

Copenhagen: Are You Guilty of Personal Greenwashing?

by [Diane Coutu](#) ([Sustainable business practices](#) - Harvard Business Review)

I have a colleague who cares passionately about the environment. She worries about global warming, supports policy to reduce carbon emissions, and is militant about keeping the heat down and maintaining the proper tire pressure in her car. Yet her car is an SUV that gets shameful (her words) gas mileage. She lives in a large house — even by American standards — and recently purchased a second home in the mountains. Another colleague badgers his teenagers to take shorter showers and fishes even the tiniest scrap of plastic out of the garbage — but several times this fall, he rode his motorcycle hundreds of miles through the back roads of New Hampshire and Vermont to enjoy the foliage. He readily admits to feeling conflicted.

What is behind this behavior that looks strangely like personal greenwashing? And how detrimental is it? Can we make real progress in reducing global carbon emission if even those who profess to have green consciences buy plane tickets and SUVs alongside Fair Trade coffee and all-natural laundry detergent?

Are people like my two colleagues deluding themselves, or, as environmental critics charge, do they just not care enough about climate change?

Having held fellowships at several psychoanalytic institutes over past 20 years, I have spent a lot of time thinking about what motivates people. And I have come to believe that the issue of personal greenwashing is not so much one of self-delusion as one of (often unconscious) anxiety. When things seem out of control — as they do today with global warming, wars in the Middle East and Africa, pandemics and overpopulation, the economy, one's health, one's kids' health — then it helps to feel control over *something*, and recycling is an obvious and legitimate choice. I shut the lights off whenever I leave the room. Is that meaningful change? Not at all, but neither is it meaningless.

The real value of small change is that it breaks down unmanageable problems into bite-size chunks, which is the way anyone really is able to tackle anything. As the famous Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu taught, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Those people with the big houses and Fair Trade coffee are taking that first step, I think. The problems facing the world are overwhelming — so overwhelming one wonders that people can even scrape up the optimism to have kids anymore. But life *has* to go on. I see what's happening now among people like my colleagues — and much of the middle class — as an acceptance that on some level the world has altered irrevocably, and their small actions are an attempt to inch their way toward a new normal.

These small actions function as defense mechanisms. I have a friend who is dying of pancreatic cancer; she underwent radiation and chemotherapy, but the cancer has returned. At some level,

she must know she is dying. But her kids are young; her husband is a stoic philosophy professor. She doesn't complain. At all. Then on Thanksgiving her favorite china bowl slipped from her hands and shattered, and she had a complete meltdown. The china had come to symbolize the only sense of control she has over her life. I think recycling is a little like that china bowl. If we were to come face to face with what we're really up against, most of us would crumble, too.

There's a saying in psychology that a good psychiatrist doesn't take away functioning defenses until there's new defense in place. Denial and self-delusion are good defenses — as is rationalization. If you want to do away with denial and self-delusion, what will you replace them with? I only ask because I don't think people live easily with reality in the absence of hope. Recycling gives you hope. At least I know it gives me hope.

Emboldened by this hope, we can summon the will to take bigger, more meaningful action.

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