

The Irrational Logic of Our Bodies on the Landscape

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St. Cloud, Minnesota 2017

“I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE to the Flag,” I say in a slow-motion stage voice. Three hundred people at the town hall stand up and join in, “and to the Republic for which it stands. . .” I haven’t said these words since high school, and then I only sometimes stood. But water meetings in Minnesota start with the pledge, and today I am the master of ceremonies. The pledge is not done at meetings on workforce development or health care. Just water. The fundamental covenant that a government must provide safe water to its people.

The red tile floor of the St. Cloud Technical & Community College cafeteria is barely visible between the plastic tables with seven or eight people crowded round. I was a research scientist for a decade before working in politics. I’m now the water adviser to the governor of Minnesota. Our office has evolved a shared language of shorthand to operate at full speed. We refer to the governor, Mark Dayton, as GMD. Tonight is our halfway mark traveling the state. An undercurrent of anxiety pulls at me. Sleeping in roadside hotels, I miss my small children.

GMD planned to attend only the first town hall out of the ten, but he has come to them all. Given the front-page articles in rural papers, the hundreds of strangers shaking hands, the inspiring stories, and the healthy debate, the town halls are considered a success. But our allies and collaborators—environmental nonprofits (the Enviro), philanthropists, state government leaders—posed a warning and a question. Can people talking to one another really achieve anything?

Agriculture contributes ninety percent of the pollution in the Mississippi River, which flows less than a mile east of this cafeteria. That pollution contributes to a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico comparable in size to New Jersey or Rhode Island, depending on the year. Forty percent of lakes in Minnesota are not safe for fishing or swimming. At least ten percent of families with private wells drink water with enough fertilizer in it to be fatal to an infant and potentially cause cancer in adults. Toxic algae kills dogs when polluted lakes heat up in the summer. There is metaphorical, and literal, shit in our water. All this in the land of sky-blue waters, the land of 10,000 lakes, the land where we pledge allegiance to our country before talking about water.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer, who combines scientific expertise and indigenous knowledge, challenges us to see our relationship with nature as reciprocal. I was trained as a scientist to see nature as indifferent. To do otherwise was anthropomorphism. When I read Kimmerer, I know with my body, as much as my rational mind, that there is a depth to my relationship with nature that goes beyond admiration when I step off city streets. As a researcher, I studied how ancient periods of climate change in the geologic record affected ecosystems, and the other way around. My last project focused on the evolution of grasslands. For all that I learned modeling aquatic ecosystems and calculating changes in water chemistry, science did not teach me to understand people as part of environmental systems. I struggle with the question: Does nature love me back?

GMD's environmental concerns came late in his administration. It started with a headline about southwest Minnesota having no swimmable lakes. Outraged, he dropped the "Buffer Bomb." No discussion, no vetting, no meetings behind the scenes to negotiate with interest groups. Industrial agriculture provides no barriers to prevent chemicals from flowing directly into rivers, streams, and lakes. GMD put all his political power into passing a law requiring a buffer of perennial vegetation between waterways and row crops. The regulation was punctuation in a conversation that had made no progress for decades. A top-down command.

Driving to the town halls, I see the miles of grass and wildflowers filtering out farm chemicals along streams and rivers. It is thrilling. These ribbons of green are evidence of my daily work at the capitol.

But passing and implementing the law wasn't easy. Pushback came from all sides—even from within GMD's cabinet. The Enviro took great offense when they found out about the Buffer Bomb along with the public: it was their right to shape and lead any environmental law. They are still furious. Insulted. And the buffer law only reduces a fraction of the pollution. Some would rather have no regulation than an imperfect one.

The buffer law, on its own, is not enough to protect drinking water or make lakes safe. It cannot save the Gulf of Mexico. Enviro want the governor to finish the job with additional regulations on farmers. GMD, nicknamed the "Buffer Bully" in the media, saw the next step as building a water ethic—a bottom-up approach. Get people to talk about water. Talking ignites action. *It started with a headline.*

While I am leading the town halls and campaign, I am not sure what a *water ethic* looks like. No matter our individual level of care, the systems in which we live, work, and play create pollution. I don't see the logic. Without bigger, more systematic change, are our individual actions meaningful?

