THE REVOLUTION WHERE YOU LIVE

SARAH VAN GELDER
Cofounder of *YES! Magazine*
Foreword by Danny Glover

STORIES FROM A 12,000-MILE JOURNEY THROUGH A NEW AMERICA

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—Gustavo Esteva, writer, speaker, and founder of Universidad de la Tierra

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—Judy Wicks, cofounder of Business Alliance for Local Living Economies and author of *Good Morning, Beautiful Business*

"Sarah van Gelder's genius, in the spirit of Wendell Berry, is to celebrate the women, men, and children who cultivate love for their places in all their diversity. This book inspires us to regenerate our connections with each other and to the ecology of our place on earth."

—Madhu S. Prakash, author and Professor of Education, Penn State College of Education

The Revolution Where You Live

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Stories from a 12,000-Mile Journey through a New America

Sarah van Gelder

Foreword by Danny Glover

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Front cover, top (left to right): detail from mural at Growing Power Chicago; George Price, permaculture farmer and professor; detail from mural in Newark, New Jersey; Jewell Praying Wolf James, carver, Lummi Tribe. Photo of author on cover by Paul Dunn. All other cover and interior photos by Sarah van Gelder unless otherwise noted. Maps by Evan Winslow Smith. Produced by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services. Copyediting by Melody Lacina. Design and composition by Nancy Koerner.

To my partner, Dee Axelrod,

who supported my wild idea

of a four-and-a-half-month solo road trip,

then gave me writing solitude

when I needed it and feedback on the ideas

and writing when I needed that—

and if that wasn't enough,

she agreed to marry me

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Foreword

In a speech delivered at Manhattan's Riverside Church in April 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated:

> We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. . . . This may well be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos or community.

We live in a world in which chaos seems to be winning out: police shootings of unarmed black men and women, war abroad and in our streets, the devastating impacts of climate change, the hardships faced by millions of Americans struggling to feed their families and make ends meet. Yet Dr. King stated that we have a choice—we can choose community. But what does community mean in this moment in history? As a starting point, it means that we reimagine our relationships to one another and to the natural world. This book, written by

Sarah van Gelder, tells the stories of people around the United States who are reimaging the world around them and, in doing so, creating new possibilities for community. Sarah spent nearly five months traveling 12,000 miles around the United States, learning how people are creating a revolution right where they live. She visited Native American reservations that—in spite of their historic social and economic struggles as stewards of the planet Earth—are blocking attempts by fossil fuel companies to mine coal and engage in fracking for oil and gas. Sarah visited Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, and small towns in Appalachia and New Mexico, learning from people working to create just and locally rooted economies. She visited leaders in Greensboro, North Carolina; Harrisonburg, Virginia; Ithaca, New York; and Moab, Utah, who are building bridges of justice and understanding between divided communities.

When I travel the world as a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador, I see time and time again the essential role of communities. It is people working locally, joining together to create powerful movements of resistance and reimagining what's possible that gives me hope. In the United States, it is in local communities that we see the impact of toxic pollution, poverty, and poor schools, which together create the world's highest rates of incarceration. But it is also in communities that we see people working to protect and restore water quality, stepping up to create safe and liberating spaces for children to learn, and reaching out to the formerly incarcerated to welcome them home.

It is in community that we can stop the environmental pollution that causes children in South Central Los Angeles to have a third of the lung capacity as children in Santa Monica. And it is in intergenerational communities that children can learn from their elders to master the tools needed to live intelligent, creative, and involved lives. Even the global movement to pre-

vent climate disruption and resist projects like the KXL pipeline are most powerful when they are based in the communities most affected.

Paul Robeson once said that each generation defines its own history. We, too, will be defined by the history we make. Like Robeson, we live in a time of crisis. It is a time of racial injustice, poverty, war, and irreparable damage done to nature. It is a time of growing divides between the wealthy and the poor, and a time when the working class struggles to hold on to what they have. Those crises test who we are as people.

> Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

Those are the words of Dr. King. It is in reimaging our relationships to each other and to nature that we make the sort of change Dr. King advocated, a change centered in our souls. This book tells the stories of people stepping up to make soul-centered changes. Often these local actions are not dramatic, and no one has all the answers. But each of us has something to offer, and in reading about the people Sarah interviewed and in learning of the changes they are bringing about, it becomes clearer that the chaos of the early twenty-first century is just part of the story. The community Dr. King spoke of is also a possibility for the human future, and in neighborhoods, reservations, small towns, and struggling cities, people are working every day to make that possibility a reality. That is a deeply hopeful sign that the beloved community Dr. King spoke of may, after all, be the legacy we leave our children.

