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No Impact Man:

Saving the Planet One Family at a Time

Written by Colin Beavan

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NO IMPACT MAN

ONE

How a Schlub Like Me Gets Mixed Up in a Stunt Like This

For one year, my wife, baby daughter, and I, while residing in the middle of New York City, attempted to live without making any net impact on the environment. Ultimately, this meant we did our best to create no trash (so no take-out food), cause no carbon dioxide emissions (so no driving or flying), pour no toxins in the water (so no laundry detergent), buy no produce from distant lands (so no New Zealand fruit). Not to mention: no elevators, no subway, no products in packaging, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV, no buying anything new . . .

But before we get into all that, I should explain what drove me to become No Impact Man. To start, I'm going to tell a story that is more a confession, a pre-changing-of-my-ways stocktaking, a prodigal-son, mea-culpa sort of thing.

The story starts with a deal I made with my wife, Michelle.

By way of background: Michelle grew up all Daddy's gold Amex and taxi company charge account and huge boats and three country clubs and pledge allegiance to the flag. I, on the other hand, grew up all long hair to my shoulders, designer labels are silly, wish I was old enough to be a draft dodger and take LSD, alternative schooling, short on cash, save the whales, and we don't want to be rich anyway because we hate materialism.

Once, during a visit to my mother's house in Westport, Massachusetts, Michelle lay on the bed in my former bedroom and stared up at the ugly foam ceiling tiles. "You know, I grew up with much nicer

ceilings than you did," she said. That, her facial expression seemed to say, explained everything.

My best friend, Tanner, meanwhile, once called me to tell me that his therapist had said that he "despairs of Michelle and Colin's differences." Why Tanner's therapist analyzed *my* marriage was a question best left for Tanner to explore in his next session, but the point was that Michelle and I had a lot to negotiate. And the story I'm telling here has to do with one of our negotiations.

For my part, I agreed to put up with the cacophony that comes with Michelle watching back-to-back episodes of *Bridezilla*, *The Bachelor*, and all the other trash-talk TV. I *hate* reality shows. Michelle conceded, on her shopping sprees, not to purchase anything made of or even trimmed with fur. That was the compromise.

Michelle liked a little fur. Not long fur coats per se, but fur hats and fur linings and stuff like that. Michelle was a *Daily Candy* girl, a Marc Jacobs white Stella handbag girl, a kind of *Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw grows up, gets married, and has a baby girl.

On the other hand, call me a pussy, but I felt bad every time I saw one of those raccoons or possums with their guts spilled out on the Palisades Parkway. I also felt bad for little animals getting killed for nothing but their skins.

Yet I managed to exempt, back then, my leather shoes from my concern that humanity puts vanity before kindness to animals. In the cold glare of my own I Want To Buy, my disdain for designer labels and all things consumerist became a little, shall we say, mushy. I was the type of guy who shopped for the fifty-two-inch television, then thought he was a rebel against consumerism because he bought the discounted floor model.

I don't mean to imply that I was a *total* do-nothing liberal. I did go to Pennsylvania to canvass voters in the 2000 and 2004 elections. I made get-out-the-vote phone calls for MoveOn.org when they asked me to. I tried to adopt some sort of an attitude of service in my daily encounters and to generally avoid doing harm. I volunteered at

the World Trade Center site after 9/11. I even prayed for George Bush, on the premise that hating him just created a hateful world.

The question was, given the state of world affairs, whether I shouldn't have been asking more of myself.

A few months after our TV-fur negotiation, Michelle got offered a brand-new, thousand-dollar, white-fox shawl by a friend whose father is a furrier in Michelle's hometown, Minneapolis.

It's free and the fox is already dead, went Michelle's reasoning.

It's not one fox, it's *ten*, went mine. I've already suffered your free-basing bad television, and we have a deal about this, I said.

But those are *your* standards, replied Michelle. Then came her trump card: I want to discuss it at couple's therapy.

Not that what we actually went to was couple's therapy. What really happened was, I would drop by sometimes during one of Michelle's sessions with her own therapist. Anyway, I trundled along to the Upper East Side office, and Michelle explained the situation. Free fox shawl, on the one hand. No fur, on the other—which is Colin's standard. Why, Michelle asked, should I have to adhere to his ethic?

When the therapist turned to me and said, "Colin?" I surprised both of them by saying that Michelle could buy all the fur she wants. Except, I said, there's one condition to my releasing her from our deal—and here's the part where I look like a jerk—namely, that Michelle read out loud certain passages of a PETA brochure about the fur trade that I'd highlighted in green.

