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Opening Speech for the Sixth California Oak Symposium: Today's Challenges, Tomorrow's Opportunities¹

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Welcome to the home of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok peoples, known today as the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria of Southern Sonoma and Marin counties. Welcome to the home of so many oaks. From time immemorial the trees sustained us—body and soul. Two hundred years ago, villages of oaks inhabited our hills and plains, lined our creeks and lakes. They were healthy, diverse. Today less than 10 percent of those ancient natives—the oaks—survive. They have been cut down, removed from the landscape. The survivors are plagued with disease. Not much different from the people who understood and tended them.

Today I understand that you have come here to better understand the oaks, not only so that we can find ways again to tend the magnificent trees but, in doing as much, guarantee their very survival. That of course from my perspective is a good thing. As the old timers said over and over again, “as the oaks live, so do the people; as the oaks go, so go the people.”

All perspectives, all points of view, must be considered and, in the end, will be necessary. The native perspective, if there is or ever was such a single, quantifiable phenomena, will not be enough, for example, if for no other reason than the world that may have generated that perspective no longer exists. The water table in our homeland is 200 feet lower than it was at the time of European contact. Flora and fauna—and the human beings—all integral to the oak's well-being are absent from the territory or greatly reduced in number. Over 60,000 acres in Sonoma County are planted in grapes, a crop that, as it is currently being raised, exists at the expense of all other plant species. Oh, lest we focus only locally, there is the problem of global warming.

But I, by no means, wish to be gloomy. We always have two choices, as the great ecologist Gregory Bateson once reminded us, “If we are lemmings going over a cliff, we can walk with the rest and drop off, or we can scream as we go and say ‘Hey, there's another way.’” I believe I am speaking to a crowd of screamers. I live for screamers and so do the oaks. So, once again, welcome.

But before I leave you to your business, which, of course, is all of our business, trees and humans, let me just come back to the question of perspectives and points of view. At the risk of simplifying our discussion, it seems to me that the discussions will fall into three larger perspectives—all of which are necessary to survival, ours and the trees.

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First, there is the scientific perspective. That is where trees and their various issues and problems are discussed in terms of specific plant communities, all carefully categorized and labeled. Trees are discussed in terms of their biological properties. Diseases are discussed in terms of symptoms and causes; in turn, remedies are suggested addressing the respective symptoms and causes. The trees' relationship to other plant—and animal—communities are defined.

Second, and of course closely related to the first perspective, is what I call the tending perspective. Here, issues of conservation and policy regarding the care and restoration of the trees have the spotlight.

Both of these perspectives I am sure all of you take for granted. No new news here.

The third perspective, that is, a spiritual perspective, is one that does not always surface in either our scientific discussions or policy discussions but, at least from my point of view, must inform both of them. I am not talking about a prayer or a song that I, or anyone else, might give you. Nor am I talking about hugging trees. Trust me, not all of them want to be hugged. And that is the point; humility in the face of the spirit of these trees, all that we do not know and can not see. The old timers said that trees had songs, rules they told the people for their care. In fact, entire human communities were organized around respect for trees. Local people knew songs only for trees in their respective areas. You would not steal because the trees could poison you if you did not know the song. We kept the population down: An entire religion was predicated on the spirit of trees and what we did not know. Trees would turn on the people all people—if forgotten. In sum, trees had great power and demanded respect. They are, after all, bigger and certainly older than us.

We don't know the songs. But we can approach our work these next two days knowing we do not know. That can humble us, force us to consider, once again, in all of our perspectives and discussion, that what we are discussing – the great oaks – have power, and that now, more than ever, we need them as much as they need us. They are Gods, we must not forget.

I would now like you to hear a Coast Miwok prayer. *Words, language the trees listened to and understood so long before English. May the trees hear these words and be happy. And you, too.*

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