

Dr Richard Rubin with photos curated by Annette Rubin

slide 1- Title

Unitarian Universalist *Principle 7*: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Thanks for the sharing opportunity. I appreciate your trust in a UCOT newcomer. I plan to tell stories and show pictures for about 40 minutes, then we'll have time for discussion.

I'll begin with some Leopold biography, significant events in New Mexico, followed by inspiration from the historic story, then ways we can practice now.

Born in 1887, Aldo was the oldest child in a second-generation American family of German origin. His grandfathers established a successful furniture factory in Burlington Iowa and the family became affluent community leaders. He thrived with his mother's literary skills and father's outdoor sportsmanship. While of Lutheran heritage, they did not attend any church. Showing superior interest as a writer and naturalist, Aldo was sent east to the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. Concurrently, in 1905 the US Forest Service was established. Gifford Pinchot, Boston philanthropist and friend of Teddy Roosevelt, endowed our nation's first School of Forestry at Yale University to train leadership. Aldo graduated in the 1908 first class.

He was assigned to the Apache National Forest in Arizona, still a US territory before statehood. Later writings show us two formative experiences from this time that will inspire his lifetime work. One was observing severe soil erosion from exploitive farming and grazing practices in the fertile valleys. The second occurred on mountain patrol when large predator extermination was official policy.

Witnessing his party killing a wolf and her cubs, Aldo had the transformative insight of “seeing the fierce green fire fade from her eyes.” As later described in his famous essay “Thinking Like a Mountain”, he realized the importance of the apex predators for balancing the deer herds that could consume too much vegetation and enable erosion. Yes, he recognized that the mountain valued and needed all its life.

slide 2- Map When he was transferred to the new Carson National Forest in 1911 as deputy supervisor, the headquarters were originally in Antonito, Colorado. But Santa Fe was the administrative center then for US agencies as New Mexico statehood was developing. Maria Alvira Estella Bergere lived among this social and political prominence. On her mother’s side, she was descended from the Luna family, recipient of a large land grant to her ancestor captain in the 1696 Reconquista. They eventually became wealthy herding sheep to California and Colorado to feed the nineteenth century mining booms.

When promoted to supervisor, Aldo moved the Carson Forest headquarters to Tres Piedras, supposedly to be centrally located, but some say to be closer for courting Estella. His biographer Curt Meine described her as “unpretentious, playful, self-motivated, independent-minded, and always gracious.” Despite her family’s wealth, she worked teaching first grade in a Santa Fe school. Aldo would ride the narrow-gauge Denver and Rio Grande Chili Line Railroad to Santa Fe but complained “It was slower’n a burro and twice as ornery.”

slide 3-House Leopold designed and built a Tres Piedras house in Craftsman Bungalow style during the summer of 1912.

slide 4- Interior The design intentionally uses natural materials and finishes, unlike Victorian decor. It has since been described as a symbol of Leopold's belief that humans' place should be in harmony with nature.

slide 5-Porch view The bungalow opens to the magnificent environment with expansive views across Taos Valley toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

slide 6- Wedding couple They were married at Saint Francis Cathedral in October 1912. Estella named the house "Mia Casita". The formal Spanish name has since been replaced by the current vernacular "Mi Casita."

slide 7- Book cover Annette and I recently published *Living the Leopolds' Mi Casita Ecology* with a Foreword by Curt Meine, his definitive biographer, and Prologue by District Ranger Angie Krall. We consider the importance of place and describe the subsequent life of this shrine. The book is available locally at SOMOS shop and Op Cit, as well as the Wisconsin Leopold Foundation store, www.aldoleopold.org and our Taos publisher www.nighthawkpress.com. Proceeds go to the Taos Community Foundation Friends of Mi Casita Fund. More on this later.

slide 8- Ranger Aldo Aldo's initial Carson assignment was implementing a grazing permit system on the new government controlled public lands. You can imagine the resistance of the traditional Hispanic shepherders and Tejano cattle ranchers who were used to having literally free range. Add the multiple Native American tribes' competition on these common hunting grounds.

