

BEING A GOOD ANCESTOR

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Since I have more years behind me than ahead of me, I am persuaded to think more about the future, the one beyond me. Although the past has some nostalgic elements to it, as Mark Twain observed, “The older I get, the more clearly I remember things that never happened.” I have become more focused on an intrusive, contemplative, and compelling question that we all should ask ourselves. When we pass from this life, what will we leave behind?

The answer to this question becomes the starting point to a commitment to being a good ancestor, someone unwilling to impose harm or unwarranted risk to future people. Marian Wright Edelman, a civil rights activist, said of this, “Be a good ancestor. Stand for something bigger than yourself. Add value to the Earth during your sojourn.”

This appeals to me since I don't want the children of the future cursing me, a ghost from their past, for limiting their opportunities and security. As Kevin Van Tighem, conservationist and nature writer says, “One hits a fulcrum in life where one transitions from being a descendent and starts worrying about being a good ancestor.”

This might start with self-awareness, not self-indulgence. Ellen Maloy, a nature writer, remarked, “Stay curious. Know where you are — your biological address. Get to know your neighbors — plants, creatures, who lives there, who died there, who is blessed, cursed, what is absent or in danger or in need of your help. Pay attention to the weather, to what breaks your heart, to what lifts your heart. Write it down.” Articulating these things makes it easier to communicate with others, to encourage them to look deeply at what is important as a legacy.

Each of us is just one link in a chain that passes from yesterday into tomorrow. Like one definition of stewardship, which is people planting trees they know they will never sit in the

shade of, our lives and accomplishments are transitory. The way we make them meaningful is to ensure we pass the torch to others and ensure it is lit.

Very rarely do big things get done in one generation — it takes several. It's also a question of scale. Climate change is a huge elephant and as a hunter friend wisely points out, “It takes a big gun to shoot an elephant.” Positive outcomes (and personal rewards) may well happen after we're gone. But what's important is that progress was made and we had a hand in that achievement.

I hope the answer to what we leave behind isn't a bunch of unnecessary stuff, a feature of over-consumption. “We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values,” wisely intones Bob Moorehead, author of *Words Aptly Spoken*. Our consumer culture is killing the Earth — colonizing the future — leaving future generations unable to protect themselves, rendering them powerless.

We would be well advised to fall back to the old mantra of re-use it, wear it out, make it do, and do without. It's not painless, it takes resolve, but we use less of Earth's resources in the process. If we were more fixated on the cost of stuff, beyond the price tag, we might become more conscious consumers. If we were to wean ourselves of defining our lives by stuff, the Earth would benefit. As a bonus, the next generation isn't stuck sifting through our stuff, trying to figure out what to do with it.

Traditional societies venerated their elders because they were repositories of experience and wisdom. A generation is seldom given enough power to foresee the lingering effects of its labour, but there are always a few survivors who, at the end of their lives, have a chance to look back over their shoulders at what has been gained or lost. They are worth listening to for it affords the opportunity to avoid past mistakes and to build on successful decisions.

The best, most valuable bequests for our children include teaching them critical thinking skills, the ability to use

information to make wise decisions, and leaving a quality environment in which there are still opportunities and choices to make. To hold ourselves accountable for acting like better ancestors, we'd be wise to encourage young people to be more vocal about what matters and to question the way things are done. We should listen to youth at every opportunity, around dinner and conference tables. When we exercise our vote in elections and invest in companies, the interests of the youngest living generation need to be at the top of our priority lists.

I know it's hard to get beyond the immediacy of today — finishing up a project, remembering to fill the car with gas, and contemplating dinner. Today stretches into the near future, to an upcoming and much anticipated vacation. But contemplating paying off the mortgage is just so far into a vague tomorrow it seems unreachable. That's the dilemma of thinking about and planning for the future — it just seems so far off.

Our descendants own the future, but the decisions and actions we make now will tremendously impact generations to come. As John W. Dafoe, a Canadian journalist, noted, “It would be well to bear in mind that the present of today was the future of yesterday and that it is what it is because of the human actions, the human decisions of yesterday. Therefore, the future will be what we make it.”

Even though we build the future everyday imagining it eludes us. We think we cannot plan well for something we cannot see, especially the future. The greatest discovery in each generation is that we can alter the future by changing what we do today. Instead of treating the future as an abstraction we can use factual knowledge to allow an informed choice to be made about tomorrow's options.

