

SINCE *SILENT SPRING*:
OUR DEBT TO ALBERT SCHWEITZER
&
RACHEL CARSON

An Address

By

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REVERENCE FOR LIFE:
Ethical Solutions to Environmental Problems

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Whether or not the name of Albert Schweitzer or of Rachel Carson was invoked loud and clear from the platform of the Environmental Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro I do not know. Nevertheless, that conference, and other environmental conferences, held throughout the last quarter of a century, are a tribute to these two remarkable individuals.

At this Symposium we are trying to express, even more specifically, our appreciation to them. We are also looking to them, in a sense, for guidance in carrying out their philosophy of Reverence for Life.

We are speaking not only for ourselves, but for the chimpanzee, the mouse, the whale, the ant, the redwood tree, dogs and cats, the crystal stream, the birds and fresh air of the heavens and, of course, for many children, women and men throughout the world, who are their beneficiaries.

Neither Dr. Schweitzer nor Rachel Carson was looking for gratitude. Schweitzer would say to friends, “expect no thanks.” And Rachel Carson at a very early age, said that personal recognition was not her goal, but only to leave this world, “a better place to live.”

But whether they would like it or not, we are saying thanks anyway and suggesting ways we can continue *repaying our debt to them* as we head into the 21st century.

They not only articulated the most pressing environmental problems of our age at that time, *they offered ethical solutions for solving them.*

We must continue to look to them for ethical solutions, especially members of the generation that have reached maturity since Dr. Schweitzer and Rachel Carson left us in the 1960s. She in 1964 and he in 1965.

During a five year period – from 1957 to 1962 – they put in motion the environmental awakening. An awakening that is helping to change the world.

They issued the clarion call. But in more popular terms, they were the whistle blowers extraordinaire.

They spoke out, as you know, against the hydra-headed man-made horrors that were descending on our planet in the early years after World War II.

One holocaust had just been ended.

But we could not rest, for another could be on its way.

Ironically, the very weapons of World War II we were turning upon ourselves – knowingly or unknowingly.

I speak, of course, of nuclear radiation from unbridled open-air nuclear testing. And, I speak of the other twin: chemical contamination of our waters, soils, heavens and our own bodies through new “miracle” pesticides. Many of them originally were chemical warfare agents.

It has been 35 years since Dr. Schweitzer warned us about the dangers from open-air nuclear testing. And it has been 30 years since Rachel Carson’s warning about the dangers of pesticides reached us through her book *Silent Spring*.

And it has been 77 years since the philosophical under-girding of their concern was articulated by Dr. Schweitzer in that all-embracing phrase, REVERENCE FOR LIFE.

This will not be a discourse on the meaning of Reverence for Life. Each of us knows how far we can go in carrying it out – how far we can expand it – a very personal decision.

But Reverence for Life was the cornerstone of their warnings.

However, I do want to ask WHY we listened to the 82-year old man from Alsace and the steaming jungle of equatorial Africa?

And WHY did we listen to the 55-year old woman from Springdale, Pennsylvania and Silver Spring, Maryland?

He was not a physicist, nor a nuclear scientist.

She was not a chemist, nor a toxicologist.

Others better qualified had already spoken.

Many of you could answer that question better than I, but let me offer two reasons.

Reason number one: both had made tremendous names for themselves and had captured the popular imagination. This gave them a position of authority.

They had earned their fame. Dr. Schweitzer’s accomplishments are too many and varied to recount here. He was a physician, theologian, organist, philosopher, builder and an author who reached our heads and hearts. He was a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. And he had been hailed by leading journals as the most important man of the century.

Rachel Carson’s achievements were far fewer. True, she had won book and natural history awards, but not the coveted Pulitzer. She did not have her Ph.D. For much of her life, she had worked as editor-writer for the U.S. government’s Fish and Wildlife Service. But in 1951 with the publication of one book her fame grew overnight.

She called her book *The Sea Around Us*. In it she took us back to the beginning for us all – Oceanus. Not since Henry Thoreau, Wordsworth, Shelley, Lord Byron, Keats, William Blake, Francis Thompson had we been in such close touch with the rhythms of the universe.

