**Connections**

**Kit Kat Essay By Greg Browning**

**March 21, 2023**

**Introduction**

This essay is a bit of a walk in the woods. It’s me wandering around in the midst of an emerging climate crisis wondering what the past has to tell the present about the connection between America’s love of its natural abundance and its desire to use it, some would say exploit it, to advance economic interest and societal progress.

When I thought about this subject the authors and artists who came to mind as people who saw this connection and wove it into their work were the Hudson River School landscape painters, about whom I knew little, and their contemporaries the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau and his Concord, Massachusetts neighbor and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, the author of famous essays and the immortal line that a “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

A longer list could range widely: From Teddy Roosevelt to Sierra Club co-founder, John Muir, who became friends with Emerson and who greatly admired Thoreau, to *Birds of America* artist John James Audubon and landscape architect and Central Park co-designer Frederick Law Olmsted. It could also include biologist Rachel Carson who authored *Silent Spring*. She was instrumental in launching a modern environmental movement that went far beyond conservation to include successful public policy development and advocacy.

The Hudson River School painters came to life for me when I visited the Cleveland Museum of Art and saw *Twilight in the Wilderness* by Frederic Church (1826-1900). It’s a huge, almost cinematic, painting of the sun setting in the wilderness casting vibrant reds, oranges and yellows across the sky. Church was a student of Thomas Cole, the father of the Hudson River School. Worth millions, the painting was purchased by the museum in 1965 for just $15,000. Today it’s the most reproduced painting in the museum’s collection. It’s also a classic example of Hudson River School painting with its dramatic colors of earth and sky in what Church thought of as God’s American wilderness. The painting appears to be suffused with spiritual meaning, and, perhaps, an anxiety about the twilight of pristine nature. You can see it in Church’s mastery of light and in what appears to be a cross in the foreground of the painting.

The trip I’m taking you on involves beginning to understand the work of these artists and how their insights might help us address climate and biodiversity concerns. I do this knowing that our literature is loaded with wisdom about the presence of the past and about the past providing useful insights about the present and the future.

An example can be found in the poetry of St. Louis-born T.S. Eliot. In one of his poems Eliot writes that:

*Time present and time past*

*Are both perhaps present in time future,*

*And time future contained in time past.*

In connecting dots between a few prominent past actors and present problems, I’ll provide the arc of the idea that nature and our relationship with it are on a short list of what matters most. I’ll do this by focusing on the historical relationship between the natural world and our industrial and technological progress with the story anchored in a sketch of the Hudson River School painters and their times.

But before I turn to this story, I’ll give you a few facts torn from today’s headlines regarding climate change. In some ways, these are messages about the environmental price of unbelievable progress in our economic lives, both in the U.S. and across much of the globe. A recent economic history, *Slouching Toward Utopia*, provides ample evidence. The author argues that during the long 20th century (1870-2010) and primarily because of an industrial revolution propelled forward by the research laboratory, the corporation and globalization, we have created unparalleled – arguably utopian – levels of economic growth that, to borrow a phrase from author Tom Wolfe, would make the Sun King blink.

Just think, since 1870 every year has seen as much technological and organizational progress as was realized every four years from 1770 to 1870 or as much progress as was realized every twelve years from 1500 to 1770. And while it’s cold comfort to many still living in poverty and experiencing inequality, in recent decades there has been a radical reduction in extreme poverty; it has fallen from half the global population living in such conditions in 1953 to about ten percent today.

The story of explosive economic growth is made even more compelling knowing that the rate of knowledge production has gone from doubling every 100 years in 1900 to today when estimates suggest a doubling every year or two.

Yet it is uncomfortably clear that – avoidable or not – this incredible progress combined with a failure to manage its environmental impact has come at a huge price in terms of climate change and species extinction. A quick description of the emerging impact is a hotter, more volatile planet with shrinking icecaps, rising seas, dramatic drops in biodiversity, more people without regular access to food and water and global migration from south to north and from shorelines to interiors. The greatest source of these troubles are the wealthiest, and not the poorest, nations. In fact, the richest 1 percent of the world’s population is estimated to be responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the people who compose the poorest half of humanity.

