

# WORLD-RENOWNED HARPIST CONCENTRATES ON EARTH BEFORE HEAVEN

A Conversation with Yolanda Kondonassis

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With the release of her first children's book, *Our House Is Round: A Kid's Book About Protecting Our Earth Matters*, world-renowned harpist Yolanda Kondonassis takes on the task of teaching the "whys" of earth conservation to kids.

**Q: Well, the first and most obvious question is: You have a successful career as a classical solo harpist – why branch into the field of kid's book writing?**

YK: This project came about in stages, but there were actually two catalysts. One was my desire for an environmental book for my daughter (who was seven at the time) that explained the "whys" behind earth conservation actions such as recycling, planting trees, turning off lights, etc. The teacher in me always says that if you want to get people to form a new habit that requires effort, they have to know why it's important. I simply couldn't find a book for kids in the pre-middle school age group that addressed environmental issues beyond basic suggestions such as recycling and certainly very little or no mention of why we need to do it. The second catalyst



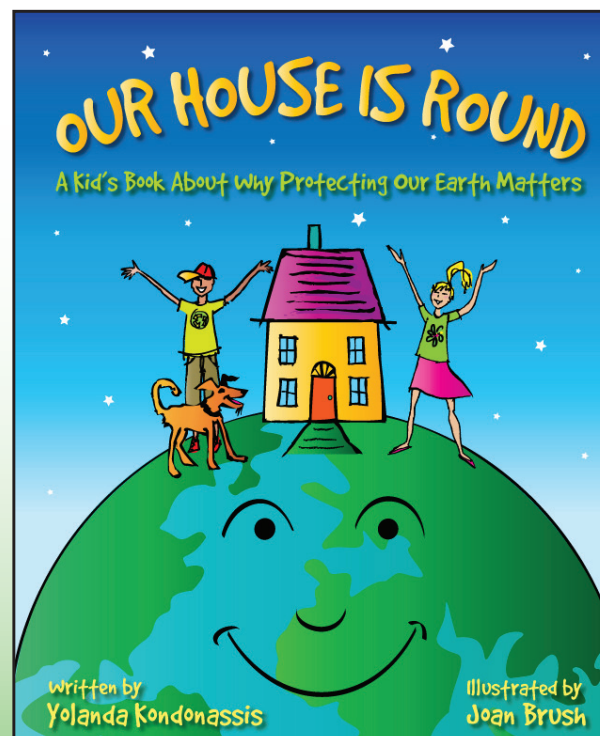
was my non-profit organization called *Earth at Heart*, which is devoted to inspiring earth awareness and action through the arts. This book was a great fit within that mission.

**Q: What is your biggest environmental concern?**

YK: Apathy and denial. The world has many concerns on its plate right now and certainly there is much work to be done on a whole host of fronts, but the time has come to view environmental issues near the very top of the priority list. This is one reason my book starts with a discussion of global connection and the metaphor of a round house. Unless we start to place a priority on dealing with all the assaults against our planet, we place ourselves in the position of someone spending untold amounts of energy trying to clean and redecorate the interior of a house that will eventually collapse from an eroding foundation.

**Q: This book is more plain-spoken than most kid's books about what causes environmental problems. Was that a conscious decision?**

YK: Very conscious. I have a huge amount of respect for the intelligence and capacity



of kids. I learned long ago that it's almost always a mistake to talk down to children. They are refreshingly lacking in agendas so their minds are open in the most productive and observant way. They are also shockingly honest. If something doesn't make sense, they will usually ask all the right questions and shine a spotlight on the blind spots of adults in about two seconds flat. I love that. Perhaps we should have a kids' delegation Congress.

**Q: In your book, you don't avoid or tip-toe around the issue of climate change. Tell us about your convictions.**

YK: It's a pretty simple cause and effect equation. The problems facing our earth aren't simple, but recognizing that we do indeed have problems should be pretty clear. I am big on metaphors so to use another one, I have found that at the beginning of a child's cold or flu, there is always the temptation for parents to say "it's allergies," "he's overtired," "she had a long day," "he's overheated," etc. For working parents, a sick child requires scheduling overhaul, missed obligations, and family upheaval. No one wants to admit when these disruptions are imminent. But most moms also know that glassy look in their kids' eyes that says we're headed into the sick zone for a few days. Our earth definitely has that glassy-eyed look and we need to admit it so we can get on with solutions. The goal should not be to slow the damage, but to reverse the trends.

**Q: What do you hope your book teaches kids that they might not have known before reading it?**

YK: There are some cool facts in the book that not only give kids some background on how our earth works, but also ignite the imagination with colorful imagery that I think will make concepts easier to remember and understand. One of my favorite images features an animated, pollution-eating tree. A lot of kids don't know that trees actually absorb pollution.

**Q: The illustrations in your book are so colorful and vivid – what were your visual goals when you conceptualized the book and worked with your illustrator?**

YK: I was extremely fortunate to find a wonderful illustrator named Joan Brush to bring all of the ideas to life. I just love her use of mixed textures and techniques. I am acutely aware of the importance of imagery in kid's books. I still recall some of my favorite illustrations from when I was a kid. I remember loving a picture of Jack and the Beanstalk that showed the vine curling and twisting endlessly up into the sky. That image began my understanding of the concept that the sky is not a ceiling, but an infinite space. Great illustrations can do amazing things in the minds of children.

**Q: What is your hope for the next generation of environmental stewardship?**

YK: I hope that our next generation will feel a genuine ownership of environmental issues that will inspire global cooperation on long term solutions. The short term will be over all too soon.