Hayden Carruth’s poem “The Cows at Night” begins with the line “The moon was like a full cup tonight.” Tonight, I feel like that cup—brimming with gratitude from the excellence and the kindness with which faculty members and students in both the Environmental Studies Program and the Department of English and American Literatures have enriched my life at Middlebury College over the past 37 years. On this occasion, I want especially to convey warm thanks to Kathy Morse, Director of Environmental Studies, Nan Jenkins-Jay, Dean of Environmental Affairs, and their colleagues on the Environmental Studies Steering Committee for inviting me to deliver the 2010 Margolin Lecture. I am also deeply grateful to Andrea Olsen for the enormous creative energy she has brought to planning all of the events that will follow and enhance this evening’s talk, as well as to Dan Brayton, who has generously taken the lead with tomorrow’s panel on environmental literature. And to my wife Rita and the members of our family who are here tonight: now and always, you are my map, my journey, and my home.

Finally, I want to thank the Margolin family. Scott Margolin was my student and advisee, and I remember him vividly. From the day Scott arrived at Middlebury, I, like many others, was struck by the warmth of his smile, his unstinting gifts of leadership and fun to our campus community, and the exuberance he brought both to his writing and to his exploration of the natural and human landscape surrounding the college. In the years
following Scott’s loss, Rita and I have cherished each of our opportunities to spend time with his parents Maureen and Kenny. Their presence here tonight, along with that of their son Ryan and several of their family’s dear friends, makes this moment an even more meaningful one for me.

2010 has been a year when sugaring season arrived in the Green Mountains early and departed fast. Even after our Maggie Brook syrup was all juggled up, however, I have tried to keep a fire stoked under my sappy, run-on title for tonight, so that it might gradually bubble toward something a bit more condensed. “Letting go” turns out to be the operative phrase, while the approach that has come to feel most promising is a personal account of lessons learned and relinquished while teaching literature in an environmental studies program. I hope that telling my own story will lend unity to what might otherwise feel like a scattered survey of this unusually dynamic area of higher education, but also that it will resonate with the individual experiences of faculty colleagues and students, readers and writers, who may have entered the environmental conversation from different angles.

Any interdisciplinary endeavor resembles what ecologists would call an ecotone—a boundary zone lying between more or less distinct ecosystems. Such a border region is typically characterized by “edge-effect,” meaning that it forms a habitat unusually rich both in species and in biotic density, while also a shifting and risky one for organisms (or professors) adapted to more predictable settings. We venture into the ecotone looking for life more abundant, but may simply end up being what’s for lunch.
I’m keenly aware, by the way, that taking ecotones as my metaphor in a talk where there may well be ecologists in the audience is itself running a risk!

Whenever forging into suspect terrain, my instinct is to seek my bearings in stories. Leslie Marmon Silko’s remarkable essay of 1986, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” explains how stories can serve in such a way. In describing the traditional role of stories for her community at the Laguna Pueblo of northern New Mexico, Silko writes, “Whatever happened, the ancient people instinctively sorted events and details into a loose narrative structure. Everything became a story.” She continues, “A dinner-table conversation, recalling a deer hunt forty years ago when the largest mule deer ever was taken, inevitably stimulates similar memories in listeners. But hunting stories were not merely after-dinner entertainment. These accounts contained information of critical importance about behavior and migration patterns of mule deer. Hunting stories carefully described key landmarks and locations of fresh water. Thus a deer-hunt story might also serve as a ‘map.’ Lost travelers, and lost piñon-nut gatherers have been saved by sighting a rock formation they recognize only because they once heard a hunting story describing this rock formation.” I hope that my own teacher’s stories may achieve at least some temporary utility in mapping the ecotone where literature and our experience of the natural world converge.

My dissertation in grad school focused on depictions of the human body by three Modernist novelists: William Faulkner, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann. So, for much of the decade after I arrived at Middlebury in 1973, my bread-and-butter class was a lecture-course on Modernist fiction. I loved teaching this material, but also soon began
to develop new interests that grew directly from the experience of living in Vermont. Rita and I had come of age in the San Francisco Bay Area, where dramatic mountains and vast wilderness-areas were just about six hours away by car. Starting in high school, I was inspired by organizations like the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth that picked up the torch of preservation from John Muir, as well as by artists like Ansel Adams who evoked the sacredness of sites like Yosemite Valley. In Vermont, I found little in the landscape that could be called wild or sublime by Western standards. But there was a daily possibility for integration between nature and culture that was new and striking to me. One could walk out the backdoor of a Vermont home like ours in the village of Bristol and, without every getting into a car, climb up onto a thickly wooded, second-growth ridge where moose and bear lived. Such experiences of local and daily wholeness made me want to link my Middlebury teaching, too, more directly to the natural and human communities around our campus.