After the pledge, I tell the audience where the bathrooms are and introduce the community college president. The gears in motion now, I sit to the side where I am out of the way, but still there—just in case. Only six months ago GMD fainted on live television.

Applause rings through the room as GMD steps on stage. He wears khakis and a maroon polo shirt with a suit jacket. His asymmetrical smile makes everyone forget he is losing and catching his balance as he walks across the stage.

GMD opens his mouth to the brightly lit room. He breathes in the crowd: "Welcome. . ." That is when they charge.

As if on cue, as if this were a dance performance, a group of twenty-something-year-old protesters bursts through the doors yelling into megaphones. They form a line clad in jeans and black

sweatshirts. One wears glasses, another a bandanna. They take off overstuffed backpacks and place them on the floor.

I'm hyperaware of my body with its kitten heels, blue dress, stud earrings. This is all that is between the protesters and GMD. I fill my lungs, ready.

The protesters talk about Enbridge's proposed Line 3 pipeline, carrying Canadian tar-sand oil from Alberta to Superior, Wisconsin. They speak of our need to stop building fossil-fuel infrastructure that locks us into irreversible changes in climate and inevitable spills and leaks. It doesn't matter that I agree with them. It's their overstuffed backpacks, not their words, that unsettle me.

My phone buzzes, a message from GMD's assistant: "Tell Arnold to stand down." I realize a bodyguard is beside me, his bulk moved into place with the grace of a ballerina. He's a cat ready to pounce. I hand him my phone to see the message. At our first big water summit, an event with a thousand attendees, protesters coordinated with security. *We'll charge from stage left. Would you mind coming from stage right? No problem. Feel free to stay for lunch. Maybe* (they did). But these protesters are not known characters, not affiliated with an organization.

In his youth, GMD protested. I can hear his voice in my head: *Give them the microphone, let them be heard. If they won't leave after they have said their piece, end the meeting. Don't fight for control, don't fight.* This year the legislature passed a bill to increase charges for protesting from a misdemeanor to a gross misdemeanor—a direct response to Black Lives Matter. GMD vetoed it. This was not simple, as the bill also would have allowed undocumented immigrants the ability to get driver's licenses. The bill was like a sandwich made with fresh bread and shit in between. A classic political move: the poison pill.

I look out at the sea of faces, more old than young. The room is waiting. The protesters aim their speeches at the soda machines against the back wall, the closest thing to decoration in the cafeteria. They are in tennis stance, ready for balls to come flying from any direction. GMD clasps the podium with both hands for balance.

I recalculate the meeting schedule. The goal is for the crowd to be heard. My biggest worry has been how I might not hear what I don't expect.

"Booooo," shouts someone from the front of the room.

"Go home," comes from the back of the sea of tables.

GMD shushes the crowd, "It's their First Amendment right to speak. Let them say what they have to say."

One protester hands the megaphone to the next. She begins a crisp call to action, touching on treaty rights, the headwaters of the Mississippi River, and farmlands. She passes the megaphone to the next person, who says pipelines are icons of inaction. We must do something about climate change. Like dominoes smacking, one picks up after the other.

I want clean air and clean water. Why am I in heels and a suit jacket? Under what circumstances would our roles be reversed? Is it a difference of personality? Am I giving less because I'm not as loud?

Being part of the system makes me crass about contradictions. Wins have narrow margins—just squeeze through. Political parties in Minnesota straddle mining communities up north and urban professionals. The parties believe they have no choice but to say *yes, and*. While sentiment is strong for action on climate change and environmental justice, it is also there for massive projects like pipelines and copper-nickel mines that make climate change and pollution inevitable. *Yes, and. . .*

In the crowd, I recognize the leaders of farm groups; each sits near an exit. I think of how they know the environment through the muscle memory of plowing fields. Ahead of announcing the town halls, the commissioner of agriculture and I called each of them so they wouldn't be taken aback. It took three hours. The commissioner joked, "It could be worse, we could have diarrhea," and, "If you want loyalty, get a dog." The farm groups stayed neutral on our budget request to the legislature for the town halls. They helped us find farmers to speak about clean water practices. Their help is the equivalent of finding a rose in your high-school locker from someone you didn't think even liked you.

