

## THE FAITHFUL CONSUMER

**By Sarah Streed**

*This is the first of what is to be a monthly column: “The Faithful Consumer.” I want to connect faith and the environment, but in a real, practical way, not in an unworkable, idealistic way. Each month, I’ll offer a concrete action that can have a significant environmental impact. (Think somewhere between Hints from Heloise and Aldo Leopold.)*

I remember Midwestern winter mornings as a child. Waking up to snow that had started during the night, big loose flakes drifting down, faintly visible in the morning light. The scramble getting off to school; “Where are my boots?” Finally dashing out the door, the snow stinging my face. There was an excitement outside, camaraderie with people on the street. Everyone was gearing up for the big snow.

It’s another winter morning as I write this. I sit huddled over my computer in a wool sweater, the heat is on and outside, it’s ... raining? Yes, raining. A winter’s day in the Midwest no longer means snow and below-zero temperatures.

It breaks my heart when my youngest sons lie in their bunk beds at night and say plaintively, the longing audible in their voices, “Mom, when are we going to get snow?” I feel helpless before their desire to go sledding and have snowball fights. What can I say that will give them winters as they are supposed to be?

I can’t say that carbon dioxide levels are rising the fastest in at least 20,000 years. I can’t say that most of the hottest years on record took place during the last decade—which was in itself the hottest in 1,000 years. I can’t quote the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: “There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last fifty years is attributable to human activities.” I can’t say any of these things, so I say, “Don’t worry, it will snow soon.”

But I do worry. I’ve always been a worrywart. My anxiety levels fluctuate between high to extreme; I occasionally exist in a state of anxiety equivalent to what most people probably experienced after 9-11. The problem is that—unlike previous worries—this particular worry isn’t going away. I can’t talk myself into how it’s unlikely to happen or reason myself back into complacency.

What I can do is turn toward what has sustained me before in my worry-filled life—my faith. Although I struggle, have doubts, have never had that radiant certainty of some, I’ve always been secure in the knowledge that there is something out there bigger than myself. That my worries and troubles are part of an encompassing whole where it all makes more sense than it appears to right now.

Stefan Edman, the Swedish delegate to the World Council of Churches, said: “Religions can help us to recapture a sense of the sacredness of creation, for nature mirrors the beauty and love of God.” All faiths profess the protection of creation in their teachings:

Christianity—“And God created the great whales, and every living creature that moveth ...and God saw that it was good.” Also, “Justice, justice, you shall pursue, in order that you and your children may live.”

Judaism—“...speak to the earth and it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Eternal has done this?”

Islam—“Transgress not in the balance, and weigh with justice .... And earth—He set it down for all beings, therein fruits and palm trees with sheaths, and grain in the blade, and fragrant herbs. Of which your Lord’s bounties will you deny?”

Buddhism—“...a king banyan tree called Steadfast, and the shade of its widespread branches was cool and lovely. ...Now there came a man who ate his fill of fruit, broke down a branch, and went his way. Thought the spirit dwelling in that tree, ‘How amazing, how astonishing it is, that a man should be so evil as to break off a branch of the tree, after eating his fill.’”

My faith also spurs me to action. In The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists (Brower and Leon) the authors point out that household operations, food and transportation account for the majority of emissions of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide is one). For example, Americans spend as much on medical care and personal items as on household operations, yet the latter produces six times the amount of greenhouse gas.

**January’s tip: Choose renewable energy when you can. For example, in my town, Stoughton Utilities offers customers the chance to collectively purchase renewable energy power. Our family purchases one share every month for \$3, or the equivalent of a Chai at the local coffee shop. Remember, green power is also people power—the more we buy, the more that gets produced and used.**

Until next month, then, God bless—and fight green lawns in winter by buying green power.

Sarah Streed is the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, a group of people of all faiths working toward a just and sustainable future. Go to [www.wicec.org](http://www.wicec.org) or email [sarahstreed@wicec.org](mailto:sarahstreed@wicec.org) to share your thoughts.

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