

Caldwell Lecture, Final  
The Humanities and Nature: An Intimate Relationship  
Tom Earnhardt  
27 October, 2017

Distinguished guests, Paula Watkins, Melanie Moore, Bill Andrews, Bland Simpson, Ann, ladies and gentlemen...

When I look around this room, I am inspired by your contributions as teachers, artists, mentors, public servants and parents. It is a signal honor to be among friends and the extended family of the North Carolina Humanities community... especially on this night, when we honor my dear friend of almost four decades, *Bland Simpson*.

Bland wears many crowns, and enjoys multiple monikers: Poet of the Pocosin, Bard of the Bog, Sage of the Spartina, and Laureate of the Longleaf. I will have much to say this evening about the multi-talented Mr. Simpson, and about some of the other Caldwell Award laureates. Before deserting our honoree for a few minutes, however, I have an obligation to address some of the creation myths and competing claims relating to the "*origin of Bland Simpson*."

Many of us have read Bland's books about coastal North Carolina... and he is not shy about claiming to be related to almost every important figure in eastern North Carolina and Virginia history... all the way back to the early 1600s.

Bland carefully plants the "seeds of kinship" to William Drummond, *first* Colonial Governor of the Albemarle Colony, and to the Blands of Virginia, who were related to Thomas Jefferson. He even suggests in his book, *The Great Dismal*, that he might have a "smidgen of the blood" of Pocahontas—running through his veins. Because Brother Simpson's claims of "universal ancestry" are so compelling, *everywhere* I go, people want to claim Bland as their own.

1—On the North Carolina-Virginia border the story has long circulated that the infant, Bland Simpson, was found by Virginia Dare, first daughter of the Lost Colony, in a basket made of bulrushes... floating on the Pasquotank River.

2—In Carteret County, in the town of Beaufort, it is considered gospel that Bland was delivered on Bird Shoal to the waiting arms of Rachel Carson, Mother of the Environmental Movement, by a golden pelican, as Carson fished for *king mackerel while the blues were running* ...

3—On the remote Albemarle Peninsula, between Plymouth and little Washington, it is universally accepted that Bland was raised by a pack of endangered red wolves... and this theory is supported by

the fact that Bland later toured with a band known as the “Red Wolf Ramblers”... before the name was changed.

4—But this is Chapel Hill, and I know many of you in this room fervently believe that the baby Simpson, wearing only diamond studs, was found by Frank Porter Graham in the Bell Tower... swaddled... in the Golden Fleece.

We may never cut through these *Kudzu* shrouded mysteries surrounding his true origin, but Bland likes it that way. As we leave the Simpson saga momentarily for for a short romp in the humanities, I want you to ponder these seemingly disconnected phrases:

*No wetlands, no seafood...*

*No wetlands, no Bland Simpson.*

*Again: No wetlands, no seafood...*

*No wetlands, no Bland Simpson. Think about it...*

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For me, standing here on this night to celebrate the Humanities in North Carolina, *there is a special irony at play...*because I was once petrified by the Humanities.

Bill Andrews and I met 53 years ago in the fall of 1964 at Davidson College when we both registered for the same course: “The Humanities.” Davidson’s Humanities was a two year program, with 24 credit hours spread across English, history, religion, political science, and art.

As a student from a small mill town, like so many of my classmates from across the South, the excitement of starting college classes was soon *dampened* by a shopping cart full of books, most of which I had never heard of and would never understand. In the first semester there were such crowd pleasers as Gilgamesh, a 4000-year old Epic from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley; Hammurabi's Code, a thriller from ancient Babylon; and exerts from Homer’s Odyssey.

In the second semester, things got worse. Our reading list included more bestsellers: Beowulf, The Song of Roland, and Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. Bewildered, I went to visit my Humanities advisor, Professor Daniel Rhodes—a 6-foot 4-inch Abraham Lincoln look-a-like. I told Dr. Rhodes that I saw little benefit in my life from the Humanities’ reading list. I could not comprehend how remembering obscure dates, kings, popes, and struggling with Dante’s “nine circles of hell” would help me in anyway.

