



*For Tomorrow's Child:  
An Environmental Epiphany*

**John Lanier  
Atlanta, Georgia**

John Lanier recalls an anecdote from his youth that has shaped his leadership of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation to this very day. “One day I was thinking about what to do, what path to go down, and I had this memory of my grandfather. I was just 18. On my way to visit my grandfather, I came up with a question I wanted to ask him, to show him I'd really been thinking about sustainability. When I got there I asked, ‘If you could wave a magic wand and make one of the world's environmental problems go away, what would it be?’ Without hesitation, he answered, ‘Global warming.’ Even then, in 2004, the science was clear—and it's even more clear today. Today, 17 years later, the majority of my work is in the climate space. It was a seed that was planted back then, and it has become the purpose of my life to work on reversing global warming. And I have my grandfather to thank for that.”

Ray C. Anderson, “The Greenest CEO in America,” often shared the story of how he had *his* environmental epiphany. “What is Interface doing to help the environment?” a customer had asked one of the company's sales reps one day. “Complying with environmental law,” he had answered.

But when Ray was told about this exchange, although he knew it was an *accurate* response, he realized it wasn't actually a very good answer. He felt that Interface could do better than that.

By that time, Interface was a multinational manufacturing powerhouse leading the modular carpeting industry. There was no real reason for Anderson to risk his position at the top, and he hadn't intended to—until that question from a conscientious customer came to his attention, and caused him to think again.

Ray Anderson prided himself on being a thoughtful and intellectually curious man. He knew it was what had allowed him to have such success in business. So when it came time to look for a better answer to the customer's challenging question, he approached it with that self-same curiosity. He picked up a book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, by Paul Hawken. And by the time he had finished reading it, he realized that reading that book was going to change the trajectory of his life.

Anderson famously described his epiphany as a "spear-in-the-chest moment." He later said that reading *The Ecology of Commerce* had as good as convicted him as being a plunderer of the earth. From that point on, he worked desperately to drive the necessary innovations that would allow his publicly traded company to take a pledge of sustainability, and set the stage for a new way forward in the realm of sustainable business practices.

For him, the work was never about a personal legacy. He believed wholeheartedly that future generations *must* be able to benefit from businessmen solving the environmental challenges of the day. He was laser-focused on the importance of the *continuity* of the work he was doing. And his “North Star” was always “I'm doing this for the generation to come, for tomorrow's child.”

Today, his grandson John Lanier carries on his grandfather's legacy through the Ray C. Anderson Foundation, which Ray endowed upon his passing in 2011. Anderson left his family without a specific directive, aside from the

understanding that the endowment was to be used to serve the greater good. John feels that this open-endedness was a gift. “It put the onus on us as a family to carve out our own niche in sustainability.”

But he started by studying his grandfather’s approach to making Interface an environmentally friendly business.

Ray Anderson had started by working to change the company culture internally, which was an uphill battle. As he announced changes, employees often wondered if this was just another “flavor of the month” from the top. “Aren't we supposed to be in the business of making carpets?” they sometimes grumbled. The substantive changes their boss was introducing took a lot of convincing. But he knew that his job wasn't just to describe *what* Interface was doing; he had to explain *why*. He believed that if his employees understood the need for widescale change in manufacturing on a global scale, they would eventually come around. And slowly, but surely, they did.

After a few years, Interface was ready to do the work they were aspiring towards: but what that work was for, exactly, wasn't defined. Ray was adamant that Interface *would become* a sustainable company, *and* that they would “do no harm.”

To do that, he knew that they needed to first ask the question, “What are the ways in which a manufacturing company does harm?”

Ray Anderson played a pivotal role in defining what sustainability in manufacturing actually is. In doing so, he tasked Interface with scaling what he called the “7 fronts of Mt. Sustainability.”

1. Achieve zero waste.
2. Produce only benign emissions into the environment.
3. Be powered entirely by renewable energy.
4. Develop a closed-loop manufacturing process.
5. Achieve resource-efficient transportation of people and products.
6. Engage stakeholders, including the supply chains and customer base, to minimize negative impacts.
7. Look for ways to redesign commerce that incentivize positive environmental and social outcomes.

Amazingly, and to the surprise of the many skeptics in his own company and beyond, Interface actually became a significantly *more* profitable enterprise for taking this course of action. Ray’s work had laid bare the persistent myth that a business could not pursue both profitability and environmental ends concurrently. The four components of his model for increasing profitability through the expansion of sustainability efforts, which still stand today, are: 1. Efficiency 2. Innovation 3. Culture Change and 4. Goodwill.

If there is a place to look at just how deeply Ray C. Anderson impacted the people who took up his cause, perhaps his legacy was best captured in a poem by longtime Interface employee Glenn Thomas, which was read by Anderson at his TED Talk in 2009.

### *Tomorrow's Child*

*Without a name; an unseen face  
and knowing not your time nor place,  
Tomorrow's Child, though yet unborn  
I met you first last Tuesday morn.*

*A wise friend introduced us two,  
and through his shining point of view  
I saw a day that you would see;  
a day for you, but not for me.*

*Knowing you has changed my thinking  
for I never had an inkling*

*That perhaps the things I do  
might someday, somehow, threaten you.*

*Tomorrow's Child, my daughter/son  
I'm afraid I've just begun  
To think of you and of your good,  
though always having known I should.*

*Begin I will to weigh the cost  
of what I squander; what is lost  
If ever I forget that you  
will someday come to live here too.*

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Intent on educating the next generation of environmental businessmen and women, the Ray C. Anderson Foundation's first major undertaking was to establish the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business at Georgia Tech. "It took my grandfather until he was 60 to figure this thing out. We wanted to make sure our up-and-coming leaders don't have to wait so long," John Lanier says. Next, the Foundation developed a partnership with The Biomimicry Institute to support entrepreneurs who are utilizing biomimicry in their startups.

To honor his grandfather's legacy, John has also helped to launch Drawdown Georgia, an initiative inspired by Paul Hawken's seminal 2017 book, *Drawdown*. This initiative is addressing the most substantive climate solutions for the state of Georgia. Its ultimate goal is to achieve carbon neutrality for the entire state, and to bring climate solutions to scale.

And it's not just John carrying on his grandfather's legacy: the whole family is involved. Ray's five grandchildren and their spouses formed the Foundation's NextGen Committee to invest in projects geared toward making the world a better place for "Tomorrow's Child." The committee funds programs in conservation and climate change education, urban agriculture, agroforestry, and grassroots solutions to address climate change challenges in Indigenous communities.

For today's young people who want to carry on a legacy of sustainability, John's message is simple. "Educate yourself with a passion," he says. "Our greatest hope is for the youth to understand that they have to be experts about the challenges they want to solve. It's a lot of work. But I think they are just the generation to do it. And I look forward to seeing their successes."

*[The poem] Tomorrow's Child has spoken to me with one simple but profound message, which I share with you...we are each part of the web of life and we have a choice to make during our brief visit to this beautiful planet: to hurt it or to help it...it's your call.*

**Ray C. Anderson**

**Call to Action:** To learn more about the Ray C. Anderson Foundation, visit <https://www.raycandersonfoundation.org/nextgen/>.

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