"I can read them when I get home," Michelle said.

"Nope," I said. "The deal is, if you want to renege on our fur deal, you read it out loud, here."

Sport that she is, Michelle grabbed the papers, cleared her throat, and began to read. Two results came of all this: First, Michelle decided that she didn't want to buy fur anymore because she actually has the biggest heart known to humankind and because we are nowhere near so different on the inside as we seem on the outside. Second—and here's the point of the story—I showed myself to be a smug little

jerk. I had mobilized my intellectual and persuasive resources to get someone else to change her behavior, and remained, I saw, utterly complacent about my own.

It's true that I had occasionally tried to make a difference in the world, but I was coming to think my political views had too often been about changing other people, like Michelle, and too seldom about changing myself.

I made the mistake of thinking that condemning other people's misdeeds somehow made me virtuous. I'd become, I realized, a member of that class of liberals who allowed themselves to glide by on way too few political gestures and lifestyle concessions and then spent the rest of their energy feeling superior to other people who supposedly don't do as much.

A year or so later, news about global warming started coming out. I mean, it's been out for twenty years, but somehow it hadn't entered my liberal consciousness. We can't maintain this way of life, the scientists said, the world can't sustain it. The ice caps will melt, the sea levels will rise, there will be droughts—or, in short, the planet will be done for and millions of people will suffer.

I made the mistake of thinking that condemning other people's misdeeds somehow made me virtuous.

The countries of the world had negotiated the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change, assigning mandatory targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases to signatory nations. But the United States, a signatory to the protocol, as well as the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases, refused to ratify it.

What had I done in light of our country's deaf ear to environmental concerns? Well, if it rained torrentially, I would say gloomily to whoever was listening, "I blame George Bush for this strange weather." If in conversation someone said global warming was just a theory, I'd say, "Actually, the scientists say it's a fact," and I'd also get a really angry look on my face to show just how adamant I was. And if it was so hot out that I felt the need to turn on both air conditioners, I'd

sometimes even feel despondent for a moment or two about the fact that I was contributing to the problem.

Cut to 2006. At the age of forty-two, I have a little girl, Isabella, who is nearly one. We live on lower Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village. It is January but seventy degrees outside. The middle of winter, and joggers run past in shorts. Young women from the nearby NYU dorm saunter by my building in tank tops.

I'm on the street. I'm walking our dog, Frankie. People around me are happy but I am not. Instead, I'm worried. I put the key in the front door of my building. I walk through the granite-floored lobby. I step into the elevator. The operator, Tommy, an older gray-haired man from Greece, says, "It's too warm, no?"

"Yeah, well, imagine how warm it would be if there was such a thing as global warming," I say.

I was being sarcastic, of course. People back then still argued about whether global warming existed. Not me. This was around the time when I had begun to feel really ill at ease. What I read in the news only confirmed, I believed, what I could already feel in my bones.

Summer seemed to toggle straight into winter, and then back to summer—the long fall and spring seasons of my childhood had disappeared. I'd witnessed, that December, a winter storm in which thunder clapped violently and lightning flashed the white blanket of snow into eerie green. Never in my recollection of northeastern winters had there ever been thunder and lightning in a snowstorm.

Tommy chuckled at my sarcastic remark. He threw the lever forward and the elevator lurched upward. After all, what could we do?

For the last few months I had traveled around, discussing a book I wrote about a secret Allied operation in France during World War II. For the last few months, in other words, I'd spent my time talking about sixty years' worth of yesterdays when I was really scared to death of what was happening today.

Here's what was on my mind when I rode the elevator that day:

I'd read that the Arctic ice was melting so fast that polar bears were drowning as they tried to swim what had become hundreds of miles between ice floes in search of food. Researchers knew this because they found their limp white bodies bobbing on the waves in the middle of the sea.

Worse: sometimes, too, desperate in their starvation, the polar bears cannibalized each other's young. We burn too many fossil fuels, the sky gets blanketed with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, the planet warms up, the ice caps melt, the polar bears can't get to their food, they eat each other's babies.

You've heard it all before. But back then, in 2006, this was news, at least to me.

What really filled me with despair, though, was that I didn't believe that the way of life that was steadily wrecking the planet even made us happy. It would be one thing if we woke up the morning after a big blowout party, saw that we'd trashed our home, but could at least say we had had a rip-roaring good time. But if I had to generalize, I would say that, on average, the 6.5 billion people who share this globe are nowhere near as happy as they could be.

