



# A Coming Home Story

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There was once a valley in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. Residents shared food, timber, equipment, labor, stories, and values. Water ran pure and wildlife flourished. Children attended a small school house, which also served as a place of worship where everyone came together in prayer. The hillsides, cloaked with vibrant forests, shimmered countless hues of green. Neighbors kept out of each other's business, but enjoyed the deep trust and strength that comes from community, sharing resources and helping one another as needed. Self sufficiency, hard work, integrity, and honesty were ordinary as were cooperation, gift exchange, and generosity. Doors were unlocked, friendships flourished, and community celebrations common.

It became difficult for farmers to farm. Crop prices declined because other places in the world had deeper soil or cheaper labor while local prices for fuel, seed, and equipment rose. Cities spread into both ends of the valley; people with urban wealth and remote jobs bid up property values well beyond what agricultural profits could justify. Taxes increased. Valley residents drove to big-box discount stores for the cheaper prices. Local markets closed. Children got bused to better schools, graduated, and either didn't want to or couldn't afford to settle in the valley and work the land. Farmers divided and sold off lots, first to make ends meet and later, after property values skyrocketed and children left, to retire to a warmer climate. People that remained watched new homes—often resembling small, private castles—erupt from the hillsides, soon to be followed by roads, utilities, gas stations and shopping centers. The scenery and solace that originally attracted people became threatened and young families, laborers, and teachers could barely afford decent housing.

The new residents demanded different services, got elected as local officials, used their networks to negotiate state and federal government programs, and

gradually reweave community fabric. Churches, temples, and mosques multiplied; schools and stores consolidated. Everyone who needed a tractor, and many who did not, had their own. The rituals of shared labor and equipment ebbed. Food and clothing traveled thousands of miles and through unknown hands to arrive cheaply and in abundance on retail shelves. Wood to build houses and furniture to fill them arrived as needed from ... who knows where. Fuel, seeds, entertainment, and trinkets flooded the valley from outside, pushed by convincing marketing campaigns.

Water began to dominate local politics and budgets. Storm water running off of roofs and pavement necessitated construction of culverts, drain pipes, and levees. 100 year floods happened more frequently, destroying property and lives. Recharge of the aquifer and rivers slowed as less water penetrated the surface, increasing the frequency and severity of drought. The water that did make it to the intake pipes was so polluted that it required expensive storage and filtration systems.

The information highway replaced the valley's community of place with diverse communities of interest. Architects striving to build green conscious, energy efficient houses could not find local wood because the foresters and sawyers had gone out of business. Invasive species escaping from yards and roadsides killed trees, smothered forests, and destroyed the biodiversity and scenery new residents sought. Fires occasionally swept through the dense forest destroying homes. Families worried about poisons hidden by the distant, faceless production of milk, meat, and vegetables and struggled to find reliable sources of safe, healthy food.

People were agitated, but felt helpless. They were ready to act, but unable to begin.

Kelly returned home with trepidation. She loved



growing up in the valley but like most teenagers couldn't wait to get out and sample the highlife she saw on TV. She finished a university degree and built a successful career that provided opportunities to live in several states. She often reminisced about her idyllic childhood but never seriously entertained returning home; she had been gone for 20 years and was a realist about the unlikely prospects of finding any childhood magic lingering in the valley. But a recent divorce and an aging parent recovering from surgery opened a window of opportunity to return, perhaps only temporarily, and give the valley a try. In an effort to reconnect she looked up the few remaining high school friends and repeatedly heard the same depressing concerns: lack of decent jobs, rising taxes, sprawling development, worrisome water, increasing food and energy prices, and uncertainty about what to do.

She decided to find part-time work. Having read about landcare in the paper, she approached the local Landcare Center with unfelt confidence and discussed starting a group in the valley. The center director agreed that the valley created a great opportunity for landcare and offered to use some of their foundation grants to provide her with modest salary, facilitator training and materials, and connections to government programs and university experts for assistance and advice. She nervously accepted and began by contacting respected land owners and business people that were friends of her parents. A few thought it worth a try and promised to invite someone they knew.

