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"IT WOULDN'T KILL YOU TO SHOW A LITTLE  
MORE RESPECT"

Cameron Young  
Trumpeter

Cameron Young is a free lance writer who lives in Victoria, B.C., 860 Melody Place, RR #5, Canada V8X 4M6. He is the winner of several awards including the Media Club of Canada award for best writer of 1990. He specializes in forests and environmental subjects. He is the author of *The Forests of British Columbia* (Whitecap, 1985), which won the Best Book of B.C. award for 1986. He is currently working on a new book *TClayoquot: The Wild Side* (with photos by Adrian Dorst), which is about the remaining wilderness of the Westcoast of Vancouver Island in B.C.

They were separated by fifty rows of chairs filled with seasoned environmentalists. He stood at the front of the university conference room — Canada's populist hero of the environmental movement - - David Suzuki. She stood at the back of the room — nobody's hero — an anonymous white-haired lady in a plain green suit. A nervous smile washed across her tired face as she cleared her throat. Then she cleared it again.

That second throaty rumble triggered a memory surge. Suddenly I realized just how much she reminded me of the white-haired ladies I used to talk to under duress on the steps of the united Church back home, on those holiday Sundays when my mother would lock my arm in a death-defying grip and parade me in front of her band of enthusiastically smiling friends. I would dutifully shake each extended hand.

"He's just back from his first year at college," my mother would beam as she cleared her throat for the fiftieth time that morning. And a few years later: "He's finally settled down and taken a teaching job." But it didn't really matter what she said. Her white-haired friends would simply beam back and say how nice and I would say thank you, it's a nice day isn't it.

Then inevitably one of the women, who invariably had a name like Marjorie or Hazel (although I always addressed them as "Mrs.") would say, "my, my, Florence. Is this really Cameron? I must say he is looking more and more like Harold every day." This from someone who saw me once every other Christmas or Easter, completely ignoring the fact that my father had been dead and buried for the worst part of a decade.

While all this was going on I would continue to smile and nod, nod and smile, but no matter how hard I fought against it, my eyeballs would roll for cover under my lifeless eyelids.

Later in the car my mother would tell me how Marjorie's husband literally had withered away from cancer. "We were afraid his bones would poke right through his skin." And then she would go on about how Hazel was suffering dreadfully with her bad hip. "It's getting so the poor soul can hardly make it out to church any more." Then, without referring directly to my rolling eyeball episode she

would add: "It wouldn't kill you to show a little more respect."

Respect, as it turned out, was exactly what the white-haired lady in the plain green suit was getting plenty of at the conference on the environment at the University of British Columbia.

True, I had been the last one in the room to catch on. This was a Marjorie talking, I had thought to myself. A Hazel. So I simply assumed that everyone would, like me, react with that certain benign intolerance we reserve for all the harmless but embarrassing white-haired ladies of the world.

Instead, with her pale hands shaking as they gripped the wobbly chair in front of her, and with her strong voice cracking as she spoke up so we all could hear, she asked a question that dropped like an invisible mirror in front of everyone in the room. We had no choice but to examine the obscure images we saw there. Myself especially.

It happened this way. David Suzuki had just finished giving a chilling review of a recent United Nations study on the environment. Carried out by an international task force called the Brundtland World Commission on Environment and Development, the study detailed, in no uncertain terms, how all the God-given resources on this planet — the air, the water, the soil, the vast tracts of forestland — are being devastated beyond repair. In fact, says the study, ominously entitled "Our Common Future," the overall prognosis for the planet is pretty grim.

But there still remains a prescription for global survival, Brundtland concludes. And that is, to use our natural resources much more wisely; to make them last. If we are to sustain a healthy standard of living, says Brundtland, we have to sustain a healthy environment.

Then Suzuki took over from where the Brundtland report left off. He said that people of the Western world have deluded themselves into thinking that they — that we — can exert total control over our natural environment. But despite our high technology and our sophisticated chemicals, he said, Nature is just too wildly complex to be domesticated. The secret to long-term survival, Suzuki believes, is for all of us to learn to live in harmony with the natural environment, not to try to dominate it. Then maybe our children will have a future worth living.

That's when the white-haired lady in the plain green suit stood up in the back of the room and resolutely cleared her throat. "I've been working on environmental problems through the United Church for nearly 20 years," she said. "But there is still one thing I don't understand. Just how do you go about living with Nature anyway?"

I think now that it must have been the very purity of her plea that humbled us all. Besides, we had just spent the entire evening worrying over the fate of the Earth;

that in itself is guaranteed to make you feel more than a little vulnerable. So when the white-haired lady asked us how to go about living with Nature, there wasn't one cynical reflex in the crowd. It was more as if a baby had suddenly piped up to ask how to take her first step.

