"Light was understanding." (in Bible translation)

--God's Secretaries, p. 144

**A Few Slants of Earthlight**

PACE

Light is the desire of the universe. Whatever little else we know about the properties of existence, within which our blue marble of a planet spins as if on a cosmic roulette wheel, we map our days and nights by the fires in the heavens, those visual expressions of obstinate energy. Threads of light traveling to us across colossal time show us that the stars hang there, beyond high. Sunlight grants us sustenance of life as we know it, moonlight clothes us in our own particular fabrics of desire called dreams.

Heavenly illumination is usually not my field, as an earthbound herder of commas and cultivator of metaphors. I confess that when the envelope arrived in the mail with the Office of the Governor of Oregon as a return address, what flashed through my mind was whether I had ever neglected to pay an Oregon parking ticket.

Instead, Governor Kitzhaber's letter of invitation to me expressed the hope that I could show up here and talk about "understanding the power and beauty of the landscapes and cultures of the West, respecting our diverse heritage and imagining our highest potential...I hope you will lend us some of

that vision, help us understand what we are working towards, and provide some inspiration to carry us forward."

Yikes, I thought to myself: is **that** in my job description now? As far as I know, I'm only licensed to think in the vicinity of 1924, where my next novel is set. There was the ethical question, too: does a writer, of all people, have any business trying to tell others how to make a reliable living?

All in all, in thinking over whether to accept the governor's invitation to come here and talk, it at last dawned on me that, given the life of governors and legislators and civically involved

folk such as you are generally, he probably wanted me here because I'm unmistakably not a committee.

So, going with what I've got, here I am at this forum of yours, ~~where among other admirable societal concerns you're trying to figure out how to keep the lights on~~, to see if I might offer a wordworker's slant on a few things, under a constellating notion that might be called earthlight. After all, whatever direction you try to travel, back in your community or your business, after the compass spin of ideas in these days of meetings here, you're going to have to get there by way of words--ones that carry conviction, hope, and imagination. And to make your ideas stick, you are

going to have to have the constant warm wax of inspiration to apply to them--and again, that's the kind of stickum writers are supposed to deal in. Let me be quick to say it doesn't necessarily have to be anything that I've ever written or that I come up with here tonight that should serve as that inspiration, but maybe I can suggest somewhere you can go for some.

First, though, if I'm to live up to my habits as a wordworker, I need to work over a short list of questions that come up out of the word "sustain." I do so on the operating assumption that what we say, and how we say it, counts mightily toward what we are able to do.

A dozen years ago, when all the states out here in the northern tier of the West--except for Big Sister Oregon--were embarking on statehood centennial celebrations, I did a novel which focused on Montana's hundredth-birthday bash and all the toasts to itself and the out-loud soulsearching that events with chainlinks of zeroes attached customarily bring. In that book one of my characters is, yes, a writer, somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job. His name, in fact, is Riley Wright--spelled, in the view of his ex-father-in-law, the way you start to spell Wrong. Whatever his dubious traits of personality, Riley is determined in his work to be ferociously clear-sighted about his story assignments, and so

he barrels around his part of the West as a columnist who is never at a loss for words--there are times, such as now, when I wish Riley was actual instead of fictional, so I could send him here to fearlessly hold forth while I stay home and herd commas. But maybe we can settle for one of Riley's passages, which he writes late in the book when the chosen centennial speaker in the little town at the heart of it all gets up and begins to deliver his talk at the start of day, there under the Rockies:

"Language is the light that comes out of us. Imagine the words as if they are our way of creating earthlight, as if what is being spoken by this man in a windswept dawn is going to carry

everlastingly upward, the way starshine is pulsing constantly across the sky of time to us. Up through the black canyons of space, the sparks we utter; motes of wordfire that we glimpse leaving on their constellating flight, and call history."

With that as prologue, let me now start slanting into that short list of questions, and see whether any illumination can be cast.

First of all, sustain what?