Living in New England also made Thoreau a more and more central author to me, because of his scrupulous attention to the character of this heavily glaciated and dramatically seasonal region. Rita gave me a copy of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in 1977, three years after its original publication, and reading it brought me the exciting realization that *Walden* wasn’t the only work on that particular shelf. Like Thoreau’s, her book was a personal, reflective essay that combined a knowledgeable and appreciative awareness of science with openness to the spiritual and aesthetic meanings of the natural world. Also like his, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* offered some of the most flavorful and inventive prose I’d ever come across. I was hooked, and set out to familiarize myself with other authors in this Thoreauvian lineage. It turned out that there
was a continuous literary succession, moving through the work of such early figures as John Muir and Mary Austin, then right up into mid-twentieth century writers like Aldo Leopold, Edwin Way Teale, and Rachel Carson. The flowering of nature writing in our own day was equally impressive to me, as represented by powerful and original figures like Edward Abbey, Edward Hoagland, Dillard herself, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams. Both in my teaching at Middlebury, in my scholarship, and in my own personal essays, I increasingly identified with this tradition of American nature writing. I began by exploring it through a series of Winter Term offerings, ultimately replacing my Modernist-Novel course with a new one called “Visions of Nature.”

Now to start locating this personal narrative in its larger context. 1982 ushered in a decade with several notable developments that fostered my own interest in the ecotone of literature and nature. That was the year *Orion* debuted, immediately establishing itself as a magazine that was both visually stunning and irreplaceable as a venue for vivid writing about the natural world. Through *Orion* I have been introduced to a lively community of authors, including Richard Nelson, Scott Russell Sanders, Ann Zwinger, Gary Nabhan, and Janisse Ray, writers whose work has so excited me that I have often included their books on my syllabi and invited them to speak at the college.

1985 brought a second development of special importance to me as a faculty member at Middlebury College. That’s the year Steve Trombulak became director of our Environmental Studies Program here, and almost immediately undertook a dramatic broadening of our curriculum. When our ES major was originally founded in 1965, that made it the first such program in the nation. But it had remained primarily focused in the
natural sciences for a number of years. Steve took the lead both in encouraging a much wider range of Middlebury faculty to participate in Environmental Studies and in helping to recruit such galvanizing additions to our program as Chris McGrory Klyza in conservation policy and Nan Jenks-Jay in environmental affairs and the greening of our campus. When he invited me to make “Visions of Nature” a core-course in the Humanities for ES, that established nature writing as a central aspect of my teaching. Because of our unusually full integration of literature and the arts into a curriculum grounded in the sciences, Middlebury remains the model for other ambitious programs in environmental studies.

Then, in 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (or ASLE) was founded. This affiliate of the Modern Language Association has rapidly grown to over a thousand members, with lively affiliate groups in the UK, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India, Australia, and New Zealand. I pause over these three developments in order to indicate the degree to which my own teaching has reflected trends of much greater import. In 1995, Jay Parini surveyed the preceding years of curricular ferment in a much-discussed piece for the New York Times Magazine called “The Greening of the Humanities.”

For me, as for many others who now teach literature in interdisciplinary programs in addition continuing to do so in English departments, this shift has definitely called for retooling. One aspect of such a reorientation has been leaving behind the traditional division of literary study into the major genres of poetry, fiction, and drama; we and our students were also now focusing on the journals of explorers and artists like John James
Audubon, the meditations of medical researchers like Lewis Thomas and physical anthropologists like Loren Eiseley, and the narratives of primatologists like Jane Goodall. For many, including myself, this obliterated any pretense to expertise. One way I have described the course of my teaching career at Middlebury has thus been as an exhilarating excursion into the vast roadless area of utter incompetence.

New patterns of meaning have emerged, however, within this trial-and-error landscape. Many authors prominently associated with the genre of nature writing both affirm the refreshing and enlivening prospect of long days out of doors and find in such experiences the basis for a stringent critique of prevailing definitions of success. It’s true that Thoreau sometimes irks readers of Walden, who suspect that when he refers to “the mass of men” who “lead lives of quiet desperation” he may just mean them. But he achieves a breezier tone in “Walking.” The best known line from that essay is “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” while an even quieter expression of Thoreau’s message comes just a little later on: “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present.”