We knew too, that how you answer that question, and how you live with your answer, takes the measure of who you are.

I sat there glued to my wobbly folding chair, not hearing a word of David Suzuki's long and careful answer. I continued to sit there even as the conference broke up around me. The white-haired lady in the plain green suit had given me a lot to think about, and I wanted to get it right. But by the time I finally figured out how to answer her to my own satisfaction, the room was completely empty and she was long gone.

All of that happened about a year ago, but the white-haired lady is still with me, and I'm still working on my answer.

I know how frustrated you must feel, I want to say to her. I've felt that way most of my life. After all, setting foot into the world of Nature is no guided walk in a park. It's more like waking up in the middle of Tokyo without a map or a phrase book.

Sure, ecologists glibly tell us that everything in life is connected to everything else, but what does that really mean? The very thought of it is overwhelming, especially when Suzuki says there are something like 30 million species of life on Earth. Or did he say 50 million? Who wants to learn to get along with all of that? It's enough to make you want to hide in front of your TV forever.

But there's a key to breaking through all that apparent confusion, I want to explain her, and when you get to the other side it's amazing how clear everything becomes.

For me that breakthrough came one spring day when I was walking down the road with my dog. We live in a rural neighbourhood, and as I walked along I was admiring the soft green wall of trees lining the road. Unseen birds chirped their background songs. I was breathing in the clean fresh air, feeling that when it comes to appreciating Nature, this is about as good as it can get.

And then, seemingly for no particular reason, I remembered the trillium. The previous spring I had wandered down a slope not far off the road, and tucked behind a grey concrete power pole carrying heat and light to our community was a single trillium. Its three luscious petals radiated creamy-white against the background of its three broad and green, almost heart-shaped leaves. It had found its own piece of soil, and it was bound and determined to grow.

Now, a year later, I didn't know what I expected to find as I set off to pay my respects. But sure enough, there it was, a burst of natural white beside the grey

pole. Another year. Another bloom. It was doing what Nature intended, and something suddenly clicked within me.

In my time I had seen hundreds of wildflowers blooming; I had seen forests filled with thousands of trees, but before that moment I had never really seen anything at all. Here was one plant, independent, its petals as pure as early morning milk. It was not a field of undifferentiated flowers, not simply one more example of one species out of 30 or 50 million. It was one of a kind, a shin-high masterpiece of natural elegance. It's uniqueness won me over, it was like falling in love, and I've never been quite the same since.

Because I learned to see that one trillium clearly, Nature is no longer a vague blur of colour and background sound. It has come into focus, and the more I look the sharper the focus becomes. Today when I walk my dog down the road I don't see a fuzzy wall of green forest. Without any conscious effort I see each tree, one by one, as individual lifeforms powering their way to the sunlight. My ears seek out the distinct song of each bird.

So I want to tell my white-haired friend to go and find her own trillium, to locate that single wild thing that touches her heart. It could be something as simple as a dandelion fighting its way through a crack in a city sidewalk, or the unmistakable smell of a roadside cottonwood in springtime. The experience, and you'll know it when it occurs, is like a revelation.

And from that point on you simply begin to respond naturally to the world around you.

Something as simple as your garbage takes on new meaning. It is stuff that originated in Nature that you are returning to Nature — but now you ask yourself, at what cost to Nature? When you run your water faucet to brush your teeth you mentally trace the delivery system back to the reservoir and the dam and the forested watershed...and you turn off the faucet.

It goes on and on, beginning with the things you see and touch and extending to the furthest reaches of the planet. You hear of ancient rainforests disappearing for all time, and in your heart you know it is wrong. You hear about acid rain and the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, and you no longer dismiss these as scientific abstractions; in your heart you know something must be done. And starting from that place in your heart you begin to do all that you can do, naturally, to help sustain the global environment.

Of course, everyone makes their peace with Nature in their own way, I want to tell the white-haired lady. You certainly can't force it on them. My daughter, for example, complains that she has been compelled, completely against her will, to endure tedious Nature walks all her life. She has just turned a world-weary ten.

I remember one particular day when the sky was a freshly scrubbed blue fol-

lowing a week of rain, and the needles on the conifer trees were bursting with the colour of life. Walking down my favourite side road with my daughter ("Do we have to go down there again!") I wound up stopping every hundred feet or so to rub the needles of yet another tree.

"See, that's a grand fir. You can feel how thick and flat those needles are compared to Douglas-fir. Here, feel that. See how the Douglas-fir needles grow all around the branch, not just out from the sides. Oh, here's that yew tree. Feel how it's needles aren't all the same length. They're more like hemlock's, only longer and more spread apart..."