DANNY GLOVER
San Francisco

A Big Revolution at a Small Scale

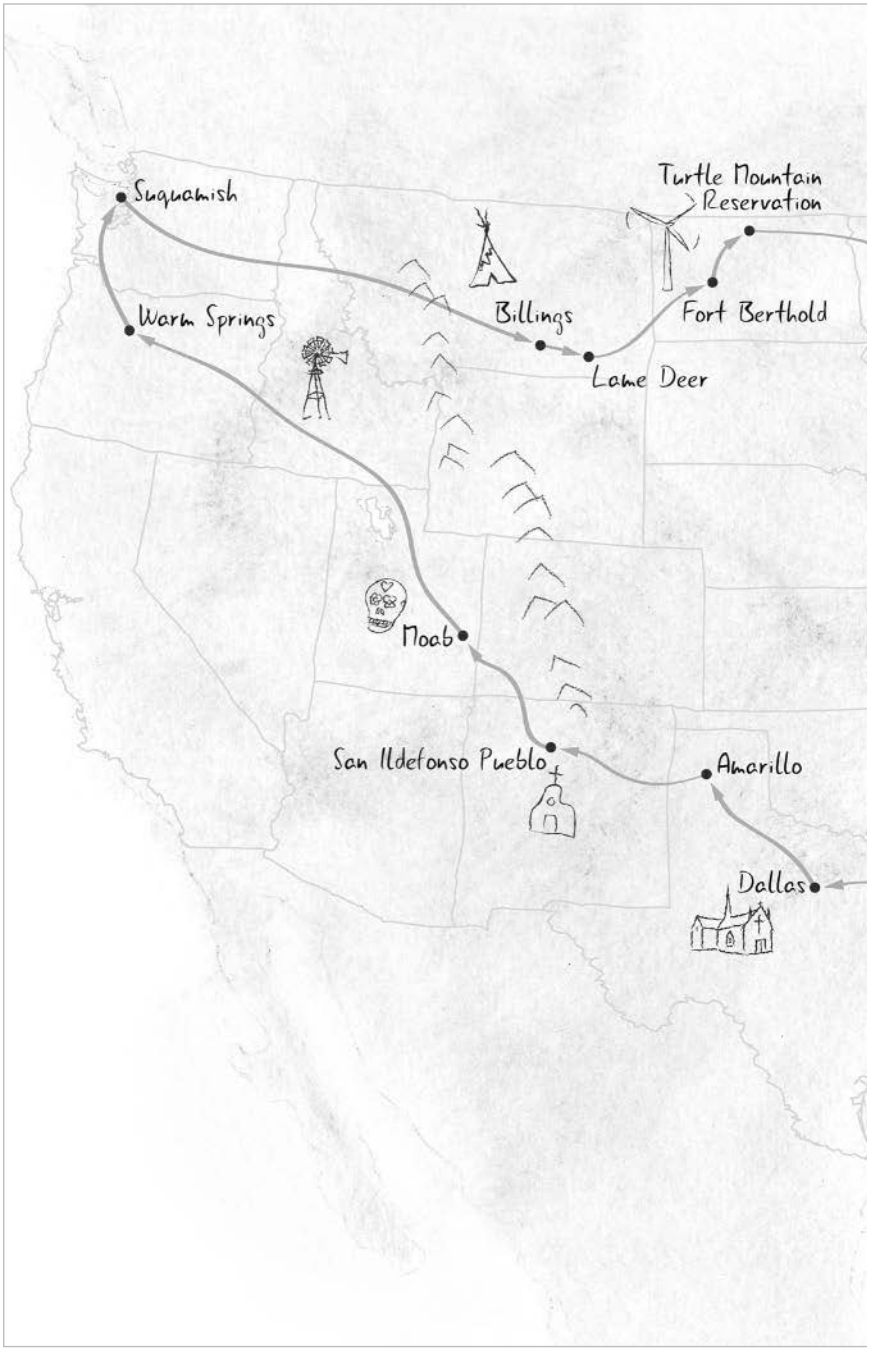
On August 15, 2015, I climbed into a 12-year-old, four-cylinder pickup truck and began an 18-week journey.

I drove 12,000 miles, starting at home, in Suquamish, Washington, an Indian reservation just west of Seattle, and visited 18 states, five Indian reservations, five industrial cities, and a smattering of small towns.

I camped on a mountaintop in the Kentucky coalfields and stopped in at the renowned Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, where Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. came to talk strategy, and where Pete Seeger cowrote "We Shall Overcome." I visited Native American pueblos of northern New Mexico; I camped on a ranch in Montana, by Lake Erie in Ohio, and in a canyon outside Amarillo, Texas. People invited me to sleep in their spare rooms, and when I got snowed in, I stayed in a cheap hotel on the Idaho border with Oregon.

People I met on the road, *YES! Magazine* readers, and people who followed my blog tipped me off to good stories and introduced me to extraordinary people.

The reason for the trip? I wanted to find out what people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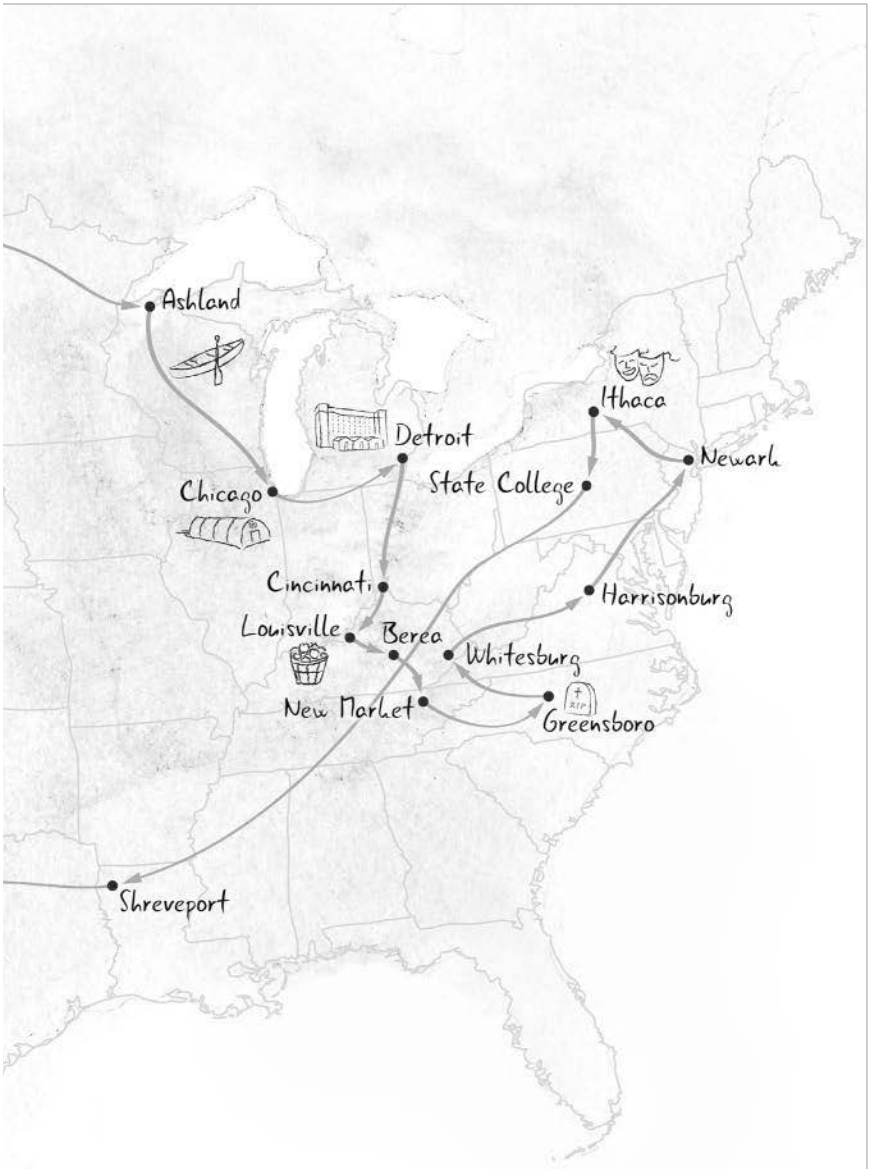


The 12,000-Mile Journey

are doing in their communities about poverty and inequality, the climate crisis, and racism. I especially wanted to find out if the places at the margins of society might have answers, and if those answers were early signs of a new society.

