I would like to begin by expressing appreciation to the funders and organizers of the Tanner Symposium for bringing us all here together to make common cause in common voice.

For there are consequences when our language, and experience, are neither common nor consistent. And there are forces against the free exchange of accurate information and artistic impression because these lead to truth, which can foil the intentions of powerful interests. Hartmut Grassl showed clearly and powerfully how unorganized and underfunded scientists, an indifferent public, a body politic preoccupied with crises of their own making, and lobbyists who actively fund disinformation all work together to permit dangerous trends to go on mostly unchallenged. And through his own limpid language and solid science, he showed how serious may be the consequences of failing to find a common understanding of human impact on climate change, species, soils, and toxics. For where, Grassl asks, are the butterflies? The wings of the butterflies? And how will we know where their flapping may affect the T-junction choices to come, if we cannot talk?

In contrast, Annick Smith shared with us the potential good that can result when we do talk; when those who care pursue a common theme with mutually supportive rhetoric and lyric. She took us down rivers on the land and rivers in our minds as we considered words flowing like water, connecting our stories with everyone else’s stories, as in the collections of writings published in passionate defense of the red-rock desert, the Arctic plain, the Blackfoot watershed. Still to come: Rick Bass’s Yaak-lovers’ anthology. Maybe, after one of the most protracted writer’s martyrdoms to activism, Montana’s roadless Yaak will finally receive protection through these testimonies. If we can’t all organize or even stand meetings, Smith promises, at least we can tell our tales, and who knows? It might do the trick.

In her poem “Geocentric,” Pattiann Rogers uses language we know and recoil from to deliver a delicious and delirious valentine to the earth. Common words, unexpected outcomes. To me what the term common language means is the concurrent flow of words and ideas, creating those confluences about which Smith writes. It’s like a synapse that flashes ON, a pheromone
that strikes home and makes all the bells go off at once. Common language does not mean concordance, but it suggests the possibility of concordance. When we speak without shared values, experience, assumptions, or desire, the synapses are duds. Yet it is hard to imagine two humans with no contact points between them. The job, then, is to find the way through the scrim of intellectual gauze and emotional swaddling that prevents communication.

We found such a passage by considering the premise of Ted Kerasote, who asked us to imagine for the moment that the issue of guns in society might be set aside in favor of the huge voting bloc that this polarizing issue denies to conservation. That’s a big “if”—but the rewards could be even bigger. Through the story of a grieving wapiti mother, Ted built a parable that could make an animal rightist pause to listen to a hunter. It is just that pause to listen that we seek.

We heard it again in the paean paid to wild animals by Dan Flores. We had a bouquet of responses and questions, not all of them posies; but the linkage of minds wrought by story and the interplay of respective, respectful knowledge and opinion let us talk about it. If we weren’t all convinced, we all thought, and listened, and watched as the world became more complex, more potent with possibility. When Flores spoke of “tangible, touchable rock, grass, and flesh,” we knew we were on solid ground in a place we all recognized. Now, tell me about it, we said. Tell me more.

Connections where we have made separations. The connections are there if we are willing to find them: they lie between Grassl’s Mongolian goats and Kerasote’s Sierran sheep, all of them together qualifying as Muir’s mountain maggots and hoofed locusts. The connection was there even between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot until Pinchot left the gate open, allowing the sheep into the national forests. Intersection may be found, too, between Grassl’s particulate aerosols and Craig Stanford’s great but diminishing apes through the sad agency of wildfire in Indonesia; and they exist as well between Jennifer Price’s L.A. River and Kent Ryden’s Tuttle Road road trip, both of them proving beyond a doubt that nature is the whole show: the urban, the wild, the urban wild; the human, the more than human. A permeable membrane indeed! And as for the human and the human-plus, Charles Darwin said that the point of separation between man and not-man has no fixed place and is, in any case, “a matter of very little importance.” Thoreau said, “We are conscious of an animal in us.” Stanford proved both of these statements to be true and also pointed out the irony of looking for life in all the wrong places, like Mars, when our own life sources, the great apes, are dying right here at home.

The degrees of separation are far fewer than six. Are there any two experiences that cannot connect if only we choose the honest words, the right
stories, for the bonding agent?

Our job as researchers is to ask the questions, find out the facts and laws, and communicate them, which should lead to common language and action. But as Grassl reminded us (and we do need reminding again and again about our national embarrassments), the action can be painfully—perhaps disastrously—slow. Nor is there any way out. We have that on the authority of no less than Bishop Carolyn Tanner Irish, who said (and I fully agree), “Well, the environment: it’s just about everything, isn’t it?”

As if in reply, Kent Ryden said, “Nature is more than a stage set: landscape is a cooperation between nature and culture, and we ignore either at peril to both.”

Jenny Price joined in, “The idea of nature has a powerful sidekick—the natural.”

