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2012 Inamori Ethics Prize Speech: The Challenge of the Twenty-First Century

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The Challenge of the Twenty-First Century: Setting the Real Bottom Line

David Suzuki

Transcript of 2012 Inamori Ethics Prize Speech

I did not think I was going to get emotional tonight. Thank you so much for this incredible award.

When I learned that I had been selected for it, I was shocked, shocked that anyone knew about the work I was doing outside of our tiny country, Canada. Of course I was delighted to learn of the award because I discovered as I read, ethics was a part of the name of the award and that Dr. Inamori talks about love and the divine, words I am not used to hearing in the battles I have been involved with. And of course I am humbled when I learned of the teachings of Dr. Inamori and his philosophy. You know, someone like me is made possible by the work of countless people who supported me, starting with my wife and my children, who have helped me by enduring my many absences, who supported me and made a lot of my efforts possible. To do something like a television program, even writing a book, it takes dozens of people to apply their expertise to make these things possible, so I accept this award but on behalf of the many, many people who have made my life and efforts possible. Thank you so much.

I am grateful, as well, for this opportunity to share a few of my ideas with you. You see, I believe we are at a remarkable moment in all of human history. For decades, leading scientists of the world have been issuing increasingly urgent warnings that humankind is rushing along a path that is undermining the very life support systems of the planet. Let me give you one remarkable example. November 1992, this amazing document called “World Scientists Warning to Humanity” was released. And when you look at the back, 1,700 scientists from 71 countries in the world, including more than half of all Nobel prize winners signed this document. And let me just read you a few lines of what they said:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future we wish for human society

and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to support life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about. They go on to list the various areas of that collision: the atmosphere, water resources, ocean, soil, forest, species, and population.

And then the words become even more bleak:

No more than one or a few decades remain before the chance to avert the threats we now confront will be lost and the prospects for humanity immeasurably diminished. We, the undersigned senior members of the world scientific community hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.

Then they discuss five basic points that must be carried out immediately if we are to avoid the collision.

This is a frightening document. Scientists are not normally signatories of a document that is so strongly worded. But if this document was frightening, the response of the media around the world was terrifying—there was none. It may have hit the back pages of a few newspapers, but it certainly wasn't on the major television networks. Since that time, scientists have published dozens of scientific reports documenting the ecological devastation and rising sense of urgency about the collision that we are involved in. I sat on the board of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the largest study ever done on the ecology of the planet, \$24 million sponsored by the United Nations and the reports were absolutely devastating. We are having an enormous impact on the things that keep us alive. In 2005, we released our final reports in New York at the United Nations. Kofi Annan was there to introduce it. A day later, the Pope got sick—he died. And then there was a [Papal] succession, and that pushed everything, including the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, right off the newspapers and the media. So it was a one-day wonder in the media, the largest study on the state of the planet. In the past two months, *Nature* has published a number of very important documents showing, among other things, human beings have become so powerful we are altering the very cycles of nitrogen, carbon, water, and the species that keep the planet habitable for animals like us, and in the last two weeks, a paper showed that in the past there have been periods of sudden change, ecological upset, that are irreversible and take us to a different place with species extinction. We are approaching that tipping point right now.

I believe that we have reached a point where what we do or do not do in the coming decade may very well determine the fate of all humankind. Now you may think that is rather hysterical or melodramatic, but consider this: One of the leading scientists in the United Kingdom, Sir Martin Rees, who is Britain's royal astronomer, was asked on BBC, "What do you think the chances are that human beings will be around by the year 2100?" And his answer sent a shiver up my back—he said, "Fifty/fifty." Fifty/fifty that our species will survive to the end of this century. Jim Lovelock, the man who coined the term 'gaia' to describe the web of life on earth, says in his latest book that 90 percent of humanity will be gone by the end of this century and Clive Hamilton, an eco-philosopher in Australia, has written a book called *Requiem for a Species*, and we are the species the requiem is for. Many of my colleagues are saying that it is too late, that we have passed too many tipping points to go back. To that I say, "Thank you for your report and your sense of urgency, but now please shut up and go away." There is no point saying it is too late. We are going to fight to the end anyway. But it is very, very urgent.

