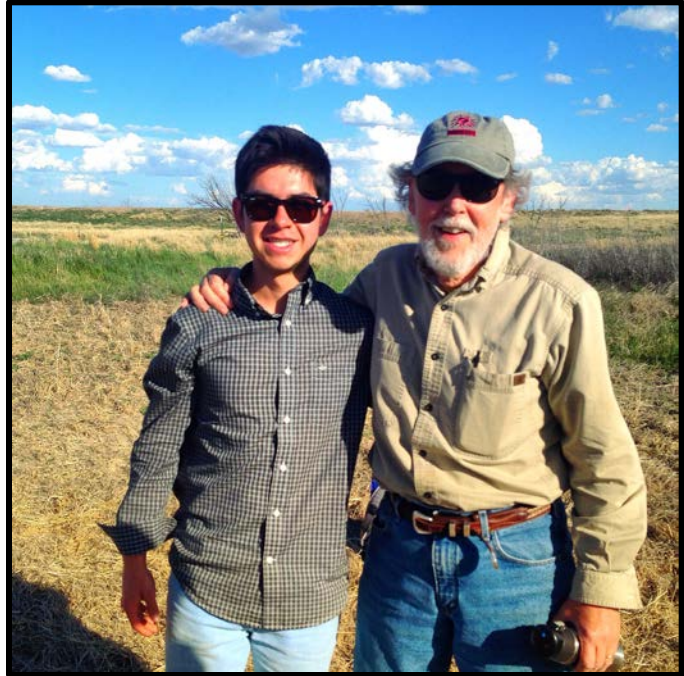


## **Responsibility, Reverence, and Reciprocity: The Life and Work of Barry Lopez**

I envision an Earth that is not stripped of its resources nor subject to the collateral damage that results from human activity and mindless consumption. I see responsible management of finite resources for their long-term use. In this future world, we value the well-being of all peoples and ecological communities over economic profit and maintenance of the bottom line. The corporations' scope of power and government influence is checked, and we no longer divide ourselves into classes of race, gender, religion, economic status, or states, but instead live as a cohesive global unit. But these are only ideas until we realize them, and only concrete when we act upon them.

I have read a few books by Barry Lopez that have shaped the way I think about our role as citizens. He has great ideas on how our species might achieve a more united and sustainable standard of living. In his early works, Lopez writes mostly about nature and divinity. Lopez's new book, *Outside*, a collection of those early stories, ignites the human spirit by connecting our external landscape with our interior landscape, the physical world with the spiritual world. Reading these stories made me feel part of something beautiful. Some of his other recent books, like *Resistance* and *Light Action in the Caribbean*, contain stories that mirror the perils of current politics and Western society, such as over-consumption and political corruption. I mention these because Lopez's work remains a constant reminder of life's beauty and the continuous pursuit to restore beauty where it has been lost.

*Conversations with Barry Lopez* is a series of interviews between Lopez and William Tydeman in which Lopez discusses various aspects of his life and the troublesome ways of our culture. Through Tydeman's careful interviews, Lopez discusses his views on politics and civilization, from which I learned the term "civil society" – a society that works locally to achieve justice and a sustainable



standard of living. While on this topic, he outlines what he believes are keys to a successful civil society: reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity. "With these three things in place, communities thrive," says Lopez. "Without them, civilizations collapse" (14). I want to take a closer look at these three things – reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity – and ask how we can all be part of the solution for building a more civil society.

### Reverence

Reverence is the act of showing honor or respect that is felt by the other party. It is crucial in a civil society because it is fundamental for effective cooperation. Lopez recognizes a lack of reverence in the relationship between Western culture and indigenous cultures.

In his travels he has spent time with indigenous people and noticed that they are consciously participating in creation. In mainstream Western culture, we try to dictate creation. Lopez says, "Western culture wants to control. Indigenous people are wary of Western culture

because its adherents become antic and angry when they're not in control" (56). A lack of respect for opposing ideologies on either side only distances our relationship. This disrupts sharing of ideas that could be beneficial in a global civil society. According to Lopez, "The aggressive, oblivious pursuit of material wealth at the cost of severe suffering in the rest of the world is perhaps the most profound injustice... [and] failed reverence" (115-116).

In the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library of Texas Tech University, I found a recorded dialogue between Barry Lopez and the famed biologist Edward O. Wilson. Recorded at the University of Utah for students of the humanities, Barry Lopez brings up the ethical issue of our lack of respect for other organisms' privacy. He says, "Ten thousand years ago we lived in small communities and were surrounded by hundreds of animals. Today, animals live in secluded areas and are surrounded by myriads of people" (Lopez, *Writing Natural History*). Our expansion of cities and destruction of ecosystems does not coincide with a reverence for the natural world. Barry Lopez thinks so, and I agree. He makes it clear that without reverence for nature, a global civil society will be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.