These realities help explain why Nouriel Roubini in his book *Megatrends* writes that “Unless you live on high ground in cool latitudes with plenty of drinking water and rich farmland, get ready to move. If good luck has landed you in the right place, expect lots of company dispersed by global warming, both human and microbial.” No wonder *Sunday Morning* television reporter and science writer, David Pogue, who is the son of former Jones Day law firm leader, Dick Pogue, notes that one of the best cities for weathering climate change is his hometown, Cleveland, Ohio.

As you all know, there are good news responses to these issues that range from new technologies, including electric vehicles, to more use of renewable energy, to global efforts to preserve and protect land and oceans, including the Half-Earth Project, which was started by Nobel Laureate E.O. Wilson and is focused on setting aside half the world in its natural state in order to save ourselves and other species.

But my essay is about looking backward to help us move forward with more insight. As you’ll see, I focus on this subject not because I think that looking at landscape paintings or taking a walk in the park will slow global warming or enhance biodiversity, but because I have a sense that the values, emotional and intellectual energy and associated personal and community relationships that connect us with nature -and each other – may be necessary, but not sufficient, elements of advancing efforts to find and implement sustainable solutions to our climate related problems.

Whether or not this is naïve, magical thinking in the midst of the brutal economic and political battles associated with climate change is a good question made better because many people find these issues too abstract, too remote, too complex to require immediate action on their part. Yet the story has many layers. For instance, while only 1 percent of Americans think climate change is the most important issue facing the nation, 69% favor the U.S. becoming carbon neutral by 2050. Additionally, Pew Research Center found in 2022 that whether those surveyed had a low, medium or high religious commitment, well over 60% of the combined survey sample agreed that earth is “sacred.”

With this in mind, let’s turn to the Hudson River School painters.

**The Hudson River School Painters**

The Hudson River School refers to a loosely affiliated group of 25-30 landscape painters living and working in the New York City area beginning in the mid 1820s and through the mid 1870s or so. After decades of American devotion to portrait and history painting, they helped generate a gradual shift to landscape painting. One analyst suggests that with the disappearance of the founding fathers’ generation of American Revolutionary War figures there was a yearning for new ways to celebrate the American story. This desire was buttressed by the bountiful beauty of America and by early evidence that this landscape was being despoiled by population growth and economic expansion.

Despite the relative emptiness of the continent, U.S. population growth was amazing. The nation grew from 9.6 million people in 1820 to over 23 million in 1850 to 38.5 million in 1870. The growth in empire was also dramatic beginning with the Louisiana Purchase of 1804. And the movement of population was phenomenal. At the end of the American Revolution, only 3 percent of Americans lived west of the Appalachians. By 1820, the Ohio and Mississippi valleys supported more than two million Americans or about 20 percent.

Many of these settlers made their way west through Pennsylvania using the Nemacolin Trail that turned into the National Pike that became Route 40, which, as you know, runs right through downtown Columbus, Ohio to this day. Others took flatboats or steamboats down the Ohio River, which was routinely regarded as the most beautiful river in the world.

This historical context helped shape the thinking of the Hudson River School painters, including the School’s father figure, Thomas Cole (1801-1848). An Englishman who was the son of an industrialist and knew firsthand what industrial progress could do to its surrounding environment, Cole was largely a self-taught painter. He began as a portraitist in order to earn an income, but gradually shifted his focus to landscapes. Interestingly, as our resident architectural historians know, Cole was, for a time, an itinerant painter in Ohio who (years later) became involved with an 1838 competition to design a new Ohio Statehouse in Columbus. Though his design did not win the day, the current Statehouse is, to a limited degree, reflective of his ideas.

