

On the Homefront

In Defence of the Health of Our Families

by Susan McIntosh

En tant que mères et protectrices de la santé familiale et communautaire, les femmes ont été les premières à établir des liens entre les divers types de pollutions et la santé de leurs familles et de leurs amies. Cet article relate l'histoire de deux femmes qui ont eu le courage de prendre position contre cet état de chose.

For most of us, the word 'home' represents far more than basic shelter. Harriet Rosenberg speaks of our impression of home as a private fortress: a haven from outside hazards that is "protected from danger by the power of love, reciprocal human feelings, and kinship obligations" (137). Karen VanDusen reports that wrapped up in a host of hopes, memories and endeavours, home is considered the "foundation upon which individuals and communities can build and progress" (164). Yet it is a false security, and it comes as something of a shock to discover that the walls of our homes do not act as a "magical detoxifying barrier" (Rosenberg, 123). We have discovered to our dismay that the walls of our homes are no protection against, for example, low level nuclear waste dumps, chemical residues, pesticides, and air and water pollution due to lead, dioxin, and PCBs.

The problem is global, and alarming: the mercury poisoning of Minimata Bay in Japan, the chemical disaster of Bhopal, India, and the nuclear nightmare in Chernobyl are some of the more well known cases. But, for every case that receives wide exposure, there are several that do not. In most cases, the struggle to protect the environment is localized and uphill. Proving that there is indeed a problem continues to be a major stumbling block.

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The burden of proof

One of the aspects that makes this work so onerous is the burden of proof. Epidemiological studies seem to be the accepted means of verifying cause and effect. Regrettably, in cases like these, epidemiology has severe limitations. Causal relationships are best demonstrated when there is accurate and specific knowledge of biological effects, a certainty of exposure to a specific toxicant, relatively common adverse health effects, and the population that has been exposed is a large one. Because these conditions are rarely met, there is considerable potential for inconclusive results. Different population groups can be studied and their health status compared, but since the health of a population is determined by so many factors, epidemiological studies often cannot distinguish whether a particular exposure has affected the health of that population (Frank *et. al.*, 143). Since the exposures in question are usually low-level, poorly defined, and only affect local populations, they do not lend themselves to conclusive

epidemiological findings. This is particularly frustrating since in our society, the onus is placed on proving harm in order to stop exposures, instead of having to prove safety in order to begin.

The role of women

For years we have shut our eyes to environmental hazards. I believe that our perception of the risk, or lack of it, is perpetuated by our belief in the security of our homes, and our desire to believe the safety assurances of government officials and corporate representatives. This perception, however, is slowly changing, and I am proud to report that in most cases, it is women who are affecting these changes. On one level, this is because it is mainly women who are exposed to these chemicals day in and day out through the routine of housework. On another, it is our role as "health guardian" of our families which motivates us (Heller).

In our society, women have been appointed primary care-givers. Whether or not we work outside the home, we are responsible for the health and safety of our families. There is no education provided for this position. There is no equivalent to Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) training. Our exposure to untested and undertested chemicals occurs through our own use of these products, as well as passive exposure through our drinking water and the air we breathe. The synergistic effects have yet to be determined. (A case in point is that of Rutherford, New Jersey where the childhood leukemia rate was determined to be six times the national average. Within three miles of the school, forty-two sites of concern were identified,

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all of which were using organic chemicals. The swamp located on two sides of the town was being sprayed with between 50,000 and 100,000 pounds of insecticides a year. The town is exposed to automobile exhaust from two major highways, and is the convergence site of microwave beams from two airports and an industrial research facility. Not surprisingly, epidemiological studies were inconclusive and a specific cause was never found for the cancer cluster (Freudenberg and Zaltzberg, 248).

It is one thing to practice preventative maintenance with our health, and choose non-toxic alternatives for home consumption. It is quite another to 'take on' governments and multinational corporations who have not been quite so selective, and who, through unsafe practices (deliberate or not), are threatening the sanctity of our homes and the safety of our families. Against all odds, women are piecing together the evidence and are asking the difficult questions. Despite the safety assurances of the experts, despite community concerns about lowered property values, despite being threatened with physical violence and loss of jobs, despite being branded 'hysterical housewives', many women are successfully tackling some of the most powerful elements in our society (Sanger; Martin-Brown; Brown). Research has shown that typical environmental activists are homemakers between the ages of 26 and 40. A strong correlation was found between the presence of younger children and activism (Edelstein and Wandersman, 83-84).

A question of credibility

Credibility is often an issue. David Suzuki writes:

I have met many people who lack specialized training but who have become very knowledgeable and raise penetrating and important questions

about the impact of human activity on the environment. Yet they are often dismissed because they lack proper credentials—even though 'experts' sometimes are too specialized to see the obvious.