Leaving aside the people who have severely limited access to food and clean drinking water, so many people I knew, both in New York and elsewhere in the world's go-fast consumer culture, were dissatisfied with the lives they had worked to get—the lives they were supposed to want.

Many of us work so hard that we don't get to spend enough time with the people we love, and so we feel isolated. We don't really believe in our work, and so we feel prostituted. The boss has no need of our most creative talents, and so we feel unfulfilled. We have too little connection with something bigger, and so we have no sense of meaning.

Those of us lucky enough to be well compensated for these sacrifices get to distract ourselves with expensive toys and adventures—

big cars and boats and plasma TVs and world travel in airplanes. But while the consolation prizes temporarily divert us from our dissatisfaction, they never actually take it away.

And, to top it all off, I thought in the elevator on that unseasonably warm day, not only have so many of us discovered that we've been working our years away to maintain a way of life that we don't really like, but we are waking up to the fact—I hope—that this same way of life is killing the planet. Thanks to global warming, we hear, the planet is facing, among other things, plagues of malaria, monsoons and hurricanes with unprecedented power and frequency, and a rise in sea level that will cause widespread destruction of people's homelands.

Back on that summery day in the middle of winter, I seemed to be hitting bottom.

What things to have to think about.

Back on that summery day in the middle of winter, I seemed to be hitting bottom. At first I thought it was about the state of the world. Yet I had an inkling, as I rode in the elevator, that that wasn't it.

I'd been complaining to anyone who would listen, telling people that we lived in an emergency. Yet, as much as I complained, I lived and acted as though everything was normal. I just led my usual workaday life. Wake up, take my daughter, Isabella, to the babysitter, spend the day writing, pick her up, watch TV, start all over. I didn't feel I could do anything about world problems. After all, if the government wasn't doing anything, what could I do? Write another history book?

But is that what I wanted from myself? Is that what I was willing to accept? That I could be in a state of despair and do absolutely nothing about it? Was I really hitting bottom with the state of the world? Or was I hitting bottom with my state of self-imposed helplessness?

For some reason, that warm winter day in the elevator, I suddenly realized that my problem might not actually be the state of the world. My problem was my inaction. I was worried sick about something

and doing nothing about it. I wasn't sick of the world. I was sick of myself. I was sick of my comfortable and easy pretension of helplessness.

Tommy brought the elevator to a stop at the ninth floor, where I live. It was just an elevator ride. It was just a couple of seconds. It was just a day when it is seventy degrees when it should be thirty. But I suddenly had these questions:

Am I really helpless? Is it true that a guy like me can't make a difference? Or am I just too lazy or frightened to try?

Winter leapfrogged into summer—another missing spring—and I had lunch with my literary agent, Eric Simonoff. We went to Beacon in midtown Manhattan, where lots of publishing types meet. Glasses clinked. Colleagues nodded. We were there to discuss my next book project.

"I can't write history anymore," I tell him.

"Don't tell me you want to write novels," he says.

Eric is accustomed to helping people like me to eke out a living from our writing.

"No, I don't want to write novels," I say, and then I launch into my dinner-party rant about global warming.

I inform poor Eric, who was simply trying to enjoy his lunch, that while reports pour in exclaiming the urgency of our environmental problems, government and big business move only at a snail's pace, if at all. We need, say the urgent reports, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent at the very least by 2050 in order to prevent global warming from spiraling out of control. Instead of acting, companies like Exxon use stealth PR tactics to discredit the organizations that try to warn us. Meanwhile, politicians try to "reposition global warming as a theory, rather than fact."

A sailboat ride west from Hawaii would soon have you crashing through a gigantic patch of floating plastic garbage, twice the size of the continental United States.

I doubted, back then, that a Democrat in the White House would move a whole hell of a lot

faster on the environment. In the voting booth, whether you pull the red handle or the blue handle, you always pull a big-business handle. And big business wasn't exactly filling the politicians' war chests with millions of do-something-about-global-warming dollars.

"What are we doing to our planet, Eric?" I cried, and continued my rant.

A sailboat ride west from Hawaii would soon have you crashing through a gigantic patch of floating plastic garbage, twice the size of the continental United States, that swirls around itself in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Or you could go fishing and come up empty-handed in one of 14,000 Canadian lakes that no longer support marine life, thanks to acid rain. Or try going for a walk in the forest, hoping to see some birds but instead coming face-to-face with a big yellow bulldozer in the 32 million acres of woodland we chop down around the world every year to make toilet paper and disposable coffee cups.

