

David Suzuki:
18th George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award Acceptance
Speech

Thank you very much.

My mother and father would have loved this very much.

I just want to thank all the people who were responsible for getting me up here. I mean calling myself an author always seems such a presumptuous thing for me to do.

MARGARET ATWOOD

You know, many may not know that Margaret Atwood—I'm so thrilled to receive this from her hands—has been a long champion for the kind of causes I've been interested in. It's built right into her DNA, from her mother, her father—who I knew of but never met—and she really has been an inspiration for me, a warrior for a just society, a person who has tried to live up to our stated ideals. So thank you very much.

I did want to say one thing that many people probably don't know, which is that Margaret has been a long-time supporter of me and my work at the David Suzuki Foundation. She gave us a significant chunk of her Booker Prize when she won it. She has donated her talents, her time, to events that we've had, and wrote a wonderful forward to my latest book, *The Legacy*.

Thank you very much for that, Margaret.

[To Margaret Atwood directly] Of course, being memorialized in your latest book as St. David strikes me as being very sacrilegious—to sanctify a lifelong atheist. But I thank you for that anyway.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

I was such an ignoramus that, although I had heard, of course, of George Woodcock, I didn't know until very recent years what a remarkable man he was. For people to say that I am of the same stature as George, I don't feel that. I feel a pygmy beside George Woodcock.

I have to tell you that I am totally embarrassed by my only experience with George. It was in the early 1990s, and he called me at home and introduced himself. I had a vague idea of who he was. He wanted me to get involved in something—I think it had to do with seals—and I just tore a strip off him and said, "This is so poorly thought out." Totally didn't agree with him. He listened very politely and then said "thank you" and hung up. Of course I was instantly sorry that I treated him that way. I never heard from him again. But somehow I feel, knowing more about him, he would have appreciated that more honest answer from me than me just mincing and sucking up to him.

SCIENCE

I did want to use this occasion to say a few words, because we've never needed words—serious words— more than we need them now. I returned to Canada after eight years getting an education in the United States. That was in 1962. I took a position at the University of Alberta, and I was absolutely stunned and appalled by the level of ignorance in Canada about science that was demonstrated by a total lack of a coherent government science policy, by the unbelievably sad state of funding for scientists, especially in areas of basic research as I was doing in the study of fruitflies.

So when I was invited to give a talk on a television show that the university had on a community channel—it was called *Your University Speaks*—I gave one lecture on genetics. They loved it so much that I ended up doing eight lectures, and that—although I didn't know it at the time—was the beginning of my second career, in genetics.

My hope in becoming involved in television in those early years was that, by showing the excitement and the importance of science, I could inform Canadians about this vital area so that they could become empowered to actually make important decisions and do something about the way science was applied. You see, if you were to judge what the important issues that Canadians really care about are— let's say that you look for a week at the number of inches devoted to different issues in papers or the number of minutes spent on different issues in television news—you'd quickly see that Canadians' priorities are politics, business, celebrity, and sports. And yet none of those can match the significance of science.

Science is by far the most important factor shaping our lives and society today: science when applied by industry, medicine and the military.

CHILDHOOD

I was born in Vancouver in 1936. When I was growing up as a boy, my parents never had to worry that I was running up a big bill text-messaging, or that I was playing too many video games or watching too much television, because, of course, none of that existed when I was a boy.

When I was a child my parents wouldn't let me go swimming in public pools or to the movies in the summer because they were afraid I would catch polio. When I was a child hundreds of thousands of people every year died of smallpox. It was a scourge. Smallpox has been extinct for over thirty years.

When I was a child there were no computers, jet planes, transoceanic phone calls, birth control pills, genetic engineering or xerox machines. I could go on with an enormous list. All of these things have become a part of our lives since I was a child, and each of these innovations has transformed the way we live. Indeed, they have changed the way we think of ourselves and what our needs are.

