

THE DAVID SUZUKI PODCAST



COVID-19 & THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF LIFE



THEME MUSIC

INTRO

David: COVID-19 offers us the potential to heal — not only from the virus, but the many interconnected problems that plague us: the mental health crisis, our disconnect from nature, racial injustice, inequitable distribution of wealth, our ailing biosphere. The pandemic has shown us that we can find ourselves joined together to solve a common problem and mobilize massive resources at a moment's notice. It's shown us that we can make vast public investments in our shared well-being — and even change the way we live our lives.

How can we translate the way we've adapted during COVID-19 into a better future, where the health of people and the planet is seen as one and cared for by all? How do we transform the urgency of the moment into lasting change? What seems to be an overwhelming crisis of many issues is, in fact, an enormous opportunity to get things right. And the best news is that we don't have to try to manipulate and direct all of nature: we are the heart of the crisis, and the solution also is in us.

On the show today, an old friend whose wise insight is as relevant as ever. As we wrap up the first season of our new podcast, I'm delighted to be joined by Neil Young. I also have the pleasure of showing of someone I get to speak to pretty much every day: Tara Cullis. Co-founder and current president of the David Suzuki Foundation board, former Harvard faculty member and environmental advocate of over 30 years, Tara is also my wife. She tells us about the different sides of the brain, and the role love and spirit play in a life of activism.

MONOLOGUE

David: Like air and water, like love and companionship, we need spiritual connection.

Yet for so many of us, the months since the pandemic began have been a time of disconnect.

Perhaps there's no better moment than now to contemplate our interconnectedness with one another, and to all life on Earth.

We are made from the Earth. Our stories tell us this, and so does the science — yet our busy, increasingly urban lives make this immutable truth so easy to forget.

The rabbi and writer Daniel Swartz noted that long ago, "We knew less about the natural world than we do today. Much less. But we understood that world better, for we lived ever so much closer to its rhythms."

My hope is that as we navigate our way through this pandemic, we will seek and rediscover these timeless rhythms that hold the key to our modern problems.

It's worth remembering that humans have lived on this planet sustainably before. Indigenous Peoples lived here for thousands of years and never imperilled the natural world.



But they understood something we must again embrace:

There is nothing on this Earth that is not connected, in body and in spirit.

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My father died in 1984.

I moved in with him to care for him in his last month and helped write his obituary. He wasn't in pain. He knew he was dying, and he was prepared. His obituary read:

"Carr Kaoru Suzuki died peacefully on May 8. He was eighty-five. His ashes will be spread on the winds of Quadra Island. He found great strength in the Japanese tradition of nature worship. Shortly before he died, he said: "I will return to nature where I came from. I will be part of the fish, the trees, the birds — they are my reincarnation. I have had a rich and full life and have no regrets. I will live on in your memories of me and through my grandchildren."

The Victorian scientist Thomas Huxley said: "Living nature is not a mechanism, but a poem."

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry wrote:

"Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and the roles we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night."

Let me share a brief part of my own story.

I have been privileged to live in the same house in Vancouver for 45 years. It is on the oceanfront of English Bay, facing West and North Vancouver.

In the 1990s, as Hong Kong was soon to revert back to China, I received an unsolicited letter from a real-estate agent announcing, "Offshore money is flooding into Vancouver. Now is a good time to sell your house and buy up."

I had never heard the notion of "buying up", and I was offended by the idea that what had become my home was simply considered a piece of real estate and an opportunity.

I decided to make a list, at the time, of everything that made this house our home. Here's some of what I wrote:

When Tara and I were married, Dad built us kitchen cabinets for our apartment and when we bought the house, we pulled one out and installed it in our kitchen. Didn't fit in, but every time I opened a cupboard door, I thought of Dad.

I invited Tara's parents to come and live with us after retirement and her Dad was an avid gardener. He planted raspberries and asparagus because he knew I loved them. After I had been away on a long trip in the US, I came home to find my father-in-law, who handed me a bag and said, "These are the first asparagus this season and I saved them for you."

I built a treehouse in the dogwood tree overlooking the beach and find enormous pleasure watching our daughters playing in it.

