

Building
Building Arks
Arks

Scott Russell Sanders

*Scott
Russell
Sanders*

*12th Annual
Lorraine W. Frank Lecture
in the Humanities*

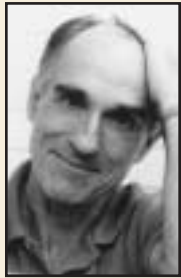


Arizona Humanities Council
Sunday, October 27, 2002
Tucson, Arizona





The Twelfth Annual Lorraine W. Frank Lecture in the Humanities, named in honor of the founding executive director of the Arizona Humanities Council, was held Sunday, October 27, 2002, at the Arizona Inn in Tucson. Author, scholar, activist, and philosopher Scott Russell Sanders of Indiana spoke about "Building Arks," a metaphor for life in the modern commons. The Arizona Humanities Council is pleased to provide you with this special souvenir edition of Dr. Sanders' talk, and we thank him for his insightful, if challenging, commentary, as well his permission to publish it in this form.



Scott Russell Sanders

His voice is steady and eloquent, the message is straightforward: We must stand our ground and commit ourselves to one place—be it a home, marriage, neighborhood, or landscape. Scott Sanders chose Bloomington, Indiana, a small city in the hills where he teaches literature at Indiana University, and where he and his wife Ruth brought up their two children and have lived for more than twenty-five years. In his book *Staying Put*, he explores both the practical and the spiritual aspects of the search for home, and by staying

put himself, has given us an example of living responsibly and well on the planet. Born in Tennessee, he grew up in Ohio, attended college at Brown, married, and then earned his doctorate in English literature at Cambridge, where he and his wife lived for four years. He has won the Lannan Literary Award and the Great Lakes Book Award. His more than twenty published works include fiction, nonfiction, and children's books, and he is a frequent contributor to periodicals and anthologies. In addition to *Staying Put*, he has published *Hunting for Hope* and *The Force of Spirit* among others.

Previous Lorraine W. Frank Lecturers

- 1990, Hanna H. Gray, President, University of Chicago, "The Humanities in Private and Public"
- 1991, Patricia Nelson Limerick, University of Colorado, "Trails of the Southwest"
- 1992, Clay Straus Jenkinson, in character as John Wesley Powell
- 1993, Alberto Alvaro Ríos, Arizona State University, "Days With Names"
- 1994, David McCullough, "The Art of Biography"
- 1995, Rita Dove, University of Virginia, "Poetry in the Modern World"
- 1996, Luci Tapahonso, University of Kansas, "Tell Us How To Prevail: Invocations to the Elderly and the Land in Native Poetry"
- 1998, William R. Ferris, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities, "Rediscovering America: NEH and the Millennium"
- 1999, Gary Paul Nabhan, "Moving Among Cultures"
- 2000, Vicki L. Ruiz, "*Comadres*, Cowgirls and *Curanderas*: Spanish/Mexican Women in the Southwest, (1540-1900)"
- 2001, Stewart L. Udall, "The West's Water Wars: A Reminiscence"



Building Arks

At dawn one morning this past July, police showed up with bull-horns, bulldozers, chainsaws, and guns to force a band of protesters out of a 50-acre woods in my hometown of Bloomington, Indiana. The sheriff and his deputies and the state police were upholding a ruling by the county council, which gave an Indianapolis developer the right to turn these woods into an apartment complex. The protesters were upholding the right of the woods to remain a woods, one of the last parcels of big trees left within the noose of roads that encircles our city. A few protesters had lived for months up in the trees on temporary platforms, while local people took turns bringing them food and drink. The tree-sitters were arrested along with a number of their supporters, sixteen in all, and they are now awaiting trial. As I write these lines, the trees are falling, and a private security firm guards the perimeter of the vanishing woods.

The police had the law on their side, of course, but they also had the banks, building contractors, realtors, truck drivers, merchants, utility companies, fast-food vendors, newspaper, and countless other boosters that stood to make money from the development. The protesters set against that power their unarmed bodies and their unfashionable convictions. They believe there are values more important than money. They believe that red oaks and red foxes and all the creatures of the woods deserve a home. They believe that a civilized community must show restraint by leaving some land alone, to remind us of the wild world on which our lives depend and to keep us humble and sane.

