

AND BEAUTY FOR ALL

John de Graaf

Thank you. I'm honored to be here with all of you.

I'm going to be a bit provocative today. I hope you will indulge me and save all your tomatoes for the end. I have no slides to offer. My friend Conrad Schmidt once told me that "power corrupts and Power Point corrupts absolutely," so that is my excuse.

I live in Seattle now, but grew up in the Bay Area and have fond memories of Napa County. My late father worked for the Coast Guard in San Francisco as an aids-to-navigation expert. He was responsible in part for the safety of boat traffic on the lower Napa River. He took me to Napa County to fish in Lake Berryessa and to hike on Mount Saint Helena. On the drives, he stopped to buy fruit and sometimes wine, to take home to my mother.

I grew up feeling secure in an America only a third as wealthy as today. It was a country with problems and inequities without question, but an optimistic one where the vast majority of Americans felt hopeful for the future regardless of their status. I am nostalgic for that feeling. I suspect you are too, if you experienced it.

I don't think I need to tell you that in spite of its great wealth, its growing economy and its low unemployment rate, America is unhappy, angry, and polarized to a degree I cannot remember in my entire 72 years on this planet. I know that some of this polarization has reached this idyllic corner of our country, and that even the best wines in the world, which you produce, cannot fully soothe the ill will or smooth out the conflict.

Only a sense of shared values will do that—and I want to speak to one such value today. Today, I want to talk to you about beauty and its power to bring us together in America and here in the Napa watershed.

I know you will agree that this is a beautiful place with its lovely river, its rolling hills of oaks and vineyards, a place that, unlike the urban centers so close to it, draws its sustenance from the land, and not the crunching of digits in computers. That land is a sacred trust and its beauty alone, a harmony of nature's gifts—or what we call more bureaucratically "ecosystem services"—and human care, should provide enough inspiration for the most careful of stewardship.

I'd like to talk with you about a campaign I'm working on called *And Beauty for All* (www.andbeautyforall.org) in hopes that by seeking to protect and restore natural beauty, create lovely urban design, bring art into our communities and support local sustainable

agriculture and healthy fish and wildlife populations, we can also build community and reduce polarization.

As I've worked on this campaign, I've found that beauty matters to both liberals and conservatives, to both sides of the political divide. You know, liberals like their gardens just as much as conservatives do, and conservatives enjoy our national parks as much as liberals do. Beauty unites us.

Beauty. *For all*. I see those words as another way of saying Environmental Justice. As we work toward resilience and protection of the biosphere, we may need different language to widen our appeal. Words like environmentalist, and green, and even sustainability, often stop our conversations before they start. Yet an old word, *beauty*, a term we rarely use these days, rarely hear in political speeches, can get the conversation going again.

I got the idea for *And Beauty for All* from two experiences. While making my film, REDEFINING PROSPERITY, I learned how the fight for beauty, the fight to save their beautiful Yuba River, brought so-called "hippies" and "rednecks" together in Nevada City, California. Rivers can do that. Watersheds can do that.

And I was struck by the wager of Doug Tompkins, the adventurer who founded the North Face and Esprit clothing companies. "If anything can save the world, I'd put my money on beauty," he said.

- The beauty of environmental restoration.
- The beauty of cities designed with nature and favoring human locomotion over automobiles.
- The beauty of farms bursting with diversity.
- The beauty of healthy fish and wildlife.
- And the beauty of good wine on the dinner table, enhancing convivial conversation!

The great novelist Dostoevsky, in *THE IDIOT*, said that beauty would save the world. So did Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel lecture. So have all three of the most recent Popes. So have numerous articles in popular *conservative* publications. And so, *on the Left*, did Dorothy Day.

Quoting Dostoevsky, the Russian poet Yevtushenko added a caveat. "But who will save *beauty*?" he asked. I don't know whether or not beauty will save the world, but I do know it can make us both happier and healthier, and I know it will be *up to us* to save it—and create it. New studies by Gallup and the University of South Carolina have found that access to beauty, *especially nature and open space*, is one of the three most likely predictors both of people's love for the communities they live in *and* of the likelihood that they are satisfied with their lives.

