

# CHILD IN VIEW

The wide angle lens of “Child Honouring,” a new ecological paradigm for long-term decision making.

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By RAFFI CAVOUKIAN

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“SEEING IS BELIEVING,” WE SAY. But people like biologist Bruce Lipton also argue that believing is seeing: that belief affects biology and, yes, vision. Still others say it’s the heart that sees. True, and yet, the mind’s a powerful seer, too. Well, there’s a new mind-expanding lens I’d like you to try, a heart and mind primer that works wonders for sight. It heightens focus and boosts depth of field, illuminating a very different world. When I recently learned that Preston Manning had turned green—inspired by his son and encouraged by his seven-year-old grandson—I wondered if he’d found the lens.

Let me explain. When you look at a train, say, you don’t just see the individual cars. You see the length of the train, the platform, perhaps reflected sun, clouds in the distance, people all around. Maybe a trip to Jasper. One thing leads to another which goes back to something else. They say you learn something new by relating it to what you already know. You connect a piece to the whole.

Enter Manning’s grandson. The lad’s a genius, in the way all kids are. His primary vision intact, he sees the world in

wholes and can’t separate “the environment” from the rest of the picture. He wouldn’t think that way unless taught to. And there’s the rub: we’re all taught early on to see things in boxes and it’s hard to put the world back together again. I remember my surprise and excitement in my first year at the University of Toronto when the word “interdisciplinary” first rocked my brain. I’d always suspected things were connected, but here was brazen confirmation!

Decades later, on a Sunday in 1997, I woke up to a similar flash of insight—a philosophy called “Child Honouring.” It came to me as a unifying principle for change, a strategy for redesigning society for the greatest good by meeting the priority needs of the young. After decades of thinking about children and how they grow, about the cultures that shape their beliefs, and the state of the planet that sustains us all, I suddenly grasped Child Honouring as a new ecological paradigm.

It’s not that surprising. Since the ’70s, “holistic” had been among my favourite words, along with “synergy,” “catalyst” and “ecology.” And now I had the integrating lens linking person, culture and planet in a new way, within the ecology of the child. In the circle of relations that holds a child.

AS THE CHILDREN-FIRST WAY OF sustainability, Child Honouring is a connective paradigm with the basis for sound,



*Long resonant with children, Raffi's message is now reaching "Beluga Grads": adults who grew up with his music.*

long-term policy on every issue. Imagine how different our world would be if every nation put the needs of children first. It would transform society and create immeasurable benefits for generations to come.

Child Honouring calls for a compassion revolution—a revolution in values that would “turn this world around,” as Nelson Mandela has said, “for the children.” It calls for a profound shift in how we regard and treat our young in the personal, cultural and planetary domains in which they grow.

This is not about a child-centred world in which children rule, or about permissive parenting. It's about a shift from domineering pedagogy to respectful love, from bottom-line hoarding to triple-bottom-line sensibilities, from a throw-away growth economy to a conservation-based eco-economy that would restore Grandson's world and sustain it.

Whenever I've spoken (and sung) about the Child Honouring lens—in settings as diverse as Harvard University, Parliament Hill and Calgary's Scarboro United Church—I've presented it as a way of seeing which links education, religion, peace, health, social justice, ecology and economy. And I've had the good fortune to meet Albertans of like mind. The Very Reverend Bill Phipps's theme of “faith and a moral economy” also connects the dots, as does the work of peace activist and writer Carolyn Pogue with multi-faith groups. University of Alberta ecological economist Mark Anielski's book *The Economics of Happiness*

abounds in connective thinking. These are among a growing number of people who have the lens.

They understand that, at a time of massive global change, Grandson is intricately connected to the global family. By 2020, humanity may be closing ranks to save the shorelines, at war over dwindling precious resources, or perhaps both. But the decisions we make today will have implications that last much longer, and with the right vision we could act with unprecedented insight. We could work to ensure that, by the time Grandson reaches adulthood, green will drive post-oil geopolitics, and sustainability will be a household word.