Cole came to America in 1818, but first visited the Hudson River Valley in 1825. Ironically, access to this wilderness area became much more available, including to tourists, that same year with the completion of the Erie Canal, which, for the first time, created a waterway that connected the heartland and the Great Lakes to New York City and the Atlantic Ocean.

Cole quickly became a master of landscape painting. Magnificent forests, majestic mountains and skies. Cole had it all. He also came to the subject with a strong belief that the American wilderness was already under siege from too many people, too much pollution and too little regard for the intrinsic value and beauty of nature. Within this view was a belief that the American landscape was an Edenic asset that was part of God’s design.

In an 1836 article titled *Essay on American Scenery*, Cole discusses the spiritual qualities of nature and rural America. He notes: “I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation.” Cole concludes by saying that: “Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly.”

Wow, this message is almost contemporary. It could have been crafted for America’s first Earth Day in 1970 – or to provide fan support for a popular song of the same year, Joni Mitchell’s *Big Yellow Taxi* and its environmentally focused lyric:

*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*

It’s no wonder that art critic, Robert Hughes, has noted, “… it was Cole who introduced in painting the terms of the great debate over natural resources which has preoccupied Americans ever since. On the one hand, the landscape is an immense cornucopia, created by a providential God for men to use just as they please …. In the opposite view – that of Cole, the American Transcendentalists, and every conservationist that followed them down to the present day – God had inscribed his being in the wilderness and to destroy it was sacrilege.”

Hughes goes on to say that in order to grasp the meaning of Cole’s “Arcadian” scenes of the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River, among other locales, one must see them in contrast to the “go-getting populist” energies of American development. The famous Alexis de Tocqueville provides a related remark: “It is the consciousness of destruction, of quick and inevitable change, that gives such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America.” To grasp this perspective is to see that Cole and his contemporaries regarded their painting as both an artistic and a moral imperative – and a counterbalance to the biblical and commercial message that God gave man unfettered “dominion” over “all the earth.”

This go-getting was propelled forward, in part, by the notion of Manifest Destiny. America’s Manifest – as in obvious beyond argument – Destiny included the view that the American Empire had the right to subdue the continent all the way to the Pacific Ocean. According to art critic, Hughes, “Manifest Destiny was America’s myth of redemptive violence. It created its own heroes; and art had a large role in promoting it.” And, as we know, it all led quickly to the closing of the American frontier before the end of the nineteenth century.

This created a contradiction, a tension, between the American sublime and the American submission of nature to progress. And within this tension, the Hudson River painters advanced their historically new, and passionately held, view that the landscape should be protected and preserved as God’s handiwork and not feared as a terrible, dangerous place. This change in perspective amounted to a “revolution in meaning,” according to Roderick Nash the author of a classic work titled *Wilderness and the American Mind.* Prior to this generation, Americans generally saw the wilderness as frightening territory filled with danger. The wilderness was something to be dominated and subdued. As such, it was regarded by many as an improper subject for paintings. In fact, the Hudson River School was originally a term of derision used to criticize landscape painting.

Yet the Hudson River painters created the first genuinely American school of art. In viewing nature as a grand, God-given asset, these artists were advancing and embodying a spiritual perspective that made them, in effect, clergy for a new secular religion that is arguably more alive today than ever before. In the process, they helped create the modern concept of wilderness. And while this led to many positive developments, it did not do justice to indigenous people who experienced wilderness as the everyday world they lived in and not as a separate sphere. Ironically, and tragically, these people were being shipped out of many territories east of the Mississippi River at the same time the first generation of Hudson River painters was active. This reality was driven by many factors, including population growth and the demand for land, and it was enforced by government actions, including the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Within this history, the religious dimensions of nature prevailed and remain alive today. You can see it in the zeal of many environmentalists and you can hear it in the voice of critics who say that when environmentalism morphs into religion it is problematic.

