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# EARTH DAY

*She speaks of fundamental things... with all the authority of the Earth and with awesome perception.* —S. B., *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue, 1971*

“THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’,” Bob Dylan wheezed; we roared “Right on!” and “Power to the people!” Echoes of Woodstock and a failed Summer of Love brushed a pastel backdrop for the sulfurous acrimony of Vietnam. Oceanography was a wonder-child, a wet thread from the sixties when Sputnik was fresh, ambition boundless, and moist-eyed idealism could still save the planet. Environmentalism was *cool*, pro-earth *all right*, and the cachet of rebellious counterculture was seductive and a little frightening. Bearded and beaded, bell-bottomed and bangled, we discovered rock operas and biodynamic gardening. With patriot’s zeal, we preached Zero Population Growth and threatened defectors with exponential guilt. In the tumultuous roil of that opening decade, amid the clangor and clash and bullets and bombast, there arose a green stem of hope, of concern for the planet. We called it Earth Day, and it had the warm feel of home.

“You were there?”

The student stared as if Rip Van Winkle had walked up to the table. “Gosh, what was it like?” he asked.

I looked at a young man, ruddy-cheeked and Poloed, and at his companion who seemed younger still in flowered dress and permed hair. A blink; fiery speeches and ambulances screamed past in silent frames, video clips cut off in mid-motion. Another blink; the campus was quiet. “Well,” I said, “it’s hard to explain.”

“Hippies,” said the girl. She spat out the word. “It was hippies and protesters, wasn’t it? Anti-government, anti-establishment; I’ve read all about it.”

“It’s different this time,” the young man interjected. “We’ve got a coalition in Washington, the president said so. The materialism of the eighties will give way to a new environmentalism, you’ll see. Do you know that the Amazon rain forest will be gone by the end of the century if we don’t take action now? Aren’t you, like, worried about ozone and skin cancer?”

I was about to agree, when the girl abruptly stood up and captured our silence. “It comes down to responsibility,” she said, hands on her hips. “We can’t go on ignoring the consequences of our actions in the Global Village. What will become of the planet if we continue polluting the oceans and poisoning the atmosphere? What will we leave our children, and our children’s children?” Her eyes flamed and she leaned across the table, accosting me directly. “What are *you* doing to help save the world?” she demanded, her voice trembling with emotion. And she pointed an accusing finger at me and at millions beyond.

From the table I scooped up pamphlets and schedules outlining activities in preparation for Earth Day ’90. Chastised and reminded, I promised to help. Walking away, I felt the girl’s eyes burning in my back. When I turned, the spark was still blazing. She waved and smiled, and so did I, strangely relieved. From ten paces I shouted, “Right on!” and raised a clenched fist, drawing looks of astonishment.

—David A. Brooks