

Dr. Marc Lappé
1943-2005



Dr. Marc Lappé, an educator, author, and prominent toxicologist and medical ethicist, died Saturday May 14th. He was 62. Dr. Lappé was a leading figure in the movement to integrate ethics and public policy, especially as it related to toxics and genetics. He authored or edited fourteen books, many of which predicted public health and environmental problems long before their appearance. *Germs That Won't Die* (Anchor/Doubleday, 1982) warned of the public health threat of antibiotic resistance, and *Against the Grain* (Common Courage, 1998) disproved many claims made by manufacturers of genetically modified foods. He held a PhD in experimental pathology from the University of Pennsylvania and was a frequent source for media outlets, appearing on *60 Minutes*, *The Today Show*, and *Dateline NBC*. He worked as a key expert witness in numerous high-profile lawsuits, including *Anderson et al v. W. R. Grace & Co.*, popularized in the best-selling book and Hollywood film *A Civil Action*. Between 1984 and 1998, he worked extensively as a consultant on the high stakes litigation that had erupted over silicone-gel breast implants. He was the director of the Gualala, California-based non-profit Center for Ethics and Toxics (CETOS), a national leader in environmental public policy that works directly with California municipalities with concerns about contaminants in their water supplies.

His career was marked by a commitment to standing up to powerful corporate interests and a concern for populations most vulnerable to toxic contamination of their water and air. He also was a lifelong teacher, gifted in explaining complicated ethical and scientific concepts to lay audiences. In the late 1960s, he began teaching as a volunteer professor in the politically-charged free university movement in Philadelphia, Pa. and Berkeley, Ca. He later held posts at UC Berkeley, Sarah Lawrence College, University of Illinois Chicago School of Medicine, and the College of Marin. In 1999, he co-founded a charter grammar and high school on the redwood coast of California's Mendocino County.

Marc Alan Lappé was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1943. His father Paul, the son of a Jewish Russian émigré, entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at age fifteen. His mother Jeanette taught in the Newark public schools. As an undergraduate at Wesleyan University, Dr. Lappé did cancer research at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. At age 25, he was granted the first PhD in experimental pathology awarded to a candidate without a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

While working on his PhD, Marc married Frances Moore Lappé, who authored the 1971 classic *Diet for a Small Planet*. (They divorced in 1975.) They had two children, Anthony, executive editor of the Guerrilla News Network and award-winning documentary film producer, and Anna, a national bestselling author and popular public speaker. They both live in New York City.

In 1971, he was one of the original fellows of the Hastings Center, the nation's top bioethics think tank, where he began examining the ethical implications of the looming genetic revolution long before it reached the popular consciousness.

Dr. Lappé's ethics were shaped by his longtime interest in Eastern philosophy. He was a proponent of the precautionary principle, the ethical theory that if consequences of an action, especially concerning technology, are uncertain but are judged to have a high risk, it is best to not carry out the action.

In 1976, he published *Of All Things Most Yielding* (Friends of the Earth/McGraw-Hill, 1976), which combined photographs of Glen Canyon, now flooded by the Colorado River, and ancient Chinese poetry selected by Dr. Lappé.

In 1978, he was named by California Governor Jerry Brown as chief of the state's Office of Health, Law, and Values, and then as head of the state's Hazard Evaluation System. When California's citrus crops were plagued by an outbreak of the Medfly, Dr. Lappé refused to sign onto the spraying of Malathion, an insecticide with known toxicity to humans. The state sprayed; Dr. Lappé stepped down.

Beginning in the 1980s, he began working independently with plaintiff lawyers on high-profile legal battles over environmental contamination and drug and medical devices failures. Cases included the infamous Love Canal toxic waste disaster in New York, Vietnam veterans sickened by Agent Orange, pesticide exposure among farm workers, and the neurological problems from the malaria drug Lariam. He played a pivotal role in the contentious silicone breast implant litigation, which pitted tens of thousands of women against Dow Corning Corp., the maker of the devices. In 1998, Dow Corning settled a class action suit for \$3.2 billion. The company was forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Dr. Lappé was named as a consultant to the Food and Drug Administration's panel on medical devices and testified in front of numerous congressional panels on genetic engineering, environmental pollution, and medical ethics.

In 1988, he became a tenured professor of Health Policy and Ethics at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

He served on the March of Dimes National Foundation's Bioethics Committee since its inception in 1975, where he was a strong advocate for acknowledging the connection between the environment, toxics and birth defects.

In 1977, he married Nichol Lovera. They had three children, Matthew, who holds a MS from Stanford University, Martine, a PhD candidate at the University of California San Francisco, and Gina, a junior in high school who is a champion horseback rider.

Ms. Lovera died in 1996.

In 1992, Dr. Lappé founded the Center for Ethics and Toxics (CETOS) in the small redwood coast town of Gualala, California. CETOS is dedicated to preventing and mitigating the impact of toxic substances, particularly where those impacts affect vulnerable populations. Since its inception the center has developed guidelines and strategies to reduce toxic exposures, including a 1996-7 campaign to prevent roadside spraying with herbicides in Mendocino County, and a testing regimen to monitor pesticides in the drinking water of the small coastal town of Fort Bragg, California. The organization also played an active role in the ongoing battles over logging on the Pacific coast. CETOS worked as a consultant to the Forest Stewardship Council, which regulates the conditions for ecologically sound and sustainable logging practices. In 2004, CETOS played a leading role in the passage of Measure H, a referendum which banned raising genetically altered crops and animals in Mendocino County, the first such ban in the nation. The organization continues to educate the public about toxic chemicals and environmental health, and to research human health and the ecological impacts of environmental contamination.

In 1997, Dr. Lappé married lifelong friend Jacqueline Durbin, an intensive care nurse and yoga instructor.

In 1998, Dr. Lappé and Jacqueline founded the Pacific Community Charter School with other parents in Point Arena, California to provide an alternative educational environment for local students. Despite his heavy load of legal cases, work at CETOS, and a teaching post at the College of Marin, Dr. Lappé devoted time to teach science at the charter high school. He was known as being a life-transforming teacher who instilled in his students a love of learning and an appreciation for the importance of ethical thinking.

Dr. Lappé was also an award-winning poet who wrote emotionally intense poems that explored family, science, philosophy, and nature.

Dr. Lappé died peacefully at home in his sleep. The cause was cancer.

He is survived by his father Paul Lappé, brother cardiologist Don Lappé and wife Jacqueline, and children Anthony, 33; Anna, 31; Matt, 25; Martine, 22; Gina, 17; and step-children, Danielle Spoor, 16; and Sasha Spoor, 29.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Center for Ethics and Toxics through its web site, www.cetos.org.

The estate of Marc Lappé, PhD