In place after place, they found that such beauty was an even more valued amenity than good schools, high-paying jobs or public safety. In every single city Gallup studied, three things were

cited by the happiest people—social and cultural events that brought people together in community; acceptance of diverse newcomers...*and the beauty of their surroundings.*

Think about those findings as you plan the future here.

You know, we're rather obsessed with the "economy" these days—with growth and money and all it will buy. But undifferentiated economic growth is not only ultimately *unsustainable*—I'll talk more about that later—it also isn't delivering happiness. In fact, the latest *United Nations World Happiness Report* shows that American satisfaction with life has actually *fallen* since 2010, when we were still in the Great Recession. Each year, we drop a notch in the list of the world's happiest nations.

I think I know why.

How many of you like to backpack? You'll know what I'm talking about. When David Graves, the owner of Saintsbury Winery, and I talked on the phone a few weeks ago, we discovered that both of us drew our love for nature from backpacking experiences. When I was in high school, I spent several weeks *each summer* rambling throughout the Sierra with a couple of my friends. My dad had taught us how, and our parents trusted us to backpack on our own from the age of 14.

We walked from trailhead to trailhead, then hitchhiked to small Owens Valley towns to resupply our food. I learned most of the lessons that have shaped who I am from those experiences. I call what I learned THE BACKPACKING THEORY OF LIFE. When you backpack, you find out what's essential to carry, and what isn't. You find the *balance* between the pain caused by too little food or water or protection from the elements, *and* the extra weight on your back that can make you miserable.

You learn that you don't need a lot to be happy: friendship, healthy exercise, fresh air, leisure time, freedom of movement, and above all, beautiful surroundings. My friends and I walked in beauty, as the Navajo say. Beauty above us in the wide crystal sky, beauty below in the fields of colorful wildflowers. Beauty before us in mountains, lakes, and waterfalls, in the grand thunderheads and cleansing rain. Beauty in the deer that wandered by at dawn and dusk, in the flash of the trout on still water, in the dew on the morning meadows, and in the ever-present song of the white-crowned sparrow.

Those were our summer experiences. But it was in a different time of year that I fully recognized how beautiful the world is and how the experience of grace and awe and wonder can shape our entire lives.

Though I lived for fourteen years in the Upper Midwest, where temperatures regularly fall well below zero in winter, I've never been fond of the cold. Nonetheless, I did do some winter backpacking, beginning with a trip in 1961 with my best friend, John Ellsworth, and my father to the Desolation Valley Wilderness near Lake Tahoe.

It was about fifteen degrees and water we had boiled for cocoa sometimes had ice on its edges before we finished drinking. The snow beneath our tents grew very hard during the night, making sleeping uncomfortable. We didn't have a great time. Still, by Thanksgiving break in 1962, John and I were planning another wintry adventure to the same area with a friend named Marvin. There was one problem though, in my case.

I'd been fighting a serious sinus infection for several weeks, with constant headaches. It was a virus, and therefore, not responsive to antibiotics. I really didn't feel up to the trip physically, and, of course, my mother warned me not to go, suggesting that my illness might well turn into pneumonia. But word was that there was little snow in the mountains that fall and that snowshoes might not even be necessary for our hike to Lake of the Woods, and planned climb of Pyramid Peak, the highest in the area. And the weather outlook for the four-day weekend was excellent. So, I went.

We camped at the upper end of Echo Lakes the first night. As we'd heard, there wasn't much snow to cross, and hiking the next day on the trail to Lake of the Woods was easy. The distance was short, and by late morning we had set up camp on the shore of the thickly frozen lake and were ready to climb Pyramid. There were several small ridges to traverse and, traveling cross-country without a trail, the going was slow, but we reached the final ridge of the peak in mid-afternoon and started up.

I was out of shape from my illness and fell quickly behind John and Marvin. As we neared the top of the nearly 10,000-foot peak, the wind was fierce and bitter, and my head still throbbed with pain. We spent only a few minutes on the summit, and then headed back to camp the way we had come. By then, I was exhausted and struggling to keep up, gasping for breath with every step. The pain in my head grew worse and I remembered my mother's warnings.

