

## **A Sense of Wonder: Honoring Rachel Carson**

*Institute of World Culture Founding Day Talk, July 3, 2010  
Concord House, Santa Barbara*



We are here to celebrate the founding of the Institute and its Declaration of Interdependence by recognizing the legacy of a great American, Rachel Carson.

The Institute of World Culture's 3<sup>rd</sup> aim is to:

To honor through appropriate observance the contributions of men and women of all ages to world culture.

Without a doubt, Rachel Carson's offering not just to the human world but also to the world of plants, animals, air, water, and soil was one of the most significant of its kind during the last century.

She was posthumously awarded the highest civilian honor in the US, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which recognizes those individuals who have made "an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

With a scientist's eye and a poet's pen Carson saw and eloquently described the interdependence of all living things and fought firmly to protect them. As a marine biologist and writer, Carson alerted the American public to the dangers of widespread pesticide use and is credited with advancing the modern environmental movement. She is most famously known for her book, *Silent Spring*.

Today as we celebrate America's Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Institute's Declaration of Interdependence in 1976, it seems appropriate that we recognize a woman who was fiercely independent yet driven by the concept of interdependence. For the two

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are not mutually exclusive. By recognizing the rights of the natural world, the right of every species to exist, Carson expanded the Universal vision behind the American Dream.

Rachel Carson also embodied the 6<sup>th</sup> aim of the Institute's by promoting fearless inquiry and constructive dialogue concerning the frontiers of science. In writing *Silent Spring*, Carson awakened an unaware American public to rampant pesticide use and its consequent harms. She made a current scientific problem accessible and understandable to the general public. Carson's book encouraged the average citizen to engage in scientific thought and to demand that the government ensure public safety and protect the natural world.

Carson also called into question the conventionally upheld "war on nature." This new war evolved after the end of WWII to make use of excess wartime chemicals to fight the newest enemy, bugs. Rather than spray insects and entire ecosystems with toxic pesticides, Carson argued for the balance of nature and suggested man's ethical responsibility to all forms of life. But man was also part of the natural world and therefore, a "war on nature" was really a "war on humanity." And the mass destruction of life harmed not just the person, but the dignity of humanity.

After Carson finished *Silent Spring* she wrote to a friend, "I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could... Now I can believe that I have at least helped a little." Her words challenge us to question how each of us is making a difference.

Carson's fight against the spraying of chemical pesticides is mirrored today by many people's protest against the largest oil spill in history, the explosion of British Petroleum's drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Like their predecessors with pesticides, BP probably did not have public safety or the environment in mind when they started their operation.

*Silent Spring* served as a wake-up call to man's growing reliance on deadly chemicals that carried serious and not fully understood costs. Perhaps the Gulf Spill will do the same for oil: provide us with a wake-up call that our dependence on the substance could be our own demise.

I believe that to question is perhaps the most patriotic act that an American can make. Questioning engages a citizen in the national dialogue, making them an active participant in the constant reforming of our nation. If Carson had not relentlessly questioned and sought out the cause of avian deaths, farmer illnesses, water quality problems, toxins in mother's milk, and mysterious cancers, it is likely that our forests, fields, homes and children would still be being indiscriminately sprayed with deadly pesticides. Thanks to her questioning, research and call to action the United States passed significant environmental laws and America progressed into an era of ecological awareness.

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For these reasons, Rachel Carson presents herself as a quintessential American: dedicated to discovering truth and engaging others in its pursuit, protecting her country and ALL of those living in it, demanding her voice be heard despite intense government and corporate criticism, and illustrating the difference that one determined individual can make.

Rachel Carson's legacy continues to this day. Her love of the sea, land and creatures inspired many to view the natural world in a new light and hold it precious. She empowered us to stand up for the rights of the natural world and prevent its destruction.

I encourage you to experience a sense of wonder as together we view this documentary drama on the life and work of Rachel Carson.

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