René Dubos

Friend of the Good Earth
Microbiologist, Medical Scientist, Environmentalist

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For lives shared
along the St. Joseph River
and
on The Farm at Henderson Grove
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On 22 April 1970, nearly twenty million Americans participated in the greatest street demonstration since the end of World War II. Two thousand communities, two thousand colleges, and ten thousand high schools took part. Its raison d’être was nothing less than the quality of life on Earth.

The first Earth Day was the largest rally in the country’s history. Provoked by years of mounting concern over environmental ravages—from polluted water, air, and food to the infamous Alaskan pipeline, the clear-cutting of national forests, and the proposed damming of the Grand Canyon, among other actual or looming crises—it was the people’s way of forcefully calling attention to these insults. Experts were warning of vanishing wilderness, depleted resources, approaching famine, species extinction, population bombs, energy shortages, greenhouse gases, and other eco-horrors. The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite captured these concerns in the multi-part series asking “Can the World be Saved?”

Among those present that April day was a soft-spoken, French-born biologist whose research had helped revolutionize medical practice. Extrapolating from his knowledge of biology, and of health and disease, he challenged the doomsday view of many of his scientific peers and spearheaded a philosophical and practical approach to ecological health that would transform environmental thinking. “En garde, Pessimists!” announced The New York Times, “Enter René Dubos.”

He called himself a “despairing optimist.” In his view, the “real” environmental tragedy was not the destruction of life but its progressive degradation,
not death but a worthless existence. The crux of the problem, he argued, was our failure to see ourselves as integral parts of the Earth’s ecosystem, an assertion we accept today as axiomatic. His optimism lay in his faith in the resiliency of nature and the ability of human beings to undo the damage they had wrought.

Dubos’ popularity during the 1970s was not surprising nor, the Times notwithstanding, was it sudden. He had been an authority on the relationship between environment and disease for decades. In 1968, he had written the Pulitzer Prize-winning So Human an Animal, which put forth the farsighted view that health is synonymous with ecological well-being. It had been his lifelong credo that a living organism can be understood only through its relationships with everything else.

Dubos’ persuasiveness was greatly enhanced by his personal appeal. He engaged audiences with his gentle Gallic accent and avuncular charm. Tall, large boned, and rosy cheeked, with durable white wisps on a balding head, his shy smile was quick to broaden. His attentive blue-green eyes, magnified by thick glasses, radiated inexhaustible curiosity. His large hands punctuated every sentence.

Even more captivating than his manner were his messages. The dramatic speeches and candid concerns heartened audiences who were discouraged by vague political agendas, conflicting data, and confusing expectations from medical technology. With his deep understanding of human potential and limitations, he had the ability to help people understand what they could do—where they lived, worked, and played—about their health, their life, and their environment. He gave the environmental crusade its most famous motto, “Think globally, act locally.”

Long before he became famous as an environmental philosopher, Dubos’ contributions as a biomedical researcher profoundly altered and enriched medical knowledge and practice. Throughout a long life, many remarkable insights and serendipitous events changed the path of his career several times. The earliest phases focused on soil microbes; he was an agronomist who observed how they decomposed cellulose and then a bacteriologist who used them to develop the first antibiotics. He became a skeptical medical microbiologist who alerted the public to the dangers of depending only on medicine and believing in what he called the mirage of health. As an experimental pathologist he revised the germ theory of disease to show that ubiquitous infection is the rule and overt disease the exception. As an environmental biologist he gathered evidence that led to a field of environmental biomedicine. Finally, as a “humanistic ecologist” he taught that achieving health for ourselves and the Earth depends on making creative adaptations. All the while, as biologist, teacher, consultant to government and private organizations, and
public lecturer, he served as a sage *provocateur* who championed the view that the quality of our daily lives is intricately interwoven with the quality of the Earth itself.

This biography tells the story of how a bacteriologist’s quest for the mechanisms of disease turned into a philosopher’s search for the meaning of health. As his concerns expanded from microbes to humans to society and, ultimately, to the Earth, Dubos became, as much as any individual of the twentieth century, the conscience of health. His ability to think ecologically allowed him to accept and expect nature’s changes, grasp its complexities, and fathom paradoxes in health and disease. Along with visionaries Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, his essays and lectures reflect his keen observation, philosophical penetration, and eloquence concerning the web of relationships that connects humans to all living things. Echoing Carson’s conviction of an “obligation to endure,” he elaborated on health as the will or vision to demand what is good for life.
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