

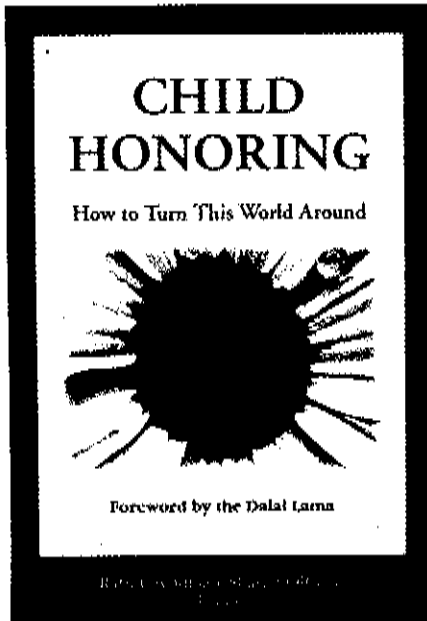
Do it for the Children... and the Belugas

Raffi Brings Child Honouring to the Forefront in Two New Works:

Child Honouring: Turn this World Around, Raffi & Sharna Olfman, Editors
Resisto Dancing: Songs of Compassionate Revolution, by Raffi with Guest Voices

Reviewed by Darcy Higgins

Darcy Higgins is an Environment & Resource Studies graduate of the University of Waterloo, where he was recently elected, Federation of Students - Vice President Internal. His latest research explores effective change in campus and institutional sustainability. He is a founder of the Young Greens of Canada and is Submissions Editor of *The Understory*, an online Green youth magazine.



"If we don't use the child honouring lens we won't go far enough, bold enough. The present moment is a defining moment in the future of the species."
Raffi Cavoukian

Raffi's earlier songs made an impact on many of us. You may have given them to your children, and you may still pass them on to your grandkids. Adults in my age group had the books and sang along with his tapes in childhood. But after some time, we had to move on from singing about Mr. Sun and brushing our teeth at odd hours of the day. As our generation moved onto adult issues, Raffi has come along with us.

Raffi sees children as the missing link to sustainability. Sustainability – best described as... moving towards a state in which, "Demands placed upon the environment by people and commerce can be met without reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for future generations. Leave the world better than you found it, take no more than you need, try not to harm life or the environment, make amends if you do" (Hawken, 1993).

But oftentimes environmentalists and politicians overlook child development and the early years when thinking about the sustainability equation. And, according to Raffi, early childhood educators too, can forget within the importance of the natural environment. "We estimate there are between three and ten million beluga grads in Canada and the U.S.", said Raffi, referring to his term for today's young adults who were active participants in his songs, such as *Baby Beluga*. "Reading *Our Stolen Future* in 1997 may have brought about the vision I woke up with one day at 6am, when the term 'child honouring' came into my

head...after years of deep reflection on ecology and children...child honouring connects the two", Raffi explained.

Raffi Cavoukian now resides on Mayne Island - a place that was inhabited by First Nations people 5,000 years ago - now just a one hour ferry ride from Victoria, B.C. *Child Honouring* is the name of a new book he edited with psychologist Sharna Olfman. It includes chapters from experts in fields of child development, economics, business, ecology and the social sciences. "It's an interesting but simple idea isn't it", I asked Raffi, "If we put children first, then all our policies and laws will be good for people?" "I really like how you've explained that," he said, "You know, we, being developmental creatures more than any other animals - our early experience after birth gives us the choices we have."

Raffi believes that it only makes sense to allow the early years to guide society, which will "develop the intelligence of the species". "When you tend to the infant ecology – set out to detox the infant ecology, renewal of society and restoration of ecosystems will happen at the same time," Raffi explained. "You can't have a sustainable society that is not a humane society. The children become the missing link."

What does he mean by this? There are few references to "infant ecology" in academic literature. But it becomes clear that Raffi's main thesis, through the melding of concepts and his sort of cross-literation

is really trying to convey a holistic approach in the way we act and teach. Take as example the period before human birth. The child in the womb soaks up the conditions of that environment. If that environment contains the financial anxieties of parents or the chemical pesticides from their neighbourhood lawn, the child soaks that up too. He uses the term 'sustainability' because it encompasses the broad work we each need to do to reach a more durable future, recognizing the interconnections between society, ecology and economy.

