

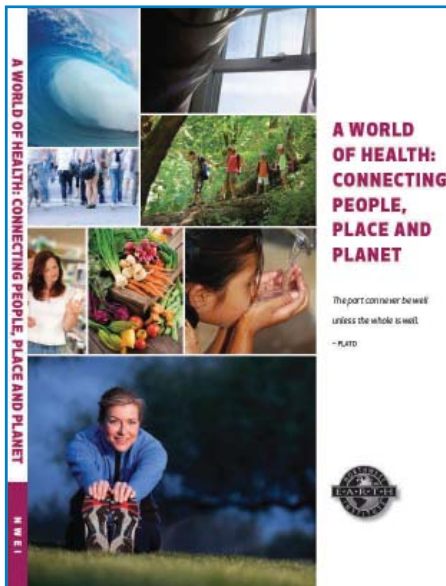
EarthMatters

Inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth.

VOLUME 17, NUMBER 1

Fall 2010

The Northwest Earth Institute's latest discussion course program is now available! See page 3 for more details about *A World of Health: Connecting People, Place and Planet*



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Toxics here, toxics there, why so many toxics everywhere?

By Lisa Frack

When I was pregnant for the first time, I was all about prenatal yoga, checking my baby's amazing developing body online, and comparing symptoms with friends. As it should be.

What I wasn't doing was avoiding traffic pollution because I knew it could cause genetic changes that led to asthma, as a recent study shows. And really, how can you? Nor did I weigh the fish I ate to minimize my baby's mercury exposure. And I happily accepted hand-me-down baby bottles (reuse! save money!), which I later learned (after years of use) contained BPA.

Nope. I ate too much, slept a lot, and ultimately gave birth to a (thankfully) healthy, full-term baby boy. It wasn't until my second pregnancy that I read Sandra Steingraber's excellent book, *Having Faith: An ecologist's journey to motherhood*. In beautiful prose, she weaves the story of her own pregnancy into a scientific report on the critical moments of those nine months, when developing fetuses are most sensitive to chemical exposures. And I've never looked back.

Not that I regret reading the book. I don't. Or awakening to the toxic world we live in. It's better that my head is squarely out of the sand. But, I do regret that modern pregnancy—and life in general—is such a toxic minefield.

What do you mean, toxic minefield?

With over 80,000+ industrial chemicals on the market, most not tested for safety, many in consumer products, the word "minefield" doesn't seem extreme. We walk through this minefield every day—when eating and shopping for food, decorating our homes, choosing toys and personal care products, drinking water and, yes, breathing. In fact, we're born into this minefield, with hundreds of chemicals in our umbilical cord blood (some banned decades ago) and breastmilk laced with fire retardants. We humans hardly start off with a clean slate.

Navigating the minefield

Some of us are aware of the potential impacts on our health, and (like me) spend a good bit of time navigating our

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MIKE'S MESSAGE

A NOTE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

One of my favorite excerpts from an NWEI course book is found in the first session of *Menu for the Future*. In it farmer Zoe Bradbury, troubled by her inability to make a decision while shopping for eggs, chuckles and wonders if the "quiche sample in the last aisle has been laced with something" causing a sudden onset of indecisiveness. Free range, cage free, local, Omega-3, organic fed, Grade A, AA, natural... the list goes on. No wonder so many people find developing new habits so challenging and give up; all the jargon is just too much to think about.

I recently took my sixteen year old daughter to Japan for two weeks. In case you are wondering, I flew there. Deciding how we would get there was relatively easy, but making the decision to go was much more complicated. The full struggle with that little voice in my head and the conversations with my daughter can't really be captured in this small space, but here are a few insights:

1) According to the carbon calculators that I looked at, for the two of us, the carbon emissions of traveling to Japan are the equivalent of driving my car

24,000 miles.

2) My son and I kayak, cycle, backpack, et cetera, but these activities are not my daughter's thing.

3) Being sixteen, my daughter thinks I was born with only half the tolerance and brain capacity of any other adult in her life. We needed a little father-daughter bonding time focused on her interests.

4) As the Executive Director of an organization working to reduce consumption, getting to Japan via airplane seemed squarely at odds with my professed values.

5) Do carbon offsets really help, or just make us feel better?

6) Could we go somewhere else, resulting in fewer emissions and gain the same bonding experience? And so on...