Then there's what we're doing to ourselves. Here in New York City, for example, one in four kids who live in the South Bronx suffers from asthma, resulting largely from the exhaust fumes of trucks that haul away New Yorkers' trash. Meanwhile, experts find that an array of health problems, including lung disease, infertility, Parkinson's disease, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and childhood autism, to name just a few, are related to the unwholesome amounts of toxic chemicals we spew into our air, water, and soil.

So it's not that while trashing the planet the human race is having a party. Quite the opposite. We feel a malaise and a guilt that at another time in history might have motivated action, but that this time seems instead to be coupled with a terrible sense of helplessness.

My point, I told Eric, is that I want my work to align with my values. I want to write about what's important. I want to help change minds. I want, I told Eric, to find a way to encourage a society that emphasizes a little less self-indulgence and a little more kindness to one another and to the planet.

Here's what Eric had to say:

"The way you talk about it is a bummer. It's a drag. It's not that you're wrong, but how will I be able to convince a publisher that people will spend twenty-four ninety-five on a book that tells them how screwed up they are? And even if anybody wanted to hear it, why would they want to hear it from you, a history writer with no credentials in this area?

"Have you considered writing novels?" Erik joked.

As I opened the door to my apartment that afternoon, I felt an unnatural rush of cool air. I knew Eric was right. If I was the type of person who left his air conditioners on when no one was home, not only did I not have the professional authority to talk about the environment, I didn't have the moral authority, either. It was the whole Michelle-and-the-fur scenario all over again. It was as though I wanted to change other people but was unwilling or unable to look in the mirror.

If I was still a student, I'd have marched against myself.

There is a Zen koan that captures the fix I was in. As the koan goes, long ago in China, a stray cat wandered into Zen master Nam Cheon's monastery. Sometimes the cat would cuddle up in the laps of the monks who lived in the east residence and sometimes in the laps of the monks who lived in the west residence. Instead of taking care of the cat together, the monks from the east and west halls became jealous of each other.

"We love the cat more than you, so it should live with us."

"No, we know how to take care of the cat better. It should stay with us!"

One day, the argument broke out in the middle of the dharma room, where the monks were supposed to be meditating. Finally, Zen

master Nam Cheon stormed into the room. He picked up the cat, held a knife to its throat, and said, "You monks. Give me one true word of love for this cat and I'll save it. If you cannot, I will kill it."

Nam Cheon was testing the monks. Did any of them really love the cat, or did they just want to win the argument? Were they willing to demonstrate real responsibility for its life, or had they become too distracted by their fight for control of it? As the story goes, none of the monks said or did anything. They were all still trying to figure out how to prove the other side wrong. So Nam Cheon slit the cat's throat.

What began to worry me was that I and the political system I participated in were a lot like those monks in the dharma room when it came to the health of the planet. Never exerting much energy toward anything but winning the argument. Too rarely taking any real action. Forgetting that the proverbial cat's life was at stake while we argued over who owned it.

This brings me back to the question I asked regarding my own progress in the arena of kindness and restraint: Am I self-evolved or just self-righteous?

I had begun with the idea of trying to encourage a little less self-indulgence and a little more kindness in our society. Now, I realized, maybe I ought not to be writing a book about changing other people. Maybe I ought first to worry about changing myself. I called Eric and made a date for another lunch.

"I have a new idea for a book about the environment that has nothing at all to do with trying to get everyone else to change," I told him.

"No polemic?"

"No. I'll only try to change myself. As a lifestyle experiment, I'll try, with my family, to live as environmentally as possible."

"One guy tries to save the world? Like Superman or Spider-Man?"

"Or," I said, "how about No Impact Man?"

Comic allusions to superheroes aside, what if, when it came to our environmental crisis, I tried to lead by example? Perhaps I had no power to change things from the top down, but what if, in my own limited way, I began trying to change things from the bottom up?

I planned to write a book about what I was doing, and in the meantime I'd keep a blog on the Internet. I would breach the norms of our normally consumptive society inside a transparent bubble, into which, I imagined, a small number of blog readers and, later, a larger number of book readers would eventually get to look.

