

How best to deal with carbon rage

The situation was all too familiar, and I'd just about had it. A car sat idling outside the post office, its 30-something driver sitting there with the air conditioner running in his big SUV, his three kids in the back seat.

When I came out of the post office five minutes later, he was still there, the car engine still idling.

I fumed as this guy sat glued to the seat of his gigantic vehicle, clueless. Did he think gasoline came free out of the air and would be there for millennia to come, so his children and their children's children could also idle endlessly with the AC on "high?"

Was he even thinking about the air as he pumped pollutants into it? (SUVs and pickup trucks generate about 50 percent more air pollution than do cars.)

Worse yet, hadn't he heard that while he was running the AC, the planet was getting perilously hot? Didn't he know that overconsumption of fossil fuels — the stuff running his bloated vehicle — was a prime driver behind the frightening change in the planet's climate?

I encounter moments like this one all too often. So often, in fact, that I've coined a term for it: carbon rage — the feeling of angry self-righteousness at other people's stupidity, arising in the throat of a spooked environmentalist.

I've found that once you tune into environmental issues, especially climate change, it's really hard not to get upset when you see people doing things that explode our carbon footprint and make the earth a more dangerous place.

How serious is it? Summarizing recent scientific findings, *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman put it this way:

"The consensus of the climate experts is utterly terrifying. At this point, the central forecast of leading climate models — not the worst-case scenario but the most likely outcome — is utter catastrophe, a rise in temperatures that will totally disrupt life as we know it, if we continue along our present path."

So what's the right thing to do when we see behavior that makes things even worse?

I've occasionally resorted to reminding people that their car is idling and "you're getting zero miles to the gallon." If it's an out-of-stater or truck driver, I'll tell them that we're trying to cut down on idling here in Addison County and would they mind turning off their engine for a moment — a request that's inevitably met with an apology and quick turn of the key to "off."

Idle-free Vermont (idlefreevt.org) promotes

a bumper sticker that says, "Thank you for not idling when parked." The town of Middlebury has even posted a few "No Idling" signs. But these signs are, to be frank, few in number and widely ignored.

I care deeply about climate change. But like most other people, the issue is a part-time concern for me.

How, I wondered, do those who've made it a full-time pursuit respond? Do they have their own version of carbon rage?

I asked several activists to answer that question. I was both surprised and inspired by their answers.

Surprised because they say that for the most part, they don't get angry. Inspired because they've managed to reframe the issue and orient their lives so positively, to meet the challenge that confronts the entire planet.

Ripton's Bill McKibben is the author of "The End Of Nature" (the first popular book on climate change) and the co-founder and chief spokesman of the upcoming international day of climate action on Oct. 24 being organized by www.350.org. Here's what he had to say:

"It's funny, perhaps because I've been doing this so long ("The End of Nature" came out 20 years ago next month) I no longer seem to have any rage at all. That's the way the world is now, and we need to change the world. So I work as hard as I know how, for the moment at 350.org, trusting that if we reach a powerful international agreement then the economy will start sending different signals to people, who will respond.

"I get the opposite — a kind of carbon delight — when I see people all over the world signing on to stage events for our big international day of action on Oct. 24," McKibben said. "And I get goose bumps when I see pictures like the ones that arrived the other day — 350 kayaks spelling out a giant 350 in Lake Superior. We have to build a movement. No time for anger, except on occasion at the real villains: big energy companies, duplicitous politicians, and the like."

Andy Rossmesl, co-founder of the Brighter Planet credit card to fight global warming (www.brighterplanet.com), turns the possibility of carbon rage into an opportunity to find likeminded people.

"I've found that there will always be Hummers idling in the Co-op parking lot," he mused. "The key is looking around for the other folks staring disgustedly. I've made a lot of new friends that way."

Greg Pahl, a local author and activist, offered this:

"I don't see myself as the 'carbon police,' although I am tempted to play that role every day when I see wasteful habits or activities around me. Instead, I prefer to lead by example, and channel most of my energy into identifying and trying to solve the numerous energy-related problems we face. I am working with many other thoughtful area residents in the ACORN Network (www.acornvt.org) and its local food and energy initiatives. New volunteers are always welcome."