What to do? I weighed, pondered, debated with others, guilt tripped myself, bought the plane tickets and went.

My daughter had the trip of the lifetime and we shared a terrific experience. She even said thank you (and anyone with teenage children

knows that this is monumental). We experienced firsthand an efficient and convenient rail system. We were shocked by the plastic packaging on every napkin and disposable chopsticks at every meal. We met some of the most conscientious, honorable people. In Hiroshima, we also saw the horror of what humanity can do to one another and the power of forgiveness. Would I do it again? Under the same conditions, in a heartbeat. Will I venture to another corner of the world in the future? Oregon has so much to offer, but only time and circumstances will tell.

As Zoe Bradbury concluded, conscientious decision making is "simply not so simple". This may be true, but perhaps the act of wrestling with the complexity of systems, weighing competing values and, in the end, making more positive choices is what being fully alive is all about.

Enjoy the wrestling!



Mike Mercer

What will YOUR EcoChallenge be?

NWEI Invites You to Take on the 2010 EcoChallenge

This October 1st through 15th the Northwest Earth Institute community will collectively walk our talk when it comes to sustainability. The EcoChallenge kicks off on October 1, 2010, and we hope you will join us as an EcoChallenger!

The EcoChallenge rallies people who care about the Earth and sustainability issues to *take action* by taking on their own personal eco-challenge. The EcoChallenge also raises money for NWEI—much like a walkathon, participants collect pledges of support.

We invite you to join the entire staff and board of the Northwest Earth Institute, as well as many other volunteers and community members, in demonstrating the power of taking action toward a sustainable future—by participating in the EcoChallenge this fall. Visit www.ecochallenge.org for more information and to register for your EcoChallenge! ■



way to a less toxic lifestyle. In addition to the unnecessary time and worry spent reducing my family's exposures to toxic chemicals, my efforts are far from perfect (and often expensive). I can choose safer products, filter my tap water, and buy organic whenever possible, but I can't single-handedly make my air clean or remove lead from all toys on the shelf (much as I'd like to!). So while personal in-home "greening" certainly matters and can reduce our toxic exposures, it is just one approach to a far broader problem.

The good news about people's increasing efforts to live less toxic lives is that, beyond some good, old-fashioned consumer-driven market shifting, it often takes us from the personal into the political, where the root of the problem often lies. Our country's toxic chemical and personal care products laws are notoriously ineffective, allowing us to be exposed daily to literally thousands of untested and downright dangerous chemicals. Our federal toxic chemicals policy was a weak law when it first passed in 1976, and because it hasn't been updated since – unlike all other major environmental legislation – it's still weak today. At our expense.

Preventing the minefield

The reason to prevent everyone's toxic exposures, not just our own, is obvious: not everyone has the information, know-how, interest, or access to research to shop greener, and they shouldn't bear the brunt of weak toxics policies. If my baby shouldn't drink from a baby bottle that leaches BPA, should yours? Should anyone's?

Of course, our planet and its non-human inhabitants – with which our health is very much intertwined – can't follow the latest non-toxic checklist (and I, frankly, would rather not have to). As a result they're affected by our petrochemical lifestyle, too. Some current examples: male frogs now carry eggs,

whales have flame retardants in their bodies, and some fish are almost too contaminated with mercury to safely eat. While these cases should shock, too often they don't, since they are the new norm.

And while it might seem daunting or feel too late (after all, 62,000 chemicals were grandfathered in with no safety testing when the Toxics Safety Control Act was passed in 1976), there are strong past successes from which to draw inspiration, like the banning of lead in wall paint and gasoline, after which average human blood lead levels dropped impressively, or the Canadian trend to ban aesthetic pesticide use. And in recent news, six states have successfully banned BPA from baby bottles, with more in the works (unfortunately not Oregon, where I live, though there is hope in the upcoming state legislative session).

There is a nationwide effort afoot to overhaul these toothless old laws that has (at last) reached the halls of Congress. The goal is to replace them with chemical safety systems that require chemicals be proven safe before they hit the market, not after, as is (tragically) the case now. It's this kind of policy change that will restore some consumer trust, shift entire markets and protect everyone – not just ourselves.

All for one planet, and one planet for all

And then there's our planet home. If we just focus on human health, we miss an essential piece of all this: our health IS the planet's health. It's not a separate thing. We depend on it, it depends on us. We muck it up, it mucks us up.

