

Senior Project Speech Transcript

-Gavin Sellors

What does it mean to be a land steward? This question was once as straightforward as it was impactful. So long as everyday life brought reminders of how fundamental the land is to everything that humans do, fostering a healthy relationship with the land was taken seriously. Cultivating this relationship was beautifully simple, since the land could be worked with directly in so many practical aspects of so many people's lives. The society that we live in today is more complex in its systems, and though a healthy relationship with the land is no less vital, the question of land stewardship has also grown in its complexity.

As I began to reckon with venturing out into the world, I started to feel our society's confusion around land stewardship profusely. The land is what supports and sustains us, so how could I know what my work in the world should be without having a grounding in the knowledge of how to work with the land I live off of? How could I discover my identity without having a sense of place in what is foundational to the world around me. So at the end of 11th grade, it seemed only natural to me to use my senior project to conduct an inquiry into what it means to be a land steward in our unique moment in history.

I did not know what deeds might provide insight into my question when I embarked upon my project. What I could discern was that society currently fosters unhealthy and detrimental relationships with the land. The products of society's relationships with the land are presented to us from behind a magic curtain while, out of view these relationships extract from and destroy that on which we all depend. Disconnection from the land breeds apathy and we impose more and more on the places we have forgotten how to understand.

The issue seemed staggering in scale, so I decided to start with something I could gain surety from: working directly with the land. There are many important ways to do this, but one that I found myself especially called to was agriculture. Growing up on a school with a farm, I had been able to understand how cultivating that which nourishes our bodies is foundational to

humanity. With this in mind, I sought out an internship on a small organic produce farm in Sebastopol called Confluence Farm. I also took the opportunity to do additional farmwork alongside Dana and his intern on the Summerfield Farm, and enrolled in an online class on Regenerative Agriculture.

For 7 weeks during my Summer between 11th and 12th grade, I immersed myself in agriculture. On a given day I might arrive at Confluence Farm at 7:00 am and spend the cool portion of the morning amongst rows of leafy vines as farmer Andy guided me in learning to discern the subtle countenance of a harvestable zucchini, come in for lunch frustrated with my struggles to bind the tomatoes instead of bind myself in the twine and go home to study papers about soil microbes after an afternoon of tucking shoots into a patch of earth that seemed immensely rich with life. Or I might spend the morning bending my aching back to mulch the Summerfield farm onions while I listened to Dana espouse on the techniques of biodynamic farming, and be amazed at how closely they seemed to be related to the principles of regenerative agriculture when I listened to the inspiring voices of my Soil Advocacy Class teachers through my headphones later that day.

Even though my days on the farm were filled with action, it felt like my biggest task was to listen, and I noticed the experienced farmers around me doing the same. Why were the onions doing poorly? What did this say about what they needed from us? Was the zucchini plant showing me it was ready to be picked, or that I needed to wait longer? Meanwhile my Regenerative Agriculture class was opening my mind to a world I had never known existed: the world of soil microbes. Living more than a billion to a teaspoon, soil microbes engage in some of Nature's most intricate symbiotic relationships, without which the vast majority of plants could not survive. It is well known that during photosynthesis plants release oxygen and take in carbon dioxide. Some of this carbon is used to bolster the structural matter of the plants, but what is often overlooked is that as much as 70% of this carbon is exuded through the plant's roots to feed the surrounding soil microbes who, in turn, collect otherwise inaccessible nutrients for the plant's consumption. Because of this, agricultural systems will become more abundant, healthier

and stabler depending on the degree to which sturdy and extensive soil microbe networks are allowed to flourish.

Unfortunately, modern industrial agriculture has neglected this foundational element of farming in favor of practices like voracious tilling that destroys shreds soil microbe community structures, and leaving swaths of soil bare for long periods of time, which puts microbes at danger of being fried by the Sun or swept away by wind and rain with all the fertile topsoil that surrounds them. Like tilling, the toxic pesticides commonly used in industrial agriculture may have temporary benefits but decimate soil microbe populations. The destruction of the world's soil is detrimental not only to food security but also to the climate. When the soil is tilled and traumatized, the carbon based soil microbe communities that were thriving securely below ground oxidize, resulting in billions of tons of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. In fact, because of tillage and related practices, agriculture is often estimated to be responsible for more than a third of the excess atmospheric carbon that is fueling catastrophic climate change today.