Hence his invitation in the essay to walk more, not as a diversion from our true work but rather in emulation of a river’s meander “which is all the while seeking the shortest course to the sea.” With all the richness of his figurative language, Thoreau means this in a concrete, literal way. Digs at property and wealth are found throughout his writing. But an even more radical message for us at Middlebury is Thoreau’s insistence that a spacious, unhurried outlook is essential to our creative and spiritual lives. As he puts it in the chapter of Walden called “Economy,” “[M]en labor under a mistake, . . . [and] are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse
labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that.” Incessant effortfulness in our mental life, he believes, has the same effect as materialism in the economic sphere, erecting a wall between us and that morning star we call the sun. Turning once more to “Walking,” members of this community may find the following passage especially timely at this point in the semester: “Many a poor sore-eyed student that I have heard of would grow faster, both intellectually and physically, if, instead of sitting up so late, he honestly slumbered a fool’s allowance.”

This reminds me of a conversation I had one year with a student in “Visions of Nature.” I had run huffing into a discussion-section on *Walden*, papers spilling out of my crammed briefcase. As I sat at a seminar-table in the Château and caught my breath, she asked me, in a genuine and friendly way, if I ever found a conflict between books I taught by authors like Thoreau and my own daily life. “Oh,” I said, “if you only knew!” This is a fundamental challenge for many of us in a campus culture where faculty and students often enable each others’ workaholic habits— with short sleep, fatigue, and anxiety as inevitable consequences. With a little help from the bankers, we at Middlebury finally seem ready to take a holiday from erecting huge, impressive buildings. Now might also be a good chance to catch up on our rest, and to remember that April doesn’t have to be the cruelest month. It’s also Vermont’s long-awaited moment for the bright yellow of coltsfoot to shine beside the muddy paths, and for the possibility of shirt-sleeve strolls away from the clock. Taking the time for such outings may also deepen our intellectual pursuits more than relentless rattling away at the keyboard and stunned fixation on the misty gray weather of a computer-screen.
In short, letting go of compulsive effort may loosen the grip in which our own agendas can sometimes hold us. Through books like *Enough*, by Middlebury’s own Bill McKibben, we’ve become more aware of the necessary link between environmental sustainability and turning away from consumerism. But a closely related form of sustainability is personal. Burn-out has been defined as a loss of faith that one’s work is worthwhile, and such a loss can be caused, even in the most idealistic individuals, by ceaseless striving. Nature writing eloquently proposes an alternative way of living.

In his celebrated essay “From Edwards to Emerson,” Perry Miller traced the origins of Transcendentalism back to the legacy of Puritanism in New England. But I believe that Thoreau, for one, owes even more to the poetry of Wordsworth, with its celebration of rustic life amid the lineaments of nature. Wordsworth found in his long walks through the English countryside a refreshing escape from what he called in “Tintern Abbey” “the fretful stir/Unprofitable, and the fever of the world.” As he also wrote in one of his best-known sonnets, “The world is too much with us, late and soon,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” To see Thoreau as a poet more than as a preacher shifts our attention from his sometimes haughty pronouncements to the many humble aspects of the natural world he both delights in and reveres. Though the initial chapters of *Walden* can feel daunting, the book as a whole is studded with scenes in which he lavishes attention on the loon in the pond, the ants on his window-sill, and even the thawing sand-banks that stand beside the railroad tracks. He celebrates the freeing power of this world’s particularity.

Central to the American nature-writing tradition is thus a conviction that if we can at least occasionally relinquish our intentionality and striving, and allow ourselves to
meander away from the buildings and other structures that reinforce our social aspirations and identity, we will be more likely to experience the fullness of life. Annie Dillard illustrates such a possibility in the chapter of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* called “Heaven and Earth in Jest.” She just happened to look up from her walk as a “mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as thought he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass.” She is reminded by this glimpse “that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”