These are tough times. Fully half of Americans are poor,[1] while virtually all the economic gains since the 2008 economic crash have gone to a tiny elite. Isolation is making people depressed, sick, and powerless. The climate crisis is jeopardizing our future, and opportunistic politicians are whipping up racism and hate to win over voters angry about being locked out of the prosperity that others seem to enjoy.

The media keep us distracted with celebrity gossip and trivia, but they ignore the really big stories that will determine the sort of future we have.

I cofounded *YES! Magazine* 20 years ago to explore underreported stories that matter, particularly the stories that show how people are taking on some of the big crises of our time. If our current systems are failing—and I believe they are—then I wanted to look for evidence that people are creating a different sort of world.

We found lots of evidence as we researched the stories and issue themes, from the viral spread of local food to the national movement against mass incarceration. People around the United States and around the world are creating worker-owned cooperatives, urban farms, time banks, land trusts, and restorative justice circles. As they do that, they are also creating and finding more satisfying ways to live and leaving behind consumer values for things that matter more.

But is all this good work enough? In spite of well-crafted critiques, social movements, public opinion, and lots of hard work, inequality continues to grow; racism remains embedded in American culture; and there seems to be no way to stop big

corporations from outsourcing our jobs, contaminating our water, soil, and air, and flooding media channels with distraction and lies. Especially worrisome is that we are running out of time to rein in the heating of the globe, which is happening even more rapidly than scientists feared.

I left on my road trip to find out if there is still hope. Are there solutions that are up to the challenges of our time, and if so, what forms do they take?

I traveled through Montana and North Dakota, where I found Native and ranching communities that have shut down fracking and mining—and are developing a restorative vision for their region. In the Rust Belt cities of the Midwest, I found people resisting home foreclosures and working to build a locally rooted economy with room for everyone. On the East Coast, I found people grappling with the nation's legacy of racism and taking steps to heal and bring justice. Throughout the country, I found people creating worker-owned enterprises, building bridges across race lines, regenerating the soil, and developing their own place-based economies.

In difficult times, strong-man leaders often arise who offer an outlet for anger, and fear disguised as nationalism.

On the left, too, revolutions often have larger-than-life leaders who mobilize millions. Those who are hungry for change may be excited by these powerful movements. But they tend to spawn authoritarian systems, and we have seen the disasters associated with patriarchal, top-down change.

The revolution I discovered is decentralized, far less flashy, and better able to include everyone, especially those now excluded from wealth and power. It doesn't rely on self-important leaders. It undercuts the values that have driven our consumer-based culture, the isolation that sickens the soul, the racism and the greed that drive Wall Street and corrupt their collaborators

in government. Instead, it is about reclaiming our rights to what really matters—community, life, the healing and unfolding of each person, and the vitality and restoration of the natural world, including the threatened species with whom we share this Earth.

I came back from my travels believing that this sort of revolution is our only real hope in the face of ecological and social unraveling.

The only way such a big revolution can happen is, ironically, at a small scale. Only where we live, in our neighborhoods and cities and towns where we encounter each other and can know each other, can the transformation be deep enough. Only in community can we reconnect to each other, to the natural world, and to our own deepest values. That reconnection is our source of power and hope.

No charismatic leader or top-down revolution can bring about the needed change. Only by working together in the places we call home can we overcome isolation, embrace our differences, confront the extractive economy, and create the sort of world that will work for all of us, including nonhuman life.

We the People Love This Place

Where I began

As a seven-year-old child, I lived in India while my father was on exchange at a small university in Andhra Pradesh, and I've carried a question with me ever since. Why do we tolerate so much suffering? We humans are creative, brilliant, and inventive—why do we allow poverty?

The question arose from a particular event, although there were many similar moments during that year. One beautiful weekend day, my parents, my three sisters, and I set out in a borrowed jeep to a meadow on a hillside outside the city and spread out a blanket and a picnic.

It wasn't long before we realized we were being watched. Slowly, a small crowd of children had gathered. Some were my age, with baby sisters or brothers held on a hip. All were thin, wearing very little; all, we assumed, were hungry. They kept their distance—they just watched in a silent semicircle. Their steady gaze was impossible to ignore. The hard-boiled egg dried up in my mouth.

I understood something about suffering. Two years earlier, I had lost my mother, abruptly, to a stroke. Our family pulled together and cared for each other, but I entered an unfamiliar world then, just as I did when we moved to India.

I remember thinking, I don't understand this—I don't know why I should wake up every day knowing I have enough to eat and finish the day knowing I would have a safe place to sleep, when so many other children don't have those things. I remember thinking, I don't understand this now, but I won't forget, and when I grow up, I will do what I can to change this.

We didn't go on any more picnics, but those children stayed with me when I returned to the United States.

Some years later, living with my family in the Hudson Valley of New York State, I learned that my country, the country I pledged allegiance to every day in grade school, was conducting a brutal war on the people of Vietnam. I felt betrayed and, more importantly, deep grief and shame that we would inflict such harm on another people. And again, I felt some responsibility. This war was only possible because our family, like other American families, was paying for it with our taxes.

When I left college, I moved to Portland, Oregon, and arrived broke, knowing no one. I started working in the kitchen of a downtown restaurant. Later, I found a job in a tiny cooperative business that sold organic produce to Portland-area food co-ops. I was excited to be part of building a cooperative economy that was supplying fresh and nutritious food to co-op members, encouraging ecologically sound farming methods, and supporting farms that were not exploiting their workers. It felt great to be part of the solution.

Later, I traveled to Guatemala; as part of my preparation for the trip, I learned about President Jacobo Árbenz, a reformer who had instituted a moderate form of land reform intended to

allow poor farmers and indigenous communities to farm and move out of poverty.[1] The United Fruit Company wasn't having it, though. In 1954, the United States helped to overthrow the democratically elected government, and big corporations were again free to extract the wealth of Guatemala; small farmers, deprived of fertile land and a say in government, were impoverished. Worse, the dictators propped up by the U.S. government conducted decades of brutal warfare against their own people, especially against indigenous communities. Those who protested turned up dead by the side of the road. Terror enforced inequity, and, I realized with shame, my country was enforcing the terror.

Out of these experiences grew my commitment to do what I could to address the fundamental causes of inequity and violence—and, later, environmental degradation.

