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Terry Tempest Williams

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One Patriot

By Terry Tempest Williams

Not long ago, my father, a friend and I were having tea around our kitchen table. We were discussing politics. The conversation circled back to September 11.

"I hesitate to say this," our friend said. "But when I watched the Twin Towers collapse and realized thousands of lives were collapsing with them—" She paused to find the right words. "It just didn't seem real. I couldn't believe it. And then seeing the hole in the side of the Pentagon and hearing about more lives lost in Pennsylvania, well, it all felt like I was watching some horrific movie—But afterwards in the privacy of my own fears, I realized, living here in the West, what would truly shatter my world would be if the terrorists bombed the Tetons or the Grand Canyon"

"Nobody could bomb the Tetons—" my father said interrupting her. "That's ridiculous."

"No, let me finish—," she said. "What I mean to say is that for me, the worst thing terrorists could do would be to destroy these wild places—like the Tetons, Yellowstone, all this redrock country"

"They are," I said.

My father looked at me and said nothing. We drank our tea.

Kenneth Rexroth writes, "The art of being civilized is the art of learning to read between the lies."

There have been many lies delivered in the name of national security since September 11, 2001. Fear has opened the door to fanaticism. The fabric of our civil liberties has been raveled. Those who raise questions are told to raise American flags instead. A hollow patriotism has emerged. We might as well be blowing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" through plastic kazoos.

* "One Patriot" first appeared in The Orion Society's recent anthology, *Patriotism and the American Land*, by Richard Nelson, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams. To learn more about the book, and the New Patriotism Book Series of which it is a part, visit www.oriononline.org.

Meanwhile, corporate America is imploding through its own greed, the stock market has become a trampoline leaving many investors suspended in midair as Bush II makes plans to attack Iraq and we bomb wedding parties in Afghanistan. The American West is being ravaged by oil and gas companies and federal regulations that have kept our air, water, and wildlife safe are now being erased.

Indeed, we are engaged in a war of terrorism.

Here in Castle Valley, Utah, with temperatures hovering around 110 degrees this summer and the valley filled with smoke from fires burning in Colorado and Arizona, it's easy to become apocalyptic about our future. The sun burns blood red through the haze. My Mormon neighbor reminds me of Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

But America is still a democracy and a strong one. We do have people with vision. That is our history. And, at this moment, no one looms larger in my mind than Rachel Carson. Here was a wildlife biologist, a government employee who worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and with her pen exposed the dangers of the entire chemical industry. It is her spirit I wish to recall and remember now. She is my model for a true patriot, one who not only dared to define democratic principles as ecological ones, but demanded through her grace and fierce intelligence that we hold corporations and our government accountable for the health of our communities, cultured and wild.

Rachel Carson. I first heard her name from my grandmother. I must have been seven or eight years old. We were feeding birds—song sparrows, goldfinches, and towhees—in my grandparents' yard in Salt Lake City.

"Imagine a world without birds," my grandmother said as she scattered seed and filled the feeders. "Imagine waking up to no birdsong."

I couldn't.

"Rachel Carson," I remember her saying.

Later, around the dinner table, she and my grandfather were engaged in an intense discussion of the book they were reading, *Silent Spring*, as my mind tried to grasp what my grandmother had just said about a muted world.

Decades later, I found myself in a used bookstore in Salt Lake City. The green spine of *Silent Spring* caught my eye. I pulled the classic off the shelf and opened it. First edition, 1962. As I read various passages, I was struck by how little had changed. Each page was still a shock and a revelation.

One of the most tragic examples of our unthinking bludgeoning of the landscape is to be seen in the sagebrush lands of the West, where a vast campaign is on to destroy the sage and to substitute grasslands. If ever an enterprise needed to be illuminated with a sense of history and meaning of the landscape, it is this. . . . It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is, and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread.

The pages of abuse on the American landscape still lie unread.

Rachel Carson is a hero, a towering example within American democracy of how one person's voice can make an extraordinary difference both in public policy and in the minds of the populace. Her name and her vision of a world intact and interrelated entered mainstream culture in the 1960's, heralding the beginning of the modern conservation movement. Even so, in the year of *Silent Spring's* fortieth anniversary, I wonder how many of us really know much about Miss Carson's life or have ever read this crucial book?

We can all rattle off a glib two-sentence summation of its text: "All life is connected. Pesticides enter the food chain and not only threaten the environment but destroy it." And yet, I fear that *Silent Spring's* status as "an American classic" allows us to nod to its power, but to miss the subtleties and richness of the book as both a scientific treatise

and a piece of distinguished literary nonfiction.

