

# Commencement Address \* University of Kansas The Serious Challenge of Our Time

Wes Jackson

Sunday, May 19, 2013, 10:30-12:30

Memorial Stadium

Chancellor **Gray-Little**, faculty, fellow honorees, members of the board of regents. And now I come to the family members; sacrifices have been made, there are loans to be paid. So a big round of applause for parents and family who helped make this moment. Finally, and most important of all, congratulations Class of 2013. This is your day.

A century and a half ago, only nine years before KU's first graduation, our nation was in the midst of a great civil war. The Declaration of Independence had declared that we are all created equal. That assertion has been called a high law of morality. On the other hand, our Constitution had one perilous flaw. Slavery was legal. America was both the land of the free and the land of the slave. To complicate matters, each side, as the poet Robert Penn Warren put it, "thought itself the legitimate heir of the American Revolution." With the higher law of morality up against legality, "the war came."

Now, a hundred and fifty years later another high law of morality confronts us, a moral law not practiced because of all of us who exercise our legal authority. That high law of morality in our time calls on us to protect our planet's ecosphere, that miraculous skin surrounding the earth within which we are embedded: our soils, our waters, our forests, our prairies, our oceans, our agricultural fields, and now our atmosphere. Yes, there are too many of us, but our consumption is rapacious. And so, the high calling to protect our ecosphere has little legal standing. It is legal to rip the tops off mountains, get the coal and burn it. It is legal to drill for oil and natural gas—from the Gulf to the Arctic—and burn it. It is legal to engage in fracking that threatens ground water to get natural gas and burn it. It is legal for all of us to purchase unnecessary products made with extracted materials and fossil energy. So, it is legal to bring on climate change, erratic weather and more. It is legal to be responsible for a loss of four-fifths as much sea ice as we had in 1980. It is legal to have our soils erode and toxic chemicals applied, legal to allow our rural communities to decline and watch so much of our cultural seed stock disappear.

We are now forced to address the legality of ecological exploitation if we are to achieve the high law of morality to protect our ecosphere.

The greatest challenge of our time is to reduce consumption of fossil energy and materials and still meet the bonafide human needs. We have to develop a culture that provides rewarding, satisfying lives and free ourselves of the moral/legal inconsistency. The challenge is huge. Corporate leaders have a "fiduciary responsibility to stockholders." Our retirement investments grow from the burning of fossil fuels. So, we are all in this together. This time, there is no North or South.

#

My hope comes from you because I know where you come from. You come from KU, in the heart of America like President Eisenhower, from Abilene, who was proud that he came "from

the heart of America.” His pride was about place and a way of thinking. As you carried your books to classes over Mt. Oread you crossed the old California road. We were connected geographically, but divided on the moral vs. legal. Our country was young then. If you celebrated a sports victory on and around Massachusetts Avenue, you did so where the town was burned and people killed. The heart of America grew stronger on those streets and Kansas entered the Union as a free state. But it did so because of the spirited discussions in the territory called Kansas, countless discussions about the tragic paradox: the land of the free and the land of the slave. Our Kansas hearts grew stronger.

Our hearts are still strong, but now ache because of our destructive ways.

We need a course correction, knowing that profound change comes hard. It has always been so—from the time of the Declaration to the constitutional amendments ending slavery and racial discrimination. Now nature is being legally and increasingly enslaved, legally locked in an increasingly abusive and wasteful servitude.

There is a source of hope: the high law of morality this time can be advanced through the democratic processes our ancestors drafted. We can overturn the legality of destruction. This requires organizing.

#

Our individual efforts will also become more important. Here is an example from my own life. I could not tell it without the Kansas spirit or KU. My passion is agriculture, natural for one reared on a Kaw Valley farm.

### **Here is the story.**

Our nonprofit at Salina, The Land Institute, started in 1976. My family and I had returned home from California, and soon after there was a convergence of two ideas.

- 1) It appeared to me from a government study that soil—the stuff of which we are made—was eroding about as bad as when the Soil Conservation Service was formed in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, despite thousands of miles of terraces, grass waterways and millions of dollars invested. This was shocking.
- 2) About that time, I took students on a field trip to visit nature’s Konza Prairie near Manhattan. No soil erosion apparent, no applied fertilizer, no sprays, no fossil fuel.

Elsewhere in our grain fields of wheat, corn, soybeans, sorghum, it was the opposite. Soil erosion was visible. Those fields were fossil fuel dependent for fertility, pest management and traction.

### **Here was a contrast.**

The contrast between nature’s way and agriculture was striking. Why? Our grain fields feature annuals – plants that must be replanted each year from seed on disturbed ground like wheat,

corn, soybeans, sunflowers. The prairie like most other land ecosystems, features perennials – plant mixtures that keep coming up every year from deep roots that hold soil.

Clearly, agriculture had taken a far turn away from nature's way. The grains responsible for some 70% of our calories are grown on around 70% of acreage worldwide. So, why no perennial corn or wheat? WHY NOT FARM LIKE A PRAIRIE? This sounded crazy then. But my former KU professors encouraged me.

So we set out to perennialize major crops and domesticate some promising wild species. We now see results from our geneticists at work on several perennial grains and our ecologist at work to integrate them.

- Kernza is a relative of wheat and other grasses. In addition to the Salina fields, 80 acres will be planted in Minnesota this fall .
- Wheat hybrids are in field trials in 20 locations in eight countries.
- We support the perennialization of upland rice in China.
- Other perennial species and hybrids are in the research plots.
- KU faculty and Land Institute scientists have joined hands recently to help ensure that farming like a prairie can have a life of its own, yielding agricultural landscapes that absorb greenhouse gases, protect soil, water, and air and feed us.

This one example illustrates what a few individuals can start without permission. It does not require society at large.

#

In summary: The moral vs. legal was on the line before the Civil War. The 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments were its products. Kansas was a key player then, right here in Lawrence. The moral vs. legal is on the line now. Both political and independent action are required again, this time to protect the ecosphere.

You come from KU. You come from the heart of America, which from its early history has displayed a great sense of oughtness. You are inheritors of that cultural seed and therefore expected to exercise your collective and individual power to merge the moral and the legal. You have an education from KU. You have the energy. I know that. I have seen and heard some of you in the classroom. I have seen and heard thousands of you in the Phog\*.

Congratulations, Class of 2013.

\*For those not familiar with Kansas basketball, the Phog is in reference to the Phog Allen Fieldhouse.