Conspicuously missing from the town halls are the urban Enviros who work to protect water and natural landscapes. Early in the planning, we invited them to tell us what they hoped for in the meetings. They said, “You will achieve nothing by going out and listening to people.” The philanthropic organization that had previously funded GMD’s public engagement declined this time, given the Enviros’ boycott. This is the equivalent of your steady sweetheart breaking up with you in a YouTube video.

In *The Organic Machine*, the historian Richard White says, “One of the great shortcomings—intellectual and political—of modern environmentalism is its failure to grasp how human beings have historically known nature through work. . . . Environmentalists stress the eye over the hand.” Media headlines focus on urban/rural divides, but I suspect the divide is less about where we live, and more about how directly our income is tied to the land.

GMD’s cabinet expressed a similar sentiment to the Enviros: *We already know what we need to do, and we won’t make progress sitting around talking*. It was with rank-and-file staff and local governments that I found excitement and support. Is hope tied to hierarchy? As in, the higher one gets, the less one believes in change? Or the more invested one is in the status quo?

An urban legislator left me a howling voicemail about a farmer who spoke at a town hall. “He said MOTHER NATURE will heal everything. HOW COULD YOU PUT PEOPLE LIKE THAT ON STAGE? Why didn’t you have university scientists and REAL EXPERTS?” For each town hall I invite speakers from the local community: farmers, high-school teachers, public-health workers, mayors, tribal chairmen, and local-government staff. Some are captivating speakers. Some express great distrust in government. Some fumble in search of the right words. I cross my fingers when they take the microphone and listen, unsure how to integrate the tales of lived experiences with scientific data.

Each protester has spoken, and they fall silent. They stand still, blinking and catching their breath, the laser from the projector in their eyes. I realize they might not have scripted an end.

GMD addresses the protesters in a neutral tone, “You’ve had your chance to speak, will you now let everyone else in the room have their chance?” The room watches to see what will push him over the edge. I’m not worried about his temper. I’m worried about him fainting again—he has been standing at the podium longer than planned. Not that he doesn’t have a temper. . . . The previous spring I had to apologize on his behalf after an altercation at a prayer breakfast. I didn’t see what happened. I was just given a business card and a bible verse by his assistant and asked to follow up.

GMD gazes out at the room. The protesters look at each other, look to the crowd, and back at each other. One starts up, again, talking into the megaphone. This time he rambles, his voice falters. Once you have control, do you give it up?

Someone in the crowd claps. More people join in. Palms turned to drums, tables of farmers, local-government staff, environmentalists, engineers, grandparents, schoolteachers, deer hunters, retired mine workers, union members, cabin owners, and college students release their clenched shoulders and the grim thoughts that shot through them with the takeover. We each have a right to speak, but there is no requirement that anyone listen.

The protesters try to yell over the applause. They look at each other, resume tennis stance. How far is far enough? How far is too far? The protesters look at the clapping crowd, look at each other. And then they fold. They walk out to the slap of water on rocks, the three hundred pairs of hands here for the process. It’s a Minnesota Nice “fuck you.” Democracy overlaid on democracy.

What falls out of the protester’s backpack is a love potion. The surprise of their arrival and the relief of their departure make us look around. We are grateful for the dingy room, for one other. We didn’t know if we were safe, now we do. We smile bigger, talk louder, laugh quicker. Like Popeye with his spinach, we have guzzled their youthful energy.

A dairy farmer takes the podium, a public-works director bounces across the stage. With each speaker, a knot inside me loosens. Finally, our destination, what all this was meant to prepare us

for. I stand at the podium, “The first discussion question . . .” Three questions will lead the room through a logical conversation on what people value about their lakes, rivers, and drinking water, what they want to see improved, and how they want that to be achieved. At the end of the town halls I want to have to-do list, a plan. Is the next step legislative? What meetings do I need to schedule? Whom do I need to call?

