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Meredith Lopez

Mothering For Your Amusement and Entertainment

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Go Green, Stay Sane

Ah, April. Here in New York City the sun has finally returned to the sky after what felt like approximately 3,267 straight days of snow, sleet, freezing rain, and sometimes all three in the same day. My boys are back and my favorite t-shirt has come out of hibernation. The hubby and I are putting new flowers and plants out on our balcony and our son, the Juban Princeling, is getting his playground on. And, April 22 is the 40th anniversary of Earth Day.

My writer-mom friend, Robyn Harding, wrote a very funny book called, "Mom, Will This Chicken Give Me Man Boobs? My Confused, Guilt-Ridden, and Stressful Struggle to Raise a Green Family." In it, she chronicles her increasingly manic efforts to greenify her household without moving them all to a log cabin in the woods and having them hunt and gather their own school lunches. Her book inspired me to pay more attention to the products I use around the house, put on my face and on my son's skin. Robyn and I recently had an email conversation about her book (she lives in Vancouver), and I threw another challenge at her: going green without breaking your brain or breaking the bank. Here's what we discussed. I've included many helpful hyperlinks and a list of links at the end of the piece.

Me: You did a lot of research on going green. What was the most surprising thing you found out in your quest to raise a green family?

Robyn: Oh God! I couldn't possibly narrow it down to one thing! Appliances continue to draw power when they're plugged in, even if you're not using them. Corn-fed beef is not a good thing: cows are meant to eat grass. Only 11 percent of the ingredients in skin care products are tested for safety. Reusable plastic water bottles may cause cancer.

The skin care thing really got me, too, when I read your book. I've been obsessed with the Skin Deep Database ever since. One of the first things I did, actually, when I read that part of the book was to replace my son's regular bath wash with one that had a lower danger score. Which gets me wondering why companies are still allowed to sell products that contain dangerous chemicals at all. Shouldn't there be stricter guidelines about what we put on our skin to be absorbed into our bloodstream so that we're not all, say, ingesting neurotoxins everyday?

Robyn: Absolutely! Our skin is our largest organ, after all. And some people believe that what we put on our bodies is as important as what we put into them. I try to buy fragrance free soaps and lotions formulated for sensitive skin. Hopefully, that means there are less nasty chemicals in them.

Oh, I know what you mean. I looked up my facial powder and it ranked a 7. Scared the crap out of me! So I went and bought different face powder. It was a few dollars more than I usually spend on my makeup, but since it's something I wear a lot of nearly every day, I figured it was worth the price. Same with my son's bath wash - he drinks his bath water, it gets into his pores, and I use it every single night on him, so I'm willing to spend the extra money for something that's less harmful to him in the long run.

One of the things I'd like to discuss, though, is conscientious consumerism. Not just with makeup, lotions and soaps, but in general. I know that I personally try to buy products that we need that are not harmful to my family and also good for the environment, but we're on a budget and sometimes those products are much more expensive than their regular counterparts. Do you think that these days, with the economy the way it is and so many people having to tighten the family purse strings, that people have to choose between their wallets and the environment? Or their

wallets and their own health?

Robyn: I think it's a common misconception that being a responsible consumer will cost you more money. But really, consuming responsibly is just consuming less, and living more simply. There are lots of painless ways to do this. For example, I don't buy expensive 'green' cleaning products: I use baking soda and vinegar. They're very cheap and have no nasty chemicals.

Eating less meat is one of the best things we can do for the environment. So if you're buying it less often, you can afford to spend more on organic, grass-fed beef or un-medicated chicken. Instead of going shopping for a new spring outfit, organize a clothing swap with your friends. It saves you money, updates your wardrobe, and it's a great excuse to drink wine with your girlfriends. And I'm a huge fan of consignment stores for kids' bikes, sporting equipment, etc... I always buy second hand for my kids, and take back their too-small gear. With all the money you save, you can afford that expensive face powder that won't give you cancer.

Eat less meat, drink more wine: got it.

