

Loading the die

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Dr. David Suzuki-geneticist, philosopher, T.V. personality...to some the equivalent of a modern shaman or guru.

According to Suzuki, man once found order and stability in his myths and customs. Today "the only stable and dependable fact, is change". This unceasing change has had two particularly important effects.

First, it has led to a search for identity and stability, both of which can be provided by a sense of belonging to a particular culture, with its own history and established traditions. He says that a variety of distinct, independent cultures and races contribute to the health of a society. A diverse society is flexible; it can adapt to changes because it can "use the best of its solutions developed by its many separate cultures in response to new problems.

Second, "the old myths have come crashing down, "and the western world has switched its faith from mysterious, all knowing gods, to mysterious, all knowing scientists. In Suzuki's words, scientists will give us all of the answers - at least they promise to, if we give them more money."

This new mythology has led to an inordinate belief in science to the point where science is regarded as being almost omnipotent, and, the opinion of a person who happens to be a scientist is treated as an unquestioned truth. The remedy, states Suzuki, is to take scientists out of their isolation and make their real strengths and weaknesses known.

Genetics is one field where blind acceptance of scientific opinion can be particularly dangerous. For example, turn of the century eugenicists wanted to create a race of Nietzschean supermen by making the "superior" (read rich or educated) have more children, or by stopping the "inferior" (read poor, non-white, or diseased) from having any children at all.

Different definitions of superior and inferior would not have improved matters much. Any definition at all would have led to a desire for some standard "superior" product. Uniformity, however, is dangerous in any biological system.

Today's geneticists are not much better.

-A professor at the University of Ottawa said that people with university degrees should try to have as many children as possible, in order to raise the average intelligence of the population (although Suzuki notes "anyone who has ever been to university knows that there is no connection between a degree and intelligence").

-One researcher recently concluded that social status is determined genetically-that the rich are rich because they are genetically superior to the poor.

-A member of the Canadian Medical Association stated that all welfare recipi-



ents should be sterilized.

-A UBC professor concluded, on the basis of FBI statistics, that blacks have an innate tendency to commit murder.

The above may be exceptional cases, but the fact that they exist at all is rather frightening. "The point of all this," says Suzuki, "is that scientists should not be expected to have any special insight or wisdom."

But, while modern scientists have no more wisdom than their predecessors, they do have a great deal more information, which gives them "fantastic powers of control and manipulation".

Thus, three facts - the scientists great power, and his eagerness to use it, the fallibility of scientific judgement, and the willingness of the public to accept scientific judgement on faith - have combined to pose dangerous problems.

For instance, with today's medical techniques, it is possible to inspect a fetus before birth. It is becoming more frequent to have the fetus aborted if it is found to be "defective" or "inferior" in any way.

"It worries me when I hear it said that everyone has the right to a normal healthy child...The converse of the statement is that an unhealthy, abnormal child has no right to live," says Suzuki.

"Where do we draw the line on acceptable and unacceptable characteristics? And who decides? Who defines normality?"

If a mongoloid can be aborted, why not an albino? Suppose that the child is going to have a hair lip, or bad eyes? How about a big nose or hair the wrong color?

"I am amazed that we accept as a right, the choice of accepting or rejecting a baby on the basis of pre-natal inspection."

In the 1970's we have an understanding of molecular biology that was undreamt of ten years ago. A decade hence we will have open to us, options of genetic manipulation which have yet to be conceived of at the present time.

The problem with genetic selection, is that eventually mankind could be squeezed into one mold, destroying diversity and adaptability. Suzuki is very strongly against any government legislation requiring mandatory, genetic counselling or any other step that would contribute to government-controlled genetic uniformity.

Suzuki points out that the problem has wider ramifications saying, "Triage is at the nub of many of the problems."

The term refers to a sorting method used in the First World War in which seriously injured soldiers were left to die and those with minor injuries were left to help themselves, thereby concentrating aid on those who had a good chance of survival.

"Will we soon be talking about cutting off aid to the Third World? What about when our energy runs out - and it will - will we draw the lines of Triage against the mentally ill; the elderly?"

Problems such as these, along with many other similarly complicated ones, are way over the heads of a society which has yet to resolve the basic morality of abortion and the question of what to do with nuclear power.

Suzuki also questions the right of the military and industry, "two major users of scientific research not known for their concern of the general public", to hide their work behind a top secret stamp, asking: "do we want major corporations to decide which scientific research to use?"

Suzuki claims that the crisis in science is now and: "we no longer have time for reflection."

"We now accept change as the one unchangeable thing in our lives."

This coupled with a history of racism in genetics and a government which supported the War Measures Act, the Oriental Exclusion Act and now imposes 'Wage controls', poses "great danger" to further development in the field.

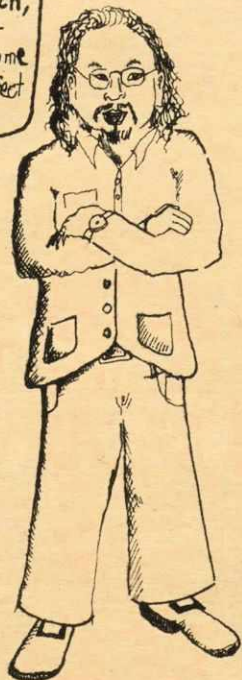
Suzuki himself spent four years in British Columbia concentration camps "for having committed the crime of having genes from Japan three generations ago."

Suzuki's message is short. "Scientists, inebriated with success" have tremendous powers, and, with all the best intentions, are "eager to play God". Unfortunately, their wisdom does not match their capability.

Geneticist David Suzuki and peers in 1976 claim:

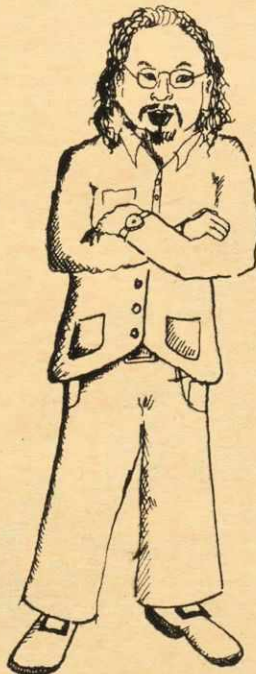
1976:

Within ten years we will have the ability to produce any human being from scratch, in a laboratory situation. We will some day create the perfect human being...



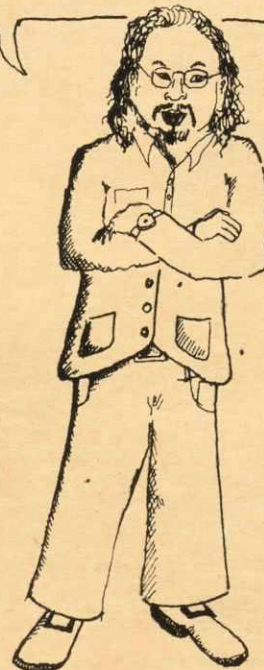
1986:

... Following the footsteps of my cellular father...



1996:

...as all my 16 cloned brothers have also said, within ten years, we will have the ability...



Wm Forrester
Dal Gazette 3/76