

Text of Shenna Bellows' Keynote Speech  
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When I was a child, each year, my grandmother would capture a monarch chrysalis in a jar with milkweed and bring it to our house. And we would watch that chrysalis slowly change and then watch a monarch butterfly hatch. My grandmother passed away a couple of years ago, and when she passed, we planted a garden in her memory near her favorite lake, and now, when I see a monarch butterfly I think of my grandmother. This summer, I didn't see any monarch butterflies. It may be because I was busy. But I was alarmed when I read the news that the miracle of the monarch migration each year is endangered. And when I think about why I am here today, it's because I want my nieces and nephews to know about monarch butterflies, and I want their children to know about the butterflies.

What brings you here today? It's a question I ask each of you seriously. Is it someone – a child or grandchild or great-grandchild yet to come to whom you hope to leave something greater than wealth? Is it the sense that the intrinsic value of nature in its current state – of the Gulf of Maine in its beauty, the land with its pointed firs – is worth preserving? Who or what is it that gives you such joy that you are here today?

It might not look like joy. It might look like fear. Climate change – and the inexorable parade of horrors leading to it – the oil and gas industry, Keystone, the Koch brothers, tar sands, fracking – these words in themselves are fear inducing of the type that makes me personally want to curl up in a fetal position under my blankets, eat chocolate and read novels all day rather than get out of bed.

Fear can be a powerful catalyst in the short term. But fear over the long term is exhausting – eventually you get numb to fear. Or worse, fear builds until it's immobilizing. It's depressing.

So that's why, as we embark on the journey that for some of us starts today – it's important to start with joy. What is the joy that you have? The love so precious that you are here on a Saturday in this room to participate in this conference because you are resolved to confront climate change now? What is the love so urgent that you won't wait for the politicians in Augusta or Washington to change? You are taking action today and every day moving forward. It may be the love for the next generation – for your children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews. It may be for the love of the ocean and the forest – so beautiful it makes you pause. Take 1 minute. I'll time it. Close your eyes and reflect upon the love that brings you here.

You can open your eyes. I share this – it's slightly corny, but it's important. Because one of our challenges as we move forward is to find out how to share our urgency around climate change in a way that brings others in instead of driving them away –

inspires rather than scares them. And recognizing that not everyone shares the same loves. We are united here in this room because we all care about climate change. For some of us, it's future generations we'll never meet. For others, it's natural wonders we know about but haven't seen – coral reefs and glaciers. And for many of us, it's people and places that are very real and known to us in the here and now. And if we can share that love – that excitement about what we love with our family members and friends and neighbors, that may be the most enduring path to getting them to engage with us as we move forward into action.

The action is important on two fronts – the individual and the collective. Going back to the butterfly for a moment, I hope the scientists in the room will forgive me for appropriating a scientific theory for political purposes. I know it's usually the climate change denialists who twist science for their own ends. But I'd like to talk about the butterfly effect – identified as such by scientist Edward Lorenz who observed that modest change to initial conditions could change the outcome of a major weather event. A butterfly flapping its wings can change the conditions that give rise to a hurricane.

So when we think about what we're doing today, there are concrete consequences that we can measure. If we start a community solar project, we can reduce fuel consumption by a specific number of barrels and our carbon footprint in a measurable way. Your individual actions – community gardens, solar panels, weatherproofing your home -- have real consequences that you can measure. Not only do we see measurable results, but these actions are contagious. A whole generation of school kids in Falmouth for example understand recycling in a way that our generation didn't. These actions will get people thinking and acting together. They transcend political differences and ages. They can change a community's culture. You are going to hear from experts and activists alike who have made these projects work in their communities and their schools. The tangible victories they can show us today will be inspiring. You can take photos of these victories. You can measure these victories. You are going to learn about concrete ways to reduce your own carbon footprint and that of your community.

Then there are the immeasurable consequences. The butterfly effect. Your community garden or solar panel or weatherization project will have positive consequences unseen to you and your neighbors.

And that brings me to the power of collective action. If the individual action that one person or one community takes is the butterfly flapping its wings that leads to a hurricane, then surely all of us acting together – collectively – is even more powerful. We know this because we have seen it – the environmental community is full of impossibly wonderful success stories because people dared to dream and to take action. We know we can stop climate change. It will be the hardest thing the environmental movement has ever done. But we – every single one of us in this room and the millions more globally who care – can do it.

We can do it if we start. If we don't wait.

These projects will not always be easy. Indeed, participating in this conference today is the easiest part. It's easy to learn about something. To listen to a workshop and ask intelligent questions and ponder what you love. It's easy and indeed wonderful to be in a room with so many people who care – who share our concerns – our fears – and our hopes.

What's hard is to act on what you love – to take action even when you don't know what the outcome will be or how much of a difference it will make. Some of the obstacles may feel stupid and unnecessary and that may be the worst part. When we embark on work this significant, it's the seemingly insignificant barriers that can be the most frustrating. Sometimes the project may feel boring. Or small. One of the reasons it's so important to keep writing those letters to our Congressional delegation is that they have the power to do big things with the passage of a law. It would be so much easier if they would just do what we tell them to do. And sometimes, they do. Witness the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act. So the letters matter.

But the courses of action outlined here at this conference matter more. They matter more because we have seen that legal limits without cultural change are not lasting. What we are embarking on in this work with the Sierra Club is cultural change. Not all of us will be successful the first time. And that's hard. We live in a society that values winning, and there's no more important effort to win than climate change. But sometimes we're going to lose. And it won't feel okay. But we'll be okay. Each one of us holds the power in ourselves to move forward if our project fails the first time – to try again. Because to truly stop climate change we need to confront the barriers in our selves and in our communities.

We cannot leave it up to anyone else. Each of us has a responsibility to try. To be patient when neighbors raise questions about the community garden or the solar panels. To persevere in going to community meetings and engaging in a full and fair group process to plan the project. To let our joy and our love lead when there's a controversy about the best way to move forward. To maintain faith in ourselves when we stumble.

There's no one else to do it. Not Paul LePage. Not Mitch McConnell. Not John Boehner. And it can't be enough to stop them from doing the worst. And it's certainly not enough to rail against them as the reason we can't make progress. It's not enough to play "defense" anymore. We need to take action now. And maybe those butterfly wings will seem small – especially when compared to windmills – but we're not Don Quixote. We know about chaos theory now. We know that the flapping of butterfly wings can create the conditions for the weather to change.