It seems that some politicians may be hearing the message. As I write this, the premier of Ontario is announcing his priorities of tackling child poverty and climate change, as well as increasing environmental education in elementary curriculum. "We're focusing next on our two most precious resources. The children we raise and the environment we share", premier Dalton McGuinty said in remarks about the upcoming Ontario budget.

Asked if it was important to have Olman edit the book to bring the psychological integrity, he responded, "It was important - our sense of self comes from our early experience because it impacts our whole lives...it's very hard work to change your sense of self, very demanding, very preferable to start out with a positive self-image. Shana is a brilliant scholar who has done a couple of anthologies and was a wonderful partner to work with; she has a connect-the-dots view of children."

Raffi's CD *Resisto Dancing* contains 13 songs of "hip hope" all related to a hope-filled future for children. And his latest song, "Cool it", can be found on Youtube.com, a piece written for David Suzuki's recent cross-country "vote for the environment" tour. "Resistance is fun, that's what *Resisto Dancing* is all about. What we're resisting is the pop culture that just counts the money", he said. When we do this, we honour our core self and our reasons for living. If one lives without compassion and community, Raffi believes we miss out on why we're here.

"Child honouring is a new lens through which we see the world...the priority must be the needs of the very young. The most valuable players are also the most vulnerable - the most impressionable to family dynamics, susceptible to cultural values, and planetary issues. When we consider that every child born today is born with a load of toxic chemicals... it opens your eyes," Raffi said. "[The plight of] children will have more of an impact than animals, although if people knew that washed up bodies of belugas in the St. Lawrence are treated as toxic waste, that would likely have an emotional impact on people who have heard the song Baby Beluga."

Raffi has had many notable leaders collaborate in his work...when asked about his meetings with various individuals, he sounded humbled and inspired by the work of many. "Nelson Mandela is one of the world leaders who gets it for children. In 2000 at a Say Yes for Children campaign, he and his wife Graca Machel said that it is not enough to have empty rhetoric, but we need to turn this world around for the children." Graca has a chapter in his book entitled *From Rhetoric to Action*. Mandela's statement inspired his song, "Turn This World Around." Raffi was chosen as the top children's entertainer of political leaders Stephen Harper, Paul Martin, Jack Layton; and Elizabeth May recently used this song in her leadership campaign. His message to policy makers is to put children at the centre. "It behooves every party to look at these ideas for the very young...I take my hat off to any politician who thinks long-term."

Raffi was also influenced by Dr. Fraser Mustard, an advocate of child honouring who he views as a foremost expert in child development. He particularly appreciates the recommendations from "The Early Years Study", a report co-written by Mustard and the Honourable Margaret McCain in 1999. "Can you imagine if new parents didn't feel alone or if every neighbourhood had a centre for parents to come to and for infants to hang out in quality care? It would be such a support. "He [Mustard] inspired one of the songs in the CD, It Takes a Village, so he's had quite an impact on me."

He continues - other prominent contributors who provide spoken vocals on one of his tracks include Jane Goodall and the Dalai Lama. "The Dalai Lama and I met first in 1999 in Dharamsala," Raffi said. "So I had two conversations with him on child honouring and the second conversation was allowed to be filmed, which is when the audio was recorded for the Covenant." The second track on *Resisto Dancing* is Raffi's Covenant for children, read by a number of influential individuals. Raffi hopes that others like Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and J. K. Rowling will take up his call.

Until then, Raffi will continue to be an inspiration for all of us to build better community and a brighter future. "The present moment is a defining moment in the future of the species," he said with confidence. "We need a compassionate revolution. The principle of 'first do no harm', can be the nonviolent mantra of our time. It doesn't have to be just for physicians." ... "Every beluga grad is needed, and let's make some noise."

You will want to share these new works with the children and your colleagues as Canada embarks on this environmental turnaround. As well you may want to consider these links:

View "Cool it", and get more information about Child Honoring and Resisto Dancing at: www.raffinews.com

GPI Atlantic, an organization dedicated to the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), in consonant with Child Honouring at: www.gpiatlantic.org

David Suzuki Foundation
www.davidsuzuki.org

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