My best friend came from Toronto and spent a week with us while I was building a fence. He spent hours carving a handle for the gate and now every time I open that gate, I think of Jim.

When Mom died in 1984, we spread her ashes on a clematis plant along the fence, and then my niece Janice died and we placed her ashes with Mom's, and every year when those purple flowers appear, I feel they are still here.

Throughout the house are pictures, knick-knacks, souvenirs that remind us of birthdays, Christmases and special moments.

That list is some of the things that are priceless and make this place our home, but on the real-estate market, they are worthless.

And that is the problem today: We have elevated the economy to our highest priority, but it fails to value the things that matter most to us.

And then I think of Indigenous people, who over thousands of years thought of Earth as their mother and home, who have so much to offer us to help rediscover our way.

We've heard, on this season of the podcast, Indigenous voices that can help us reconnect to the timeless rhythms of the Earth and spirit.

Perhaps now is the moment for each of us — in this time of anxiety, uncertainty and separation — to again look for wonder in the interconnectedness of all things, and to contemplate what in life is truly important.

TRANSITION MUSIC

VOICEOVER: NEIL INTRO

David: My first guest today is Neil Young.

Neil needs no introduction for fans of his music — he is considered by many of us to be one of the greatest musical artists of all time.

In his songwriting and in his actions on stage, Neil has stood up for his beliefs and fought for a greener and kinder world. He's been pointing out the impacts of our society on the Earth for decades.

Music has always been a powerful way to communicate change.

Neil knows that better than anyone, and right now, he's entangled in a legal case with Donald Trump over the use of his songs at political rallies.

We caught up with Neil at his home.

NEIL INTERVIEW [Duration: 11:29]

Neil: Hey now, how are you doing?

David: Good, how are you?

Neil: Good to see you, David.

David: Thank you for doing this. Great to see you. How's Daryl [Hannah]?

Neil: She's great.

David: I know she's great. I have to tell you right off the bat that this is great for us to have you. But I met and fell in love with Daryl before I even knew about the work you're doing. She's been an eco-warrior for so long.

Oh, yeah. Doing a lot. Yeah. She's fantastic. She's incredible. Yeah. So please pass on my love and, you know, just admiration. The two of you — I feel it's kind of like Tara and me, you know, the combo is pretty powerful.

Neil: We feel real glad to be together and lucky that we can share so many things.

David: You know, one thing I've wondered and I've asked a number of musicians this, and they've never really given me a good answer, you know, through all the years I've been doing things. Whenever I ask musicians... John Denver, Bu fy Sainte-Marie and Gordon Lightfoot from way, way back. Bruce Cockburn. And you've been a long-time activist. What is it about musicians and music? What is it that makes them more open to these issues?

Neil: Well, I don't know if they're more open to them and they just have a voice. There's just as many people in all walks of life that are very concerned about things and have opinions, but they don't have a way to share them and they can't put them into a message that people share. Musicians really don't have any more going for them than regular other people. It's just the musicians that got this tool.

David: Have you met Greta [Thunberg]?

Neil: I've never met her, no.

David: What do you think of the impact she's had?

Neil: Oh, I think she's great. I think she's wonderful. You know, I love what she's doing and I love the way she is. And I love everything about her.

David: See, the power of Greta, to me, where she is really, I think, different is she's got no vested interest in the status quo. So she sees with the clarity, she's not into all the games that are played in business or politics or the law, she just sees as a child, with clarity.

Neil: She'd be good to go to Ottawa with us.

David: Yes!

Neil: She'd be good because she's a youth voice. You need voices that are understood, not just Canadian youth voices, but youth around the world that is understood. And she's a great example. She's done really well. And she's so focused because of the way she is, you know, the way she's built. Yeah, she's a very focused individual. And, you know, you can see it in her face. You can see she rarely cracks a smile because she's very serious about things.

David: Well, you know, she came to Vancouver and it was overwhelming. Every person around wanted to touch her and make eye contact. Well, you know what it's like when you're a star like that.

Neil: I would love to see. I don't care who Trump debates, but I would love to see her. I would love to see Trump take on Greta. What a great idea.

