Final Paper

David Suzuki: Passion, Science, and Nature

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David Suzuki is a well-known Canadian scientist and geneticist, science broadcaster and environmental activist. His upbringing as a born and raised Japanese-Canadian has contributed to his passion for science and civil rights (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). His family’s experience during the Second World War and bombing of Pearl Harbour has fueled his avid interest in genetics and its history. At a young age he discovered his interest in all things to do with nature. This sparked his lifelong passion that he continues today. He states that ‘all my life, nature was my touchstone, my life, my passion’ (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). It all began with a love of nature and then blossomed more specifically into the study of genetics. Suzuki has a long running history in Canadian radio and television broadcasting with CBC. He founded and briefly hosted the Quirks and Quarks program which still runs on CBC radio. He is best known for his work with the popular CBC TV and science magazine, The Nature of Things. This program has aired worldwide in approximately 40 countries and speaks to topics such as interests in the natural world, threats to human well-being and wildlife habitats as well as to present alternatives for achieving a more sustainable society.

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1936, David Suzuki and his family were Canadian born and raised (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). In 1942, his family was stripped of all rights of citizenship, property and assets were seized, and bank accounts were frozen (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). They were then incarcerated for 3 years in internment camps with fellow Japanese-Canadians located deep in the Rocky Mountains (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). The crime for which many Japanese-Canadians paid the price was simply sharing genes with Canada’s enemy at the time of the Second World War and more specifically the bombing of Pearl Harbour. The ‘results of the war left [him] with a lifelong aversion to any hint of bigotry and discrimination and a passion for civil rights’ (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). The treatment of his family in this time molded his entire outlook of life and the treatment of people. He ‘developed a compulsive need to excel at whatever [he] did to prove [his] worth as a human being’ (Suzuki, 1998). He discovered that through their genes, was the only cause for their incarceration (Suzuki, 1998). His family’s experiences ‘shaped the lives and psyche of all Japanese-Canadians’ (Suzuki, Biotechnology…).

Even though Suzuki suffered an unfortunate and unfair childhood this did not give way to a bright future full of science and life. In 1958 he graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts with a Bachelor of Arts in Biology. This is where he first discovered his passion for the study of genetics. And in 1961 he received his Ph. D in Zoology from the University of Chicago. He became an assistant professor in genetics at the University of Alberta as his first academic position (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). He taught genetics to second year agriculture students whose curious questions about genetic engineering and breeding of plants and animals sparked his intrigue further. As he searched for answers to satisfy his students curiosity he became more interested in the topics he was teaching and studying.

David Suzuki is the co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation. He is an award winning scientist, environmentalist and broadcaster who is ‘renowned for his radio and television programs that explain the complexities of the natural sciences in a compelling, easily understood way’ (The David Suzuki Foundation Website). Suzuki is specifically a geneticist and also a recognized world leader in sustainable ecology. The David Suzuki Foundation works to ‘collaborate with Canadians from all walks of life, including government and business, to conserve our environment and find solutions that will create a sustainable Canada through science-based research, education and policy work’ (The David Suzuki Foundation Website). The foundations mission is ‘to protect the diversity of nature and our quality of life, now and for the future’ (The David Suzuki Foundation Website). Their ‘vision is that within a generation, Canadians act on the understanding that we are all interconnected and interdependent with nature’ (The David Suzuki Foundation Website).

David Suzuki’s background in science allows for a broad perspective and reflection on the topics of genetics and biology. His contributions in writing books and newspapers, radio and television are among his most notable. I believe that David Suzuki is classified as a scientist above all. As much as his beliefs can be seen through his science, he is a firm believer in the workings of science. He even says that ‘the most powerful force shaping society today is science’ (Suzuki, 1998). He also believed that ‘science could eliminate superstition and ignorance by providing us with an understanding of the underlying mechanisms of all the cosmic forces impinging our lives’ (Suzuki, 1998). And he ‘believed that through a better understanding of mutation, recombination and gene activity, we could eventually be able to manage, and possibly even eliminate the hereditary problems that afflict humankind’ (Suzuki, 1998). His perspectives and beliefs in the power of science are purely for the betterment and evolution of humans. His belief in science’s power to change society is proof of his passion and reliance on science. He often talks of science and society as interdependent subjects. Science influences society and vice versa. I think that this shows how vast Suzuki’s scope is. He has a broad perspective and can see how influences from one subject affect the other. It also shows a sort of open-minded concept. Even though it seems that Suzuki is reliant on science, he is also accepting of other explanations for human actions. His connections between science and society are valid and easily understood. As a humanist and environmental activist, you can see how Suzuki’s perspective and belief can be put into action through things such as his foundation and broadcasting. All of his works aim to enlighten and educate the general population on the simplicity and importance of nature. ‘Scientists need to learn more about the social ramifications of their activity as revealed by history’ (Suzuki, 1998). This refers to his connections of genetics and the incarceration of Japanese-Canadians; which he also draws parallels to the Nazi forces and their reasoning through genetics during the Holocaust.