To those for whom science and technology reign supreme, it is the ultimate insult to accuse someone of emotion, passion, and/or irrationality—which is precisely the charge levelled at most activists.

One of the most blatant cases of this kind of undermining and personal attack was directed towards Rachel Carson and her book *Silent Spring*. *Time Magazine* wrote:

Miss Carson has taken up her pen in alarm and anger, putting literary skill second to the task of frightening and arousing readers... Many scientists sympathize with Miss Carson's love of wildlife, and even with her mystical attachment to the balance of nature. But they fear that her emotional and inaccurate outburst in *Silent Spring* may do harm by alarming the nontechnical public, while doing no good for the things that she loves (Graham, 69).

When the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) conducted a health survey under the direction of Dr. Beverly Paigen, a Department of Health physician called their survey (which supported their contention that the neighbourhood was dangerous to their health) "information collected by housewives that is useless" (Freudenberg, 43).

It takes a lot of courage to put oneself "on the front lines" so to speak. Women fight on the grounds of what they feel is "right," not what men argue is reasonable. Perhaps it is up to women to "reintroduce the value of being moved by principle and morality" (Hamilton).

There is, however, a very real possibil-

ity that the environmental crisis will be dumped in women's laps. If women in developing countries can be blamed for deforestation due to their search for fuelwood, then it does not seem too bizarre that chemical contamination of our planet might be attributed to household cleansers. After all, phosphates in laundry detergent played a major role in the eutrophication of Lake Erie. Chaviva Hosek warns, "I think we (women) have a role to play, but it's crucial to guard against being put back in the kitchen for the purpose of fixing the environment."

Ironically, although it is concern for and love of family that initially motivates many women to action, activism is time consuming and husbands and children can often feel neglected. And, in many cases, these struggles lead to individual transformations—gains in self confidence and consciousness, with women recognizing their own potential and power (Hamilton).

"We need to tell the stories of women in the community who have managed to win environmental victories, and women in the professions who have done outstanding environmental work" (Hosek). However, most importantly, we need to *hear* them and learn from them.

Hearing local stories

Eldorado Nuclear and Port Hope, Ontario have a long and controversial history. "The Town that Radiates Happiness" has long since taken down the sign that announced its claim to fame, but the question of the disposal of low level nuclear waste remains. Eldorado, once federally owned, still produces nuclear fuel for Canada's CANDU reactors, as well as highly processed uranium hexafluoride for export (Sanger). It is the town's major employer. In 1986, Eldorado announced, as part of their clean up of hazardous and illegal dump sites, the opening of new sites to be located in Tyrone and Orono.

Much of the land in question was prime agricultural land and had been farmed by the same families for generations. It had not undergone an environmental impact assessment. The health effects of low level radiation is an extremely controversial subject. Residents were understandably anxious about the experts' conflicting advice. The proximity to Lake Ontario and the possible contamination of ground water supplies was also a concern. A sharp decrease in property values was predicted.

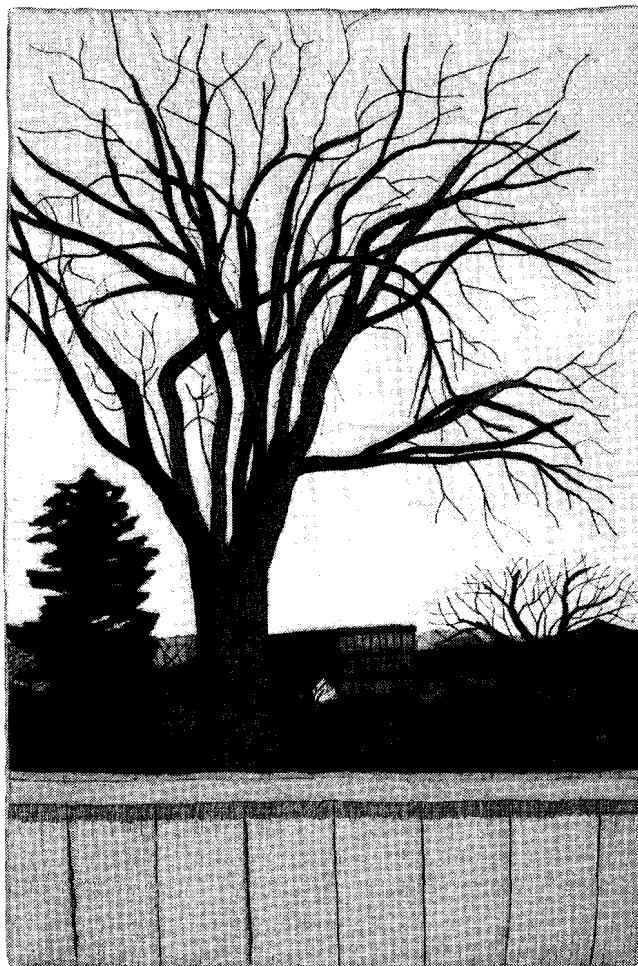
The residents were not going to give up their family farms easily, and they decided to fight. A major component of their protest was a procession to the gates of the Port Grandby dump where a large and successful rally was held.