David: Well, you know, she came to Vancouver and really gave a big shot in the arm to a group called Sustainabiliteens. These are teenagers that are fighting for climate. And they did a little film. And three of them went to see the minister of the environment in Victoria, this is the B.C. minister, and he greeted them all: "Hi, kids. Great to see you. Welcome." And he thought it was a photo op, and they nailed him immediately with "Why is the government pushing LNG (liquefied natural gas)?" And you see his face change and go, "Well, you know, I think it's a transition fuel. Well, I'm really sorry, but we have to go now."

So I think I mentioned to you in my email, I'm urging youth. Now, if your mum and dad love you, they've got to be warriors on your behalf because they vote. They're the ones that can tell government, "I'm not going to vote for any politician. I won't vote for you or your party if the environment isn't at the top of your agenda."

You know, the people that are going to be listening to this are all going to be big Neil Young fans. And I think the big question is, what is it that got you into being an activist?

Neil: Just because you have a job doesn't mean that you don't have an opinion. You know, you've got to be able to say, come on. All right. I don't know. I don't even feel like an activist. I mean, you know what I wrote? "Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s." I wrote that in 1970. I mean, it's just what I do... I happen to be a musician.

David: I've been really intrigued by your support of farmers. And again, was that sense of social

justice that farmers were on the short end of the stick, or was it that food is such an important part of our lives?

Neil: Well, as usual, Bob Dylan was the one who put that together. And then we, you know, everybody just gathered around because it seemed like the right thing to do. Now, farming is an ugly thing. I mean, you know, we've got some of the worst shit happening in the world with farms. But they are very, very locked in. I mean, you know, but it's again, we've got to clean up the way we do our work. You've got to clean up the way we treat the Earth. And that's a basic thing. You got the dirt in your hands. You got a machine going back and forth. You're putting this crap on it or you're not. That's the basic thing. It's either yes or no. Is the Earth good enough with the sun and the water and the air? Or do we need to add crap to it? Yeah. Ask yourself that question.

David: I've belonged to the National Farmers Union for many years now, and I'm very proud of supporting the farmers. But farming, you know, there are different kinds of farms. And I think industrial agriculture is not farming. Industrial agriculture is what leads to these massive incarcerations of animals. And it's just to get a product out — input, output. There's no concern for the Earth. But you meet farmers, boy, I mean, family farmers — very different relationship with the land.

Neil: They are the land. They live on the land. They take care of it. They touch it. And, you know, some of them have been polluted. Some of them have been purchased, other ones have lost their farms. And then the corporations have come in and just wiped everything out. It's just something that we need to deal with, but we can't deal with it with the old head. We need a new head. This is the challenge. It's coming.

If you look at cleaning up the mess that's left, it's exactly the mess that we've had. It's just bigger. It's the same mess ravaged. It's gotten bigger because every environmental protection thing we put in place has been taken away. So when that's put back in, we've just got to go much farther with it. But it's the same subject. There's nothing new. We've just got to do our thing. We've just got to go in there and do it. And I really feel confident that we can do it. We have to be able to do it. If we don't, it's curtains for our grandchildren.

David: I always tell people I'm in the death zone. And, you know, there's nothing morbid about that. The reality is, when you hit your 80s, you know, the chance of living much longer is much diminished.

Neil: Expand the death zone.

David: Make the death zone as happy a one as possible, and that's my grandchildren. You know, I've been holed up here in a cabin. You would love it here, Neil. I'm on a cabin on an island in the Pacific with three of my grandchildren. Yesterday of my dock, I was going to set out in my boat to go salmon fishing. I noticed the anchovies were jumping. I threw my line in and I caught an 8 pound salmon right of my dock. My grandchildren were there with me. It doesn't get any better than this.

Neil: No, it doesn't, especially, then you eat it.

David: Yes, exactly.

Neil: And then hey, that's it. Hello.

David: Yes. And I'm sharing half of it with my neighbour, who's got a great garden. And she gives us all kinds of things. This is, you know, this is kind of the way we should be living.

Neil: How can we bring that thinking to the inner cities?

David: This is the challenge, of course, because cities are our major habitat now. How do we make cities a place that is livable, where kids can experience nature and grow their own food?