Similar conflicts are being played out from coast to coast, in more or less dramatic fashion, over the fate of more or fewer acres. By and large the boosters are winning. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that we are losing 2.2 million acres of open space to development each year, including farms, forests, wetlands, and prairies. I will return to my own local struggle later on, but first I need to place it within a larger frame. So bear with me. I must begin by speaking of the trouble we're in before I can say how we might get out of it.

It's plain that the Earth cannot support for much longer the extravagant way of life so common in rich countries, nor can it support the spreading of that extravagance to poor countries. Sooner or later we'll burn up all the cheap oil, we'll pump the aquifers dry, we'll cut down the last big trees, we'll fish the oceans bare, we'll plow up the last arable land and taint the last clean air. The life of endless consumption is ruinous to the planet and bound to fail. The question is not whether it will fail but when, and how the end of our spree will come—by careful preparation, or by catastrophe.

*endless consumption
is ruinous to the planet and bound to fail*

Our population is now over six billion and growing by about 80 million per year

Knowing all this, how should a person act? We might shrug off the knowledge, pretend we can go on building vast houses, driving enormous cars, shopping around the clock, wiping out other species, fouling the atmosphere, polluting water, and squandering soil forever and ever. We might admit the gravity of our situation, while counting on scientists and engineers to come up with a technical fix. We might place our faith in the free market, believing it will somehow furnish a second, unspoiled Earth for our use, once the price is right. We might concede that neither economics nor technology will enable us to pursue infinite growth on a finite globe, and so decide to live it up while we can, leaving future generations to figure out how to survive on a ransacked planet. Or we might seek to live more lightly, reducing our demands on the Earth, devising or recovering simple, elegant, durable practices that could serve our descendants long after the current binge of consumption has withered away.

The first four responses to Earth's limits are by far the most visible. Many people refuse to see the abundant signs that the fabric of life is fraying. They simply deny that there is any reason for concern, and the more the evidence piles up, the louder their denials. Others believe in technology, trusting that genetic engineering, fuel cells, molecular machines, missile shields, or some other stratagem will spare us from having to curtail our numbers or our desires. Others trust in the magic of the market to overcome limits, as if the mechanism that got us into this dead-end way of life will somehow get us out, if only we will apply it more fervently. Still others, and perhaps the majority, know that we are living on borrowed time, that the Earth's reserves are running out, and yet they go on gobbling up toys and sensations anyway. They don't apologize for their gluttony, and they don't lie awake nights pondering where it might lead.

By comparison, those who strive to live more simply are harder to see. They don't crowd the malls or the fast food shops. Occasionally they make news by defending trees from bulldozers, but they rarely show up on talk shows, on the covers of magazines, on ballots or business pages. Instead, largely invisible except to one another, they go about learning the skills and mastering the tools necessary for meeting basic human needs. They grow food. They build shelters. They make clothes. They draw energy from sun and wind and wood. They get by with fewer possessions, and learn to repair the ones they have. They create much of their own entertainment, with homemade art, music, and stories. They derive pleasure from good work, human company, and the perennial show that Nature puts on. So far as possible, they rear their children away from television and advertising. They buy as little as they can from the global economy, and instead they support local economies based on

cooperation, barter, and sharing. They protect and restore woods, prairies, and swamps, making room for wildness.

I think of these people as builders of arks, for their ways and works are vessels designed to preserve from extinction not merely our fellow creatures, as on Noah's legendary ark, but also the wisdom necessary for dwelling in place generation after generation without diminishing either the place or the planet. In their efforts to conserve skillful means and wild lands, they point the way beyond the rising flood to a new and durable civilization.



