

Vision: A "Child Honouring" World

by Ron Miller

Mayne Island, BC - Raffi Cavoukian is known to millions of children and their parents as the singer and performer Raffi. His engaging and positive songs (such as "Baby Beluga," "One Light, One Sun," "All I Really Need") not only delight children, but invite them into a caring relationship with the natural world and the global human family. Since his first album, *Singable Songs for the Very Young*, appeared in 1976, he has sold over fourteen million recordings and video/dvd's. His books, including his autobiography *Raffi: The Life of a Children's Troubadour* have sold over three million copies.

Ten years ago, Raffi began turning his enormous success into a popular campaign to draw attention to children's developmental, emotional, social and health needs and the ways the modern world is failing to address them. He called this movement Child Honouring, "a children-first paradigm for global restoration that calls for a profound redesign of every sphere of society."

"I realized in the early '90s that escalating societal issues and global ecological crises couldn't be solved in isolation, that they had to be viewed in a holistic, connected way," Raffi says. "Early one Sunday morning I was awakened by the phrase—Child Honouring—and I knew in that moment intuitively what it meant, what it implied, and that it was the work of the rest of my life, which my years up to that moment had prepared me for."

His extensive experience with young children, deeply attuned to their needs for three decades, inspired Raffi to launch Child Honouring. Study, observation, and experience of their playful intelligence and pure love motivated him. He was further galvanized by reading authors such as Alice Miller, Joseph Chilton Pearce and Jean Liedloff, who described the vulnerability as well as resilience of young children, and by learning about other cultures that truly respect and accommodate the natural patterns of children's development.

"Child Honouring is a comprehensive meta-framework for global change," says Raffi. "It seems that no other philosophy connects the personal, cultural and planetary domains via the lens of the young child, through the vulnerability and priority needs of the infant ecology. As social change movements go, this is unique."

His website, www.raffinews.com, explains in detail what a child-honouring society would look like: 1) It would show love for its children in every facet of its design and organization; 2) It would uphold the basic human rights of every child; 3) Corporal punishment would be a thing of the past; 4) No child would live in neglect or lack access to health care; 5) Kids wouldn't be alone after school with violent computer games, eating junk food, waiting for a parent to get home; 6) Family support centres would be developed in every neighbourhood; 7) Working with the young would be valued and well rewarded; 8) Universally available child care centres would be staffed by trained professionals.

Inevitably, the Child Honouring vision holds specific implications for our educational system, such as the development of more schools and more teachers, smaller class sizes, and a range of learning options for families to choose from. Child development would be considered a primary subject as fundamental as reading, writing, and arithmetic; children would learn about the importance of empathy and the basics of nurturant parenting.

His *A Covenant for Honoring Children*, written in 1999, further spells out the conditions of a child honoring society: "We find these joys to be self evident. That all children are created whole,

endowed with innate intelligence, with dignity and wonder, worthy of respect. The embodiment of life, liberty and happiness, children are original blessings, here to learn their own song. Every girl and boy is entitled to love, to dream and belong to a loving 'village' and to pursue a life of purpose." The Covenant also describes key principles that would guide a society truly concerned about children's welfare and their thriving. These include respectful love, caring community, conscious parenting, non-violence, sustainability and ethical commerce. The Covenant is currently circulating among policymakers, religious leaders, scholars and educators, inspiring them to rethink their understanding of children in society.

To promote the Covenant's principles, Raffi and co-editor Sharna Olfman have produced an anthology of writings by eminent scholars and activists called *Child Honoring: How to Turn This World Around* (Praeger Publishers, 2006/Homeland Press, 2007). So far the book has been well received. The Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, for example, held a special luncheon at which she referred to it as "required reading."

Currently Raffi travels around North America discussing ideas from the book and the Covenant. "Educators have been among the most receptive audiences for my presentations, and the reading of the Covenant often draws tears," he says. "At a number of universities—including those in Vancouver, Victoria, Pittsburgh, Halifax, Charlottesville and Toronto—Child Honoring has received a rousing welcome. In the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, the teacher training program uses the Covenant as part of its curriculum."