Climate change often seems to be a vast and disheartening problem with only abstract solutions, but as I learned, so many of the answers lie just beneath our feet. When respected and fostered, soil microbes can be the key to turning the industry of agriculture into a carbon sequestration machine. Regenerative agriculture practices, such as no till farming, cover cropping and the cultivation of perennial plants, strive to accelerate natural processes rather than disrupt them. When these practices are implemented, plants are free to draw down, via photosynthesis, the carbon that is plaguing the atmosphere and exude it into the soil where it can be stored for hundreds of years and only does good, feeding the soil microbes that crops depend on for health.

Through my regenerative agriculture class, I discovered that agricultural practices which degrade the land also degrade the climate, and that agricultural practices which work in concert with the land also heal the climate. I found this connection between land stewardship and climate

change very intriguing, so when Summer ended and it came time for me to venture into society and find a new way to explore land stewardship, I chose to take up climate organizing.

In early October of my 12th grade year I joined the Sonoma County hub of the Sunrise Movement, a nationwide network of youth organizers who strive to build a massive social movement that can transform our society's systems to solve climate change. When I joined, I intended for this portion of my project to be a side exploration, but as my involvement with the Sunrise Movement deepened and I became hub Outreach Team Lead, I grew more and more inspired to organize for climate justice and my involvement with the Sunrise Movement snowballed into a commitment that continues to this day and comprises the vast bulk of the time that I spent on my project.

Throughout the year we watched our hub grow as we organized demonstrations and advocated for climate solutions in local policy, all the while coming together to build community around our values and discovering our capacity for humanity as we fought with love for the future of our planet. During the Autumn of 2019, we were absorbed in preparations for the December 6th climate strike. In my time away from painting signs and banners, helping to hash out the logistics of the event in nighttime meetings, and attempting to help coordinate the organizational efforts of high schools across the county, I was able to attend an intensive training for new Sunrise leaders in Berkley that helped me level up my skills.

On December 6th, dedicated crowds assembled amidst pouring rain to stage "Die - Ins for Life" and demand that a livable future for our planet be realized. Summerfield teacher George Hershwitz once told us that if our work truly comes from our heart, then the work itself will provide gratification no matter the trials or outcomes. As I stood drenched in the freezing wind but surrounded by others who I knew believed in the work we were doing as much as I did, I felt the truth in George's statement.

During the Winter of 2019 - 2020, our Sunrise hub brainstormed policy ideas to transform Sonoma county into a cleanly powered, regenerative and equitable place to live, and we brainstormed tactics to build the people power that would be necessary to enact these

policies. We also trained many new Sunrise Movement members and our general meetings grew increasingly large and formal. As Spring came we put our groundwork into action as we began plans for an Earth Day climate strike. Preparations progressed in a promising manner and we had reason to believe that the 2020 Earth Day climate strike might be the biggest, most epic mass social mobilization in Sonoma County history (if I do say so myself).

During this time the Outreach Team was busier than ever. We strove to facilitate greater involvement among Sonoma County high school students and students at SSU and the SRJC. We worked to build connections with similarly focused organizations in Sonoma County, and with ecologically or politically oriented campus clubs. At first this work left me feeling exhausted and almost dishonest. I assumed that the most practical method of outreach would be to try to make as many people as possible listen to me and convince them that the Sunrise Movement's vision is what they needed. However, I began to notice that my outreach was much more successful when I stopped to let people articulate for themselves what it was that they needed. When I listened to what other people's needs were, I found that we had a surprising number of needs in common, and that we could then collaborate to work towards addressing these common needs in the context of the Sunrise Movement. By shifting our view of the Outreach Team's role to one where our primary task was to listen to the community, we were able to grow the network of our base and allies through genuine human relationships that left me feeling empowered and blessed by the gifts that I discovered others had to bring to the movement.