Most people, when talking about their involvement in the environmental movement, mention a catalyst. For many people in Durham Region, this was it. For two women in particular, this event catapulted them from stay-at-home moms to environmental activists. These are their stories.

Helen MacDonald has only to look out her kitchen window to see one of the proposed sites. It lies just beyond the trees that she and her husband planted when they bought this land (in the area where her husband's family had lived for eight generations) and built their house. When the house was completed, Helen was expecting their second child. It was the summer of Chernobyl. Helen miscarried. Four days later, Eldorado made their announcement.

For Suzanne Elston the situation was entirely different. She lives many kilometres away in the town of Courtice. She heard about the proposed dump site only when some friends from church invited her family out to see how beautiful their farm was and what would be lost. Suzanne had worked for TV Ontario for several years, first as Public Membership Coordinator, then as International Marketing Coordinator, before she retired to become a full-time mom. She had developed a reputation in the community as someone who could deal with bureaucracy.

For both women, the rally at Port Granby was their first experience of demonstrating. The experience was intimidating for Helen, as she was very afraid of being thrown in jail. In the process, however, she acquired first hand practical knowledge about media and the political process. As events were drawing to a close,



Laurie Swim, *Early Spring*. 50 x 33" From *World of Crafts: Quilting* by Laurie Swim. Friedman Group, 1991

she was asked, "When it's all over, what are you going to do?" Her answer was to "get involved." She went to her local councillor and the town clerk who gave her a crash course in municipal bureaucracy.

Helen took out subscriptions to all the local newspapers and started attending council meetings. She was accepted on the Community Services Advisory Board and the Clark Museum Board. (She later chaired the latter, and vice-chaired the former). The experience left her feeling empowered and showed her how meetings should be run. She also learned how

to have access to local government, and found herself in a mediator role with her community, many of whom now approach her instead of their local councillors. She loves the feeling that she is making a contribution.

She joined Port Granby Environmental Group and encouraged them to expand their mandate—to become proactive instead of reactive, and to concentrate on community education. She started going to hearings and making presentations. Helen also became an active letter writer. She was becoming recognized in the community and beyond, and the media were starting to ask her opinion and to quote her. She downplays this by saying "They knew they could call me at home 'cause where else would I be, right?"

Although she has credibility in her own eyes and in her family and community, she feels that she lacks the credentials that are expected in some quarters. To this end, she is working on her B.A. in Environmental Studies at Trent University. She is also active in an incredible array of projects—bringing Environment Week activities to school children, co-ordinating The Environment Fair, doing photography for the local newspaper, her own radio show, writing columns for two newspapers, "Green Community" projects... She has been called an "alarmist" (which she sincerely resents because she sees herself as the polar opposite), a trouble maker, a hysterical housewife, and someone who has nothing

better to do. These comments have never been a deterrent. Interestingly, her husband, who was also very involved in the Eldorado activity, has never received similar comments.

For Suzanne, the Port Granby rally "just seemed right." While there, she was handed a leaflet describing Durham Nuclear Awareness (DNA). It took four months before she called them, but a very active relationship soon developed. During their initial conversations, it was mentioned that there should be a plaque on the gate of Darlington Nuclear Generating Station stating that "not everyone thought this

was a good idea." Suzanne wanted her name on that list.

The Elstons are the seventh generation to live in their family home. It is located just down the street from Darlington, so their family has a personal interest in learning more about nuclear power. When Suzanne approached her councillor for information, she was made aware of many questions that needed to be asked, and realized that she had a real interest in finding out more. Before long, she was making deputations to council about tritium. She was making a difference...

DNA accomplished their plaque, but in a unique way. With the blessing of the town council, and the participation of several nuclear groups (both pro and con) they have erected a monument at the entranceway to Darlington. On the monument is a plaque which reads:

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." (*Great Law of the Haudenosaunee*)

This monument marks the opening of the Darlington Nuclear Generating Station. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors—we borrow it from our children. The time capsule contained herein shall be opened after seven generations in the year 2129. The capsule contains information reflecting the debate on nuclear technology. Our children shall judge us.

