

the Frugal Environmentalist

because being green doesn't have to be expensive



Volume 1, Issue 3

Fall 2003

\$4.95

Stop Feeling Guilty

After my parents got hooked on *The Frugal Environmentalist*, I decided it was time to help them experiment with making eco-friendly changes in their own home. You see, they were interested in what I had to say (I'm their kid, of course), but they weren't necessarily interested in making radical changes in their lives. At least not without some gentle prompting.

I started small, with a thin glossy catalog from Connecticut Light & Power. Through this catalog, CL&P sold a variety of energy-saving devices to its electric customers. My parents agreed to try compact fluorescent bulbs in every fixture that would accommodate them, provided that they liked the quality of the light. They also agreed to try CL&P's plastic toilet bags, which displace water in the tank so that less water is wasted with each flush.

My goal was not simply to change my parents' behavior, but rather to use them as a sort of "test family." After all, my parents are an average, middle-aged, working-class couple. Although they aren't environmentalists, they can see enough environmental blight in their post-industrial town of Waterbury, Connecticut to know the importance of protecting the environment. Nonetheless, they don't want to spend more money, and they don't want to inconvenience themselves. If I could find solutions that would work for my parents, then certainly these solutions would be well within the grasp of the readers of *The Frugal Environmentalist*.

After the second issue came out, I confessed to my mother that I hoped she and my father would become my test family. Every month or two, I'd suggest a couple of changes to them. They'd try them out, and after a year or so of experimentation, I'd write about their experiences in *The Frugal Environmentalist*.

My mother looked dubious.

Her concern: my next set of changes involved household cleaning products. My two suggestions: switch to eco-friendly automatic dishwashing detergent, and replace harsh, strong-smelling chemical cleaners with red juice and blue juice, two relatively benign cleaners sold through The Clean Team catalog (www.thecleanteam.com).

My mother balked at the eco-friendly dish detergent. It was three times more expensive than the phosphate and chlorine laden product she was

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The Frugal Environmentalist
Fall 2003

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Anderson Business Graphics
1141 NW Market Street
Seattle, WA 98107

Subscriptions are \$17.95.
Sample copies are available for
\$5.00. Please send check or
money order to:

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Seattle, WA 98145-0095

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currently using. This price difference assumed that I bought a case of detergent on sale at the co-op with my working member discount, and she bought hers on sale at the grocery store with double or triple coupons.

So we looked at her dishwasher manual. Given her water type (medium) and the dirtiness of the dishes they were putting in the dishwasher (they were only lightly soiled), she could use 75% less detergent than she was currently using. By drastically reducing the amount of detergent she used, she could switch to the chlorine and phosphate free Seventh Generation product I was advocating, and still spend less on automatic dishwashing detergent.

As for the other cleaning supplies, they would start out free; they were leftover from the time before I began making my own cleaners. Besides, The Clean Team products would be fairly cheap if she liked them and decided to eventually buy them on her own. Once you have the spray bottles (\$2 each), you could buy concentrated cleaning solution in bulk, then mix up your own batch with water. It's a quick and easy process, since the instructions are right on the bottle. One formula (blue juice) is used for cleaning glass, the other (red juice) for all-purpose cleaning. The end cost is about fifty cents per pint.

By the time I was talking about switching to The Clean Team cleaning supplies, my mother was convinced they *wouldn't* be the right test family. But I wouldn't give up. I knew if my mother would agree to this, I'd have rich fodder to share with my readers.

After a lengthy discussion, the truth about her apprehension finally came out. "I'm worried that I won't like your products," my mother explained. "If it takes too much effort to clean with them, or if things don't get as clean, I'll go back to my old toxic chemicals."

"So what?" I countered. My point was not to remake my family into the picture-perfect environmental household. Rather, I wanted a family of average Americans to test out how various eco-friendly changes would work for them. Surely, not all the changes would be successful. I was less interested in perfection, and more interested in what would and wouldn't work—and why.

"But if I gave up, I'd feel *guilty*," my mother continued.

Like mother like daughter.

The summer before I decided to launch *The Frugal Environmentalist*, I went through my own struggles with guilt. That hot summer, a debate was brewing over the potential sale of our local nuke plant to an out-of-state, Enron-style energy company. There I was, a supposed environmentalist, writing letters, attending hearings, and holding protest signs, hoping to prevent the sale of our local nuke, which I dearly hoped would close soon. All the while, I was sucking up nuclear power like cold lemonade on a hot August day.

What I dreamed of, of course, was living off-the-grid, breaking my dependency on power produced by burning fossil fuels, damming up rivers, or setting off chains of dangerous nuclear reactions. Once I moved to Vermont, I realized just how realistic a dream this was. The hills of

southeastern Vermont are dotted with alternative folks who've disconnected from the grid, relying instead on solar and/or wind power to meet their daily energy needs.

In my ideal world, I would buy a house with a good southern exposure, so I could add solar panels and a huge garden. Or I would buy land well-suited for solar power, and build my own house—perhaps an eco-friendly straw bale house like the ones that suddenly seemed to be all the rage in southeastern Vermont, at least with my small circle of progressive friends.

After many months of searching for either land or house, reality hit. Property values in Vermont seemed to be growing exponentially, as wealthy New Yorkers and Bostonians pulled out of the stock market, sold their overpriced urban homes, and flooded into the pristine hills of Vermont with large stashes of cash. Our meager savings and earnings couldn't buy us a halfway livable house—or even a decent piece of land, assuming we wanted to have enough money left over to build a modest house on it.