I pull up a chair at the table with GMD and an assorted group. He has told me, “The day I ask for talking points is the day you can take me out back and shoot me.” But I still need to take notes on what he says.

On each table there are giant pieces of paper and markers, instructions for the phone app to enter discussion points, and blue spherical pieces of paper for sharing individual thoughts. The blue paper is meant to be water drops but could just as easily be tears.

“What you did with the Buffer regulation” the woman looks into GMD’s face. He squints at her and leans forward to hear. We all lean in, elbows on the table.

“It was the right thing,” she says.

I smile, but then I feel the itch, the discomfort of having fought two legislative sessions to keep this law. I want to ask her, *was the Buffer Bomb worth losing the House and Senate?* I’ve heard from more than a handful of legislators that the last election was a response to an urban Governor regulating rural communities. It is unbearable to consider what we could do if we didn’t have divided government.

“Buffers aren’t about protecting water, they are a government taking of my property!” an older man at the table says.

“My family drinks bottled water. It’s just what we have to do in farm country,” a younger man with a baseball cap says.

“What does someone sitting in an office building in Saint Paul know about farming my land?” a middle-aged woman snaps.

One truth completes another. Farm bankruptcies are on the rise—as are farmer suicides. It is a tradeoff: remove acres of crops and potential profits to reduce pollution. There is evidence that over time clean water practices can lead to higher yields and increased

profits. But farmers depend on loans, and neither local banks nor Wall Street's secondary markets are interested in long-term outcomes. Do the banks even realize they've institutionalized the poisoning of our lakes and rivers? And in our democracy, nature doesn't get a vote. Future generations don't have a voice.

When I started working for GMD, I spoke with Greg Page, former CEO of Minnesota's food giant Cargill, the largest privately held corporation in the United States. We met at a grocery store café near his home. He wrote out an equation on a sticky note: his take on the Buffer Bomb.

$$\text{Dissatisfaction} * \text{Vision} * \text{Quality of the first step} > \text{Resistance} / \text{Trust} \\ D * V * FS > R/T$$

Simply put, the desire for change has to be greater than the resistance to change. And nothing happens without trust. Most people aren't aware of water pollution. It often has no taste or smell (low dissatisfaction). GMD announcing the buffer regulation without talking to interest groups felt like an attack on rural communities and the Enviro-s (low points for the quality of the first step). No one trusts government (resistance is high). A new regulation is maybe not so different from how, despite my agreeing with the protesters, their shouts felt like a punch to the gut—maybe whenever someone else forces punctuation into our lives, our impulse is to punch back.

I check the phone app to hear the discussions uploaded from other tables: *Get rid of the layers of government; change requirements for manure management, for the good of others and not just ourselves.*

My phone alarm goes off. "Time for the next question," I whisper to GMD.

"We are having a good conversation," he protests. "I am so interested in the dairy farmer."

"I have the schedule all worked out," I assure him. He looks as though I turned off a movie right before its climax.

At the podium I clap cymbals together. The shrill ring reverberates through the room. "For the second question, please go to a

different table with people you have not yet spoken to.” The room unfolds as people stand and make way for one another. GMD moves over a few tables.

I jump off the stage, look up, and I realize I’m in front of two legislators. I shake their hands and thank them for coming, a smile plastered on my face. They voted against funding the town halls. “It would be letting the camel’s nose under the tent,” the environmental committee chair had told me. It’s a common saying at the capitol, but thrown at me, the phrase rolled around in my head for days. The committee chair didn’t see any harm in the town hall meetings, but in a divided government, he did not want to be seen working with the other political party.

In what feels like a few seconds, we move tables for the third question, cabinet members make closing remarks, and then it is over.

“Thank you,” a large man comes up to me. My hand disappears into his.

My phone pings, it is GMD’s assistant: “Come outside.” I take my leave from the man before hearing about his appreciation for the meeting or his problem with a permit.