The flood I have in mind is partly the literal rise in sea level from global warming, but more generally it is the cumulative effect of our assault on the Earth. Each year we manufacture and spew over the globe millions of tons of toxic chemicals. Some of these chemicals have thinned the ozone layer, exposing all organisms to higher doses of ultraviolet light. The smoke from our power plants and exhaust from our engines produce acid rain, which kills forests and freshwater lakes. By trawling the seas with mammoth ships, we have depleted most of the world's fisheries, some of them beyond the point of recovery. Pollution from rivers has created dead zones in the oceans, such as the one at the mouth of the Mississippi in the Gulf of Mexico. By irrigating crops, we have saturated millions of hectares of land with salt, rendering it sterile. Through the use of heavy machinery in farming, we have lost much of our topsoil to erosion, and through the application of poisons we have reduced the fertility of the soil that remains. Through the clearing of forests, especially near the equator, we have enlarged the reach of deserts. By draining wetlands, paving fields, and moving plants and animals from continent to continent, we are driving to extinction countless other species, rivaling in our impact the great cataclysm that snuffed out the dinosaurs some 65 million years ago.

Clearly, it's high time to build arks. Scientists have estimated that by the end of this century, if we carry on with current rates of habitat destruction, more than half of all the species now alive will have perished. This havoc is powered by the swelling number of human beings, multiplied by our increasing rates of consumption. For humankind to reach a population of a billion took hundreds of thousands of years, from the beginnings of our species to 1830. A second billion was added in just a hundred years, by 1930. A third billion was added in the next thirty years, a fourth in fifteen years, a fifth in eleven years. Our population is now over six billion and growing by about 80 million per year, and some demographers expect it to reach ten or twelve billion by the middle of

we are facing a worldwide flood

this century. If you draw a graph of these numbers, you will produce what mathematicians call an exponential curve, one heading nearly straight up. Such growth cannot be sustained indefinitely, since it points toward infinity. Either by design or by disaster, the curve will peak, and human population will begin to decline. Already, the amount of fossil energy, fresh water, arable land, and food available per person is declining. As a consequence, the number of people suffering from malnutrition today is greater than the number of people alive a century ago.

So when I say that we are facing a worldwide flood, I am referring not only to the waves that will lap higher and higher on the shores of our continents as the icecaps melt, but also to the rising tide of human beings, the rising toll of chaos and misery, and the wholesale erasure of our fellow creatures.



The forest that the tree-sitters were trying to save is called Brown's Woods, after the local speculator who owned it. Bill Brown—who is by all accounts a decent as well as a prosperous man—could have sold or even donated the woods to a land trust or the city of Bloomington, but he stood to make a tidy sum by selling it to the Indianapolis developer, so that is what he did. Landowners here and elsewhere make such decisions every day, usually without any public notice. Judging from remarks in the newspaper, Mr. Brown was clearly chagrined that such a fuss had been made about his sale of the woods for an apartment complex. No doubt he was sincere in declaring his relief that no one had been hurt during the arrests.

But of course people have been hurt, if you take into account the effects of losing those woods to concrete and brick, the increased traffic and pollution from the residents of the 208 new apartments, the greater crowding in parks and schools. The protesters hoped that moral and ecological arguments might prevail over economic ones. They spoke at meetings; they gave interviews to reporters; they held rallies. Out in Brown's Woods, they wove a web of yarn among the big trees, and they laced the web with flowers. When the sheriff's crew showed up, however, the bulldozers tore through the yarn, crushed the flowers, brushed aside all the arguments. The heavy machinery was on loan from the Indianapolis developer. And a good thing, said the sheriff, because it would have cost his department a bundle to rent so much equipment. The developer could write off the cost as a business expense.

The arguments for turning Brown's Woods into the Canterbury House Apartments are familiar: people need somewhere to live; people need jobs; investors deserve a return on their capital; the city must grow.



We can always think of reasons for subduing land to our desires.