### Responsibility

Once reverence is restored, taking responsibility for unjust actions becomes more likely. In *Conversations With Barry Lopez*, Lopez asks how involved a writer should become in exemplifying the ethical standard of living. He wonders what can be done to strengthen a civil society and finds a solution in writers and artists: "[S]torytellers and artists have always been involved with determining the moral framework of the societies of which they are a part" (54). So, he does what he does best, he writes. He translates his idea of a beautiful coherence between nature and people into inspiring stories.

In the short story, “Desert Notes,” recently republished in *Outside*, Lopez writes, “I’ve been told there is very little time left, that we must get all these things about time and place straight. If we don’t, we will only have passed on and have changed nothing. That is why we are here I think, to change things. It is why I came to the desert” (16). Having read these words, I thought about my life and what impact I might have on the world. How are my actions going to help create a more sustainable Earth? Does my life influence others to lead a sustainable lifestyle? As I write this essay, the answer is no. I drive a gas-powered vehicle; I do not have a recycling bin in my house, and I participate in mindless consumerism. I am failing to strengthen the emergence of this civil society.

Just living with these sustainable ideas in my head does no good; they must be realized into my life if I am to take responsibility and action as an informed citizen. “Illumination must be accompanied by action if there is to be any real change” (Lopez, *Conversations* 122).



Lopez answered his own questions with actions. He writes and is actively involved giving speeches and working with other individuals who are as concerned as he is about the political situation in our country. He inspires me as a pre-medical student to focus on the health of my community as well as my future patients. My peers and I have a responsibility as the next generation of leaders to lead the earth into an era of sustainability, an era that Lopez feels will only mature from the bottom up through community powered civil societies. I can help solve

some of the world's challenges by becoming an environmentally conscious actor in my community. These actions are how I will realize the world I have dreamed up.

### Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. This is the glue that holds communities together. I'm grateful to say that the community in which I live provides me the freedom and resources necessary to become a physician. It's a privilege. But for everything the community provides me, what do I offer back in exchange? If my actions do not work to better the community in some way, then the relationship is not mutualistic. I am then leading an individualistic life, something Lopez believes can be dangerous if unchecked. He asks, "If we are endangered as a culture, do we need to ask ourselves what price society pays for our vigorous support of individual visions?" (Lopez, *Conversations* 13). Being involved in community projects and volunteering helps benefit the community, but my relationship with the environment is still not mutualistic. To reduce my fossil fuel emissions and recycle whenever possible will not only create mutualism between me and the environment, but will also inspire others to do the same, creating more reciprocity between my local environment and its people.

In the spring of 2015, Lopez helped organize an outing of three classes, including my own, to the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge. We spent the entire day outside from sunrise to sunset. We each ventured individually into the refuge for hours at a time to reflect and explore our thoughts.



At sunrise, I felt the wind welcoming me with a heavy blanket of air, and heard the birds putting on a concert. When the sun was directly above me, I could feel its rays flooding each of my cells with warmth. I could smell the vegetation's attractive aroma.

During one of our group conversations, Lopez told us, "Don't impose an intellect onto a place. Let

perspective come to you. Don't make it mean anything; just go deeper with what is presented to you. To get in, you have to let go" (Lopez, Oral). Later, as the Earth turned away from the sun, I saw the different ecotones and edges of light fuse into a grand masterpiece. Thinking about a landscape from this perspective is a direct pathway to forming a reciprocal relationship with a place. I know, because I felt this kind of relationship with the refuge before the day was over.

Lopez's work and life give me hope for the challenges humanity faces. His words have fanned a flame that was barely burning inside me. Lopez reminds me, "Use the material, the images and ideas that developed during your youth. Don't be afraid to use what you know to address the big issues, like the political power of the state and the absence of justice" (Lopez, *Conversations* 15). These lessons will not be forgotten and will serve as a reference in my endeavor for a civil society.

## Works Cited

- Lopez, Barry. Oral Presentation. Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge, NM, Apr. 2015.
- . *Outside: Stories*. San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2014.
- . "Writing Natural History: Dialogue #1 Barry Lopez and Edward O. Wilson with Edward Lueders, Moderator, Feb. 1, 1988." Box 2D. Barry Lopez Audio-Visual Collection, 1964-2007 and undated, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.
- Tydeman, William. *Conversations with Barry Lopez: Walking the Path of Imagination*. Norman, Oklahoma: U of Oklahoma P, 2013.