When we got back to camp, John and Marvin let me crawl into my sleeping bag while they prepared hot soup and cups of tea. Soon, it was dark, and despite the sinus pain, I quickly fell asleep. In the middle of the night, I woke up suddenly and grabbed for my glasses. We were sleeping without a tent, covered only by tarps—we were crazy kids!—and I saw immediately that the sky was perfectly clear, a canopy of stars with a big moon in the middle.

The entire area was bathed in brilliant moonlight; it seemed as easy to see as at mid-day. It was also perfectly still, without a breath of wind. It took a moment, but I suddenly noticed something else. My head no longer hurt. After a couple of months of constant pain, I felt absolutely none. I couldn't quite believe it, but a peace and calm had fallen over me that I had never experienced before, nor ever since.

I got up and walked over to a rocky point on the lakeshore in the bright moonlight. I stared quietly across the lake, still and frozen, to the dark ridge of Pyramid Peak beyond and the sparkling sky overhead. It was the most profound spiritual experience of my life, and though I am not religious, it left me feeling that there was a purpose to the universe and to my life, and that things would turn out well if I placed my trust in providence. Like my sickness, other things

would pass and I was always going to be all right. I remember grateful tears of joy streaming down my face as I looked out at this calm and perfect silent night around me. Surely, this was a church like no other.

Over the years, I've come to think of America as a backpacker who didn't learn its lessons. Our national backpack lacks some essential things, especially for the poor. As one student put it to me, we've got a defective first aid kit, for example. Some Americans truly need more. But as a country, we are weighted down with stuff, like a backpacker with too big a load who has fallen over backwards and struggles, like an upside-down beetle or turtle, to get right-side up.

Have you seen the movie, WILD? Do you remember when Reese Witherspoon puts on her enormous pack for the first time and falls over? She had to get rid of things so she could even walk with the pack on. Our lives are overloaded with stuff, with expectations driven by advertising, with tight schedules, overwork, hurry and worry and stress.

The straps are cutting into our shoulders and we are angry, dammit. And we are blaming everything—women, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, gays, minorities, regulations, taxes—instead of the misguided values and priorities that have left us where we are. And we are sacrificing the beauty of the world in our constant drive for economic growth. It's time to ask: how much wealth is enough?

When I was growing up in South San Francisco in the late 1950s, I only got to the Sierra a couple of times a year. But in those days, we had lots of open space right on the edge of the suburb where I lived. We were as free to wander through the grassy hills as the cattle were to graze there. We found rocks to climb, and ponds full of frogs and salamanders. We could hike all the way to Pacifica to wade in the tide pools, excited by all the marine life they contained.

But by the time I graduated from high school in 1964, all that open space was completely covered with suburban homes—the “Little Boxes on the Hillside” that Malvina Reynolds sang about. As California's population grows, all the open space that remains will be coveted for development. What we save now is all we will *ever* save—for *all time*--so that our children and theirs may discover some of the joys of nature that I took for granted.

We need to re-wild our cities and even our rural communities, and encourage children, especially, to experience trees and flowers and animals and open space on a *regular* basis. John Muir understood that a rising material standard of living wasn't enough. “Everyone needs *beauty* as well as bread,” he proclaimed.

The need for beauty may atrophy without access to it, but it never dies. In the late 1800s, Muir marveled that San Francisco's street urchins, living in squalor, asked him for flowers on his return from hikes on Mt. Tamalpais or the Berkeley hills. “As soon as they caught sight of my wild bouquet, they quit their pitiful attempts at amusement in the miserable dirty streets and ran after me begging a flower. ‘Please Mister, give me a flower, Mister,’ in a humble, begging tone as if expecting to be refused. “And when I stopped and distributed the treasures...the

dirty faces fairly glowed with enthusiasm while they gazed at them and fondled them reverently as if looking into the faces of angels from heaven.”