When Metro was seeking to establish a garbage dump in the area (there were several proposed sites), Suzanne was again asked to help. She was involved in contesting the Darlington, or N1 site. Together with other concerned citizens, they fought the dump on purely environmental grounds. Suzanne also helped coordinate Recycling Week (later called Waste Reduction Week) in the Town of Newcastle in 1988, '89, and '90. (Interestingly enough, the other co-ordinator was Helen. The two women did not know each other, but had both been involved in community activism in their own way and in their own areas, and so had been nominated by the mayor).

By this time, the phone was ringing off the wall constantly. People wanted to know more, but didn't know where to turn—there was a real need for grassroots information. Suzanne approached the Oshawa Times with the idea of a newspaper column, and now writes for seven papers. She has had her work distributed in caucus by Jenny Carter and sees her column as a vehicle through which to inform, incite, and motivate personal action. She was also commissioned by the Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues to write "Women and the Environment" for their Action on Issues series.

For her, environmental activism is simply an extension of mothering. Her children have never known any other way of living, and are well aware of how important it all is to her. In fact, when her eldest son was younger and angry with her, he would put his hands on his hips and announce, "When I'm grown up... I'm not going to recycle!" Suzanne's husband is involved in work very much related to hers, and has been incredibly supportive of her. At one point, her involvement became a compulsion, and she had to draw back and decide to focus on nuclear issues and her

writing. As it is, to incorporate what she does around her family's schedule, she gets up at 4:30 to write.

Credibility is not an issue with Suzanne who has never felt that her femaleness is negative (in fact she credits being able to juggle five things at once to being a woman!), although she does feel that most columnists are seen as being on the "fringe." In this capacity, she has been criticized by some readers. She has a "fairly high level of self-confidence," and has always tended to call people on negative comments, rather than let them penetrate or undermine her credibility.

Both women freely acknowledge what they call their "elite" position—being at home allows them the freedom to get involved. While their activism is primarily environmentally-related, both are also quite earnest about the need for a shift in the whole social structure.

Where it leads

The issue of mentors and/or role models is an important one. Both the women I spoke with were passionate about the people who had influenced them. Interestingly enough, when I first asked if they would be willing to be interviewed both said yes without hesitation, but went on to list other women who they admired and felt I should talk to. The work done by these women, and countless others like them, is important and deserves recognition. Time after time I have read about women who, in the struggle to defend the health of their families, have discovered an inner strength—and have empowered themselves. Young women need to see this and draw energy from it. One of my favourite stories comes from Elizabeth May who tells about how her mother has influenced her. "One December when I was a child, we went to New York City to do our Christmas shopping. I remember clutching my mother's hand as she scolded a department store manager for displaying a Santa Claus riding a rocket. 'This is Christmas,' she said. 'How can you have Santa Claus and a symbol of militarism in the window? Everybody is going to complain.' He replied, 'Madam, you are the first to complain.' My mother turned to me and said, '*Elizabeth, I want that on my tombstone: she was the first to complain.*'"

For me, home and environment and health are all closely intertwined. I am appalled by the toxic condition of the homes and neighbourhoods in which we live our lives and raise our children and by the circumstances that make this the status quo. Yet, I am heartened and inspired by the stories of the women who make it their mission to confront the power structures threatening their families. I truly believe that through the example of women like these, others will be motivated and together we will ensure a healthy future for all our families.

My sincere thanks to Helen MacDonald and Suzanne Elston for taking time out of their busy lives to share their insights with me.

Susan McIntosh is a graduate student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. The mother of two children, she is actively involved in raising environmental awareness in her community.

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HELENA MALTON

Tannenbaum

"Are you happy?"
You have worn out the words
with asking.
Ask me how I feel.
I will say everything
by saying nothing.
You take my hand. I reclaim it.
"Explain," you say.
"Tell me how you feel."

(Explain? That I want commas to guide me,
capitals and periods to mark my boundaries?)

I am an evergreen, planted here.
You trim my neck with
kisses like glass ornaments.
"Please don't touch me."
"Explain."
I will tell you and you will understand.

(When Daddy put his
fingers in me I
watched from above with
passive tinsel-angel eyes.
When you touch me like
a Christmas tree I stiffen
my branches for your garlands,
feigning festivity.)

After I say these things
you contract, appalled.
"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

(I tried to tell you but
trees are ineloquent.)

Does anyone ever think of asking the spruce
if she wants to be decorated?

Helena Malton is an actor and theatre-technician who is working on a BA in English at Acadia University. She is also working on a novel.