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Interconnections

David Suzuki

Recipient of the 2012 Inamori Ethics Prize

Throughout history, people have always understood that we are deeply embedded in and utterly dependent on the natural world. In stories, songs, and dances, cultures around the globe have celebrated being part of their surroundings. In a world where everything is connected to everything else, any action has repercussions and so responsibilities accompany every deliberate act. Acknowledgment of that responsibility has also been explicit in the rituals of every society.

That sense of being an intimate part of nature has been shattered over the past few centuries. Science brought forth a different way of looking at the world. If the cosmos is an immense mechanical construct, then by focusing on the parts of this machine—the cogs, wheels, and springs—one might be able to understand how the machine works; like a giant jigsaw puzzle, all the parts could be fitted together to explain the whole. Reductionism, the focusing on parts of nature to explain the whole, was repudiated by modern physics but continues to be the underlying assumption in most of biology and medicine. Reductionism has fragmented the way we see everything and obliterated the rhythms, patterns, and cycles within which the parts operate.

As human numbers have exploded, more and more of the world's people have spent their entire lives in a period of unprecedented growth and change. To them, this is the normal condition of humanity and it is expected—indeed, it is demanded—by those who know no other way.

In the twentieth century, there was a remarkable transition from villages and rural communities to big cities. In an urban environment, it has become easy to assume that human technology, economics, and industries create our habitat and fulfill our material needs, thereby enabling us to escape the bounds of nature.

At the same time, information has mushroomed, assaulting us from all sides in print and electronic media. But the bulk of the information that hits us is junk—advertisements, pornography, mindless entertainment—and does nothing to inform us about the important matters in our lives. Even

the so-called news reports provide only snippets of information, devoid of explanation, history, or context that might explain why they even matter.

A global economy continues the process of disconnection by treating nature and all its services as something outside economics. Economists assume that the atmosphere, water, soil, and biodiversity that are crucial to all life are “externalities” to economics. For example, the natural services rendered by a tree, including exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen in the air, prevention of soil erosion, influence on weather and climate by transpiration, and provision of habitat for other species, have no economic worth, whereas cutting the tree down for lumber or pulp does. So human intrusion and exploitation contribute to the global economy, whereas nature’s activities in keeping the planet habitable are “worthless.”

Taken all together, these factors have severed the sense of interconnectedness and with it, any feelings of responsibility for what we do. The challenge of the twenty-first century is to recognize that our biological nature determines our most basic needs, which all come from nature.

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