In his book **The Country and the City**, the fertile thinker and writer Raymond Williams tells of opening with anticipation a

memoir about the good old green and pleasant rural England he himself grew up in, and of having his eyeballs stopped in their tracks by the author's immediate lament that that way of life had suddenly ended--"A whole culture that had preserved its continuity from earliest times had now received its quietus." According to the book Raymond Williams held in his hand, the destruction of the immemorial ways of rural and small-town England took place between 1918 and 1939, done in by the Depression.

But he had just been reading something else which put the demise of the old days of the true English countryside, and

therefore the true England, at around 1910, when all the erosions brought by the motors of modernity could be fully seen.

Curious now, Williams got up and went over and started going through his bookshelves, and found that people writing around 1910 mourned the loss of rural England in the 1870s--which, inconveniently for that theory, was the period when Thomas Hardy began writing his novels about the great climacteric change in rural life that happened in the 1830s. 1830s? Williams thought; wasn't that the era when George Cobbett was making his famous rural rides and documenting the fading of old ways on the land?

Sure enough, there he found Cobbett "looking back to the 4T happier country, the old England of his boyhood, during the 1770s." ~~and 1780s.~~" Williams bopped the side of his learned head in consternation: Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," was written in 1769. He reached down his copy, and there it was in black and white, Goldsmith's famous verse:

"E'en now, methinks, as pondering here I stand

I see the rural virtues leave the land."

Well, Williams kept on with his literary arithmetic, back and back, the successive Good Old Englands, until he began to see where it would all end, or rather, begin-//the Garden of Eden.

On that example, here in Oregon's green and pleasant land I would urge you against a tendency to single out any good old days of town or country OR ENTERPRISE--particularly if they just happen to coincide with when you yourself were a little more green and limber-- as an example of the sort of thing you're trying to revive or sustain. EDENS ARE ~~They're~~ a target that is always going to be pulling away from you. Dream forward, not back, in your goals.

Along that same line, I would urge you not to judge your community and its chances by any single civic footprint in the dunes of time. I have in mind here the kind of self-defeating lament that I've heard the choruses for forty years, in all the

corners of this end of the country, from Billings, Montana, to Wickenburg, Arizona, to Fairbanks, Alaska, people saying, for instance, their town is going downhill because it can't manage to hold on to its young people. Or, out beyond the town limits, on ranches and farms, I wish I had a silver dollar for every time a rancher or farmer has explained the decline in the agricultural way of life by telling me, "You just can't get help any more."

As an ex-kid who went all through grade school and high school in Western towns with populations less than that of this room at the moment, and could discern no appropriate career path there for myself even if the town fathers had really tried, and as an ex-farm and ranch hand who slept in converted chicken coops that were called bunkhouses and watched my employers buy a fifteen-

thousand dollar piece of field equipment any time they thought it would replace a hundred-and-fifty dollar a month hired hand, I've always had a little different perspective on those one-shot explanations OF WHAT THE PROBLEM IS.

The One Big Reason, in the life of any community or livelihood, most likely obscures some other useful questions that could be asked. In my business, books, the One Big Reason is always right there handy whenever an author's latest book doesn't sell as well as it would if there WERE any justice in this world--the stupid publisher did not put enough advertising and publicity money behind that incomparable book. The slackening reading habits of

the public, the competition for time and interest from the Internet and other technological pursuits, those get blocked from sight by the One Big Reason. I can personally tell you it's not easy to look hard at a way of life you have loved and thrived in, and decide that those clouds on the horizon really mean something. I am a hard-core print person, reading books and writing books has pretty well comprised my working life, I still do some work by typewriter--although I have taken to putting it out of sight when reporters come for interviews, so that the questions don't revolve around, "What's it like to be an analog person in a digital world?" The printed word has been my sustenance, but I've lately decided

that the One Big Reason--publishers have lockjaw of the wallet--doesn't cover everything, and so, just in case, I've tugged and hauled and cussed into creation the Website "Ivandoig.com" It reminds me remarkably of filing on a homestead, as my grandparents did, and what it will lead to I have no way of knowing--but at least I hope not to be stuck behind that One Big Reason that chills all effort with its overpowering shadow, and I urge you not to, in looking over the situation that has brought you here.