Whatever the arguments, the upshot is that the felling of Brown's Woods has diminished our commonwealth, and those who live here after us will inherit a grimmer, grimier place. We are not the only ones hurt. The hawks, the coyotes, the toads and salamanders, the spicebush butterflies and orb-weaver spiders will all have to leave, if they can outrun the bulldozers and chainsaws, and if they can find another refuge anywhere near the sprawling city. The red oaks and shagbark hickories have no such chance, nor do the trout lilies and dogtooth violets, the bloodroot and chanterelles. These neighbors have no say over the future of the neighborhood. They write no checks, cast no votes. They have no voice in how we use the land—unless some of us speak up for them, as the tree-sitters have tried to do.



You will recall that God sends the Biblical flood in punishment for human corruption, sparing only the upright Noah, Noah's family, and a breeding pair of "every living thing" (Genesis 6:19). God instructs Noah to build an ark and take refuge there along with a male and female of each species. Then come forty days and forty nights of rain. "And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, birds, cattle, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm upon the earth, and every man; everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life" (7:21-22). You might wonder why all the crows and crickets and other innocent breathers must drown for sins committed by humans, but the Bible does not say.

When the skies clear, Noah sends forth a raven and then a dove to search for dry land. The raven never returns; the dove comes back empty-billed on its first flight, returns bearing an olive leaf on the second flight, and after the third flight does not return at all. Reassured, Noah and his fellow passengers drift to shore and step onto solid earth. Pleased by Noah's obedience, God vows, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (8:21-22). It's a beautiful promise, one that softens considerably the image of the tyrant who sent the flood.

But the promise has a dark side, from which we are still suffering. For God says to Noah, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every

Whatever ⁵ *the arguments*

I gave you the green plants, I give you everything • Genesis 9:1-3

moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (Genesis 9:1-3). The passage may be read as merely stating the plain truth: all beasts do live in dread of us, because we are clever enough to displace, capture, or kill every other species. Understood in this light, God’s charge to Noah may be taken as a warning not to abuse our power. But the same words may also be read—and, in fact, have often been read—as justifying our utter dominion over Nature. If every animal and plant was created to serve our needs, if everything has been given into our hands, then we may use the Earth as we see fit. Read in this way, the passage becomes a license to loot the planet.

A few verses later, however, we find yet a third variation on the promise, one that clearly limits our dominion. “Behold,” God tells Noah, “I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:9-11). The God who speaks here sounds chastened, as if regretting the slaughter of so many innocent beings. This God is the creator and protector of crickets and crows, rattlesnakes and rotifers. This God cherishes all creatures, whether or not they go about on two legs, and by implication Noah is being told to cherish them as well.

The lesson we draw from the Biblical flood depends on which of these rival traditions we embrace. One tradition blesses humans alone, conveying the whole Earth to our use; the other blesses all creatures alike, granting to each species its own right to survive and flourish. The first view instructs us to fill the Earth with our kind and to impose our will on all living things; the second instructs us to honor our fellow creatures, to show restraint in our uses of the Earth, and to take our place modestly in the household of Nature.

By and large, those who wield the levers of power in our society hold by the first view. They insist on the sovereignty of human appetite. Nothing has value in their eyes except insofar as it can be bought or sold or otherwise used. They scorn the idea that animals or plants could have rights, even the right to survive. While they fight against the protection of existing species—mocking those who defend snail darters or spotted owls—they support the engineering and patenting of new life forms, which can be turned more conveniently into cash. They resist every effort to preserve wilderness; they regard public land as an arena for private plunder; they reject any limits to growth; they seek to overthrow every barrier to drilling, mining, logging, road-building, polluting, or

profit-making. By largely controlling the delivery of news, advertising, and entertainment, they tell us what to believe and what to buy, and they force-feed us a lethal vision of the good life.

Those who embrace the contrary view insist that human beings belong to the community of soil, water, air, and all living things, and they seek to live in such a way as to preserve and enhance the health of this greater community. They accept limits to growth and limits to human population. Whether or not they’ve read the Bible, their actions are in keeping with God’s command to Noah, which was to save not only those species that would be useful to human beings, but everything—the creepers and crawlers, the stingers and biters, the predators and parasites. From a religious perspective, these are all the handiwork of God, who loves the Creation and wishes to preserve it. From an ecological perspective, each species is vital because it embodies an irreplaceable store of knowledge accumulated over millions of years, and it interacts with other species in ways far more intricate than we could ever fathom let alone recreate. Religion and biology alike instruct us to honor all life. And so, recognizing that the Earth has suffered great damage because of our carelessness, and realizing that many other species besides our own are in danger, those who believe in the solidarity of living things have set about building arks.



