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Returning to Eden ~ Christa Grace-Warrick

I first heard of the Eden Project while in England in 2000/01. I remember my sister, a butterfly preservation expert, mentioning it. Preoccupied with family, it didn't click. But now I realize this amazing botanical garden in Cornwall, the south-west tip of Britain, was just opening at that time.

Last year, my brother from Australia was here for the summer and at the end of it he flew to England to my stepfather's 85th birthday.

Richard, a lifelong lover of Cornwall where we grew up, took my stepfather to the former china clay tailings pit transformed into the Eden Project, the '8th wonder of the world.' He brought back the guide book for me and, about this time last year, I read it one Saturday morning.

A language fan, I was inspired as much by the direct way the booklet was written as by the story of the transformation of the derelict site into a botanical garden with a difference. The foreword was written by Tim Smit, the mover and shaker, I guessed. Who was he? A web search was fruitful.

Originally an archeologist turned pop-song writer and recording producer, Smit moved to Cornwall to create a recording studio but went exploring one day....

I read *The Lost Gardens of Heligan*, Smit's story of his first horticultural project in Cornwall. Tim had literally hacked his way into this overgrown Victorian garden next door. It took hold of his imagination. Smit used his leadership and team-building talents to talk his way through fundraising, local planning authorities and small-town public meetings.

Spotter of opportunities of all sorts and quick to turn them to advantage, Smit and the many people he inspired restored the gardens (www.heligan.com). He felt it was a tribute to all the ordinary Victorian working people who had originally created the garden.

Smit is not just a life-long learner, he takes what he knows and applies it to his next project. What about building a botanical garden that shows the world-wide connection between people and plants—in the disused china clay pit that he often drove past?

Once again he caught the imagination of people in this economically depressed region, and throughout Britain. The

project received magnificent offers of help, from architect Nicholas Grimshaw and construction giant McAlpine and many others. A seminal boost was a \$50million UK Millenium Project grant.

The Eden Trust pre-opened in May 2000 as a 'come and see us build the world's largest greenhouses' (a very successful strategy which had happened unplanned at the Lost Gardens of Heligan)—and was flooded with visitors. In March 2001, its gigantic fabric biomes and gardens went live and have since had millions of visitors.

Never marking time, Eden's programs and project world-wide have burgeoned and Tim's music business know-how has even been incorporated through an annual pop concert series. And there's even a skating rink which helps keep the attraction going year-long.

A business maverick, Tim Smit is still CEO of Eden. The facility has had millions of visitors, practises local-sourcing of supplies (giving a sustaining boost to Cornwall's economy), recycles assiduously, and has an innovative business and employment ethic for its 600 employees.

Smit is a promoter of social enterprise—business with a heart. He thinks that many things that need doing can only be done by large enterprises and that many of them are willing to have a go—if only they knew how or what.

Meanwhile he has developed an provocative set of management rules. 'Business,' he says 'is life writ large.' He says he makes sure to work with people he likes, this is of course an add-on to basic competence for the job.

Team leaders are interviewed and chosen in a two-day process by the people who will work for them. What a boost, he says, to start a job with a team which made you its leader.

He plans to keep employees ten years and has some unusual requirements of them. Once a year: they must give a performance of some kind; they must give a presentation about why they like working for Eden; they must cook a meal for forty colleagues; and they must make a wish come true for somebody who does not know they are doing so. Everybody has to learn to play samba drums and once a year the entire company comes together to play samba. Every year, each one must read two books, see two plays and watch two films which their friends

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would say are outside their areas of interest.

Removing the blinkers from people's eyes is Smit's objective, both with visitors to Eden and the staff. He wants his employees 'not to be comfy intellectually but comfy with the people they work with.' A question he likes people to ask themselves is, 'What do I feel strongly about that I know nothing about.'

He often turns ideas on their head to provoke new ideas and solutions from employees. To get a focus on company structure, one of his well-used questions is 'What 10 things would you do if wanted to trash this company?' He also likes to start at the end point, 'What does great look like?'

On a daily basis, employees are encouraged to say 'good morning' to 20 people. That way, he says, people know what's going on in the enterprise. He also says that he gives people time off in the day so that every so often they can work at night,

'by winelight.' This is when all the best new ideas get created.

He has strong ideas about women—freeing up restraints on women will change the world, he believes. The anthropologist in him has no undue reverence for the past or ancient cultures, especially if they suppressed women.

He believes we are at the start of the first global civilization. It is an idea which seems to please him a great deal.

On October 30 this year, Smit spoke at two local public meetings. Eden wants to install a very tall wind-turbine on the edge of the one-time tailings pit, to generate Eden's power needs on-site and even feed some renewable energy into the national grid. Some neighbours are against it. The decision will be made by Restormel Borough Council on January 29. It will be fascinating to see what happens next.

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