

21st Century Environmentalists: Diversity, Hope, Unity, and Action for a Better World

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SUMMARY

Today's environmentalists must be multi-lingual not only in the languages of the world, but more importantly, in the languages of business and public policy. The author gives a personal account of the dangers of first impressions and the social stigmas of being an environmentalist. His personal experiences highlight the emergence of a new paradigm where the 21st century environmentalists will be known for their entrepreneurial spirit and patriotism alongside environmental idealism.

KEY WORDS

Hispanic, diversity, Peace Corps, environment, climate change, clean energy, California, Connecticut, entrepreneur

*“The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out and upon me,
The Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.”*
— Maya Angelou¹

My name is Bryan Garcia. I grew up in Southern California, the son of a sacrificing Mexican father, a retired hardworking construction foreman, and an independent Puerto Rican mother, a retired change management consultant and electrical engineer. Mine was a middle class family in a community comprised of Blacks, Whites, Asians, and Hispanics. My neighborhood was as diverse as anyone would imagine a small Los Angeles suburb to be – a virtual melting pot of the “new” America. Growing up in a racially and socially varied environment – among rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, laborers and academics – I learned how to accept different points of view and to seek common ground.

There is a significant Hispanic presence in Los Angeles, and with a surname like Garcia, one would assume that I speak Spanish. I don’t. Though my family was comfortable with its identity, I never felt my ethnicity was front and center in defining who I was, and I suspect it was because of that, that I never learned to speak the language.

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It was not until I traveled to Kazakhstan, as a volunteer for the Peace Corps, that I realized my Hispanic ethnicity could be something in which people were very interested. Fans of American soap operas and Latin novellas, the people of Kazakhstan found unending entertainment in the amazing resemblance they perceived between my

¹ On the Pulse of Morning by Maya Angelou, read at the Inauguration of William Jefferson Clinton on January 19, 1993.

face and that of a character named “Cruz” on the American serial *Santa Barbara*. While Cruz was not exactly the figure I would have preferred to have been identified with, I should not complain. The similarities earned me free Russian language lessons, savory Ukrainian meals, and trips to the country – all essential things for a struggling Peace Corps volunteer living on a modest stipend.

Despite the perks, the experience of being a Hispanic-American abroad, where people were constantly making judgments about me based on a brief interaction, showed me how powerful first impressions can be. It also showed me that my ethnicity played a starring role in the creation of those impressions. For the first time in my life, the identity I was assigned by my community was that of a Hispanic first and everything else second, and the significance of those first moments of interaction should never be underestimated. It is the phenomenon that Malcolm Gladwell revealed to us so clearly in *Blink* – a useful, instinctual tool with unfortunate liabilities – first impressions are often misguided and require time to overcome.

It is, after all, not only ethnic minorities who face such snap judgments. It is easy to anticipate what would happen if you were to meet a new acquaintance at a family gathering or a social event and introduce yourself as an “environmentalist.” The list of preconceived notions they associate with environmentalism is likely to include: “tree hugger,” “Birkenstock wearer,” “Liberal,” “greeny,” “extremist,” “communist,” “vegetarian,” and, my favorite, “anti-capitalist.” For some reason, we “environmentalists” have a social stigma that hangs over us like a plague. It is as if caring for the environment denotes dreamy idealism and the prevention of economic progress.

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But just like many others, these assumptions often prove to be false.

I, for example, do not fit neatly into any of these categories. Though the physical environment was always a part of my life, it was not

always a positive force. My brother, a construction foreman like my father, suffers from asthma, as does my sister, a practicing farmer. I happened to be the lucky one – free from the clutches of asthma, but still bothered by the health impacts of suburban smog on my family.

In other ways, though, my relationship with the natural world might appear more textbook. As a kid, the environment served as a refuge for me, a place to get away from the difficulties of home and the constant quarreling of my parents, who would eventually separate and then divorce. The memory of the days our family spent together outdoors in “the environment,” camping alongside the beautiful June Lake in California, were the happiest days of my life.

The natural world came to embody security, peace, and hope for me, and my relationship with it continued well into adulthood, when I found myself at a new crossroads in my life. An undergraduate at University of California Berkeley, I saw my childhood dream of becoming a professional athlete come to an abrupt end when I was cut from the school’s baseball team, and my world was forever changed.

I think back on that cold winter morning, distraught, dejected and searching for meaning, and I realize - it was in that moment of despair where I discovered, once again, the capacity of hope contained in the natural world. In that moment, I was reborn, inspired to serve. All of the energy I had channeled into athletics over the first twenty years of my life would be invested into academics to help me better understand how I could help protect the environment. I pursued a degree in political economy of natural resources – policy, business, and the environment – a powerful and popular combination, and I continued this line of training into graduate school.

When I completed my Masters, I had the great fortune of spending six years of my life in the investment and renewable energy sector working for the State of Connecticut. During this period, I was responsible for coordinating one of the first sub-national efforts to confront climate change.

And suddenly, there I was – a Hispanic *and* an environmentalist – without premeditation or self-consciousness, and no one knew what to expect of me. A progressive Democrat and Hispanic, I was the climate change coordinator, under a Republican administration, for the governor’s Steering Committee on Climate Change. Due to the diversity of my training and background, I was able to speak many

languages to many different people. Rather than speak about climate change as an environmental issue, I learned to speak about it in the language of energy, industrial, and economic development policies – the language of all political parties. I applied all I had learned to relate to diverse stakeholders in their own tongues, while maintaining my own unique perspective.

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I have never felt like I had a competitive disadvantage or handicap as a Hispanic environmentalist. Rather, I believe I have a complementary set of skills and perspectives to add to the policy dialogue, representative of a different type of environmentalist. And I know I am only one of many. There is no longer any such thing as a cookie cutter environmentalist. We come in all colors, all nationalities, and all disciplines. To be leaders in the new environmental movement, we will have to be more than interdisciplinary; we will have to be multilingual, alert to the backgrounds from which our colleagues have come and able to communicate with them across our differences.

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We are at the dawn of a new era of environmentalism, a moment of paradigm shift. We have reached a proverbial tipping point, and “environmentalists” are being justly re-branded. There is growing recognition that the inclusion of professionals from a variety of

disciplines will be essential in environmental problem solving. The 21st century environmentalist will not only be a conservationist, but will also be an entrepreneur and a patriot – capable of communicating in disparate ways across multiple disciplines, in different languages and among diverse cultures.

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As New York Times reporter Tom Friedman recently wrote, “Green is the next red, white, and blue.” The solutions to the Earth’s most pressing environmental problems reside in our ability to recognize the significance of diversity, and to unite our collective hopes for a better environment and a better world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bryan Garcia is the program director for the Center for Business and the Environment at Yale. Prior to his arrival at Yale he served as director of energy market initiatives for Connecticut Innovations, a quasi-public venture capital fund. In his position, he invested resources that made Connecticut the regional leader in voluntary clean energy markets including being a co-founder of SmartPower and creating the EPA and DOE award-winning Connecticut

Clean Energy Communities Program. He was the climate change coordinator for the Governor’s Steering Committee on Climate Change where he served to facilitate interagency and cross sector collaboration to develop the state’s climate plan. This first-of-its-kind

sub-national effort on climate change received international recognition and won an EPA Climate Protection Award in 2005.

He is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer where he specialized in NGO capacity building and environmental education in the Republic of Kazakhstan. He has a BS degree in political economy of natural resources from UC Berkeley, an MPA in public-non-profit management, an MBA in finance from NYU, and an MEM in environmental management from Yale University.

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