Meetings since then have occurred almost every month, usually at a local community center. An invited guest gives a presentation, usually an expert on something important to landowners or a representative of another landcare group that has had a success they wanted to share, or perhaps someone from a government agency promoting a cost-share activity or some other program. After questions and discussion, spokes-

persons for working groups describe recent accomplishments and possible future directions, soliciting input and assistance from the larger group. Valley Landcare now has four groups: food, water, forest, and livestock. Each meeting concludes with a potluck coffee and desert social. Childcare is provided.

They've been meeting for exactly 3 years, but today was different. Kelly was always a little nervous before a meeting; today she was also visibly joyous. On the occasion of their three year anniversary as a group, the State Secretary of Natural Resources was going to present Valley Landcare with an award. It was hard to believe how far they had come. From the first few struggling meetings with small attendance and suspicion they now had some real energy, on-the-ground accomplishments to point to, and members of Valley Landcare were being asked to serve as coaches and speakers for other landcare groups around the state. An amazing number of people in the valley knew of landcare and proudly bought landcare products: food—including steaks, vegetables, fine wine, and even bottled water—building supplies, local energy, and carbon credits to offset their vehicle use. Kelly marveled at the expanding circles of friends she and others have made through their landcare activities: many lives have been touched.

This month's meeting started differently than usual, it was more of a celebration. People milled about, excited by the opportunity to meet the Secretary and the media that were also in attendance. Kelly started the meeting by calling people to order and explained that the Secretary would speak first and then they would have brief business meeting followed by the usual coffee and cookies. The Secretary was gracious and brief. He complimented the group on some of the better known accomplishments, like getting their US Senator to host a regional food systems meeting, securing loans and USDA approval for a local slaughterhouse needed to meet the



growing demand in urban centers for grass-fed beef, the remarkable and growing number of stream-side buffers and restoration projects protecting valuable headwater streams that serve as water supply for others in the state, and the vitality of the group. He extended the best wishes of the governor who is proud to have been an early supporter of Valley Landcare projects. The Secretary explained his desire to wait and formally present the award at the end of the meeting, so that media would stay and hear and learn from the business reports to be presented next. He specifically mentioned Kelly by name and congratulated others for supporting and standing by her during the group's formative years.

Kelly beamed from the praise but quickly and professionally transitioned to the business meeting segment of the evening's activities by reporting for the Community Supported Agriculture Committee, for which she served as chair. She noted that this recently formed group was having success on several fronts. The cities at both ends of the valley had been receptive to proposals to expand the size and frequency of their farmer markets, and at least two food networks had formed in the valley, where farmers contract with households to provide them with meat and vegetables, guaranteeing the farmers higher prices by removing the middleman and helping families find fresh, healthy food of known origin. Restaurants and grocery stores seemed to be taking notice as several other farmers report receiving inquiries. It remains difficult to guarantee the regular supply of high quality local produce restaurants and grocery stores need if they are to commit to regular purchases, but with luck and persistence Kelly hopes to enlist additional farmers to grow for Valley Landcare and to construct and staff a sorting, storage, transport, and marketing system that would work with the constraints retailers face. Several local foods do now appear seasonally on grocery store shelves right beside African coffees and European cheeses, conveniently expanding consumer

choice and making it possible to know where some food comes from. However, everyone recognizes that to fully penetrate the local grocery stores requires not just consumer preferences, but a sophisticated infrastructure that can compete with national and international suppliers who have access to much larger economies of scale. She ended on a positive note by pointing out that the livestock committee faced similar challenges and was making good progress. With that, she turned it over to Jack, a tall, lean, slow-talking third-generation rancher who has cautiously come to embrace Valley Landcare.

