

# I pulled into the parking lot in front of the yoga studio in January and found a space next to a supersized SUV.

It was a frigid evening; I noticed that the SUV was running, but no one was inside. I was early for class, so I went into the market for some weekend supplies. When I returned 15 minutes later, the SUV's engine was still going, exhaust pouring from the tailpipe. The previous class had just ended, and people were heading for their cars; a young woman began climbing into the SUV.

"You left your car running," I said. "Did you know that?"

"Of course." She looked at me as if I were an idiot. "I didn't want my car to be freezing when I got in."

"Don't you know how wasteful that is?" I admit it. I was not minding my own business; my inner calm was about as woeful as her enlightenment. "All those emissions, poison pouring into the air? Haven't you heard about global warming?"

"Global warming? I don't believe in all that global warming stuff."

I SPENT CHRISTMAS in Rhode Island last year. It was a balmy week, and I took long walks along deserted lanes by the ocean. Most of the houses in this seaside town were closed for the winter. But the gardens were not. In one, cherry trees were in full bloom. In another, the peonies had begun to push up out of the earth, and their waxy, blood red stems stood a good nine inches tall. *Go back*, I wanted to say. *You're here too early. You'll be killed.* The newspapers were full of strange reports: schools of dolphins off Long Island; bears in the Catskills unable to hibernate, foraging in people's trash; 2006, the warmest year in U.S. history.

Normally, my children's eyes roll back when I begin to go on about climate change and what we have done to our planet. But not this winter.

"I'm beginning to believe in all this global warming stuff, Mom."

Believe? As if this were like a belief in God or Santa Claus? We seem to have lost the distinction between matters of faith and matters of fact, which is frightening enough. But this kind of willful confusion is now accompanied by a flagrant disregard for responsibility in the face of impending catastrophe; it is, in short, immoral.

Some of us console ourselves with the idea that the truly terrible consequences of climate change will happen long after we—and our children—are dead. Why worry about something we won't be around to see? I walk the beach and think about the wonders of

this coast: the pools and eddies that swirl at the foot of the granite cliffs; the tide lines that mat the grasses; the plover's nest full of brindled eggs; the marsh ponds dotted with mute swans. I love this landscape. Of course, the coastline changes, daily, and I accept that as part of its natural rhythm. But to have it disappear? I maintain a fantasy about what my children's lives will be like; how they will live in the house I've built with their children, how they'll walk the same lanes and explore the same shoreline. It is a fiction, of course, but comforting. I can't indulge it at all without some certainty about the natural world we now inhabit together.

WHEN I WAS IN high school, I read several books that altered the course of my life: Plato's *Symposium*; *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. You can see instantly the absurdity in such a list. You can also feel what I now understand to have been that touching openness and vulnerability to big, if not overblown, ideas that is one of the earmarks of adolescence.

The memory of reading this constellation of books has been much on my mind lately—and I never think of one without all of them bubbling up together. They are somehow inextricably linked, and they somehow seem very important again.

There was no philosophy class in my public high school in Stamford, Connecticut, until one of the history teachers decided to pull together a little seminar of students who might be interested. I signed up. On the first day of class, Mr. Falcone handed out an index card to each of us and asked us to write, in one word, what we considered the most important thing in life.

I confess that this is the sort of exercise that I still find excruciatingly unpleasant. I always feel there is a trick—that there is a correct answer, and that I will be humiliated by whatever I have come up with. I had my answer immediately, but I was sure it was wrong—simplistic, stupid; I tried to find a better one. I stared at my little white blank card, and it reflected my blank mind. Finally, time up, I wrote down: HAPPINESS. The goal in life is to find happiness.

I was not kicked out of the class, and we began at what was then considered to be the beginning, with Plato, and went on to spend a pleasurable and momentous semester talking about what motivates people to act



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the way they do; what is important in life; what makes for a whole individual; what is the nature of love; all the wonderful treasures in any philosophical tract worth the time.

