Address to

Writers Conference of Northern Appalachia

St. Francis University

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Thank you. It's an honor and a pleasure to be here with you, asked to address the annual meeting of the Writers Conference of Northern Appalachia.

How often do we get to be among other writers? When in our daily lives do we have a chance to speak with people who understand the quirky, demanding, confounding, but highly rewarding work of writing?

Upon reflection, I think there are two reasons that explain why I am standing here today. One is that I became attached, very young, to the idea, to the importance of place. By this I mean physical places, geographical features—towns, neighborhoods, creeks, mountains, ridges, valleys, hollows, down to the intimate space at the base of a massive oak, hopefully much like a spot that's known to you in a personal way.

Places matter, and therefore stories about places matter.

If you're like me, we share a sense that contemporary culture, market pressures, and communications are all encouraging us to accept the irrelevance of physical place.

Take notice of advertisements still printed in magazines and newspapers. How often do these provide a physical address? Rarely. How often do these ads provide you with a sense of WHERE that business or service IS?

Not long ago, your telephone number indicated WHERE you lived. No more.

We no longer need to think about how to reach a physical place in a car. We punch in an address, or say the name of a business, and a device directs us. No critical thought on our part about direction, relationship to our current location, or the route between.

I know that some people must believe that irrelevance of place is an advance for humanity, and I imagine that many more people have never thought about this trend one way or the other.

But for me, no story is satisfying without geographical context. I've even interrupted people who were telling a joke and asked, "WHERE did this happen?" Knowing where something happened rounds out its meaning for me. Place is as important as historical dates or a human conversation to informing the truth in a story.

And no matter what technology we invent that obscures the importance of place, we remain biologically dependent on physical places for our nourishment, our water, the air we breathe. Physical place, and more specifically the ecological health of physical place, supports our lives.

I also believe that a connection to place, an affiliation with its weather, soil, vegetation, life, and seasonal processes, supports our emotional health as human beings. Curiosity, understanding, and

even affection toward these elements of place glean for us wonder, resilience, and delight in our daily lives. These are among the qualities that make us human, and these gifts are enhanced when we share our insights of place with others.

Speaking now in a regional sense, I know that I am strongly affiliated with THIS PLACE—the ancient, water-carved, beautiful, brooding, ecologically mature yet diverse, hospitable yet mysterious hills, ridges, and plateaus of Northern Appalachia. It is a marvel that despite so much historic abuse, neglect, even contempt of nature here, this PLACE still exudes so much of its native character. That's an enigmatic reality that I love. And it stimulates much of what I write and what I'll try to say here today.

I also know when I began to feel this allure, this connection to THIS place. This feeling first arose when I was very young and my father and uncles took me fishing and hunting on the streams and in the wooded hills of Fayette and Greene counties, Pennsylvania.

It is informative to me that I can remember so much about those excursions. I can recall the winey smell of the fall woods, and the metallic tang of the taste of the air above a trout stream in the early spring. I can still feel the struggle against gravity on the hillsides and hear the "lonely" but compelling calls of unseen crows. I still feel the absolute magic in the first sight of a deer appearing in the woods. And though I seldom hear it these days, when I do hear a ruffed grouse drum, I take it as a sign of my connection to place that I involuntarily check to make sure that concussive rumble is not the errant beat of my own heart.

Like most men of their time in this place, my father, uncles, and all my outdoor mentors were brought up in hard times and war, acclimated to hard work and sacrifice. That experience, I sensed, bred into them a sternness and asceticism that was the only way to adapt to the challenges they'd faced. Generally, they wore that sobriety like they wore a workshirt. But I saw them become as light-hearted as boys on the trout streams and in the deer woods. These seasonal pursuits were release and reprieve, well-merited diversions from labor and obligation.