Though frequently lapsing into a twitchy and compulsive state, I have continued to find this Thoreauvian lineage immensely helpful both personally and in my teaching at Middlebury. Even a change as simple as moving a class from the main campus out to the College Garden can transform the tone of our discussions. A walk along that narrow, winding way, cool air on our cheeks, grass flickering around us under the wind, geese and clouds flowing overhead—these re-establish the vital backdrop for our deliberations. It’s not that the life of study isn’t precious in itself, but rather that its value is diminished when isolated from what David Abram has called the “more-than-human world.” Letting go of our dogged agendas, we recover a capacity to focus on our deeper goals. Walking out to the Garden also affirms the value of conversations we may have when arriving there. The unscripted turnings of a seminar, like a meandering walk, can release us from the preconceptions with which we set out.
I’ll always be grateful for the ways in which the genre of nature writing enlivened our literary curriculum, introduced many new voices into the literary conversation and framed valuable exchanges with the natural and social sciences. But the term “nature writing,” which has commonly been used to describe the Thoreauvian tradition since about the 20s, has increasingly come to feel problematic. For one thing, there’s its odd doubleness: after all, we refer to the more established genres as poetry, fiction, and drama, without addition of a second word. Such redundancy has the effect of calling into question the literary status of the works it describes. “Nature writing” seems to come out of the same lexicon as “cheese food,” a descriptor that, printed on a tube of picnic Velveeta, suggests an awkward and arms-length relation to actual, well, cheese. Beyond such built-in self-deprecation, and much more problematic, is a lack of clarity about the term’s reference.

For people encountering the term for the first time, “nature writing” may suggest either a comprehensive reference to all writing about the natural world or some much more specific, yet mysterious criterion. In either regard, where are such profound interpreters of nature as Homer, Shakespeare, and Melville supposed to come in? Furthermore, nature writing—like much of the membership and language of the conservation movement as a whole—is not only associated with a particular lineage of American thought and traditionally limited to nonfiction, but has also been represented largely by writing in English by white authors. As its name indicates, when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment came into existence in 1992, the dynamic young founders made a conscious decision to steer away from “nature writing,”
preferring the more open-ended term “environmental literature.” This was another moment of letting go for me, a relinquishment of the beloved Thoreauvian tradition for a more capacious encounter between literature and the natural world.

I must admit to having felt an initial regret, tinged with defensiveness, when the lineage of nature writing was criticized for its racial and cultural narrowness by a rising generation of what we now call ecocritics. In addition to pointing out a becoming modesty within the form’s historically circumscribed definition, I also wanted to draw attention to the bold and socially progressive visions of writers in the tradition from Thoreau to Terry Tempest Williams. Conservationists have experienced a similar impulse to defend their movement when America’s National Parks and federally designated wildernesses have been described as preserves for the recreation of upper-middle-class, white Americans. It finally seems indisputable, though, that with all their sterling qualities, both nature writing and the wilderness movement have sometimes paid insufficient attention to cultures and literatures outside their core constituencies. This critique has gradually come to feel more like an opportunity than a setback, though. Reluctantly letting go of our narrower sense of nature writing, we have been offered yet another chance for fresh thinking and adventurous teaching, just as we were when the children of Thoreau first rampaged into the literary curriculum thirty years ago. “Only that day dawns to which we are awake,” we read in *Walden*. The criticism of nature writing as exclusive and privileged is another invitation to awaken into a refreshing, larger world.

Just one week ago, Lauret Savoy gave a reading at Middlebury in which she addressed the influence of race and culture on our visions of nature. In the introduction
to a multi-cultural anthology of environmental writing which Lauret co-edited, entitled *The Colors of Nature*, she tactfully acknowledges the great value of the nature-writing tradition: “Mainstream environmental and nature writing in this country has had a core concern with the celebration of pristine wild places and the lament over losing them as well as losing species, places, tribes, and the sense of continuity and belonging within a natural matrix.” She goes on to ask, however, “But what if one’s primary experience of land and place is indigenous or urban or indentured or exiled or degraded or toxic?” This has been a daunting challenge to an environmental conversation that’s always assumed its close affiliation with three other progressive movements that flourished in the 60s: the Civil Rights, Women’s, and Anti-War Movements. Being called out for a certain privileged oblivion within the genre of nature writing has, as I have already remarked tonight, felt startling. But the wider range of writing now studied under the heading of environmental literature has both amplified our historical and ethical frameworks and introduced delightful diversity into our literary experience.