An example of the latter is the view of Michael Crichton, the late science fiction writer – think *Andromeda Strain* and *Jurassic Park* – who saw the role of religion increasingly filled by environmentalism or, as some call it, “ecotheology.” Crichton says that environmentalism remaps Judeo-Christian beliefs: “There’s an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there’s a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we see salvation, which is now called sustainability.”

Though I’m not ready to sign off fully on this version of events, it’s another perspective saying that nature and religion are directly connected and that together they can provide necessary zeal for reform and potential division when zeal becomes zealotry.

This passion and power also helps explain why Hudson River School art that celebrated America and its Manifest Destiny was a big hit with the public. Many jumped at the opportunity to see traveling exhibitions of this artwork. This likely encouraged more attention and more interest on the part of aspiring painters. It also helped bring newcomers into the field, including Thomas Cole’s greatest student, Frederic Church (1826-1900).

Church’s realism was imbued with a strong Christian faith, stemming from his family’s Puritan past, and a belief that he was painting God’s kingdom on earth and providing a glimpse of the divine in the process. After studying with Cole for just a few years up until Cole’s death in 1848, Church, who was only 22 at the time, soon became the most important landscape painter of his generation. He also became quite wealthy. Wealthy enough to design and build – on land he once painted from as Cole’s student – a spectacular, Persian inspired home in the Catskill Mountains that he called Olana and that you can visit today in its restored form as it sits high above the Hudson River Valley by Hudson, New York. And perhaps consistent with his wealth and his background as the son of a successful Hartford, Connecticut businessman, Church lamented the loss of wilderness while *simultaneously* believing that economic progress was part of the divinely ordained destiny of the United States.

As previously mentioned, Church’s masterwork, *Twilight of the Wilderness*, was the painter at the height of his skills. Exhibited in 1860, just one year before the beginning of the Civil War, the painting is both an icon to America and, according to Andrew Wilson and Tim Barringer in their book, *American Sublime*, it is possible in retrospect to see “Church’s flaming vision as an apocalyptic portent of the (Civil War) violence that would soon engulfed America.”

Interestingly, a second generation of Hudson River School painters included an artist named Sanford Robinson Gilbert (1823-1880). A luminist, Gilbert was capable of painting Hudson River Valley masterpieces. One of his clients, James Pinchot, a close friend of Teddy Roosevelt’s father, was a successful, Yale educated businessman with wide ranging intellectual interests. He was a wallpaper and interior furnishings merchant with ties to the lumber industry. Yet he was opposed to many of the timber harvesting practices of his time, particularly clear-cutting of forest land that led to terrible erosion problems.

Pinchot so admired Sanford Gilbert that he named his eldest son after the painter. That son’s name was Gilbert Pinchot. Gilbert Pinchot began his career as a forester for George Washington Vanderbilt’s Biltmore estate. He eventually became Governor of Pennsylvania, but well before that he became the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service. He was also a major supporter of America’s national park system – a system that began in 1872 when President Grant signed the legislation that made Yellowstone the first national park. Significantly, there is historical evidence that reveals links between the Hudson River School painters and this policy decision. The connection is tied most directly to the western paintings of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) and Thomas Moran (1837-1926), both of whom have a Rocky Mountain peak named after them.

Pinchot was appointed to his post as chief of the newly created U.S. Forestry Service by President Theodore Roosevelt, whom he first met when Roosevelt was Governor of New York. As is well known, Roosevelt was a champion environmentalist who internalized the nation’s conflicting values with regard to the environment. On the one hand, he, more than any national leader before him, and arguably since, moved in dramatic ways to preserve and conserve American lands and waterways. In fact, in total, he conserved 234 million acres and in the process he: created or expanded 150 national forests, created 51 bird sanctuaries and six national parks to name most, but not all, of his preservation initiatives.

But this “wilderness warrior” was also an avid hunter – a Boone and Crocket Club member with a tendency to kill everything in sight when he was hunting or on safari. And he saw no contradiction between conservation and hunting; in fact, they went together perfectly.

