

Turn this World Around Creating a Child-Honoring Society

An Interview with Raffi Cavoukian

Interviewed by Pamela Gerloff

MTM: You've said that your dream is to embrace child honoring as a central organizing principle in society—

RAFFI: Oh, yes!

MTM: And you often ask people to imagine the benefits of a child-honoring society: "one whose love for its children is manifest in every aspect of its design and organization."
What do you

imagine a society that truly honors children would look like?

RAFFI: It would be a society where the primacy of the early years would be well understood by everyone. People would understand that we are formative creatures; we grow from a little tiny baby whose brain after birth is still forming—and it forms with all of the impressions that the child perceives: of love or its absence, of connection or its absence. If we, as a society, were to understand this, I think we would change all of our institutions to support giving the best start possible to every child in our society.

This would be a non-partisan understanding. Of course, people would differ about how to provide that support for every child, but there would be a tangible sense that we would detoxify the air, the water, and the soil; that foods would be

grown without pesticides; that corporations would serve the common good. It would be a revolution of values—and I use those words consciously. A child-honoring society evokes, for me, the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Every sector of society would understand and respect the irreducible needs of the very young. You might say that there would be a truly compassionate, family-friendly agenda to politics. A child-friendly world would be our goal—a world that is hospitable to newborns; as they say in some circles of the United Nations, "a world fit for children."

MTM: You've said elsewhere that you don't mean a society where children rule.

RAFFI: Not at all.

MTM: People sometimes feel fearful when we start talking about honoring children. They're afraid we're going to turn over the world to them.

RAFFI: Right—and I don't mean that at all. That would disrespect the child, actually. Children need our guidance. They need to test our strength, but to know that our strength is superior to theirs. They have their own power—their power to inspire our love.

The best kind of conscious parenting sets reasonable limits (reasonable to the adult, I mean!). In the best parenting, warm bonds are there, but they're there because the child feels not only cared for, but secure within the limits that are firmly set and held.

That's why I haven't called this initiative "child centered." It's not child centered. Child honoring is, of course, a children-first approach to healing



Raffi Cavoukian, known around the world as "Raffi," is an internationally renowned children's troubadour whose award-winning recordings have played in millions of homes, schools, and libraries. A generation of fans in Canada and the United States has grown up with his children's classic, "Baby Beluga."

Raffi has been a longtime champion of children and ecology and his original songs have been sung in premiere concert halls, at the Kyoto Global Forum, and in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Raffi is a member of the Order of Canada, the Order of British Columbia, and the Global 500, as well as a recipient of the United Nation's Earth Achievement Award. He was recently awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Victoria and will be awarded an honorary doctorate from The University of British Columbia in May, 2005. He is a member of the board of advisors of More Than Money.

President of the "triple bottom line" company Troubadour Music, Raffi is also the founder of child honoring, an original philosophy and unifying principle for restoring the human and natural communities. He has published an autobiography, The Life of a Children's Troubadour (Homeland Press, 1999) and written "A Covenant for Honoring Children," an expression of society's duty to its young.



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“This is the defining moment
in the history of humanity.”

communities and eco systems. But that’s very different from a society where children rule.

MTM: It’s really about a change of perspective, isn’t it?

RAFFI: That’s right. Not only the change of perspective that comes when you don the child-honoring lens—when you look through a child-honoring lens, the world

looks very different—but also, it’s what a lot of ecological economists have been talking about: moving from a “bottom line society” to a “triple bottom line society.” In a triple bottom line society, instead of money being the sole, or even the most important, concern, other profit and loss pictures become equally important. A triple bottom line economy would be one in which social and environmental, as well as financial, considerations are

at play. The word “responsibility” comes to mind. In all three spheres, we need to behave responsibly.

MTM: Would you say more about how money relates to creating a child-honoring society?

RAFFI: At the very basic level, those who have more money, as opposed to less, have more choices, and enjoy the power that comes with that choice-making ability. We who have more choices need to remember that money is supposed to serve us. Money is a symbol and it should not turn tyrant. A monetary economy is supposed to serve the people—and by that I mean all the people, every child and every child’s family. If I were going to playfully invent something called capitalism, I would probably call it goodwillism, so that the maximizing wouldn’t be about maximizing capital; it would be about maximizing goodwill.

I’ve been an entrepreneur of a triple bottom line company—Troubadour Music—for almost 30 years and am now the chair of The Troubadour Foundation, which is working with a number of child-honoring initiatives. What I’ve learned about money is that money has a phantom power, which, if not directed toward good, can wreak havoc. For example, the stark truth is that if people have savings in a bank or a credit union (let’s say a teachers’ association credit union), most people have no idea what the bank or credit union is doing with those savings. Unless there are stipulations as to how that money is invested, it can go to all manner of investments that are opposite to the values of the people who have invested their savings there.