*I also complained about the lack of a good “humanities textbook” in place of our seemingly random collection of stories, plays, and poems. In reality, I was looking for a way out of the course...and Dr. Rhodes knew it.*

Rhodes had clearly heard the same complaints before. He calmly informed me that the course was NOT about remembering dates, kings, gods, heroes, and rogues. *He said that the readings were chosen to stimulate debate about issues we would all face someday*—fears, doubts, temptations, anger, jealousy, success, and failure. *More importantly, Rhodes said* the humanities would help us all to *identify* important issues that occur over and over again throughout history... and that knowledge of the past, and of reoccurring themes, would enable us look “beyond the moment.”

Rhodes explained that, whenever possible, the course was designed around *PRIMARY SOURCES*—the raw materials of history, literature and art. He described *primary source* materials—plays, diaries, poems, and eyewitness accounts—as “history without conclusions and commentary” often found in textbooks or outlines. He concluded: “The life of any student or scholar, no matter their age, involves the continuing search for *primary sources*.”

I left the good professor’s office—still enrolled in the course—and in agreement that *knowledge of recurring themes* in history and literature, might be good things to know. I was less sure, however, about wanting to find additional primary sources outside of humanities.

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Much to my surprise, it was soon clear that *primary sources were all around me*. In addition to university and public libraries, these source materials were in county court houses, museums of art and history, and at historic sites.

Even now, while preparing episodes for *Exploring North Carolina*, I frequently use the North Carolina Collection at Wilson Library and the North Carolina State Archives where I work with maps, photographs, diaries, and records—primary pieces of North Carolina's past.

I am completely aware that in our connected world, we get much of our information off of little flat screens. We have access to art, music and drama... and online courses in the humanities. On our computer screens we can examine digital copies of many of the documents, paintings and recordings once available only to researchers in archive basements. Access is good.

There is still, however, another *primary source* of information and inspiration available to us—no matter our income, job, or the schools we attended. It is NOT AVAILABLE online. It is a source of material that equips us to communicate with both the written and spoken word. *That primary source* is the natural world around us.....nature.

For men and women in this room—especially those of us born a couple of generations ago—it was generally assumed that nature was part of our lives whether we had grown up on a farm, in a small town, or in a city. When nature was just outside your back door, or across a neighbors fence, access was easy.

Many of the human attributes that we study in the humanities were observable every day in nature—family, plant and animal communities (things working together), symbiotic (or mutually-dependent) relationships, and even monogamy. As in the world of humans we can see courtship, vanity, and deception in the form of camouflage.

In nature you'll also see reminders of the darker aspects of the human condition—violence, territoriality and jealousy. And whether we want to acknowledge it or not, *in nature* there is love, grief, and perhaps the “human traits” of compassion and empathy.

In nature, our senses are put to the test. To my knowledge we cannot experience cold, wet, exhilarating solitude, or exhaustion on a computer. You cannot smell the fragrance of fir and balsam, or feel the sting of the wind on an iPad.

In nature *we can see* our greatest yearnings and fears play out on a less than human stage. Freedom, the fragility of life, and death—are on display.

One of my earliest memories in the mountains near Asheville was watching a mother ruffed grouse with chicks faking a broken wing TO LEAD a scrawny dog farther and farther down a logging road..AWAY from her brood. I remember cheering for the mother grouse... until the dog caught her... And carried her into the rhododendron.

I was the upset by what I had seen. My father explained that many animals—not just humans—put themselves at risk save their children. “Don’t be mad at the dog,” he said. “Poor thing was hungry and just needed a meal... And the mother grouse did was necessary to save her young.”

In wild places and rural landscapes, along with biology lessons, there are, for each of us, there are lessons in understanding and in the ephemeral nature of life.

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Four years of college and lots of time outdoors had not prepared me for a new profession and a changing world. When I began law school here in Chapel Hill in the fall of 1968, the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the War in Vietnam were in high gear; Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had been silenced; *protection of the environment* was barely an afterthought; and Richard Nixon was leading in the polls for the November election. Here in Chapel Hill I found little time to think about the humanities and the natural world.

