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Earth Day aims to preserve, conserve, renew

By Skid Crease

The year was 1969. I was in my second year of teaching in Canada when an American environmentalist named John McConnell proposed a global holiday to celebrate peace, justice and the integrity of creation. It was named, simply, Earth Day.

In October 1969, at the National UNESCO Conference in San Francisco, McConnell announced his intention to organize a worldwide awareness campaign to honour the diversity of life on Earth.

The organizers selected March 21, the vernal equinox, the return of the light and a renewal of life in our little corner of the Northern Hemisphere. That day, in the city of San Francisco, McConnell made the first Earth Day Proclamation about the need to preserve, conserve, and renew the threatened ecosystems upon which all life on Earth depends.

Those were heady days for the emerging environmental movement in North America. Acid rain, oil spills, topsoil erosion, groundwater depletion, contamination of the oceans, and air pollution dominated the headlines. The passion for change was thick in the air as we demanded social justice, nuclear disarmament, and environmental literacy. They truly were the days of peace, love, and groovy. I missed Woodstock, but my Grade 5 class added their voices to that first Earth Day Proclamation, still celebrated today on March 21 by the United Nations.

At the same time that McConnell was organizing, a young American law student named Denis Hayes was conscripted by Senator Gaylord Nelson to organize the first Earth Day marches in the United States on April 22 to coordinate with Arbor Day.

?The objective was to get a nationwide demonstration of concern for the environment so large that it would shake the political establishment out of its lethargy,? Senator Nelson said, ?and, finally, force this issue permanently onto the national political agenda.? It succeeded beyond his expectations, Millions joined in celebratory marches across the U.S.A. and Canada, my class included, to demand an end to unsustainable exponential economic growth.

It was the beginning of massive arbor day tree plantings, garbage-less lunch campaigns, recycling programs, and resource conservation projects from classrooms to business offices.

In June 1970 McConnell created the Earth Day Proclamation for worldwide use and awareness. The Earth Day Proclamation declared the principles and responsibilities the signers undertook to care for the Earth. It was signed by 36 world leaders, including UN Secretary General U Thant, Margaret Mead, John Gardner and others. The last signature by Mikhail Gorbachev was added in 2000.

Earth Day indeed had increased environmental awareness in America, and in Dec, 2, 1970 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established by special executive order to regulate and enforce national pollution legislation. On April 22, 1990, the 20th anniversary of Arbor Earth Day, more than 200 million people in 141 countries participated in celebrations.

Few remember though, that it was the partnership of John F. Kennedy and Rachel Carson that tilled the soil that would become our Earth Days. When Kennedy championed Silent Spring and defended Carson against the rage of the chemical industry, it began to stir an awareness across North America that it was time to get informed, stand up and speak out for the defense of our Home Planet. In 1963, Congress passed the Clean Air Act to deal with cross-border pollution from the Ohio valley into the Great Lakes and Canada. The war on acid rain had begun in earnest, and Big Coal was not happy.

On, Nov. 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Barely six months later, on April 14, 1964, Rachel Carson died of cancer. The seeds of our modern environmental awareness had been planted and they germinated in 1970 with our two Earth Day celebrations. Perhaps these two days are as much a tribute to Kennedy and Carson as to Earth. They serve as a constant reminder that greater love hath no one than this.

These Earth Days should remind us of the sacrifices made by women and men around the world, like the legendary Gaura Devi of India's Chipko (tree-hugging) movement, or Wangari Maathai of Kenya sowing seeds of hope across Africa, or Lois Gibbs of Niagara Falls, New York, who exposed the toxic wastes of the Love Canal, or Jacques Cousteau and Sam Labudde and Rob Stewart who fought for the sanctity of our ocean ecosystems, or Jeton Anjain of the Marshall Islands, sick to death with cancer, fighting to expose the dangers of nuclear waste and nuclear war.

This is what our Earth Days are about. It's a lot more than planting one little sapling that may not make it through the summer, but looks good in a political photo-op with smiling children. It's about speaking truth to power. It's about campaigning for the security of the EPA, The same EPA that brought us the Clean Air Act and is now threatened with castration by Donald Trump and Scott Pruit. It's about making certain that Kevin O'Leary never becomes a candidate for political leadership in Canada. It's about standing up to hate speech and hateful actions that bring fear and division into our lives and thoughts. It's about supporting the building of sustainable communities, of learning how to live elegantly with less, of realizing at last that, as E.F. Schumacher tried to teach us

years ago, that ?Small is Beautiful? in home and national budgets.
Earth Days are a celebration of participatory democracy, honouring the responsibility of a people to protect their families, their communities, their environment. A wise mentor once told me, ?You know, we have no rights without responsibilities first. I do not have the right to clean water unless I make sure I'm not putting any pollutants into the global chain. I don't have the right to breathe clean air if I leave my SUV idling to keep my winter heat up, or my summer air conditioning on.?
Game on. Happy Earth Days!

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