Or as the words to that powerful song written for the striking immigrant textile workers of New York and Lawrence, Massachusetts, put it: Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but roses too. Beauty as well as bread. And you know what Aldo Leopold said: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and *beauty* of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” We’ve done a lot of otherwise.

I think most of us have personal heroes and mine was the late, great environmentalist David Brower, who built the Sierra Club and was the leading American voice for conservation in the second half of the 20th Century. He also started Earth Island Institute, on whose board I currently serve. Some of you may have known him. Dave advocated what he called “CPR for the Earth”—conservation, preservation and restoration. Exactly what you all do.

I knew Dave for the last 28 years of his life and visited him at Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley, where he lived, only a few days before he died in 2000. It was clear that the end was near, but when I left, I told him, “The next time I see you I hope you’ll be back out there healthy again and fighting the good fight.” He looked me right in the eye and said, “John, I don’t think that’s in the cards, but it’s been a great 88 years.”

I think that’s what we all want to be able to say when our time is up, however much or little time we have. We want to know that our lives have counted for something, that we made a difference, not just a killing. I think David Brower died a happy man, but he was certainly a worried one. In many of his speeches, he used a powerful metaphor to point out the absurdity of our current faith in *limitless* growth. He compressed the age of the earth, estimated by scientists at some 4.6 *billion* years, into one week.

When you do this, a day represents about 650 million years, an hour, 27 million, a minute, about 450,000, and a second, 7,500. Think about that.

On Sunday morning, the earth congeals from cosmic gases, and by late Monday, the first tiny life forms emerge. In the next few days, they become larger, more complex and more wondrous. Before dawn on the last day—Saturday—strangely-shaped creatures fill the Cambrian seas. In the afternoon of that *very last* day of the week, giant reptiles thunder across the land and fill the sky. The dinosaurs enjoy a long run, commanding Earth’s stage for about six hours, before an asteroid or a series of volcanic eruptions makes earth too cold for them.

Late that evening, mammals, able to withstand a cooler world, flourish and evolve, until, *less than a minute before midnight*, on that final night of the week, we show up. Only about 10,000 years ago in real time, *less than two seconds before midnight* in our metaphor, humans develop agriculture and start building cities. At a third of a second before midnight, Buddha is born; at a quarter of a second, Christ; at a fifth of a second, Mohammed.

Only a thirtieth of a second before midnight, we launch the Industrial Revolution, and, after World War II, perhaps *one hundredth of a second before midnight* in our week of creation—again, on the *final* night—the age of consumerism—or what I’ve called “the age of Affluenza,” begins. In that hundredth of a second, Brower and others have pointed out, we have managed to consume more resources than did all human beings all together in all of previous history. We have diminished our soils, wildlife, fisheries, fossil fuels and forests by half. We have caused the extinction of countless other species, and we have dramatically changed the climate.

Think of what it means that we have done all of this in this blink of the geological eye.

There are people, Brower said, who believe that what we have been doing for that last one-hundredth of a second can go on indefinitely. They are considered normal, reasonable, intelligent people; but, really, they are stark, raving mad. We can’t *grow* on like this. We will not find what we need by worshipping economic growth and material progress. In fact, we just might drive ourselves to extinction.

We will need to live more lightly on the earth, more slowly, appreciating simpler things, natural things. We will only do this if our children live with nature around them and come to appreciate the wonder of all living things.

Perhaps we cannot imagine that now because we have lost so much of the beauty of the world. But we know too, from the research, that gloom and doom like I just offered you, is more likely to inspire passivity than action. We will have to convince our fellow citizens that learning to live responsibly and in balance with nature really can mean a better, *happier* life. And we need to convey that message with language and examples that touch the heart and soul as well as the head—*good news*, if you will.

Our children are demanding these changes. With their high school climate strike and their Sunrise Movement and their call for a Green New Deal, they are asking us to leave them a *tolerable* planet to live on, as Thoreau once put it.

