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Utah Conservancy at the Alta Club. Oct. 28 '06

Once there were two young journalists in love. I know, because I was one-half of that combination. All those years ago, I was a young magazine editor freshly married to a young magazine editor, named Carol--an inspired lack of imagination on both our parts: we're still together--and along with Carol, I gained a magical landlady.

Her name was Dr. Marjorie Carlson, a retired professor of biology at Northwestern University (where Carol and I had both gone through journalism school, and were back there in Evanston, Illinois, magazine-editing tooth and nail before we could get smart enough to light out for the West)...and Dr. Carlson and her companion, Kate Staley, were

women of the land--women with the roots of their minds down into the planet. By then they were well up in their eighties, but they still headed for the outback in Mexico every winter to look at plants--they would hire guides to get behind them and push them up the hillsides they could no longer clamber up by themselves.

Needless to say, Dr. Carlson and Kate were Nature Conservancy members--Dr. Carlson ultimately preserved, through her efforts and contributions, a precious remnant of downstate Illinois Prairie. And even more needless to say, guess who else were promptly Conservancy members, on their little magazine editor salaries.

Not only has that lasted, with Carol and me--it keeps spreading. The Conservancy up in the state of Washington where we live, the Montana

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record?

Conservancy--and the Dugout Ranch project some years ago, down at Canyon^Alands, got us involved with this bunch. If I could stand on a passing comet and watch the clock of earth below, a moment I would choose is when Dr. Carlson and Kate Staley came into the lives of Ivan and Carol Doig, and brought nights such as this with them. So in a sense, I am here to salute those two long-gone but still persevering women, and their love of the basic earth.

Time passes, as it has a way of doing, and in the four decades since Carol and I first met up with the Nature Conservancy back there in Illinois, she and I have crossed paths with a remarkable series of people who have re-enforced us--if we ever needed any re-enforcement--in the conservation ethic. I want to tell you about just a few, because they

provide a spectrum on preserving some of the earth as it has been--these are not folks who think alike about much else.

Tony Angell: longtime board member of the state of Washington Nature Conservancy...

--Tony's work is robust, as he is; I've brought a dab of show-and-tell...(show Gilcrease pics) *6' ravens*

--To be around Tony's art has been a constant reminder of the miracles nature holds for us, if we will let it ~~is~~^{be}. Here's what he had to say when I interviewed him for this Gilcrease catalogue piece...

And here's what I had to say, a few years later, when I did another piece on him for his "Birds in Art" show at the Woodson Museum in Wisconsin:

“To encounter Tony Angell and the plenteous generation of sculptures that have come to cold yet fiery life in that naturally refrigerated studio of his is literally to see a world in the making. Basically, he by now has populated a ~~private~~ private planet--rock at its core, or course--with everlasting specimens that we at once recognize but see in a new plane of being.

“Notice that I do not say ‘in a new light,’ for, in that nailhead verbal dexterity of his that makes him the kind of maddening friend a writer can only ~~glue~~ ^{GULP} inwardly at and put up with, Angell lately ~~as~~ told an interviewer that he sees his art as an attempt to work ‘beyond the light.’

“It’s an exciting notion, and as usual with Angellisms, there is that long body of work standing as a chorus of testimony behind the airy

formulation. He is bringing out essences of form and being in his true-to-life yet bigger-than-life sculpted creatures that depend not on play of light but depth of source. His creations do emanate in and of themselves, once the unnecessary penumbra of outer rock has been carved away.

“And so we have, in the mighty circle of work that Tony Angell has bestowed on us across the past three decades, an orb of double importance. While the earth we have mistakenly taken to be our kingdom to overuse and misadminister as we please begins to show the wear and tear of that, he has given us a brilliantly preserved wingdom. The murrelet riding its everlastingly secure wave of chlorite; the scrub jay sleek and invincible within its black marble sheen; and the raven

under whose wisely wrought bronze wings everything prospers; they tell us, they show us, the lastingness of beauty in nature's forms."

Tomorrow at the public library I'll be talking a bit about, among other things, "the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist"--not, as you might think on first hearing, a mis-speaking about "the precision of the scientist and the passion of the artist"--the other way around--and I have a passionate scientist to tell you about; one of the most memorable people I've ever met.

Roy Silen; forest geneticist for the U.S. Forest Service in Oregon.

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--grumpy; but "gene pool" piece...Silen liked to make the same point three times, never met a lively verb in his life, and so on, but he obviously knew his stuff in his field...we made the tree farmers at

cleaning

Weyerhaeuser look at their hole card a bit: papers were ordered up...I worried for Silen, but his boss in the Forest Service (in, shall we say, those less politically driven days?) backed him, and Silen felt he'd had an impact on the forest health of the Pacific Northwest through that article...

--takes 2 hours to explain...

--it turned out he was not merely grumpy, he was haunted: by the specter of extinction of so many of nature's genetic treasures.

--So alarmed was Roy Silen about the pace of extinction that he believed humankind should resort to a "double planet"...swaths of the earth where people would live, and preserves that they would stay out of,

insofar as possible, and leave the species of the rest of nature alone there.

--Obviously a radical idea; and I thought it was significant if only for the alarm it showed in this world-class geneticist. Once again, I said I'd render it into readability for him, and here's the first few hundred words:

-- Then I tried to get it published for him, and got nowhere.

Magazines were starting to fade--the old Saturday Review might have been the logical home for a 'think' piece of that sort... Harper's, Atlantic Monthly...even the Sierra Club... Silen's treatise on the need for a 'double world' never saw the light of day, except that some ideas pretty similar to his have been cropping up, here thirty years later. Some of them are as small in scope as overpasses or underpasses for creatures of

the wild to cross major highways or railroad tracks; some are as ambitious as the Yellowstone to Yukon corridor proposal, of political stitchwork to create a two-thousand-mile long ecoregion in western North America. And I leave it to the Conservancy staff, more conversant with organizational history than I am, to talk about any other bio-region philosophy that has or hasn't come into favor in recent decades. I simply know I met a scientist with a passion for preservation, and he and his argument were unforgettable.

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--Rappolds, if time...

So those are a few of the shaping forces and forceful personalities that have touched my relationship with the Nature Conservancy. My own philosophy on anything tends to run to book-length, but I can sum

up for you that it seems to me a concern for nature simply has melded into, and all through, my other concerns as a writer, which are remembrance and cognizance. One of my novelist compatriots, Shirley Hazzard, once said that the articulation we know as art springs from the oldest, deepest, most memorious longing: to relieve the soul of incoherence. I come here tonight as a longtime self-unemployed practitioner of memory. Written pages--mine now add up to eleven books and an appalling number of shorter pieces--written pages are a form of word-memory that we call "literature." And many of my pages deal with what might be called world-memory--the earth's own memory, the topographical testimony of the planet's processes. 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 imitates art in finding ways to tell its story, again and again, over and over but never quite the same twice, in the long devotion of the seasons and the ground and the sky.

I'll be glad to try to talk further on any of this during the q-&a if you'd like, but now to that other kind of memory, the literary sort I just mentioned... (show book) Here's the other reason I'm in town, and the reason I've been in forty-some towns, coast to coast, since this was published on the 1st of June...