

Raffi Sings New Song to Wolfville's Beluga Grads

by Kathryn Furtado

Raffi Cavoukian – the same Raffi we all know from his songs ‘Baby Beluga’ and ‘Bananaphone’ – was at the Acadia Theatre on Sunday night, speaking, dancing, and singing. However, he wasn't there to sing cute little songs that the Beluga Grads grew up with, (though the crowd at the Acadia Theatre was treated to the first verse of ‘Baby Beluga’). This presentation focused on introducing a new covenant and set of principles to receptive adults: Child Honouring.

Raffi started off the presentation by asking the audience, first, who all had been a baby, and second, who all had been born of a woman. His point was well made: childhood is a unifying factor that spans the globe. And so, an initiative that looks to enact reforms in the global, cultural, and personal spheres for the benefit of children just might be the “universal ethic” that the Dalai Lama, among others, has called for; an ethic “that the world can embrace regardless of race or religion.”

The philosophy itself looks at three inter-connected circles, at the centre of which is the human child: the personal, the cultural, and the planetary. Raffi identifies nine major principles that are designed to protect the “newfants” (children aged 0-4, in the formative and most vulnerable years) of the world, while taking those three spheres into account: respectful love, diversity, caring community, conscious parenting, emotional intelligence, nonviolence, safe environments, sustainability, and ethical commerce.

I was fortunate enough not only to attend the presentation at the Acadia Theatre, but also to have done a phone interview with Raffi prior to the event. He shared with me in greater depth his ideas for a global compassionate revolution, as well as some of the ways in which the child honouring covenant and principles were already being enacted.

“The physician's oath, ‘first, do no harm,’ can become the non-violent mantra of our times.” This oath explains all the principles of child honouring, vowing to protect children from physical and emotional harm by providing for them a world free of violence, free of toxins, free of neglect, free of maltreatment and the corporate manipulation of young minds (safe environment and nonviolence); a world with businesses that take into account the fiscal, social, and environmental cost of their product (ethical commerce); a world where governments and community join together to create safe green spaces for play, and societal compassion for and investment in the very young (caring community, conscious parenting, sustainability); a world where children are loved for, and encouraged to be, who they are, and where they learn to respect the diversity of others while expressing their own gifts (respectful love, emotional intelligence, diversity).

Conscious parenting and diversity have already made an appearance on the educational scene. The faculty of education at the University of Victoria has embraced the covenant and principles in their teacher-training programs. Mary Gordon, in Toronto, is doing a 'roots of empathy' program, in which a two-month-old baby, a parent, and a facilitator are coming into the classroom. The children in the classroom get to learn about what it's like to be a baby, without the obstacle of sibling rivalry, and develop compassion towards the very young. Raffi foresees the development of a curriculum which will teach the basics of nurturing parenting, based on the principle of respectful love. Already, respect for diversity is present in some of the schools, where cultural differences and similarities are expressed by the study of other cultures, or sister schools in other countries. "When we celebrate our similarities," he says, "we don't have to fear our differences."

There have also been steps towards a safer environment for the children of the world. The "mother's milk" initiative, concerned specifically with the presence of dioxins discovered in mothers' milk all around the world, encourages the purchase of products that have been manufactured without the creation of such harmful byproducts. The example of a harmful product that Raffi gave was chlorine-bleached paper. His own independent music label, "Troubadour Music" uses chlorine-free paper. The government of Vermont, also, uses chlorine-free paper in its business. On a more personal note, Raffi issued to the University of Acadia the challenge to switch to chlorine-free paper products.

Economically, Raffi is calling for triple-bottom-line businesses. These businesses would focus not simply on net loss or gain of money, but on social and environmental impact as well. "These are currently known as externalities," Raffi laments. Products such as chlorine-bleached paper that have a higher environmental cost would have a higher cost at the till. Government subsidies and popular demand from the consumer would encourage the purchase of benign products, and hold businesses accountable for their impact on the planet. "Adding indiscriminately, that's what's wrong with the GDP. Counting only the money makes no sense to me," he sang to the audience at the Acadia Theatre in his song, 'Count With Me'. "Let's embrace an economy in service of humanity." With a guitar strumming in the background, it's the same Raffi sound we grew up with – but this time, it's political.

There is no real numerical way of measuring the social progress stemming from this initiative. Environmentally, the changes we hope to see can be gauged. You may be able to count the laws in the name of environmentalism, or the amount of money put into national daycare centres, but the social change caused by these can't be reduced to numbers. The change may be gradual, and difficult to see, originally. Raffi acknowledges that it's a new idea still, but also that it is spreading to policy makers, academics, Beluga Grads who grew up listening to his music, and others. The Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia even gave a luncheon in honour of the anthology, and referred to child honouring as "a vast change in the human paradigm."

Raffi is the founder of this philosophy, which came to him as an idea in 1996, and was written down as a covenant 1998. The covenant, available on his website (along with

other information) www.raffinews.com, was his response to reading the Declaration of Independence in a room in Virginia. Raffi describes the covenant as an emancipation paper, written to encourage the honouring of children. The document is not that of a prescriptive revolution, but rather is written in the spirit of invitation. “This is the most decentralised revolution in the world,” he says. “You don’t have to join an organization, you can start embracing and taking the covenant and the principles to heart. This spirit makes the many reforms, which touch on a broad array of social, economic, and ecological problems, seem more plausible. Each person can pick up on the aspects of the non-violent mantra “First, do no harm,” that resonate with them, and work to achieve these reforms.

The covenant and principles of the child honouring philosophy are written in the anthology, ‘Child Honouring: How to Turn This World Around’. This compilation was edited by Raffi and psychology professor Sharna Olfman, and has a number of contributors, all with credentials in fields pertinent to the topic(s) they discuss. The companion cd, ‘Resisto Dancing: Songs of Compassionate Revolution’ delivers the messages at the heart of the philosophy in song form. Both the book and the cd are also available at www.raffinews.com.

Though Raffi no longer directs his music to children, his efforts still seem to focus on the principle that started his public career so many years ago: the importance of the human child. This was perhaps most aptly described by the new verse to ‘Baby Beluga’, which he presented to the Wolfville audience: “Grown-up beluga, oh, grown-up beluga, sing a song of peace, sing with all your friends, we need to hear you.”

Raffi invites Acadia’s Beluga Grads to change their personal lives, and spread the word to each other. “Form pods. Become pod-pals. Create pod-casts. Podruple your power!” It’s an open invitation from Raffi to, “Get on your bananaphones and spread the message.”