At the root of these issues, I think, is a system of beliefs and a power structure that allow big corporations and their enablers in government to extract wealth from our natural world and our communities. A worldview that devalues people of color and turns their land, labor, and bodies into extractable resources is also part of the picture. Until recently, many white Americans believed they would benefit from this system of corporate capitalism, or at least be immune from its worst excesses. But big corporations and the neoliberal policies they endorse have undermined the foundations of the middle class and turned mountaintops, waterways, and urban neighborhoods in the United States into sacrifice zones. They've rolled over small businesses with big-box stores, our homes with predatory lending, our schools with privatization schemes, and our medical care with bloated drug costs. Plus, they've pushed on us foods laden with chemical additives, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and antibiotics (which are creating resistant

forms of diseases that may soon make routine ailments into life-threatening catastrophes).

To tolerate this, we learn to numb ourselves, binge watching television series, taking drugs, or overeating. We separate ourselves emotionally from our communities, from the natural world, even from ourselves. Schools teach us this, as does advertising.

We learn to accept the demise of beloved outdoor spaces and of wild species. Maybe our obsession with cute animal videos is an emotional compensation for the pain of losing the diverse life forms that wink out on a daily basis.

We learn to leave family or community to chase down a better job, to leave our children in sterile child-care centers because we have to earn a few dollars working a low-wage job. We learn from watching nonstop images of violence in the media that other people are not trustworthy.

And we learn to use stuff to fill the hole left by isolation and to disassociate from our deepest values. We adopt the values of consumerism and learn to live vicariously via celebrities and to accept the illnesses that come from stress, toxins, and bad food.

I'm not sure why we allow all this. I think it must be because we are exhausted by trying to get by—many people are deep in debt and work multiple jobs to pay the rent. And we are mesmerized by corporate media. And we are isolated.

When we lose our connections to each other, we lose our power. We believe we can't change things and can't remake our world. We lose the ability to create an economy together, and we become dependent on big corporations for our livelihoods. And we become less able to resist advertising messages that tell us we are only worthy if we buy stuff. Our isolation, when coupled with economic hardship, makes us vulnerable to the hate speech of demagogues.

When we disconnect from the natural world, we lose a grounding, a sense of belonging to a larger community of life, as well as an experience of the wildness and freedom we share with our cousins of other species.

Building a community and a magazine

There are ways people can reconnect, though, even if society as a whole is fragmenting. When my husband and I started a family, we chose to raise our young children in a community we helped to form on Bainbridge Island, Washington, a short ferry ride from Seattle.

I remember a moment in 1991, when a group of some 15 of us looked around the circle at each other, took a collective deep breath, and committed to continue with the long meetings, difficult interpersonal issues, and financial risks in order to build a cohousing community.

We had five acres of land, the inspiration of Danish cohousing communities, and architectural drawings. Our plan was 30 small homes, mostly in duplexes, clustered close together. A parking lot in the corner would be the only area to accommodate cars. The remainder of the site would be for a common house, a large organic garden, an orchard, a pond, and a play field. Making the housing small and tightly clustered would keep the homes affordable and allow us to save open space for play, gardening, and nature.

The other thing we had was our belief in each other, a belief honed by many months spent working to bring this vision to reality.

What we didn't have was financing. We were facing the prospect of losing all the time and money we had invested because we couldn't find a bank that would loan us money to

construct the project. At this critical meeting, we had to decide whether to put in more of our own money, or cut our losses and go home.

We took the leap.

Not long after, a credit union came forward with the financing. "You're not that different from us," the president told us. "You are owned by your members—we're owned by ours." With their loan, our cooperative community was built, and a year later, we moved into one of the first cohousing communities in the United States.

The experience of living there was ordinary and extraordinary. Everyday life included the usual work of raising a family, plus additional obligations to co-manage the land, buildings, finances, and group dynamics of nearly 100 people. But it was also extraordinary. When someone was ill, or dying, the community surrounded them with love and help. When babies were born, we supported the family and shared the delight.

On the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the community, a group of confident, thriving young adults—whose earliest memories were of playing in the common house and woods and gardens—came back to share what it meant to them to grow up with the support of a loving community. Many who live their lives in traditional villages take this sort of support for granted. Yet in the world's wealthiest country, this simple community connection can be difficult to find or to create.

In 1996, we founded *YES! Magazine*. Like many startups, we had an energized small team, an idea we thought important, and a basement for our offices. But unlike many startups, we had no money, so the early years were difficult.

Still, we found that people were hungry for the sort of solutions stories we produced in *YES!* They wanted to know that a better way was possible. The questions I'd lived with all my

life—how can we end poverty, inequality, violence, and environmental harm, and build a world that works for all people and all life—were questions we asked every day. And we spent our time researching and reporting on the people around the country and around the world who were creating answers—often in their own communities.

Reporting on the answers helped them to spread as others picked up the ideas. Magazine themes, which included multiple angles on a topic, revealed something even more profound. These innovations formed something larger than individual stories of change; together they revealed the outline of a possible new world in the making.

Understanding my place, or trying to

Today I live on the Port Madison Indian Reservation across Puget Sound from Seattle, a place that, as a non-Native, I can never really call mine. The events since I moved here in the year 2000 have changed me, giving me a glimpse of an indigenous perspective on place, the natural world, how people once lived without police, and the role of elders and women. And living here has made me think deeply about racism and poverty, and about community-based transformation.

In 2000, I bought a small cabin on a quiet street in Suquamish, a small town on the Port Madison Indian Reservation. Suquamish is on the waterfront, looking east across Puget Sound toward Seattle. It's a checkerboard reservation, made up of land owned by the tribe, Native American families, and non-Natives. Once I knew I'd be living here, I visited the tribal museum to learn about this community.

When Chief Seattle was alive, I learned, a giant longhouse, more than 600 feet long, made out of split cedar logs and hand-

carved poles, was his home and the home of many others, and the center of the tribe's main village. People would come in canoes from all over the region and spend days at a stretch at Old Man House, as it was called, in potlatches and other ceremonies.

The U.S. government–appointed Indian agent ordered the longhouse burned down shortly after Chief Seattle died in 1866. When word reached Angeline, Chief Seattle's daughter, she paddled her canoe the 13 miles across Puget Sound from Seattle; according to the story, she arrived weeping, crying, "They're burning down Papa's home," and scooping water from Puget Sound with her hands to pour on the dying embers.