In the instance of your communities, I would simply say don't be too hard on yourselves about some of your young people not

wanting to stay within hollering distance of where they grew up. Don't hopelessly regard that tendency, or any other single social sign, as something like that black spot--you remember--that got passed around in *Treasure Island*--one touch of that and your town is automatically a goner. It is the nature of the young to leave the nest. Maybe, in your neighborhood or community, you want to try instead for jobs and amenities there for former children when they retire, or when they burn out on commuting or Web-surfing. If there is such a thing as American genius--beyond our almost supernatural perfection of trivia--I think it has been mobility.

The land historian Vernon Carstensen pointed out that the peopling of America, since 1607, "has been the largest and longest sustained voluntary migration in human history." Writing at the time of the Bicentennial, Carstensen calculated that "America has been the magnet that attracted over forty million emigrants" and by now of course the total is many millions beyond that. We started restless, with that colossal uprooting and transplanting, and we're still pretty much that way. Such epidemic mobility is literally **un**settling for communities to live with--but this obstinate energy by which Americans pinball from place to place in the course of lifetimes simply seems to me

something you have to acknowledge and allow for. To me, this would suggest sometimes stretching the boundaries of where and what you try to sustain--at best, MAYBE try to keep those kids in the state, instead of IN the old neighborhood.

There's one more angle of view--one more slant--I'd ask you to consider, as you sort through possibilities of sustainability. By all the lights I know of in the history of the West, you would do well to always give a skeptical look at single-crop ecologies or economies, be they lumber or spuds or computer chips, or as it used to be in Seattle, Boeing airplanes.

I have for you a very Portland-based illustration. A number of years ago, a young writer came to town here to look back at the history of the Pacific Northwest woods. He began the story, as writers tend to do, with a general picture:

"The storms track in from the Pacific on collision course first with the Olympic Mountains and the Coast Ranges, and then with the longer and loftier jut of the Cascade Range north to south through the states of Oregon and Washington. We can't say for sure what at least one writer has alleged: 'The first thing reported about the Northwest Coast was rain.' But we do know how impressed the early explorers were with the vast growth fed by

this damp North Pacific weather--the dark green forests which bristled from horizon to horizon, mighty trees often a height of 200 feet or more."

Actually, that's by me--it was your very own late great poet, Bill Stafford, whom I once heard say, "Who better to plagiarize from than yourself?" But I am a good deal grayer now than that comparatively young writer I was when I came here to write the history of the Pacific Northwest Forest & Range Experiment Station--headquartered over by Lloyd Center; I gathered that whatever administrator ordained that didn't want any trees obscuring their forest--a brief history of the Experiment Station's

first fifty years, done in 1975 as a contract job for the Forest Service.

I felt I learned a lot, in quite a hurry and quite pleasantly, hanging around with those foresters for a while--it was kind of like a nice graduate school where they hand you some money as you write each chunk of your dissertation. One of the things I caught on to was the shaping hand of the past, even when it came to trees--one of the forestry scientists pointed out that the famous big tree species here perhaps survived the ice ages because our mountain ranges run north and south. The trees had an escape route up the mountains, he figured, instead of, say, being trapped

against crosswise east-west mountains as big species were on the Eurasian land mass and thus eliminated. It gives a person pause, when you're embarking on a career of writing about this region out of love for it, to realize that it is what it is because of some fortunate wrinkles in the epidermis of the earth.

But what was giving the forestry scientists pause, in fact what had some of them scared half to death, was concern over dilution of the Pacific Northwest forest gene pool. Remember, this was a quarter of a century ago, before our current level of awareness about global warming, before that current stark statistic about the diminution of old-growth forests: that while the Amazon has lost

what is considered to be an alarming eleven and a half percent of its old-growth trees, here in the Pacific Northwest forests the figure is more like ninety-five percent.