However, fate was not kind to Aldo. On horseback range patrol in the Jicarilla district during April 1913, he was caught in a severe storm and

barely survived acute kidney failure. He was only 24. Recovery back at the family Burlington Iowa home lasted eighteen months. Curt Meine records that he read widely then, including Thoreau and the Bible, and exchanged thoughtful correspondence with Estella who was having their first child in Santa Fe. These studies become important for his land ethic incubation.

In late 1914, Aldo returned to a Forest Service desk job in the Albuquerque Office of Grazing. After a Forest Service hiatus year as Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce but disliking the “boosters” resistance to his growing conservation values, he returned to be forester in charge of Southwest Operations Management and coordinator of the new Game and Fish Program. He described the role as “promoting the protection and enjoyment of wild things.” As his priorities shifted from game management to wildlife conservation, a radical concept at the time, he organized the civilian Albuquerque Wildlife Federation which continues to do volunteer service on public lands. He also began developing the idea of wilderness protection for the Gila National Forest, eventually the first officially designated by the Department of Agriculture in 1924. The Albuquerque family home still exists at 135 Fourteenth St. SW with state designation as the Aldo Leopold Neighborhood Historic District.

Aldo then accepted a move to the Forest Service Products Laboratory in Madison Wisconsin. But by then, his thinking had evolved beyond material forestry interests. In a 1923 paper before leaving New Mexico...*yes, one hundred years ago...* titled “Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest” he said: “The privilege of possessing the earth entails the responsibility of passing it on the better for our use, not only to immediate posterity, but to the unknown future.”

By now, Aldo had a growing national reputation as a thought leader. After four years, he again left the Forest Service. While conducting game surveys, he wrote about and initiated conservation programs, and published the text *Game Management*. As he was eager for progressive opportunity in the new environmental sciences, his colleagues developed funding for a unique position in the University of Wisconsin School of Agriculture as the first Professor of Game Management. Under his leadership, this evolved to Wildlife Management.

However, Aldo was a field scientist and outdoorsman at heart, beyond writing and teaching. So he bought eighty acres of depleted abandoned farmland in the Sand Hills of southwest Wisconsin. The family now included five children. They spent weekends and holidays there and converted an old chicken coop into their bunkhouse, nicknamed “The Shack.” More importantly, they wanted to restore the land to natural vitality. Thousands of native trees were planted, songs were sung at fireside, often led in Spanish by Estella, and Aldo recorded his detailed Phenology studies. We now define Phenology as the study of seasonal events’ timing for understanding relationships of natural phenomena.

In 1939, Aldo wrote his first ecological viewpoint paper, “A Biotic View of Land.” Over the next decade, he organized essays into almanac narrative form. He walks us through each month of the year, observing and appreciating via his evolving land ethic perspective. Rejected repeatedly by publishers and requiring several revisions, the manuscript was finally accepted by Oxford University Press in 1948 as *A Sand County Almanac*. A week later, while battling a neighbor’s grass fire, Aldo suffered a fatal heart attack.

The book was published in 1949 but had limited sales. Estella and the children subsequently organized the Shack land into a family trust. It is now the center of the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

They steward the land and provide educational programs based on his life and literature. I recommend the website at www.aldoleopold.org.

slide 9- SCA book *A Sand County Almanac* was reissued in a 1966 paperback as the environmental movement developed. I first read it then during college. It has sold in the millions and been translated into a dozen languages. You all should obtain this 50th anniversary edition with a Foreword by Barbara Kingsolver from the Foundation store at www.aldoleopold.org.

Now follow me into deeper modern understanding of the Land Ethic. Here is Wendell Berry's view from his recent book *The Need to be Whole* (2022). "My thoughts were first guided by my inherited inclination to see the good care of the land as the highest human obligation, and the good care of the human community as the second highest. These principles of mine were radically amplified, clarified, and set in order by my reading, many years ago, of Aldo Leopold's essay 'The Land Ethic.' That ethic, to one coming upon it in the midst of our darkened and disordered age, declares itself with the sudden brightness of obvious truth. Quoting Leopold: 'All ethics so far evolved rest upon a simple premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. The Land Ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the human community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land.' Berry then states: 'When I read that, my two thoughts of the land and community became one thought.'"

