

Resilience

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Resilience Reflections with Courtney White

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In Resilience Reflections we ask some of our contributors what it is that inspires their work, and what keeps them going.

[Read more Resilience Reflections here including Sandra Postel and Robert Jensen.](#)

A former archaeologist and Sierra Club activist, Courtney dropped out of the 'conflict industry' in 1997 to co-found The Quivira Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to building bridges between ranchers, conservationists, public land managers, scientists and others around the idea of land health. Today, his work concentrates on building economic and ecological resilience on working landscapes, with a special emphasis on carbon ranching and the new agrarian movement. His writing has appeared in numerous publications, including Farming, Acres Magazine, Rangelands, and the Natural Resources Journal. Courtney's books include '2% Solutions for the Planet: 50 Low-cost, Low-tech, Nature-based Practices for Combatting Hunger, Drought and Climate Change' (Fall 2015), 'The Age of Consequences: A Chronicle of Concern and Hope (2015)', and 'Grass, Soil, Hope: A Journey Through Carbon Country (2014)'.



Who/what has been your greatest inspiration?

My greatest inspirations are William Shakespeare and Aldo Leopold. The key to moving hearts and minds no matter what your field of endeavor is good storytelling and no one did it better than ol' Will. There's a reason why his plays are regularly performed four hundred years after they were written: they are gripping tales of revenge, love, lust, tyranny, jealousy, betrayal, murder that resonate with us as humans. His words are lofty and musical and his plots and his characters have a poignancy that keeps us coming back for more. Anyone who aspires to being heard can still learn much from the Bard of Avon. On the nonfiction side, I take a lot of inspiration from the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold who not only was a fine writer but focused his creativity and intelligence on the pressing issues of his day, including wildlife management, wilderness protection, environmental education, sustainable agriculture, economics, ethical behavior, and scientific documentation. Leopold once described living on a patch of land without ruining it as "the oldest task in human history" – a task more pressing today than ever – which ranks it right up there with Shakespeare's ruminations on the human condition. Whether this task is ultimately a tragedy, a history or a comedy remains to be seen!

Knowing what you know now about sustainability and resilience building, what piece of advice would you give your younger self if you were starting out?

Don't expect facts, logic, or more education to be sufficient. When I began my work with the Quivira Coalition nearly twenty years ago, I assumed that social change was mostly a matter of spreading the news – giving people facts, making logical arguments, promoting profitable approaches, rebutting emotional objections with real-world examples, creating educational opportunities, and generally counting on people to eventually "see the light." What I didn't understand is how deep personal beliefs

go – as in *really deep*, even to the point of self-destructive behavior (a rancher once told me he'd rather “go down with the ship” than change his management – which is exactly what happened!). Going in, I knew that humans acted in contradictory and illogical ways, I just didn't understand how stubborn we could be even in the face of empirical evidence. I do now. The advice I'd give anyone now is to concentrate more on hopeful, fact-based storytelling and less on lectures, numbers, and complaining. I would also advise focusing on young people, who are often more open to new ideas than their elders.

What keeps you awake at night?

Besides the low pay of nonprofit work and writing? What keeps me awake at night is thinking about the world my children will be inheriting. Even if we get our act together as a society and work hard toward a sustainable future, all of our children will still inherit a challenging situation. And if we don't work *really hard*, then the challenge will be *huge*. Of course, this situation isn't fair to them. Parents are supposed to improve the world for their children, not diminish it – but diminishing it is exactly what we are doing. I can only imagine what future generations will say about us when they realize that we still had an opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive to these challenges and we didn't take it. Strenuous cussing comes to mind.

What gets you up in the morning or keeps you going?

My muse – who is a stern taskmaster. No lollygagging allowed, especially in the wee hours of the morning. Hup hup! Seriously, I've suffered from an irrepressible creative impulse and a dangerously insatiable curiosity since I was a teenager. I just love the world, its history, its cultures, its beauty, its mystery, and its diversity. Exploring and interpreting what I find, whether in writing, photography, or activism, is hard-wired into my behavior – I don't know why. I suppose my parents are to blame! My father was a neurologist who just loved helping people get better. He found humans, and their illnesses, endlessly fascinating. My mother was also insatiably curious about the world, though her interests involved art and literature. Together, they gave me an enduring thirst for discovering and caring. As for the stern muse, as my sometimes exasperated family can tell you, it never sleeps.