Now, the pursuit of happiness obviously tied into feminism; how could any woman be happy when she was being discriminated against, treated unfairly, held back, etc. I was wholehearted in my feminism; it defined me. There was absolutely nothing I did that wasn't informed by thoughts of justice, equity, fairness. A friend of mine made me a silver charm of an equal sign inside the symbol for female (♀) and I wore it on a chain around my neck every waking moment. I wanted to proclaim to the world that feminism was the most important cause—and I wanted to convert people to it.

I have held firm to both ideals—feminism, and the need to live in a society that guarantees us the pursuit of happiness. The feminism has taken many turns, as I've dealt with the corporate world, and marriage, and motherhood.

But what I want to get to here is the underlying sense of urgency I felt about the feminist cause—an urgency that is now absorbed by another sense of urgency having to do with the condition of our planet. It is hard to say that this is a feminist issue, but perhaps it is worth considering our contribution to climate change from the point of view of motherhood, community, and consciousness.

When I read *Our Bodies, Ourselves* as a young woman, I suddenly, electrically, felt connected to women everywhere. I felt as though we were a community, whether we knew it or not, of like-minded people, simply because we were like-bodied. The book managed to do two contradictory things at once: strip away the mystery of our bodies, and glorify the magic of our selves.

Science has taken us to a place in which much of the mystery about how things work is gone. And still we remain dazzled by the wonder of our natural world—that poetry at the heart of science.

I've been thinking about the connection I felt as a feminist, the sense of community in the world, as I've been reading the increasingly terrifying news about climate change. It is as clear as day that we are dramatically altering our planet, and that the results of our polluting ways will be disastrous for the world we are leaving our children. There is absolutely no serious scientific controversy about this state of things. (In fact, scientists are wondering—among themselves, sadly—why “citizens” aren't more upset about global warming. And this citizen is wondering why our scientists haven't been more vocal, dynamic, impassioned with their grave warnings.)

Indeed, where is our communal sense of urgency about climate change? Where is our sense of moral responsibility—as a country? Where is our leadership? Are we all sleepwalking, stirring sporadically with the drift of oil prices?

We are in a crisis of democracy. Climate scientists are testifying about Bush administration interference in their research. NASA's mission “to understand and protect our home planet” was quietly canceled months ago. Activist Laurie David has reported that high

school science teachers are not allowed to accept free copies of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, although they do accept oil industry involvement in curriculum funding. The opposition—those whose interest is not served by an informed public—is fierce. Intelligent, well-educated people say to me all the time, oh, do you believe all this stuff about global warming? Or, as one 25-year-old put it recently, I guess we'll have some really nice weather in the future. Even now, newly elected politicians, with environmental concerns and credentials, arrive in Washington talking about moderation, taking it easy, so as not to alienate voters—next time around. But wait! We put you there for this time around! We need leadership now.

We no longer have the excuse that we don't know how serious the problem is. We may differ on whether it is the most important problem the world faces—just as we once differed on whether civil rights, or feminism, say, was more important. To my way of thinking, climate change is the gravest issue we face—it will cause great poverty, disease, homelessness, famine, drought.

THERE IS SOMETHING so overwhelming about the magnitude of the disaster facing us that the temptation to look at the sunny side is understandable. Why not enjoy a North Carolina climate in once snowy New York? But to enjoy it, as an individual simply enjoying warmth and the shedding of a heavy winter coat, is to operate in a manner that is oblivious to the greater good of our world.

We are, of course, all  
in this together—whether  
we like it or not. These times feel  
much like the nascent days of the feminist  
movement, or the civil rights movement.

As has happened in the past, we are at a crossroads. We have a decision to make, and we have to use our collective power for change. We have to decide what kind of world we want to live in—a world that wastes and pollutes, or a world that cherishes our resources and safeguards the future. We have to decide to change our ways. We have to assert our rights as consumers; we have to demand to know what is in everything we buy—because it is now clear that products are laced with toxic chemicals, from the plastic toys we give our babies to chew, to the fire retardants in the furniture in which we cuddle them, to the food we spoon into their trusting mouths. We have to decide that we love our children enough to give them the same right to pursue their happiness that we have taken—and are now squandering—for ourselves. We cannot expect the next generation to clean up our mess. There isn't the time. The time is now.



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