As a longtime environmentalist who eventually had two kids, I lost the pure environmental drive for a little while when I shifted my focus over to little humans. I am working hard to protect them from their environment – the chemicals, the air, chemically-laced food, the lead paint, the pesticides. What I didn't see until more recently was the

(perhaps obvious) truth that my efforts would only be enhanced by valuing and protecting the planet around us, since it's all so darn interconnected. As in: stop burning coal for cleaner air and less mercury in the fish we eat. And stop farming with pesticides for clean water and few neurotoxins on our fruits and veggies (and in our farmworkers).

What if I convinced my neighbor to stop using pesticides on her yard, started biking instead of driving, or ate only organic fruits and veggies? I wouldn't just be protecting the vague "environment" as a whole, I would also be protecting my family's health. Two birds with one stone! So whether your passion is people or the planet, these steps improve the health of both. Reducing local pesticide use can improve drinking water quality and reduce human exposures to neurotoxins (especially for farmworkers), biking instead of driving reduces carbon emissions and petroleum extraction and makes us exercise, and eating organic whenever possible improves drinking water quality and farm health and significantly reduces our dose of neurotoxins.

So we are all responsible for the health of one planet (all for one...), and it, in turn, supports the health of us all (one for all).

Achieving environmental health

The increasingly common term "environmental health" is more than just a trend. It's an emerging field of health and science that actually takes the environmental causes of sickness and health into account in an effort to prevent the former and promote the latter. It is defined by the World Health Organization this way:

Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors

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that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments.

You know, polluted air causing asthma, lead causing IQ damage, phthalates disrupting endocrine systems. But environmental health is also—very clearly—about the environmental causes of good health (clean air and water, organic food), and the impact we have on what kind of health the planet can offer us. Because if it's sick, we're sick. And if it's well, so are we. So let's take care of it, so it's healthy enough to take care of us—and all earth's inhabitants—for a long time to come.

*Learn more about environmental health in NWEI's newest course, *A World of Health: Connecting People, Place & Planet*, and from two Portland authors: Nena Baker, *The Body Toxic: The Hidden Chemicals in Everyday Things* Elizabeth Grossman, *Chasing Molecules: Poisonous Products, Human Health & the Promise of Green Chemistry* ■*

[Lisa Frack served on NWEI's curriculum review committee for our newest course, *A World of Health: Connecting People, Place and Planet*. She is the Portland-based social media manager for the Environmental Working Group and mother to Coleman, age 7, and Georgia, age 4.](#)



NWEI's Featured Partner: Arkansas Earth Institute

The Arkansas Earth Institute has been busy—here are some of the exciting efforts they have undertaken!

1) Neighbors Rebuilding America from the Ground Up

Little Rock, Arkansas was the host city for the Neighborhoods, USA Conference this May. The conference focused on the importance of neighborhoods—the fabric of our communities. The Arkansas Earth Institute was a conference presenter and conducted the Northwest Earth Institute's workshop "Cultivating Sustainable Communities: One Conversation at a Time". Community and neighborhood activists from all over the U.S. participated in interactive discussions on how the discussion courses can be used as a tool for community leaders. Participants dialogued after reading powerful excerpts from NWEI's course books. We look forward to hearing how the courses are used to engage neighbors and neighborhoods across the U.S.!

2) Sustainability on Campus

In 2009, the Sustainability Committee at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) began efforts to reduce energy use and increase recycling on campus. The Committee also identified NWEI's *Sustainable Systems at Work* curriculum as a tool for employee sustainability education. The first *Sustainable Systems at Work* discussion course was offered in early 2010 and over fifteen department heads and key leaders participated.

"By offering the *Sustainable Systems at Work* discussion course at UALR, we hope to begin diffusing sustainability into conversations and activities across campus. We expect to raise awareness among faculty, staff, and students about

sustainability and how it can be integrated into one's home and work life." said Dr. Nancy E. Landrum, Associate Professor of Business Management and UALR Sustainability Committee Chair.

