientists and explorers appear briefly, and she includes a few pages on oil exploration. According to historian Gary Kroll, she did write a full chapter on *using* the sea—“The Ocean and a Hungry World”—which addressed the debate at the time about whether to harvest plankton and fish as major food sources. She decided to cut this chapter. Her last sea book, too—*Edge of the Sea*--is all natural history. As she worked on *Silent Spring*, she ran through a number of possible titles, which included *The Control of Nature* and *Man Against the Earth*.

The beauty of the living world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind—that, and anger at the...brutish things that were being done. I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could—if I didn't at least try I could never be happy again in nature.

--- Rachel Carson, from a letter she wrote to friend and nature writer Lois Crisler in the wake of *Silent Spring*, 1962—published in Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*

Why the sea? Where does that question lead? Rachel Carson is one of the great American apostles for the vision of nature as the real and timeless world outside the troubled human world. The book's legacy, I think, is mixed. It's double. Much of *what Silent Spring* set in motion is acutely invaluable. It awakened public awareness about real and frightening environmental dangers, and it led to groundbreaking and foundational institutional structures to grapple with these dangers. Why did Carson write *Silent Spring*, though? Well, Carson generally helped cement this problematic vision of nature at the very core of modern environmentalism. And that, I think, is a more troubling part of her legacy.

What did Roger think?

Roger Christie, the famous boy in the book *The Sense of Wonder*, isn't an easy guy to find, or to find out about as an adult—which is itself interesting. He's not thanked in the biographies. The literature does say that after Carson dies, her editor Paul Brooks, not her family, takes him in—though Roger doesn't appear in the acknowledgments for the biography Brooks writes, or in the index and even barely in the book. Reading this literature, you have to begin to wonder. Where's Roger? Is he alive? Is he, like, in prison? Or worse than that, does he maybe work for DuPont or something?

He's not highly googlable, but you can get a few hits. In 1980, he accepts the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Carson's behalf. But where does he live? What does he do? In 1993, he shows up as one of the talking heads in the PBS *American Experience* documentary—but not one of the main ones. He says, "I never forgot that I had another mother who was a real mother, but, you know, Rachel was my mother too." He clearly loved Carson and admired her. He also says, "She would find something interesting and call me over...She was a great one for getting down and hearing under the rocks." Nice, but he doesn't say, Hey, we got under the rocks together!—or Wow, those outings were amazing! And what *does* he do? If he were a biologist, or a scientist or conservationist of any sort, the PBS documentary would say, wouldn't it? Finally, in 2007, the centennial of Carson's birth, his local newspaper publishes a feature on him. He lives in Harvard, Massachusetts. He's married and has two sons. He's a recording engineer. That same year, the *Washington Post* quotes him in an article about a re-screening, which he'll attend, of the 1963 CBS special. He says, "She would lie for hours on a blanket in the woods...and see what would come and go." Some of the outings, he says, "were a little too boring for me."

There is something infinitely healing in these repeated refrains of nature, the assurance that after night, dawn comes, and spring after the winter.

Rachel Carson, in *This Week Magazine*, 1952

Roger must have had such a painful childhood. He lost two mothers by the age of twelve. He was, according to Carson's chief biographer Linda Lear, a somewhat difficult and undisciplined child. One wisp of critique I find in this literature is that Carson, while she loved Roger and devoted a great deal of time to him, might not have been the most skilled indoor parent.

Carson herself was close to her mother, but I can just infer from the silence in the biographies--though I don't know for sure—that she was not close to her father, or to her much older sister and brother. Her father doesn't

seem to have been around a lot. As adults, her siblings both left bad marriages. She had to drop out of graduate school at Johns Hopkins University to help support her family, and when her father died shortly after, she became the main breadwinner for her mother, as well as for her sister and two nieces, who had all moved in with them. Her sister died soon after *that*, leaving Carson and her mother with the two young nieces to raise, and her adult brother was by all accounts a real piece of work. Then one of her nieces dies, which leaves her with Roger. All these constant crises prevent her from pursuing a Ph.D. and then hinder, first, her progress in a career in science, and then, time and again, her ability to focus on her writing career. Throughout, she takes refuge in the natural world. I wonder, though, if nature offered the same consolations for Roger. Surely to some degree--but maybe not as much.

What did Roger think? Where might that question lead? In the modern era, the wild places and things in nature can hold great beauties and wonders—for which Carson was a supremely eloquent voice. These places and things hold ecological truths that, Carson conveyed passionately, we need to understand to inhabit the ecosystems we do inhabit. They can also offer real refuge and solace from the pace and demands and social complexities of modern life—including anxieties about modern life itself. Not for everyone, however, and not necessarily for other societies or in other eras. Carson is one of our great apostles for the oh-so-problematic *idea* of nature as a timeless refuge from the relativism and vicissitudes of the human world--and again, she helped cement this idea, so far almost un-dislodgably, at the very core and center of modern environmentalism. But this idea of nature as timeless—and this is one of the reasons why it's so deeply problematic--disguises that it in fact has a history. It has served both general social needs throughout American history, and specific social needs for every generation, and, I think, fulfilled very specific and very personal needs for Rachel Carson.

