

Book Review: Be the Difference: A Beginner's Guide to Changing the World

Richard Arnold

Richard Arnold, a native of Alabama, has lived on Vancouver Island, B.C. since 1985. He is a long-time explorer and defender of wilderness, belongs to several ecological societies, and teaches English and Environmental Literature at Malaspina University-College. His first collection of poetry will be published in 2002 by Leaf Press (Lantzville, B.C.). Recent journal and anthology publications include [The Wayward Coast](#), [Wind Magazine](#), [Sunstone](#), [Terrain.org](#), and [The Trumpeter](#).

Book Review: *Be the Difference: A Beginner's Guide to Changing the World*
By Danny Seo. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2001.

171 pages, paperback. US \$14.95/CAN \$18.95. Foreword by Deepak Chopra.

When I received this book to review, I chuckled skeptically as I pulled it from its envelope and saw the jacket photo of its fresh-looking, almost-impossibly young author. "He's just a kid," I thought. "Somebody else wrote this book for him." Well, I have read the book, with my suspicious eye subconsciously searching for evidence of "ghost writing" or some such subterfuge — and I can aver with confidence that Danny Seo not only wrote it, but taught me a few things as I read it. Sure, he's young — early twenties — but he's been a hard charger with a focus since he first founded the environmental group EARTH 2000 on the eve of his twelfth birthday. This is his *third* book. Like a young battle-scarred veteran, he seems savvy beyond his years.

As a twelve year old, Seo founded his first "company" with the visionary but impossible theme of "saving the planet by the year 2000." That year has come and gone, and as the subtitle of this book intimates, Seo has since narrowed and focused his vision on something more sensible and achievable: *changing* the world. This automatically gives the book wide appeal to a host of readers, for who, honestly, can't think of *something* they'd like to see change in the world?

In our time, the critical state of Earth's natural environments has become the source of deep worry for many thousands of people: witness the rise of Theodore Roszak's Ecopsychology Institute, as one well-known example. Early in the book, Seo paints a typical picture that many of us suffering from eco-depression can relate to:

Book Review: Be the Difference: A Beginner's Guide to Changing the World 2

It's easy to watch the television nightly news and feel an instant call to action after seeing a horrific story about the ozone layer. But your stomach grumbles and dinner soon takes priority. (2)

Be the Difference is full of insights like this: its youthful author understands the real-life situations which seem constantly arrayed against our best intentions. However, he always reminds us that one effective antidote to despair is to *do something*, rather than letting worry eat up our health and relationships. Huge problems such as the global threat to nature cannot be solved instantly; they are best handled as a series of connected smaller problems, each of which requires specific action.

It seems that Danny Seo has left few stones unturned, few approaches untried, in his quest to fix things on the planet. He is in some ways a New Age version of my grandfather in Alabama, who was a thrifty farmer and jack-of-all-trades. On his monthly walks into town to get the few items he could neither grow nor make, he would keep his sharp eyes open, and literally fill his overalls pockets with things he spotted in the weeds beside the road: nuts and bolts, pieces of wire, screws, etc. Though he was constantly chided by his family about the “junk” he collected, he ultimately found some use for it.

Likewise, Seo tries it all, finds out things which perhaps few people know about. This book is a genuine toolbox of tactics and ideas for effecting social, environmental, and political change. One interesting example is related on page 25: Seo had often, he says, wondered what becomes of all the coins collected in fountains and wishing wells that are common in shopping malls, restaurants, parks, and other public places. One day he called the U.S. Mint and found out that there was actually an entire department “devoted to collecting mutilated coins”:

I couldn't believe it. So with a phone call to the shopping mall, they gave me several buckets of wet coins, which I took to the closest division of the U.S. Mint; from there, the Mint wired the total amount of \$2500 to our checking account.

Similarly, the book gives good, specific advice on everything from charitable credit cards and checking accounts, to websites and toll-free phone numbers.

The book has some weak points. Perhaps it is inevitable for a young author to use clichés and callow language sometimes, and a few of these weaken the product. Examples:

A good cup of coffee and the morning paper are as American as apple pie. Watergate and Whitewater were brought to light by the print media — and taught the American public to avoid things with aquatic names. (42)

In another place Seo makes a statement which surely has been said too many times already: "Stranger things have happened" (124). There are other examples of tired language in the book; moreover, Seo's refrain, "to marry style with concern for the planet" (with its implication that one can be both a wealthy entrepreneur and an eco-crusader) would seem to run counter to the principles of Deep Ecology.

However, my overall impression is strong. The layout is clean and reader-friendly, with bold section headers and strategic shaded boxes for highlighting information. Portions of the text are presented in attractive "point" format. The book is designed primarily with a U.S. audience in mind, but a laudable attempt has been made to modify it for a Canadian readership as well. Finally, I think it sensible of both the author and the publisher to include positive reviews from "heavyweights" such as Dr. Jane Goodall and Deepak Chopra. I like this book, and its young, but worldly-wise, author. It took a dedicated visionary half my age to make me pause in my relentless rancor over the massive scale of environmental ignorance, and see that there are more effective ways to save the planet. The secret is in organizing, being creative, and taking small steps. I think Danny Seo *is* making a difference.