We first have to face the magnitude of the challenge that scientists are now documenting. You see, I do not think we have come to grips with the fact that we have suddenly become a 'force.' Human beings evolved about 150,000 years ago on the plains of Africa. For almost all of human existence, there were never a billion people. We reached a billion people early in the 1800s. I was born in 1936, when there were just over 2 billion people. The population of the planet has more than tripled in a single human life, in my lifetime. If you were to plot that on a graph in covering 150,000 years, the curve leaps straight off the page in the last pencil width of time. We are now the most numerous mammal on the planet, and every one of us needs air, water, food, shelter, and clothing, so just the act of living, because there are 7 billion of us, means we have a very heavy ecological footprint. It takes a lot of air, water, and land to support us, to keep us alive. But of course, we are not like rats or rabbits or mice; we have an enormous amount of technology used on our behalf. Just to come to Cleveland, think of the computers and phone calls and cars and planes, just to get my bottom from Vancouver to Cleveland. That's all technology used on our behalf. Look at your clothing, your food and where you live, your computers and cars, and you realize, technology is amplifying our ecological footprint. That technology that takes us to the depths of the ocean, to the tops of mountains, and into the center of the earth, we can now exploit for our purposes.

Ever since World War II, we have been afflicted with an incredible appetite for stuff. We love to shop. After that terrible tragedy of 9/11, George Bush's first speech to the American people included, "I want you to go out and shop." That wasn't a joke. The American economy is absolutely dependent on consumption, and all of the stuff that we buy and use, most of it is absolutely not necessary for our lives or livelihood. All of that comes out of the earth and when we are finished with it, we throw it back into the earth as waste and our ecological footprint goes much higher. And we now have a global economy that exploits the entire planet as a source of raw materials, as a place to dump our toxic waste. And that global economy hides the ecological and social impact of its activity. When you go to a store to buy a cotton T-shirt, I am absolutely sure very few of you ever ask, "Is this organic?" Cotton is one of the most chemically intensive crops that we grow and if you go to the Soviet Union, or what used to be the Soviet Union, around the Aral Sea, the largest cotton growing area on the planet, it has been devastated by large scale growing of cotton—the use of chemicals and the draining of the rivers to irrigate the crops. But we don't see that; we just want a T-shirt, and we pay our money, buy it, and put it on. Yet the very act of buying that shirt has repercussions that extend around the world. When you buy a car, how many of us ever say, "Gee, there are a lot of metals in this car?" Mining is one of our most destructive activities. "Where are all the metals that are in my car mined? And what was the impact of mining on the communities of that area on the local ecosystems?" We do not care about that; we just want a car that operates efficiently, we pay our money and out we go. The global economy now hides the ecological and social costs of the way that we live. When you add up these things—population, technology, consumption, and a global economy—we have become a new kind of force on the planet. We are altering the physical, chemical, and biological properties of the planet on a geological scale. There has never been a species able to do what we are now doing on the planet, and it has happened very suddenly. The Nobel prizewinner Paul Crutzen says, "this should be called the Anthropocene era or epoch, a period in which humans have now become a geological force."

This is the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the modern environmental movement. In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, all about the unexpected effects of pesticides. And when her book came out, there wasn't a single department of the environment in any government on the planet. Rachel Carson galvanized a movement that exploded in the coming

years. In only ten years, by 1972, there was a global conference on the environment in Stockholm and the United Nations Environment Program was established. Now at every level of government, from the federal to the state to the municipal, there are committees and departments of the environment. Think of the laws that we have to protect water, to prevent pollution of the air, to protect endangered species, and forests. Millions of hectares of land have been now protected in reserves and parks. All were achieved through this massive movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, I was involved in a number of battles. We stopped a mega-dam to be built at Site C on the Peace River in Northern British Columbia. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska is where the Porcupine Caribou herd has their calves. Because the Alaskans want to “drill, baby, drill,” periodically there are riders attached to bills to allow Alaskans to drill there, and we have mounted great campaigns and kept it from going into that area.

We fought and stopped a proposal in Canada to drill for oil in Hecate Strait up near the Alaskan panhandle. Brazil had a plan to build a series of mega-dams on the tributaries of the Amazon River and we got the World Bank to pull its loan and stop the dams.

These are great victories that we celebrated, but here we are thirty, thirty-five years later and every one of those issues is back on the agenda. We failed as environmentalists because we thought the victories meant that we were on a different path, but we didn't educate people about why we were opposing dams and drilling in critical areas. There was a bigger picture to be seen and a different relationship that we needed with the planet, but we did not achieve that, we did not shift the paradigm. We have failed in a fundamental way.

And I believe the great challenge that we face, the one that we have failed, is to change the human mind. The way we see the world is shaped by our values and beliefs. I realized how important that was many years ago when I did a film in a small village in Peru. The children in the village are taught from a very young age that in the mountain where their village is, is an apu. Apu in their language means god, and they believe that as long as that apu casts a shadow on their village, it will determine the destiny of everyone in that village. That is very different from the way our kids in British Columbia grow up in the Rocky Mountains and are taught there is a lot of gold and silver in there.

