

Think Globally, Act Locally ***Getting Your Students to Become*** ***Good Citizens of Earth***

by Nathaniel Tripp

For many of my generation, the environmental movement had its beginnings in the summer of 1969, when we saw the first photographs of the earth taken by men standing on the moon. We saw our beautiful home as never before, and the image was galvanizing. Of course, there had been an awareness of the fragility of our planet's environmental systems before that on the part of a growing body of scientists and writers. Rachel Carson's landmark book *Silent Spring*, which condemned the harm to the earth caused by the chemical industry, had come out in 1962, and organizations such as the Sierra Club, under the leadership of David Brower, were already assuming the role of environmental activist, filing lawsuits and taking political action. But it was the Apollo mission photographs that really turned the tide, changing the way people thought about our planet in much the same way as the discovery that our world was not flat, or that it was not the center of the universe after all. The following year, in April 1970, we celebrated the first Earth Day, and within just a few more years, nearly all the important environmental legislation and regulatory bodies we have today, such as the Clean Water Act and the Environmental Protection Agency, were in place.

In many ways, we had it easy. At a time when the nation was deeply divided by the war in Vietnam, the environmental movement was a focused way of getting people united and giving them hope. In addition, the problems were relatively simple both to identify and remedy: water polluted by sewage, air fouled by soot and smoke, highways and streets littered with refuse. A great deal has been accomplished since then; yet we are also now beginning to sense that many of these improvements may have been merely cosmetic. The deeper problems, such as global warming and resource depletion, will take much greater effort to remedy, especially now that we've become even more dependent upon

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cheap energy and food. Yet I think the biggest challenge facing young people today is apathy, not just on their own part, but among older generations as well. Perhaps one reason for this is the constant bombardment of negative news by a 24-7 news media. Within this context, world problems—especially environmental ones—can seem insurmountable. Opinions are polarized and facts are distorted by both sides. It seems easier just to change channels or visit another Web site.

But for those who are informed and concerned enough to take action, it is important—and easy—to take the first steps. We all might begin by looking at our own lifestyle. Do you and your students turn off the computer when you are finished with it, or do you let it slide into “hibernation”? Do you recycle? Do you use recycled paper? If you can answer a few simple questions such as these with environmentally friendly responses, then the next step is to “go public.” Many campus and community organizations invite concerned individuals to participate in conservation commissions, watershed associations, or recreation clubs. Other groups promote recycling or transportation alternatives. As René Jules Dubos said in 1980: Think globally and act locally. That’s the way change is brought about. But community involvement takes courage. And more than that, it takes some skills that are not often taught and can be hard to learn. Among them are the skills of communication and negotiation, interpersonal skills which won’t be found on the Internet, but which can be practiced in the classroom or neighborhood.

As is so often the case, even these lessons can be found in nature. Ask young people to think of the “balance of nature” depicted in illustrations of food chains or water cycles. Discuss the notion that if you break this chain with pollution or by taking too much of one part out, nature will go “out of balance,” and all the other parts will suffer the consequences. People’s needs must be balanced, too. We all need safe and plentiful food, for example, but careless agriculture can pollute water. We need energy, but what are the long-term costs? All too often, a discussion of these issues can result in a confrontation and the kind of deepening divide which politicians and the popular media love to exploit.

But differences can be overcome by discovering common problems and interests, and agreeing upon solutions: We may decide that it’s worth it to pay a

little more for food that is grown responsibly. A community organization may want to buy a piece of land between a farm and a waterway to absorb stray waste. A local corporation might start using compact fluorescent light bulbs, which, although expensive to buy, in the long term will save them money and protect the environment. Admittedly, arguing even these simple points can be frustrating. However, there is nothing more thrilling than success when it comes, although it may be a long and rocky road before getting there.

I'd like to offer two bits of advice that might help people of any age get down that road. The first is to think back to the original Greek roots of the word *ecology*. This is a wonderful word, which I prefer to *environmentalism* because it hasn't become so politicized. (And why? Who on earth could see themselves as opposed to the environment?) Today, *ecology* refers to understanding the complex interrelationships—the balance—between living things and systems. But the word is derived from *oikos*, which meant “house.” To the Greeks, ecology just meant good housekeeping, and was very closely related to economics. It should be. They're really almost the same thing today, too. That planet we saw in the stunning 1969 photographs is our house. We should all start by keeping a clean house, and then we should balance our books and think of other “hidden” costs, such as long-term harm to the planet or society.

The second thing we all need to do is set aside some time to get away from the computer screen, turn off the cell phone, and get outside. Take your students to the wildest place you can find nearby, but also encourage them to go alone. It may only be a park, or even a vacant lot, but once they get there they should just stand still and listen. Encourage them to look up at the sky; to get down on hands and knees and see what is happening down there; to feel the air, to breathe it in and smell it; to study nature and devour every bit of information but also to leave room for the spiritual messages which abound. One has to be cautious when talking about “spiritual messages” so as not to place religion or mysticism above science. Scientists do speak in these terms, so don't be scared to do so. The more scientists know, the more questions they have. Life is an incredibly intricate mosaic, and its patterns have an intrinsic beauty which we love because we are a part of it. This is what scientist E. O. Wilson termed “biophilia.”

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In the end, the biggest threat to our environment, our “ecology,” is not really pollution or resource depletion. The biggest threats are greed, ignorance, and indifference. One needs to be armed with considerable courage, as well as the facts, to overcome these threats. I hope that these suggestions will help you to initiate change within your local environment—a change which will ultimately impact the global environment, our shared world in which we all live, for the better. And considering that the more we look at life on this planet, the closer to its “spirituality” we become, perhaps that’s where the courage to take action will come from in the end.

Thoughts on Environmental Organizations

I would encourage everyone to find a local group which addresses meaningful issues. Nearly everybody lives near a body of water such as a lake or river which has a watershed association, or a national park or wildlife refuge which has a citizen’s support organization. Of course there are also the well known large organizations such as National Audubon, the National Wildlife Federation (which is quite active in school programs), Friends of the Earth and the Nature Conservancy.

But the “oldest, largest and most influential” is the Sierra Club, (www.sierraclub.org), with local chapters across the nation. They have many excellent programs and activities specifically meant for young people. Less well known, but also nationwide and an excellent choice is the Student Conservation Association (PO Box 550, Charlestown, NH 03603). They are a force of high school and college age volunteers who are committed to protecting and preserving the environment with projects such as remediation and trail building.

About The Writer

Nathaniel Tripp's *Vietnam memoir, Father, Soldier, Son*, was a New York Times *Notable Book of the Year*. He has also written children's books and produced films and television shows about nature and science. Shortly after returning from Vietnam, he produced the first "public service" television advertisements about the environment for the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society.

Confluence: A River, the Environment, Politics and the Fate of All Humanity

by Nathaniel Tripp, Foreword by Howard Dean

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