When I tell children what the world was like when I was a child, they stare at me in absolute amazement. They can't believe anyone could be that old! The first thing they ask is always, "Well what did you do!?" To a child today, a world devoid of all they take for granted is an ancient civilization, long extinct. And, of course, they are absolutely right. We are impacted enormously by what is discovered and invented and applied from science.

ENVIRONMENTALISM VS. POLITICS

In the 1970s I joined a group in Ontario that did a survey of members of parliament in Ottawa. I doubt that much has changed very much today. Over 70% in the survey came from two areas: they came from business and they came from law. I think that the primary reason for that is that they are two of the groups that can afford to run for office, and lose! Most of us can't afford to do that. We then gave a very simple test for comprehension of science terms and concepts—a very, very simple elementary test—and applied it to 50 different MPs. And guess what?

It was business people and lawyers who scored absolutely rock bottom. If they were in my genetics class I'd have to have a special section for slow learners. And these are the people who are making decisions right now about stem cells, about genetically modified organisms, about climate change, about species extinction, about endocrine disruptors, cloning, intelligent computers, and on and on. Can you imagine Ralph Klein, or even Minister of Finance-Jim Flaherty, making informed decisions about these? Or Stockwell Day, who doesn't even believe in evolution? These are the people who are incapable of assessing the kinds of advice they get, and so decisions are made that are not informed decisions. They are made for political expediency, and our futures, then, are out of control. What is happening now is absolutely terrifying.

In 1988, a group of scientists meeting in Toronto (and I know this because Stephen Lewis was asked by Brian Mulroney to chair some of the sessions), over 300 climatologists, concluded the evidence is in: Humans are a part of the warming trend we are seeing and which is being driven by fossil fuel use. The scientists issued a press release that said, at that time, "global warming represents a threat to human survival second only to all-out nuclear war." And they called for a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in 15 years.

Think if we had taken the warnings seriously and done it. We would be way past the Kyoto target. In 1988 Brian Mulroney was re-elected and appointed his brightest star to be the minister of the environment, Lucien Bouchard. I interviewed Lucien several months after he was appointed. I said, "Mr. Bouchard, what do you think is the most important environmental issue Canadians face today?" And right away his answer was "global warming." That was impressive! So I said, "How serious is it?" And his answer was, "it threatens the survival of our species. We have to act now."

So there you have it. The science was in, the scientists spoke out and the politicians had got the word. I'm not going to explain why nothing actually happened. But I can tell you that the fossil fuel industry, the auto sector, and neoconservatives like the Koch brothers in New York began to invest tens of millions of dollars in a campaign of deception. You can find the evidence, the best documentation of this, in James Hoggan's book, from Vancouver, *Climate Cover-Up*, and in Naomi Oreskes' book, *Merchants of Doubt*. And you see the incredible campaign to confuse the public about climate change. They called it 'junk science,' supported by a handful of naysayers, to say it was a natural occurrence. And it worked.

So now we seem to have the public opinion on this driven by organizations like the Fraser Institute, the Heartland Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute. You just have to read the National Post and you'll never have to change your mind on climate change; you'll know that it's baloney. You only have to listen to the Rush Limbaughs and the Anne Coulters and the Glenn Becks to dismiss the vast majority of scientists around the world.

THE FUTURE

And so we are in a terrible state.

I began my career in television believing that through education—through writing books, through television and radio programs—that we would have a better-informed public. But in fact we're going backwards. The level of trust of scientists—where you have phoney-baloney issues like Climategate—the level of trust of scientists, especially in the United States, is dropping radically. And if we can't trust scientists, then what do we turn to? The Koran? The Bible? Or all of these right-winged pundits who we read? Where do we turn?

Those of us who are interested in ideas and the importance of books in conveying them, are losing big-time, and it's a big challenge. We have no choice but to take it on because eco-crisis is urgent.

I thank you very much for this award.

[Fairmont Hotel Vancouver, February, 2011]