

Cover Essay

The Grass Is Always Greener

The conventional wisdom of the proverb “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” is no longer appropriate for these times. This proverb is suggestive of the discontent that leads people to believe that the other side is always greener, a perception that then colors their reality. However, the obsession with grasping after this mirage of greener grass has become an insatiable hunger wherein appetite can never be fully satisfied. It is akin to the drive for development that today consumes everything. This proverb is inappropriate for these times because the complexity of the world calls for deeper wisdom which crosses the borders of mistrust that define nation states and that seeks to reconnect the divisions which separate modern individuals from nature.

The logic in this proverb is questioned in the cover painting by New Zealand artist Kate Lepper, who implores, “Do conservation and production need to be on opposite sides of the fence?” We see in her painting the sharp contrast between a farmed landscape and a native forest on the other side of the fence. Bridging the division is a young man digging a future very different from that dreamed by the early European pioneers in New Zealand, whose visions of productivity led to widespread clearing of native vegetation and sowing of grass seed.

The fenced boundary line divides the picture in two. One side depicts an overly farmed pastureland stripped bare to reveal a lone skeletal tree devoid of foliage and an eroded hillside marred by an incision where a stream once flowed. Indeed, the drive for development has left in its wake a costly legacy of environmental abuse and human neglect. The inverse (portrayed on the other side of the fence) is that of conserving native forests, viewed by some developers as an obstacle to progress. The simplicity of one side of the fence where the land has been denuded of its former richness contrasts sharply

with the complexity and mystery of a living, dynamic ecosystem. Humans play a central role in this picture, for indeed the balance between production and conservation depends greatly on the intentions—and interventions—of humans and the ethics that drive the technology of change.

Whether the fence impedes or protects natural functions (or does both) depends on our perception and on which side of the fence one stands. One perspective is that the fence is a crucial first step in New Zealand’s ecologic restoration because it prevents sheep and cattle from wandering into native bush in search of more nutritious fodder. Thus, the fence allows a space for regeneration. A different perspective, however, might see the fence as an impediment to ecological flows that occur on a much larger scale than those delineated by the surveyor’s map. Therefore, the fence acts as a physical barrier to contain nature within discrete, closed boundaries. Ultimately, remnants such as the one depicted in the cover painting must be connected to a wider ecosystemic whole if they are to function with any degree of ecologic integrity. We must be careful neither to sit on the fence over this issue nor to be fenced in.

The fenceline has a deeper grip on the modern psyche than might be suggested by its physical structure alone. A fence is a manifestation of the Western mindset that works to divide things into reductionist categories. Dualism further separates those categories into competing opposites: economic production vs. nature conservation, private property vs. the public domain, humans vs. nature, and so on. This line of thinking may be traced back to the Greeks and their definition of a sphere as a surface equidistant in all directions from a point. Buckminster Fuller argues that the symbolic fallout of the Greek sphere underpins the psychological, philosophical, and mathematical axioms of

modern thinking. That definition creates a closed-system bias whereby all those inside the sphere are set against an infinite and boundless unknown that falls outside the sphere's dimensions. Fuller asserts, however, that there are no solids and that a sphere is "full of holes"; there is a constant exchange between insiderness and outsiderness, within and without, and the self and the other. The key is relationships. A more appropriate symbolic terminology based on this understanding would replace the notion of a boundary with Fuller's pluralistic acceptance of "approximate spheres of influence."

The young man in the painting works within this sphere of influence. He dwells on the margins of the forest, preparing ground for new growth that in time will soften the edge dividing conservation and production. His presence evokes a progress of hope: a sense of *doing* and of *being*. In *doing* something—the simple act of planting a tree—he shares in the profound pleasure received when one's actions enhance life and support organic processes, as in the etymologic origin of development: de-veloping of what was enveloped (like unrolling a scroll), unfolding of latent possibilities, bursting of the bud into bloom, or sprouting of new life. He also portrays a more humble role as a person who seeks identity in relationship with the land, expressing commitment to *being* in place. Thus, he reminds us that we are, foremost, human beings and not human doings.

The active (doing) and contemplative (being) need not be held in dualistic opposition. Sustainable lifestyles draw on the natural economy without depleting precious primary resources. That is the essence of sustainable agriculture with its economic foundations based firmly on ecologic principles. In Kate's painting, she acknowledges the connection among healthy ecosystems, healthy people, and healthy economies. This tripartite connection equates to true wealth that may be sustained indefinitely if the correct balance is retained. The beehives produce a bush honey rich in protein and energy, and on the world export market, New Zealand's manuka honey is highly sought after for its special healing qualities. Indeed, the full implications of *health* extend beyond medicinal benefits. The word *health* is formed of the root *hāl*, such that *to heal* means "to make whole." Furthermore, the etymologic connection may be extended to the word *holy*, meaning "that must be preserved whole or intact, that cannot be transgressed or violated" (*Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*).

It is on this holy task of healing the land that our actions must now be fully focused. This implies that we must also address the divisions in our dualistic thinking that have given rise to the fences that divide and oppose. Step by step, we must begin to dismantle those fences of the mind that inhibit us from accepting the collective responsibility of our relationship with nature. When barriers have been removed and we come to accept that there is not an "other side," conventional sayings such as "the grass is always greener on the other side" are revealed as shallow insecurities. In reinhabiting places that we revere, we must dig roots that grow deep and strong and that nurture and enrich the soil and the soul of this earth.

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Cover Art

The Grass Is Always Greener... by Kate Lepper

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND THE AUTHOR

Kate Lepper is a practicing artist based in a rural area of the Kapiti Coast, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Kate began painting, drawing, and doing craft work at a very young age. She has exhibited her work regularly since 1996 and has both sculptures and paintings in local and international private collections. Kate has worked as a full-time artist since early 2001. She finds her inspiration from the natural environment, music, literature, people, politics, and the work of other artists. In 2005 Kate plans to take up undergraduate study in fine arts to enhance her art practice. More of Kate's work can be viewed at her website: <http://katelepper.vc.net.nz>

Charlotte Šunde is an environmental researcher based in New Zealand. She recently completed her PhD at Massey University in Palmerston North and currently facilitates the New Zealand programs for the International Honors Program (in affiliation with Boston University) on Indigenous Perspectives and Rethinking Globalization. Charlotte and Kate first met playing soccer for their local club as teenagers in the late 1980s. Having lived in separate parts of New Zealand for the last 15 years, they have kept in touch intermittently. This collaboration marks their latest reconnection after 8 years.

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