For me it was different, perhaps because I was born at a less demanding time in history, a time that afforded the luxury of pondering things a little more removed from the crunch of immediate need. But for me fishing and hunting in the hills felt like more than diversion, more than mere recreation. Fishing and hunting felt like a way to approach something profound, something fundamental and lasting. They were authentic experience, an avenue toward the authentic center of things. These outings were an introduction to communion with place, and spawned the reverence for place I still feel today.

You will all understand this: At some point, then, I felt a compulsion to share my thoughts and feelings about this place through writing. I do not remember exactly when I first thought this was a good idea; I just started imagining it, then after a lot of procrastination, a common writers' trait, began actually doing it. So, my early attachment to place partly explains why I'm standing before you today, which brings me to the second explanation for why I'm here, hoping to offer you something of value.

Over years, I wrote myself into a niche as an "outdoor writer." I wrote for all the outdoor magazines, and outdoor columns in newspapers. I reached a point where editors of these publications would publish everything I submitted. I made modest, but steady, money doing it that supplemented my "day jobs" over the years, a fact in which I take pride.

But at some point, I felt unsatisfied and wanted to be justified in thinking of myself not as an "outdoor writer" but simply as a "writer." I saw this organization (WCoNA) as a path toward that, so I've been drawn to it. This goes way back to PJ Piccirillo's seminars at Pitt Johnstown about the need to establish a brand and canon for Northern Appalachia's literature. An outgrowth of attending those seminars was the opportunity to submit work to Northern Appalachia Review.

That was a new outlet for me, outside my "niche" where I wrote about different themes beyond the traditional "outdoor" genre. NAR had deadlines I did not want to miss, and editors I admired and did not want to fail. I wrote about people and work and especially about nature in a different voice than I had before, but always informed by and in recognition of place, this place.

So, this organization has mattered to me, because it has helped me think of myself as a "writer," which is an enormously important step in doing work with words.

Speaking of doing work with words, I'd like now to revisit the theme of this conference— "Stories Matter."

When I was thinking about what I might say today, I was helped by two books I happened to be reading at the time: "*Braiding Sweetgrass*" by Robin Wall Kimmerer, and "*Arctic Dreams*" by Barry Lopez.

Kimmerer is a botanist and member of the Potawatomi Citizen Nation.
Her book is a collection of essays in which she reconciles her training in formal western science with stories about nature and place told to her by elders in her Native American culture, two very different ways of viewing the natural world

Her central message in the stories in Braiding Sweetgrass is "Gratitude to Place." I'd never thought about it in exactly Kimmerer's way before, but I did feel it. I've always felt it.

Barry Lopez is likely known to you. His work reveres many places where Lopez traveled, worked as a biologist, and explored the relationships between human culture and wild nature. His *Arctic Dreams* won the National Book Award and in it he uses a phrase that struck me the first time I read it with its clean brevity, its sagacity, and especially its humility. He wrote that we should/must approach landscapes (places) with "An attitude of regard."

An attitude of regard. In other words, be open to what the Earth can teach. Know that some aspects of it are unknowable, yet worthy of respect. Consider that some places are better, offer humanity more, if left as they are than if altered by us. That is so simple, but it says so much.

I feel that regard strongly toward THIS PLACE—our hills and streams and ridges and woods. And I thank Kimmerer and Lopez for affirming things inside that I'd never articulated, for the stories they wrote that mattered.

I that regard so strongly that I bristle, I rankle, when someone compares, in a negative way, the natural character of this, MY PLACE with other places acclaimed as "spectacular."

As a writer about place, and as one who does approach his native place with Lopez's "attitude of regard," I don't believe in the word "Spectacular." It's not in my vocabulary. I don't use it about places because proclaiming one place "spectacular," neglects, ignores, and overlooks the spectacular in other places that is less conspicuous, less obvious.

Often you will hear reference to Alaska and parts of the American West as spectacular. These regions certainly have their native inherent qualities, more than worthy of respect and recognition. But and I hope you'll remember this more than anything I say, the fact that OUR PLACE is not considered Spectacular in that same way is merely an accident of history.