Slowly, I became despondent. Surely part of it was that I was 32 years old, and still could not fulfill my childhood dream of owning my own home. But it went deeper than that. I felt guilty. I might oppose nuclear power on principle, but here I was consuming nuclear power regularly as part of my high-energy lifestyle, which included: two computers (my husband worked from home full-time, and I part-time), an ancient and grossly inefficient refrigerator, and an equally pathetic stove. As apartment dwellers, we lacked the ability to upgrade to energy-star appliances.

I felt like a failure. There was no way I could stop contributing to the very destruction I opposed. Eventually, I gave up on trying to make small changes in my life. What was the point? In reality, I'd let guilt disempower me, only I didn't quite realize that at the time. Back then, I thought that maybe I wasn't a real environmentalist after all.

My turning point came while driving one of my straw bale, off-the-grid friends back to her country home. As we were leaving downtown, I noticed the gas tank was low, and asked my friend if she knew of anywhere to buy gas along the way. Yes, I'd lived in Brattleboro, Vermont for almost one full year, but I hadn't a clue where to buy gas.

My friend's six year old son gasped in amazement. "You don't know where to buy *gas*?" I might as well have said I didn't know how to spell my own name. Clearly, trips to the gas station had been a regular part of his early life, since his family had to drive about 25 miles round-trip just to come into town.

I turned to his mother and tried to explain my ignorance. The bulk of our driving consisted of heading two hours south to Connecticut every month or two to visit my parents; we usually tanked up somewhere off the interstate during our trip. My husband also needed to make periodic trips to Boston for his work, and again, he bought gas somewhere along the way.

When it came to day to day living, we almost never drove. Our apartment was only a few blocks from downtown. We could walk to the grocery store, the bank, the post office, the library, and just about anywhere we'd hang out with friends. My job was only a ten-minute walk away, and my husband

worked from home. Our main in-town driving consisted of a half mile trip to the laundromat every week to ten days. That spring, my husband and I had even joked that between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, we'd driven our car exactly six times, if you subtracted out our short periodic jaunts to the laundromat.

Later that day, while driving home from my friend's house, the cloud of despair that had hung over me that summer began to lift. Our one-car family may have been relying on nuclear power for its daily needs, but our consumption of *oil* was probably considerably less than the average American's. Maybe I wasn't quite as bad as I thought I was. Maybe I *was* an environmentalist after all. And maybe, just maybe, the solution lay not in a few die-hards living some theoretically perfect eco-friendly lifestyle, but in many of us doing the best we could—and accepting that what's best for one person may be very different from what's best for someone else.

So instead of continuing to agonize about my reliance on nuclear-power, I began applauding myself for minimizing my driving, and working for political change. Then I vowed to make whatever small changes I could to decrease my impact on the planet. I invested in compact fluorescent light bulbs, which use only one quarter the electricity of typical incandescent bulbs. I covered pots to bring water to a boil more quickly. I turned my electric burners off just *before* food was ready, so the excess heat would continue to cook the food even with the power off. I began to shut off my computer monitor every time I knew I'd be away from it for more than five minutes. And whenever I'd come to a dead end of ideas, I'd

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explore a myriad of ways to cut my budget even further, so I could afford to spend more on things that really mattered.

Once I stopped feeling guilty, and shifted my focus to what I *could* do, the concept of *The Frugal Environmentalist* was born.

* * *

It's been several months since my mother and I discussed household cleaners. Once I reassured my mother that there was no such thing as failure, that the only failure could be not to give something a try, she began to experiment with my suggestions.

Just days before this issue went to press, my mother sent me an amazing email:

We started using the Seventh Generation dishwashing detergent. We've been leaving one cup empty, and filling the other up only halfway. The dishes come out just fine. Of course, your father rinses the dishes before he puts them in the dishwasher.

I'm also using the blue juice and red juice. I never realized that Windex and Fantastic had an odor until I started using the red juice and blue juice. They don't clean as well, though. I have to work a little harder to get things clean, so I'm not sure if I like them or not. I'll let you know after I use them more.

Love,
Mom

Four Frugal Ways to Help *The Frugal Environmentalist*

Running an eco-friendly magazine like *The Frugal Environmentalist* isn't easy. Because we insist on running our magazine according to our values, we print on 100% post-consumer recycled paper, making our printing costs higher than for other publications. And because we don't want to compromise what we write about to suit the needs of advertisers, we rely solely on you, the subscriber, to support us.

In order for us to keep going, we need your help. One great way to help us out is by ordering a \$25 support-a-startup gift subscription. However, we realize that many of you are experiencing the difficulties of getting by during this "jobless recovery."

If you'd still like to help *The Frugal Environmentalist* but lack the funds, here are four things you can do to help us spread the word and grow our subscriber base:

1. Ask your local library to subscribe to *The Frugal Environmentalist*. Most libraries don't even know we exist, and many might be interested in subscribing if a patron requested it. Many libraries even have a special

request form you can fill out. Be sure to include our address, website, and phone number on the form: The Frugal Environmentalist, P.O. Box 1654, Brattleboro, VT 05302, www.frugalgreen.com, and 802-254-2775.

2. Ask your local independent bookstore to sell *The Frugal Environmentalist*. Again, most bookstores don't realize we even exist. If you live in a progressive, environmentally-aware community with a thriving local independent bookstore, please tell them about us. They can learn more about selling our publication by calling us at: 802-254-2775, or emailing us at:

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3. Too shy to talk to your local bookstore? Simply contact us and let us know the name, address and phone number of local, independent bookstores in progressive, environmentally-aware communities. Be sure the bookstore actually carries magazines!

4. Have a website? Consider adding a link to our site: www.frugalgreen.com.

Thanks!

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