The Pinchot connection with the Hudson River School, which was provided to me by art historian, Henry Adams, underscores the growing support in early 20th century America for the preservation and conservation of nature – and the fact that like James Pinchot and Frederic Church Americans were often on both sides of the tension between nature and commerce.

Thomas Cole also embodied this tension and so did many of his clients. An example of the latter is the vastly landed Van Rensselaer family of Albany, New York who were part of a conservative squirearchy who – as is the case today for many – wanted it both ways: They wanted to continue making money using nature as need be *and* they wanted to honor it while protecting it and themselves against the excesses of overly aggressive development and rapid population growth.

But just as there was a conservative theme running through the Hudson River School painters and their clients so was their alignment with thinkers of a different type. Two leading examples are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Both of these transcendentalist writers believed in self-reliance, in simplifying life and in the divinity of nature, in part, as a balance wheel for an increasingly secular society consumed with the conquest of nature and the accumulation of wealth.

Thoreau’s view of nature can be found throughout his writings, which are filled with the tensions between nature and civilization. This includes life at Walden Pond that was often interrupted by a train roaring by just a short distance away.

Thoreau’s perspective on nature is articulated, now famously, in his essay, *Walking*, when he writes that:

*The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wilderness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind ….*

This view of nature as both essential and imbued with spiritual significance did not die with the 19th century. It can be found in contemporary environmental literature and it was front and center in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which is a foundational book for the modern environmental movement. Published in 1962, it focuses centrally on the extreme dangers of DDT – a synthetic insecticide that was highly destructive of ecosystems and dangerous to humans – and other poisons that Carson referred to as “elixirs of death.” Her work sent a message that it is not enough to simple preserve and conserve nature; instead, it also needs to be protected proactively through effective regulation and public education.

The story of the “silent spring revolution” of federal public policy reforms that were encouraged by Carson and others and that played out primarily in the 1960s and 70s has been told with compelling prose and almost endless detail by historian Douglas Bentley. Brinkley, who grew up in Perrysburg, Ohio and graduated from Ohio State, notes that though it took ten years, Carson’s call to action regarding DDT was followed by the creation of the U.S. EPA, which moved rapidly to outlaw the insecticide domestically in 1972.

Carson never stopped thinking about the essentially spiritual importance of nature. In fact, in 1954, in Columbus, Ohio, she made a speech to approximately one thousand young women that made just this point. Here’s part of what she had to say: “I’m not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I stand here tonight and tell you that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man’s spiritual growth.” Carson went on to ask, “Is it the right of this generation, in its selfish materialism, to destroy these things because we are blinded by the dollar sign?”

A photographic companion to Carson’s *Silent Spring* can be found in another 1962 book. This one is a book of fine art photography by Eliot Porter. Porter was a Harvard trained physician who fell in love with nature photography with encouragement from Ansel Adams. But, unlike Adams, Porter, who was the older brother of painter Fairfield Porter, worked in color and was one of the first persons to legitimize color photography as a fine art.

Porter’s book of photographs, which was published with Sierra Club support, was paired with quotes from Thoreau and the book’s title was taken from Thoreau’s words that *In Wilderness Is The Preservation of the World*. Porter’s book became another foundational work for the modern environmental movement.

Porter’s work punctuates the point that the environmental movement was shaped and inspired by a vital blend of social, spiritual and religious elements that first fueled conservation and preservation priorities and then, in the early 60s, evolved rapidly into practical political action in the midst of an age of anxiety that included fear of nuclear war.

Brinkley spells this out in great detail regarding federal environmental action through the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations. The breakdown reveals a new day in environmental activism and includes legislation resulting in:

* 106 National Wildlife Refuges
* 100 National Parks
* An initial Endangered Species List (1966-1967) that consisted of 331 species.

