

**Acceptance Speech for 2016 Association of Environmental Studies and  
Sciences William R. Freudenburg Lifetime Achievement Award**

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I am honored beyond words to receive AESS's William R. Freudenburg Lifetime Achievement Award. Though I never knew Bill, I feel as though I did. Personally there was only one degree of separation between us. More importantly, I feel that I knew Bill because he stood for something, and that is the feature of Bill's life and work that I most admire.

The great challenge in an acceptance speech like this is to resist turning it into a long-form academy awards speech—thanking my mother and my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher—everyone who helped me to get where I am today. Succumbing to this temptation does not honor these people enough, and would surely bore the rest of you. I will instead try to use this occasion to say something about what I have learned about our field over this “lifetime” (which I hope will not come to an end to soon). Like Bill, I will try to say what I stand for, at least insofar as it relates to environmental studies as an academic field.

But first another apology. You will have noticed that it is not me who is reading this speech. If it were only a matter of increasing my already outrageously large carbon footprint I would be with you tonight. Instead I am at a long-planned workshop on wilderness, somewhere in Sequoia National Park, with no internet access, far from major transportation hubs. While you are listening to this speech I am probably discussing with various colleagues whether there is any such thing as wilderness or nature, in a place where any normal person would think you could answer these questions just by looking around.

I have already alluded to two ironies of our field. The first (regarding my carbon footprint) is that we devote ourselves to educating people about problems to which we ourselves contribute. Anyone who is part of the “global middle class”—whatever their politics —contributes to climate change. Together we are remaking the Earth in ways that are destructive to ourselves and other living beings, yet we feel powerless to stop, no matter how much we say we would like to do so. Humanity has never been so powerful, yet never have “things” seemed more in control. ‘The Anthropocene’ is as good a name as any for this cultural moment, so long as we don't get its meaning in this sense confused with the technical question that is now before the International Commission on Stratigraphy.

The second irony is that as college professors and intellectuals, we problematize things that most people take for granted. In my opinion this is what makes our

work so urgent and important (though I think there are better targets for our critical faculties than wilderness and nature). What we really have to offer our students and communities is not the inspiring and exemplary nature of our lives, but our skill in critically thinking about our present predicament and relating it to history and to broad areas of knowledge both in the natural and human sciences.

These two ironies are related in important ways. Since we are critical thinkers we should be smart enough to confess our sins (if you like that language) rather than making claims to moral purity that we cannot sustain. Sure, buy carbon credits and teleconference when appropriate, but don't think that this frees you from complicity in climate change. Perhaps some of us will become (or are) moral leaders, but some accountants and politicians may also find themselves in that role. "Green guru" is not part of our job description. What is in our job description is thinking as honestly and as hard about our present problems as possible, and following this trail of reflection wherever it may lead. We follow the argument, not the money or the adulation.

Sometimes the temptation to see ourselves as moral exemplars leads us to jump over the difficult critical project and get right to cheerleading for what are often facile or superficial "solutions." There is a lot in our culture that rewards such behavior. We all want happy endings (especially Americans). We don't like being bummed out. I think that our current obsession with "solutions" and "empowering people" is in part a response to the pervasive sense of powerlessness which we actually feel and to which I have already alluded. But powerlessness cannot be talked away. Its roots are entwined in the conjunction of the partial and constrained nature of human psychology, and the global sweep of our technologies. As we can still learn from Marx, the first step in making real change is to understand in the deepest possible way the origins and dynamics of the present condition. Once we've done this hard work, we can talk about solutions. (OK if you've just made a breakthrough in fusion energy YOU can talk about solutions, but I think you get my point.)

How do we carry out this critical project? When I was at Carleton College, advocating for the creation of an Environmental Studies major (something my former colleagues led by Kim Smith achieved after I left), I remember at one point someone objecting to our proposal that it sounded like a liberal arts major. Since Carleton is already a wonderful liberal arts college, the idea of inventing a liberal arts major inside of a liberal arts college seemed absurd. But it should not have been seen as absurd. The traditional liberal arts are still vital to almost everything we should want from an educated person. It is true that in the Anthropocene the liberal arts need to be practiced in relation to new problems and circumstances, and this calls for new skills and the ability to mobilize different bodies of knowledge as well as requiring a different balance between the old competencies. But if I had to put my trust in Bill Gates or Bill McKibben I know where it would go, and this bet goes all the way back to Gifford Pinchot and John Muir.

It should be no surprise that the traditional liberal arts colleges have been in the forefront in developing our field. They have long prized the ability to integrate knowledge, and the mastery of basic skills of numeracy and literacy. They are also institutionally less committed to the paradigms of knowledge generation that govern the modern research university.

At NYU we have launched a new Department of Environmental Studies, growing out of an Environmental Studies Program that we founded in 2007. Becoming a Department means that we can hire our own faculty and create our own graduate programs. This allows us to overcome some of the challenges that we faced as a program (e.g., the interminable difficulties involved in making joint appointments with departments). But being a department also presents new challenges. Departments in top-rated research universities are often narrowly constructed and value most the “deep dive” into the heart of their disciplines (there is a reason disciplines are called “disciplines”). To some extent environmental studies represents a challenge to this way of doing business, valuing synthesis and integration as much as analytical prowess. If environmental studies becomes just another discipline along side others, with its own canon, methodologies, literatures, terms of art, problems, and rankings it will have accomplished something, but mostly we will have simply recapitulated the problems that environmental studies was born to address.

Creating environmental studies isn't just creating a new discipline. It involves creating a new field which incorporates strengths and insights from existing disciplines, but couples them with the knowledge and skills demanded by life in the Anthropocene. In other words, it presents a grand challenge. All academics work hard, but those in our field work even harder. More importantly, we take greater risks than most academics. Some of us may choose this path in a moment of calm deliberation, but I think most of us wind up here out of some combination of bloody-mindedness, dumb luck, and not knowing how else to live. I offer a little of my own story as a case in point.

I grew up in California but spent the 1970s in the East as a graduate student and junior professor. In 1980 I was offered my dream job at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The only catch was that I had to teach an environmental ethics course (a field that barely existed), with an environmental scientist whom I had never met. After thinking about this for a nanosecond, I said “No problem” and accepted the job. I soon found myself in the classroom with Mickey Glantz, who led the societal impacts group at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. The class was a disaster. We had little by way of common vocabularies, methodologies, or literatures, and the overlap in our declared interests was not much greater. But we each came away from the class with an intense interest in each other, and over time this led to developing deep interests in each others' projects and ways of thinking. The groundwork for my entry into environmental studies had already been laid by my education, life experience, and predilections, but the door through which I entered was a deep and expansive interest in the mind of another person.

The platitude that this supports is that work in environmental studies is necessarily collaborative, but I mean to say something much stronger than this. To create a new field together, we have to like each other—in fact it might be more true to say that we need to love each other. We need to spend days and weeks and months learning from each other yes, but also sharing common experiences and empathizing with the ways that each other sees the world. NSF provides grants for collaborative research, but when it comes to this kind of real “soak” time, you’re on your own.

I have war stories to tell about my thirty years in trying to build environmental studies programs in three different colleges and universities. I could give you some helpful hints, and probably some especially good advice about what not to do (since I’ve made most of the mistakes at one time or another). But I think I’ve already said what matters most. You are not here tonight because you were attracted to the cushy life of an academic. Though we may sometimes forget this, what brought you here was something more personal and demanding—something that taxes your time, your intellect, and sense of commitment. This is not a cost of going into environmental studies. This is part of why we do it.

Thanks to AESS for the Freudenberg lifetime achievement Award. I will continue to try to be worthy of it.