I had left behind the primary sources of college humanities, but I was soon confronted with a new set of primary sources in law school— the Magna Carta, English Common Law, the Constitution, Acts of

Congress, and precedent setting cases from state and federal courts ...the raw materials of law and justice.

In law and other disciplines, it is easy to allow your world to become narrowly focused—to the exclusion of the world around you. When you ignore the things things in your life that are important, you are very lucky if someone comes along to help you refocus...

It was in the middle of my second year in law school that Dickson Phillips, the magnificent Dean of UNC School of Law in the 60s and 70s, and later a distinguished Judge on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, *GAVE ME PERMISSION* to embrace the things I valued the most—outside the law.

It was totally unexpected, when Dean Phillips stopped me in the hall between classes and said, “Mr. Earnhardt, please come to my office for a few minutes.” As I followed him into his office, I asked if there was anything wrong?

Phillips responded, “You're doing fine, but sometimes I don't think your head is here at the law school... *And that's OK. All of us have to have leave room in our lives for the things we deem truly important.*”

He handed me a small book and said, “This volume has been very special to me and I think it will speak to you as well.” ...It was Aldo Leopold's, *Sand County Almanac*. I'd never heard of Aldo Leopold—a forester, philosopher, and ethicist—but within a couple of weeks I'd read the small volume several times.

In short order that spring, Dickson Phillips and Aldo Leopold became integral to my understanding of the law...humanities...and nature. Phillips and Leopold shared the same land ethic.

Although these were the words of Aldo Leopold, they could've just as easily been the words of Dickson Phillips:

“If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good. ... then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.”  
(PAUSE)

For me, however, *another phrase* more than any other, incorporates the natural world view of Dick Phillips and Aldo Leopold:

“To those devoid of imagination, a blank space on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.”

Several years after law school, I went duck hunting on a Saturday morning with Dean Phillips. We were in the swampy bottomlands of the Haw River, which are now under Jordan Lake. That morning Dean Phillips *talked* about his favorite time of day—the half hour before sunrise when each small bird finds its voice and becomes part of nature’s symphony. We never fired a shot that morning, but we did listen to the symphony—chickadees, nuthatches, Blue Jays, Cardinals, and titmice. To Dickson Phillips, that swampland on the Haw River was the most valuable part.

In that time of epiphany, I embraced the natural world as a primary source. There was no need to separate my passion for wild places from the humanities or the study of law.

I began to notice that many writers, musicians, artists, and lawyers channeled nature effortlessly in both the written and spoken word. For the first time, it also became clear that in nature there is common language that enables us to communicate across cultural and economic divides.

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Just like your favorite songs from the 60s, 70s, or 80s... I know that you *can still* remember the sound of a bobwhite, a whippoorwill, or the raspy voice of cicadas on a summer’s eve. If you’ve ever held a wet salamander, or an eel, you’ll always be able to describe slippery.

Today, you can still remember fireflies in a jar, the smell of skunk, or the terrible itch of chiggers. These are just a few of nature’s primary lessons that you *can still write* about and express verbally.

For writers, lovers, poets, parents, and teachers... nature is a warehouse of simile and metaphor:

—Think about the *similes* from nature you’ve used over the years:  
mean as a snake, sly like a fox, gentle as the morning dew, wise like an owl, cruel as the winter wind, and dumb as a rock.

—*Metaphors* or even more fun:  
the first blush of spring, the autumn of her life, the loving arms of a river, or politicians with reptilian empathy.

Think about *your exposure* to the natural world, and you’ll remember countless phrases that have helped you understand or communicate with others:

If you’ve ever watched the incoming tide fill a bay, then you understand John F. Kennedy’s often-used phrase: “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

Just about everybody here knows Muhammad Ali's classic, 1960s "nature poem": "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see."

That meant something to us who had seen butterflies—impossible to catch or touch—dancing in the summer breeze or when we had been jolted *by the sting of an insect*.

How do we praise and extol the virtues of North Carolina? — With the help of nature:

Here's to the land of the Longleaf Pine, the summer land, where the sun doth shine... (but how many of today's children have walked in a longleaf savanna?)

