

# Lauret Edith Savoy

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an excerpt of

## *Pieces toward a Just Whole*

. . . Scott Russell Sanders' essay "Simplicity and Sanity" urges all of us, all Americans, to rethink our conduct in life, our "vision and practice," as an initial step to ending "the vandalism of the many" in our wasteful, wealth-and-technology-driven, environment-damaging society. Inspired by Henry David Thoreau's thinking and words, Sanders asks each of us to choose to lead materially simpler lives, "to conserve rather than consume," and "to launch our own experiments in simplicity" while minding the word's root: "all of a piece, single, whole."

Yes. I offer a wholehearted "Yes, thank you," but . . . still . . . I feel a troubling unease. What of those Americans who don't have the freedom, agency, or economic privilege to choose? What of Americans whose lives and experiences have been poverty-bound or degraded?

For Gunnar Myrdal, writing more than six decades ago in his massive study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, the paradox was that this nation "believes in and aspires to something much higher than its plane of actual life." Writing now, forty years after 1968's spring of assassinations, I grieve for a nation that remains accustomed to what should be unacceptable. Huge disparities in opportunity and income remain, with protected, vested wealth for a few. Violence continues against people who are often out of mainstream-media sight—whether in ghettos, barrios, reservations, labor camps, prisons, or elsewhere—and thus not heard. America's invasions of other lands for resources and power are cloaked as wars for peace and democracy, and thereby prioritized over the basic human needs of our own citizens. The dilemma that Myrdal observed remains: How does one reconcile ideals and principles of freedom and justice with actual life in this

nation—that is, how does one move beyond hope and lip service to principled engagement? . . .



We face many crucial challenges, including global climate change, as well as the loss of biological diversity and ecosystem integrity. The question we all need to answer is this: how, if at all, can the deeply rooted values and economic norms that institutionalized the exploiting and manipulating of the natural world be separated from what marginalizes human lives? Elemental to *our* American past and present are the omissions that have allowed separatisms by race, class, and gender, inequities in privilege and power, to remain.

The complexities and ambiguities of this nation's intercultural past and present, and the ways in which white America has perceived, used, or impacted the Earth, cannot be separated from what drives racism and other inequities in political and economic power. If seen in terms of process and response, the dynamics of the past several hundred years on this continent have yielded very different kinds of estrangement for those in power and those at the margins. Although it may be desirable to think of the past as long over, we all carry history within us, our pasts becoming present in what we think and do, in who we are.