As a pathway to a sustainable future, thought, planning, and foresight allow today's decisions to be measured against tomorrow's realities. Then we can start to answer the question, how do we imagine the future and what do we want it to be?

Hopefully the answer centers around a quality environment.

In the annals of shipwrecks there is always the cautionary tale of those who drowned trying to take their gold with them. Apparently, gold is not a good life preserver. Modern life has been made so easy, so convenient, and so unbearably comfortable we lose track of what really counts. Each of us have choices to make. Maintaining healthy ecosystems and restoring damaged ones are clear choices. Alternately we could blindly accept the temporary fruits of using up, abusing, or neglecting the things that actually support us.

How about an investment in the things that assure us (and generations to come) of fresh air to breathe, fresh water to drink, fertile soil, biodiversity, and ecological integrity? That would be a life jacket for subsequent generations (and our own) rather than starter castles, adult toys, and investment portfolios.

Accomplishing these fundamental survival goals means we have to invest in:

- comprehensive land and resource use planning that recognizes limits;
- the creation of parks, protected

- areas, and wildlife refuges;
- biodiversity protection and recovery of species at risk;
- the removal, or limitation of many toxic chemicals from our lives;
- work towards dealing with climate change;
- a transition to clean energy usage; and,
- sustainable and regenerative forms of economic activity.

For societies, it's never been more important to think ahead to future generations. A meaningful way to give to the future is to think bigger and leave behind something that can be stewarded — and used and adapted over time — as a legacy. Don Ruzicka, a land steward, has an additional element in the recipe: "You have to put something in if you want something back." This also means leaving behind resources with an eye to how they might endure for multiple generations, without prescribing too narrowly what each generation does with them.

It would serve subsequent generations well if we acted like tenants of the Earth and renters of its resources, not owners with a penchant for exploiting everything

in our time here. Each generation borrows from the next and should remember that any debts accrued will fall to the next group.

Hilton Pharis, a foothills rancher, once confided in me that he wanted to leave his ranch better than he found it. I thought, this could only come from someone profoundly aware of his responsibility to others. To do that the Pharis family committed to lessening the footprint of grazing, fixing the damaged landscape bits, and living within the constraints of the land. The goal was to bequeath the land to the next generation, as Hilton's generation had been given it, and possibly in better shape.

This is inspirational — live lightly, do little harm, make do with less, and leave it as you found it, maybe better. It seems like a starting formula for a good ancestor's Hippocratic Oath.

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NATURE SASKATCHEWAN 2023 AWARD WINNERS

Each year at the Fall Meet, Nature Saskatchewan recognizes outstanding service and contributions that Society members, and/or affiliate and partner organizations have made towards Nature Saskatchewan's objectives and goals.

RECIPIENT OF THE NATURE SASKATCHEWAN 2023 CONSERVATION AWARD: STAN SHADICK AND DOUG WELYKHOLWA

The Conservation Award is presented to an individual/organization whose total contribution to conservation is outstanding, whether in relation to a particular project, or in a number of roles over a period of years.

Stan Shadick

In 1970, at the age of 15, Stan joined the Saskatoon Nature Society (SNS) board as a director and has served on the board many times since, totalling 50 years of service to SNS between 1970 and 2021. He was president twice — in 1981-82 and in 2011-12, and also served as President of Nature Saskatchewan in 1984-85.

Stan is best known for organizing and leading field trips. In addition to organizing field trips for the Canadian Nature Federation, he has led innumerable SNS field trips for the last 50 years and has been the longtime field-trip committee chair — a role which he continues to hold. In his book, "For the Love of Nature: History of the Saskatoon Nature Society 1980-2005", Attila Chanady (former conservation director of Nature Saskatchewan) writes: "The success of the Society's field trip program was in no small measure due to the level of professionalism brought to it by Stan Shadick, field trip and tour organizer,

coordinator and leader par excellence. Stan's organizational skills and commitment to the Society in general over many, many years were indeed quite remarkable."

With respect to outreach and conservation activities, Stan initiated the fall bird count in 1979 to complement the spring count that began in 1957 and has been organizing those counts continuously since then. More recently, he was one of two Regional Coordinators from 2018-2021 for the Saskatchewan Breeding Bird Atlas. Stan was on the initial organizing committee for "Nature Notes" in 1989. Beginning in the 1980s, he