

The Cure for Green Fatigue

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I can't remember a time when I didn't cherish the earth and work to preserve it. After all, it has cared for me all these years—providing food to eat, places to explore, and a green sanctuary for retreat from the world's hard edges.

Sometimes, though, I'll find myself wishing I didn't have to consider my environmental impact all the time, wondering if my conservation efforts are making a lick of difference. How can my little actions matter, when our global climate problems are so big?

My attitude has a name: green fatigue, a general malaise characterized by cynicism and hopelessness. News junkies like me are particularly susceptible to it. Pessimistic warnings about a changing climate seem to get more dire every day. Even documentaries about God's amazing creation can be downers. I was shocked one night when my ten-year-old daughter sat down to watch the PBS program *Nature* and remarked grimly, "I wonder which animal is going extinct this week."

The problem with so much bad news is that people stop taking it seriously, doubtful that their efforts could possibly make a dent.

Along with hopelessness comes cynicism. Journalist Hugh Wilson sheds some light on the psychology behind this attitude. According to his article "Have You Got Green Fatigue?" industries have used conservation as a marketing tool,

prompting the term "green-washing." When big corporations and celebrities make superficial claims about their environmental impact, cynicism isn't just inevitable, it's a coping strategy for consumers who are trying to do the right thing. (To read more of his article online go to www.independent.co.uk/environment/greenliving/have-you-got-green-fatigue-402971.html.) When Wal-Mart claims to be sustainable, but its shelves still bend with imported plastic goods and apples from China, can it claim to be green? What does "green" mean, anyway?

I ignore the quicksand of green fatigue until I'm up to my neck in it. Suddenly all my efforts seem like a sad farce. Come on, who am I kidding? Becoming overwhelmed with bad news tempts me to feel responsible for the whole planet. Like a misguided Atlas, I fret about polar bears and penguins, not to mention the people who suffer from the consequences of poor resource management: deforestation in Haiti, rain forests on fire, and other stomach-clenching dilemmas. I fret as if it were my job to monitor the twenty-four-hour news cycle, as if every report were a personal call to action, when I really need to turn off the television.

The cure for this melancholy outlook is almost a cliché, but it works: "Do something." I see it in my friend Sue, a member of the Holy Cross religious order, who creates programs that teach people about creation care.

She spends most of her days steeped in the realities of global warming, but she doesn't assume it's all up to her. Saving the world is God's job. "You can't do it perfectly and you can't do it all. Just do what you can do," she tells me when I'm in a green lather. "You can't do everything. But you can do *something*."

I have found that it helps to do something with someone else, to be part of a community effort. Here is just a small example. I recently spent an hour helping my daughter's elementary school ecology club sort and bag bottle tops. They hope to collect enough to purchase a chair for the playground made of...bottle tops! I left that classroom buoyant with hope. Why? Because the fifth and sixth graders were doing something right where they were, setting an example for their classmates. Who knew what that would inspire? They were doing their part. Now I need to do mine.

Teaching my kids about gardening, helping a business set up a recycling program, moving to a smaller home, writing about the challenges of a sustainable life—these are the things I'm able to do. Like a tiny trickle, my "somethings" flow into the grand ocean of other "somethings." I can make a difference, and so can you—we just have to do it together. No more green fatigue! ■

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