I wouldn't preach (or at least I'd try not to). As an experiment, I'd simply dedicate a year of my life to researching, developing, and adopting a way of life for me and my small family—one wife, one toddler, one dog—to live in the heart of New York City while causing as little harm to the environment as possible. What would that feel like? Was it possible to live environmentally in our modern culture? Would it seem so unappealing that no one would follow my lead? Would I be making myself into a freak? Or would what I was doing have some real value?

I didn't just want to have no carbon impact. I wanted to have no environmental impact.

I was not talking about taking easy environmental half-measures, by the way. I was not talking about just using energy-saving fluorescent lightbulbs or being a diligent recycler. My idea was to go as far as possible and try to maintain as close to no net environmental impact as I could. I aimed to go zero carbon—yes—but also zero waste in the ground, zero pollution in the air, zero resources sucked from the earth, zero toxins in the water. I didn't just want to have no carbon impact. I wanted to have no environmental impact.

I realized it would be hard. I decided that—if I didn't want my wife and family to move out—I should ease us in by stages.

Stage one was trying to figure out how to live without making garbage: no disposable products, no packaging, and so on. Stage two

involved traveling only in ways that emitted no carbon. In stage three, we would figure out how to cause the least environmental impact with our food choices. Then we'd proceed through stages involving making as little environmental impact as possible in the areas of consumer purchases, household operations like heat and electricity, and water use and pollution. The whole thing would get harder and harder, or so I imagined, as we made each new adaptation.

I also decided I'd have to balance what negative impact we couldn't eliminate with some sort of positive impact. We would do this by cleaning up garbage in the Hudson River, helping care for newly planted trees, giving money to charity—environmental activism, maybe.

In blunt mathematical terms, in case you are an engineer or just a geek who likes math, we would try to achieve an equilibrium that looked something like this:

Negative Impact + Positive Impact = No Net Impact

This wasn't meant to be scientific so much as philosophical. Could we decrease our negative impact and increase our positive impact enough so that they would balance out? Could I, at least for one year, live my life doing more good than harm?

So this book, in short, is about my attempt with my little family to live for a year causing as little negative environmental impact as possible. If what I've described so far sounds extreme, that's because it's meant to be. My intention with this book is not to advocate that, as a culture, we should all give up elevators, washing machines, and toilet paper. This is a book about a lifestyle experiment. It chronicles a year of inquiry: How truly necessary are many of the conveniences we take for granted but that, in their manufacture and use, hurt our habitat? How much of our consumption of the planet's resources actually makes us happier and how much just keeps us chained up as wage slaves?

What would it be like to try to live a no-impact lifestyle? Is it possible? Could it catch on? Would living this way be more fun or

It was to be an experiment in putting the habitat first and seeing how that affected us.

less fun? More satisfying or less satisfying? Harder or easier? Worthwhile or senseless? Are we all doomed or is there hope? Is individual action lived out loud really just individual action? Would the environmental costs of producing this very book undo all the good, or would the message it purveyed outweigh the damage and add to the good?

But perhaps most important, at least when it came to addressing my own despair, was I as helpless to help change the imperiled world we live in as I'd thought?

These are the questions at the heart of this whole crazy-ass endeavor. Answering them for myself required extreme measures. How could I figure it all out if I didn't put myself in the crucible of going all the way? This was not intended to be an experiment in seeing if we could preserve the habitat we live in and still stay comfortable. It was to be an experiment in putting the habitat first and seeing how that affected us.

As it would turn out, my environmental exercise would wind up drawing the attention of both some independent filmmakers, who wanted to make a documentary about the No Impact project, and *The New York Times*, which halfway through the year would stumble upon my blog and write a profile of my family. The result of that profile was as much a surprise to me as anyone. The world media was fascinated by my experiment, and I found myself in the middle of a press storm, sometimes centering, to my chagrin, on the somewhat trivial fact that, as part of the project, I'd chosen to find a more environment-friendly approach to bathroom hygiene than toilet paper.

I was thrust into a debate about collective versus individual action and unwittingly became something of an environmental spokesman. I got thousands of e-mails from people asking what they should do, how they should live their lives. I suddenly found that I was, though I hesitate to say it, an accidental leader.

So much has changed since I began this project. My thinking. My career. My friendships. My fatherhood. My marriage.

But on the eve of the start of the No Impact project, I simply thought that by taking a personal approach to the problem of the health, safety, and happiness of our species, maybe I had found a non-finger-wagging way to change some minds after all. But if I couldn't, when all was said and done, at least I would have been able to change myself. At least if I couldn't solve the problems, I'd be able to say that I had tried.