Think about this: North America was settled (after its original habitation) by Europeans from East to West, due to the accidental juxtaposition and proximity of the European continent. It took settlement 300 or so years to make its way across North America, and by the time the concept of conserving some natural places for future generations arose and took hold in the American imagination and political policy, that which had been "spectacular" in our place was already destroyed, gone and forgotten.

The "Spectacular" here was not to be found in the wide vistas of the West, or on soaring mountains like Alaska's Denali. It was in, and of, forest. Vast and diverse communities of trees, and all the life associated with those trees, the regional micro-climate those trees fostered around themselves. We are not equipped, it is not within our realm of experience, to imagine the forest that was here.

But had instead this continent been settled in reverse, from west to east, and had a conservation ethic evolved before settlement reached the Appalachians, we would today admire the spectacular old-growth stands of oak, chestnut (had we not introduced blight), white pine and hemlock in the way we now exalt the Grand Canyon and the spine of the Tetons.

That forest is gone, of course. But there are vestiges, and forest has returned to so much of our region. It's not the forest that was here but we're glad to have it. And I know that as a writer about place and nature, I must be open to the "spectacular" that is here now and still on a more intimate scale—instead of vast landscape, I must be open to the spectacular in things I can hold in my hand, or taste, or hear. And these are all around us in many forms.

If we, as writers, can direct a reader's attention to that smaller-scale, more intimate "spectacular" within reach here in our place, then our stories matter.

If I may, now I would like to share with you what I think of as my own "tenets of writing." These are what they are because of my personal tendency to write primarily about the natural world.

No. 1: Get Out There

Just being outdoors here, in our place, lubricates my thinking, prompts ideas and different ways of seeing, and saying things.

No. 2: Pay Attention

I don't know how else to say this except "be open" to what's around you. Observe. This is a skill you can refine, like "muscle-memory." You can teach yourself to be attentive. Learn to take "mind-photos." Record details in your memory for recall later. It works with practice.

No. 3: Trust Internal Clues

Sometimes your unconscious mind will tell you what to write about before you've mentally formed the idea. Something you've seen will keep recurring in your brain. Some feeling will well up in response to a smell. Sometimes you'll dream something, which can be developed further through conscious thought. Trust these impulses as the beginning of a piece of writing work. They are precious.

No. 4: Take Risks

Don't be afraid to write about things you've thought, felt, or done that seem embarrassing. Readers like to know you, the writer, are human. They will grant you greater credibility if they know you recognize your own shortfalls and eccentricities.

No. 5: Learn Something, Teach Something

Especially, it seems to me, when writing about nature (*or history or science or mechanics*), self-education is so important. When you learn something on your own, you can communicate it to others through your words in more creative ways. You have more options in style, voice, and structure. And do your reader the service of helping him/her learn from reading your work. Convey intimate knowing detail. Those kernels of knowledge will resonate.

I'd like to close by reminding us that world-acclaimed writers from here, our place, wrote stories that mattered, in big ways.

Rachel Carson, from Springdale, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania did one of the great services to humanity when she wrote Silent Spring. Howard Zahniser, from Tionesta, Forest County, Pennsylvania wrote the Wilderness Act in a style that was uncharacteristically lyrical for legislative prose. Zahniser's Wilderness Act became a law of the United States in 1964.

Their stories mattered.

But a story doesn't have to have worldwide reach to matter. A story can matter between two people, the writer and the reader. Or, as the two participants in a story.

I wrote a story about making tea from bee balm, a native plant in the mint family with extravagant scarlet flowers, with my granddaughter when she was six years old.

Making that tea mattered to me, and I hope that when she reads that story in future years (I saved it for her) it will matter to her. I hope that whenever she sees bee balm in bloom, she'll remember her grandfather and things he tried to teach her. And, just as important, she'll know there are simple accessible ways to know this place well, and maybe she'll tell that story to someone else.

Thank you.

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