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Local News

Saturday, February 18, 2023

Parenting in a time of climate crisis



Bridget Shirvell poses for a portrait at her home in Mystic Tuesday, December 20, 2022. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

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December 28, 2022 3:51 pm

By **Bridget Shirvell**, **Special to The Day**

It hits unexpectedly. Some days it strikes while buying groceries or when I spot how high the water in the river is. Often, the thought lingers underneath my delight at watching my child play outside. I knew what was in store when I gave birth to her. I knew the planet was warming, and we were — are — in crisis. How will I answer if she eventually asks me, "how could you have had me, knowing what you knew?"

By the time she was born, I had been writing about food systems and the environment for nearly a decade. I'd spoken with countless worried farmers about soil erosion and what it means for their ability — and inability — to produce food. Other food industry professionals had expressed their fears about what the changing climate could mean for sourcing ingredients. And while I hadn't witnessed firsthand the wildfires in the West, friends and colleagues had lamented the poor air quality that forced their families inside and sometimes shared stories of horrifying middle-of-night evacuations. By the time I decided I wanted a child, I was well aware of the climate crisis horrors a child could face.

Yet, for my child to one day ask that question means we fail. That there is no hope, and I don't believe that to be true. I believe we can mitigate the worst of the climate crisis, that we can adapt to what we cannot change and that, in the process, we can create a better, fairer, more sustainable world.

We have the knowledge, the technology and the money to prevent the most dire climate scenarios from becoming a reality. W



we need now is action. As Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of The Lancet, the world's leading medical journal, recently stated, "we need a complete reconstruction of civilization in a generation." This has to happen on a systematic level, yes, but governments and businesses will not be able to mitigate the climate crisis on their own. Individual actions, even imperfect individual actions, are essential.

I've long been in the habit of weighing my choices against their effect on the environment. Some, like eating a primarily plant-based diet, unlawning my yard to plant native flowers, or acquiring an electric car when I finally admitted I couldn't afford to keep fixing my old vehicle, were simple decisions; but after my daughter was born, I started questioning more. My interviews with climatologists, oyster farmers and even fashion designers no longer simply about their areas of sustainable expertise but about how they parent. How they talk to their children about the climate crisis. The skills they think their children will need. And the choices we make every day that are a vote for or against the environment. For or against our children's futures.

New organic cotton shirt shipped to my door or polyester from the store down the street? Local yogurt in a plastic container or non-local in a glass jar? Drive my electric car to visit my sister or take the train? It's exhausting and, at times, infuriating that it has come to this; that everything from how I brew my morning coffee to how I get to the grocery store to the laundry detergent I buy is a decision that contributes to what we will be able to save. Sometimes I fail.

Caring about the environment can feel like a privilege, especially when you're wondering how you will heat your home or put food on the table. At times, it seems like the climate crisis asks too much of us. The individual actions we can take so endless that we are paralyzed into inaction. Yet, when I watch my daughter running up and down the beach, delighting in how the water laps her feet, chasing her if she runs back from it, I know I can't give up trying to save every bit of the world I can for her and the generations that come after her. And it's important to know that every one of us can do something. That simply considering the impact of our actions is a win.

The United States is cutting carbon emissions faster than any other country on the planet, and we're doing it while growing the economy. We will not make our goal of reducing carbon emissions by 50 percent by 2030, but thanks in part to the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act, we will hit that target a few years later. But we need everyone in this fight.

Research published in 2022 by The Future of Urban Consumption in a 1.5oC World (which is made up of the University of Leeds School of Earth and Environment, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, representing nearly 100 of the world's biggest cities and global engineering consultancy, Arup) found that individuals can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 27 percent. That's huge.

To get to that 27 percent, though, individuals need to make six major shifts:

- Eat a primarily plant-based diet and minimize food waste.
- Buy no more than three new items of clothing per year.
- Keep electrical products for at least seven years.
- Keep flying to a minimum.
- Ditch your car. Or keep your existing vehicle for as long as possible.
- Make at least one shift to nudge the system, like switching to green energy, voting with the climate in mind or talking to others about the climate crisis.

Some of the shifts on that list I've done with varying degrees of success; others, like divesting the heat source of my house from fossil fuels are works in progress. Some like composting, I have to remind myself to give myself grace when I forget. And others, like keeping flying to a minimum or ditching my car, I'm not sure I can do. I hope, though, that at the end of the day, the week, the month, the year I repair more than I harm.

Over the next week, I'll introduce you to people in southeastern Connecticut who are making their corners of the world more sustainable. From Jason Hine, who reduces waste while organizing others to take action, to Doug Rice, who eats with the planet in mind, to Maggie Redfern, who gets by without a car, to Arline and Jeff Culp, who added solar panels to their home after years of other environmental actions and Vivian Zoe who saves every bit of water she can, individuals right here showing the power we have to make change.

There is no way I can parent without acknowledging the impact the climate crisis will have on the life of my child. These days when I take walks on the beach with my daughter, we arrive with two buckets. One we use to collect treasures like seashells (pieces of sea glass, the other to pick up the bits of plastic that seem like they are everywhere. While I hope one day the plastic will



be gone from the beach, I hope I can parent my child in a way that she grows up to be an adult that leaves her part of the world better, without even having to think about it.

We have the agency to stop the worst of the climate crisis predictions from becoming a reality. I hope this series will inspire you to take your own action, no matter how imperfect it may feel.