MTM: So intentionally aligning our money with our values can help support a child-honoring society.

RAFFI: Yes, definitely.

MTM: What are some other practical steps that we as individuals can take to help create a child-honoring society?

RAFFI: I can give you an action list of 12 things to do, continued on p. 8

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but I prefer not to. I prefer that people reflect on the child-honoring covenant that I wrote. [See sidebar, this page.] I invite people to read the covenant and the principles and, if they feel so inspired, to *live* the covenant and principles—make them a part of their lives.

The first principle is *respectful love*. We can begin by showing respectful love to every child we know or encounter. Of course, we can do that with adults as well, but it's so important with the child. It's so important that the love we give the child be respectful. Essentially, the covenant is about seeing the innate brilliance of every child, and, with our actions, behaving in ways that respect the living world we all share.

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MTM: You're suggesting that the solutions will naturally emerge from the people themselves.

RAFFI: Yes. People can figure out what to do. This is an invitational process, not a prescriptive one.

Children are impacted by personal, cultural, and planetary conditions. When I say “personal” I mean in their personal and family lives. Cultural conditions can mean such things as the economic model that we live by, the educational system and how it regards the child, or how religions regard the child.

The first question we ask is, *How do we regard the child?* And then, *How do we treat the child?* How we treat the child comes from how we regard the child.

Essentially, child honoring requires a process of “seeing”—seeing the child for who she or he is. That's why the first line of the covenant says, *We find these joys to be self-evident, that all children are created*

whole, endowed with innate intelligence, dignity, and wonder, worthy of respect.

By our very birth, by being here, we are blessings to the world. That's not a view held by a majority of humanity at this point. But it shall be.

How's that for optimism? It reminds me of a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, who said, “If a thing must be done, it can be.”

MTM: It also makes me think of an article I just read, which pointed out that some of the great cathedrals of Europe took 800 years to build.

RAFFI: We may not have that much time to turn this world around, actually.

MTM: Would you say more about that?

RAFFI: It's what other people are saying.

I've had conversations with people such as Maurice Strong, who was the chair of the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992; Stanley Greenspan, the premier child psychiatrist in Washington, D.C.; and chimpanzee researcher and environmentalist Jane Goodall. When I have talked with them about what we need to do to turn this world around, they've said, “You know, we don't have much time.” There is a sense that this is the defining moment in the history of humanity, that we have perhaps but one generation to decisively set humanity's course.

Entrepreneurs are saying this, too—such as Ray Anderson, the CEO of Interface, the carpeting giant in Atlanta. More and more people are understanding that the turn toward sustainability is one we need to make now. The 1990s were called the turnaround decade, but we didn't see the turnaround that we needed. We fell further and further behind. That brings a certain urgency to

the situation, not only in our own countries, but to the world culture—because we're such an interconnected world now.

I think that one thing we'll need to do in moving toward a child-honoring

A Covenant for Honoring Children

By Raffi

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 to belong to a loving “village.” And to pursue a life of purpose.

We affirm our duty to nourish and nurture the young, to honor their caring ideals as the heart of being human. To recognize the early years as the foundation of life, and to cherish the contribution of young children to human evolution.

We commit ourselves to peaceful ways and vow to keep from harm or neglect these, our most vulnerable citizens. As guardians of our prosperity, we honor the bountiful Earth whose diversity sustains us. Thus we pledge our love for generations to come.

Child-Honoring Principles

The words of “A Covenant for Honoring Children” suggest nine guiding principles for living. Taken together, they offer a holistic way of restoring natural and human communities, thus brightening the outlook for the world we share. They form the basis for a multi-faith consensus on societal renewal.

- Respectful Love
- Diversity
- Caring Community
- Conscious Parenting
- Emotional Intelligence
- Nonviolence
- Safe Environments
- Sustainability
- Ethical Commerce

For an elaboration of each of the nine principles, please visit www.troubadourfoundation.org.

society is to change what we measure in our economy. Right now we have the Gross Domestic Product [GDP]. It's a very crude and, in some ways, dangerous measure, because it only counts the money, and it adds indiscriminately! It doesn't look at how the money was generated, whether what was done in generating the money is useful or not, whether we want those activities to grow or not. It asks no questions.

We'll need to come up with something like a quality of life index or an index of well-being that measures what matters most in life. That would be a Smart Domestic Product, not a Gross Domestic Product. That would be a measure that shows us that the things we want to grow are growing and the things we want to shrink are in fact diminishing. That kind of index would be a child-honoring index, hopefully, because the criteria regarding the well-being of children would be factored in. In other words, the child-honoring lens would be applied to that index.

The good news is that, in Canada, a number of my colleagues are working on exactly what I'm talking about.