It was more than the history of the sea, it was the prose poem of the century. It was translated into thirty-two languages.

And for reason number two: Albert Schweitzer and Rachel Carson put us in touch with ourselves, our inner thoughts, our inner hearts, our inner music and harmonies. For short, you could call it soul.

They gave us truth. They gave us beauty. And wasn't it John Keats who told us "that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."?

Both, as children, knew the sweetness of the countryside. She, on a small farm in Springdale. He, along the streams and hills of the Vosges. Dear to them both: clover, grazing cows, birds, pigs, chickens, rabbits, bees, butterflies and above all, companion dogs and cats. All of these provided the bond, as did the fragrance of the good earth after rain, of fresh cut hay, and the night sounds of insects.

They both shared a sense of wonder. And most importantly, they shared a revulsion against hunting, trapping and all cruelty to animals.

Both children – though they could not articulate it then – pondered the question that he phrased so well later – "I am the life which wills-to-live in the midst of life which wills-to-live."

And they wondered why this should be so.

They spent most of their lives seeking the answer. It is the question many of us ponder.

It is a question we can and must answer – even if in different ways.

For all these reasons we listened to Albert Schweitzer and Rachel Carson. They had awakened in us a sense of wonder and appreciation of all that lives. So when they spoke up, we knew it was no false alarm.

Instead of asking first WHY the public listened, perhaps I should ask WHY these two separated, unacquainted individuals decided to take on the superpower structure of militarism and unregulated capitalism. What could have been more formidable? More dangerous?

The answer for both decisions is both simple and similar. Others had tried to tackle the question of open-air nuclear testing – even Albert Einstein. Some were crucified for their efforts. Or in the case of pesticides, they were simply ignored.

Albert Schweitzer and Rachel Carson – only a few years apart in making their fateful decisions – looked into their own consciences. And they were not afraid.

CONSCIENCE. That is the key word.

On April 24, 1957 Dr. Schweitzer's appeal to the world was sent out by radio from Oslo, where three years earlier he had delivered his Nobel Peace Prize address.

He called it a DECLARATION OF CONSCIENCE.

He had studied the evidence. Like a country doctor, which indeed he was, he took us by the hand and explained radioactivity to us, starting with Mme. Marie Curie.

He explained how strontium 90 descending through rain and snow, "poisoned our waters and soil and entered the food chain –from the grass eaten by cows and into the milk and then into human tissue and bones."

The open-air testing by the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, he said, must stop!

"We must muster the insight, the seriousness and the courage," he said, "to leave folly and face reality."

After the spur from Schweitzer, the anti-testing crusade continued until a Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty banning open-air nuclear testing was signed by John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev in October of 1963.

By that time, another campaign was underway – the one started by Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring* the year before.

Do not think for a moment that Dr. Schweitzer had been unaware of these "elixirs of death" – (that's how Rachel Carson termed them) – but he could only fight *effectively* on one global front at a time.

Reports of the chain reaction, the devastating effects of DDT had reached his ears. Though threatened by insects at Lambaréné, Schweitzer ruled out DDT. He put up signs aimed at DDT, saying:

"Do not use insecticides for killing the poor creatures. Invite them to take a walk in nature. Insecticides are dangerous for your health."

In 1956, he wrote a French beekeeper whose bees had been wiped out by aerial spraying:

“I am aware of some of the tragic repercussions of the chemical flight against insects taking place in France and elsewhere and I deplore them. Modern man no longer knows how to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth from which he and other living creatures draw their food. Poor bees, poor birds, poor men.”

Rachel Carson herself was to receive a letter in January, 1958 – though not from Dr. Schweitzer – but from a friend whose song birds had died from aerial spraying. The friend believed such spraying, where not needed or wanted, was “inhuman, undemocratic and probably unconstitutional.”

Rachel had long worried about DDT and in 1945 she tried unsuccessfully to interest *Reader's Digest* in this threat.

Fresh in her mind was Dr. Schweitzer's Declaration of Conscience. (As a parenthesis, I might point out Rachel became more aware of Dr. Schweitzer and his philosophy – as we all did – when he came to the United States in 1949.) She knew that pesticides were just as dangerous as radiation. She asked others to take up the fight, as had Schweitzer against nuclear testing. She met with no success. She knew she must write a book. The ball was in her court.