What you are doing here can provide models for that Green New Deal the young demand. Your organizations, and especially, the Resource Conservation Districts of Napa County and all of California, can provide the space and knowledge to engage your citizens in shaping what that Green New Deal will look like. These district organizations were created during the first New Deal, itself a *green* New Deal, with conservation and environmental restoration its first emphasis. The Soil Conservation Act that created them was passed literally while the pages of the bill were being darkened by soil blowing to the U.S. Capitol from the Dust Bowl in the Midwest. A time of bad news for the environment, just like now.

But you have a lot of good news here to share with the world. I understand that Chinook salmon are coming back into the Napa River, and the beavers are back too, even here in downtown Napa. And I’m inspired by the Cullinan Ranch restoration between the River and San Pablo Bay, where a breaching of the levees has led to the restoration of vast brackish

marshes and the annual return again of thousands of shorebirds and other waterfowl. In my state of Washington, when they tore down the Elwha River dams they expected salmon to come back in a decade or more. They came back in two years! Nature is resilient, with a little help from us.

Environmental restoration projects can sequester immense amounts of carbon drawn out of the atmosphere. They can make our communities more resistant to climate change.

I've written about what your neighbor community, Vallejo, that gritty, very diverse, industrial port city at the mouth of the Napa River, is doing. I am now working on a film about Vallejo and the dream of its mayor Bob Sampayan that Vallejo might eventually be a model for the Green New Deal. Bob grew up in a family of former farmworkers in Salinas and was using a short-handled hoe in the lettuce fields by the age of 12. He worked his way through college and became a police officer—a job he held for 34 years. He was an urban homicide detective—a tough cop. He's not the first person I'd expect to be a committed environmentalist. But I call him a "tree hugger" and he seems okay with that.

What Bob is trying to do is to bring more beauty, and more nature, more "wild," if you will, back into Vallejo. It's exactly what I hope every city and town in America will begin to do—and sooner rather than later. Each September, Vallejo hosts a festival called *Visions of the Wild* to introduce young people to nature and to use art and design to create the kind of beauty that can build community. *Visions* gets people out on local trails and Solano County land trusts, gets them in kayaks on the Bay and boats on the Napa River. At the same time, the city is working to re-forest blighted neighborhoods, restore wetlands, create new city trails and parks, and preserve open space for wildlife and for exploration.

This work builds on fruitful long-term efforts by the Solano Resource Conservation District, which has provided outdoor education to thousands of students. Those students have participated in watershed restoration activities, assessed water quality, planted trees, shrubs and grasses, and learned about human impact on these wild spaces within urban communities.

Solano RCD and *Visions of the Wild* are engaging citizens in dialogue about the kind of future they'd like to see. The work also unites the city with organizations like the Forest Service and many others. Mayor Sampayan is excited by its promise. When I interviewed him several months ago, I found we had something special in common—a childhood love of nature, and especially of Yosemite National Park. We had both gone there as children with our families, and those experiences were formative. Along with Bob's trips to Fremont Peak State Park, near his home in Salinas, they awakened a deep appreciation for the natural world, and the necessity of restoring it to cities like Vallejo, so that it can work its marvelous magic on all of us and our children.

We know—and I know *you* know--from *so many* studies, that nature and open space improve our health and our happiness in dozens of ways. What we may *not* know is that living, working and playing amidst beauty makes us kinder, more tolerant and more generous.

Mayor Sampayan knows this from first-hand experience. He told me that when he was barely out of high school, he and his brother would often drive up to Yosemite and camp for the weekend. Still teenagers, they loved to play their music loud in the campground. "We were stupid kids," Bob explained. But one day a man came over and asked them to turn down the volume. He didn't shout at them. He just calmly asked them why they came to Yosemite and they told him of their love for the beauty of the place. He agreed and asked them to understand that, for his family, part of the beauty was the quiet and the birdsongs and other sounds of nature. They turned the music off. That conversation brought them together and Bob and his brother became good friends with that family.

That's what nature can do. That's what beauty can do. And that is what America needs above all. Will you save beauty? Will you help make this marvelous watershed, stretching from the forests of Mt. Saint Helena to Mare Island Strait, an example of environmental stewardship for all of America?

Thank you.