Through my research of David Suzuki I was unable to pin point a specific religious view. Although I do not have a straight answer for his religious standing I can hypothesize through evidence in his writing and opinions of science that he may have been influenced in the Buddhist faith. This conclusion may have been alluded to by the style and interpretation of his demeanor of through his cultural background as a Japanese family. Being Japanese myself, I can attest to some of his viewpoints as a Buddhist. I would not classify myself as practicing or overly committed to the faith but it is what my grandparents had taught me. I theorize that David Suzuki is from the same generation of my grandparents…actually this is entirely true. My grandparents experienced the same incarceration as Suzuki and were quite possibly in the same camp as they were removed from the same area. I can compare the way my grandparents talk and view the world to the same ways that Suzuki writes about. In this similar upbringing it is easy to see how their generation views their Buddhist faith and how it influences their actions.

Much of my knowledge of Buddhism comes from observation rather than practice. I believe that people of the Buddhist faith, especially of Japanese decent, are very in touch with the side of nature. From my brief interaction with the Buddhist religion, I have found it to be relaxed and easy going. There is no pressure to believe or conform to all of the teachings. There is a strong focus on the good dharma, ending suffering and enlightening people through the elimination of ignorance and craving by understanding and seeing a sublime state. As I am still learning the Buddhist teachings I can gain subtle hints from Suzuki’s writing and conclusions that point to him also possibly being of some Buddhist faith. In my naive knowledge of Buddhism I would describe it as being heavily connected with nature and peace. Practices of meditation are commonly used to awaken the inner soul and a sense of gratitude is among the pinnacles of the Buddhist teachings. I believe that in Suzuki’s circumstance, science is the overpowering force when it comes to the science and faith debate. His faith does play a part in influencing his science but I believe that science, in his world, comes first.

I believe that science is David Suzuki’s narrow focus. I think that it is his main viewpoint and the sub-topics of society, racism, nature, etc. fall neatly around it. All of these topics are, in his eyes, interrelated. They must all coexist in order to maintain balance. Suzuki said that he ‘had achieved far more in science than [he] had ever dreamed or hoped. It had been the joy of research that absorbed [him] for a quarter of a century’ (Suzuki, Biotechnology…). I don’t think that his need for achievement is what defines his passion for science but simply the understanding and factual explanations of the complex concepts that draw him in.

I do realize that coming to conclusions about Suzuki’s faith based purely on observation is not the most valid means, but I found this to be a very relatable topic. Buddhism is the one religion that I have had the most exposure to in my life thus far. I understand that it is not wise to assume someone’s faith, but my interpretation of Suzuki’s contributions and conclusions in relation to his faith point towards Buddhism. I may hold a bias, as it is one of the only religions that I am familiar enough with to have an opinion on but I have always viewed faith as a place where imagination and perception were widely accepted views. I, personally, have no set faith but rather like to think of myself as open-minded to all religions and their teachings. My position on faith is not set in stone, I find myself always curious about what certain religions believe and what their faith has to offer. I like being many things and knowing many things about all there is out there. I don’t like to be one finite thing. I believe that we can be ever changing and that everyone should have the opportunity to gain different experiences and try different things.

In conclusion, my overall assessment of David Suzuki is that of a scientist. His wealth of knowledge and experience allows him to have a broad understanding and interpretation of the world. His many passions in life prove to make him a well-rounded contributor to the world of science and genetics. My assumptions of his faith explain his zealous demeanor and passion for humans a life. His belief in the importance of the connection of science and society can also be proof of his seemingly Buddhist faith. Overall, I believe that David Suzuki can be described using three key words; passion, science, and nature.

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