So, even before any of that, some of these forest guys sounded like what we read and hear all the time now: genetics, genetics, genetics. They had big reason to be thinking about this. In all the world, historically the tallest firs, pines, spruces, hemlocks, redwoods, and larches all rose along the Pacific Coast of North America, most of them along our northern coast country here. The growth rate, the productivity, the sustainability, call it what you will, of those great forests seemed to those scientists a

bonanza which only a vast diverse gene pool could account for. We don't particularly have superior soil here where the big conifers grow, and for all our rain, we have droughty summer weather--as we're becoming more and more aware. No, these tree guys had put all the study they could think of into it--and had brought in as tests the best species from other forests around the world and watched our native ones outgrow them like crazy--and the best they could conclude was, this size of forest can only be accounted for by this magnificent gene pool.

But, as the lead forest geneticist put it, if you look back at human handling of plant genes--the history of corn, most

famously, which was tamed from the wild until it can't survive there any more--the process it most reminds you of is mining. As he put it, "One prospects the gene pool for the richest sources of the desired genes, refines them into as pure a state as possible, then spreads the product as broadly as the competitive market permits. Everything except the pure product"--in the terms I'm talking about here tonight, this single modified species or crop or other output, the monoculture--everything except that, the scientist concluded, "goes into the waste heap."

The tendency he was talking about, to push something until it becomes all one thing, pretty readily sounded familiar to me, because the prairie just east of the place where I grew up and still do a lot of writing about, in northern Montana alongside the Rockies, that prairie about a century ago was turned into wheat country. I was a late participant in that, as a teenage farmhand

operating a ~~D-8~~ Caterpillar pulling an armada of plows and harrows and drills, for the wheat farmer who paid my wages. Probably all that needs to be said about the inappropriateness of our turning that particular benchland, which down through centuries had supported bison, antelope, grouse and other bird species, and a tough persistence of grass, into a wheat monoculture is that that piece of land now is a Montana State Highway Department gravel pit.

To keep myself out of even deeper discussion waters here, let me be clear that I don't at all mean to extend this analogy brought

up by the example of the forest gene pool, and the historic dark shadow of monocultures, too far--say, to the current era of human genetic research: diversity seems to be the very name of those discoveries. But those echoing concerns of those forest scientists--remember, twenty-six years ago, this was--about the waning diversity of what might be called the original ecology or economy here--that breathtaking forest--I think still speak to us as we ponder what societal products ought to be encouraged by our communities, our regions, our states. Even the oldest cliches chime in: Don't put all your eggs in one basket. One size doesn't

fit all. Maybe you want to encourage a barber college down the street from the high-tech firm you hope to lure.

A quicker question now, from this slantwise list of what you might want to ask yourself every so often--sustain at whose cost?

I'm going to make a flying leap of assumption here, past the question of monetary budgets and the wrestles you are bound to have, among your various constituencies, over where the wherewithal is going to come from, on your various projects of sustainability. The dollars will get sorted out, you have to get them sorted out--that's the political process, and the civic process. I want to ante in a viewpoint, for your consideration, on

something that won't be sitting right there at the table with you, and that's nature.

There are annals of eloquence to be cited on behalf of preserving as much as we possibly can of the natural word. The spaceship Earth has never lacked for eloquent chaplains: Stegner, Abbey, Thoreau, Leopold, add to the list as you will. I'm not going to recite any of that, but simply try to give you a bit of a blunt notion about why, when development projects of whatever kind and existing natural stuff meet at intersections of your sustainability decisions, you should yield the right-of-way to nature. The land, the sea, the sky, any of the aspects of nature--

any loss we inflict on those is a memory loss we ourselves also will suffer. Because I think it can be argued that nature is an ultimate form of memory--different from our human sort; it's the universe's sort, the cells of memory ticking away in tree rings and geological strata and the beaks of finches and glaciated valleys--and that, left to itself as best we can manage to do that, nature the rememberer gives us a reliable appointment book of life that we otherwise lack, in its long devotion of the seasons and the cycles of all living things including us.

