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Going Green: Protecting Our Future

An Interview with David Steinman

By Donna Strong

The deep ecologist Joanna Macy once stated, “The heart that breaks wide open can contain the whole world.” These words are poignantly appropriate to David Steinman’s quest that became his newest book, *Safe Trip to Eden*. In talking with him for this issue, he admitted that much of the urge to complete this book came about as a result of a loss that left him the single father of his three beautiful children. Many great initiatives are born from such loss. David has wholeheartedly embraced this challenge through his search for hope and inspiration. It has led to the creative achievement of two books being published simultaneously: *Safe Trip to Eden: Ten Steps to Save Planet Earth from the Global Warming Meltdown*, and the new version of a classic, *Diet for a Poisoned Planet — the 21st Century Edition*. Creative expression is an act of resolution, completion and empowerment. In this case, it is an act of empowerment not only for David’s personal life, but it has become another substantial contribution in favor of the public interest.

David is a seasoned crusader with considerable stamina. For more than two decades now, he has withstood storms of resistance and negative publicity from conservative money interests as he exposed environmental injustice. This is a man with staying power. I think of him as a ‘Bob Woodward’ reporter for the environment, disclosing information for the public good and being an original ‘green patriot’.

The beginning of *Safe Trip to Eden* is a riveting exposé of the convergence between oil interests and national security, global warming and the burgeoning potential for environmental catastrophe, and the enormous personal and public health issues linked to widespread distribution of environmental toxins. What we are doing to poison ourselves and plunder the planet is profoundly poignant and seriously depressing.

As the old saying goes, ‘We live in interesting times.’ We don’t know how this era will turn out and the journey feels quite perilous at times. Although this book is saturated with information that is sometimes difficult to absorb, it has also fulfilled David’s deep desire to find hope and he shares it abundantly in this work. With the fire of courage and conviction, David has provided a map to inform and inspire the return trip to a place called home, to live on our planet Earth as a garden where we may thrive and prosper. His eyewitness travelogues astutely capture the passion and purpose of green pioneers forging a productive future.

With this issue’s theme on relationships, we thought it would prove interesting to explore what it is like to change our relationship with the planet. David Steinman has graciously offered to give us his thoughts. We hope you enjoy the journey.

Awareness: You have taken an enormous environmental odyssey to gather this information and one of the questions I want to ask is, what led you to do this book?

David: You know that is a great question. I have been an environmentalist all my life. To me it has been a way of life; going on backpacking trips into the Sierra Nevada, and sailing the California coast down to Mexico many times on trips with my father. So it is natural for me to have a really strong interest in the environment; it has always been part of my life.

In the 1980’s I did a number of investigations that won awards for my reporting. Among these, I measured

the blood levels of fishermen and women in the Santa Monica Bay for the pollutants, DDT and PCBs, and testified as an expert witness at a Congressional subcommittee hearing on the Santa Monica Bay. The results of the study were critical to coalescing public support to clean up the Bay. I saw firsthand how people desperately needed defenders, as well as the environment. It made me feel good and important to think I was doing something good for society — but my life is people. I tell stories about people and their lives, and this one just came out green.

So the environment has always been part of my life, and I also love this country that has been good to so many. We have lots of problems, and many of them can be answered eloquently with green patriotism. After 9/11, I saw environmental issues disappear almost completely from our civic life. Suddenly, environmentalism was marginalized, made out to be completely irrelevant to the American way of life. Vice-President Cheney barred environmentalists from participating fully in the nation's energy planning meetings. The network media basically stopped covering environmental issues. There was a concerted effort by the right-wing talk-radio to paint environmentalists as un-American.

Environmental concerns were being trivialized simply as personal virtue — as if personal virtue doesn't matter! As a lifelong environmentalist, I found this extremely troubling. I wanted to be relevant, but I didn't want to only preach to the choir. I knew the power of our consumer shopping dollars, and I knew we had to be leaders in this country and try harder.

Awareness: Quite understandable.

David: I wanted to find a way to make environmentalism relevant to everybody, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals. Without this approach, we would not be able to build our future. The environment determines our fate. You can't get around it, no matter how many raiding wars nations launch to take from other lands the resources they cannot provide for themselves. I realized that the next war we might be fighting would be a raiding war over resources such as oil. It would be the greatest tragedy of my generation if we failed to do the things today necessary to prevent this kind of a war.

I was living daily with Iraq and wanted to do something to support our soldiers. I put together green and patriotism, taking environmentalism or being green, which is usually a purview of the liberal left, and patriotism, which is thought of as the rallying cry of the conservative right, and came up with 'green patriotism'. It ends up changing the way you look at the world because it links winning the war on terror and building a safe and secure future — reaching our Eden safely.

Awareness: I love your term green patriot — I think it is the kind of term that is going to call on people's imaginations. It feels like a bridging term.

David: One thing that I learned from eight years of publishing *The Doctor's Prescription for Healthy Living* and other books on the environment and health; you really have to speak a language everybody takes in and quit politicizing things. I found our audience consisted of a really diverse gathering of people, from very fundamentalist people in the Bible Belt, to African Americans and Latinos. People want to be green patriots. They want to be good citizens and do something good for America, especially now with our troops giving their full measure.