Neil: Look what's happening. This virus has completely changed the way we view the safety of the city, the security of the city, our need to be in the city. If you have an internet connection, you don't need to be in the city. You might want to go to somewhere for a conference with your company, you know, or Zoom or do something with them, you know, regularly, but not every day. Maybe once a month. Yeah, whatever.

But that's changed. The city is built on the fact that everybody has to go to work. They go to the work headquarters. It's all bullshit. It's all done. It's finished. People don't realize it's not about just Black lives in balance and racial balance. It's everything. It's all happening right now. I feel it's a tremendous time to be alive to view this. Because it's happening.

I'm a lucky, very lucky man. And I live in a beautiful place. I walk out every day. I don't go anywhere. I don't see anyone. I've wanted to slow down for 50 years. For 50 years, I've been travelling, doing this, doing that, concerts, this make a record, going round all over the world, everywhere. And I'm going to myself this is not going anywhere and not going to cities and just staying in one place and working and cleaning up the mess that I've made for the last 50 years with my art, so that I can organize it and get it all done.

David: COVID was a gift.

Neil: In a strange way.

David: Thank you. I hope we see each other again soon.

Neil: Thank you, David. Take care.

TRANSITION MUSIC

NEW COPY COMING...

One more thing, before we get started. Tara and I recorded our conversation on Zoom from our home, so you might hear some glitches from time to time.

TARA INTERVIEW [Duration: 12:21]

David: So, Tara, welcome to this podcast.

Tara: Thank you. This is interesting.

David: This is a program all about spirit, whatever that is. And, you know, the first time I went to Israel, I went to Jerusalem, to the Dome of the Rock, you know, a very famous dome that is revered by both the Muslims and the Jews, which is a sacred place. At that time, I thought, you know, if an alien came from a different galaxy and found this planet and started studying the organisms on the planet and discovered, "One of those species seems to show some signs of intelligence." And so they zeroed in on it and came to the Dome of the Rock. And they say, "Well, this organism has built a very elaborate structure." When you look at what that structure is built over, well, it's a rock. You know, it's just a rock. Like, what the heck? But humans have made it something much more than that. I mean, this is a sacred place. The human brain remembers things, embellishes the stories around that rock.

Tara: It is all about the brain and that sense of being able to create meaning, to put meaning into an inanimate object or something like a rock. It's a manifestation of spirit because it's meaningful to the minds of all the people who respect that place.

And what is spirit? I mean, it comes from the word or the same root as the word inspire and which actually means to breathe in. So spirit is breath.

It's the first breath that a little newborn baby takes. It's the last breath that you or your mother or your spouse takes on your or their deathbed. So air is sacred. Spirit is its breath, the symbol of life. And during life, there are moments when you feel it — inspiration. You're sort of breathing in something more than air. It's a glorious feeling.

It's the feeling that triggers the sense that I'm on the path I'm meant to be on. Spirit is that part of you that captures the essence of what you feel is the everlasting centre of you, the things that you remember after a person is dead.

So it's your essence. And it comes from your right brain and it is connected to the others, into the past and into the future. But in life, the spirit needs the body to act. And so that's when I realized we really do have to balance the left and the right brain, that's so important, so while we're alive, the spirit has to be balanced by the body.

[many paragraphs missing]

Tara: How did we get to this overdependence on breaking things down? Actually, a concept of progress really only appeared around the early 1800s. And when we came through into the 20th century and got into the '50s, and we saw the glory days of advertising starting to help business to profit by making us want more things. And by that time, Western thinking had pretty well become left-brain thinking.

And then the '60s hit, which was incredible. I mean, it was an explosion of the right brain against that long left-brain creep of the centuries. And no wonder they call it the counterculture. It was amazing then to be young and alive and to protest against the hierarchy and against the dominant linear thinking, which appropriately was called "straight".

It was an age of rebellion, of marches and demonstration. It was an era of rejection of injustice and a boiling up of noble ideals. And it wasn't just against something. It was supremely creative. It gave birth not just to an explosion of music, as you know, but think about it, to the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the peace movement, and the environmental movement.