3) Making a Difference at Work

Arkansas Student Loan Authority (ASLA) has an growing sustainability program, Sustainable Steps. Sustainable Steps was created, in part, due to ASLA's involvement in discussion courses organized by the Arkansas Earth Institute. While ASLA's Sustainable Steps program was forming AEI presented on sustainability and introduced the NWEI discussion course programs. Since then ASLA has offered *Voluntary Simplicity*, *Choices for Sustainable Living* and *Menu for the Future* in their offices. "The growth of our [sustainability] program will continue to be influenced by the knowledge we gain from the Earth Institute discussion courses," shared Kimbra Johnson, ASLA Sustainability Director and AEI board member. Increased environmental awareness has led ASLA to change many things including: reducing waste; reducing office supply purchases; replacing disposables with reusable dishes, silverware, and napkins; starting a recycling program and opening it up to other businesses in the building; having an energy audit performed; and the entire ASLA staff plants trees to commemorate Earth Day. ASLA is just one example of the powerful work being done in the community, inspired by Earth Institute discussion courses and brought to fruition by committed volunteers!

[Shelley Green has been organizing discussion courses in the Central Arkansas region for the past five years. She founded the Arkansas Earth Institute in 2006. Since its inception, over 400 people have participated in Northwest Earth Institute discussion courses through AEI.](#)

A Sneak Preview of NWEI's New Course A World of Health: Connecting People, Place and Planet



By Meg O'Brien

In the past few years there has been a great deal of public debate around the topic of health, much of it focused on issues of access and coverage. We hope to broaden the conversation by bringing together people like you to explore the topic further, to reflect upon what “good health” really means and how we, both individually and collectively, can enjoy it. The course begins by discussing some of the limitations of the current medical model and its approach to health. It then progresses through the places where our personal health intersects with the environment—from our food and homes, to our communities and society, and finally, to our planet. At each stage we uncover individual actions that promote good personal health and in turn, promote a healthier environment. Course participants are challenged to think about the reciprocal nature of health and the environment through taking action. These positive changes reinforce one another, as a healthier

environment is a fundamental condition for sustaining human health and well-being. *A World of Health* consists of six sessions which are designed to generate stimulating and interesting group dialogue. Sessions include readings, video clips, short assignments and accompanying discussion questions. The course book also includes Weekly EcoChallenges, a Taking Action: What You Can Do list, and a collection of Further Readings and Resources.

Following are summaries the six sessions of *A World of Health*:

Session 1. Redefining Health: Good health is something we all strive for, but what do we really mean when we talk about it, and how might we go about creating it? This session explores how we define health and how that understanding informs our individual and collective well-being.

Session 2. Eating Well: Most people agree that eating well is a foundation of good health. Yet many of our decisions are focused on avoiding foods that might be harmful to ourselves and our planet. How did we

arrive at this point where food, which sustains us, has become something to fear?

Session 3. Cleaning House: Americans now spend nearly 90 percent of their time indoors, much of that at home. We look to it as a safe haven, a place to escape from the stresses and trials of the outside world. But recent studies suggest our homes may not be the safe refuges we think.

Session 4. Building Healthy Communities: Many Americans' health problems may be traced not only to what we eat, but also to where we live and how our urban design impacts health. The readings in this session examine how issues of proximity to major roads and industry, urban and suburban sprawl, and access to amenities and green space impact our overall well-being.

Session 5. Curing Consumption: Having considered some of the more direct links to health in previous sessions, the authors in this session looks at health within the broader context of a consumer culture. This session makes connections between the products we buy and our health.

Session 6. Healthy Planet-Healthy Self: The focus of this session widens to consider health within the context of Earth's dynamic and life-sustaining ecosystems. The readings explore the importance of biodiversity, the health of the oceans, climate change and the interplay between the forces of nature and not on our individual and collective health.

Meg O'Brien is the Northwest Earth Institute's Director of Curriculum. To order your copy of *A World of Health* call NWEI at (503) 227-2807, or order online at www.nwei.org.

Knowing Your Place: Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.

By Jenny Price

There are many places in L.A. you can go to think about the city, and my own favorite has become the Los Angeles River, which looks like an outside concrete sewer and is most famous for being forgotten. The L.A. River flows fifty-one miles through the heart of L.A. County. It is enjoying herculean efforts to revitalize it, and yet commuters who have driven over it five days a week for ten years cannot tell you where it is. Along the river, the midpoint lies roughly at the confluence with the Arroyo Seco, near Dodger Stadium downtown. L.A. was founded near here in 1781: this area offers the most reliable aboveground supply of freshwater in the L.A. basin. It's a miserable spot now, a trash-strewn wasteland of empty lots, steel fences, and railroad tracks beneath a tangle of freeway overpasses: it looks like a Blade Runner set that a crew disassembled and then put back together wrong. It's not the most scenic spot to visit the river but may be the finest place on the river to think about L.A.