Awareness: How interesting it is that what you did from a love of the environment has drawn you into the need to talk to people and bridge the polarities.

David: I started a conversation with Safe Trip to Eden and talked to a lot of people, from some of the poorest citizens of the land to some of the most innovative and important green patriots. People we need to know about because their very lives inspire us to be better. I felt that I was really put in a unique position to do that. Also, because I was running a company, I had to deal with real-life business issues on a daily basis.

I felt I could bring some real-world knowledge of running a business, particularly one as raw material and capital intensive as publishing, to the environmental movement, and bring my environmental sensitivity to the business arena.

As an environmentalist, I have reported on, and seen firsthand, the devastating damage of chemicals. There is substantial proof that many children who have been exposed to chemicals have had a significant number of IQ points shaved off their potential. Both immigrant and middle-class children — it simply cuts all ways. These chemicals are all petrochemicals, used in our cosmetics, our cleaning products, and of course our transportation too.

I wanted to show how conscious citizens could act powerfully as patriots when they simply stop buying so much petrochemical junk. If it means one less petrochemical toy duck, it is a start. We all need to do what we can now. The world can't wait — too much is riding on our decisions. The earth needs us now.

As the largest consuming nation, people need to see us blunt the increasing need for oil. We can only do that through an environmental movement. That is why the next president has to be a green patriot. We can choke off the sheiks and mullahs from their arms when we make the right shopping choices. In many ways this was one of the themes of Safe Trip. We can win the war on terror also by marginalizing terrorist groups through working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) globally. Wherever such groups infiltrate, they have a liberalizing effect on repressive and fundamentalist regimes.

For example, we can stop buying particleboard derived from rainforest trees and no longer offer our consumer dollars to practices that destroy the lands of indigenous people. Instead, we can purchase FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified-wood products, which helps prevent future terrorist havens from being created in lands like Indonesia, already thought of as vulnerable to al Qaidainfluences. We can use environmental NGOs as a major liberalizing effect in Iran as well.

Awareness: Your book is so full! The range of issues and information that has been distilled and your insight are quite impressive.

David: I wanted to tell a story and I don't think that I could have written this book without first having gone through all of this. It was a great leveling experience. I tried to show why America needs green patriotism. It is the force creating all of the new capital markets and technological breakthroughs, spurring on individual freedom, it is everything good and Jeffersonian. And, it is the future. It is a tide that is coming in and no amount of walls anybody can build politically will stop this from coming.

That is why the story ends, you know, with me in the Adirondacks at a pond, fishing and watching how a little momma catfish is defending her three little baby catfish.

Awareness: This is so insightful, because you are acknowledging how innately we all want to preserve our kin, and to care.

David: And this is in a forest with a friend of mine, whose father used to be a CIA agent during the cold war. He found his love of forests through traveling with his father, an intelligence professional working throughout the global rainforest belt. He has taken that love from his past and now he is defending forests for The Nature Conservancy. We are walking in a 104,000-acre forest that was run by Domtar, a forestry company that was doing all the right things insofar as creating sustainable practices. Domtar had just given the forest to the state of New York, while enabling sustainable logging rights. It was a great example of how government and private industry, public interest groups and citizens were working together for the common good. It is a wonderful story where everybody won.

Awareness: This reminds me of a favorite spiritual truth from Sanskrit scholar Thomas Ashley Farrand,

“There is no spiritual progress at the expense of another.” Your book is documenting an increasing spiritual awareness to act with more integrity through allowing more win/win interactions among people and groups. This is very heartening.

David: Yes, local communities will finally have stability and will be able to grow an economy. In the forest, the moose were returning and rare endangered bird species finally had the unbroken canopy they needed — and here was this little mama catfish guarding her three little ones so zealously, and I understood it as so primeval — you will do anything to protect your young.

Bringing this around for me personally, the loss in my own family provided an opportunity to focus on my relationship to the earth. It allowed me more space to consider what I can uniquely contribute to the world — to create a movement that would benefit America and all of our children. The book is dedicated to our children.

Awareness: So you share a common link with that momma catfish, wanting to protect the young. Your comments here and in the book speak poignantly to the sacred calling for us all to affirm and protect life.

David: In *Safe Trip* I tried to show the links between God, country, community, family, and being a green patriot. We need green patriotism, or environmentalism, for our country, for our relationship with God, for our family, community, and personal health. What is important is that we find the right thing to do. That is why I offer simple lessons, “Be kind to animals”, “Put good products in your homes”, “Put good food on your table”.

Awareness: You really did tap into so much imagination and positive energy.

David: People are starting to see how incredibly important environmental concerns are to their very existence, particularly spiritually, and in their relationship to God. No matter whether they are Christians, Jews, or Muslims, one of the colors of God is green. We need environmentalism now in order to live out the life that God wants us to. And it’s coloring what people do, how they make decisions around the globe.

Everything I do now is weighed on how it will impact the earth. When you start to see how profound shopping choices, food choices, and product choices affect your own family and others, you begin to see that this is the right thing to do for many reasons.

For more information on David Steinman’s books or his speaking schedule, please visit www.greenpatriot.us or www.amazon.com

Donna Strong loves to write about passionate people who are making a difference. She can be reached at www.DonnaStrong.com

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