A book may be an ark, as *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac* clearly are, ferrying the vision of a land ethic through stormy times. Horse-logging, organic farming, solar designing, or other practices that protect the fertility and abundance of Earth may be arks. A co-op for sharing food or housing or tools might be an ark, and so might be a community chorus, an arts center, a backyard garden, a children’s science museum, a yoga class, a school—any human structure, invention, or gathering that conserves the wisdom necessary for meeting our needs without despoiling the planet.

Among the builders and tenders of arks, the ones who come closest to fulfilling Noah’s task are the people who work at protecting and restoring wild lands. Some devote a portion or even the whole of their own land to providing habitat for other creatures. I know a man who is replanting a farmed-out piece of ground, acre by acre, to prairie; he measures the success of his work by the variety of birds and butterflies returning to his farm. I know a couple who are restoring a swamp by plugging up the drain tiles in a badly eroded cornfield. As the water pools once more, rushes and cattails rise around the margins, and beavers and raccoons and geese leave their footprints in the mud. With help from

Religion and biology alike instruct us to honor all life

The ark-builders understand

parents, children in our town have been planting trees and wildflowers on their school grounds, and city workers have begun restoring the riparian lushness and meandering flow of creeks in local parks. A group of Quakers bought property bordering a state forest just outside of our town, and they're turning it into a retreat center, where children can watch tadpoles or swing on grapevines, where adults can meditate and pray, where all can seek the spirit in Nature.

Others save open space by forming land trusts, which acquire property outright through donation or purchase, or acquire conservation easements that protect land from development. The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land have been doing such work across the nation for decades, but now in addition there are local land trusts operating in all fifty states, more than 1,200 of them at present, and the number keeps growing. In my own county, the Sycamore Land Trust has combined gifts, grants, and federal and state conservation funds to protect a 336-acre parcel of wet bottomland forest along Beanblossom Creek, which is home to a rookery for great blue herons. Every time I see one of these magisterial birds wading in a nearby lake or flying overhead with long legs trailing, I realize they might not be here at all without the Beanblossom Refuge.

Whether protected by government, trusts, or individuals, natural lands offer the last resort for other species as well as for those of our own species who crave contact with wildness. These preserves need not be large to be valuable; every scrap of ground can serve as an ark. Quite a few people in my city have dug up their lawns and planted their yards to native flowers, shrubs, and ferns. As one yard after another goes native, the roar and stink of mowers give way to the songs of birds and the smell of flowers. In summer, monarch butterflies on migration stop to nectar on blossoms, and in winter possums leave their tracks in the snow. All year, people walking by these exuberant yards pause on the sidewalks to gaze and listen, caught by a feral scent, a startling shape, a flash of life.

Yards with a bit of sun may also be planted in tomatoes, broccoli, and beans. My wife and I raise enough on our own tiny plot to keep our daughter and her husband, my mother, a few neighbors, and ourselves in salad all summer. Community gardens have sprung up on land provided by the city, complete with water spigot and compost bins. In the evenings and on weekends you can see families planting and weeding and harvesting, visiting with other gardeners, trading tips on cooking and canning. From early spring until late fall, a farmers' market brings into the heart of the city vegetables, fruits, honey, and flowers from local growers. You can buy sweet corn that was picked only hours before, and hand your money to a person who helped raise this bounty, and you can

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the link between consumption and devastation

talk about how the soils and crops and kids are doing. Because you know the grower, you can also know that the food on your plate was neither sprayed with poisons nor injected with antibiotics; you know that it reached you from five or twenty miles away instead of five hundred or two thousand, and so it cost the Earth far less in petroleum; and you know that the money you paid for it will circulate in the local economy.