One special gift for me as a teacher, arising from this brusque call to rethink my literary and pedagogical context, has been the incentive to look more closely into contemporary Native American writing about nature. I framed this talk with an essay by Leslie Marmon Silko that distills the Native American critique of wilderness. She argues that her people’s landscape is above all a narrative topography, binding landforms and natural patterns to mythic, historical, and personal accounts. “Wilderness,” for Silko, is a name given to the land by people who don’t know its stories. Years ago, when I began teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury’s summer program for
graduate study in literature and writing, I had my first inkling of this Native American alternative to the Transcendentalist vision of transparent eyeballs going off-road. I was talking on the porch of the Bread Loaf Inn with Pauline Yvonne, a Native Alaskan woman who was pursuing her Master’s at the School of English. Pauline was the high-school English teacher for a traditional village that still divided its year between berry camp and fish camp and where the common language was Yup’ik. She told me how surprised she was by Thoreau’s implication that the best way to learn about nature was through the experience of solitude in the wild. When I asked her what she would have thought the best way was, she replied, “by following the old people around and watching what they do.”

Native American novelists and essayists like Silko, Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Joseph Bruchac have enlivened the more solemn aesthetic and tone of nature writing by bringing the traditional stories of their people into the mix. Two of the characteristic features of these stories are their extreme precision about just where they are set and their collective rather than individual authorship. As Silko’s essay relates, “Traditionally everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest person, was expected to listen and to be able to recall or tell a portion, if only a small detail, from a narrative account or story. . . . Through the efforts of a great many people, the community was able to piece together valuable accounts and crucial information that might otherwise have died with an individual.” By sharing such stories, Native American writers have in effect deepened the history of presentness. As Joseph Bruchac writes in his essay “At the End of Ridge Road,” we have thus arrived at a moment when “Our old words keep returning to the land.”
The traditional Abenaki stories woven into Bruchac’s essay allow it to evade the solitary scene of revelation notable at so many of the key moments in Thoreauvian nature writing, right up to the work of our contemporaries Dillard, Lopez, and Williams. Perhaps in part because they were intended for the pleasure and participation of children as well as of adults, Bruchac’s Abenaki tales can have a positively silly character that comes as a welcome relief from so much high-minded solitude. (Native American stories are often pretty sexy, too—another quality in short supply in Thoreau’s own writing.) Here’s Bruchac’s narrative of how those great heroes Turkey and Moose took on the Stone Giants, cannibals who delighted in breaking down the forests with their feet:

“Turkey and Moose found the deep tracks of the Stone Giants. Even without those footprints, which sank at places into the stone itself, it was easy to follow those monsters for they left a path of devastation behind them like that made by the whirlwind. Turkey and Moose crept up to the place where the Stone Giants were gathered at the edge of a cliff. Turkey gave his loud war cry [Gobble here!] and flew at them, pecking at their eyes. Moose lowered his horns and charged at them. Surprised by Turkey’s cry, struck by Moose’s horns, the Stone Giants stumbled backward, fell over the cliff, and were killed. Moose’s horns were flattened from striking the Stone Giants. Turkey’s throat was stained red by their blood. Then Moose and Turkey each cut the hair from the top of the dead Stone Giants. To this day Turkey wears that hair on his chest and Moose wears it on his chin as a badge of courage.”

Bruchac’s version of the story, like most Native American tales, makes a moral point, while it also conveys specific naturalist observation, in this case about the specific location of the distinctive “beards” worn by mature male turkeys and moose. But it’s
also delightful in its wild cartoon action, including violence of the highly stylized sort found in many a Roadrunner episode and its emphasis on the odd appearance of these two animals who seem to caricature recognizable human traits. As our own ES program continues to evolve toward a more global perspective, and to align itself with the increasingly international orientation of this college, we may look forward to many other instances in which new stories complement, and also thus refresh, our sense of place here in the Champlain Bioregion.

Another local connection with the reorientation of environmental literature has been the concerted effort at Middlebury College over the past 37 years to achieve greater diversity in our community. We still have far to go in this regard. But the fact remains that a commitment by many over this period has resulted in a richer representation of racial, ethnic, cultural, economic, and national backgrounds on our campus, as well as in a serious attempt to acknowledge and value the range of sexual orientations in this community. I celebrate these changes at Middlebury for the same reason I welcome the broader spectrum of environmental literature in my own experience and that of my students. Beyond the important issues of justice and ethical obligation, such increased diversity makes for more fun—a better party, with lots of enticing tastes, catchy new tunes, and more people to dance with. Thoreau’s cabin at Walden definitely has its own quiet appeal, but it’s not necessarily where you want to hang out on a Friday night!