She BEGAN.

She began with the warning that “chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world, the very nature of life.”

PARTNERS. Note the word.

Little did she know that, in a sense, she and Schweitzer were now partners forever in history – and I hope in HEAVEN!

She proceeded to put in her own language Schweitzer's admonitions about strontium 90 – the deadly element of radiation.

She compared pesticides with this element:

“Similarly chemicals sprayed on cropland or forests or gardens lie long in the soil, entering into living organisms, passing from one to another in a chain of poisoning and death.”

That was her case. She set out to prove it in the following pages. But not before reaching out to Albert Schweitzer for strength: perhaps reassurance.

“Albert Schweitzer has said,” she continued, “Man could hardly even recognize the devils of his own creation.”

Proving it was not easy, because impeccable scientific evidence was scattered. Scientists who should have spoken up, clammed up. She found Dr. William Hueper of the National Cancer Institute who had pronounced DDT as a chemical carcinogen. She found other allies, such as Dr. Douglas Pimental at Cornell, Dr. Malcolm Hargraves of the Mayo Clinic. *Document! Document! Document!* And that she did. Take a look at the last 54 pages of *Silent Spring's* documentation.

She explored the field of biological controls of insects, instead of chemicals, and also better farming methods that would reduce the number of crop-destroying insects. She chased down anecdotal evidence about people being killed, injured from contact with pesticides and herbicides.

That's how I met her. She called me about my knowledge of a woman made ill by falling into a lawn treated by herbicides. This was the beginning of a fine and meaningful relationship. I started as a seemingly dispassionate newspaper correspondent, but ended a true ally.

During the years of research and writing, troubles beset her. Her mother, her helping hand, now nearing 90, died. She had a nephew to raise, due to loss of his parents. And now she was ill from cancer.

In her mother, she had seen Albert Schweitzer. And in him, she had seen her mother.

“More than anyone else I know,” Rachel wrote of her mother, “she embodied Albert Schweitzer's ‘reverence for life.’”

Rachel toiled on with enormous courage.

One of her last acts before going to press was to dedicate *Silent Spring* to Dr. Schweitzer. She discussed the dedication with no one. Open the book and there you will read:

“To Albert Schweitzer
who said

‘Man has lost the capacity to foresee
and to forestall. He will end by
destroying the earth.’”

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Somewhat shortened – don't forget she was an editor!
– this was the Schweitzer letter to the beekeeper.

But no one knew where the quotation had come from. I am grateful to the late Ali Silver, devoted nurse of the Schweitzer Hospital at Lambaréné and his archivist at his home in Gunsbach, France for asking me in 1986 to try and track down the source. At last, it was found amongst her papers on a page from the 1956 bulletin of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, based in Brussels. There it was! Someone had sent it to her, marking the Schweitzer letter.

The dedication was her repayment to Dr. Schweitzer for the power and strength of his philosophy that had bolstered her convictions and sustained her through sad times.

I am particularly glad we found the source. Only recently, a scientist proclaimed that her Schweitzer quotation had been filched from one of Schweitzer's warnings against radioactivity. You can imagine my delight informing her otherwise!

Silent Spring was published first in *The New Yorker*, then on September 27, 1962 in hardback by Houghton Mifflin.

All HELL broke loose!

She expected it, and had told me several times she would need to find a desert island to escape to. But instead of escaping, she met head on the vicious criticism of the book, and of her personally.

I invited Rachel to answer her critics at the Women's National Press Club on December 5, 1962 – a good forum. Her counterattack was spirited, even though she was weakened from the spreading malignancy. After deriding some of the most hysterical accusations from industry's scientists, Rachel released a flaming arrow into the very heart of the organizations that were pillorying her.

Calmly – she always spoke very calmly (I never knew her to raise her voice) – she asked:

“When a scientific organization speaks, whose voice do we hear – that of science? or of the sustaining industry?”

Rachel knew the book had scored. Justice William O. Douglas called it “the most important chronicle for this century for the human race.” President Kennedy was listening. Congress was listening. The world was LISTENING.

