

THE PRINCETON PACKET



SOLUTIONS

By Huck Fairman

Science writer, composer harmonize on saving civilization

The D&R Greenway Land Trust presented another of its engaging and important talks about how we might save our environments, and indeed our world.

The D&R President and CEO, Linda Mead, first summarized the many, worrisome, national and international reports recently issued on the state of Nature on our planet, and then she introduced the two guest speakers, Science Writer Michael Lemonick and Composer/Guitarist Sam Guarnaccia.

Michael Lemonick is well known to Princeton audiences as a writer and speaker for Climate Central, on Nassau Street.

A Princeton native, he attended Princeton High School, and then Harvard, and is currently an opinion editor at *Scientific American*. Previously he was a senior Science writer at Time Magazine and a staff writer at Climate Central. Now he also teaches Journalism at Princeton University.

He began by revealing that in 1987 he wrote a cover story for Time about the threats presented by global warming. He, and his fellow writers, thought that if the public was simply informed of the situation, people would urge the necessary changes. But there was no detectable response from the public.

In 1988, Lemonick recalled, former NASA scientist, James Hansen, delivered a warning directly to Congress, again about the very real problems brought on by global warming. But once again, there was no appreciable response. The UN did initiate its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) but there too nothing substantive was done.

Now, thirty years later, as we are witnessing real environmental changes and threats to our well being worldwide, Lemonick and his colleagues concede that they made several tactical mistakes. First, they thought that facts alone would speak for themselves, and people would react. This did not happen.

Second, they had not anticipated that counter explanations from opposing interests would discredit scientific conclusions. Oil companies, related enterprises, and political allies disparaged the science. (Even as it has been

lately revealed that Exxon and others were well aware of the problems.)

Third, the science writers did not foresee that people ideologically, philosophically, or religiously against government intervention would oppose the scientific conclusions and any efforts to respond.

In addition, Lemonick and company now recognize that they did not understand that people learn in different ways, and that they need to be approached in different ways. Simply providing them with facts would, and did, fall on deaf ears. Other ways and means of making the scientific cases would be necessary.

An example of this became evident in the personal histories Lemonick and Guarnaccia told about how they got into their respective fields and developed concern for the Earth. Lemonick admitted that it was a personal impulse to learn and understand how nature's systems worked, not a desire to save the world, that directed him to science and science writing.

Somewhat differently, Guarnaccia expressed the deep excitement he discovered in observing Nature and the Heavens. His father introduced him to the world of natural history, and as he pursued that interest, he came to recognize the threats to what he saw as a world of wonders – one that he naturally wanted to preserve.

In time, as he became an accomplished musician, and then composer, he wanted to express his love for the beauty of music, the world, indeed the universe, through music – which became, for him, a means of access to those wonders.

At this point in the evening, the speakers paused and a video was shown. It was a recording of a performance in Philadelphia of a choral segment (“The Peace of Wild Things”) from Guarnaccia’s “Emergent Universe Oratorio.” The segment was adapted from a poem by environmentalist, Wendell Berry, and Guarnaccia acknowledged the many contributors to this complex, many-faceted work, including his wife and producer Paula Guarnaccia. Sam sees the oratorio as a cosmic creation story whose purpose is to shift our consciousness of the world through

music and poetry. It is a powerful and moving expression of existence on our planet, whose future we are attempting to come to grips with.

Listening to the “Oratorio” can provide an example of Lemonick’s observation that many people need to feel, see, or experience the world, and the changes it is undergoing, through other means or forms, before they accept any of it.

Following the music clip, Linda Mead invited the speakers to describe their life paths leading to their current work. Michael said that he was inspired by his father, a physics professor at Princeton University, but that he wanted to create stories which illustrated the sciences he was learning about.

Sam, on the other hand, was intrigued by natural phenomenon such as human hands and birds’ wings and by the evolution that brought them into being. He found that the world and universe elicited deep emotional responses within him. And he found that because the human brain acts quickly, to music say, music can be a spice for the mind, stimulating it to consider things we might not otherwise acknowledge.

He was also inspired by Bill McKibben’s book, “Eaarth,” which raised the questions: What do we know? ... and, What can we do? – while suggesting that we indeed have deep things we humans can, and need to, share.

Finally, Linda Mead asked both what they see ahead for our threatened world. Michael stated that the threats are so pervasive that only governmental action will have the scope to address them. And governments must be willing to levy economic penalties if the necessary changes are not adhered to. But first, to arrive at that governmental leadership, people must pressure governments to act.

Sam suggested a further, necessary step, namely changing, or even to some degree, re-inventing humans and their societies. And to do that, people must first recognize the love they have for life in its many forms. What music, and other arts, can do is to embody, or express, that love – an essential first step toward the changes we need to make.