

Prologue

"I have a vision of the world 1,000 years from now, where it would have fewer people, nature would be better protected and the quality of human life would be better. I want to live my life to push things just a little bit in that direction. If the human race is a brain, and my life is one cell in the brain, and if I send out a certain neurochemical signal and enough other cells do the same, then someday, the brain may get this new idea."¹

The above statement is from Robbie Ali, one of the most visionary and inspiring people I've known thus far. I had the privilege of working with Robbie on environmental public health projects for more than a year. He walks his talk, connecting with his surroundings in various ways, bringing his visions of a better world to life. The manner in which he does so reflects many characteristics of naked idealism.

To begin with, he has a deep understanding of reality, gained from both life experience and an extensive formal education. While his approaches are grounded in this, he doesn't allow it to depress him or keep him from dreaming big. Consequently, he has founded or volunteered on public health projects in countries around the globe including Haiti, Madagascar, India, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Jamaica, China, Rwanda and Indonesia.² His efforts have benefited tsunami victims, environmental health researchers, urban farming advocates, and even low-income students from his high school. He does all of this despite barriers such as a lack of public understanding, sometimes limited human and financial resources, and large organizational bureaucracies.

He also emanates a contagious passion and positive energy alongside his visions. This is another trait of a naked idealist. I recall a winter afternoon when I picked up the phone to an excited voice: "Dave, what's up? I'm acquiring a three-quarter-acre plot of vacant land that could tie into Pittsburgh's community gardening endeavors. Do you want to come take a look at it? It's got a lot of potential!"

Finding his rare exuberance and invitation to a mini-adventure hard to resist, I put on a few warm layers to brave the winter cold and grabbed the digital camera.

Despite my own visionary nature, I had some serious doubts when we arrived at the site. Although much of it was pleasantly wooded, it was bordered by train tracks and several deteriorating houses. Trash was intermittently strewn about along with a large number of tires. It would need some serious work. However, Robbie focused on the positives and began to create possibilities: “Those train tracks go all the way to the river; I used to walk alongside them. It’s a beautiful walk. Maybe it will be a trail someday...With those abandoned tires, you might even be able to build some type of small eco-friendly shelter or shed...The garden could go right over here...Maybe movement on this site will encourage someone to fix up these vacant houses...”

Although I soon returned to graduate school to pursue additional training in psychology, I later spotted a local newspaper article describing several individuals and initiatives who had become involved in making the site a community resource. His vision, alongside his ability to authentically relate to the world, had attracted the people needed to help create a new reality. These same characteristics had inspired me even when our environmental health work together revolved around bleak and depressing aspects of our current world.

Robbie is not the only person I know who embodies many aspects of naked idealism. The Rainbow Grannies, whom we’ll meet later, have not halted their civil rights quest despite obstacles including death threats. In fact, after bicycling across the continent, they expanded their energy to other causes, like building a home from recycled materials – entirely on their own! Jo Stepaniak, driven by her vision for a compassionate and sustainable world, has authored or co-authored 16 books supporting that vision. She has done this since a time when audiences for such work were incredibly small. Throughout this book, I mention several other inspiring people I’ve met, including “words of wisdom” from a few.

These individuals also seem to keep most of their ego out of their work, focusing on end results. That’s yet another trait of a naked idealist. In fact, I was hesitant to mention their names here for fear that their humility might keep them from recommending my book to others. I hope that they still will, knowing that their examples may inspire many!

Like all of these people, I hold idealistic visions of a sustainable and authentic world, and I wish to help create that reality. Like them, I also possess a strong sense of how much we are interdependent with all other life on our planet. This has been

the case since I was quite young, when a cousin rescued me from drowning in the cold, chest-stinging water of a farm pond. While this is a relatively extreme example, our lives are intertwined with myriad elements of our surroundings, and our existence depends upon our respect for them.

However, I have often struggled to pursue my visions with the same level of commitment and energy as people like Robbie, Jo, and the Rainbow Grannies. I've felt that there are still a few things missing, and part of me wants to be selfish. I sometimes have difficulty integrating what I want in my own life *and* what I'd like to see in the world. I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the current state of global affairs, *and* I want to devote more time to the things I enjoy. I want to love life to the greatest extent possible every day. These pieces don't always seem to fit together.

I eventually realized that while Stacy rescued me from the murky water that nearly took my life many years ago, she could not save me from a death that many of us suffer every day – that of not being authentic. To be fully alive in a way that fulfills us *and* creates a sustainable world, we must understand who we are and proactively work to develop a life that honors this. As we begin to do so, elements of our lives and world may take on profoundly different meanings. In the remainder of this book, for example, water symbolizes life and energy, far different connotations than it once had for me.

I hope the chapters ahead empower you to be more like the naked idealists you've met, in the way that fits you best. Congratulations on having the courage to pursue what's important to you!