Because it was such a special occasion, with dignitaries and media present, Jack took the time to explain how he came to be involved. He admitted attending the first few meetings burdened by a great deal of suspicion. Initially, landcare sounded like another environmentalist agenda wasting tax dollars and making it harder for people to earn a living. He already had to hold down a full time job in-town just to make ends meet on his farm and did not have the luxury for frivolous endeavors. Kelly promised him that economic development was a critical and necessary leg of the stool supporting landcare and that the direction the group took depended entirely on local interests, not some external government program out of touch with local needs. And after three years of experience, Jack admitted that both promises had proven true. When he first approached fellow livestock growers about participating, most were more skeptical than he and only a few took time to investigate. Now the local Livestock Association was fully on board and most members were actively pushing Valley Landcare programs because they saw it not only helped them make money, but helped them be better stewards of their lands, and, not unimportantly, it raised their status in the eyes of fellow valley residents.

He was sad to report, however, that the direct sale website just closed for the year, as they have run out of beef to sell. This is disappoint-



ing because they were starting to penetrate some of the bigger urban markets over 100 miles away with express mail sales of their low-fat, grass-fed, all-natural beef. He worried that turning customers away could hurt future sales. This year they did manage to tithe a portion of their meat to the food pantry. A very nice letter from the director of the program was just posted on the web site and can be used by those needing a donation receipt for tax purposes. The federal government grant received last year has been almost entirely used up in doing whole farm system plans. Ten members are now cross-fenced and have new water sources on their pastures. They are working on another grant with the local university to test whether warm season grasses can cover the summer forage shortfall and to produce improved wildlife habitat. Last, but not least, he introduced new members, Mr. Scott Evans and his wife Cheryl and Mr. Andy Bell. Andy, like Jack, is a third-generation rancher and is thinking about converting some of his herd from yearlings sold for fattening and processing elsewhere to two-year, grass-fed beef he can market regionally for greater profit and less heartache. The Scotts just bought the Smith place out on Route 42 and are learning about farming. "I'm sure they'd like to meet their neighbors and get any advice you might have on managing or leasing their pastures next season."

Bev, a wiry man of boundless energy, had a reputation for being cantankerous. Tonight he was not going to disappoint. He eagerly took the stage as chair of the Timber Committee (Kelly and a few others exchanged nervous glances that Bev noticed but ignored). He wanted the Secretary to know who first promoted landcare in the valley. Bev reminded Kelly that over three years ago he brought the landcare job announcement to her attention. He explained, mostly for the benefit of the secretary and press—everyone else had heard the story many times over—that he had learned about landcare while traveling in Australia to do research for his

forest management business and that he had been among the first in the valley to walk the talk. He had invested his own money, sweat, and time by purchasing a portable sawmill and using his tractor in the name of Valley Landcare to extract a few trees from neighbors needing to improve forest health, reduce fire risk, and obtain materials for home repairs and additions.

After being acknowledged for these contributions by Kelly and the Secretary he seemed satisfied and moved on to report that the state government grant Valley Landcare received to document forest resources also identified opportunities for a small fuel pellet mill that could be used in a fuels-to-schools program. He requested input on how to get the school board to think seriously about requiring a flex-fuel boiler in the new school being planned, as doing so would help jumpstart this potentially important biofuels pilot program that could help the valley achieve some measure of energy independence. Bev made it clear his thoughts on the suspicious national energy policies that had landed the country in a costly and immoral war. He commended the County government for donating a long term lease of 2 acres in their industrial park to locate the forest mill works. The county development officer was also helping the Timber Committee with applications for revolving loan funds to upgrade their equipment and take advantage of increased economies of scale. With luck, Forest Landcare, Inc. soon would be employing several millers, loggers, and marketers, and providing certified, sustainable, local timber for those new houses with owners demanding green architecture. He also was just contacted by the local Ruffed Grouse Society chapter that would like to lease hunting rights on lands with recent timber cuts, as these areas produce excellent ruffed grouse habitat. Anybody interested in investing in the mill project or experimenting with a hunting lease should see him after the meeting. "This landcare thing keeps bringing us new opportunities. I'm constantly impressed," he abruptly concluded and



sat down with a wink and a smile directed towards Kelly.

