

Editor's Note

Caitlin Lee's "Where Are the Crazy People?" focuses on Cal Poly Professor Lars Tomanek's commitment to and passion for the environment. The author organizes her discussion according to a pattern of carefully selected responses to the interview questions that illustrate a particular depiction of her subject. This strategy of relying on Dr. Tomanek's responses results in a sense of immediacy for the reader, in effect providing the audience a privileged glimpse into the interview and the subject's worldview. Also, because ideas are sequenced analytically and rhetorically, not strictly chronologically, the essay maintains its focus on the analytical thesis by using as evidence only the strictly relevant portions of the subject's responses. For instance, one paragraph explores a key point in Tomanek's early development, while a later one defines him via descriptions of individuals whom he admires. Lee includes plenty of colorful descriptive detail that directly supports her observations about her subject in the opening paragraph. Quotation comprises roughly half of that paragraph—how well does this approach work in the introduction?

Where Are the Crazy People?

Caitlin Lee

“We need more crazy people!” Hand gestures fly and Dr. Lars Tomanek, a third-year biological sciences professor at Cal Poly, is atwitter with excitement and genuine passion. His voice gives way to a slight accent, revealing his childhood in Germany. His modest beard, jean pants, and tennis shoes (dark enough so dirt is not readily noticeable) align with his enthusiasm for the natural outdoors. His strong eye contact is representative not only of the severity of this global climate change crisis, but of his unshakable belief that we, as humans, will save the planet. “We need more crazy people to come up with solutions, to make the first move, to take the first step.” He says, “You don’t know what you start; you might start something. Instead of going right, make a left, and all of a sudden everyone thinks, ‘You know what, that’s a smart move. I’ll do this too, this way. That seems good.’” He pauses, “We have this amazing opportunity before us . . . we are going to change the planet; we have to fix it. This is the only planet we have and it’s a pretty damn nice place; let’s take care of it.”

At age eleven, Dr. Tomanek had a “small, but brilliant thought.” He was given a book about amphibians and building ponds by his biology teacher. He read in this book that a person needs permission to build a pond or to change something in a “green space.” He felt his hometown, an industrialized region in Germany, could use

a little more green. He called the city officials looking for an environmentalist, someone to help him build a pond. He was sent from one place to the next, given one number after another, when finally he thought he had the right person. At 10:00 pm he reached a youth group leader, who proceeded to invite him to attend an activity the following day to explore the natural history of Germany. "This little connection I made [with the environment] really paid off," recalls Dr. Tomanek with a laugh as nostalgia fills his small office that is overstuffed with biology books. "We built many ponds; we changed whatever we could." His rate of speech increases and he shifts to the front edge of his chair when he reveals that by age fourteen he was arguing with the city officials about how to maintain the green space in the city.

Since that experience, Dr. Tomanek has become increasingly more aware of the huge human footprint and of the environmental destruction that is a problem worldwide. Unfortunately, the world has been in denial of this big issue. Dr. Tomanek agrees that big issues are difficult to deal with because the solution involves changing our entire life and adopting a different mindset. However, Dr. Tomanek already has a different mindset. "As much as [global climate change] is a danger, it is an opportunity. We have so much to gain."

A large portion of the world has yet to discover this opportunity and, as a result, is hesitant to jump on the bandwagon. The world has been warned about the potential of this problem since the 1970s and here it is: the year 2008, and global climate change finally has reached the level of recognition that is needed to initiate change. "I think that people believe that it will cost us to do something about climate change, but I cannot see a single reason not to do what we have to do in order to reduce CO₂ emissions," Dr. Tomanek shrugs. He calls attention to the fact that even a little investment will pay off, both for the environment and the economy. He recognizes that people may have to give up a tiny bit of luxury in their everyday lives, but of course he emphasizes the opportunity above all else. "We can be much stronger. We totally have it in us to fix up the planet."

Strength is evident in people Dr. Tomanek recognizes as "change agents." In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to follow orders that she give up her seat to make room for a white passenger, thus resulting in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the civil rights movement. In 1977, Wangari Maathai began planting what would amount to over 30 million trees across Kenya to prevent soil erosion and combat deforestation, and thus the Greenbelt Movement was born. Dr. Tomanek identifies these people, among others, as change agents because they had an idea and an ensuing action that turned into a solution. He knows the mindset it took to initiate that kind of change and is looking to bring the same mindset to the global climate change issue. His fervor reaches a new level when he advocates "global climate change parties," where every-

one brings a solution. He adds, “If we are proud to be humans, if we are proud to be on Earth and be alive, and if we are thankful, we should show off that we really are the smartest species.” But this intelligence incorporates more than just brain power; it adds in an appreciation for the present and future environment.

Serenity temporarily overtakes the office atmosphere as Dr. Tomanek relaxes back into his swivel chair and reminisces about hiking and backpacking through the great outdoors. It is through this bond with backpacking that he realizes how much he relies on the environment. He describes the point on a trail where hikers have no choice but to stop to take in the beauty. Thinking of songs and poems that attempt to capture this moment, Dr. Tomanek hopes “that people will still appreciate nature and be thankful for our connection with it” in the years to come.

Dr. Tomanek radiates optimism. From someone who knows and understands the full extent of the problem, optimism is refreshing. His confidence is contagious. He refuses to give in to negative messages about the end of the world or a return to the days of the caveman once the world depletes its resources. He believes these messages should encourage positive visions and promote positive change. More people need to embrace the opportunity for change and be a part of the transformation. He admits that it may take three to five years to turn the environment around, but he has every reason to believe it is possible. Dr. Tomanek is excited about the solutions that Cal Poly students and countries nationwide are bringing to the design table that will allow for innovative and creative ways of living life. He leans back and sighs, “Who knows . . . maybe you have a brilliant idea in you.” Who knows? After all, we need more crazy people.

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