

## The Power of Place

Delivered by Rob Williams

Upon Receipt of the 2018 Conservationist of the Year Award

The Georgia Conservancy

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I was once fired by the Governor of Georgia. Not reassigned, not allowed to resign, not even offered severance, separation or even a plaque. Just fired. I learned four significant things from that day:

1. everyone should be fired, at least once in their life. In a perverse way, it is liberating.
2. If you are going to be fired, be fired by someone important. It just feels better;
3. When you are fired, you achieve more attention and recognition than you ever did when you were employed; and
4. I learned where the word "fired" came from.

I looked it. Words are important to me and especially the origin of words, which carry more feeling and expression than any definition in a dictionary. James Patterson, the founder of National Cash Register Company (NCR), now headquartered in Atlanta, is credited, some 100 years before Donald Trump, with coining the phrase "You're fired". (I hope my saying that does not generate a Twitter storm.) Patterson once sent an NCR executive he disliked to visit a customer and when the executive returned to his office, Patterson had moved his desk out on to the lawn and set it on fire. He did it many more times over the years until it was common for employees at NCR to refer to the dearly departed as having been "fired". Interestingly, one of the people so fired, was Tom Watson, who went on to found IBM.

So why was I fired and how did that event eventually lead to this night? In the 1980s, several of us, all University of Georgia faculty, had researched and written a document for a statewide long-term public policy discussion group called "Georgia 2000". In it, we described a developmental phenomenon in Georgia in which almost 80 percent of the economic development had taken place within 60 miles of the Atlanta Airport. Conversely, the indicators of poverty, low high school graduation rates, declining health statistics, out-migration and loss of communities in the remainder of the state led us to label the dynamic "Two Georgias". The Governor, a good Governor who had worked hard at economic development, took offense.

That Governor did me a favor. He started me down a path that led to 30 years in leadership development which I describe as "helping people understand where they came from, how that influences what they do or don't do to affect their job performance and their ability to take advantage of future opportunities and for me to do so with constant positive regard."

Before I begin that story and leave you with one suggestion about the future of conservation in Georgia, I need to point out that if I am receiving this award tonight because of my work with IGEL then I should not be standing alone on this stage. There are co-facilitators, staff, presenters, and Board members who have spent countless hours developing the content, raising the funds and selecting a diverse and talented group of leaders for every one of the sixteen classes. Please join me in recognizing all the people who have made Institute for Georgia Environmental Leadership what it is today.

In the few minutes I have tonight, I would like to explain that anything I have done to deserve this award was, in part, about love of place. I think a few words about the power of place, the love of place and the loss of place are important to those here tonight. The work of the Georgia Conservancy, and the work of dozens of environmental organizations, and leaders of corporate sustainability efforts, and government employees who stand vigilant watch on the towers that protect the environment, and the engineers and scientists who innovate and educate about this creation we call the environment, and others of you who are in this room, are first and foremost committed to preserving a "place". What I wrote about in that "Two Georgias" documents was about the loss of "place" and the increasing tension between urban and rural, rich and poor, black and white, fifth generation and recent immigrant and how that tension would continue to diminish our sense of place. **Without a connection to place you lose the desire to conserve. Without a connection to place you lose the desire to conserve.**

In the moment that I was fired and I looked around and listened to those in the Governor's outer office that day, I realized that we collectively, all Georgians, had started the process of loss of a sense place, a place that I had only recently come to love.

What is this word "place". According to Joseph Shipley, in his The Origin of English Words (1984), goes back to the Indo-European language roots where the word "place" was "pela". "Pela" meant a wide, broad plain, most often populated with farms and small towns. But it was more than a geographic description. It was also about nurturing and connecting. The word "placenta", the first source of nurturing for all of us, comes from the same root. The philosopher whose real name was Aristocles, was given the nickname "Plato", meaning broad

shouldered, because he either had broad shoulders or was dependable, two derivations from the root of "pela".

I believe that humans throughout our evolution have required a sense of place upon which they could depend and a place that provided connection and nurturing. We may go "home" or claim a birth state, but all of us carry within us a tie to a place of origin, a place of joy and a place of security. Even when we say we are from Macon or Moultrie or Montezuma, we really mean we are from a forested road up a mountain incline or from the quiet glass surface of a coastal marsh or the well-worn front yard of a shotgun house in Cabbagetown.

Several years ago, bursting with Delta frequent flyer miles, I made a commitment to revisit every one of the 17 houses I lived in before leaving home at 18. In suburban Washington DC, I drove to the subdivision and to the house I lived in at age 9 and which I had not seen in 57 years without a map or GPS. You makes you wonder what links in our evolutionary psychology to place are similar to the millions of birds who travel from hemisphere to hemisphere in search of place. I think we discount the power of place and its imprint on us. If I can find a house I lived in for 9 months 62 years ago, think of imprint of place upon you if you spent tens years or 50 years in a place.

You see, I grew up without a sense of place. I was a military brat who went to 13 different schools before I graduated from high school. My parents never owned a piece of land or a house until they were in their 50s. I lived in my birth state for less than 36 months in 71 years. While most people are from a place, I believe I constructed a place to be from and that place is Georgia. The hammer and nails were quite simple.