Every unsprayed garden and unkempt yard, every meadow, marsh, and woods may become a reservoir for biological possibilities, keeping alive creatures who bear in their genes millions of years' worth of evolutionary discoveries. Every such refuge may also become a reservoir for spiritual possibilities, keeping alive our connection with the land, reminding us of our origins in the green world.



Ark-builders realize, however, that nothing is gained by creating refuges in one place, if we behave in such a way as to contribute to the despoiling of land somewhere else. If we're going to build arks, we should do everything we can to avoid swelling the flood. This means living more lightly. Since two-thirds of energy use in America goes for transportation, which also releases the bulk of our greenhouse gases, living lightly means, first of all, buying more fuel-efficient cars and driving them fewer miles; it means walking or bicycling whenever we can; it means flying less often and lobbying for passenger railway service. Since every item shipped to stores or to our front doors rides on petroleum, living lightly means buying as much as we can from local growers, makers, and merchants, instead of transnational corporations. It also means buying only what we need, avoiding fashions, learning to mend whatever we own and to make it last. It means seceding, so far as possible, from the global economy, which cares neither for the fate of the Earth nor for the health of particular places.

The ark-builders understand the link between consumption and devastation: the more we consume—of gasoline, junk food, clothing, containers, electronic toys—the more of the Earth must be mined, bulldozed, clear-cut, and paved. Recognizing this, the ark-builders don't identify themselves as consumers but as conservers. Their aim in life is not to devour as much stuff as possible, but to savor the necessities of life. They learn to provide for themselves as many of those necessities as they can, from growing food to rewiring an old house, from playing the banjo to sewing quilts. They share tools, cars, and recipes with friends and neighbors. They exchange labor with others in their community, trading a load of firewood for a tune-up, say, or swapping a haircut for a massage. The ark-builders don't rush from one sensation to the next, as

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buying only what we need

Thrift is normal

the media propose, but instead they relish the pleasures of an unhurried pace. They hang their laundry outdoors, enjoying the sunshine, instead of stuffing it in a machine. They cook their own food instead of grabbing a sack of sugar and fat in a drive-through lane. They take walks or sit for talks with people they love, instead of buying a ticket to the latest craze. They meet the world in the flesh, instead of through a screen. They remember how to dream and laugh without benefit of electricity.

None of this would have seemed strange to our grandparents. Thrift is normal; it's what sensible people have always practiced, in every land. What's abnormal is the binge of consumption that the rich nations have been on for the past few decades. The ark-builders know this binge will pass, and the sooner the better. Meanwhile, they do what they can to hold back the flood of devastation.

By protecting wild land, they are helping to preserve the biological heritage—the seed stock, the diversity of species, the intricate web of fertility—that we will need to replenish the Earth after the flood recedes. By living simply, by meeting more and more of their own needs from local and renewable sources, they are conserving the skills, knowledge, and values that our descendants will need in order to live decent lives without impoverishing the planet. By forming alternative communities, they are creating islands of sanity and integrity from which a new civilization may spread.



When the tree-sitters were arrested in Brown's Woods, the sheriff was quoted in the paper as saying, "We want to do this slow and easy, so no one gets injured—so everybody has their say and can get on with their lives." What he didn't seem to grasp was that the protesters were getting on with their lives. They were expressing their love for a piece of the Earth. In this dispute over Brown's Woods, one side has its say by sending in police and bulldozers, and by throwing the protesters in jail; the other side has its say by weaving yarn among the trees and speaking plain words on behalf of the greater community of living things.

When "The Bluebird 16," as they came to be known, were arraigned on charges of criminal trespass, they all requested jury trials. "They want to clog up the system," the county prosecutor complained. "They just want to make this as public and drawn out as possible." Of course the protesters want to make the dispute public. That's in the nature of civil disobedience, and in the nature of any democratic challenge to legal but harmful behavior. One of the defendants said that the goal is to put sprawl itself on trial, along with the developers, investors, and officials who send bulldozers into every open space.

