

A child of the planet

As a girl, Severn Cullis-Suzuki electrified the 1992 UN Earth Summit; today, her life remains the message

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She was the girl who silenced the world. For six minutes in 1992, 12-year-old Severn Cullis-Suzuki stunned delegates at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro with a crie de coeur so powerful it reduced some to tears.

Standing before a room full of bored-looking delegates, wearing a flower-print dress, her fuzzy hair pulled into a ponytail, Cullis-Suzuki said, "I have no hidden agenda. I am fighting for my future."

She spoke up for the children "whose cries go unheard," and for "the countless animals dying on this planet because they have nowhere left to go."

She spoke openly, emotionally, eloquently, of her fear, and her hopes for the future, her dreams of "seeing the great herds of wild animals, jungles and rainforests full of birds and butterflies."

"I am only a child," she said. "And I don't have all the solutions."

She asked simply, "If you don't know how to fix it, please, stop breaking it."

What she dreamed of then was all people on the planet acting as "one single world, with one single goal."

Her clarity, strength and conviction electrified observers and captured the world's attention; Al Gore rushed to congratulate her and said her speech was the best moment of the conference. It galvanized the international media and thrust the young girl on to the world stage.

Sixteen years later the international environmental crisis has not been solved, and the girl who stepped forward to save the earth has embraced a private life in the deep space beyond the spotlight. But she has not disappeared.

Cullis-Suzuki may have eschewed the role of celebrity poster girl, but only

because she has chosen to mine the twin veins of personal interest and public responsibility that were opened in Rio.

The video of her speech continues to influence children -- and adults -- around the world through its second life on YouTube.

"It's really shocking seeing that speech on YouTube," said Cullis-Suzuki in an interview from her Haida Gwaii home, "partly because it is still so relevant today."

After the Rio speech, Cullis-Suzuki, who has always described herself as simply a "concerned citizen," was awarded the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 award; she was profiled in magazines around the globe, later worked side by side with Mikhail Gorbachev on the Earth Charter and as a member of Kofi Annan's special advisory panel in Johannesburg.

She has also devotedly followed her interests, completing an undergraduate degree at Yale in ecology and evolutionary biology, and recently completed her master's in ethno-botany under Nancy Turner at the University of Victoria.

In August she married and settled with her first nations partner in Haida Gwaii. It's a long way from Rio.

"A lot of people have said, Oh my God, she's moved to Haida Gwaii, she's fallen off the face of the earth," said Cullis-Suzuki.

But she doesn't see it that way. While she is still actively involved in trying to save the earth, she must also find her place on it.

"I want to be happy," she said. "I'm going to pursue what I'm interested in. If you pursue your dreams, that's where to put your energy.

Much of her learning and study in recent years has centred around the interconnection between issues of cultural, environmental and social justice, something that dovetails with her own deep yearning for connectedness.

"My partner is from Haida Gwaii, and he is rooted to place in a way that I can never hope to have."

For Cullis-Suzuki, right now, the most important thing in the world is "rooting, learning the Haida language, spending time with elders.

"Working with elders, looking at language revitalization and getting more into cultural issues and research has been a nice transition. I've become more and more convinced that environmental challenges are intertwined with cultural

strength and cultural identity."

"I can still be part of the international dialogue," she said, "but I need to be here in Haida Gwaii to ground in family, relationships and community."

In spite of a soul-saving relationship with nature, as a Canadian with multi-ethnic immigrant roots, Cullis-Suzuki feels the disconnect particularly sharply.

Her father, the renowned scientist and environmental crusader, Dr. David Suzuki, is a third-generation Japanese Canadian who suffered internment as a child in Canada, and had to face racism and displacement. His experience, she said, influenced her own.

It is that jarring displacement from place, from ancestors, from fellow citizens that Cullis-Suzuki cites as particularly damaging.

In an essay published in the anthology *Notes From Young Activists* (Greystone), Cullis-Suzuki writes "In the city, our sense of responsibility to our land and our community, our sense of being part of a continuum in history are invisible. We float as individuals living individual moments in history and time. We don't think about the fact that we're ancestors of future generations."

"It's alien to think of a deep connection to place when we can move our families at the drop of a hat or the drop of a job," said Cullis-Suzuki.