Here is Leopold's challenge to us: "The Land Ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member of it.... Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to

which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (Sand County Almanac Foreword, 1948).

Another thoughtful voice, Leopold scholar J. Baird Callicott, poignantly summarized *A Sand County Almanac* in the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, 2011.

“From the first page to the last, Leopold aims at worldview remediation. He essays to supplant a toxic mix of biblical human exceptionalism and consumerism with an evolutionary ecological way of conceiving and experiencing ourselves in relation to the world we share with ‘our fellow voyagers...in the odyssey of evolution.’”

University of Wisconsin environmental historian William Cronin said it this way in a 1993 essay: “Human beings are not the only actors who make history. Other creatures do too, as do large natural processes...There cannot be people outside of nature; there can only be people *thinking* they are outside of nature.”

More of Aldo’s words: “A land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.” Biographer Curt Meine describes how Leopold saw that an ethic had to be a collective cultural effort, ever emerging “in the minds of a thinking community.” It is not an exclusive ideology or theology.

Meanwhile, back at the bungalow, after the Leopolds’ brief time there, Mi Casita had various changes as a working site through many tenants, the Depression, and World Wars. But in observance of the Forest Service centennial in 2005, it was extensively restored to the original appearance. The new official mission of Mi Casita became recognition

of the Leopolds' historic status here and to offer the public a place of reflection on conservation and scholarly pursuits.

Now let's consider what volunteers are doing here recently to foster land ethic attitudes and practices.

Slide 10- Current Initiatives 1) After the restoration, a group of Albuquerque professors established the Leopold Writing Program. They provide a month-long retreat at Mi Casita for professional environmental aesthetic writers, journalists, teachers, and managers. They also conduct a Leopold theme essay contest for New Mexico middle and high schoolers. Applications can be found at www.leopoldwritingprogram.org.

2) The Albuquerque Wildlife Federation started a library at Mi Casita in honor of their esteemed teacher Dr Richard Becker. The original sixteen books have grown organically from multiple donors to over a hundred volumes. It is a resource for scholars, Forest Service staff, and students, and I am grateful for my continuing education. The Federation's calendar of volunteer ecological service projects can be found at www.abq.nmwildlife.org.

3) Several years ago, prompted by a visiting botanist writer and approved by my Forest Service guide, I recruited the Taos Native Plant Society chapter to develop a garden of forbs and shrubs at Mi Casita. This group returned yesterday for an exploration field trip.

4) The national Leopold Foundation publishes a Leopold Education Project curriculum for elementary to high school ages. We are now sponsoring use by the Rivers and Birds program with Taos school groups.

5) I guide college groups on tours, recently with Western Colorado U and Oklahoma State. Such are available and encouraged by our local Forest Service.

Slide 11- Book cover 6) Annette and I wrote a guidebook about how we live here with Land Ethic consciousness, called *Homescape Rewilding: Stories of Ordinary Ecological Practices* (Nighthawk Press, 2021). Proceeds go to the Leopold Foundation and Native Plant Society.

7) With significant strains on their resources and staff, Carson Forest Service managers asked me to form a Friends of Mi Casita volunteer group for historic preservation and public participation. I give thanks for joining to Michael Burney, formerly a certified archaeologist on the Carson. We have improved handicapped access, replaced warped porch floors, blocked rodent intrusion, and installed a safety liner in the cracked chimney. Thankyou Rachel and the Peoples Chimney Service. New fire-retardant roof shingles are planned this Fall. While entry to the house is still restricted without authorization, the Forest Service seeks greater ongoing value for the public. To support this work, we established a Friends of Mi Casita Fund at the Taos Community Foundation. All proceeds from our Mi Casita Ecology book go there. And donations can be made through the Taos Community Foundation website www.taoscf.org.

slide 12- Aldo at desk Some concluding words from Aldo, imagined at his Mi Casita desk:

“We see repeated the same basic paradoxes: man the conqueror versus man the biotic citizen; science the sharpener of his sword versus science the searchlight of his universe; and land the slave and servant versus land the collective organism.”

And finally: "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."

slide 13- Troi at rocks Come explore with me.