

**A sermon for the funeral of Russell McKee
May 29, 2010**

And so we have come to the end. The end of Russell McKee's mortal life. To the end of 85 long years, good years, on this earth. Joyfully, to the end of his illness, the gathering weakness of Parkinson's that pressed upon him so these last year. But sorrowfully as well, to the end of our relationships with him, as husband, father, uncle, grandfather, mentor, and friend.

Russell's was a long, rich life, from its beginnings in Illinois, through service in the European Theater in World War II, including the Battle of the Bulge and the drive to the Elba River. But it was after the war, when Russell returned to the US and started college on the GI Bill, that his real path began to come clear.

He ended up at MSU, studying English and Journalism, becoming a rabble-rousing writer with a voice strong enough to shake the MSU administration's confidence. He then ended up spending the fall of 1950 in a tiny log cabin in northern Wisconsin, writing. And the amazing synergy that was to define his life emerged.

The woods and the words. These two forces took hold of Russell McKee and framed the rest of his life. Words and woods. Nouns and nature. Stories and streams. Tales and trails. They began to weave themselves together, when he went to work for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources in 1952, doing public relations.

In a few short years, he was editing the DNR's bimonthly magazine, "Michigan Natural Resources". From this bully pulpit he advocated for wild Michigan, our water-winter wonderland, as the old license plates described it. He worked to end the use of DDT, helping to make Michigan the first state in the Union to ban the destructive chemical. He promoted the bottle deposit law, to reduce trash and litter along our roadsides. He wrote books about our Great Lakes, about the Great Plains, and about the wonderful yarns and tall tales told Up North. He was honored and respected by his peers.

In fact, when I have thought about Russell these last few days, what keeps coming to mind is that simple Dr. Seuss book that says so much about conservation ... the Lorax. I keep hearing the voice of the Lorax saying “I am the Lorax! I speak for the trees! I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues!”

And so Russell also spoke for the trees, and the lakes, and the birds and the soil and animals and all good and wild things that make our state so beautiful, all the good and wild things whose voices get silenced by the crushing, demanding hubris of humanity.

But Russell also was a good human. In the story of Genesis, God makes the first man, Adam in Hebrew, out of Adamah, the Hebrew word for soil. We might say that God made human out of humus. Russell was a good human in the best, earthiest kind of way – salt of the earth. When he met and married Shirley Saunders in 1953, he took her two children, Rob and Linda, as his own. After Shirley’s death in 1992, Martha Seaman wandered into his yard to look at a cabin he had built there, thinking she might want to build a similar one. What happened instead was love at first sight, and instead of a cabin, they built a marriage together.

But all things must end. Leaves fall, the geese head south, the marshes and lakes freeze over. Trees stretch bare fingers to the soft gray sky, and summer fades into memory. This is a fragile earth, our island home, and we are fragile beings, passing our time upon its surface, living, loving and doing the best that we can.

But just as Earth is sustained and supported in God’s gracious hand, so too are we sustained and supported in that loving embrace. God has always held Russell close. We know that. We gather here today to remind ourselves of that never-changing truth. That under the bleak and frozen landscape of winter, life endures and cannot be conquered. That when our mortal bodies lie in death, there is prepared for us an eternal dwelling place safe within God’s loving embrace. That death is simply a gateway into another adventure, another place with trails to walk and people to meet and stories to tell once more.

And really, I can't say it any better than that, so I turn instead to another wordsmith, ecologist, advocate, author, farmer and human made of humus. I turn to the poet Wendell Berry, who wrote a poem called The Wish to be Generous. Let it be an elegy to a great man, Russell McKee...

It goes like this:

**All that I serve will die, all my delights,
the flesh kindled from my flesh, garden and field.
the silent lilies standing in the woods,
the woods, the hill, the whole earth, all
will burn in man's evil, or dwindle
in its own age. Let the world bring on me
the sleep of darkness without stars, so I may know
my little light taken from me into the seed
of the beginning and the end, so I may bow
to mystery, and take my stand on the earth
like a tree in a field, passing without haste
or regret toward what will be, my life
a patient willing descent into the grass.**

Amen.