The fresh air feels good. I am amped up. Steam rises off my suit jacket. GMD and members of his cabinet huddle with reporters. GMD’s assistant intercepts me, “That group over there. Can you talk to them? GMD has an early morning and it’s a long drive back.”

I walk up to an older man and woman. “I’m the governor’s adviser. I heard you had some concerns?”

“The county won’t listen. . . . If your office told them to do something, they would.” The woman’s eyes are big, her hands wave, emphasizing her words.

“So you have a dispute about the land by the lake?” I ask. The couple are emotional, and until they get their angry out, the details gum up. If this is the county’s jurisdiction, the main service I can provide is listening. At every town hall people come to me with stories of government permits—county, state, federal agencies, none coordinated, not even within the same level of government—that sound like allegories of bell jars and spider webs.

I watch GMD and his assistant walk to the black SUV, get in, and drive away. I let out a sigh and my shoulders relax.

Back inside, I hear my name, “Anna!” I turn and see an acquaintance who works in corporate sustainability. His perpetually flushed cheeks and blond cowlick make him look freshly roughed up by the wind.

“Did that make you hopeful?” I ask.

“People came. They talked to each other,” he smiles.

“But what does talking translate into?” I ask.

“The point is that people were here,” he says.

“Is that enough?” I feel the prickles of fatigue. My adrenaline running dry.

“It means something,” he smiles.

The room empties. A vacuum roars. We keep talking. It feels good not just to listen, but to exchange. I am no longer hosting.

At a bar we hash out our ideas. We want outcomes as crisp as our nachos, as refreshing as our beer. It’s past midnight. A new kind of energy pours into me: possibility. I don’t want to go to bed—I want to run a marathon.

The Governor’s Mansion

“Do you remember the St. Cloud protest?” I ask.

GMD wears a flannel shirt, and one of his socks has a hole in it. The white tablecloth of his dining room is littered with M&M wrappers and Diet Coke cans. There are homemade cookies on a gold-rimmed plate, and the sun streams through a window overlooking the garden with its fountain.

“I was ready,” I tell GMD.

“Ready for what?” he asks.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I know that he is fatalistic—if someone wants to attack him, they will. I close my mouth and shrug.

“What would I have told your sons if something happened to you?” The tone of his voice says, *Are you fucking kidding?*⁹ *My life is not more important than yours.*

I was prepared to protect him—from fainting, from protesters, from inconvenience.

“I really enjoyed talking to all the people at the town halls,” he smiles.

A strange unease comes over me. “Enjoy” is not a word I would use for the town halls. I was counting the minutes: delivering a show. But for him, it was always about the people, in any and all forms. That was why he traveled the state. He was focused on making connections, not achieving tangible outcomes.

I think back to the ten times I raised my voice to pledge our country and the hundreds of voices that joined at each town hall. I didn’t stand for the pledge in high school because I felt like the god it referenced was not mine. But what links my homeroom in Providence, Rhode Island, and water town halls in rural Minnesota is less about the words or what they mean. It is the power of voices joining together. We connect with one other when we do the same thing at the same time.

At the town halls, an old man talked about farming his family’s homesteads. A tribal chairman spoke so quietly it forced stillness over the large crowd. A group of older people in blue, matching pro-mining shirts threatened to cause a disturbance and then dissolved into discussion tables. A Somali member of a school board in southern Minnesota filled a table with his daughters. All this I hold onto. I treasure. But when the change happened inside me, I was standing outside a bathroom in north-central Minnesota. I was with a group of protesters who just a few minutes before, in the main meeting space, had shoved phone cameras in my face shouting questions. One had a white plastic mask pushed up on her forehead like sunglasses. Outside the bathroom, we circled up and spoke of being mothers. That was when we looked each other in the eye. It resolved nothing. We were just a circle of mothers seeing each other’s beating hearts. Perhaps being in relationship with nature starts with relating to each other.

From these town halls I hold onto the truths that go beyond science. Science in our lives is part of larger narratives. And what we believe in are our stories, not science. We live by our stories.