

SPEECH TO SILICON VALLEY TOXICS COALITION

November 16, 1994

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I've been speaking and writing about cancer and the environmental connection to our current cancer epidemic for several years, but I've never before spoken to a group as sophisticated as this one. I don't have to tell you who are here tonight that the world we are in is a very dangerous one, a world which holds even more threats to the lives and health of our children and grandchildren than it did for my generation. You here know that. And many of you here must have known Debbie Cole.

Debbie's name is a familiar one to me, but I never knew her. I'm very sorry about that, because I admire what I know of her work, and because, different as our lives probably have been, we also shared a few things. Among those is the disease which took her life; breast cancer is the same disease that propelled me into becoming an environmental activist. I would like to have asked Debbie how it is that she became a dedicated environmentalist, what it was that moved her to spend her life's energy fighting to make our communities livable, to rid our water and our air and our soil and our food of poison, because it wasn't until I became a breast cancer victim that I, too, began to understand just how urgent the need for environmental reform is. Moreover, if Debbie Cole had lived, I'm pretty sure that she and I would have found ourselves working closely together in the very near future because the cancer movement and the environmental justice movement - of which you all are a part - must form a partnership, and perhaps because it is absolutely necessary for that unity to happen, it is, in fact, already occurring.

Thirty years ago the World Health Organization estimated that 80% of cancers are caused by human-produced carcinogens. In the ensuing 30 years, we in the industrialized world have increased the numbers of carcinogens in our environment a thousand fold, and one of the results of that uncontrolled and unabated practice of polluting is the cancer epidemic. The latest newsletter of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition has some very good articles about just how pervasive the contamination of our environment is and about how that contamination is linked to cancer and other illnesses and genetic defects. If you haven't had a chance to read that newsletter, I urge you to do so, and I won't bother to repeat the evidence clearly demonstrated in the articles.

Instead, tonight I want to touch on two points, one depressing and one exciting. First the bad news. And that is that I think the situation regarding environmental pollution and the cancer epidemic is possibly even worse than it is presented in the newsletter. Not only is the chemical contamination in our bodies already so severe that if the breast milk of most American mothers were bottled and put up for sale on grocery store shelves, the FDA would be forced to recall it as unfit for human consumption - not only is that the case - but our bodies must

also contend with a nuclear pollution that is, I think, much greater than most of us realize. For instance, the Livermore labs have leaked more than a million curies of radiation directly into the atmosphere. To give you some idea of how serious that is, the amount of radiation released in 1979 during the Three Mile Island accident, which has resulted in a six-fold increase in infant mortality rates in the area according to the Physicians for Social Responsibility, was all of fifteen curies. In our own backyard, a million curies have been spewed into our air, and the Livermore labs are not the only nuclear facilities around. The female breast is the most sensitive of all human organs to the carcinogenicity of ionizing radiation, and breast cancer rates, according to Drs. Jay Gould and Ernest Sternglass, are nearly 40% higher among women living downwind of nuclear power plants. When you look at the whole picture, taking into account chemical, nuclear, and electromagnetic pollution, then you begin to get some idea of how complex and how threatening the situation we find ourselves in really is.

In the same vein, the "cancer establishment," was mentioned in one of the Action articles. Those are the people who are supposed to be fighting cancer. We use that term to designate certain financially and politically intermeshed and interdependent groups, those being (1) cancer research institutions, (2) government agencies such as the National Cancer Institute, (3) the fabulously wealthy pharmaceutical industry, and - last - the American Cancer Society. This cancer establishment is a very deeply entrenched force for maintaining the status quo, a status quo which has served them well. More than a TRILLION dollars have been spent on research and treatment since the so-called war on cancer was declared in 1971, while the mortality statistics continue to climb year after year. The annual shipments of cancer drugs are in the neighborhood of 40 billion dollars. In these lucrative circumstances, it's quite consistent that the American Cancer Society is, for instance, still maintaining that premenopausal women should get annual mammograms - annual doses of yet more ionizing radiation - instead of developing a non-harmful screening method; there are billions of dollars tied up in those very expensive mammography machines, and the only way that investment can continue to realize a profit is by continuing to zap our breasts and bill our insurance companies - never mind that those machines may well be contributing to some breast cancers. I don't think the cancer movement fully understands yet how formidable an adversary the cancer establishment is. These highly profitable and very powerful organizations are not about to seriously address the need for radical policy changes in the way we produce food and goods in this country. So we will have to directly confront not only the polluters and the politicians who protect them, but also the cancer establishment, particularly the American Cancer Society which is their public mouthpiece - most of what the American public believes about cancer they learned from the American Cancer Society - because these guys are the silent accomplices of agricultural and industrial polluters.

Third, if we are going to be effective, we are going to have to

expand our actions and networking across national borders. NAFTA, as you all know, promises much worse pollution on our continent, and GATT is looming over the horizon with the potential of increasing still more the avenues which polluters will have to escape any local or national limitations on their profit-making polluting practices.

That's the bad news - the situation is pretty grim, and our battle is going to be a really tough one. But I promised you some good news, and there is some; some really hopeful things are happening.

Even though the situation is grave and the fight will be a hard one, as a people, we've faced difficult battles before. Don't forget that we stopped the war in Vietnam 20 years ago! We really did that. And the signs that we are really beginning to confront the cancer epidemic are blooming like spring flowers - all over the place. Environmental and environmental justice groups, cancer groups, civil rights groups in the past year or so have begun forming local and national coalitions - we are today understanding that we have a common goal and that we will only gain the strength we need by uniting. We're doing it! And we are crossing the borders, at least on this continent.

So, I want to end by congratulating all of you who are here, because you are my hope, my hope for a healthy world for my grandchildren (I just became a grandmother), for all our children and grandchildren - for all future generations. In the spirit of Debbie Cole, let's give ourselves and big hand, and... keep up the good work!