When I started spending time on the North Carolina coast at Harkers Island in the early 1970s my neighbor, and life-long "islander," Donald Willis, would answer every question with a natural reference. For example, when I asked, "How high is the tide on this October full moon?" Donald responded: "The tide's so high the sharks done ate my collards."

One windless morning in August, as I got into my boat to head off shore, I asked Donald if the ocean would be calm all day? He responded: "Ay,...It's so ca'm you could hear a loon fart to Egypt." Donald knew how to communicate using natural references, and I had just enough experience on his turf to understand him.

One of my favorite botanical references about struggle and tenacity came from Julius Chambers, civil rights' champion and Chancellor, and LeRoy Walker, United States Olympic track coach, when both were at North Carolina Central University during my teaching tenure there.

Both Chambers and Walker had heard the same story growing up... probably in a sermon. It went like this: "There are two ways to get to the top of a *mighty oak* tree. *The first method* is to climb it. Plan your route to the top and know the stronger, thicker limbs at the bottom of the tree will make you feel secure.

But when you reach the smaller limbs near the top, and the winds blow, there's little security, but don't stop climbing till you reach your goal."

According to Chambers and Walker, *The second way* to reach the top of a mighty oak is much easier: "Sit on an acorn, and wait." It's safe to say that neither of those men ever chose the second method.

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*These metaphors, similes, and examples all beg the question: Would the writer, speaker, artist, teacher, poet, or composer have used them, without a clear understanding of the natural world? AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP with nature helps us to communicate better! Some of the common themes where nature is invoked are beauty, love, escape, yearning and freedom.*

*You would expect nature to be the source of examples from a more rural, pastoral, time and you'd be right. William Shakespeare, John Donne, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning all drank from nature's deep well. You can, however, find nature's impact much closer to home in our great poets.*

*George Moses Horton was an enslaved poet who lived much of the first half of the 19th century in Chatham County. Because his status as a slave precluded him from being a student, it must've been especially painful when he wrote poems FOR UNC students. In some of his works, birds served as symbols of freedom.*

*In two stanzas of his poem "George Moses Horton, Myself," he wrote:*

*My genius from a boy,  
Has fluttered like a bird within my heart;  
But could not thus defined her powers employ,  
Impatient to depart.*

*She like a restless Bird,  
Would spread her wings, her power to be unfurl'd,  
And let her songs be loudly heard,  
And dart from world to world.*

*Maya Angelou, who lived in Winston-Salem for many years, was even more direct in connecting freedom to images from nature in "Caged Bird:"*

*The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wings  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings  
with fearful trill  
of the things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill... for the caged bird  
sings of freedom*

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I do not know whether my favorite writers of the past and present took more courses in the humanities or in the sciences... and I don't care. They all have one thing in common: *these heroes of mine* see themselves, not as lords of the universe, but as parts of a complex web of life in which *every part* is important.

I told you there was special irony at play tonight because after complaining about “primary sources” 50 years ago, I now have a room full of books by women and men who have channeled the lessons of the natural world in poetry, history, novels, photography, and art. Along the walls, you'll find Thomas Harriot, John Lawson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Robert Frost, Eudora Welty, Rachel Carson, Mary Oliver, E.O. Wilson, Doris Betts, Wendell Berry, Maya Angelou, David Quammen, Stan Riggs, Dorothy Redford and David Cecelski. Each of these people is fluent in nature's vocabulary, and capable of looking beyond the moment.

I have only met a few of these people, but I know how they think...because I share with them a common language across miles and decades. I know each of them would agree with a sentiment expressed by *Henry David Thoreau*... naturalist, poet, and philosopher, who decried the destruction of the natural world even before the Civil War. Thoreau asked this question, which is even more applicable today in our world of changing climate and altered landscapes:

*“What good is a house if you haven't got a decent planet to put it on?”*

*My writers would also applaud a similiar sentiment expressed more than a century later, by singer/composer Joni Mitchell in her environmental anthem, “Big Yellow Taxi”*

*They took all the trees  
And put them in a tree Museum  
And they charged all the people  
A dollar and a half to see 'em*

*Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
'Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot*

I ask the question again: Can you tell whether your favorite writers and artists are products of the humanities, or of the sciences?