There seems to be a close connection between the spirit of festive inclusiveness now beginning to enter into both environmental literature and the broader environmental movement and a growing interest in the “Slow Food” and local-food movements. Both
developments go along with an emphasis on the pleasures of community, and a distancing from the Transcendentalist interest in “purity.” I believe that the concept of purity is a more valuable with reference to air and water than it is to culture. It’s important, too, that an appreciation for Thoreau not make us Luddites when it comes to new technology and social networking media. We need to shift from the rhetoric of disapproval to what might be termed a more invitational environmentalism: just taste THIS! I don’t find in such new language a denial of our gravest environmental concerns, such as climate change. To the contrary, it offers a way to strengthen the vital bonds of community as we embark on a half-century in which human population will peak at around ten billion before beginning to decline. As James Hanson of NASA and Bill McKibben both argue so persuasively, the next few years may determine whether we merely experience serious climate destabilization or plummet into truly cataclysmic and unmanageable changes. Celebrating the nourishing beauty of our earth-community together may be a more promising preparation for significant, long-term changes in behavior than a solemn and solitary sense of obligation. Think Mardi Gras as a prologue to Lent.

It’s good news that the language we use to talk about human interactions with the natural world, including “nature writing,” “wilderness,” and even “conservation,” tends to collapse under us. This helps keep us from getting stuck in insufficiently expansive formulations. Although the term “environmental literature” may have struck the founders of ASLE as a much more serviceable one, all of the variants of “environment,” too, turn out to have problems of their own. In an essay entitled “Conservation is good work,”
Wendell Berry writes, “The idea that we live in something called ‘the environment’ . . . is utterly preposterous. This word came into use because of the pretentiousness of learned experts who were embarrassed by the religious associations of ‘Creation’ and who thought ‘world’ too mundane” . . . The real state of things, of course, is far more complex and intimate and interesting than that. The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh . . . None of this intimacy and responsibility is conveyed by the word environment . . . That word is a typical product of the old dualism that is at the root of most of our ecological destructiveness.”

The preliminary dismantling of “environmental” by such a critique has had the interesting effect of allowing “nature” and “nature writing” to escape from the compartments to which that broader frame of reference had seemed to consign them. In Sphere: the Form of a Motion, his remarkable poem about the theory of relativity, A. R. Ammons writes that “the discrete/annihilated, suddenly here it is, blandished and available:/thing go away to return, brightened for the passage.” The desire for a less narrowly Anglo-Saxon and Transcendentalist approach to writing about nature has called our attention both to non-Western literature and to other genres in English that have illuminated the preciousness of the Thoreauvian tradition. That more narrowly defined genre has thus been augmented and made new.

I always figure that there are at least three ideas every undergraduate at Middlebury should be exposed to. One is irony, the way in which things we thought of as different are the same and things we classed as essentially the same are fundamentally
different. Both variants are supremely illustrated in *Oedipus Rex*. Another is the law of unintended or unanticipated consequences, incidences of which fill every issue of every newspaper. And a third, closely related to those first two principles, is dialectic, the way in which our thinking advances through the synthesis of apparently conflicting terms or ideas, a synthesis that then generates or discovers its own antithesis, driving the dialectic further along. The collapse and reformulation of terminology in the discourse of environmental studies exemplifies the challenges and benefits of such a dialectic.

The essay by Leslie Silko that I’ve already mentioned re-stories the map in a way that may at first feel antithetical to the Thoreau-inspired wilderness movement. But when she concludes by affirming the importance of the austere New Mexico landscape for the myths and histories that undergird Pueblo tradition, she also reinforces a basic value of Thoreau’s literary universe. Namely, that poverty and simplicity can clarify our spiritual values and promote a more grounded, sustainable culture. “The bare vastness of the Hopi landscape emphasizes the visual impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious. . . . So little lies between you and the sky. So little lies between you and the earth. One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph, that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally—even the most humble insect or reptile. You realize you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year.”
Like “nature writing” and “environment,” “sustainable growth” is a term that has become problematic upon closer scrutiny. The fact that this oxymoron remained in currency as long as it did reveals how difficult it is for people in our society to question the self-evident value of continued growth. But of course growth that goes on forever is less a sign of health than the manifestation of a serious disorder—like a hyperthyroid condition, for example. For me, though, the term “sustainability” itself still seems to work. I agree with Wendell Berry when, in the essay quoted above, he writes that “Sustainability is a hopeful concept not only because it is a present necessity but because it has a history. We know, for example, that some agricultural soils have been preserved in continuous use for several thousand years. We know, moreover, that it is possible to improve soil in use.” Soils are preserved and restored in part by fallowing fields that have been too long given to heavy-feeding crops, as well as by rotating crops among the larger set of available fields. Returning to Thoreau and his successors, after having found their writing to be insufficient in certain regards, we discover how sweet and nutritious it has again become within its new, more expansive frame of reference.