We switched to eating meat only once or twice a week a few years ago because meat is so expensive. When we do buy it, we buy the all-natural, hormone- and antibiotic-free stuff. In fact, last fall we were part of a "cow pool," where we paid \$170 for 25 pounds of grass-fed and grass-finished, humanely-raised cow. While \$7 per pound might sound like a lot if we got, say, all ground beef, the fact is we got lots of really good cuts, like filet mignon and New York strip. And the meat tasted so much better! It actually tasted like meat, instead of like nothing. And it was leaner, too, so it was healthier for us. I highly recommend that people do a little online research and find a local cow farmer and then go in with your friends to buy a whole cow like we did.

I also think that consignment shops are a terrific idea. Like I said before, in this economy everyone's looking for ways to save a buck. About 75% of my son's clothes come from bags of boys' clothes I buy in bulk through our neighborhood classifieds. (The other 25% comes from his grandmothers.) I've actually just signed up to sell almost all of his spring and summer clothes from last year at a huge Brooklyn consignment event in mid-April called Be Green Kids. So yeah, that's definitely a really good way to save money, and even make a little money while saving the environment!

These are all also good ways to feel like I'm actually *doing* something right. I know that I, personally, sometimes get overwhelmed by how many different things I need to think about when I want to go green. Like right now, I just sneezed and reached for a tissue and thought, "Do I really need to use that tissue?" It can make you a little crazy sometimes!

Robyn: Bless you! But I draw the line at reusable hankies.

The cow idea is a great one. In Vancouver, we're actually allowed to keep two chickens in our backyards for fresh, healthy, humanely produced eggs. Of course, not everyone is up for the work involved in cleaning a chicken coop. And if they're not kept clean, they can attract rats! But I have also heard that chickens can make quite nice, cuddly pets. Personally, I'll stick with my little dog and buy free range, organic eggs.

My brother, ironically, uses hankies. I say "ironically" because he has obsessive-compulsive disorder, so you'd think he wouldn't like carrying around his own boogers all day, but there you go.

Chickens, huh? I can't decide if that makes Vancouver very progressive, or very weird. Maybe both.

I try to buy organic food whenever I can for my family, but sometimes it's tough. And I feel like sometimes things say "organic," but maybe aren't really. How can I know? I feel like there has to be more to it than just buying only things with the word "organic" on them, right?

Also, sometimes organic is much more expensive than regular products. For example, my son's current favorite breakfast is berries. I buy them frozen, but the organic frozen berries cost twice the price for half as much. Since I'm buying two bags of those per week, that adds up for us. And fresh, organic fruit costs two or even three times as much as the non-organic. For something like, say, pasta or other processed foods, is organic really going to make that much of a difference? And then what about buying local? Isn't that better?

I think I just gave myself a migraine thinking about our next trip to the supermarket.

Robyn: I totally agree on the organic issue. It's both expensive and confusing. I've read that "certified organic" is a very stringent set of rules that often eliminates smaller farmers who are actually using earth friendly, chemical-free growing techniques. And that maybe it's better to support small, local farms that use a few pesticides instead of organic mega farms. But the fact remains; I don't like feeding my kids poison!

The Environmental Working Group (the same group that has the cosmetics database) publishes the *Shoppers Guide To Pesticides*. It lists the "Dirty Dozen" (produce with the highest pesticide residue) and the "Clean 15" (the lowest). I keep it

taped to my fridge and try my best to remember that sometimes, it's worth the money to buy organic, but sometimes, you can save a few dollars.

Dirty Dozen
 Peach
 Apple
 Bell Pepper
 Celery
 Nectarine
 Strawberries
 Cherries
 Kale
 Lettuce
 Grapes (imported)
 Carrot
 Pear

Clean 15
 Onion
 Avocado
 Sweet Corn
 Pineapple
 Mango
 Asparagus
 Sweet Peas
 Kiwi
 Cabbage
 Eggplant
 Papaya
 Watermelon
 Broccoli
 Tomato
 Sweet Potato

So as for The Princeling's berry addiction... It appears that sweet fruit without a peel is usually high in pesticide residue. (It makes sense. If you were a bug, wouldn't you go for the blueberries?) Eating fruits that are in season can save you some money. Last summer, we went to an organic farm and picked our own blueberries. This saved us quite a bit of money. (My husband is an amazing berry picker. I might try to hire him out on weekends.)