But remember, all these movements were in those days thoroughly intertwined. And music and art were integral parts of them. So our field, for example, the environmental movement, was born in the time of civil rights and social justice and pacifism and was steeped in it. That's why Greenpeace got its name, right.

Environmental work was born out of a deep link between social justice and all progressive movement. And for the first couple of decades the modern environmental movement was pretty successful.

I mean, that was when we were really following our spirit.

We were just, I mean, it might look random historically, but it was so much fun.

David: We also lucked out in, you know, part of it was because of our environmentalism, but also the filming, you know.

Tara: Oh yeah, absolutely.

David: We lucked out in meeting the Haida.

Tara: But you know what? When I think back because of *The Nature of Things*, because of your television program. It was in the late '70s, and at that point, we weren't environmental. Well, we just, like, everybody else is worried about pollution. But that show introduced you to the Haida people, which introduced you to Indigenous people in general. And that, I think, is what started our conversion to environmentalism. Because after that show, we got involved with the Stein Valley, the Nlaka'pamux people in the Interior of British Columbia fighting for their forests. And then that gradually spread, the same problems, we realized, holy smokes, are popping up in other parts of the world. And so we just had one adventure after another. Once we opened that door to see what was really going on in our own province and then recognizing those same patterns.

David: So what if we learn from the COVID-19 lockdown, and what kind of a world do we want to head for after?

Tara: Wow. Well, that's, I guess, the question everybody's asking. I think for us, we were forced to look back at nature and spend a lot of time in it, and we couldn't help but notice how nature was bouncing back, even a little bit in our corner of the world.

And I think it just gave people a moment to take a breather and just ask, are our lives proceeding in the ways that we had hoped for and in the ways that are going to bring us fulfillment and a happy, healthy life in the future?

I know a lot of people only felt hardship in this time, and I don't presume to speak for them. For them, people have lost their jobs. People have lost their lives and loved ones.

But I think for me and for a number of the people I know, it's brought a sense that one can make the right decisions for oneself in the future, and a determination to try to not let that slip away. It's a powerful feeling and it's a good feeling. And it gives us hope, for those looking for sources of hope.

But I think this is quite a big one. And I'm going to take it.

David: Well, I don't think there's any better way to end this discussion than that. Thank you very much for that.

TRANSITION MUSIC

OUTRO

Thanks to Tara Cullis for that expert interview. I've had so many memorable conversations with her over the years, and that was no exception.

David: And thank you for listening to Season 1 of The David Suzuki Podcast:

COVID-19 & the Basic Elements of Life — produced by the David Suzuki Foundation in partnership with Jason Arkley Productions.

I recorded these interviews from the traditional, unceded territory of the We Wai Kai First Nation. I am so grateful for how Indigenous Peoples have been responsible stewards of these beautiful lands for thousands of years, and how they continue to teach us so much about how to live sustainably on this planet.


For more information on how you can help advance a green and just recovery from COVID-19, visit davidsuzuki.org/greenandjustrecovery.

To support our work and help us make more podcasts like this one, visit davidsuzuki.org/donate.

This wouldn't have been possible without our incredible production team: Jason Arkley, David Leibl and Brendan Glauser.

And Katie Jensen, Renita Bangert and Michal Stein of Vocal Fry Studios.

Theme music by Scott Nolan. Artwork generously provided by Roy Henry Vickers.



Until next time, take care of yourself, each other and this beautiful living planet. It is after all, our only home.

Music is an incredibly powerful source of expression and communication. It can bring people together and inspire action. It's played a vital role in social movements as long as I've been around. At the end of each episode of this podcast, we'll play a song to end on a healing, meditative note. Four of the five artists we profile are independent, from the heart of Turtle Island. We hope you enjoy, and do what you can to support up-and-coming musicians, especially during this particularly challenging time.

To close this episode, a perhaps lesser-known song by the legendary Neil Young. Neil Young has been using his music and voice to bring attention to environmental and social issues for decades. "Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s," he wrote 50 years ago.

It is my great privilege to wrap the first season of the David Suzuki Podcast with a beautiful musical contribution from this iconic musician, devoted activist and dear friend. Here is Neil Young with "Green Is Blue".

MUSIC PERFORMANCE [2-4 MINUTES]