"If you look throughout the history of humanity, there has always been migration, but in the 20th century, particularly in North America, people were transplanted to a different universe. That severing of our homelands has been a driving force behind our connection with consumerism."

Cullis-Suzuki is trying to meet "the challenge of finding a balance between the local and the global."

She is excited to commit to a place -- its people, its culture, its challenges -- as she continues to ask the "macro questions" about the nature of "what we are doing here as human beings."

To make a real difference in the environment -- cultural, social and physical -- "The most important thing we can do is stay put," said Cullis-Suzuki. "That kind of rooting is necessary for all Canadians now. It's up to us to connect with where we live."

She believes that another generation of young voices will emerge in this country, and directs readers to the *Young Activists* anthology as an example of how diverse and exciting the work of other young people is -- from members of organizations such as *Apathy is Boring*, to aboriginal and child labour

activists.

She urges parents to expose their children to nature in whatever way they can.

"Kids love to be connected to bugs, mud puddles, vacant lots. When you think it's just video games, that's scary. It can be as simple as going to the park. It doesn't have to be old growth rain forest.

Grow food. Food is an innately fascinating interface between us and our environment. You plant a seed and it grows into something you can eat. I've met children who don't know milk comes from cows. Take a field trip to a local farm, explore a city dump, find out where your water comes from. Have an experience."

Although in the years since her speech to the U.N., "it does seem like one environmental catastrophe after another," she still finds it possible to be inspired, to look forward with a kind of joyful anticipation that, as an impassioned 12-year-old she struggled with.

"My viewpoint has shifted. I wasn't an idealistic 12-year-old. I was extremely pessimistic. Now I realize it's not up to the world leaders, it's up to us."

Certainly, she said, being the daughter of David Suzuki and Tara Cullis, also a noted environmentalist, influenced her perception as a child of just how dire the environmental situation was.

To parents who want to raise aware children she cautions, "It's not fair to freak your kids out. Having a seven-year-old take on the weight of global warming is not cool. I used to cry myself to sleep at night because of all the problems in the world.

"My saving grace was that my parents were involved in so many exciting things, part of a team that was fighting for what was right, and I really looked up to them for that."

The great lesson Cullis-Suzuki has learned along the way, and has internalized and made work for her is that "it's all about translating fear into something powerful and positive.

"Life is beautiful. Life is amazing. My mom has always reminded me that every generation has their challenge. Every generation thinks this is the big one. This is a critical time. Be excited. Act as advocates for the future. It's powerful, and we need it."

Cullis-Suzuki is the first to say she's not a perfect environmentalist, and she grapples with carbon footprint-guilt and "the tricky balance between comfort

and doing the right thing."

Her work for Safe Harbour, a program of the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of B.C.; for the David Suzuki Foundation; and on the Citizens' Conservation Council on Climate Action keeps her travelling.

"It's so hard to break habits," she said. Carbon off-sets are one way she deals with the travel.

But more and more she hopes to stay connected to the global community through the Internet. She believes "change is imminent," if people begin to "think outside the box, to be visionary."

Most importantly, she hopes kids coming up who want to do something find their own ways of taking action.

"I have gotten a lot of correspondence from young people asking me how they can speak at the U.N. or some other high-profile event," said Cullis-Suzuki. "There are so many other things we can do. Pick your vision accordingly."

The speech that launched her on to the world stage in 1992 "was such a fluke," said Cullis-Suzuki.

Cullis-Suzuki had founded ECO, the Environmental Children's Organization at the age of nine with a group of friends.

When the Rio conference came up, Cullis-Suzuki and three friends realized that children were not being represented at the conference. So the kids held bake sales and sold beadwork to earn the money to travel to Brazil.

The group of kids from Vancouver was asked to speak when a delegate dropped out and a time slot had to be filled.

The speech that stunned the world was written with less than an hour's prep time -- in the back of a taxi.

In 1992, at the Rio convention, Cullis-Suzuki quoted her father, who always told her, "you are what you do, not what you say."

In Rio she did something that was spontaneous, and from the heart. She hopes other kids will do the same.

Now she quotes Gandhi, "My life is my message. It's really important to communicate, but it's more powerful to walk the walk."

"You're never not on a personal journey," she said. "That's what this has

always been for me."

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