The battle to ban DDT was getting underway and serious thought was being given to an environmental protection law and agency. Indeed, much was going on. We could say the “joint was jumping” – that is, until 1980, when the music seemed to stop.

In case no one gets to it during the Symposium, let me tell you the battle over pesticides is far from over. Some of the worst – like DDT, dieldrin, endrin – have been

controlled in this country, but are being shipped to innocents abroad. Millions of tons of other pesticides are being turned out that have not been properly tested. If you want to know more about them, I suggest you obtain a copy of *Basic Guide to Pesticides*, available this fall through the Rachel Carson Council, 8940 Jones Bridge Road, Chevy Chase, Maryland 20815 or your favorite bookstore!

Rachel Carson knew she couldn't live to see or participate in the unfolding drama. (Don't forget she could still be active. She would only be 85!)

But she also knew that she must enter – even if rather quietly – another arena: the arena of animal protection at the Federal level. She – like Schweitzer – felt she owed a debt to animals that are abused and exploited.

She expressed herself this way:

“Until we have the courage to recognize cruelty for what it is – whether its victim is human or animal – we cannot expect things to be much better in this world.”

Helping me – and others – to stop the horrible, lifetime, basement caging of hundreds of Food and Drug Administration laboratory beagle hounds in 1959 was her first step. Then in 1962 she sent a message to Congress urging proper care and treatment of laboratory animals and avoidance of cruel experiments.

We can thank Christine Stevens of the Animal Welfare Institute and the Society for Animal Protective Legislation for giving Rachel Carson the facts. Also we can thank Mrs. Stevens for helping to obtain Dr. Schweitzer's endorsement of such legislation.

Rachel Carson also gave her support to campaigns to stop cruel trapping and poisoning of wildlife. She wrote a preface to *Animal Machines*, a book by England's Ruth Harrison, exposing the horrors of factory farming. She wrote one also for *Humane Biology Projects*, teaching young people how to learn about life in ways other than pithing frogs and starving rats.

In short, Rachel Carson wanted a better environment for animals – domestic or wild. This was – and continues to be – a *true* environmental issue on which she and Dr. Schweitzer left their mark.

For those efforts, and for *Silent Spring*, she was awarded the 1962 Albert Schweitzer Medal by the Animal Welfare Institute.

In her acceptance speech, she advised us to look to Dr. Schweitzer for guidance:

“If we are to find our way through some of the problems that beset us, it will surely be in large part through a wider understanding and application of his principles.”

In case anyone had forgotten, she recalled, in his own words, one of his basic principles:

“We are not truly civilized if we concern ourselves only with the relation of man to man. What is important is the relation of man to all life.”

On the medal she held in her hand was engraved the heart of that principle – indeed, words to live by.

“We need a boundless ethics that includes the animals, also.”

Now I conclude by returning to the central question of this Symposium:

What are the ethical solutions to environmental problems and how do we repay our debt to Schweitzer and Rachel Carson?

First, I suggest that we continue to look at how they repaid their debt to nature.

Whenever Dr. Schweitzer killed or injured an animal or a plant, inadvertently or deliberately or out of necessity, he tried to help another plant or animal.

He called it “atonement.”

There were two ways of approaching this. Kill the malaria-bearing mosquito of necessity, but make up for these deaths by not killing, willy-nilly, everything else that buzzes and flies.

But Dr. Schweitzer had another reason, that of saving the ant, for example, merely for its own sake – just to show respect to another being’s will-to-live.

Likewise, Rachel avoided injuring animals. For example, she always returned living specimens to the tidal pools from whence they had come. And I think she believed in reverence for life for insects as well, and deplored their abnormal proliferation due to skewed technology and chemicals that only caused more deaths.

Some creatures that are spared often say “thank you” almost immediately. Look to the bee. The bee pollinates our fruit trees and our flowers. What a wonderful response not only to our mercy but mainly of our acknowledgement of its right to live.

Also we get our “thank you’s” every time we save a marsh and wetlands, because they are the nursery and baby sitters for countless life forms: waterfowl, fish and myriads of plants.

(It seems most appropriate that the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge on the coast of Maine is nearly ninety percent wetlands. I regret to report this, but it, too, is threatened.)

