

Chesapeake Echoes the Landscape of our Minds & Hearts

**"But we have only begun to love the earth
. . . so much is now in bud."**

Denise Levertov

In early 2003, the *Baltimore Sun* announced that only 2% of citizens surveyed named "Environment/ Chesapeake Bay" as top priority for the Maryland legislature. In December 2002, The Chesapeake Bay Program had reported that 89% of watershed residents are concerned with pollution in the Bay, but only half of them can grasp how their daily actions impact water quality locally or in the Bay. The Bay Program's 'Chesapeake Future' report rightly concludes that an ominous or bright future depends on our social and political choices.

But how do we build the will to make the right choices? One line from Aldo Leopold's break-through essay "The Land Ethic" gives a clue: "We can be ethical (act rightly) only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love. . . have faith in."

**How do we build the
will to make the right
choices?**

With that in mind, consider two ways of telling the Chesapeake story, and how they affect our personal, social, and political will.

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The most common story heard about the Chesapeake is composed of up-to-date facts, action summaries, and loaded with numbers. It's a "signs of crisis, demanding heroic action" story.

News reports provide the troubling facts. Native oyster health is ranked at 2 out of a possible 100. Crab numbers fluctuate. Oil or sewage spills are reported by their gallonage. Photos of gridlocked SUVs on super-highways are provided along with information that 25% of nitrogen in the Bay comes from airshed pollutants -- and that population is steadily growing in attractive Bay-side areas. We hear of the Bay's 64,000 square mile watershed and of an airshed, source of atmospheric pollution, that is 6.5 times larger, reaching westward into Illinois. It is estimated that it will cost \$1 billion a year to really clean up this Bay.

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After sketching facts, this story shifts to hopeful actions -- new legislation; school-kids planting early-stage oysters, or trees to buffer streams, rivers, and bay; citizens digging raingardens to catch

stormwater; farmers discovering that more careful manure management can raise profits along with helping the Bay. Bay-action citizen groups and of Bay-friendly government offices and people are leading fine action.

This story is real, and it's well in place. It moves political and organizational actions by leaders used to making decisions based on science-based numbers.

But political action is also built by constituent priorities. A truly great story also needs to inspire widespread personal efforts in seeing, feeling, loving, and commitment along with understanding of the facts. That takes heart along with the numbers that appeal to our calculating minds.



In a second story, Chesapeake is a world beauty whose waters and watershed are our beloved home. Chesapeake! That dramatically dark-blue, once-life-rich, elongated, lace-edged, drowned-rivermouth of the old Susquehanna. Her waters, rivers, streams and her creatures touch our senses & mind, and we can reflect them back in song, in art, in words, in feeling.

In this second story, we who live here are urged to understand the ways that our lives bear the marks of being Bay people. Artists and poets among us encourage us to notice the way the heart-shaking beauty of the Bay's places and species -- from heron to silvery sea minnows -- can lift our spirits. Witnessing yearly migrations of heron and monarch butterflies becomes as important as celebrating human birthdays or achievements.

The Bay and rivers are themselves powerful, living realities that teach us about ever-flowing change and natural cycles that return over tens, hundreds, or thousands of years. We are teased into a sense of the mysterious and amazing nature of life itself, from our own self-conscious view in the here and now through to the greater time periods of planetary life in the evolution of the universe.

We begin to see how our inner beliefs about the role of humans in the universe affect our attitudes toward the rivers; how our spiritual or religious perspectives do or don't take account of the living beauty of Chesapeake. We may also have the sudden shock of feeling the ways our car-exhaust is going into Chesapeake's air and water or begin to grasp what it means that our toilet flush, somewhat purified, ends up in the Bay.



A truly great story also needs to inspire personal efforts in seeing, feeling, loving, and commitment -- along with grasping current facts.

Chesapeake waters & creatures can touch our senses & mind, so we reflect them back in song, art, words, feeling.

The first story puts objective numbers from experts at the very center. Citizens wait for these experts to tell us about the best realistic fixes.

The second story emphasizes the need for us all to choose inward as well as outward action -- do more about the state of our own minds and hearts if we are to "save the Bay" -- and ourselves as deeply-living humans. It asks us to seek out opportunities to experience the living beauty and grace of the Chesapeake, then challenges us to express our insights.

The felt wonder of this story is already deep in the hearts of many who then use their energy to collect those numeric totals that can influence legislators. It was alive in the lives of earlier folk whose livelihoods came from Bay and river waters. It lives still, but is not yet deeply established, in schools, marketplaces, communities and homes across the watershed. But it can flourish, and bring deep hope and joy to those who experience it.

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The 85% of citizens who worry about water pollution in the Bay region give us a clear signal: some awareness is growing. But the 50% who don't see how their daily lives connect with the issues, and the 98% who don't choose to make Bay health a top Maryland priority, tell us that we need to work hard on *experiencing* that connection.

We need, in short, to bring alive the poet, artist, and creative level of our Chesapeake lives. We need to link the two stories above and learn how to attend to both. The numbers that describe Chesapeake future will echo the inner landscapes of our minds and hearts.

In paraphrase of Denise Levertov, 'we have only begun to love the [Chesapeake] . . . so much is in bud.'

-- Sara Ebenreck
Project Director, CHESTORY

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CHESTORY would like to know your thoughts:

1. How is the state of the Bay related to the state of your mind and heart? To the public mind and heart?

2. How have you worked to deepen your felt, personal, spiritual connection to the Bay and river waters and lands?

Email your responses to CHESTORY : chestory@earthlink.net