Rachel Carson presents her discoveries of destruction in the form of storytelling. In example after example, grounded in the natural world, she weaves together facts and fictions into an environmental tale of life, love, and loss. Her voice is forceful and dignified, but sentence by sentence she delivers right hand blows and counter punches to the status quo ruled by chemical companies within the Kingdom of Agriculture.

The "control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man . . . It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.

The facts she presents create the case against "biocide": We are killing the very fabric of nature in our attempt to rid the world of pests through these "elixirs of death." She indicts the insecticides by name: DDT, chlordane, heptachlor, dieldrin, aldrin, and endrin. And then she adds parathion and malathion, organic phosphates that are among the most poisonous chemicals in the world.

The fictions she exposes are the myths we have chosen to adopt in our obsession to control nature. She reminds us of the story of Medea, the Greek sorceress who, overwrought with jealousy over her husband's love of another woman, presents the new bride with a gift, a robe that will immediately kill whoever wears it. It becomes a garment of death. Carson calls our use of pesticides "death by indirection." We are killing insects and in turn, killing ourselves, as these toxins slowly and violently enter the waters and eventually our own bloodstreams.

Rachel Carson did not turn her back on the ongoing chronicle of the natural history of the dead. She bore witness. "It was time," Carson said, "that human beings admit their

kinship with other forms of life. If we cannot accept this moral ethic, then we too are complicit in the killing."

With each chapter, she adds to our understanding of the horrors of herbicides and hydrocarbons, the web of life unraveling. It is impossible for us not to be inspired by Rachel Carson's emotional and intellectual stamina, of her ability to endure the pain of the story she was telling.

Miss Carson had a vision.

"Sometimes, I lose sight of my goal," she wrote in an essay in her first year of college. "Then again it flashes into view, filling me with a new determination to keep the vision before my eyes." Hers was a conscientious and directed soul who believed in the eloquence of facts. She loved both language and landscape. "I can remember no time when I wasn't interested in the out-of-doors and the whole world of nature," Carson said.

Writing became the expression for her passion toward nature. She published her first story when she was ten years old, winning the Silver Badge from the prestigious children's magazine, *St. Nicholas*. "Perhaps the early experience of seeing my work in print played its part in fostering my childhood dream of becoming a writer."

Here was a young woman pulled by her destiny. In 1928, she graduated magna cum laude from Pennsylvania College for Women, now Chatham College, with a major in zoology. The strength of her course work in both science and literature supports the evidence of her dual nature as both a scientist and a poet.

"I thought I had to be one or the other," she said. "It never occurred to me that I could combine two careers."

Paul Brooks, Rachel Carson's editor, writes, "The merging of these two powerful currents—the imagination and insight of a creative writer with a scientist's passion for fact—goes far to explain the blend of beauty and authority that was to make her books unique."

Rachel Carson's gift to us is seeing the world whole.

Carson continued her education as a biologist, receiving a master's degree in zoology at Johns Hopkins University, where she studied genetics and wrote her thesis, "The Development of the Pronephros During the Embryonic and Early Larval Life of the Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)."

In 1936, she accepted a position with the United States Bureau of Fisheries, which later became the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, as an aquatic biologist. Here she was able to effectively fuse her talents as a scientist and a writer, eventually becoming chief of publications for the bureau. Early in her tenure at Fish & Wildlife, she continued teaching courses at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins.

Under the Sea-Wind was published in 1941. *The Sea Around Us* was published in 1951 to great popular and critical acclaim, receiving the National Book Award in nonfiction. It remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for months. "If there is poetry in my book about the sea," she said, "it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could truthfully write about the sea and leave out the poetry."

In 1955, four years after the success of *The Sea Around Us*, Carson published *The Edge of the Sea*, extending her readers' knowledge of the ocean to the ocean's interface with land. She focused her naturalist's eye on tidepools, writing about the extraordinary nature of adaptation in a littoral world, while at the same time illuminating the magic and intricacies of the sandy beach and rocky shore. Her words not only speak of a natural history but a natural philosophy:

Now I hear the sea sounds about me; the night high tide is rising, swirling with a confused rush of waters against the rocks below my study window . . . these coastal forms merge and blend in a shifting, kaleidoscopic pattern in which there is no finality, no ultimate and fixed reality—earth becoming fluid as the sea itself . . . Contemplating the teeming life of the shore, we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp. What is the message signaled by the hordes of diatoms,

flashing their microscopic lights in the night sea? . . . The meaning haunts and ever eludes us, and in its very pursuit we approach the ultimate mystery of Life itself.