What is most utterly evident on this hard-used planet is that the human mind has been something like a nuclear event amid the

evolution of earth's living things. We want to be careful where we aim ourselves.

Thirdly, the end-peg on the list but perhaps a question you'll find yourself up against pretty early in the process--sustainability by whose definition?

This is a bit of a tricky one to handle, because it may come dangerously close to suggesting that the answer is a committee. But I hope it needn't come to that. This being Oregon, let's see if you can't figure out a cleaner greener way to do it. Just call it "bunching up," or, accidentally finding yourselves all in the same place at the same time.

In any case, whether it's by risk-taking political leadership, or tireless civic activism, or something in the water, I think you do have to spread your story, of what you're talking about when you talk about sustainability. I don't how many of you would have come here, to this sustainability forum, thinking of yourselves as storytellers. But in a way, that's what you are going to have to be, to put across your ideas in your community, your business, in the Oregonian sitting next to you, You must find ways to talk to each other--to put yourselves and the person opposite you into a dialogue that holds both your interests. I urge you into a generosity of discussion and listening, of painting the walls of

AND IN THE ONE WHO HAPPENS TO LIVE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CASCADES FROM YOU

your civic dreams with words from your heart and soul--in short, into that oldest storytelling frame of mind, the one that comes from sharing light. The one that has been in us ever since art began to dance off the cave walls to us--storytelling, writing, literature, civic assembly, remember, perhaps all begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think stories still can be our way of sharing light, whether it's the white sheen of a page or the nebulae of cyberspace--of sitting together around humanity's fire to fend off the universal dark all around us.

Some of that will involve not only discussion but argument, and I'd say you better set your minds to think some argument is okay. Carol and I live in a neighborhood where if you so much as want to build onto your garden shed, it has to pass review--and all the members of our community board are currently reading a book called **How to Have Difficult Conversations.**

When it comes to definition time, I absolutely urge you to hone your own words as accurately and artfully as you can--with what Vladimir Nabokov once, with perfect inverted logic, termed "the precision of the poet and the passion of the scientist"--and yet

be aware there are other versions. The dictionary offers sustenance in this: it generally lists more than one meaning.

Well, that's probably about enough nagging questions, for any one sustainability forum. I promised you earlier that I would actually try to be helpful and provide a suggestion that might hold some inspiration, when the committee chairs grow too hard, ~~and the paint job resolution gets one too many polka dots amended to it,~~ and in my final minutes here let me turn to that bit of musing.

I would say the place for you to seek inspiration is to look homeward, to the better angels of your Oregon family tree.

You have a strong, diverse gene pool of examples to draw from, in your civic life here. In politics, to observe propriety here and highlight only those of the past, Richard Neuberger and Tom McCall stand out to any of us, anywhere in America, as politicians who left their chosen ground a better place. It intrigues me that both of them were wordworkers in one way or another, journalists early on: I stand in awe of the voters of Oregon for having put writing guys actually in charge of something.

In the more accustomed role of writers--putting into print stories that comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable--I can

say with authority, as an ex-Master of Ceremonies of the Oregon Book Awards and proud to have been, that you've had an exceptional lineage of wordsmiths, who have written to an exceptional extent within the Oregon frame of reference. Stewart Holbrook, whom I wish I had known, and the more recent losses, William Stafford and Terence O'Donnell, both of whom I did know and cherish. And to cite just a few top-of-the-mind books from your existing vibrant literary community: Sometimes a Great Notion, by Ken Kesey; Winterkill, by Craig Lesley; Ursula LeGuin's warning-light novel of a Portland and a world gone

wrong, The Lathe of Heaven--on and on, your writers have provided spokes of light into the soul of Oregon.