One effect for me of returning to the tradition of nature writing in this broader context has been realizing its deep affinities with lyrical poetry as well as with science and religion. Thoreau would never have heard of the seventeenth-century haiku master Basho. But coming out of a vastly different literary, religious, and political context, Basho nonetheless anticipates Thoreau’s vision in striking ways. I think especially of one haiku in this regard: *kare eda ni/karasu no tomarikeri--/aki no kure.* On a bare branch/a crow alights--/the end of autumn. It’s a stripped-down universe, depicted with great precision and also with a certain tone of melancholy. Yet from such directness and
simplicity comes an enlarged sense of the world. Intently watching that branch bob as a large, silhouetted bird lands on it hones the sharp edge between seasons and lets us feel the wholeness of the turning year.

Within the history of poetry in English, too, we discover kindred expressions that affirm the importance of sympathy within essays where we have sometimes been distracted by moments of self-absorption or sententiousness. Fellow-feeling and compassion are so keenly experienced in works of nature writing like Loren Eiseley’s *Immense Journey* and Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge*. And just as such Thoreauvian writers find an ancestor in the Wordsworth their work also flows directly into a contemporary poem like Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day:

> Who made the world?  
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
> Who made the grasshopper?  
> This grasshopper, I mean—  
> the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
> the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
> who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
> who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
> Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
> I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.  
> I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
> into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
> how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
> which is what I have been doing all day.  
> Tell me, what else should I have done?  
> Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
> with your one wild and precious life?

Oliver’s catechism brings rapt attention to grasshopper. Her observation of details like the insect’s sideways-moving jaws and pale forearms is as precise as an entomologist’s or
a Native American story-teller’s. And her concluding address to the reader is as earnest and challenging as the final chapter of *Walden*.

Over the past couple of years, I’ve stumbled into a new form of letting go as a teacher. (Perhaps the image embedded in the word “stumbled” is one of toppling over an unseen root and flinging out your arms out to catch yourself, so that whatever was in your hands scatters onto the ground.) I haven’t advanced far enough yet into this latest relinquishment to envision what sort of synthesis it may contribute to. But it does feel like a promising new form of disorientation, and one that may help to map whatever paths I end up following after retirement. In the past two fall semesters, with guidance from Middlebury’s Tiffany Sargent, I have undertaken to teach courses in the realm of “service-learning” or “community-based education.” In both of them, I’ve also had the privilege of working with Diane Munroe, who so skillfully supports a variety of field-based offerings for the Environmental Studies Program.

The first of these classes, entitled “Portrait of a Vermont Town,” had as its community-partner a committee of citizens from Starksboro who were hoping to use stories and the arts as a way of enriching that town’s long-term planning process. Vermont Land Trust and the Orton Family Foundation co-sponsored this class, in which students ended up conducting lengthy interviews with over fifty Starksboro residents about the particular stories that tied them most closely to that landscape and community. At the end of the semester, teams from the class presented to the town both a printed selection of the accounts they had received and a series of “digital stories,” maps, and other video interpretations. A public presentation in Starksboro’s Robinson Elementary
School gathered together what was by all accounts one of the largest and liveliest groups ever to discuss the character and future of their town. The stories of home which we heard that night caused gales of laughter, along with a few tears. In this way, they complemented our more formal lectures and discussions here at the college in much the same way as stories like Bruchac’s enrich the traditional voice of nature writing, offering deeply rooted, emotional expressions to a multi-generational audience.

