

1.* Hello, I am _____ (name of speaker).

TERRA LOAM. Hello, yourself. I am Terra Loam, voice of the soil.

2. Terra Loam, you say?

TL Yes. Terra is for earth. Loam is for the soft mixture of sand, silt, clay and humus.

3. You must be Mr. Soil himself !

TL That I am. Except that I am not Mr. or Ms. I'm just IT. I'm soil, alright!

4. Why haven't I seen you around before?

TL Around before? Why, I'm around all the time. You humans tend to look down on me in more than one sense. I resent that!

5. My apologies. I should have known better.

TL Well, you people are not used to hearing from the soil. It is time that the soil stood up and spoke out. That's what I'm doing.

6. What do you do all day, Terra Loam?

TL Oh, I do support work. I support trees, grass, bushes, deer, cows, horses, roads, this building. I am busy with production of food crops, pasture for cows, and timber production.

7. What brought you here just now? If you work so much, how did you find the time to come here at all?

TL I am here as a result of a special event. I have just come from a cemetery where some men dug a pit to bury one of you people in tomorrow. They laid me out on a canvas beside the pit and went away. So I gathered myself together and I am out seeing what's going on here.

8. How old are you, Terra Loam?

TL How old am I? Oh, I'm 10,000 years old, give or take a few centuries.

9. 10,000 years? That's old!

¹ By Francis D. Hole, 1992

* Numerals represent lines spoken by human beings.

TL Well, I admit that time has taken its toll on me. I'm leached down to here. And my colloids have settled in my middle region. But that's nothing to worry about. It's just a sign of maturity. Actually, I'm not a very old soil at all.

10. Have you had a medical check-up lately?

TL Yes, as a matter of fact, I had a medical check-up today. I was lying there on the canvas, beside the pit, as I told you. Some soil doctors...soil scientists they called themselves.. happened by and were delighted to see me there. They went over me with knives and lenses and acids and all kinds of charts. They said that my Ockric layer (that's my upper part) and my Argillic layer (that's my middle part) are in pretty good shape, with one exception.

11. What's the exception?

TL Well, you will notice that if I take off this square of turf that I wear like a green cap, I am bald. That is a result of erosion that I suffered when I was in a corn field, before I was annexed to the cemetery. The farmer was careless with me. He gave me no protection! The best part of me eroded off and washed down to the bottom of the hill. It will take ages for the top part of me to heal again!

12. I am sorry to hear that you lost your top part. Perhaps it is not too late to fix you.

TL Those are good words to hear. But how shall it be done?

13. We could bring your lost parts back from the footslope to where they belong.

TL And suppose you do bring my lost parts back to where they belong, how will you keep them there? Now think like a soil!

14. By means of erosion control practices: strip cropping, contour farming, with plenty of sod crops. The soil conservation people know how to do that.

TL Wonderful! What a well informed group of people you are! You know that a soil needs protection if it is to maintain production of crops.

15. You love plants, don't you, Terra Loam!

TL I do love plants. They are my children. I nourish them. And already they are taking care of me in return.

16. How do the plants take care of you, Terra Loam?

TL The plants shield me from the otherwise merciless blows of rain drops, from running water and from gusts of wind. The roots of plants bind me safely together.

17. And what about the animals, Terra Loam. Do they help you too?

TL For the most part, the animals help me too. Earthworms enrich me and keep my channels open for rainwater. Ants, moles, gophers... so many wild animals living in me and on me keep me in prime condition. And the animals help distribute seeds. Birds do that. They help the plants. We all work together.

18. You and the plants and animals are the original cooperative community, Terra Loam.

TL My children and I are indeed the original cooperative community, the original community of life on the lands of this planet. But, you know, we have one major threat!

19. What is the threat, Terra Loam. I, for one, will work to eliminate the threat!

TL The threat is the human race!

20. Human beings? How do people threaten you?

TL People are the accelerators of erosion, the wasters of acres. Not all human beings are that way. This group, for example, seems to care about me. You wish to protect me to keep me in production. That means that you work to slow erosion. You are stewards of acres.

But I must be going. I must get back to the cemetery to resume my pose on the canvas, ready for the interment tomorrow.

21. Do you have one last word for us before you go, Terra Loam?

TL My final word is to invite you to join me in celebration. Let us celebrate the designation by the Wisconsin Legislature of the Antigo silt loam as the official state soil.

22. How many states have an official state soil?

TL Ten states do. Nebraska was the first in 1979. Then came Wisconsin in 1983. The last was the Paxton soil in Massachusetts.

People in these states have been interested enough in me to name one of my many variations as the official state soil in each state.

23. Tell us about the Antigo silt loam, the official Wisconsin soil.

- TL I will be brief. The Antigo silt loam is the most representative of the 600 kinds of soils in the state. It is a soil that is between extremes: not too sandy, not too clayey; not the most productive soil but certainly above average. It is scattered in patches across 12 counties between Green Bay and River Falls. It supports dairy farming, potato growing, forestry and wildlife. The Antigo silt loam is found chiefly in Wisconsin and is named after a city in this state. Antigo is a good soil to know.
24. Thank you for stopping to visit with us, Terra Loam!
- TL You are welcome. Goodbye. I'll be seeing each one of you, one of these days! I can wait!