Why no criticism?

and then, after the publication of *Silent Spring*, the specific circumstances of her personal and professional life as a woman stir up a kind of perfect storm of the intertwined meanings of women, nature, virtue, authenticity, and history...in which Rachel Carson is the perfect apostle for the idea of nature as authentic and timeless...which is an idea that has so often rendered the idea itself outside of history and also resistant to critique...and which, in turn, can render its perfect apostle resistant to historicization and immune to criticism.

Here's the thing. We know that being a woman opens Carson and *Silent Spring* to attack—but it also deeply informs the defense. Carson is single. She never marries. Her closest relationship is with her mother. Her other major close relationship as an adult, apparently non-sexual, is with a woman, her friend Dorothy Freeman. And yet, she still raises children. Lovingly. She sacrifices dearly to do so. She dies of breast cancer.

She's the paragon of a virtuous woman—through no intent or fault of her own.

That women are the caretakers of a society's virtue and morals might be one of the few ideas historically that can rival, in power and persistence, the idea of nature as the authentic *source* of virtue. It's as if Rachel Carson stands between the meanings of women and the meanings of nature, and both radiate virtue towards and around her in a kind of closed system. Again, through no choice of her own. (I'd actually love to hear what she'd have to say about her sainthood—I expect it'd be quite funny.) She also successfully pursues a career against all odds in a male-

dominated profession, and she readily out-argues the men--which resonates in the feminist era. And in this post-feminist era, she does all that *and* she raises three children.

Why no criticism? Rachel Carson's life and vision both personify ideas about both nature and women that radiate timeless virtue and authenticity. And this biography, along with Carson's exceptional ability and passion, helps make this self-reinforcing idea of nature—for which she's such a great apostle, and which she helps cement firmly at the core of environmentalism—exceptionally hard to dislodge and to critique.

When I googled up a 2009 CBS special on the legacy of *Silent Spring*, and clicked to play the video, guess what advertisement popped up?: BP's ode to what a fantastic job they've done to clean up the 127 million gallons of oil they spilled in the Gulf.

The environmental movement so clearly still has a great deal of work to do. Carson's crusade, against omnipresent and poisonous toxics, is not even close to finished. And this powerful vision of nature, as the central environmentalist trope—as what we talk about when we talk about environmentalism—has gotten us far. But it is long past time to move it away, to dislodge it, from the center of environmentalism. We owe so much to Rachel Carson. But I don't think that her vision of nature can ultimately sustain a culture of environmentalism that will effectively arm us to create the clean, healthy world, full of healthy wild things and places, as well as healthy people, that she wanted to create for Roger.

When one-time Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum questioned whether President Obama had the proper Christian values—just one of his famous pronouncements, that would have been startling if they hadn't been so frequent—it turned out that he was talking about Obama's *energy policy*. And later on *Face the Nation*, when moderator Bob Schieffer asked him to elaborate, he explained, “I was talking about the radical environmentalists”—of which, apparently, Obama is one--who all believe that Man is less important than the Earth. And Santorum might be an extremist--the sweater-vest version of Glenn Beck, the polite Rush Limbaugh—but the Republicans are exploiting this class divide, which has long plagued environmentalism, fiercely. More than any cultural, social, or economic issue, environmentalism is the #1 right-wing bogeyman. It's *the* codeword for “they don't care about you.” *They*. Environmentalists. The people who want you to be able to breathe clean air and drink clean water. And we make it so easy for people like Santorum—every time we say we're trying to save the planet.

I do know that environmentalism is changing. I know that a new and more inclusive culture of environmentalism, that breaks down the class divide, is happening in a lot of places. I see it in projects in Los Angeles, for example, in not a few newfangled cross-class coalitions to preserve park space, to clean up the air, to revitalize and reimagine and intensively remanage the phenomenally messed-up watershed that L.A. inhabits. And I'm sure you see it, too, in the places where you live. Yet the established 20th-century rhetorics can seem ineradicably powerful, and so persistently counter-productive. And shouldn't we fight as fiercely as we can to change them?—with all the skill, passion, and rock-solid integrity that Rachel Carson brought to the cause?

Here's my Dad. These are his grandchildren.



They are very much, in all the best ways, their grandfather's grandchildren. My father loved history. He believed in its power, so I have to think he would agree that the most powerful thing historians can do with their heroes is to make them stranger, and then to make that strangeness familiar--Why did their ideas make sense to *them*? And how do these ideas make sense and not make sense for us now?—so that we can achieve the perspective that we absolutely need to move into the future.