Even television--and this is saying a lot--even Oregon television has contributed to this state's sense of grace and desire for earthly balance, with the "Oregon Field Guide" show. I don't know of any other state that can collectively sit down every week and watch a pretty terrific home video about itself.

You've had historians who make sense. Just to cite the ones in the fields I brush up against, as I try to figure out the American West:

--Richard Maxwell Brown, at the University of Oregon,who has clarified for us the extent to which violence did and did not exist, in our supposedly "Wild West" origins;

--William Robbins, at Oregon State, the only historian I know of with the useful job background of having been a choker-setter on a logging operation, who has given us insightful work on laborers and their bosses;

--William Lang, who strayed off to Montana for a while but rebounded to Portland State; Lang has given all of us in the West the vital article on how the history of the Yellowstone River, the longest undammed river left in the lower forty-eight states, helped

to keep it from being dammed--and he's been the enabler and encourager of much current scholarship on the life and times of the Columbia River.

People and achievements such as these are, to put it in a kind of Vladimir Nabokov somersault phrase, symptoms of health, in the longstanding Oregon body politic. As I savvy it from the historians I hang around with, there have been times when you in Oregon have been pretty slick about slipping systems into place for the public good. I have read that a sly decision in the 1920's to first set up your state park commission by naming the state **highway** commissioners to it--avoiding the turf wars and budget

battles that that parks agencies and highway departments were waging in other states, in twentieth-century versions of the Hundred Years War--that innocent-looking LITTLE administrative decision produced a kind of "conservation by subterfuge."

Or there was what we might call the creative gubernatorial stealing-of-the-ball when Tom McCall grabbed hold of the bottle bill to catch everybody's attention, and go on from there to greater ecological issues.

And again, the establishment of the Land Conservation and Development Commission provided an invention, a device, a tool to adjust your urban growth boundaries: I'm not qualified to judge

its whole effects, but I can read a calendar--LCDC has given you twenty-eight years of some kind of mechanism to work on a tough public-policy problem, hasn't it.

Those kinds of accomplishments, arising out of individual slants of idea, are part of your heritage. But that was the past, and this is now--is it ever. Do grace and desire and decent attentiveness to the world around, still count for that much? You bet they do. I think I can back that up with one last brief story.

I had great reason, not many days ago, to think over attentiveness to the world around because I was flying over the patterns on the land across about half the earth, back from a trip to

Russia. What powerfully came to mind, to share with you here tonight, was what I could see of the stories of nations, written down there on the pages of earth beneath the homeward wings of the plane out of St. Petersburg:

--First, the apparently random Russian fields and forests, even yet looking like the scattered jigsaw puzzles of princes and archdukes--the old estates without farmhouses anywhere on them, the earth manipulated for the whim of the privileged in Czarist times and then paralyzed in failed collectivizations in the time of communism.

--Then the thrifty, bunched smallholdings of Finland and Sweden, nurtured-looking, enduring lessons in making the best of what you've got.

--And ultimately, in a last chapter of the trip that I would not have dared to dream up as a fiction writer, the plane arced me over exactly where I started in life--over the Two Medicine country of Montana, bordered on one side by that failed benchland of wheat turned gravel pit, that I told you about, and on the other side by the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area with its BLESSED preserved landforms as familiar as the palmlines in my hand.

To me, the true accents of those countries below were what their land says. What it has been caused to say, in the patterns put upon it. If ever you have a moment of doubt about whether what you're embarking on here, in this statewide brainstorming session about what Oregon might become from here, whether any of it really counts, think about it from overhead. The patterns we put on the ground AND LIFE around us do count--they are the story, the wordfire called history, you will be read by.

THANK YOU.

And now I have the glad task of stepping out of the way and letting you at the refreshments. Along with that, some of you have asked about having books signed, or about buying books--thanks to the Sustainable Northwest crew, there's a table ~~over~~ DOWN here with some signed books available, and I'll make myself available there to personalize inscriptions if you would like. See you there or in the buffet line.