When we save the rain forest, we are thanked by the contributions of plants and trees with life-saving medicinals, and, of course, by cleaner, less dangerous atmosphere. It is home to skilled tribal peoples, primates of many marvelous kinds, wondrous birds and reptiles. For God's sake, let them live for their own sake! They will thank us by just being there!

It is hard to look to the pine tree, the running stream and the clear heavens and to have the imagination to hear them saying "thanks." But if they are healthy and free of the befouling sludge of our civilization, that should be thanks enough. This thought must sustain us as we recycle paper products and cut down on gas guzzling. Just listen to the "wind in the willows" and the murmuring of sparkling brooks.

As we enter the 21st century, we may receive unexpected repayments by taking today what some of you may consider heretical steps. *Or should we say revolutionary? like overturning old customs – such as animal slavery?*

I refer to saving the frightened cattle, pigs, chickens and lambs from the butcher's knife and *not* eating them. And we find their thanks through a new abundance of human food from croplands that had been previously devoted to producing animal food. We will find our streams saying thanks for they will be free of the blood, manure, pesticides, entering their flow from slaughter and processing houses. Also our own bodies will say thanks. I think Dr. Schweitzer knew this.

His motivation for giving up meat was concern *first* for the animals.

Likewise, if we want to throw a lifeline to miserable animals incarcerated in a harsh, unnatural environment, let us place our weight behind greater development and adoption of viable substitutes and epidemiological studies. We will be repaid with better health and clearer consciences, as well as saving a great deal of money.

Also we will be able to feel better about ourselves if we meet head on the domestic animal tragedy that surrounds us daily: the over-population of dogs and cats. Millions are killed in our shelters, because *there is no room, save in the heart*. Chemical sterilants and surgery are both available and must be used. Greedy breeders, careless owners must be brought in line. The subject deserves to be treated with more dignity and deserves as much publicity as given to trash recycling.

What about human babies – the ones that die of starvation and problems attendant to it – even before given a chance at stunted adulthood?

Dr. Schweitzer's and Rachel Carson's proven concern for suffering human beings gives the lie to charges that those who would save animals care little for people – a

charge often leveled by those who refuse to acknowledge that we are all made of the same cloth.

Dr. Schweitzer and Rachel Carson made it abundantly clear that choices are difficult – that life is a tragedy in so many ways – especially in battles (not just of “tooth and claw”) for TRUE survival. But I do *not* believe that either Schweitzer or Carson would prefer the cruel “euthanasia” of starvation and disease caused by malnutrition and neglect, rather than birth control.

I have referred to only a few of the links of the chain – the extended circle – of life that Dr. Schweitzer and Rachel Carson wanted so badly to keep unbroken. But basic to my thoughts – and certainly, to theirs – is this:

Please let us not forget our relationship with all that lives. Remember the meaning of ecology: *we live in the house of life and all the rooms connect.*

Not long before she died, Rachel Carson reminded us that the English poet, Francis Thompson, had summed up universal kinship with these lines:

*“Thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling a star.”*

And Dr. Schweitzer gave us many parables, but none more unforgettable than the one about removing the worm from the hot pavement to the life-giving soil or grass, rather than letting it shrivel and die.

He worried about the worm’s environment. He didn’t worry about thanks.

A saved worm repays by aerating the soil. Grass GROWS and maybe nice, red tomatoes!

What better illustration of the thought that if an animal’s environment is better, so, too, is ours.

If this extension of the helping hand can become second nature, we will GROW into the ethical solutions to environmental problems.

We will GROW into the ideals that Albert Schweitzer and Rachel Carson placed before us.

Then, we will have repaid our debt to them – the only way we can say THANK YOU.

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(Ann Cottrell Free was a recipient of the Albert Schweitzer Medal from the Animal Welfare Institute and the Rachel Carson Legacy Award from the Rachel Carson Council. She initiated the naming of the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge. She was author-editor of *Animals, Nature and Albert Schweitzer* and author of other animal-related books. She was a former Washington and foreign correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* and other publications and served as special correspondent for the United Nations in China and the Marshall Plan in Europe. She died in 2004. More information about her life and work can be found at www.AnnCottrellFree.org.)