

IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

“It is miraculous what you guys have here.” With these words, Douglas Brinkley, Ph.D. began his talk at the 2013 Thought Forum, referencing Seattle’s natural beauty, as well as our region’s role as environmental trend-setter.

This year’s Thought Forum was sponsored by Laird Norton Wealth Management (LNWM) in celebration of King County Parks. It brought together LNWM clients, parks advocates, King County executives and many others who believe as LNWM does: that preserving our green spaces benefits all who live here, for generations to come.



An acclaimed historian and best-selling author, Brinkley’s topic was the past, present and future of the U.S. conservation movement. Having written an award-winning biography of Theodore Roosevelt (*The Wilderness Warrior*, 2009), Brinkley used Roosevelt’s legacy as a base from which to view today’s environmental challenges. His talk went on to captivate, surprise and inspire.

IT HAS NEVER BEEN EASY

Don’t think it has ever been easy to be an environmentalist, Brinkley pointed out. In Roosevelt’s time, the Civil War had just ended, leaving the South denuded and the North bent on hyper-industrialization. The environment was not an issue, and pollution was endangering lives.

The “forever wild” movement started in upstate New York, noted Brinkley, out of necessity. It was a matter of life and death. People realized that pollution from upstate streams would end up poisoning those in New York City, where the Roosevelts happened to live.

NATURE AS CURATIVE

Nature often cures what ails us, Brinkley said. And to succeed at safeguarding nature, we must first see beyond our own personal challenges.

Roosevelt suffered from childhood asthma and later from severe depression and insomnia. But he persevered, taking comfort in nature through what Brinkley called “biophilia,” an innate love of nature and animals.

Roosevelt instinctively knew that often, the fastest way to heal yourself is to go out into green and open spaces. Brinkley, who also had asthma as a child, did the same: he got out into the open air. “It liberated my lungs.”

Roosevelt would have 50 to 80 pets at any one time, said Brinkley. Standouts included a badger named Josiah who would attack Congressmen, and the three mascots Roosevelt took with him to Cuba during the Spanish-American War: a cougar, an eagle and a dog. All three survived.

CLOUT AND CLEVERNESS

Eventually becoming governor of New York, Roosevelt butted heads with the state's business interests. To get him out of the way, Brinkley said, Roosevelt was nominated to be President William McKinley, Jr.'s running mate in the 1900 presidential election. Little did anyone expect McKinley to be assassinated shortly after being elected.

From 1901 to 1909, Roosevelt as U.S. President enacted hundreds of federal edicts to safeguard America's wilderness. Some of the highlights: safeguarding The Grand Canyon, which Congress had approved for mining, and creating the first bird sanctuary, which Brinkley called radical for the time.

In a single summer day, Roosevelt cordoned off 150 national forests. And just before he left office, Roosevelt designated Washington's Mount Olympus as a national monument.

Today, our environmental challenges are global, Brinkley conceded. Countries need to work together to solve problems. But political savvy and passion similar to that of Roosevelt is still what's required.

Brinkley emphasized that we must not rest on our environmental legacy. Many followed in Roosevelt's footsteps, he pointed out, including a handful of Presidents and a lot of people who don't get enough credit, such as Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

Brinkley also cited Seattle residents Denis Hayes, founder of Earth Day, and William Ruckelshaus, the first head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

WHAT WE CAN DO TODAY

"We need to focus on our young people, bring them more into nature. Not enough of our young people are out there doing things like planting trees," said Brinkley.

He emphasized that Roosevelt's childhood was all about getting out. He looked closely at birds, many hundreds of them, bison and all sorts of other beasts. When not in nature, young Roosevelt read about it. His idols included Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, and his "crazy Uncle Rob," who wrote nature books.

Another priority, said Brinkley, should be reaching out to minorities. Our efforts to preserve the environment must include people from all ethnicities, races and income levels.

In closing, Brinkley proffered: "Urban wilderness is the new thing; and Seattle you're it. You've done a better job than most places at protecting what you have."

Seattle is “ground zero of the environmental movement today,” Brinkley opined. “You may not consider yourselves that, but you are. “

WHAT LNWM IS DOING



To ensure that future generations continue to benefit from the Northwest’s natural bounty, Laird Norton Wealth Management worked closely with King County Parks earlier this year to launch the King County Parks Foundation (www.ourparksourfuture.org)

The focus of the Foundation is King County’s 200 parks and 175 miles of trails – to renew and expand our access to these green and open spaces.

As LNWM President and CEO Robert Moser said as he welcomed everyone to the Thought Forum: “Our parks are a barometer of the health of our community.”