MTM: Our most recent issue of *More Than Money Journal* was on the topic of money and happiness. In it, we published an article on Bhutan; it discussed that country's shift away from the Gross Domestic Product as a measure of economic well-being to an index it calls Gross National Happiness. [See "*A Wealth of Happiness: Bhutan's Economy of Well-Being*," by Karen Mazurkewich, *More Than Money Journal*, Issue #38, *Money and Happiness*, pp. 14–16.]

RAFFI: The Gross National Happiness index is kind of what I was talking about—goodwillism. It's an economy that values intangible currencies.

MTM: It's interesting that people who have been to Bhutan say that people do seem happier there—especially the children.

RAFFI: That *is* interesting. Often, when you ask children about the world *they* want—when you ask them who would have food and shelter and clothing—almost universally, you will hear from them that they want those things for everybody. As one six-year-old said to me, "Nothing ought to cost more than 20 dollars!"

The world children want is the world that child honoring tries to express. Children don't want their beluga whales going extinct and being riddled with toxic chemicals. They don't want their eagles to be endangered and to become extinct. They want a natural, pristine, beautiful world. Now, who doesn't want that?

But I will say, in the conflict of interest between the power of corporations to do good or harm, and in the reasonable right of every child to breathe and to be fed—to be nourished—the child's

“The world children want
is the world child honoring tries to express.”

Raffi's Metamorphosis

MTM: You once wrote that you went from “a person totally oblivious to children to someone who learned to appreciate and love them.” How did that happen?

RAFFI: It happened over a number of years, but it began one day in the mid-70s, when I was in a classroom in front of first-grade kids. (I used to take my guitar into classrooms and sing for kids before I did concerts.) Until that day, I was used to thinking of children as a group of kids—a group of second graders or a group of kindergartners. They were a group of kids to me. But that day, my eyes gazed across the group, and I beheld the children as individuals. A very important light went on, and I thought, “My goodness, every one of these people is an individual.” Sure, they may share the traits of childhood, but they're individuals—and that was a key.

Beyond that, I needed to learn about how to entertain people who are not like adults. Children are not little adults. I had been an entertainer for grown-ups before—a folk singer—so I had to learn who my new audience was. In order to do that, I had to talk to people who knew children. I had to read books about children and child development. The child development reading and studying became a tremendous window of learning for me—not only about children, but about myself and how I grew to be the person that I am.

needs must prevail. I mean, this is such a reasonable statement! Just to have to make it says a lot about us.

MTM: It does seem kind of peculiar that we even have to talk about child honoring.

RAFFI: I know. I think of it this way: In the film *The Corporation*, the filmmakers have looked at the behavior of the publicly-traded corporation and come to the conclusion that it's the behavior of a psychopathic entity; that is, the traits that corporations show in their behavior are psychopathic. That calls to mind Erich Fromm, who talked about the pathology of the normal—the idea that what seems normal can actually be pathological, and the psychologist Abraham Maslow, who said that healthy individuation requires resisting unhealthy enculturation. We are swimming in unhealthy enculturation at the moment. And, you know, corporate ingenuity

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can be directed towards good or not. Unfortunately, corporations, which, legally, are only mandated to serve the interests of their shareholders, aren't particularly good vehicles for being accountable to the public good. So, to the extent that there are competing rights between the rights of an abstract entity we call the corporation and the reasonable basic human rights of a being who is real flesh and blood—our child, this soul-encased, corporal being—this is the one whose needs must prevail.

MTM: Haven't you suggested elsewhere that in the history of humanity, we've never really had a child-honoring society?

RAFFI: I think what I've said is that we've never had a revolution inspired by the universal needs of children. But perhaps child honoring is an idea whose time has come. Many people around the world, including Nelson Mandela, are campaigning for the world of children. In 2000, Mandela

said that it is not enough for world leaders to spout empty rhetoric. He said, "What we need to do is to turn this world around for the children." I subsequently wrote a song called "Turn This World Around for the Children" and sang it for him in 2001.

I also spoke and sang at a conference at the World Bank called Investing in Early Childhood. There were a number of presentations there about how investment in early childhood saves many times that amount in socioeconomic costs later on in life. So financiers and economists, too, are coming to understand that we need to tend to the early needs of children as a proactive measure, not only in order to build the most productive societies, but also to save money in socioeconomic costs—the cost of neglect, you might say. The idea of attending to and meeting the needs of children is definitely gaining currency worldwide. ■

Raffi on Learning from Children

MTM: What's the most important thing you've learned from children?

RAFFI: Oh, that's easy—the importance of play.

MTM: Children do seem to know how important play is!

RAFFI: Well, it's the way they are. Their knowing is their being. I think it's astonishing that the very young learn the most important things in life—how to be a person, how to talk and eat and write—they learn all of those astonishingly complex feats while they are in a mode of play. That says two things to me: Play is important—because that's the mode children are in when they learn this stuff, right?—and it's important to retain play throughout life.... Almost any task done with a playful attitude becomes more do-able.