What has been your biggest setback and how did you recover?

There was a period of time when I struggled with a sense of failure; a slow-growing realization that I wasn't going to achieve as much as I hoped with my activism. When I began my career in social change, first as an environmental activist with the Sierra Club and then as a cofounder and director of the Quivira Coalition, I had decently-sized expectations of changing the Status Quo both at the grassroots (including the ‘grass’ and the ‘roots’) and at higher levels. I put a lot of heart-and-soul into these expectations so when Business-as-Usual continued to prevail despite our best efforts, my spirits took a beating. We had some success – don't get me wrong – and I'm proud of our work and the lives we touched, but in the Big Picture we didn't accomplish as much as I hoped. This was hard to accept for a while, but eventually I got over it. I recovered the way most people do – by going through a grieving process and coming out the other end stronger, wiser, and more focused. Like any loss, you deal with it. The alternative is to succumb to sadness and despair. Those weren't options for me, so I picked myself up and got back to work (remember the stern muse) and began exploring new horizons.

For you resilience is...?

Resilience is both bouncing back and moving on. It's the capacity to cope with the unexpected, going through a grieving process for example, in order to handle loss, but it's also the ability to thrive in the face of never-ending change. I love this quote by the Buddha: “*Change is never painful, only the resistance to change is painful.*” Resilience is all about overcoming the resistance to change in ways that create positive, hopeful and healthful paths into the future. That's easier said than done, of course! Take the adventurous journey into mid-life, for example. When you enter your fifties, resistance to change becomes almost a fact of daily existence, especially if you have teenage children as we do. What do you mean I'm not forty anymore! It's not very resilient, I can tell you, to fight these changes, including the reluctance to admit that life is, in fact, “bounded by a sleep” as Shakespeare put in *The Tempest* (his career-concluding meditation on aging). The resilient answer, at least for me, is to move on to new work,

new horizons, and new opportunities. Never stop using the oars, in other words, even if we must row more slowly.

What one social/political/cultural/policy change would most assist your work/hopes/dreams?

From my experience, I'd say incentivizing people to do the right thing with their land is job #1 today. Unfortunately, we have a society/politics/culture that strongly encourages people to do the wrong thing with the planet, and we're reaping the consequences big time. In vivid contrast, incentives to take care of the natural world (including ourselves) are hugely lacking. What would they be? Aldo Leopold struggled with this question all his life, especially in light of the economic and environmental devastation brought on by the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. He examined a wide variety of financial and policy incentives and found them wanting. In the end, he settled on a plea for a change in our ethics. Fast forward to the present day and his plea looms larger than ever. There is an important difference, however, between his time and ours (see my next response), which leads me to believe that financial incentives might work after all. If we could pay land owners, for instance, to double the carbon content of their soils – and by pay I mean *money* – than I'm certain we'd see positive, resilient, regenerative results. This is described in detail in my book *Grass, Soil, Hope: a Journey Through Carbon Country* (Chelsea Green).

What gives you hope?

Human ingenuity. I know it's the bane of our existence as well, but I've been deeply impressed by the large amount of innovation that has taken place within the ecological agriculture community over the past thirty years. It's staggering actually. The regenerative toolbox is overflowing with new ideas, many of which have gone through an on-the-ground, beta-test phase and proven to be practical, profitable and effective. As I like to tell people, we don't need to invent anything to solve our problems – we've already done it! Mix in photosynthesis and you have answers to most of our problems. This is incredibly hopeful stuff – and I'm certain that Aldo Leopold would have agreed. The challenge, of course, is scaling up – and quickly. That's the next step and it's a big one, but in the meantime it's encouraging to know that human ingenuity is still hard at work for the betterment of ourselves and the world.

Courtney's next book '2% Solutions for the Planet: 50 Low-cost, Low-tech, Nature-based Practices for Combatting Hunger, Drought and Climate Change' will be published by Chelsea Green in the fall of 2015.

[More articles by Courtney White](#)

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