



## Overdosing The Earth

Elizabeth R. Sawin  
29 August, 2007

Not long ago I lived through a few minutes of very deep fear, thinking it possible that I had accidentally given my six-year-old an overdose of an over-the-counter medication.

I filled the little plastic measuring cup with a teaspoon of the viscous liquid and handed it over to my daughter, who drank it down, if not willingly, then without complaint.

It was only after she had swallowed it all, as I washed the little cup at the sink, that I noticed the confusing labeling – teaspoons and tablespoons jumbled together on the same faint row of measuring guides. Which had I given: one teaspoon as directed, or one tablespoon, a dose for someone three times her weight?

It didn't take long to figure out that all was well; I'd given the proper dose, but the period of not knowing was more than long enough for a mother's mind to run through worst case scenarios: stomach pumping, convulsions, unconsciousness, liver damage, brain damage.

We were spared all of that, and my daughter barely registered the depth of my panic during those few moments; certainly she didn't understand the bottomlessness of my guilt.

Every day since that one, every time I look at her – her dark eyebrows, the small, light hairs on the back of her neck, her sturdy little body – every

time I hear her making a joke or whispering to her sister – I am amazed by the power of my love for her. Ten times a day I am left breathless by the hugeness of what could have so easily been lost through my carelessness.

If it weren't for the self-protective layers that we wrap around ourselves when it comes to climate change, I imagine we'd all be feeling something similar about the melting Arctic, the rising seas, the wreckage of New Orleans, and all the losses to come, the species, the island cultures, the options and possibilities.

What we might feel, if we were able to break out of that cocoon of self-protection, would be an amplified version of what I felt that morning at my kitchen sink, a gut-churning combination of fear, remorse, and panic. Amplified because, in the case of climate change, the overdose isn't just a possibility or a passing fear. It is an actual overdose; every day we pour twice as much carbon dioxide into the air as the Earth can absorb. And where my story of almost-overdose would have affected just one child, this one affects them all, all that live today and all that are not yet born, human and non-human alike.

This enormity of feeling is not something most of us have been taught we are strong enough to bear, which explains, of course, the protective

layers of denial and distraction we wrap around ourselves.

But we must try our best to bear this sorrow and fear. I learned again at my kitchen sink, clutching a little plastic medicine dispenser in my hands, that fear and grief and remorse are the mirror images of love and dedication.

We shy away from our fear and grief about climate change because they are so huge, but that hugeness is also to our advantage, because the hugeness of these ‘dark’ emotions reveals the hugeness of our love for our world and our sense of responsibility for it. This hugeness is the untapped power we have to draw on to complete the work of the Sustainability Revolution.

Obviously there are better ways to come to understand the gift of a child in your life than to almost risk that child's health in a careless mistake. And there are better, less costly ways to come to know the gift of being a part of the flowering of life on this planet than to push and pound away at that flowering until its beauty and viability are threatened.

But the overdosing of our Earth is not yet irreversible. Scientists tell us that we have a decade or perhaps two to in which to make drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. That

we can hardly imagine the magnitude of this change, or the work and creativity and common purpose that will be required to accomplish it, does not change the reality that we still have time to act.

When it comes to climate change we are not going to be as lucky as I was with my daughter's almost-overdose. We aren't going to earn the gift of knowing our blessings while having caused no lasting harm, because harm has already been done – harm to communities and ecosystems, harm to the future. But when the scientists tell us that we have time to act before the worse scenarios of climate change become unavoidable, what they are really saying is that we have the opportunity to awaken to our blessings in time to save many of them.

The flip side is also true: the longer we wait to feel the sorrow, and thus know the power of our love, the less of what we love will we be able to save.

---

Elizabeth R. Sawin is the Co-Director of Sustainability Institute's Our Climate Ourselves program; more columns like this one can be found at [http://www.sustainer.org/oco/oco\\_writings/](http://www.sustainer.org/oco/oco_writings/).

Beth is a writer, teacher, and systems thinker who lives with her family as part of an intentional community and organic farm in Hartland, Vermont. To be placed on mailing list that will inform you of new columns, sign up at <http://www.sustainer.org/oco/oco-news>

Reproduction Permission Granted with: 1) Full attribution to Elizabeth R. Sawin and the Our Climate Ourselves Program of Sustainability Institute, Hartland Vermont. 2) An email sent to [bethsawin@sustainer.org](mailto:bethsawin@sustainer.org) when you reprint a column. Please include your total circulation and a short description of your publication's mission. Also, please send one copy of your publication with Beth's writing in it to Beth Sawin, Our Climate Ourselves Program, Sustainability Institute, 3 Linden Road, Hartland, Vermont 05048. Finally, although it is not a condition of reprinting the work, please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to support the continuation of Beth's writing on climate change. You can donate online at <http://www.sustainer.org/oco/>