Among the many climate activists who gathered this past May in Middlebury for the "Getting to 350" conference was John Passacantando, former head of Greenpeace USA. He had this to say about those who idle their car engines or have too many biological children:

"Rage of any sort starts with us, the rager, not the idler or the procreator or anyone else who appears to fire up our rage. We have to first get to the bottom of those feelings inside ourselves and dissipate them. They only hurt us and they have no useful societal benefits, either."

Like 350 conference organizer Jon Isham and others, Passacantando often turns to recent American history for inspiration:

"Many of us enjoy reading the history of the Civil Rights Movement for inspiration," he noted. "The most cursory reading shows a stark difference in the success of that movement during the life of Martin Luther King Jr., which was overwhelmingly love-based, and post King Jr., which was rage-based."

"Congressman John Lewis even speculates in his memoir that it was the angry post-King spirit that stopped the reforms before they could take root in the larger cities, many of which subsequently burned in a stunning display of rage. Wander through some neighborhoods in Newark, N.J., disputed areas in Palestine, the minds of George Bush's National Security advisors post 9-11, a kids soccer game being taken too seriously by parents, anywhere really, and you will find that rage simply doesn't work too well."

So what did I do about that guy outside the post office who was idling his SUV?

I bit my tongue and walked on by. I tried to imagine him bathed in light. I told myself that maybe he was having a hard time. Perhaps his wife was sick, so he had to look after the kids on top of everything else he had to do.

The last thing he needed was to hear from a stranger who was telling him what he was doing wrong.

But, boy, I sure wanted to tell him just that.

Gregory Dennis's column appears here every other Thursday. Email him at GregDennisVt@yahoo.com.



Between The Lines

by Gregory Dennis

Letter

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Book Shed. Unexpectedly this practice was ended last month.

What the board may not have realized is that the very survival of several local, independent booksellers is linked to the ability to source large amounts of free used books, which are then sold at a nominal price to our avid readers.

Vermont has lost a half a dozen independent booksellers over the past decade. This reflects a national trend away from community bookstores and towards big box stores, as well as a drop in active readers. Even with a partial supply of free books, local bookstores struggle to stay afloat. Owners routinely forfeit their paychecks to

keep their doors open.

I have emailed the board for redress (no reply). Six of us arrived to attend the monthly meeting Thursday, only to find it canceled at the last minute.

I appeal now to readers of all ages to protest this ruling. Please support local bookstores, reuse of local resources, and local jobs by telling the ACSWMD to allow local harvesting of this resource. Reuse is the highest form of recycling. Many of the books being discarded will never be printed again. Once knowledge is lost, it is lost forever.

Larry Plesent
CEO, Vermont Soapworks
Partner, Seasoned Books and Bakery

Clippings

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transportation system. Even in the short time I've been here, ACTR has expanded its routes substantially, partnering with other area bus companies and receiving funding from Middlebury College and elsewhere to provide service to Rutland and expanded service to Burlington. And in the news recently, New England legislators are hoping to use economic stimulus funding to expand Amtrak lines throughout the area, including a high-speed rail line and extended coverage through

Vermont.

I've come to the conclusion that transportation, like so many things in life, is all about compromise. I live close enough to work that I can walk most days, and I enjoy walking or biking to the supermarket, the library and the gym. And to get home to Manhattan, I can take the bus to Rutland and take Amtrak — which, let's face it, is more relaxing than driving into the city.

But when I need to drive, I drive. For now, this compromise is something I can live with.

Davis

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to drive up medical costs faster than overall inflation.

3. Make much more extensive use of "effectiveness research" to determine which medical procedures and drugs are associated with positive outcomes, publicize the results of these studies, and structure payment systems so that providers and patients have strong incentives to use those procedures and drugs with a demonstrated record of effectiveness. (Opposed by some physicians and most conservatives.)

4. Take several steps to reduce the cost of prescription drugs, including

allowing the importation of drugs from Canada, requiring Medicare to negotiate prices directly with pharmaceutical manufacturers, and limiting the period of market exclusivity for biologic drugs to seven rather than 12 years. (Strongly opposed by most drug companies.)

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