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More than ever, our future is a collective venture: the energy choices of countries such as China and India will greatly determine the parameters of Grandson's life. How green we live affects them too. How—and how soon—Alberta deals with its oil and beef habits will impact air, water and soil quality, alter the biosphere and shape the prospects of a habitable future.

“Sustain” plus “ability”: fifth graders get it in a heartbeat. What will it take to put sustainability—and dare I say survival—strategies at the forefront of debate in a provincial or federal election?

A prime minister’s cabinet can help decide the fate of endangered orcas and belugas, the great boreal forests and the world’s devastated fisheries. A premier’s vision can transform Alberta from an individualist enclave to a connected community of brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. A mayor can act on the fate of hundreds of homeless children among the tens of thousands living in poverty in otherwise prosperous cities.

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AND GRANDSON’S FUTURE? Whatever their standing, Albertans are immune neither to climate change nor to a “body burden” of toxic chemicals to which the very young are most vulnerable. It doesn’t help that in public discourse the quality and fate of Earthly life is reduced to bickering over “the environment,” one issue among many. Why are governing parties and news media slow to embrace the S word, even while businesses now see it as opportune? Is sustainability that hard to understand? Not to the fifth graders I was working with recently. “Sustain” plus “ability”: they got it in a heartbeat. What will it take to put sustainability—and dare I say survival—strategies at the forefront of debate in a provincial or federal election?

Edmonton’s David Schindler, Killam Memorial Chair and professor of ecology at the University of Alberta, has been an outspoken champion of the natural world. But is there political leadership in this province for conserving the beauty of creation, for putting an end to tar sands projects, for championing the birth of a massive clean-techology sector? Will Alberta’s leaders give people something to really get fired up about?

In his new book *Plan B 3.0*, Lester Brown, the elder Earth-watcher who has tracked global trends for four decades, writes that “saving civilization is not a spectator sport.” He delivers an urgent, overarching call for mobilizing on a wartime scale the resources needed to address the multi-faceted climate-change crisis. Brown exhorts us to find the collective will to act.

The good news is that seeds of an unimaginably bright future on Earth are now taking root in the crumbling past. Those clutching to the old and familiar feel frightened, defensive. Those embracing a bold way forward are excited, and a growing number of them are Albertans. They’re pragmatists tapping the possible, urging maximum restoration in the

shortest time. For them, survival means finding the right energy, the right means for restoring the verdant commons. A chance to change fuels and clean house. Now. They’re asking, “Why not?”

Albertans, with a huge budget surplus, vast natural resources and human ingenuity, are well positioned to embrace the new lens and join the compassion revolution. “If we are to survive,” Bill Phipps writes in *Cause for Hope: Humanity at the Crossroads*, “we must learn to see the planetary system, including humankind, as a whole.” Again, there’s that quality of seeing. “In fact, ecology touches all aspects of human living,” he adds. And I believe the ecology of the child is key to reordering societal priorities.

Belief systems vary from person to person. But no belief system trumps each child’s need to feel the love of caregivers, community and society. In the developing infant brain, pathways of experience support or impair human capacities for loving and caring—“moral agency,” what Darwin held to be our most prominent feature. The moral imperative for society now is to do right by the child: to quickly change course and chart a sustainable way forward.

Time is of the essence. As Lester Brown puts it: “We are in a race between tipping points in the earth’s natural systems and those in the world’s political systems. Which will tip first?” Will the unsustainable Muggle culture—the business-as-usual-crowd—wake up in time? Will wizards appear in sufficient numbers to save the magic of the real world?

A regenerative future is in our sights: a caring, low-carbon, fair-market “bionomy”—not endless financial growth, but an economy for happiness, fulfillment and genuine prosperity, measured by an index of well-being.

On our warming planet, we need systemic remedies—not just reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but fundamental changes, ways of living and co-creating powered by a child-honouring, Earth-friendly protocol for commerce. We need a partnering spirit between adult and child, woman and man, postmodern and indigenous and among all peoples. A great reciprocity—synergy and diversity lived large.