The people rebuilt separate homes and a church on the same piece of land. But in 1904, the military informed the tribe that it would be taking almost the entire waterfront to build fortifications to protect the nearby Bremerton Navy shipyards. The people were paid a token fee and moved off of the ancestral waterfront land, a segment of the small reservation they had retained as part of the Treaty of Point Elliott when they relinquished the land where the city of Seattle now sits.

The military never did use the land for fortifications to protect the shipyards. Instead, it sold the ground to developers who subdivided it for vacation homes. The state of Washington, recognizing the historic importance of the land where Old Man House had stood, bought three of those lots and turned them into a state park. About a mile away, my house stands back from the waterfront, among the trees, on a section of another of those lots.

A reluctant activist

Many of us know in a sort of general way that the land we live on was taken from an indigenous nation. I know the specifics. When I visited the tribe's museum and saw the map, I thought

that if there ever came a time when the tribe wanted to get back their stolen land, I would work with them.

Still, when I first moved there, I had no intention of stirring things up. I was in the intense early years of getting *YES! Magazine* off the ground, and I was raising two children, so I wasn't looking for a project. Also, I am deeply skeptical that well-meaning outsiders can move into a community and do good—especially a white outsider moving into a community of color.

But one day, one of my neighbors knocked on my door and invited me to join others in opposition to the tribe's plan to build housing in our mainly white neighborhood. At a big community meeting, non-Native residents of the reservation, one after another, stood up to tell the county commissioner that they didn't want "those people" living nearby. The tone got more hostile as the evening wore on.

I was paralyzed by confusion. I hadn't realized I was living in the midst of this anti-Indian hostility, and I had come to the meeting alone; I knew almost no one. Finally, though, I couldn't stay silent, and I spoke up for the right of the tribe to house their members on their reservation. One or two people applauded, but clearly I had violated the script—the flier that announced the meeting called on us to stay united against the tribe.

As I left the meeting, an older man followed me outside and introduced himself. His name was Ted George, he told me. I realized to my horror that this soft-spoken Native elder had witnessed 90 minutes of anti-Indian speeches, which were continuing inside the building. He thanked me for speaking up, we talked for a few moments, and we went on our way.

Shortly after came news that Chief Seattle's grave had been vandalized. The headstone had been pushed off its pedestal and

broken, and newspaper clippings about the housing project were left strewn around the gravesite.

I waited in vain for a religious or human rights leader to speak up so that I could join in offering condolences to the tribe. There were quotes from tribal leaders in the local papers conveying their shock and hurt, but silence from the nontribal community. Finally, I contacted the few people I knew in Suquamish and some friends from nearby Bainbridge Island, and I got back in touch with Ted George, who introduced me to other tribal elders. We called a meeting, and dozens of people attended who were likewise appalled at the desecration and the hostility. George and I became cochairs of a new group that formed that day in 2001, Suquamish Olalla Neighbors.

Over the course of several years, with the guidance of George and other tribal leaders, we educated ourselves about the tribe's history, values, and culture. We know enough about all the troubles of the reservation, he'd say. What we need to do is lift up the people who are bringing the community together and strengthening the culture. So we organized potlucks to celebrate those people and shower them with praise.

When hostile and disparaging statements appeared in the local newspaper or were voiced at public meetings, we countered them with our own statements of respect for the tribe and their rights.

In the past, hostile white neighbors had claimed to represent the entire nontribal community, but by showing up in large numbers at public meetings and by contributing letters to the newspaper, we were able to counter the influence of the anti-Indian voices.

In 2002, when a member of the Tribal Council contacted us, we joined with him and mobilized hundreds of supporters, nearby and across the state, to press for the return to the tribe

of Old Man House Park, the state park where Chief Seattle's longhouse once stood. The same group of opponents who had fought the housing project geared up in a big way to prevent the return.

The day the State Parks Commission made the decision is a day I'll never forget. After months of our organizing, packing meetings, writing letters, visiting the commissioners, and bussing in supporters to the hearing held 65 miles away, and then after hours of testimony on all sides, the commission voted unanimously to return the park to the tribe. The gym where the meeting was held erupted in drumming and singing, the elders stepping up to shake the hand of each commissioner, tears flowing freely. On the bus ride home, Leonard Forsman, who is now chairman of the tribe, thanked those who participated. "We have to do this work as Indians, because it's our duty," he told the riders. "You don't have to, but you did it anyway. For that we thank you."

This history is now preserved in the Suquamish Museum. And the community is now different.

Ten years later, the predictions that the tribe would mismanage the park or exclude white folks haven't come true. The park is better cared for than ever and open to all. Perhaps that is why, instead of increasing after the victory, the hostility has faded away. A couple of the more outspoken residents left town, but most others simply turned their activist attention in more productive directions—like caring for other neighborhood parks.

And the tribe continues to get stronger, recovering its culture and building an economy that supports its members. In 2009, the tribe opened its newly built longhouse, "The House of Awakened Culture," as a successor to Old Man House.

Many factors have shifted the culture of our small commu-

nity. The tribe's growing wealth as a result of income from its casino and other enterprises has allowed it to offer employment and services to addicted and traumatized members. Young people go to college, the tribe has built its own schools, and it is buying back land on the reservation. Plus, the tribe has given nearly half a million dollars over the last five years to nontribal educational and charitable programs.

The tribe is restoring the traditions of its people, including participating in an annual canoe journey, in which canoe families from dozens of tribes journey on the salt waters of the Salish Sea and sometimes out into the Pacific Ocean to reach the shores of the host tribe. I have been honored to be one of the pullers (paddlers) on those journeys for the last four years.

Suquamish Olalla Neighbors helps the tribe host canoe families from other tribes; dozens of volunteers bring food, serve, and clean up after sitting down with visiting tribal members for a meal. Former tribal chairman Bennie Armstrong told me after one of those occasions how he impressed the other tribal leaders, bragging, "When we want to do something, we just talk to our nontribal neighbors. We don't have to get out our lawyers or nothing!"

Are we going to lose it all?

In my community work, I could see real progress. We seemed to be resolving some important issues and learning to get along. And I'd hear the same thing from other place-based activists I talked to while researching articles for *YES! Magazine*. Locally, they got stuff done.

But at the larger scale, things seemed to be unraveling at a faster and faster pace. Extraordinary wildfires occur now every year. The ocean is acidifying, and just in the last year or so,

all the starfish have disappeared from our beaches here in the Pacific Northwest, and scientists don't know why. Other species around the world are vanishing. Ecological systems are stressed, and many are dying.