Does it matter that Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction, is a virtual botanical guide to the Southern Appalachians...when you read it closely.

Did readers wonder whether it was literature or science, as they read the words of Wilma Dykeman, a Caldwell Laureate, when she wrote about the "killing" of French Broad River at Asheville in 1955?

Are you moved by the words of Caldwell Laureate Dorothy Spruill Redford because she is a first-rate naturalist, or a great historian, who gives visibility to the lives of countless enslaved people who were brought to the Albemarle Peninsula...many of whom were her ancestors?

The 1997 Caldwell Laureate represented North Carolina to the world on "Sunday Morning," and "On the Road."

In his unmistakable, warm baritone voice, Charles Kuralt never missed an opportunity to celebrate the natural wonders of this state and country.

And, finally, you don't have to leave this building to find a strong connection with the natural world. Bill and Ida Friday walked through this building more than 25 years ago with Dot Wilbur and chose the names for every room. When you leave tonight you'll notice they were named for North Carolina NATIVE wildflowers—Mountain Laurel, Trillium, Red Bud, Windflower, Dogwood, Magnolia, Jessamine and Sunflower... Those flowers should also be a reminder of the *diversity of this state—in nature and people—that Bill and Ida celebrated every day.*

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It is time, again, to offer you the two seemingly disconnected phrases, and see if they now make sense:

No wetlands, no seafood. No wetlands, no Bland Simpson,  
or at least not the Bland Simpson that we have come to know.

Just as Hugh Morton is identified with Grandfather Mountain, and Wilma Dykeman is forever tied to the French Broad River, Bland is a product of coastal wetlands and saltmarsh...no less than shrimp, oysters, and prothonotary warblers are also products of the same wet world.

*When I met Bland in the early 1980s, and long before that... he had black water in his boots, marsh mud on his clothes, and salt spray in his beard. It was perhaps pre-ordained that Bland's partner in all things, Ann, grew up in Sea Level...Carteret County.*

With passion, swagger and joy, Bland has turned Cypress, Tupelo, Spartina, pirates, canal boat captains, coffee colored water, salty winds, a plate of oysters, and a sip of tax free whiskey into story, song, and magic. Bland is a truth teller and prophet, who rarely misses a chance to be honest with us about the *environmental challenges* facing our coastal region.

He is one of those rare students who *mastered the primary source materials* of the humanities here at Chapel Hill...while embracing *new sources* in music, theater, and the natural world. *In the process, Bland Simpson has become a primary source himself... and occupies a long stretch on my bookshelf.*

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If the humanities in North Carolina are to remain vibrant, our primary sources can't all be contained in a few libraries, archives, *museums, or your computer's hard drive.*

We must view our state parks, and other accessible portals to nature, not just as places of recreation and repositories of biodiversity, but also as libraries of simile, metaphor, and "*nature's truth*"—*the most endangered species!*

In supporting the Humanities Council, we must insist that every person residing within Tar Heel borders HAS ACCESS to the inspiration of the North Carolina Symphony... the music of Doc Watson...the soul of Rhiannon Giddens and the Carolina Chocolate Drops....and the magic of Red Clay Ramblers.

We HAVE A DUTY to preserve as primary sources the passion of Julius Chambers, the historical perspective of John Hope Franklin, the wisdom of Dorothy Redford, the voice of Maya Angelou, the unifying insights of Charles Kuralt, *and* the civility and vision of Bill Friday.

Dickson Phillips would also urge us to slow down and keep every cog and wheel as we continue to devour and tinker with the natural world. He would remind us that every child should have the opportunity— a half hour before sunrise— to visit *those blank spaces on the map, the most valuable parts* of North Carolina.

It is in those places—coastal wetlands, untamed rivers, and mountain cove forests—where you can hear the Symphony.

No wetlands... No seafood.

Thank you.