The way we see the world shapes the way we treat that world. Is a river the circulatory system of the land or simply an opportunity for energy and

irrigation? Is a forest a sacred grove or just timber and pulp? Is soil a community of organisms or just dirt? Is another species our biological kin or simply a resource or opportunity? We have to see the world through different eyes.

The current paradigm through which we see the world is illustrated with what is often cited as the triple bottom line. Generally the triple bottom line is indicated by three circles of equal size. There is the economy, the environment, and society, and those three circles overlap. Where all three share an overlap, that is the sweet spot. If you focus in that part, then you get triple bottom line benefit to the economy, society, and the environment.

What kind of a vision is that? Are we suggesting that the economy is as big as society? Is society—us—as big as the environment? I believe that is the picture that is leading us down a very destructive path because the reality is there is one big circle, and that is the biosphere. That is the zone of air, water, and land where all 30 million species live. And within that biosphere are 30 million smaller circles of varying size representing the 30 million species that live within the big circle. But today one of those circles now occupies 40 percent of that area within that circle, and *that* is us. Scientists say that we are now using 40 percent or more of the net primary productivity of the planet, that is the sunlight captured by plants through photosynthesis that all life depends on in order to survive and flourish. Humans now have co-opted 40 percent of that net primary productivity of photosynthetic activity and that drives huge numbers of species to extinction. So, within the biosphere our circle is too big. Within the circle that is us, there should be a much smaller circle, which is the economy. That is the reality of the world that we live in.

We have to move from our current sense that the planet is there for us to use in any manner that we can, where everything we see is a commodity or resource, to visualizing ourselves as one species among a community of organisms dependent on the generosity of nature within that biosphere. The biosphere is our home and makes our lives and well-being possible.

In the real world, our lives and society are shaped by laws of nature. In physics, we know that you cannot build a rocket that will travel faster than the speed of light. There is a law of gravity, so we cannot build an antigravity machine. Entropy means that order inevitably becomes disorder or goes toward randomness. Those are realities that we live with; that is what is dictated by physics.

In chemistry, we know that there are principles and laws that regulate the kinds and rates of reactions that we can carry out and the kinds of molecules that are possible, limited by the atomic properties of the re-agents that we

want to react. Chemistry tells us what we can or cannot do. And biology dictates and constrains our basic needs and reality. We are animals.

I gave one of the keynote speeches at the first Green Building conference in Austin, Texas, many years ago. There were a number of children in the audience, so I said, "Now kids, if there is one thing you remember from my message, please remember that we are animals." Man did their parents get mad at me! "How dare you call my Mary an animal! We are not animals, we are human beings!"

We think somehow that we are different from the rest of creation, that we have transcended being simply animals. But we are biologic creatures; we are mammals. We know that the most fundamental thing in our lives is air. The minute every one of us left our mother's body, we needed a breath of air. That first breath was to inflate our lungs and announce our arrival, and from that point on, fifteen to forty times a minute, we need air to the last breath we take before we die. We do not even think about it.

Try thinking about it for a minute. It's so easy, right? Two to three liters of air right down into the warm, moist organs that we call our lungs. Our lungs are made up of about three hundred million alveoli, little capsules. We need three hundred million to give us the surface area to come into contact with the air. If you flattened out all of the alveoli in our lungs in two dimensions, they would cover a tennis court. That's how much surface is all wrinkled up in our lungs. Each alveolus is lined with a three-layered membrane we call the surfactant that reduces surface tension so when the air comes into contact, it sticks. Carbon dioxide rushes out, oxygen and whatever else is in the air rushes in. Hemoglobin molecules in red blood cells grab the oxygen and with each beat of our heart, that oxygen is pumped to every cell in our bodies. And when we breathe out we do not exhale all of the air; if we did that, our lungs would collapse. About half of the air stays in our lungs. So the point is, you can't draw a line and say "the air ends here and I begin there." There is no line. It's in us, it's stuck to us, and it's circulating throughout our bodies. We are air. And the air that comes out of my nose mixes in the room and goes straight up your nose and when I tell this to kids, I see them go "Oh, yuck." I guess they think they have a bubble of air that belongs to Johnny or Mary.