And then came *Silent Spring*.

Rachel Carson received a letter from her friend Olga Owens Huckins, a journalist, who asked her for help in finding people who could elucidate and speak to the dangers of pesticides. The Huckinses had a small place in Duxbury, Massachusetts, just north of Cape Cod, which they had made into a bird sanctuary. Without any thought of the effects on birds and wildlife, the state had sprayed the entire area for mosquito control.

Huckins sent a letter of outrage to *The Boston Herald* in January, 1958. Here is an excerpt:

The mosquito control plane flew over our small town last summer. Since we live close to the marshes, we were treated to several lethal doses as the pilot crisscrossed our place. And we consider the spraying of active poison over private land to be a serious aerial intrusion.

The 'harmless' shower bath killed seven of our lovely songbirds outright. We picked up three dead bodies the next morning right by the door. They were birds that had lived close to us, trusted us, and built their nests in our trees year after year. The next day three were scattered around the bird bath. (I had emptied it and scrubbed it after the spraying but YOU CAN NEVER KILL DDT).

. . . All of these birds died horribly and in the same way. Their bills were gaping open, and their splayed claws were drawn up to their breasts in agony.

Olga Owens Huckins bore witness. Rachel Carson responded. Four and a half years later in 1962, *Silent Spring* was published. Carson wrote to Huckins that it was her letter that had "started it all" and had led her to realize that "I must write the book."

This was a correspondence between friends, two women standing their ground in the places they loved, each one engaging the gifts they possessed to make a difference in the world. We can never forget the power of

impassioned, informed individuals sharing their stories of place, bearing witness, speaking out on behalf of the land they call home.

Rachel Carson told the truth as she understood it. The natural world was dying, poisoned by the hands of power tied to corporate greed. Her words became an open wound in immediate need of attention. A debate had begun: a reverence for life versus a reverence for industry. Through the strength and vitality of her voice, Carson altered the political landscape of America forever.

Loren Eisely wrote that *Silent Spring* "is a devastating, heavily documented, relentless attack upon human carelessness, greed, and responsibility."

Not everyone saw it that way.

The Monsanto Chemical Company, anticipating the publication of *Silent Spring*, urgently commissioned a parody entitled "The Desolate Year" to counteract Carson's attack on the industry. Its intent was to show the pestilence and famine that Monsanto claimed would occur in a world without pesticides.

Robert White-Stevens, a biochemist who was assistant director of the Agricultural Research Division of American Cyanamid, became the chemical industry's spokesman. He made over twenty-eight speeches against *Silent Spring*. He was outraged by the evidence waged against DDT, charging that Carson was "a fanatic defender of the cult of the balance of nature."

In its weekly newsletter, the American Medical Association told the public how to obtain an "information kit," compiled by the National Agriculture Chemicals Association, to answer questions provoked by *Silent Spring*.

Time magazine called *Silent Spring* "unfair, one-sided, and hysterically over-emphatic," and accused Carson of frightening the public with "emotion-fanning words," claiming her text was filled with "oversimplifications and downright errors."

Former Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson (who later became Prophet of the Mormon Church) wrote to Dwight D. Eisen-

hower regarding Rachel Carson, asking simply, "Why a spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics?" His own conjecture was that she was "probably a Communist."

Spinster. Communist. A member of a nature cult. An amateur naturalist who should stick to poetry not politics. These were just some of the labels used to discredit her. Rachel Carson had, in fact, lit a fire on America's chemical landscape.

In speeches before the Garden Club of America and the New England Wildflower Preservation Society, Carson fought back against her detractors and addressed her audiences with great passion. "I recommend you ask yourself—Who speaks?—And Why?" And then again,

Are we being sentimental when we care whether the robin returns to our dooryard and the veery sings in the twilight woods? A world that is no longer fit for wild plants, that is no longer graced by the flight of birds, a world whose streams and forests are empty and lifeless is not likely to be a fit habitat for man himself, for these things are symptoms of an ailing world.

President John F. Kennedy became aware of *Silent Spring* when it was first serialized in the pages of *The New Yorker*. At a press conference on August 29, 1962, a reporter asked Kennedy about the growing concern among scientists regarding dangerous long-term side effects from the use of DDT and other pesticides and whether or not the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the U.S. Public Health Service was planning to launch an investigation into the matter.

"Yes," the President replied. "I think particularly, of course, since Miss Carson's book."

The Life Sciences Panel of the President's Science Advisory Committee was charged with reviewing pesticide use. In 1962, the committee issued a call for legislative measures to safeguard the health of the land and its people against pesticides and industrial toxins. The President's report had

vindicated Carson. Her poetics were transformed into public policy.