“Farm Stories,” which took place just this past semester, was not as centrally focused on the collection and transcription of lengthy, taped interviews. But the rationale for this course (co-sponsored by the Land Trust again and also by the Vermont Folk Life Center) was in other ways quite similar to that of “Portrait of a Vermont Town.” Much of the work once more took place away from campus, as teams of students fanned out to learn about twelve local farms. They then planned and carried out a range of projects that included both digital stories and a photo-exhibition at the Folk Life Center that was accompanied by audio selections from various teams’ interviews. “Farm Stories,” too, involved a delightful gathering, between students and members of the participating farm families, this one hosted by the James and Rooney families of Monument Farms Dairy and taking place at the Weybridge Congregational Church.

Just as some students in Starksboro got involved in driving up before dawn to help cook the hunters’ breakfast at the Jerusalem Schoolhouse and others had sleep-overs with the elderly couple who adopted them as grandchildren, so too participants in the farm-stories class were invited to drive dump-trucks by affectionately teasing farmers and got to roam through the fields with astonishingly self-sufficient three-year-olds. Such rewarding personal bonds between students and people from the larger Addison-County
community were the most thrilling aspects of these classes for me. In most cases, neither the residents of Starksboro nor the farmers in last semester’s course would have been likely to have significant contact with members of our student-body. But the respectful, interested attitudes of our students met with a remarkably generous, and curious, response in these off-campus communities, and led to a number of meaningful friendships being formed. Here too, there seems to be a similarity to the underlying dynamic of both nature writing and environmental studies: a dialogue across conventional boundaries that can result in unexpected new possibilities for connection. I will not be surprised if our commencement ceremonies this year end up being attended by residents of local communities who have come to honor their new friends here and meet their families from away. Similarly, I expect that some of these 2010 grads will find themselves returning specifically in order to keep up with Addison County families who became integral to their college experience.

It was a lucky thing that the benefits of these two courses felt so evident to me, since, as a teacher, I was also confronted in them by a particularly challenging form of relinquishment. Ordinarily, our twelve-week semester provides an encompassing arc within which to shape a course. By the eighth or ninth week, it feels as if we’ve found our footing as a community and have also established a firm intellectual foundation in a particular literature, historical field, or topic. Then it’s time to muster all our resources in a collective effort to deepen the conversation. I’ve never lost the sense of excitement that accompanies this moment of fruition in a class. But the rhythm of a service-learning class, and the teacher’s role, turn out to be fundamentally different. I was of course still responsible for conceiving and framing the course, and for facilitating the first several
weeks of discussion. After that, though, the students scattered into the field to do their own research, getting to know people I would never develop as full a relationship with, then planning and carrying out their projects with considerable autonomy.

In the latter part of the semester, my own role sometimes felt less like that of a direct participant and more like that of a friendly bystander. This was borne in upon me one brisk afternoon last fall when I walked over to watch a Middlebury women’s soccer game in which a couple of my “Farm Stories” students were playing. Standing on the sidelines and cheering them on felt remarkably like my role in the course by that point in the semester. Perhaps they could hear me, but the fact remained that I wasn’t on the field and definitely wouldn’t have been of much help to them even if I had been. The students were on their own in the “Farm Stories” class now too, just as those two athletes and their team-mates were; on the farms as on the soccer field, they advanced toward their goals as their supporters yelled words of encouragement and waved our arms. The experience of learning in such a framework can beautifully support the confidence, determination, teamwork, and effectiveness we hope to see our students achieve. It is well worth a teacher’s pang in letting go.

When, at the end of the service-learning courses, we held our final celebrations at the Starksboro school and the Weybridge church, those occasions in their turn reminded me of holiday gatherings with grown children who now have spouses and families of their own. It’s so satisfying to have everyone seated at a single long table again, in a party that will be amply commemorated with photos and toasts. In the natural course of events, though, both before and after the festive meal, members of the younger generation are on their own, making their own plans and carrying them out as they see fit.
I feel a special rapport with this year’s seniors who even, or especially, at this moment of intense concentration on their final projects, may also be feeling as if they have one foot out the door. For them, as for me, the sensation of edging into an ecotone may now be giving way to that of stepping across a threshold. A character in English literature I have always identified with strongly as a teacher is Mrs. Ramsay, in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. In part, this is because the dinner party she creates for her own houseful of family and friends has always felt like such a striking parallel to the suspense and rewards of a seminar. In concluding my final lecture at Middlebury, then, I can’t help recalling the moment when, in leaving her party Mrs. Ramsay, pauses within the narrow ecotone of a doorway to look back over her shoulder for one last time: “It was necessary now to carry everything a step further. With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past.”

Thank you.