

# Save the Redwoods League

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Long ago, when I was a kid, my mother told me something I've never forgotten. We were outside, planting a tree. Since the tree was just a sapling, even smaller than I was, I asked her how long it would take to grow big and tall. She answered by telling me an old saying:

**“No man ever stands so tall as when he kneels down to plant a tree—under which he will never sit.”**

That saying—about the magic and splendor of trees and the value of giving them to future generations—has always moved me. And it has never seemed more fitting than right here today at the annual meeting of the Save the Redwoods League. Thanks to all your efforts over nearly a century, the world's tallest and most inspiring trees are here for us and future generations to enjoy! That is an amazing *gift*—and also, I might add, an amazing story. A story that has some wonderful and important chapters yet to come.

Let me digress to say that I have *always* loved a good story. Ever since my youth on a ranch in Colorado, when I'd listen to tales told around a campfire, the power of stories has called to me. So it's no surprise that, after college, I dreamed of becoming a writer. When I wrote my first novel and sent it off to publishers, I had big dreams of how that novel would kick off my writing career. I could live in a cabin somewhere in the wilderness of Colorado and write books—what a great life.

That first novel had, you could say, a *terrific* reception. I sent it off to 32 publishers—and it quickly garnered 32 rejections. Now, rejection is never easy...but 32 all at once? That really hurt. Just to be completely fair—not all of those rejection letters were cold and cruel. At least a few of them treated me with kindness. One letter in particular was so deeply personal, I can still remember every word:

**“Dear Sir/Madam (they circled “Sir”), Your work of fiction/nonfiction (they circled “fiction”) does not meet our standards for our spring/fall publication list.” (In that case, they circled *both* “spring” and “fall”—just to make absolutely *sure* I didn’t miss the point.)**

**It was clearly time for Plan B. So I signed up for business school and went to work for a private equity and venture capital firm in New York. Several years later, I was the firm’s president and chief operating officer. Life was busy...but I still had the persistent urge to write. To tell some stories. So, encouraged by my wonderful wife Currie, I had the fun of shocking all my partners and investors—just when our financial results looked promising—by telling them I was going to quit and move back to Colorado. Not to start another business—but to see if I could write at least one book that somebody, somewhere, might want to read.**

**That career change was 25 years ago—and also 31 books ago. (And best of all, 5 great kids ago.) All sorts of good things have happened in that time—including the opportunity to unite my work life with an enduring passion for conservation, environmental education, and young people.**

**All my books, whatever the genre or plot, have two basic themes: First, that *every person*, even the youngest or frailest among us, can rise to great challenges and do heroic things. And second, that *nature*—forests, oceans, mountains, and all our fellow creatures—is central to our lives. So the sense of place and the vibrancy of landscape are as important to my stories as the people who walk among them. The *paradox* of nature’s great power—and great vulnerability—creates the tension in those stories. And the *care* of nature, its conservation and restoration, is the work of my heroes.**

**All of which brings me to be here with you today.**

**One of my books, called *The Ancient One*, was actually inspired by a great redwood tree. I was hiking alone here in California when I encountered the most magnificent tree I’d ever seen—a redwood of such grandeur that I nearly fell over backward trying to see its highest boughs. As I came closer, the smell of its**

resins enveloped me. When I ran my hand across the deep creases of its bark, it was almost like touching the face of an old friend. My other plans for that day suddenly evaporated; I wanted to stay right there with the tree. Though I hadn't expected to camp out, and hadn't brought a sleeping bag or food, I decided to stay for the night.

Snuggled against the ancient tree's gnarled trunk, I opened myself to the sounds, shapes, textures, and aromas around me. All through that night, I listened to the great tree's swaying, creaking—and, I felt sure, breathing. Just as I was breathing. Sharing the same air, the same moments, breath for breath.

Whether or not I slept that night, I don't remember. But I do remember feeling an extraordinary sense of peace. And I also remember wondering, all through the dark hours, what amazing stories this 2,000-year-old tree could tell, what rich wisdom it could share. If only I could hear its authentic voice.

By the time the rosy rays of dawn touched the tree's highest branches, I knew I wanted to hear those stories. And to travel through time with this awesome companion. That's what gave birth to *The Ancient One*.

That book features a teenage girl, Kate, who finds herself in a race against time to save her family—as well as the grandest, oldest redwood tree around. That tree is so old that even in the days of the Native Americans who lived there centuries before, they called that tree the Ancient One. Here's where the fantasy comes in: Kate discovers that this tree is more than a magnificent living being—it is also a *time tunnel*. So with the help of the tree, she travels back in time, has a great adventure, learns something very important from the Native Americans—then rushes to return to her own time, the twenty-first century, *before* it's too late.

But there is someone else in this story—someone who does not want Kate to succeed. That someone starts to cut down the Ancient One. And if that tree is cut before Kate returns home...all will be lost.

