

Land as Free as Air - Joseph Marshall - OSEU 1

Well, the thing that strikes me first is... obviously... our history with your Americans... Europeans and your Americans... is based on how we looked at the land... the different ways we looked at the same thing. And it's again, I'm a very simple-minded person, so I tend to simplify things as much as I can or to deal with it. There were two divergent viewpoints. Your Americans... Europeans look at land as a commodity... as something to be owned... something to be divided... something to be used for the production of whatever in... it meant enriching themselves. I mean, I remember the history about the European serfdom. The landowners would... have people living on their land and working so many acres... and giving them a house or something like that. And then whenever their crops were done, they gave an overwhelming majority to the landowner and kept a very little of it for themselves. And they had the right to live on the land. But all of it was intended to enrich the landowner. So, in that sense, the land was something to get rich off of. And the opposing viewpoint, here on this continent, among most of the indigenous people, were that we had a... it was a relative, pure and simple. Earth itself was a relative. It was nothing to be owned in the same way we lived on it. We had territories. But we couldn't own it anymore. The sense was we couldn't own it any more than we could own the air in the water. It was that of the four elements, you know, that kind of thing.

So that's where the... that's where a lot of the difference is. I mean we... we have learned the European way. The Dawes Act came along and divided up the land into 160-acre quarter section... an eighty acre... and we were taught what a Platte map was and... that this 80 acres is yours and this 80 acres belongs to your neighbor or your relative or whatever. So, we were forced to learn that we had to go by that because that's just the way things were. But along the way, after a generation or two, then that sense of looking at the land as a relative began to fall by the wayside. So, it seems quaint to some of us to talk about it in that sense because we've... for several generations now... we've been landowners ourselves. You know we... all the allotment process... and then inheriting and the heirship process and all that kind of stuff. So, we're having to function under the rules of, of the authority that prevails. And they tell us this is the way things are. And so, we have to look at land this way. That doesn't mean we can't, you know, relate to the environment the way our ancestors did. I mean. And then the extreme assumption... the assumption that there was an extreme to that. We're

like... we're all tree huggers... and we're not. And there were you know... there was no word for environmentalists... that concept in our language at all. And really, if you stop to think about it, there's no word for wilderness in our language because we were part of a whole. We weren't apart from it.

There's a word that's Manitou that has become the word for wilderness, like a lot of other words, have become something else with influence of your American culture. But Manitou just simply meant "where the people were not." That's all. So, one time the people were not over here, and the next time the people were not over here. But it was all a whole. So, there was not that sense of wildness that the Europeans had about... they were afraid of everything out there that wasn't part of their little village or that part of their enclave. They were totally afraid of it. And that was the difference. I don't think our ancestors were afraid of that environment. One, because they knew it intimately. They were part of it for so long, the generation after generation after generation. They knew it well. They knew it intimately. There were things to be afraid of. Sure. Mountain lions and bears and floods and prairie fires. You know, we had to be realistic about what was out there, what nature was capable of. But that doesn't mean we know said nature was bad or evil or all the other things that we attach whenever there's a natural disaster or a landslide or something. We come up with all these adjectives that describe how mean or harsh nature is. It isn't any of that in our purview and our ancestors purview. Nature just does what nature does, and we accept the reality of it.

We don't attach labels of "nature's cruel." We don't... we didn't do that, but we've learned to do that. But you know, and so that was the difference. Once I looked at it as something to be owned, the other side looked at it as relative because Earth... Earth is the source of life. Grandmother Earth... just I mean... she's so important that we when we pray, she's the second thing we pray to. Father Sky, Grandmother Earth... because she's part of the process. And life comes from Grandmother Earth. And it's obvious that's the reality of it. It isn't. Anything that we made up is not a myth. It's a reality. You look around and life comes from the earth. And we go back to the earth when we're done with our life. So, she is also our repository. To you, we shall return. It's part of the prayer. Grandmother Earth, to you we shall return. So, in that simple phrase, we're acknowledging this profound and realistic relationship we have. That's just the way things were. That's just the way things are. But unfortunately, again, the forced influence began to sort of chip away at our attitudes regarding that reality... that then we've been

taught to let go of that reality and accept this other one over here. So, in some of us... and there are people who are ranchers and farmers who may or may not accept the new way of thinking. I'm sure some of them don't. But we all still talk about Grandmother Earth and that special relationship.