People's lives are coming unraveled as well. Millions lost their homes as a result of predatory lending and Wall Street speculation. In Seattle, where a tech boom is pricing people out of the rental market, thousands of homeless people camp in parks and under bridges, and more low- and moderate-income people are displaced every day. People of color, who had the most tenuous foothold in the middle class, are especially hard hit. Inequality of wealth, mirrored by inequality in political power, is undermining the foundations of our democracy. Endless warfare seems to be baked into life now, shattering the lives of thousands of veterans and millions of refugees.

I believed when I helped found *YES!* that we humans are capable of so much more, and over the years, we have uncovered a lot of evidence that this is so. Nonetheless, the big trends are deeply disturbing.

Maybe I was wrong when I thought that we could avert collapse or dystopia. Maybe the momentum and power of the extractive economy is simply too strong, and, in spite of millions who want something different, maybe the big money, the military-industrial complex, the prison-industrial complex, and the frackers and drillers will win. That seemed to be happening.

Where would the universe send you?

I was agonizing over these issues when I stepped into Akaya Windwood's Oakland, California, office during a visit to the Bay Area.

Akaya is someone who quickly cuts through the small

talk. As head of the Rockwood Leadership Institute, a national training program for activists, she works with people who care deeply about the world and who devote their lives to making change. She knows that many of those people pay a personal price for their work, and that their own well-being and the effectiveness of their work are intertwined. So when she asked me how I was doing, it was not a casual question.

I'm worried, I told her.

Did we miss our chance to stop climate change and to heed Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning about the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism?[2] And am I even looking in the right places for answers?

Akaya wasn't about to answer these questions. Instead, she asked another question. "If the universe could deploy the one small person that is you, what would it have you do?"

What I said next surprised me as much as it surprised her. "I'd go out traveling and see for myself."

I had not been thinking about a journey. But suddenly I knew that it was time for me to take a fresh look. It was time to go out and see for myself what was happening in our struggling communities. And I wanted to see if place-based work might hold clues to our future.

To find out, I would visit people at the margins of society who are the least embedded in the big institutions—big money, big corporations, big government—that reward status quo thinking. If the status quo is failing, I wanted to learn from those who have never been invited in, and those who have chosen to stay out.

I would avoid the power centers on the two coasts, and the progressive enclaves. I wanted to disrupt my comfort zone, meet new people, visit places I don't usually go, and learn what people care about and what they are doing about it.

"Once you say something like this, you can't un-say it," Akaya warned. When I left her office that day, I knew I was on my way.

Three questions

After talking with Akaya, I returned to Suquamish, and with a loan from the local credit union, I bought a small 2004 pickup truck and a tiny camper to fit in the truck bed. I negotiated time away from *YES!* and proposed to Steve Piersanti at Berrett-Koehler Publishers that I tell the story of my trip in a book. With the help of *YES!* colleagues, I started a blog site. Then I packed up my camper with food and bedding, clothes for the heat of a Great Plains summer and for a frigid Northeast winter, gifts to give away as I traveled, and a collection of books-on-tape for the long miles ahead.

As I prepared for my travels, I honed the questions I would be asking on my trip, and I narrowed them to these three.

1. **Is anti-racism work best done in communities?** At a time when Black Lives Matter was on the rise, and police were killing black people with impunity, could place-based work counter racism? In fact, is doing anti-racism work in person, in place, the only way to go deep enough to make it genuinely transformational? Were other people doing work like we did in Suquamish to combine justice and healing, and did it work?

2. **Climate change: Is local activism the way to both stop the extraction and transition to a sustainable future?** Before I left Seattle, I met with some of the kayakers who had earlier blockaded Shell Oil Company's huge drilling rig. The delays only lasted a few hours, but Shell did

eventually give up on drilling in the Arctic, and the Obama administration canceled future drilling leases. Likewise, the Keystone Pipeline encountered fierce opposition both nationally and in the particular places where the pipeline would run. I wondered, could we take a stand against fossil fuels and rebuild most effectively one community at a time?

3. **Can we build a new economy, rooted in our communities, that can support us and protect the natural world?** We need ways of meeting needs and providing livelihoods that don't extract wealth from most of the people of the world and from nature. Are communities succeeding in building locally rooted economies that offer real opportunities to all? If so, are they doing it without wrecking local ecosystems?

Fundamental to all of these questions is the one that comes back to why it all matters. Do these innovations enliven people, tapping into the creativity each of us has to offer, and do they, likewise, revitalize the natural world?

A snail on wheels

Before I left to see what I could learn about these questions, I did one more thing. I wanted to carry with me something that would remind me of where I was starting from and where I would return to. So I asked a young artist and Suquamish tribal member, Kate Ahvakana, if she would paint an image on my camper.

I thought she would do a small painting on the front of the camper where it extends over the cab. But she and her boyfriend, Toma Villa, who is also an artist, had a more ambitious

Kate Ahvakana, Suquamish tribal member,
with the images she painted on the front of the camper.

truck plan. Using spray paint, they turned the sides of the camper into a giant snail shell. Then they used ferns and cedar as stencils to paint patterns from the Pacific Northwest on the back. And on the front, Kate painted an emblem of Mother Earth, with two canoe heads, painted in Coastal Salish style, to represent a journey, and two paddles.

"The paddles face up to symbolize that you are traveling in peace and coming together with others to celebrate," Kate told me. "And the crescents and moons are to help you find the way back home."

I named the truck Caracol ("snail shell" in Spanish), because I would be carrying my home on my back. The snail also represented slow journalism; I would slow down enough to be

with people and hear their story on their terms, and let them tell me what was important to them.

Caracol is also the term the Zapatistas use to designate the autonomous villages that are creating their own governance and their own ways of life. Caracol, with Kate and Toma's art, reminded me of Suquamish, of home, of the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and of the potential for those of us who are non-indigenous to also learn ways of life characterized by respect and reciprocity.

What I Found

I started my journey in Montana and North Dakota, where I met Native women and men and ranchers who have stopped coal mining and fracking—and who are developing a vision for their region that can work for them and for future generations of ranchers and Native people. In Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, and other Rust Belt cities, I talked to urban farmers, worker-owners in the growing cooperative movement, and organizers building a new economy to take the place of the corporate economy that has failed these regions. In Greensboro, North Carolina, Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Ithaca, New York, I met people who are taking on their community's legacy of racism, and I traveled to Kentucky, where people are striving to restore Appalachian culture and to create a post-coal and post-racist future.

