

Sandra Steingraber, Ecologist and Poet, Draws Parallels Between Environmental Health and Human Health for a “Mind and Memory” Audience

The interdisciplinary course “Mind and Memory,” conceived by Professor Emeritus James McConkey and first taught by him in 1996, has attracted a wide community on both sides of the podium. The weekly lectures by invited speakers cover areas of study at Cornell from prosthetic knees to snakes, from architectural design to music composition. In the audience—in addition to the 120 students—there are usually 50 visitors each week. Some come year after year to learn about the creative work of Cornell’s community of artists and scientists.

On occasion, a speaker bridges the chasm between the arts and the sciences. Sandra Steingraber, a visiting assistant professor at Cornell’s Center for the Environment, poet, and ecologist, was such a speaker. Following in the tradition of ecologist Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, alerted America to the hazardous application of chemicals in the environment, Steingraber is a spokesperson for informed caution in industrial and farming practices.

Steingraber told a compelling story—one that links pollutants and cancer. It is, in part, a personal story, starting with her diagnosis of bladder cancer at the age of 20. Five years later, she was free from medical surveillance, and she went to Africa to study the environmental causes of a region’s famine and unrest. In an interview with an African farmer about the problems with the local river, he turned her questions back to her; she learned to question the causes of pollution in her native Illinois River. She returned home and began to study the ill effects of pesticides, fertilizers, chlorination, and industrial effluvia; she identified critical parallels between the failing health of the environment across the nation and increased incidence of cancer.

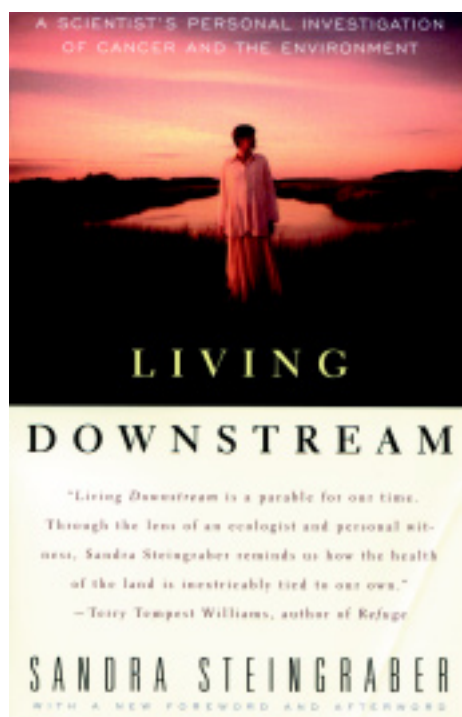
Currently a member of Cornell’s Program on Breast Cancer and Environmental Risk Factors (BCERF), Steingraber works with a team that investigates how individual lactational history affects breast cancer risk for women. She examines both ecological literature and medical insights in order to follow the relationship

between the environment and the inside of the body: When we eat food, drink water, and breathe air, the external world comes inside us. Once she has analyzed current research, she translates it into terms that will make sense to the nonspecialist public. Like the old circuit riders, Steingraber travels to different communities to provide information and answer questions. At Cornell, she receives about 100 e-mail messages a day calling on her to answer practical questions; some queries come from lactation consultants and nurse/midwives. At the national level, she has given testimony before the Environmental Protection Agency and at Congressional hearings, and she meets regularly with government officials to present scientific information that may affect public policy. She sees herself as one voice in a huge conversation.

Steingraber’s recent books, *Living Downstream* and *Having Faith*, are extraordinarily articulate combinations of science and personal history. Perhaps her eloquence comes readily because she is a poet. Steingraber also spent a year at the Bunting Institute as a poetry

fellow. Steingraber told the “Mind and Memory” audience that she sees science and poetry as sharing a philosophy; they are both about the mystery of being alive. Science attempts to solve the mystery, while poetry likes to say, “Behold, here is the mystery.” They are different ways of knowing. As a cancer survivor, scientist, and writer, Steingraber brings passion, objectivity, and eloquence to her research and to her role as public advocate.

Joyce Morgenroth
Director, Mind and Memory
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Sandra Steingraber, visiting professor, Center for the Environment