Now, if you will allow me, I'd like to read to you an excerpt from the book—what happens when Kate begs the tree to take her

forward through time to the modern world. To do that, she will need to let the tree gather her up—body, mind and spirit. In other words, she will need to become *one* with the tree. That won't be easy. And so the voice of the Ancient One warns her:

*“This will be hard for you, very hard. For you are of a race that has forgotten how to stand still. To stop all running, all racing, all searching—to sink instead your roots in a single place, to watch seasons roll past by the thousands. And to stand tall and straight, anchored equally in earth and sky, to bend with the wind but not to break, to bear your own weight gladly.”*

*As she listened to the low, richly toned voice, Kate began to hear something else, something even deeper than the voice itself. It was a rushing, coursing sound, like the surging of several rivers. She realized with a start that this was the sound of resins moving through the trunk and limbs of the tree. And, strangely, through her own self as well.*

*Then she heard something more. With all her concentration, she listened to a distant gurgling sound. It came from far below her, rising from the deepest roots of the tree. They were drinking, drawing sustenance from the soil.*

*Another sound joined with the rest, completing the pattern. Like an intricate fugue, it ran from the tips of the remotest needles all the way down the massive column of heartwood and into the roots of the redwood. Back and forth, in and out, always changing, always the same. This was the sound, Kate realized at last, of the tree itself breathing. The sound of air being cleansed for all the creatures of the forest. The sound of life being exchanged for life, breath for breath.*

*“Great tree,” spoke Kate in wonder. “I feel so young, and you are so very, very old.”*

*A full, resonant laughter filled the air, stirring even the sturdiest branches. “I am not so young as you, perhaps, but old I surely am not. The mountains, they are old. The oceans, they are old. The sun is older still, as are the stars. And how old is the cloud, whose body is made from the vapors of an earlier cloud that once watered the soil, then flowed to the river, then rose*

*again into the sky? I am part of the very first seed, planted in the light of the earliest dawn. And so are you. So perhaps we are neither older nor younger, but truly the same age.”*

*As she listened to the rhythmic breathing of the tree, Kate felt herself beginning to breathe in unison. A sense of her body was slowly returning, a body that bent and swayed with the fragrant wind. Every element of her being stretched upward and downward, pulling taller and straighter without end. Her arms became supple, sinewy limbs; her feet drove deeply into the soil and anchored there. She felt tall and strong, centered and surrounded, sturdy and whole—content beyond human experience.*

*A sweep of time swirled past, seconds into hours, days into seasons, years into centuries. Spring: azaleas blossoming and pink sorrel flowering. Summer: bright light scattering through the morning mist, scents of wild ginger and licorice fern. Autumn: harsh winds shaking branches, gentle winds bearing geese. Winter: ceaseless rains, frosty gales, more rains brewing. Again and again, again and again. Seasons without end, years beyond count.*

*Fire rages through the grove, scarring the outer bark. But still the tree stands. White rot infects many branches. But still the tree stands. An earthquake rattles the forest, toppling many others. But still—the tree stands.*

*Then comes a peaceful day when the mist spirals gracefully skyward. A doe and her fawn step serenely into the glade, nibbling at the ferns.*

*Then, suddenly: A sound unlike any other sound ever heard fills the forest. Piercing, screeching, banishing forever the centuries of stillness. A shudder, a scream of pain erupts from her whole being. Stop! Stop, please. Go away, leave in peace.*

*But the pain only deepens. The sound grows louder.*

*It is the sound of chain saws.*

**That's not where the book ends. But I hope that the scene conveys the risks—what's at stake—for our beloved redwood forests. And I also hope that you might have felt, if only briefly, the great majesty, beauty, and wisdom of a redwood tree. That you might have known what it's like, as the tree itself said, "to stand tall and straight, anchored equally in earth and sky, to bend with the wind but not to break, to bear your own weight gladly."**

**Bringing all this back to the Save the Redwoods League—I must tell you that I'm more impressed than ever with the importance of this organization, the value of its work, and the timeliness of its vision. And I'm also greatly impressed with Sam Hodder and his terrific, forward-looking leadership.**

**In the past year, I've walked with League staff on the Boy Scout Trail in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park—and felt the spirit of a forest that is literally millions of years old. I've hiked through Peter's Creek old growth and heard the trees creaking in the wind, singing their timeless song. And I've seen hundreds of families in the Muir Woods—people who have come from all around the world just to witness the most wondrous trees on Earth.**

**At the same time, I've witnessed the League's evolving vision for a conservation legacy. Your Centennial Vision, which is now being framed, seeks to honor *both* the League's remarkable heritage from the past as well as its great potential for conservation impact in the future. Key to that vision are the themes Protect, Connect, and Restore.**

***Protect:* That means saving not just trees, not just groves—but vibrant, functioning forests. The resiliency of our treasured ancient trees depends on the health and stewardship of the forest where they stand.**

***Connect:* This means getting more people—especially young people—out into the redwoods. Diverse people from all backgrounds. As someone who believes deeply in the spiritual power of the natural world, I *know* that those experiences will change lives forever.**

***Restore:*** Driven by the strong scientific standards that have always supported the League’s work, this means taking an active leadership role in healing the forest we have lost. Restoration in the redwoods is uniquely achievable—after all, redwoods are themselves an inspiring symbol of resilience and regeneration. In the redwood forest, unlike so many iconic landscapes around the world that have been compromised or lost, we have the opportunity to fix humanity’s mistakes. With love and care and expertise, the groves we have saved over the past 100 years need not be vulnerable, isolated islands. Instead, they could be awe-inspiring elders in a vast, vibrant redwood forest.

I truly believe the League can accomplish these great goals. We have on our side a century’s worth of experience, a strong network of partners, capable leadership, and the respect of people all around the world who love the redwoods. Plus one more thing—the towering inspiration of those awesome trees.

With all that...how can we *not* try to aim high in our second century? To reach as high as the redwood trees themselves!

Let it be said, a century from now, about the people of this League...that we had the courage and vision to stand tall.

That we “anchored ourselves equally in earth and sky, able to bend with the wind but not to break, ready to bear our own weight gladly.”

Thank you.