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What's abnormal is the binge of

consumption

If I were in the dock—as by rights I should be, given my sympathies—I would testify that we must protect the remaining wild lands, especially in our cities, because we desperately need the companionship of other species. We need them for pleasure, for instruction, for inspiration. We need them to recall us from the frenzy of our lives. We need the birds, butterflies, frogs, and snakes to help us monitor the health of our home places. We need the trees and other plants to purify our water and air. We need wild lands as reminders of the natural cycles and deep time out of which we have evolved and on which we depend. These untrammelled spaces offer us relief from the hard, temporary, sometimes ugly shapes of human constructions. They serve as reservoirs from which other parts of the city and countryside might be repopulated with wild creatures. They give us a chance to glimpse the shaping intelligence in Nature, to sense the ultimate mystery from which all things rise, and to align our lives with that power.

Not all those who sympathized with the Bluebird 16 could be accommodated in the courtroom during the arraignment, so an overflow crowd milled about in the hallways. According to the newspaper, employees in nearby offices sprayed air-freshener in the direction of this motley crew, presumably to banish the odor of unwashed bodies. The gesture prompted me to imagine the rank smell in Noah's legendary ark, and to wonder how the offended employees of the justice building would manage to endure forty days and forty nights down in the grunting, roaring, hissing hold, or even to sleep for one night high up in the arms of an oak.



Although I dwell here on the fate of Brown's Woods and its defenders, I know from my travels and reading and correspondence that struggles over wild land and experiments in simple living are going on everywhere. These efforts tend to be small-scale, and thus too humble to attract the spotlight. They are responsive to the needs and conditions of particular places, and thus are rarely publicized further afield. They are voluntary, which is to say they arise from affection and conviction rather than from duty or fear. They are cooperative, depending on mutual aid between neighbors who have a shared interest in the welfare of their neighborhoods. Government can sometimes aid these efforts, and so can charitable foundations, and so can large corporations; but such aid may be cut off at any moment by the shifting winds of politics or economics. So the efforts that I find most hopeful are largely the work of individuals, households, and small associations of people. All of these ventures, scattered among thousands of places, add up to a vast ferment of imagination, inquiry, and labor devoted to creating a durable way of life.

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I dwell here on the fate

We are not the captains of this vessel

The defenders of Brown's Woods and the other people I am calling ark-builders don't belong to a single political party. They don't follow one particular religion, or perhaps any religion at all. They don't come from one age bracket, ethnic group, or educational background. They don't obey a master plan, nor do they pretend to have a remedy for all the ills of our day. Instead, they're bound together by a certain joy and boldness in seeking to preserve the diversity of living things and the essentials of human knowledge and art. What they share is a moral vision, one informed by an understanding of ecology and a reverence for life.

Building an ark when the floodwaters are rising is not an act of despair, it's an act of hope. To build an ark is to create a space within which life in its abundance may continue. But no refuge can be sealed off entirely from the worldwide flood. Acid rain may leach it; ultraviolet radiation streaming through the ozone hole may bleach it; invasive insects or viruses may attack it; pollution from adjoining land may wash over it. In any case, no refuge is large enough to contain the full array of species. The big predators, such as grizzlies and wolves, need more space, as do grazing animals such as bison. And the animals that migrate, from snow geese to hummingbirds, need sanctuaries stretching across entire continents for feeding, resting, and nesting. Even thousands of sanctuaries, blooming across our cities and countryside, will not be spacious enough if the rest of the planet becomes an industrial wasteland.

Ultimately, there will be no security for life on Earth unless we see the whole planet as an ark. We are not the captains of this vessel, although we may flatter ourselves to think so. We are common passengers, and yet because we are both clever and numerous, we bear a unique responsibility to do everything we can to assure that this one precious ark will stay afloat, with all the least and greatest of our fellow travelers safely on board.

We are
common passengers



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Founded in 1973, AHC is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency.

The Arizona Humanities Council encourages people to share the stories of Arizona's vivid past and vibrant living cultures through public programs celebrating individual, communal and cultural lives.

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