I met people working with the new activist mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and then traveled south and spent time with Christian leaders in Dallas, Texas, who believe that scripture tells them that all peoples, including Muslim immigrants, deserve to be welcomed. In a small Native pueblo north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, I met a young Navajo mother and midwife who is working to bring traditional birthing practices back to the com-

munity and to restore the health of the women who are in the best position to pass along well-being to the next generation.

The stories I found suggest that people are building power through place-based resistance and creativity, and as they do that, the outlines of a different society begin to emerge—one that is inclusive and healing; one that nourishes the soul and restores the landscape; one in which economies serve families and communities rather than the other way around.

Increasingly, people are seeing that these issues are not separable. Our health and well-being depend on the well-being of others, including nonhuman life. Reweaving relationships in the places we live provides a foundation for building a better world, and it gives people power that many didn't realize they had.

The people whose strategies were most powerful—that energized people and resulted in real change—do some combination of the following:

They build bridges among people who have been separated.
This work enables them to share power—especially across barriers of race and generation. They lift up the stories of those who have been silenced, and they reallocate power and wealth to those who have been excluded. They challenge systems that exclude and exploit. Done well, this effort builds trust and opens channels of connection that have long been blocked, unleashing unexpected joy and empowerment.

They reconnect to their ecological home.
For people in resource-rich areas, that may mean reclaiming the right to prevent their water, air, mountains, or soil from being sacrificed for the profit of extraction industries. In cities, it may mean urban farming, or protecting public use of green spaces and waterfronts. In any area, it means learning to deeply

understand the complex ecological systems we live within, so we can know how to protect and restore them while enhancing our well-being.

They rebuild the economy.
By building on local strengths and connecting to local needs, instead of using taxpayer subsidies to lure big corporations, they create livelihoods and a cycle of prosperity. These locally rooted economies avoid boom-and-bust cycles, reduce inequality, and restore dignity to work and entrepreneurship.

They take power.
They don't ask for permission, they just make stuff happen. They get involved in elections and government, but they set the agenda, rather than simply picking between column A and B, and they especially support the leadership of those who have been excluded. Locally based collaboration helps people break out of their isolation and experience their power.

Mural in Newark, New Jersey.

They carve out spaces for healing, creativity, and spirit. We come from many places in our communities, and trauma is one of them. Racism is a source of trauma that carries across generations, as are combat duty, sexual assault, and child abuse. Inclusive communities acknowledge the pain and offer safe spaces for refuge and healing. And they make space for celebration, beauty, and creativity, including spaces where art can tell the stories of the community.

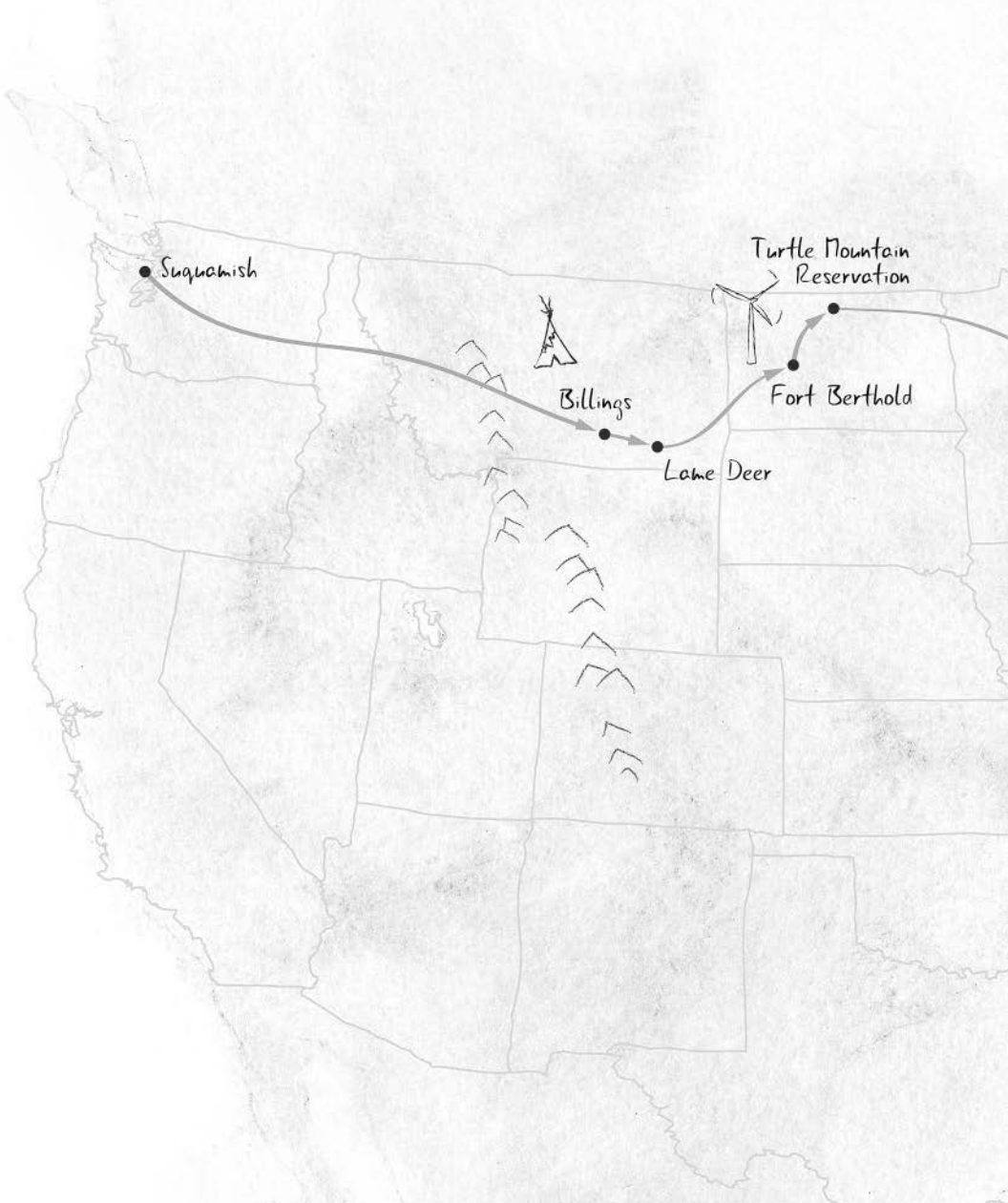
Those who are most effective distance themselves from the consumptive mindset that is part of corporate media—many have consciously set out to decolonize their ways of life and their ways of thinking. They recognize that *we the people* are sovereign, and we have the right to create a better world.

