

MEAN, GREEN AND (WELL) OVER 18

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Sitting outside the Cowes bakery on the weekend of the Phillip Island Superbike World Championship, I watched as the leather clad, helmeted young gods rode their beautiful steeds – Ducatis, Suzukis, Harley Davidsons – in syncopated rhythms down the main street. As they came closer and alighted, pulled off helmets and unzipped jackets, reality hit as middle aged faces and figures were heavily represented in the group. Youthful trappings had effectively obscured the actual age differences. Later, listening to the bikers' conversations, I noticed how exuberance and excitement about their shared passion obliterated the age differences. For this weekend at least age barriers seemed to have disappeared. Enthusiasm, dedication and commitment to an objective larger than self appeared to be great unifiers.

This got me thinking about my own experiences of the past year, during which I have fallen in love with the environmental movement, been anointed with the green oil, and found my sense of hope and optimism expand exponentially in the process.

The green, human rights and anti economic globalisation movements are predominantly led by the young. As such, they are characterised by the idealism, single mindedness and energy of youth. At 12, the Canadian, Craig Kielburger, started Free the Children, which is dedicated to the elimination of child labour. This organisation now has 100,000 young members in 35 countries and an extensive programme of mentoring, sponsorship, fund raising and activism. Meanwhile, 13 year olds are protesting at the Nike factory gates and college students across America recently made a huge impact on the sweat shop conditions

of some clothing manufacturers. Naomi Klein, author of 'No Logo', the anti multinationals bible, is only 30.

As a baby boomer it is not necessarily easy to find your place in these movements. After all, we are frequently seen as the enemy. It is our generation which holds the reins of power in big business and from whose ranks politicians are drawn. Politicians' timelines are inevitably linked to their stay in office, which makes them very poorly positioned to be making big decisions about the long term future of the planet. And yet it is precisely because we have this power that our generation needs to be recruited to the cause.

Furthermore, tapping into our increased disposable incomes could have huge implications for world markets. It has astonished me how many 'alternative' and 'ethical' products are available once you begin to look. You can buy wine in returnable bottles and lipsticks where the cases are returnable with part of the proceeds going to AIDS research. Ethical investments are developing a respectable niche in the market. It is now possible to purchase electricity from renewable sources. And, of course, there are organic foods, where our buying power, as well as having implications for our own health and the national health dollar, has the potential to change economic priorities, farming practices and even the global environment.

In Europe, organic food shopping already represents a massive 30 – 40% of food expenditure. Supermarkets are unable to keep up with the demand for organic products. Agri businesses are being supplanted by smaller concerns, specialising in multi-cropping and organic methods, with enormous benefits for the environment. Of course, this shopping revolution might represent less an ideological shift than a pragmatic one. Europeans, with their limited land space, shared borders and succession of ecological

disasters, are currently living the consequences of non sustainable practices. In Australia, the motivators might need to be somewhat different.

Prior to my conversion, I thought organic food was just too 'alternative' – expensive, spotty, odd sized, and short-lived. But this was before I tasted the difference and before my education began. Being an urban creature, I was charmed to learn, for example, that organic eggs are so called partly because the chickens are particularly unstressed. This is because they live with and even sleep on, a breed of dogs, Merrimas, trained to be their guardians. My daughter swears that she can taste the difference in 'happy' eggs. I know it is fanciful, but when was the last time thinking about eggs made **you** smile?

The experience of re-connecting with where food comes from has added a completely new dimension to the meals in our household. Because I have to shop more frequently, I have the opportunity to develop personal relationships with the local organic shop keepers, most of whom see educating community members on recipes and environmentally friendly practices as a fundamental part of their role

The young are heavily represented in the organic movement. WWOOFERS (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) is a not for profit organisation through which volunteers, mostly but not exclusively young, work for their keep on organic farms across the world. In some areas, the involvement of WWOOFERS makes all the difference by providing a cheap and committed workforce, critical to the survival of those farms. Having just returned from a 'holiday' WWOOFing in the Yarra Valley myself, I can vouch for the enormous satisfaction to be gained from preparing and eating food which had been harvested by one's own hand just minutes earlier.

The young are green because it makes sense for them to be. After all, they will be alive in half a century, and it is in their interests to ensure that the world is still livable by then. For baby boomers there is a somewhat different issue. Like me, many of my clients are in mid life. Typically, at a time when they had hoped some responsibilities could be left behind, many still feel burdened by responsibility, living in increasingly crowded nests. They are fearful about their health, their financial futures and their current work situations. There is also mortality with which to contend. Yet while these issues can be all consuming, they can also be insufficient to make meaning of life.

The Pulitzer prize winning author, Jane Smiley, said that if we continue to look backward, comparing ourselves with who and how we were at 20, we 50 year olds will undoubtedly be depressed and swamped by feelings of loss. We will be stuck in the present and obsessed by the past. Jane Smiley talked about the importance of making ourselves over, of looking forward rather than backward. What better way to do that than by committing ourselves to saving the planet, via local and global actions, in large and small ways? After all, transcendence is a tried and true way of dealing with the hard issues that life typically presents at an accelerating pace to the middle aged.

One of the joys of commitment to these movements is the increasing contact with the young who people them. Though it is not necessarily easy to find a place, as Susie Costello found, when she attended a meeting to plan the S11 demonstration. Some of the participants were expressing concern about political plants. One turned to Susie and said: "Nice clothes!", to which she replied politely: "Thank you." It took her a moment to realise that it was not meant as a compliment. The rewards, however, can be immense – those feelings of hope and optimism rubbing off and re-igniting in ourselves. A marvellous example of that occurred in Melbourne in mid May when Craig Kielburger (now 18), delivered an impassioned, inspiring, exuberant address, which I attended in the company

of friends and children. It is very comforting to see the baton being passed into such competent hands.

It seems to me that an essential requirement for making myself over has been the choice to put on Lplates, to step outside my comfort zone, and let go of the kudos of being the one in the know. There is a element of relief in not having to be the one in charge of making things happen, the responsible one. It was a salutary, if challenging, experience at the S11 meetings to see youth so confidently and competently in charge. Similarly, at a recent Amnesty International Victorian Refugee Team meeting, it felt great to be educated with such assurance by the likes of the young lawyers, Eve Stagoll and Georgie Costello. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed being a student. It can be very restful to take a break from always being the teacher.

The future of the world could well depend on a meaningful collaboration between youth and age, where the wisdom of the latter can be harnessed to the clear sighted and unencumbered visions of the former. Craig Kielburger described how at the latest round of World Economic Forum talks – this time held in Mexico - he made the choice, as well as listening to the predominantly young protestors outside, to accept the invitation to speak to the captains of industry and assembled politicians inside. He said that, despite the prevailing ignorance of this fact, the groups had quite a bit in common. There were participants in the Forum who were aware of the issues and are most concerned about social justice. The difficulty, according to Craig, is how to bridge the gap.

I feel so lucky that I have discovered activism, and in so doing have had increased exposure to the energy and optimism of youth. Hearing so many frightening stories of environmental vandalism and human neglect, the only alternative for me would have been pessimism and despair. But when you can take action, there is every cause for optimism.

Great things are happening - look at the moratorium on the mining at Jabiluka. You cannot fail if you are optimistic because even if in the end you prove to have been misguided, your life will have been more joyful, and you will have lived it in such good company. By acting as if it isn't already too late for the planet, you have nothing to lose and the world to gain.

You might risk looking foolish, but one of the advantages of getting older is the capacity to say, 'Who cares?' Maybe I'll travel to my next rally on a Harley Davidson.