The Water Committee report was presented by Bob, who restored some calm by noting with self-deprecating humor that he was perhaps the most senior and seasoned person in the room. He began with a story of growing up in the valley as a child, moving away and then being saddened when his family sold off its land to pay taxes and put grandchildren through college. He shared his delight at seeing part of his homestead up for sale 10 years back and the good luck of being able to afford it. With considerable pride he renamed the place “Headwater Acres” because the property straddles the continental divide and has springs that feed two watersheds. “I can go out back and dribble a little water on top of the hill...half of it will go to the ocean and the other half will go to the Gulf”, he chuckled.

He became interested in Valley Landcare’s water group after witnessing heavy erosion and flooding on his streams and attending an early landcare meeting where a man from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries presented the notion of stream restoration and government cost-share. Bob had planned on straightening his streams and hardening the banks with rocks to reduce the flooding and erosion, but the presenter suggested that returning the stream to its natural meandering path and replanting trees along the banks would have an even better outcome—plus the cost share program would help organize and pay for the work. Bob was suspicious of government handouts and inefficiencies, but came to trust the program officer and is now its chief advocate in the valley.

Bob realized that all the good work he did on his property got erased downstream by cows in the streams denuding vegetation and eroding banks. Someone at the regional Landcare Center developed a map of the creeks in the valley, showing their erosion potential and contribution

to regional water quality. Bob invited his neighbors to the landcare meeting where those results were presented and made a point to show off how well his property compared to theirs. Soon, neighbor after neighbor were restoring their creeks and springs. With a deliberate nod towards several people in the room, Bob explained that others have surpassed his own efforts with some truly impressive restoration projects. Now, when he wants to show a curious visitor or a skeptical neighbor what stream restoration actually looks like on the land, Bob takes them to their properties and brags on his neighbors. He concluded by explaining that lots of work remained because only 40% of the valley creeks have been restored: “But the folks in the state capital tell me our valley is way ahead of most other places. We should feel good about that!”

It was time to adjourn, open the doors, and let the children and their energy rush in—as the next generation, they provided a powerful symbol of the meeting’s purpose, plus they had begun peering through the windows at the cookies and punch and Kelly could not count on them being patient much longer. The Secretary of Natural Resources made a few concluding comments congratulating Valley Landcare, presented a framed certificate to Kelly, and pointedly addressed the media who had been waiting for a photo-opportunity and interviews: “Everyone wants healthy food and water, dignified jobs, and community respect. Government programs alone are insufficient to the challenges facing us from globalization and urbanization. Look at what has been accomplished here and tell your readers and listeners to start something similar in their neighborhoods. Celebrate the leadership and community built here. Rejoice at the improved natural capital being passed on to future generations. Highlight the careers, taxes, and businesses being sustained. Tell others they can create a thriving and sustainable place where they and their children will want to live in the future.”



Sincere applause erupted. Kelly glowed. She was glad she came home.

*learned the new story... We need a story that will educate us, a story that will guide, heal and discipline us.*

Thomas Berry (1988)

### Conclusion

*The preceding story illustrates one way landcare can unfold in a community. It illustrates the emergence of a community landcare group in a once rural landscape now feeling the pressures of urbanization and globalization. Other aspects of landcare—practices, enterprises, partnerships, and regional planning—also generate compelling stories that allow people to see themselves as actors in something bigger, something that gives meaning and purpose to their lives. This story is fictitious, assembled from various actual stories we have heard.*

### Editors

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To learn more about landcare and forming a community landcare group, visit [www.landcarecentral.org](http://www.landcarecentral.org) or email us at [landcare@vt.edu](mailto:landcare@vt.edu)

Stories are how we know the world. They explain why things happen: they order events, connect facts, and provide purpose. They reveal direction from past, through present and into the future. They illustrate roles people play and provide reasons to play them. They show how choices are related to outcomes we desire. They explain how striving and sacrifice realize goals; if we see where we want to go, then we may accept the need to change direction. Without a vision of a thriving and sustainable future, how are we to get there?

*"I have a dream."* Stories are invitations to act. They invite us to ask: "What should I do?" Storytellers invite listeners to share an experience, care about an event, and join in the search for shared meaning. Believing that one has something important to contribute is energizing. Purpose gives meaning. Stories give characters purpose. Stories create the will to change.

*It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in-between stories. The Old Story - the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it is no longer effective. Yet we have not*