

# My Motivations for Starting First Light

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(These are Peter's comments at the start of an awareness training program with Maine land trusts and Wabanaki REACH which was held at the beginning of First Light Learning Journey)

I know enough about myself to trust my motivations for engaging with people who are different from me:

I want to learn,

I want to understand different ways that people relate to the land and to each other.

I want to deepen my own relationship to place.

That the stuff that's easy to say, right? I'm going to start with the easier stuff and hopefully I can build up to the harder stuff. Everything I want to offer is honest to me.

Let me start with what's in my head and move to what's in my heart.

What's In my head: I believe in old growth cultures more than I believe in old growth forests.

I respect every human culture that's managed to live in a place for a thousand years or more without destroying it. Those cultures that have done that (not just Indians, but pastoral people, some urban people, even some Christian brotherhoods) have learned or been given a set of operating instructions for how to live in a place that is critically important knowledge. I'm drawn to those cultures, always have been all of my life.

After 25 years of cutting my own firewood, not using petroleum to heat, birthing 500 lambs, raising children that were born in our home, I know full well that I don't have that kind of knowledge and never will.

I love Northern New England. I'm a second-generation immigrant to this country, and I've nestled pretty hard into this place. I found myself in northern New England when I was 18 and I've never left. My family farms and stewards two places: one in VT and one in Machias, Maine and I've spent spend a year of my life (365 days or more) driving route 2 between them. I've never stopped being interested in the people and the landscape.

I concluded years ago that if I want to really understand this landscape that I love, I must understand and be in some relationship with the Abenaki and Wabanaki people who were here first. A landscape this beautiful must have produced a people of equal beauty.

Let me say some harder stuff, this is something that been pounding in my heart for 72 hours. At the Wabanaki social this past weekend I met a young man who had just finished up Marine boot camp. They did an honor dance for him. I met him cause he's the nephew of Tim Shay. He said, "the true belief in the land is no longer here."

It was as if he said: "You want to help? Well, you're 250 years late."

"You want to help? Well, you created this problem."

It was as if he said, "you can't get what you want because you destroyed it a long time ago."

I understand only something of the enormous tragedy of that alienation.

I understand only something of the terrible irony of me saying "I want to help" when it was my culture that created that alienation.

Last piece I want to talk about is particularly hard because it catches me being hypocritical or maybe shows here I can and can't live up to my values. It has to do with money, legacy, ownership, what's most important to leave my children.

Some of you might know me because of work I've done in conservation, others might know me as a writer or as a facilitator, educator. But how I know myself is as a place-maker: the most important, consistent work I've done throughout my life creating healthy, welcoming places that grow food, are refuges for people.

Here's the truth as I can speak it: my family own a 150-acre farm in the mountains of Vermont and a 600-acre homestead on the coast here. In neither case, did we pay money or inherit because of blood lines (family), but in both cases, we got that land because we are white and well educated and because of our connections. Because we were trusted by other privileged people. The fact that one person who gave us his 600 acres lived on less than \$7,000 a year doesn't change the enormous privilege of my situation.

I used to tell the story of being gifted Knoll Farm with pride, and now I don't tell the story because I see the primarily the great privilege of it.

We've poured our lives into both of those places, worked really hard, done good things, but I can not escape the privilege of it, that I and my family and our friends have so damn much when others have so dam little.

It's a privilege to live where and how I do, on a healthy productive farm, where we've had the freedom to make it the tapestry of our lives, building our home, raising our kids, feeding other people, making our home a refuge for others.

I know the name of the Irish immigrant who first built a cabin on this land in 1804 but I don't know the name of the Abenaki mother, father and daughter who were displaced from the land they love.

I wrote a book about Dickinsons Reach and the white man who lived there for 50 years, but what I wrote about the Passamaquoddy's, who have burial grounds adjoining this land, filled just a paragraph.

For me, the desire to learn and to make some amends with Abenaki and Wabanaki people is not about my guilt or shame, this is about my journey to become a whole human being through knowing history, understanding my privilege, and using that privilege to not repeat history.

How do we respect, connect, share?

Resilience is impossible in a world of insiders and outsiders.

The point of my life is to do something good and equitable with the privileges I've been given. If I allow and encourage it, my privilege gives way to awareness and action.

What are the actions I'm thinking about? Before I turn 60, we will also convey to the Abenaki people a deeded way to harvest and hold ceremony forever on this place.

Is sharing the land enough? I have no idea. Probably not, but it's is taking all the strengthen and privilege I have and that's' what matters most.

I want to say a few last words about what's been hardest:

Am I skilled enough to have these conversations?

I've made mistakes years ago, months ago, days ago, that all keep me awake at night.

It's been hard to acknowledge that some part of my motivation to do these things arises from a desire to be thanked, and I must do this work without the ego and self-centeredness of wanting to be thanked.

Less hard, is dusting myself off and trying again and again when I've failed to connect, or when my connection didn't work.