Rachel Carson testified for over forty minutes during the Hearings before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations of the Committee on Government Operations, "Interagency Coordination in Environmental Hazards (Pesticides)," on June 4, 1964.

According to Carson's biographer, Linda Lear, "Those who heard Rachel Carson that morning did not see a reserved or reticent woman in the witness chair but an accomplished scientist, an expert on chemical pesticides, a brilliant writer, and a woman of conscience who made the most of an opportunity few citizens of any rank can have to make their opinions known. Her witness had been equal to her vision."

Senator Gruening from Alaska called *Silent Spring* equal to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in its impact, and predicted it would change the course of history.

In 1967, five years after *Silent Spring* was published, the Environmental Defense Fund was born, with a mandate, in the words of one its founders, "to build a body of case law to establish a citizen's right to a clean environment." Three years after that, in 1970, the Environmental Protection Agency was established.

And today, we have a new generation of individuals carrying the torch of vigilance forward in the name of ecological integrity: Lois Gibbs, who exposed the Love Canal to the American public as a dark example of industry's arrogance and disregard for the health of communities; Monica Moore and Sarojeni Rengah of Pesticide Action Network who provide scientific data and policy proposals worldwide to citizens fighting to maintain the biological health of their communities.

And women like Mary O'Brien in Eugene, Oregon, remind us that the risk assessment question, "How much of this pesticide is 'safe' or 'acceptable'?" is the wrong question to be asking. The better question is, "How little pesticide use is essential?"

These are green patriots who have taken the banner that Rachel Carson raised and have kept it flying high in a world that still refuses to believe in the dangers of biocide.

Tyrone Hayes, the lead researcher on a study concluding that atrazine, the most popular herbicide in the United States, causes a wide range of sexual abnormalities in frogs, was quoted in *The New York Times* on April 17, 2002 as saying, "I'm not saying it's safe for humans. I'm not saying it's unsafe for humans. All I'm saying is that it makes hermaphrodites of frogs."

As Rachel Carson noted,

If . . . we have concluded that we are being asked to take senseless and frightening risks, then we should no longer accept the counsel of those who tell us that we must fill our world with poisonous chemicals; we should look about and see what other course is open to us.

Pam Zahoran of Protect Environment and Children Everywhere is showing us an alternative course. She, along with 22,000 other citizens, signed a petition against a major hazardous-waste incinerator to be built by Waste Technologies Industries in East Liverpool, Ohio.

Bill Hedden, former county commissioner in Grand County, Utah, has never given up the hope of seeing 10.5 million tons of radioactive waste removed from the banks of the Colorado River, left from the uranium boom in the 1950's. For almost two decades, he has delivered devastating facts and figures to the United States Congress showing the toxic risks to the entire Colorado River Basin including the Los Angeles water supply.

And Robert Boone, president of the Anacostia Watershed Society, is working with the children of this poverty-stricken community just outside Washington, D.C., to clean up the Anacostia River, one of the most toxic waterways in America. He is restoring hope in this forgotten landscape. So far, they have removed 327 tons of debris, 7,218 tires, and mobilized 25,666 volunteers in their vision of a clean river. They are holding the Environ-

mental Protection Agency accountable to the Clean Water Act.

These are Rachel's sons and daughters who are taking the facts and fueling them with passionate resistance to protect the integrity of their hometowns and communities. This is the bedrock of democracy—"the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time." By protecting the health of America's open spaces we preserve America's open heart.

Recently, I visited the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, a rich salt marsh that encompasses approximately 4,500 acres along forty-five miles of coastline in southern Maine. Carson knew this country well and worked toward its protection. It was the place she loved most, the place where she kept summers at her cottage near Boothbay Harbor with her nephew Roger and her dear soulmate, Dorothy Freeman, who lived nearby.

As I walked through the sanctuary and listened to the water songs of red-winged blackbirds and watched the deliberate flight of great blue herons, I wondered, if Carson were alive today, would she find this estuary a bit quieter? Would she find the tidepools less vibrant, vacant of certain creatures? I wondered what accommodations we have made through time without even noticing what we have lost. I would have loved to ask her what price she paid, personally, for her warriorship surrounding *Silent Spring*?

I imagined her looking directly into my eyes, a bit stunned over such a presumptuous question, shaking her head, and then looking out toward her beloved sea.

Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks At Cancer and the Environment*, writes, "Carson laid out five lines of evidence linking cancer to environmental causes. . . . [She] predicted that the full maturation of whatever seeds of malignancy have been sown by the new lethal agents of the chemical age would occur in the years to come."

The irony is a painful one. Rachel Carson died of breast cancer on April 14, 1964, at

the age of fifty-six. Diagnosed in 1960, she wrote *Silent Spring* through her illness and faced her powerful detractors with limited physical strength, often having to be hospitalized after strenuous professional obligations. But the public never knew. She proceeded with great presence and resolve, even completing a rigorous television interview on CBS months before her death, where she was paired with a spokesperson from the chemical industry. Carson's "grace under fire" with compelling facts to back her sentiments finally won public opinion over to her side. Brooks Atkinson in his column in *The New York Times* proclaimed her the winner. He wrote, "Evidence continues to accumulate that she is right and that *Silent Spring* is the 'rights of man' of this generation."

In spite of her cancer, Rachel Carson never lost "the vision splendid" before her eyes. Her love of the natural world, especially all she held dear in the coastal landscape of Maine, sustained and supported her tenacious and elegant spirit.

Before her death, she wrote to her friend, E. B. White, "It is good to know that I shall live on even in the minds of many who do not know me and largely through association with things that are beautiful and lovely."

And she does.

Consider these examples: *Rachel's Daughters*, a film investigating the environmental causes of breast cancer; Rachel's Network, a political organization committed to seeing women in positions of power and leadership within the conservation community; the Rachel Carson Institute at Chatham College dedicated to the awareness and understanding of current environmental issues inspired by their distinguished alumna. And there are thousands of references to Rachel Carson within American culture, including one by a puzzled Richard A. Posner, who wondered in his book, *Public Intellectuals*, why Rachel Carson had more citations in Lexus Nexus than the French Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. What a perfect metaphor for Rachel Carson's impact. After all, didn't she deconstruct the entire chemical industry until we were able to see, collectively, the essence of what it

does—destroy natural systems—the dark toxic roots of pesticides exposed?

Rachel Carson writes, “There is also an ecology of the world in our bodies.”

Recently, an open letter was signed and sent to the U.S. Senate to ban reproductive cloning and to place a moratorium on therapeutic cloning by a broad coalition of scientists, environmentalists, feminists, healthcare workers, religious leaders, political leaders, philosophers, and writers. If Rachel Carson were alive, her name would have appeared on that list.

Similar political actions have been taken to elucidate the dangers of genetic engineering, from the possibility of infecting wild salmon populations to the perils of genetically modified foods. Rachel Carson understood that tampering with nature is tampering with health in the broadest, ecological sense.

In 2002, Rachel Carson’s spirit is among us. Like her, we can be both fierce and compassionate at once. We can remember that our character has been shaped by the diversity of America’s landscape and it is precisely that character that will protect it. We can carry a healthy sense of indignation within us that will shatter the complacency that has seeped into our society in the name of all we have lost, knowing there is still so much to be saved.

Call it sacred rage, a rage grounded in the understanding that all life is intertwined. And we can come to know and continue to learn from the grace of wild things as they hold an organic wisdom that sustains peace.

Do we have the moral courage to step forward and openly question every law, person, and practice that denies justice toward nature?

Do we have the strength and will to continue in this American tradition of bearing witness to beauty and terror which is its own form of advocacy?

And do we have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that in-

spires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism?

Rachel Carson’s name is synonymous with courage. She dared to expose the underbelly of the chemical industry and show how it was disrupting the balance of nature. In *Silent Spring* we see her signature strength on the page, and witness how a confluence of poetry and politics with sound science can create an ethical stance toward life.

But perhaps Rachel Carson’s true courage lies in her willingness to align science with the sacred, to admit that her bond toward nature is a spiritual one.

I am not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I say that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth.

Rachel Carson has called us to action. *Silent Spring* is a social critique of our modern way of life, as essential to the evolving American ideals of freedom and democracy as anything ever written by our founding fathers.

“If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or by public officials,” Miss Carson wrote, “it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem.”

There are many forms of terrorism. Environmental degradation is one of them. We have an opportunity to shift the emphasis on American independence to American interdependence and redefine what acts of responsibility count as heroism. Protecting the lands we love and working on behalf of the safety of our communities from the poisoned residue of corporate and governmental neglect must surely be chief among them. Perhaps this is what the idea of “homeland security” is meant to be in times of terror.

After my father and his friend left, I walked outside and sat on our back porch. The blinking bodies of fireflies were rising and falling above the grasses. They appeared as a company of code-talkers flashing S.O.S. on a very dark night.

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