In addition to his educational work, Raffi is currently working in his native Canada with a group developing an "index of wellbeing." He is collaborating with the growing "conscious pregnancy and birthing movement," and with what he calls the "responsible commerce community." He is also re-directing his music towards adults, particularly those who grew up on "Baby Beluga" and his other ecology-oriented songs. His latest CD called "Resisto Dancing: Songs of Compassionate Revolution," includes inspiration from the Earth Charter, Nelson Mandela, Jane Goodall, Riane Eisler, and his Holiness the Dalai Lama. His newest production, a 55-minute DVD called *Raffi Renaissance: Child Honoring and the Compassion Revolution*, is scheduled to be released next month by his company, Troubadour Music. "Beluga Grads are saying they feel inspired by my new work," he says. "That's good news. I consider them a vital part of the Compassion Revolution."

Without a doubt, this Renaissance man is making a contribution to the world's children that goes far beyond the delightful music he has been performing for them for thirty years.

Education that Honors Children

Usually, when policymakers and business leaders focus on education, and when the mainstream media cover educational issues, they are primarily interested in defining the content of the curriculum, establishing "high standards," requiring accountability through rigorous testing, dealing with funding issues, or quelling violence in schools. When local school boards meet to set policies, financial and legal concerns are usually center stage. Rarely is there serious discussion of the developmental needs of young people themselves. Almost never does anyone in these positions of authority stop to consider the nature of learning or the characteristics of learners—the very people who are at the heart of the educational process.

Our society holds a "transmission" philosophy of education; the underlying assumption is that schools exist to transmit a certain body of knowledge (as this is defined by certain elite groups), and the role of students is to absorb this instruction as effectively as possible, to be rewarded or penalized according to their success. How young people actually learn, what they are actually interested in learning about the world, and what social, emotional, and cultural obstacles get in the way of their learning, are generally considered irrelevant. We tell them, in effect: "Here's the

curriculum. In this grade you will meet these standards. Your scores on standardized tests will determine your educational and vocational future. Do your best—or else."

Alternative educational approaches, which include diverse methods that may be called "holistic," "progressive," "democratic" or something else, are alternative precisely because they begin with young people's experiences and aspirations. In one of the classic books in this literature, *The Lives of Children*, George Dennison wrote in 1969 that "the business of a school is not, or should not be, mere instruction, but the life of the child." Or, as the evocative title of another classic put it, "today is for children, numbers can wait." This educational philosophy trusts that young people, when given a supportive and caring environment that nourishes them as whole persons, will learn effectively, even passionately, without being herded or coerced.

Raffi Cavoukian's campaign for a "child honoring" culture, profiled in my feature article, is a wake up call to modern society. By neglecting the natural developmental needs of growing human beings, we have created a toxic, violent, ruthless world that is unhealthy for all of us, and for the living planet. As Raffi has observed, if we want to bring peace, healing, and happiness to the world, then we must critically examine how we are treating our children. To support them and honor their natural developmental patterns, we need to provide a more caring environment for their learning and growing. Thus nourished, they will become adults with the commitment and strength to transform society even further. Raffi calls this the "Compassion Revolution."

A century ago, the brilliant educator Maria Montessori reached a similar conclusion. The visionary basis of her entire career was her belief that "If salvation and help are to come, it is from the child, for the child is the constructor of man, and so of society. The child is endowed with an inner power which can guide us to a more enlightened future. Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities" (from *Education for a New World*, published just after the Second World War).

A child-honoring education respects the creative impulses at work within the unfolding child as much as, if not more than, the cultural imperatives that conventional schooling seeks to overlay onto the growing personality. If we want to educate for a truly democratic society and not one that is hierarchically ruled—if we desire a dynamic, progressive culture and not one that is rigidly fixated upon the past—then the educational process must take into account the inner life of the child. Curriculum decisions and learning environments need to meet and accommodate vital energies, not suppress them.

Child honoring and democracy go together, and a culture that is authoritarian toward its children will eventually become, if it is not already, authoritarian toward all but the most elite of its members. It is revealing, I think, to look at the No Child Left Behind program, with its relentless testing and rigid control of learning, in this light. I have heard NCLB referred to as "Childhood Left Behind," which seems to me a troublingly accurate description. If childhood is left behind, so too is our essential personhood.