We are air; it is our most vital need and we share that air not only with each other, but with all of life on the planet. In a wonderful thought exercise, the American astronomer Harlow Shapley said, "What happens to a breath of air?" How do you follow a breath of air? 98 percent of it is oxygen and

nitrogen. Breathe in and it goes into your body. Breathe it out, and much of the oxygen never comes back out and some of the nitrogen stays in our bodies. But 1 percent of the air is an element called argon, which belongs to a class of elements called the noble gases which are so snooty, they won't react with anything else. They are inert gases. So argon is a good marker of the air. You breathe it in, it goes into your body. You breathe it out, it comes right back out. How many atoms of argon in one breath of air? Shapley calculates 3×10^{18} , that's 3 followed by 18 zeros. Take it from me, that's a lot of argon.

So if we take a breath of air that comes out of Bud's nose, very quickly through convection that one breath will mix in this room and every one of us will be breathing gazillions of argon atoms from that one original breath. But the door and windows are open, and eventually that breath will diffuse across Cleveland, across the United States, around the world and, according to Shapley, one year later, every breath you take, wherever you are, because air is a single system, every breath you take will have about fifteen argon atoms from that one original breath that Bud took a year before.

So on that basis, every breath you take has argon atoms that were once in the bodies of Joan of Arc and Jesus Christ, every breath you take has argon atoms that were in the bodies of dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago, and every breath you take will suffuse life forms with argon as far as we can see into the future. So air is not only a vital element, our most fundamental need, air should be sacred. It connects us to the past, the present, and on into the future. It is a connector for all life, yet we dump our most toxic substances into that air.

We are water. We are over 70 percent water by weight. We're basically a big blob of water with enough organic thickener added so we don't dribble away on the floor. We're losing water through our skin and our eyes and our crotch, we're losing water all the time. We drink water and that water comes from all over the world, and we think we're intelligent, but what do we do? We use water as a garbage can as we do with air.

As biological creatures, our most fundamental needs are dictated by our animal nature. We need air, we need water, we need food that comes from the soil, we need energy that comes from the sun. And we need biodiversity on the planet to deliver those sacred elements to us. Those are dictated by laws of biology. We cannot change those laws of nature. We live within it.

Other things are human creations. We draw borders around our property and I understand in Texas if someone comes onto your property, you can shoot and kill them; it's legal. Well, we take those boundaries very seriously.

We draw them around our cities, our states, our countries. And we will go to war and kill and die to protect those boundaries. But nature couldn't give two hoots about human borders. We have salmon that are born in Canada, in British Columbia, go out the rivers through the Alaskan Panhandle into the Pacific Ocean. They travel all the way over to Japan. Whose salmon are they? But we think, "Oh, when they're in our waters, they belong to us." Salmon don't care whether they're in Japanese, American, or Canadian waters. In the same way birds migrate from South American all the way to the Arctic, Monarch butterflies from Canada fly down to Mexico; fish, birds, they don't care. Even trees or plants don't care. Air, water doesn't belong to us. Dust travels from Africa on the high wind currents and drops on the United States. They don't stop at the border and say, "Oh, gee, I forgot my Visa." They come in because nature couldn't care less about human boundaries.

And then we create things like capitalism, economics, corporations, currency, markets—we created them. They are not forces of nature, we created them. Yet you talk to a neoconservative, Milton Friedman's disciples, and they seem normal until you say the word "market." And the minute they hear "market," it's "The Market, hallelujah; yes, praise the market; free the market, let the market do its thing." What kind of insanity is that? We created the damn thing. We can't change the laws of nature, but we sure can change what we created. You see, the only thing we can manage on the planet is us. We can't manage nature. We can't manage the air, the water. We can manage us and how we interact with it, and we can certainly change economic systems, currency, markets, any of those things, and we have to.

The economic system is a major problem. I've been watching the Republican National Convention and now the Democratic, and I don't know what planet these people are on. When protecting the air or the oceans, as I saw in the Republican Convention, becomes a one line joke, what kind of planet are these people living on? We're not facing up to the major challenge scientists have been warning us about for years. The biosphere is our home and it's finite.

Carl Sagan told us that if we were to reduce the biosphere, the zone of air, water, and land where all life exists, to the size of a basketball, the biosphere would be thinner than a layer of Saran wrap, and that's it. That's the home of us and thirty million other species and nothing can grow within the biosphere indefinitely, even though economists think that we can.

But in our focus on the economy, and the need to grow so the GDP has to be kept going up, we fail to ask the important questions. What is

an economy for? Why has growth suddenly become the end? Growth is a means to something else. What is that something else? Growth shouldn't be enshrined as the good that we aim for; it's just a means to something else. Are there no limits? Are we happier with all the stuff? How much is enough? What are we leaving for our children as a result of our profligate growth?