Dutifully my daughter shook hands with every tree I introduced her to, smiling and nodding, nodding and smiling. But it soon became obvious that she was losing the battle of the uprolled eyeballs, and as politely as she could she tried to pull away.

Did I really hear myself say: "It wouldn't kill you to show a little more respect?"

Then just a few weeks ago the two of us were barely out of our driveway, me with that obnoxious, Nature-loving spring in my step, her with those invisible lead weights lashed to her ankles, when something in the neighbour's driveway suddenly caught her attention. She darted straight to the base of a tree and started talking sweetly to the ground in front of her.

She bent down slowly, and when she straightened up she was cradling an obviously wounded green and white swallow. She gazed down on that little bird with the compassion of a Madonna. The swallow, staring her straight in the eye, surrendered itself to her care.

The bird became our house guest as my daughter, who christened it "Little Guy", set it up in the spare bedroom in an old cat cage. But it wasn't long before we knew we needed help.

Day after day Little Guy just stood there, glued to the bottom of the cage. On occasion he would weakly lift his head toward the light from the window, but he lacked the energy even to flutter his wings.

The main problem was, we soon discovered, was the fact that swallows never eat food while standing on the ground. They need to feed on insects on the wing.

When we finally made the decision to entrust Little Guy into the care of the SPCA, they told us they didn't have the facilities to care for a swallow. The best they could offer was to put it to sleep. My daughter insisted that Little Guy didn't look all that tired.

At the eleventh hour we were lucky enough to find a local bird lover with a small aviary in his basement. A complete stranger, he graciously agreed to care

for our dying swallow. However, he felt it was only fair to warn us that the prognosis was pretty grim.

We then struggled through the longest week of my daughter's life. The bird man had promised to keep us posted on Little Guy's condition, but for seven endless days the phone never rang. Of course we shouldn't have waited as long as we did to call him back, but the fear of bad news had us immobilized.

Once I had thoroughly convinced myself that Little Guy was no longer among the living, I phoned the bird man to get the bad news first hand. "I'm so glad you finally called," he said. "I managed to lose your phone number right after you left, and I've been dying to tell you the good news."

It seems that all Little Guy needed was some expert care for a couple of days, while he recovered from a mild concussion. He soon got so agitated at being caged up in the basement that the bird man had to let him go.

"I'm sure he's flown back to your neighborhood by now," said the bird man. "Swallows always return home."

Today there are half a dozen swallows snatching insects out of the air around our house, each brilliantly plumed in shiny green and white. But my daughter is sure she can pick out Little Guy each time he swoops by.

I was so impressed by my daughter's act of mercy in rescuing the injured swallow that for days afterward I continued to praise her selfless efforts. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she decided to shut me up and set the record straight at the same time.

"You've got it backwards, Dad," she said in a calculated, but off-hand way. "Don't you see? Little Guy was sent to watch over me. I could tell right away by the way he looked at me."

So it seems that at age ten, my daughter already is living closer to Nature than I ever will - or ever understand. But what I am coming to understand, after staring at her sprawled across the couch in a way that would drive my mother wild, is just how much of my tireless 80-year-old mother is reflected in that head-strong ten-year-old girl.

Now, reviewing these endless observations with the white-haired lady has become a daily mental routine for me and, thankfully, I no longer harbour the conceit that I have any particular wisdom to impart to her. The simple truth is, the more I talk to her, the more the connections fall into place.

Take Marjorie and Hazel. It's clear to me now that just as I see my mother reflected in my daughter, from their perspective on the steps of the United Church, Marjorie and Hazel saw in me the replicated image of my father.

Through their enthusiastic smiles and their small talk they were really marvel-

ling over the process of life itself; how life marches on. More than that, I'm sure that in their way they were telling me to buckle down and start looking after things the way he had once done.

Marjorie and Hazel didn't need a David Suzuki or a Brundtland report to show them the way. In their hearts they always knew the truth, that it's the duty of every living person to hand over the world to our children in better condition than we found it. But apparently there are a lot of people today who need to be reminded of that, who need a formal report from a world body to tell them in black and white that we are caught up in an industrial frenzy that quite literally is destroying our global home.

And just one more thing. The name 'Brundtland' from the Brundtland report belongs to Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former prime minister of Norway. Now I don't know what Mrs. Brundtland looks like, and I hope I never see a picture of her. Because, as a person who has looked the world straight in the eye and made us think seriously about our common future, I always want to imagine her as a white-haired lady in a plain green suite.

"Dad," whispers my daughter from a mysterious corner of my brain. "Don't you see it yet? She was sent to watch over all of us."

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