

Mimi Casteel on Stewardship

For the public announcement of the Willamette Valley Oak Accord, March, 2017

I spend a lot of time thinking about words and meaning. We underestimate the way our words, the rhetoric of our time, designs the present and the future, though we need only open a history book to have that lesson proved definitively.

Two words I have spent a lot of time around lately are steward and owner. The word steward has roots in the roots *stig*, for hold, household or pen, and the old English *weard*, which in its long history is mostly adverbially used to mean 'turned toward, bend toward' but later 'to keep guard, watch, protect and preserve'

And then owner, whose roots 'own', from *agen*, literally mean 'possessed by'. I'll just let everyone sit with those.

Regardless of how you self-identify, ownership of the natural world is a contrivance unique to humanity, and rooted in an animalistic notion of territory. It is given the appearance of truth by the laws we make, and dressed and held up by lawyers and reams of paper. One cannot help but connect the notion of ownership with the human brain's awareness of self, the powerful notion of control, and the uniquely human way of connecting everything in one's environment back to that self. Ownership incorrectly assumes that the owned thing also operates within that episteme. Ownership implies control.

Stewardship, on the other hand, puts the other thing in the foreground. The steward has a relationship with the thing, cares for and guards the thing. The steward recognizes that the thing does not belong to it, and that the steward's own self-interest, the interest of the thing, and all its inhabitants, neighbors, and their future relationships, are directly tied to the quality of care administered by the steward. And specifically, with regards to the land, the success of a steward demands that the steward recognizes a chronology far greater than his or her own, and that makes all the difference.

Today is not the day to debate the difference between the problems *with* agriculture and the problem *of* agriculture. I still submit that as farmers of a perennial crop, vineyards and winegrowers have a unique opportunity to begin to address and shift both of those trends away from the dangerous trajectories we are currently on. We are the stewards of the land. The papers and laws may call us owners. But that definition will make us lazy, forgetful, disrespectful and ignorant to the obvious fact that in a relationship with nature, *she is in* control.

It is for us to remember that as farmers, stewardship is our life's work. The best farmer must know more about more things than any person in any other profession. *WE* should be the most intelligent, if not the most educated, and certainly, CERTAINLY, we should feel the weight of the lives of the beings that will thrive or die by our hand, human and far beyond.

As winegrowers in a growing industry we wield pretty words and pictures of this place to sell our products. With pride we point out our windows to the magnificence of the landscape that is becoming so much window dressing to our tasting rooms. And yet, concurrently we strip that place to bare bones, removing the architecture, the mineral teeth and bones, the very soul of the land to make for an efficient, controllable landscape. This trend, along with increased absentee farming, will be our undoing. Nobody will expose a lie more poignantly than nature and our wines. That she would reveal her mysteries through our wines is a gift, not a promise. She is infinitely generous, but that generosity is built on an ancient relationship where there are no words for owner, and reverence informs every action. This isn't just about oaks. This is about the fire that burned in your heart to make wine from **this place**.

Yes, our industry is growing, and that is good. You are the leaders. We are the community. We are the eyes. We are the stewards. Yes, we can grow without being the last generation to work this land. But we must honestly face a true reconciliation with limits. Nature is not a capitalist. She has limits that we will only be allowed to ignore for less than seconds of real time. If we can embrace those limits, the rewards are real and greater than anything we currently know or understand. The wines that write poetry, the best of our tradition throughout history, honored a proportion of eyes to acres that we are treading dangerously far from. To truly access the living image of a place that a wine can vividly paint is only possibly when **place is put first**. We must remember and honor that ratio of love to landscape that has never failed to build and nourish the community around it, and has forever been at the very heart of civilization.

I get asked about how Mom and I have time to do volunteer work in this way. Well, I'm a farmer. Without anyone ever saying the words to me, I saw the example in many of the people in this room right now, and I wanted to be that example in the world. We are farmers. Nobody's work is done until everybody's work is done. To quote a line from EM Forster's *Howards End*, 'It all turns on affection now, don't you see?' Do you love this land? Why do you? How do you? There is no task that should be tended without skill and mindfulness on this landscape. There is no drudgery or mind-numbing work when your vistas are diverse, replete with the dappled shade of the iconic oaks, the boulders they make anchor on, the wildlife that visits them and the native plants that spill into our rows. That place, **that place** fills the worker's and the steward's heart, until finally it fills the glass. It all turns on affection. And to have affection, to feel love, one must know. And to know, one must BE HERE.

Whatever we think we can buy or sell to save this is to miss the whole point. The salvation of the agricultural landscape has been identified throughout our history by countless poets and farmers. Columella, Sir Albert Howard, Aldo Leopold, Louis Bromfield, Rachel Carson, Wendell Barry; careful, scientifically reputable work repeated and ignored that is neither provincial nor outdated now or ever. The keys to the success of our endeavors are written on this landscape. Our access to those keys lies in our willingness to see, to observe real time, to be a part of the landscape, not apart from it.

Wes Jackson said, 'Do not try to improve on this patch of native prairie, for it will serve as your standard by which to judge your agricultural practices. There *is no higher standard*.'