

Despite our solemn, heartfelt vow to cleave to each other and “become one” my husband and I, like most spouses, are not always of a mind. One thing that’s really been sticking in Jeff’s craw lately (besides the fact that I continually mention him in this column) is my failure to demonstrate proper alarm over global warming.



“I don’t understand why you people are so determined to ignore science!” he says, and by “you people” he means me and my fellow Republicans. The fact that I’m not *actually* a Republican, but an Independent, makes no never mind. By reserving a wee bit of skepticism, by reading analysis in the

*National Review*

, not just the

*The Nation*

, by keeping an open mind about climate change even though the debate has been pronounced “over,” I’m

*acting*

like a Republican. This does not make my dear husband happy, and with the way most of our high-profile Republicans have been acting lately, who can blame him?

But I gotta be me, even when it means irritating the hubby. And despite what Al Gore might tell you, the global warming debate is not quite ready to have a fork stuck in it. To quote Debra J. Saunders of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “there are a number of well-known scientists who don’t believe that global warming is human-induced, or who believe that, if it is, it is not catastrophic.”

The *Chronicle* columnist shares a few examples: “Hurricane expert William Gray of Colorado State University believes the Earth will start to cool within 10 years. Neil Frank, former director of the National Hurricane Center, told The Washington Post that global warming is ‘a hoax.’ Climate scientist Robert Lindzen of MIT believes that clouds and water vapor will counteract greenhouse gas emissions.”

Debra J. Saunders is a very brave woman to publish such words, especially in the ultra-liberal *San Francisco Chronicle*. In doing so, she’s risking her credibility with millions of readers, many of whom will now see her as someone better suited to the loony bin than the newsroom. In questioning global warming, she’s attacking a cherished and deeply-held belief system, assaulting what has become a modern-day sacred cow – especially, and curiously, among the crowd for whom little is sacred.

It is certainly not my intention to argue against the reality of global warming; I’m well aware that most of the scientific community supports it and I put great stock in that community. It’s not even my intention to undermine the concept by suggesting, as did MIT meteorologist Robert Lindzen, that much of the global warming panic has been promoted by scientists who would lose their funding should they determine there’s really no great crisis on the horizon after all.

No, my interest in this topic, as always, is the human angle. I’m fascinated by the way we, as a country, have responded to this issue – not only the way it’s been swallowed whole by the normally-skeptical Left and main stream media, but also by the Right’s strange reluctance to jump on the bandwagon. After all, this is an issue that should speak to both sides of the political divide. The Earth belongs to everyone, not just liberals. Besides, until recent years, conservatives have had a long-standing tradition of... well, conservation. So what gives?

First, it’s obvious that politics is partly to blame. It’s hard, in this day and age, to separate issues from the political personalities who promote them. How much you fret about global

warming may be a direct function of your preference for Keith Olbermann over Bill O'Reilly. If you listen to Rush Limbaugh regularly, you probably think global warming's a vast left-wing conspiracy to rob you of your SUV, whereas, if Al Franken's your radio host of choice, you likely saw "An Inconvenient Truth" three times at the theatre then bought the DVD – deluxe edition. Most of us fall somewhere in between these extremes, but we do tend to lean. Some of us, for example, wish Ann Coulter weren't so bitchy, but secretly think she's kinda funny and way smarter than the "smart" people acknowledge.

But it's not just politics. While still pondering the global warming question last week, wisdom came to me, as it often does, during my morning workout at the Y. Preparing to mount the stair master, I was perusing the magazine rack, when what should appear before me like a sign from the universe but a brand new *Vanity Fair*. Not just any old *Vanity Fair*, mind you, but "The Second Annual Green Issue." Pay dirt! There, on the cover, was Leonardo DiCaprio, resplendent in a sleek black parka, surrounded by sparkling snow and ice, with – get this – an adorable baby polar bear at his feet, gazing up at him with sad, soulful eyes. (Leo's eyes were sad and soulful, too, for the record.) Inside the magazine were all sorts of pro-environment, anti-Republican articles, along with slick, provocative photographs of slinky movie stars and slouchy rockers, all being celebrated for "getting the word out" about climate change.

While thumbing through this spectacular, two-fold tribute to environmental sensitivity and extreme hipness, I found myself increasingly annoyed. For me, the global warming issue has become too "Hollywood." When you see figures of questionable character like Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan wearing "green" slogans on their tiny tee-shirts, when you're subjected to austere portraits of brooding actors poised on ice with baby polar bears, when you watch a suddenly suave and slick-haired Al Gore accepting an Oscar, it all starts to feel a little phony, almost as if, by glamorizing the issue, we've trivialized it. Like going green is just the latest celebrity trend – right up there with naming your kid after a fruit or wearing a red string around your wrist. Of course, the entertainment industry has a long tradition of promoting political causes, and there's certainly nothing wrong with that. But am I just jaded, or has the "We Are the World" schtick gotten really stale?

A particular feature in *Vanity Fair* helped clarify another concept I'd been toying with while working on this column. The feature was entitled "Dante's Inferno: Green Edition," and was illustrated with evil-looking caricatures of conservative politicians and corporate CEOs flying around the page like so many little Anti-Cupids. At the top, the slogan "Abandon Hope, All Environmental Sinners" paid clever homage to the original "Inferno." Beneath this banner, the witty editors had consigned a host of characters to descending circles of hell, preceded by The Vestibule, to which were assigned the 50,456,062 Americans who voted for George W. Bush in 2000. Beneath the Vestibule was the First Circle of Hell, in which were placed the 62,039,073 Americans who voted to re-elect George W. Bush in 2004. Beneath that, you had all sorts of polluters and consumers and chemical companies, along with individuals like Rush Limbaugh ("global warming denier"), Michael Chrichton (ditto) and Bjorn Lomborg (author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*). At the bottom of the chart, in "Hell" were Senator James Inhofe, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney... and Satan.

*Vanity Fair's* nod to Dante's great Christian epic highlights a reason I believe the global warming issue is being embraced with such passion by many Americans, and may shed light on why some of us are holding back a little. I think that, for a lot of folks, the quest to "save the planet" has become a religious quest, filling a hole in the soul of a nation that's been steadily

losing its religion for the past fifty years or so. We all have an essential need to feel connected to each other and to our world, and most of us need to believe in a power greater than ourselves. For the majority of us, that three-fold spiritual craving was once satisfied by the Judeo-Christian concept of an all-knowing, all-loving God. But in this increasingly secular age, we can no longer count on that shared connection to each other and to our universe, nor do we all share a sense of higher purpose.

But just because we've stopped seeing God doesn't mean we've stopped needing Him. I believe that, in trying to restore the creation, a vast majority of people are really trying to recover the Creator. This is why convictions about global warming run so deep; this is why "true believers" have decided the debate is over, even when legitimate questions still linger; this is why those who treat the issue with skepticism – usually the hallmark of good science – are treated as madmen and heretics.

And this is why many evangelical Christians (most of whom are conservatives) are less than gung-ho about global warming. They recognize religious fervor when we see it, and they already have a religion, thank you. As for me – and I'm just your average, garden-variety mainline Protestant – I'm perfectly willing, eager even, to help make this planet a better, safer, and more sustaining place for my daughter and the generations that follow. It's the reasonable, sensible, right thing to do. Just don't preach at me about it. (I already have a preacher.) And don't roll your eyes or act appalled when I ask questions. (I'm not a scientist.) And don't expect me to bow to The Gore-acle or St. Leo of the Tundra. Global warming is an important issue, but for me, it is not "sacred." Maybe it is for you, and that's fine.

Isn't it grand to live in a country where there's freedom of religion?