5 tips for parenting in the climate crisis

1. Get Outside. Children and adults that spend time outdoors are more joyful, content and less anxious. And according to a multitude of studies, children and adults who feel connected to nature feel a greater responsibility to protect the environment.
2. Garden. You can grow herbs on a windowsill even if you don't have a yard. Put your kids in charge of it in some way, and then, depending on their age, you can use the garden to talk about the environment and the climate crisis.
3. Talk. We can't hide global warming from our kids, but talking about the climate crisis isn't a formal, sit-down conversation, and it's definitely not a one-and-done discussion. With little kids talk about how the things we do affect the environment, such as why you turn off lights when you leave a room. As kids grow, answer their questions, for example, about why it doesn't snow in July, slowly explaining weather, climate and the carbon cycle. NASA's Climate Kids is a good resource for answering questions. As kids become teenagers, let them lead, answer their questions and help them take the initiative to find resolutions to the things they can change independently.
4. Reduce carbon footprint. There are plenty of free, easy-to-use carbon footprint calculators available online. Do one with your kids and then work to determine areas you can reduce your carbon footprint.
5. Act. Pick one thing you or your kids are passionate about, such as food, the ocean or even a specific animal and figure out what you can do to protect that one thing and reduce your carbon footprint.

What changes - big or small - have you made to reduce your carbon footprint. Post in the comments of this article on theday.com or send an email to t.cotter@theday.com.

READER COMMENTS

Adrian Johnson December 29, 2022 at 11:21

[Report](#)

Great column Bridget, thank you for sharing. And please don't bother reading the comments by the likes of Mr. Spillane, there will always be people who live in an alternate reality and search out any semblance of justification for their outlandish beliefs.

Stephen Spillane December 29, 2022 at 11:06

[Report](#)

All the climate change hoaxes are predicated on "data" from computer simulations.

The computer simulations have dozens, sometimes hundreds, of variables.

One variable being inaccurate, or erroneously weighted in the computer simulation, renders the entire simulation inaccurate.

The best meteorologist's in the world can't accurately predict the track of a hurricane that's already formed.

If meteorologists can't track a storm visible today, how can they possibly forecast catastrophic changes decades in the future?

Stephen Spillane December 29, 2022 at 10:47

[Report](#)

Here's an idea: Maybe parents and school personnel should stop pumping climate fear porn into the children.

More people are dying right now because of the energy shortage than from some imaginary climate crisis. Fact, look it up.

Other climate hoaxes through the years:

1972: Global Cooling/ Coming Ice Age Hoax

1980: Acid rain and deforestation Hoax

1981: Global Warming Hoax

1993: Global Climate Change Alters Rainfall Hoax

2003: Carbon Footprint and Fossil Fuels Hoax

The current "Climate Crisis" hoax is nothing more than a way to justify bilking money out of countries that are stupid enough to fall for it. China is the world's biggest polluter by far, but they're building coal fired power plants as fast as they can.



The climate hoax is for suckers. Prove me wrong.

JOSE GONZALEZ December 28, 2022 at 12:44

Report

Well written and timely.

LISA PICARAZZI December 28, 2022 at 10:19

Report

I'll say it again. Go nukes.

JESSICA MORRISSEY December 28, 2022 at 10:05

Report

Great article and Work by Bridget Shirwell

Lon Lipman December 28, 2022 at 09:46

Report

The Wall Street Journal article cited in the comment below is an opinion piece, by WSJ's own reckoning. Adults are also interested in facts.

Margaret Favretti December 28, 2022 at 07:18

Report

Hello, Bridget,

You are not alone. We are neighbors in thought as well as geography, and I want to reach out a hand, well maybe two. One is the idea of collective courage. Here in Mystic, there is a new organization forming called the Alliance for the Mystic River Watershed. We don't have a web presence yet, but we are a 501(c)(3) aiming to bring communities together in support of climate-forward learning and planning. You can contact me at maggie@alliancemrw.org. Two is this. I believe that parents can be very effective in support of education as it becomes a source for nature-based intergenerational healing and collaboration. My new book, Learning in the Age of Climate Disasters, just out from Routledge, and #1 New Release in Secondary Education on Amazon, could be the basis for bringing together some neighbors at the Ditty Bag.

KEITH J. ROBBINS December 28, 2022 at 06:02

Report

When you are done with the hysteria, the adult version is here:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/climate-doomsday-is-nigh-again-united-nations-environment-climate-change-fossil-fuels-11666989086>

Tym O'Byrne December 27, 2022 at 16:07

Report

6. Enforce laws against illegal dumping in residential areas of East Lyme.

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU





Mystic Seaport Museum comes alive for Wintertide festivities

Mystic — After a long winter's rest, Wintertide awakened the Mystic Seaport Museum on Saturday for the new year. From live reindeer and Saint Bernard dogs, to ice sculptures and s'mores, there was som...



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Editor's note: Day reporters followed two state representatives for a day each to see what it's like to work a full-time job while the legislature is in session. East Lyme — Holly Cheeseman was ...



Howard balances being a legislator and a police officer

Editor's note: The Connecticut General Assembly website says the legislature "is considered to be part-time." The National Conference of State Legislatures puts Connecticut between full-t...



Courtney says new HUD mold standards a start; more needed

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, called it a "wake-up call" that Branford Manor, a federally subsidized housing development in the City of Groton, was inspected in June 2022 and received a pass... [Back To Top](#)



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