**The Machine in the Garden**

I’ll close this essay with a brief mention of an image created by MIT historian Leo Marx. In his 1965 classic, *The Machine in the Garden*, he aptly refers to the longstanding tension between America’s devotion to and domination of nature through industrialization as the story of “the machine in the garden.” Marx thought that this imagery captured a central historical reality. It informed his belief that industrialization – the capitalist-driven process by which a predominantly rural and agricultural society became predominantly urban and industrial – was the most important “event” in American history.

Marx, in the same book, addresses issues that are reminders of the contemporary scene regarding tensions between urban and rural populations and related interests and perspectives. He also says that the allure of the imagined sanity and simplicity of the pastoral as a refuge from the tensions and complexities of the urban has been with us from the beginning. It includes complex issues of economic interest, class conflict and cultural perspective that are often not understood well by the actors or the onlookers.

**Conclusion**

So, as you can tell, my walk in the woods took me down a winding path through interesting terrain. I was searching for America’s connection with the pastoral – with nature – and how it might inform the present. I discovered now familiar themes of hope, connection and contradiction. What I was most surprised to find was so much of each and the fact that our relationship with nature is so infused with spirituality. Interestingly, I found a present day example of this when I received a thank you for my modest donation to an environmental cause and the writer quoted E.O. Wilson saying that: “Unless we preserve the rest of life, as a *sacred duty*, we will be endangering ourselves by destroying the home in which we evolved, and on which we completely depend.”

The importance of hope is shared by historian Douglas Brinkley. In *Silent Spring Revolution*, he writes that the environmental reforms that played out after the publication of *Silent Spring* took the conservation ethic of Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot forward in new ways and far beyond conservation and preservation. In doing so, grassroots advocates encouraged national leaders and together – often with significant, bipartisan support – they created a new environmental movement. This shift gives Brinkley hope for the future. In fact, he characterizes these policies as a veritable “hope machine” operating in a world where it appears that the more we do the more we need to do. This situation is made more challenging by the powerful paradox of progress: the more progress we make – and we have and are making much more than the nightly news or social media often suggest – the worse things appear in important part because goals and expectations continue to expand.

Finally, as we struggle to find our way through the Anthropocene Era when people are the most powerful force in nature, it is both interesting and compelling that the tensions embedded in our historic relationship with nature are also at the heart of our current environmental dilemmas. Whether it’s the “machine in the garden” or another metaphor, it is a complex reality that provides fertile ground not just for division, but for genuine engagement when actors realize that we are all in this together and that, to a large degree, we are all on multiple sides of these issues in our daily lives.

It reminds me of a famous insight from Walt Whitman regarding the complex, often contradictory nature of America. In 1855, in the preface to the *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman famously says that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”

16 years later, the same author, in the aftermath of the Civil War, in an essay titled *Democratic Vistas*, paints a starkly different picture. Not a view of an idealized nation, instead, Whitman writes about a land where genuine belief has disappeared, where hypocrisy is the order of the day, where churches have walked away from their values. He goes on to say that the “spectacle is appalling.” As for business, Whitman says that money-making is our “magician’s serpent” and “sole master” of the field. He ends by saying that it is “as though we were somehow being endowed with a vast and more and more thoroughly appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.”

What is most interesting about Whitman’s insights – and what relates so directly to the tensions and contradictions embedded in the image of the machine in the garden – is that both of these insights are true in fundamental ways. And this truth, in turn, is a reminder that Emerson’s line about a foolish consistency is also worth remembering.

In the end, the conflicts and contradictions embedded in this brief story about a complex subject – it amounts to skipping a stone across the pond of people and nature in America – tells me that instead of ridiculing our history we might want to embrace it as a first step toward reckoning with it successfully. Maybe if we maintain our essential principles while appreciating the wisdom, ironies and inconsistencies in our views and the views of others, we can help create the relationships needed to address big issues successfully, including climate change.

My experience tells me that when this happens it includes cracking the code, once again, on creating trust, which, when all is said and done, is the true coin of the realm essential to addressing our most pressing problems.

With that, I hope I’ve given you another reason to take a walk in the woods.

Thank you.