And I never bother with organic pasta, ketchup, cheese, etc... You've got to draw the line somewhere!

Oooh, thanks for these. I'm printing them out as we speak to post on my fridge.

I think that last line of yours really sums up how I feel lately - you have to draw the line somewhere! Though, as your book points out, sometimes it's hard to know where, exactly, to draw that line. Since I live in New York City and therefore, a) don't live in a big house, just a small apartment; b) don't own a car and therefore either walk or use public transportation everywhere; c) we recycle, I figure my family's carbon footprint is probably on the smallish side compared to, say, the average American family. Or, as you might put in your book, we're a nice Christmasey emerald green color: not hardcore forest green, but definitely darker than mint or pale green.

Therefore I do try to cut myself a little slack sometimes. I do all our laundry in hot water because I have a thing about bacteria and germs on our clothes and towels and other things that will be touching our more sensitive body parts. I also crank up our air conditioning in the summer because we don't have central air, just small wall units, and we have giant, south-facing glass doors in our living room that let in a ridiculous amount of hot sunlight all day long, even with the curtains closed. So yeah, I'm bad sometimes - but I feel like the Earth is fine with me not wanting to live in a sweat lodge for three months every year.

It's tough. But you're obviously doing a great job. Any other advice for going green without breaking the bank or your brain?

Robyn: It's true. New Yorkers (and other big city dwellers) have lower carbon footprints because they live in such a condensed area. So I think you can use your air conditioner guilt free!

Raising kids is demanding and stressful. Parents shouldn't be consumed by green-guilt or overcome with environmental confusion. Saving the world is important: saving our sanity is critical! But we all need to be conscious of how we're treating the planet, and we can all make green choices that fit within our lifestyle and our budget. Carry a reusable shopping bag. Be conscious of over packaging and individually wrapped items. (They're more expensive anyway.) Pack your child a

litterless lunch. Walk or take transit when you can. Turn off the lights. Unplug the TV. Buy local and organic when you can afford it. They're small things, but I really believe it all adds up. Most importantly, teach your kids to care about the earth, because its future is in their hands. (Cue Whitney Houston song.)

Green Links:

Robyn's Book: http://www.amazon.com/Will-This-Chicken-Give-Boobs/dp/1553653904/ref=sr_1_9?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270051077&sr=8-9

Robyn's Book on Kindle: http://www.amazon.com/Will-This-Chicken-Boobs-ebook/dp/B0028AEB1Y/ref=sr_1_10?ie=UTF8&m=AG56TWVU5XWC2&s=digital-text&qid=1270051077&sr=8-10

Robyn's Book at B&N: <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Mom-Will-This-Chicken-Give-Me-Man-Boobs/Robyn-Harding/e/9781553653905/?itm=5&USRI=robyn+harding>

Skin Deep Cosmetics Database: <http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/>

Shopper's Guide to Pesticides: <http://www.foodnews.org/>

Eat Wild, "Your source for safe, healthy, natural and nutritious grass-fed beef, lamb, goats, bison, poultry, pork, dairy and other wild edibles": <http://eatwild.com/>

Eat Wild's State-By-State Directory of pasture-based farms source for grass-fed meat and dairy products in the US and Canada: <http://eatwild.com/products/index.html>

Herondale Farms, where Husband and I got our 25 pounds of cow: <http://www.herondalefarm.com/>

About Litterless Lunches: <http://www.wastefreelunches.org/>

Litterless Lunch products: <http://www.laptoplunches.com/products.html>

Be Green Kids Consignment: <http://www.begreensale.com/>

Cleaning with baking soda and vinegar: <http://www.doityourself.com/stry/vinegarbakingsoda>

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