I view the most significant in constructing my sense of place was being accepted to the University of Georgia in 1965 as an out-of-state student. Dean Tate, the legendary dean of men, had a certain missionary zeal for those of us non-Georgians. As a sophomore, I was failing French and was called to his office. In his quizzical, owl-like style he told me stories of places and people in Georgia I did not know. He then handed me a copy of the Book of Psalms in French to help me in translating class assignments. I did not have the heart to tell him that I did not know the Book of Psalms in English, so it would not be much help in French.

It was in the English department at Georgia that I fell in love with the South and by extension, Georgia: an English professor who let me ride along with him to visit with Flannery O'Connor's mother at Andalusia Farm outside Milledgeville, another who invited me to informal living room meetings of the remnants of the Southern Agrarians who shaped American literature in the 1940s and 1950s, and one who introduced me to Gullah-Geechee folk stories of the Georgia coast and the emerging African-American poets of Birmingham, Atlanta and New Orleans.

Until I began to travel the state of Georgia, first as a documentary film maker and journalist, and later as a social psychologist, my life had been one of frequently being "out of place", of not belonging. I was quite shy growing up. At a young age, I once went up under my mother's skirt with an ice cream cone when a stranger spoke to me. I also spent a lot of time alone. Well not really alone. I had books and I had my imagination.

I so appreciate those practical and realistic people here tonight. Those whose clear direction, work ethic and purpose-driven personalities build cities,

economies, industries, innovation, progress, safety and security, and trains that run on time. Unfortunately, I am not one of those. I am a dreamer. I once took a psychological profile called the Kirton Adaptation Inventory. When the psychologist reviewed the findings with me, she noted that I was off the scale on creativity and imagination. "Rob," she said, "It is not enough to say you are an out-of-the-box-thinker when you did not come with a box at all."

Those who know me--and have lived and worked with me--have both benefited and suffered from that characteristic. But it is perfect for my line of work. I see possibilities--even if I am imagining them--in every leader with whom I work. I told you earlier the description of my work: "helping people understand where they came from, how that influences what they do or don't do to affect their job performance and their ability to take advantage of future opportunities and for me to do so with constant positive regard." So if you have one of those dreamers at home, who at 10-12 seems still in love with games, or at 18 wants to major in dance or skip college and live in Tibet for a year in a Buddhist temple, or at 36 wants to change careers and become a psychologist or run a soup kitchen (and oh by the way you are married to that person and you have three kids), please give them my card. They will succeed and even one day get a neat award.

In many cultures, if a person receives a gift, they must immediately give one back. Thank you again Georgia Conservancy, Chair Leslie Mattingly and the rest of the Board of Trustees, and Robert Ramsay and all the staff of the Georgia Conservancy who made this award and this beautiful evening possible. Let me see if I can leave you tonight with a gift, as whacky as it may seem at first.

When I was 8, the Quaker Oats Company had a giveaway. If you ate the prerequisite number of bowls of Quaker Oats and filled out the appropriate form and sent it in to the Quaker Oats Company along with a self-addressed stamped envelope, you would receive in return mail, a deed for one-square-inch of land in the Yukon. It was in the Klondike gold strike region, somewhere between Dawson and Whitehorse in the Northwest Territory of Canada. I have with me, for those of you doubting my ownership--Claim Number C314998--here is the official deed I was sent 63 years ago. I will ask any lawyer present to come forth and validate its legality. Over many months and enough Quaker Oats to feed a horse farm, I acquired 10 square inches of land in the Yukon.

But I acquired something else in the process: a sense of place, a sense of belonging. Based upon owning 10 square inches of the Yukon, I read every book--fact or fiction--based in the Northwest Territory and Alaska: Jack London, Pierre Berton, Barbara Greenwood, and Graham Wilson. Dog sleds, Sgt. Preston of the Mounties, grizzled prospectors, (and maybe a few dance hall cuties), they all sledded and slogged through my imagination. Why, because I had a sense of belonging to a place.

And that brings me back to the future of the Georgia Conservancy and the future of conservation and environmental stewardship in Georgia. It will not depend upon the motivation, labors or gifts of the 300 in here tonight. It will depend upon developing a sense of place for the 3 million out there who have live in Georgia for less than a year, those who are the sons and daughters of recent immigrants (foreign and domestic); or have lived here in generations of poverty and who still do not own one square inch of Georgia. Within that 3 million are hundreds of thousands of children with no sense of place and without the developmental benefits of belonging.

So, what if, for every tract of land conserved by the Georgia Conservancy--or the Nature Conservancy, or the Trust for Public Lands, or the Department of Natural Resources, or Park Pride--every sixth grader in Georgia got a deed for one square inch of the Okefenokee, or of Panola Mountain, or of the Altamaha River Greenway, or Sapelo Island or Proctor Creek.

A deed to hold and to dream.

To dream of belonging to a place.

And that place would be called "Georgia".

Thank you.