***The L.A. River is one of the city's central natural facts. L.A. inhabits a river basin, and the major river drains large portions of three mountain ranges out to the Pacific. The L.A. Basin, while large enough for a megalopolis, is small for that much drainage, and the L.A. River consequently poses a greater flood danger than most urban U.S. rivers. In the 1930s, when a last-straw series of floods made half of L.A. canoeable, the city signed up the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who heroically proceeded to dig a concrete straitjacket for the river and all its tributaries—a twenty-five-year project that required 3.5 million barrels of concrete and remains the Corps' largest public works project west of the Mississippi. The Corps and County Public Works rechristened the river the "flood control channel." They recategorized it as infrastructure, with

the freeways and electrical grid. To the public, in any case, the channel no longer looked wild enough to be a river or to count as nature at all. And this is how L.A. lost its river—not lost as in no longer had one, since L.A. actually still had it, but lost as in could no longer see or find it.

***I am a nature writer—a unique brand of writer that has felt no compulsion whatsoever to write about L.A. and even less to live here. Though you could toss an apple core into the bushes in Missoula, Montana, and hit a nature writer, I have found four practitioners so far among the ten million people in L.A. County. "Is there nature in L.A.?" people typically respond when I say I write about nature in this town. But I have ended up here happily exactly because L.A. has become the finest place in America to think and write about nature.

More urgently, L.A. is the ideal place to tackle the problem of how to write about nature. In the past twenty-five years, the venerable American literature of nature writing has become distressingly marginal. Even my nature-loving and environmentalist friends tell me they never read it. Earnest, pious, and quite allergic to irony: none of these trademark qualities plays well now. But to me, the core trouble is that nature writers have given us endless paeans to the wonders of wildness since Thoreau fled to Walden Pond, but need to tell us far more about our everyday lives in the places we actually live. To define nature as the wild things apart from cities is one of the great fantastic American stories.

And it's one of the great fantastic American denials.

***Imagine the site of Los Angeles County four thousand years ago. The people who lived here—the ancestors of the Tongva, the Chumash, the Tataviam—used birds and deer to make

food and clothes, and turned trees into shelter, and turned water, rocks, and dirt into energy, tools, boats, medicine, religious objects, art. The people used and changed nature in order to live. They told stories about nature to explain the world and to guide their actions within it.

What do we do in Los Angeles now? Essentially the same thing. We use nature and tell stories about it to live and explain our lives. To use nature is to be human: that's a pretty fair working definition. To tell stories is to be a human explaining how things work. The stories that any people tell about nature are some of the most basic stories they tell.

***Is there nature in L.A.? One may as well ask if there is water in the ocean. To get on the bus—to imagine a more vital and comprehensive nature writing—is to deem the question plain dumb silly, along with "Where is nature?" and maybe even "What is nature?" and especially that nonsense about the end of nature, which makes only as much sense as declaring an end to rocks or air or water and bespeaks exactly the way of thinking by which L.A. lost its river. The powering question of this literature should become, rather, What nature is it?—and then, How do we use nature? How do we change nature? How does nature react? How do we react back? How do we imagine nature? Who uses and changes and imagines nature? And often the most vital questions of all: How sustainably? How fairly? How well? ■

Jenny Price is a writer, Los Angeles Urban Ranger, and LA River tour guide. This piece is comprised of excerpts from Price's "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.," excerpts are denoted by ***. For a link to the complete essay visit <http://tinyurl.com/jennyprice13ways>

NWEI News



Welcome, Jonathan!

Jonathan Jelen is NWEI's new Outreach Director. Jonathan coordinates our outreach efforts and strategies to maximize the impact of NWEI discussion courses. Jonathan joined NWEI in May, bringing with him nearly a decade of experience working on environmental and conservation issues. For eight years, he worked as an advocate, lobbyist, and fundraising/outreach director on environmental and conservation issues with the State PIRG's and Environment Oregon. Most recently, Jonathan led Oregon Wild's

efforts to permanently protect the last remaining old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. Originally from Chicago, Jonathan has grown roots in Oregon where he loves to get out hiking and camping as much as possible with his wife Laura and their pup Suna.



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