As the child goes, so goes society; this developmental truth is starting to sink in. And the child grows not in isolation, but within families, communities, cities, provinces and nations. The child is a *holon*, both whole in itself and part of something bigger, like the rest of us. And in the young child is a pure love, a love with tremendous power we can rekindle in ourselves. ■

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# Consider the Children

## 4 ways to honour our future citizens.

### 1. Learn from kids

3 When a child sees an adult throw trash into the street, they often chase after the litterer, trash in hand. It's a reminder that adults have a responsibility to not only teach children the rules, but to follow the rules themselves; our children learn how to behave responsibly from us. But we can learn as much from them as they learn from us. We can change our relationships with the young citizens in our lives—parents can involve children in some household decisions, teachers can empower students to do more of the teaching, all adults can be better role models. We should debate lowering the voting age to, say, 14 years old. If uninformed adults are allowed to vote, why shouldn't informed adolescents be allowed? Nine other great reasons are outlined at: <http://tinyurl.com/6mgroh>. Obviously, some adult perspective in electing politicians and creating laws is essential, but we'll all benefit from encouraging young people's inherent understanding of sustainability to influence government.

### 2. Turn off, tune in

3 The average Canadian has seen 350,000 TV commercials by the time they graduate high school, and the youngest among us can't distinguish ads from programming. The Internet is even more subversive, and both media are rife with "product placement"—ads within content. Left alone to soak it all in, kids grow up obsessed with material culture; hardly a sustainable habit. Parents can limit TV/Internet time and, whenever possible, share it; the Media Awareness Network ([www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)) offers a tip sheet called "Talking to Kids about Advertising." Cities can regulate ads on public transit, where kids are a captive audience. Schools can avoid buying

resources that contain questions like this from a 1999 McGraw-Hill textbook: "The best-selling packaged cookie in the world is the Oreo cookie. The diameter of an Oreo cookie is 1.75 inches. Express the diameter of an Oreo cookie as a fraction in simplest form." Politicians can enact laws restricting ads that target children, and companies can be proactive. Quebec, for example, bans advertising to children under 13, and European soft-drink companies voluntarily ceased such advertising in 2006.

### 3. Head outdoors

3 Take your children hiking and camping. When children are exposed to wilderness, they learn to love it, and ultimately they become conscious of the need to protect it. After all, you can't protect something if you don't value it. The government should make it easier for low-income families with children by reducing or eliminating user fees for parks. What kids learn in the woods they'll carry back into their urban lives. Schools and daycares should establish recycling programs and plant organic gardens; children should help plan both, and—if school crossing guards teach us anything—they'll be thrilled to gain the responsibility. Schools and daycares alike should plan daily outdoor education. Such programming will only get better and better as environmental education is included as part of teacher and daycare worker training.

### 4. Spend wisely

3 Every purchase you make is a vote for the world your kids will inherit. If you want to bequeath a clean environment, buy clean products. Better yet, limit your consumption, reuse all that you can and recycle the rest. Buy only what you need and choose

products that have the least packaging. Consider starting a toy library in your area, as Okotoks has done ([www.okotokstoylibrary.com](http://www.okotokstoylibrary.com)). For your next birthday party, consider [www.echoage.com](http://www.echoage.com), an alternative gift registry; kids receive notice of a donation made on their behalf to a charity instead of 20 more shiny bits of plastic. And detoxify your world. Chemicals generally have a greater effect on kids than on adults. Consumers can influence companies to clean up the products they make and sell (as we've seen recently with bisphenol-A). The only truly "child-friendly" lawn is a pesticide-free one. Edmonton and Calgary are the two largest cities in Canada without bylaws restricting the cosmetic use of pesticides. Tell our civic politicians what leaders in over 130 other Canadian municipalities already know: kids shouldn't have to play in a chemical soup. In short, we won't survive without our youth, and they're counting on us. Most generations understood this relationship—until ours. If we truly want to honour our children, we'll need to start an eco-revolution. Yesterday would've been the best time to start, but today will do just fine.

—Evan Osenton