“Yet to many,” said Ryden, “we seem to be living more and more in a postnatural world.”

“Maybe so,” replied Bishop Irish. “But we are subjects, objects, and agents within this world. We weep in the presence of wonder, and wonder has consequences: we judge for the dolphins; we act on our moral sensibilities as we become aware. We are response-able so we can be responsible.”

“Right,” said Ryden, “and just wait. Agency will reassert itself.”

To even now wonder so that we have the chance to weep and act, we learned over and over that we must go out. We swapped yarns of the virtual, sneaking in to steal the real from our experience, or extinguish it altogether, in company with all the forces that erase the beloved features of the land. Some of us parlayed in a workshop over the countervailing forces, the good ones that are working to keep the real alive and to take the young out of doors: places like the Teton Science School and Journey School, the North Cascades Institute, the Orion Institutes, and our own wonderful Stokes Nature Center, just up Logan Canyon. These programs seek to bring people, places, knowledge, and experience together to benefit us all.

And some of us actually went outdoors, thanks to naturalist extraordinaire Susan Tweit. We heard the bunchgrass greening, smelled the towhee calling, and watched north-slope snow sublimate in the sun. Twelve glossy ibises sickled overhead toward the Bear River marshes; a redtail rose and swooped and fell and rose with heavy prey a’talon, made an exchange with its mate, and flew up to the nest in a cottonwood as deer stotted below. We realized again that getting out is what it’s all about.

Back inside, we heard about flagship species and Bubba Thoreaus, how learning to use nature well will save our souls, and that our mountains are not just an elaborate hoax. Surely a common language must be based on the utterances of lips run by the engine of minds that are both free and open, and voices that are willing to speak with honesty and compassion.
We discovered a duet of natural habitats for all these traits in the humane and wise offerings of Ellen Meloy and Bill Kittredge. Meloy defined the wild more in her person than in all her elegant words—the wild lies beneath her feet, which are bare. Many people may be tortoises on their backs, but not this wise woman, this exhibitionist hermit, who knows the “raw instinct, the uncooked act of creativity,” great squalls of the heart, the notion of expansion.

And as for Bill Kittredge, what can you say about him, but that he goes out, away to the world with hope? Well, as he battles the bastard unfairness of things, reawakening love in the shifting presence of the ten thousand things, he reminds us that we understand place in terms of stories, where we seek the right way to live and maybe find out what we’re up to. And he loves a good party: he urges us on toward bloodless uprisings, to play among Bob Dylan and Thomas Jefferson and the other good mudheads in revolution and reexamination of the carnival of life.

But surely it is the poets who finally lead us into the territory of the common, uncommon tongue. Ken Brewer said of words, “Ah, my friends, again you have fooled me!” We beg to differ. Singing the poems of dogs and dust mites, happy slugs and tarantula hawks making love to flowers, the joy of failed divorce, the joy of surviving the sun come to earth, the joy of loons and sweet, sweet clarinets. Just one more word, he offered—“to the moon.”

“The moon—there’s the moon,” wrote Keith Wilson. “The Llano moon locked outside.” Wilson too croons to dogs, and crows, and snakes—“there’s worse critters than snakes, you know.” The presence of the backyard. What can be made of a place like this, he asks; and then makes something of it. The lines in hard hands that throw the stick to wherever, where Old Red lives always. The suction of the sands, the hot air between us and the echoes of rabbits. Wilson told us, and it is true: “We are of the earth—we are the syllables on her tongue.” We have only to open our mouths to sing.

As a Navajo wrangler once told me, we’ve got to take our imaginations out of our back pockets. As we know in our hearts, we must get out. A dear friend, Mía Monroe, manager of Muir Woods and other National Park Service treasures nearby, e-mailed me this today, and it gladdened my heart:

Image of Mía-as-modern-manager: my cell phone only works in a few spots, and wouldn’t you know, those “touch-bases-with-staff” spots just happen to be where a covey of quail do their stretches in the a.m. AND, moving on and later in [the] day . . . pipevine swallowtails float downslope in midday, AND, final check-in before they go home . . . the great horned owlets get their evening meal in the p.m.
Surely this is how it should be: our busy-ness secondary to life itself.

Finally, I wish to share the thoughts of two old sages whose words still ring true. The first is Herman Melville. In the voice of Ishmael and in words all writers will recognize, he moaned, “This book is but a draught—nay, the draught of a draught! Ah, time, cash, patience, and strength!” And yet he later prayed, “Hold me, keep me, bind me, all ye Influences!” Could we ask for any more in our search for the wily words of common thought?

And the second is the great Costa Rican naturalist Alexander Skutch, whose ethic should underlie all environmental writing and education: “Those who care greatly because they appreciate greatly have no more sacred obligation than to do everything in their power to preserve the kind of world that will nourish appreciative minds for countless generations. Appreciative, cherishing minds are the world’s best hope.”