By now it was clear to me that for some reason, listening must be an integral part of land stewardship, so for the culmination of my project I decided to delve deeper into the meaning of this concept. I decided to conduct a twenty four hour wilderness solo with the intent of listening to the land. I spent months preparing both logistically and mentally for the experience, but when I hiked into the hinterlands of Sugarloaf State Park early on a morning near the beginning of March, I still felt that I had no idea what to expect. I took only my clothes, my sleeping bag, a water bottle and a few snacks with me to my solo spot in a secluded meadow. After a long period of exploration already, I was figuring out that the best way to learn what it means to be a land

steward might be to hearken to what the land kislef might have to teach. So for twenty four hours I sat amidst the budding flowers, the sheltering trees, the swiftly bustling birds, the wind - numbed rays of the Sun by day and the mystifying glow of the moon by night, and strove to simply listen to the land.

Though I had been engaged for months in constant deeds and action, I found my solo to be more difficult than any other part of my project. Really listening to the land is hard and arduous work. It requires constant attention and a perfectly quiet mind. Furthermore, it requires a certain patience and willingness to accept whatever comes, for as I discovered, the knowledge that the land gives is rarely the kind that can be abstractly intellectualized and articulated. Throughout the course of my solo I struggled against fear, loneliness and incessantly distracting thoughts, but during the moments when I was able to truly listen, I began to understand, not intellectually yet, but on a deep level, why listening is such an important part of land stewardship.

‘What does listening to the land really mean anyways?’ I wondered as I lay watching the orange tinged clouds herald the end to my night in the wilderness. What was I hearing during my solo? Well, I heard the birds chirping in the trees. I heard the trees liltting in the wind, and the frogs lifting their voices in chorus at night. In a sense I was also listening when I gazed at the grasses in the meadow, or the raptors soaring through the sky, because I was looking to see what they had to tell me. I was listening to other beings. By listening I was able to gain an understanding of what was around me that was based not only out of my own conceptions but that was informed by the beings who together with me comprised the reality I was in.

And this, I believe, is what interconnects agriculture and climate organizing. It is what connects land stewardship to the most disconnected of society’s systems. Perhaps our relationship with the land as a society has become so detrimental because we have forgotten how to listen to the land. The most destructive practices can seem efficient and even ingenious if we fail to take into account the perspectives of the beings who will be most directly impacted by these practices. If we do not listen to those who share this life with us to form a common reality,

our actions will inevitably cause us to impose our own subjective sense of reality on others and great discord will result.

When I walked back into society after completing my solo, I still did know exactly what it means to be a land steward, but I knew that it would be a lifelong journey to find out, and that the way to get there is to listen. I must strive to listen to the land when I work with it directly. I must strive to listen to others in all my dealings with the more detached systems of society. Through listening to the land, and through listening to other members of human society to understand how I can act in a way that benefits others and myself, I can work to transform our society's systems, deed by deed, into systems of land stewardship.

It sounds simple, but as my solo proved, true listening is much easier said than done. Nevertheless, after nine months of exploration, I am excited to venture out into the world as a seeker of connection and understanding. There are many pressing challenges to be met in our time, and all of them, I believe, have something to do with land stewardship. Therefore I am hopeful that in listening through my actions, I can discover how to do good work in the world.

In conclusion, I feel that my project has been more than anything a process of learning from others, so I would like to take a moment to thank all of the mentors who I could not have completed this project without. First and foremost, thank you to my parents for always being supportive of my process. Thank you to Advisor Beth Weisbern for your indispensable advice, and to Ronni Sands, Ben Mew and all of the Summerfield High School teachers for offering guidance along the way.

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I would likewise like to extend my gratitude to Christine Byrne, Janina Turner, and all my Sunrise family. It has been an incredible honor for me to work with you all and I know I will

take what I have learned from you wherever I go in life. The same goes for my wilderness solo mentor Michelle Saucedo. You have been a true elder to me by showing me such an invaluable path to self knowledge.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, I would like to thank the entire Summerfield community for holding me in my development with as much care and support as you always have. It is because of this community that I realized the importance of land stewardship in the first place, and it is this community that has allowed me to discover how I can conduct myself in the world by striving to become a land steward.

Thank you very much.