We the people call this place our home

On a newly painted mural in one of the blighted neighborhoods I visited in Newark, New Jersey, is the phrase "We the People LOVE This Place." Out of the connection each of us have to place—our physical and ecological place and also our human community—we are creating profound change.

"In fact, we the people call this place our home," the mural continues. "We the people": an assertion of our power and our right to create in our own communities a way of life that works for all of us. "This place": an acknowledgment that whether we live in an urban neighborhood, a struggling small town, a suburb, or on a reservation, our place is our home.

Love: We evolved in family and community, in a place, and our connections make us who we are and give us power. By reclaiming that power, and by joining across barriers of race and ethnicity, ordinary people are making change happen.



1. Setting Out, from the North/Northwest

1 Fire, Coal, and Climate in Montana

It was the height of wildfire season in the West as I took off, a record-breaking year, and the air got smoky as I reached Montana.

A few days into my trip, I woke up at a campground south of Missoula to find a thin layer of black-and-white ash covering my truck and camper and the nearby pine trees. Driving in search of breakfast, I heard on the radio of the death of several firefighters in north-central Washington.

The smell of burning trees had followed me across Washington, Idaho, and into Montana along with the haze and the sting in the eyes and throat. An older couple I met at a coffee shop that morning told me that fires are common, but this fire season started earlier and was more intense than any they could remember.

A storm may be coming through in a few days, a young clerk at a run-down gas station and convenience store told me. Business was slow, and he had time to talk. It could bring winds that would blow the smoke away, he said. But it could

also bring lightning strikes and set more fires in these bone-dry pine forests.

We risk passing tipping points where climate change takes on a life of its own, and it will be too late for humans to dial it back. We may have already passed some of these tipping points.

When more forests burn as a result of shifting climate patterns, and the burning releases more carbon, causing additional warming, we see this vicious cycle in action. Likewise, when receding ice cover in the Arctic leaves behind darker ocean waters, those waters absorb, rather than reflect, heat. Scientists have identified more than a dozen of these so-called positive feedback loops.

I thought about the salt waters where I live in Suquamish becoming acidic from the excess carbon, and the sea life that is dying. Then high in the Rockies as I crossed the Continental Divide, I saw evidence of the glaciers shrinking, year by year. For parts of the world that rely on runoff from mountain snowpacks, this is dire. I felt like I was witnessing a planet shift in real time. Instead of climate change being an abstraction of graphs and charts, I was seeing it in the changing waters, breathing it in the smoky air.

Journalists, scientists, policy makers, teachers, and other professionals are supposed to be dispassionate. We are trained to push aside our grief in favor of analysis and unbiased observation. Such practice is useful. But when we stand by as life on our beautiful planet dies, as one miraculous species after the next winks out, this stance turns from a professional calling into a pathology.

Cautiously, as I traveled, I let the lid off my grief.

Coal, from the Otter Creek Valley to China, and what happens in between

In Montana, I was looking for reasons to believe we can turn things around before we hit a climate Armageddon. I started with the people who were resisting plans for a giant new coal mine.

I first learned about the plans for the Otter Creek mine when controversy erupted about the transport of coal from the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming to a proposed new coal export terminal in the Pacific Northwest.

The Gateway Pacific coal export terminal would be the largest in North America. It would be located some 100 miles north of Seattle on the traditional land of the Lummi Tribe. The terminal was designed to handle 54 million metric tons per year, most of which would be coal, according to the Washington State Department of Ecology.[1] Mile-and-a-half-long trains and giant ships, many from Asia, would cross waters and lands considered sacred by the Lummi people. SSA Marine, half owned by Goldman Sachs, was pushing the project.

The Lummi Tribe opposed the terminal. If any doubts existed about the strength of their opposition, they were laid to rest in September 2012, when tribal leaders stood on the beach of their homeland and set fire to a large facsimile of a check from port developers they stamped "non-negotiable."

Lummi tribal members, like most of those in Indian Country, are not wealthy. But the tribe made it clear that money would not buy their support for a project they believed would threaten the clean water needed to support their fisheries and the sanctity of their traditional lands. The tribe has treaty rights to fish in these waters, which gives it the legal standing to block the terminal.

Lummi tribal members aren't the only ones who would be affected by this massive new coal mine and port project. Large numbers of Bellingham residents also oppose the project, and they elected a slate of county commissioners who were outspoken opponents to the terminal. The coal would be cheap enough to make it attractive to Asian nations, such as China, where toxic pollution is causing 1.6 million premature deaths a year, according to research cited in *The Guardian*.[2] And it would add still more carbon to the atmosphere, worsening the climate crisis.

Then there are those who live adjacent to the source of this coal, the residents of the Otter Creek Valley in southeast Montana and the neighboring ranchers and members of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. Arch Coal proposed to strip-mine this area, creating the largest such mine in Montana. The mine would yield 1.2 billion tons of coal over 20 years and be located in what is now a quiet valley of ranches and creeks near the boundaries of the Custer National Forest.

Arch Coal and its partners, including the Burlington Northern Railroad, would build an 86-mile railroad spur to get the coal to the main train line. The new rail line would follow the Tongue River, which borders the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, and cross ranches, many of which have been in the same family for generations.

"The only way the railroad spur can be built is to force it on the ranchers," Dawson Dunning told me when I sat down with him at a coffee shop in Livingston, Montana, just outside Yellowstone Park. Dunning, age 32, is a member of a family that has operated a ranch in the Otter Creek Valley since 1890. He has a round, open face, blue eyes, and a short beard. Instead of the stereotypical cowboy hat, he wore a baseball cap and shades, and he plans to return to that remote valley to operate the ranch

Dawson Dunning comes from a family of Otter Creek Valley ranchers.

when his father retires. To him, the Otter Creek Valley is home, and he doesn't want it destroyed.

Those ranchers and their organization, the Northern Plains Resource Council, along with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Sierra Club, are at the core of the resistance to the mining project and railroad spur.

In support of this resistance, Lummi carver Jewell Praying Wolf James and his crew carved a totem pole and announced they would offer it as a gift to the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. I decided I would be there when it arrived on the reservation on August 30.

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