We need to see the world in a very different way. Well, is that just some kind of hippy dippy dream, or is it possible? I believe that a paradigm shift is definitely possible and that we're seeing bits and pieces of serious shifts. I'm sure most of you have heard of the Kingdom of Bhutan in the Himalayan mountains on the border of India. The King of Bhutan said, "Hey, we're in the twenty-first century, we shouldn't have kings anymore; (or words to that effect) you need democracy and elections. I'm resigning as king. Now you go ahead and elect a prime minister." And they did. But the king said before he resigned, you know, the aim of government, the reason we have leaders like me or government, is not all about economic growth, it's about wellness and happiness. We should make wellness and happiness the goal, the very end to which we are operating, and on April 2, 2012, at the United Nations, he presented the vision of using wellness and happiness as the driving force of the way we govern people. Sixty-eight countries immediately cosigned. But what is happiness, how can we measure it? Bhutan has now established a working group charged with developing those measures and those indicators within the next two years, and I think that's a fundamental shift in the way we see the world.

I just came back from a month filming in Ecuador and Bolivia. Bolivia elected Evo Morales the world's first indigenous person as president, and he certainly talked a great deal about Pacha Mama, which is Mother Earth. We have to pay attention to Mother Earth. Ecuador is led by President Correa, who is an economist, trained in America. President Correa has revised the constitution of Ecuador to enshrine Pacha Mama in the constitution. That means Pacha Mama now has constitutional rights; trees, birds, fish, all have a right to exist and flourish.

Recently, a legal case was brought in southern Ecuador on behalf of the Vilcabamba River, under the constitutional rights of Pacha Mama, and the litigants won. While they cannot claim money, the river must be restored to the condition it was before it was impacted by a road builder.

Cuba, we all know that Fidel Castro in Cuba has been demonized in this country, which I think was terrible. Cuba has led the world of necessity in urban agriculture. Eighty percent of the food consumed in Havana is grown

in the city of Havana, and it's a model for a new relationship with food. And there is much more to be learned from Cuba. But allow me to end with two stories.

My great teacher and mentor was my father. In 1994, he was eighty-five and he was dying, fortunately of a non-painful type of cancer. He knew that he was dying and he was not afraid; he was prepared for it. I moved in to care for him the last two months of his life, and that was one of the happiest times I spent with my father. We laughed, we talked, we cried. Every night my wife would come over with slides of trips that we took together and it was a joyous time. In all the time we were together, Dad never said, "Gee, do you remember that big house we had in London, Ontario," where we lived? "Do you remember that 1957 Buick I owned?" or, "Do you remember that closet of clothes that I had once?" That's just stuff. All we talked about were family, friends and neighbors, and things we did together. And my father said to me, "David, I die a rich man." Because his wealth was in his experiences, shared with people that mattered to him, and in that he was truly a wealthy man. We've got off on some weird tangent where we think that stuff is what gives us happiness and what gives us meaning in life. My father's death showed me that it is not that at all. It's our relationships that we have with each other and that brings us great joy and happiness.

I want to end with a story of my time in the United States. I was beginning my senior year at Amherst College in the United States in 1957. On October 4, we were stunned to learn that the Soviet Union had launched Sputnik. For those of you who are old enough to remember, the months and years that followed were really a terrifying time. Because as the American rockets were blowing up on the launch pad in full television view, the Russians launched the first animal in space, a dog, Laika; the first man, Yuri Gagarin; the first team of cosmonauts; the first woman, Valentina Tereshkova. America didn't say, "Oh my goodness, they're so far ahead of us. We can't afford to catch up to the Russians." America said, "We've got to catch up and pass them." And in 1961, John F. Kennedy said, "We're going to beat these guys to the moon." And it was a glorious time. Even a foreigner like me, all we had to do was say, "I like science." You threw money at us. Money went to universities and science departments. It was a glorious period. And look what happened. America is not only the first country but the only country to walk on the moon. And think of all of the spin-offs that nobody anticipated would come out of the space race—cell phones, GPS, twenty-four-hour news channels, and every year the Nobel prizes are announced, over fifty years later, most go

to Americans because America said, “We’ve got to win this race.” And they did everything they could and then wonderful things happened.

I believe that to take a challenge like climate change and say, “Oh, what are you talking about? It’ll destroy our economy” is not the American way. And you can be absolutely sure if you make that commitment, decide this is a high priority, that you have no choice, all kinds of unexpected things are going to happen.

This is what Goethe said: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. The moment one definitely commits, then providence comes, too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise not have occurred. Whatever you can do or dream, you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.”

That’s the challenge I leave with you. Thank you very much.