

# Dinah Cardin: These days, it's not easy being green

By Dinah Cardin/Sitting in

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Salem - So there I was — a proud participant in Salem's first Living Green and Renewable Energy Fair. My mission? To convince people to get out of their solo car experience and commute by bike, train, ferry or carpool.

The sun shone on Old Town Hall. Nonprofit directors and vendors of all things green smiled over a common goal.

Then, I remarked to the owner of a natural-materials baby clothing store that my significant other was currently honing his capitalist skills in China, doing business with a country that is building coal-fired power plants at an alarming rate, where Olympians will wear masks later this summer to breath beyond the pollution.

“Oh yeah,” she said without missing a beat. “Well, my husband works at a chemical plant.”

For some reason, I mentioned this to my therapist who confessed something about herself for a change — her husband helped market the artificial bovine-growth hormone.

“But we've got babies!” she exclaimed, raising her hands in the air, reenacting the moment her husband told her about his new client. She resolutely continued to buy organic milk, even though his job put food (and milk) on the table.

This is when it occurred to me. With all this effort being put into going green, there is no doubt we are succumbing to some level of Green Guilt. It's bad enough to fret about our own carbon footprint. But we also seem compelled to try to smudge the environmental sins and carbon traces of our loved ones.

Are there bike commuters thinking with every uphill pedal how their significant other is driving 30 miles one way to work? Are there train commuters out there slogging in the rain partly because their beloved is contributing heartily to a landfill somewhere by getting their morning coffee to go while failing to bring a reusable container?

A tinge of piousness rises up when we do something “socially responsible,” be it supporting sustainable business by buying free trade coffee or doing our part to save the ocean by purchasing natural cleaning products.

We are faced with more choices now — to take the high road toward environmental awareness or the low road, leading to the purchase of that offensive, destructive laundry detergent, which was considered mainstream only five years ago. We envision our singular acts of green as productive, even if a shopping spree for the right household items is all we manage to achieve all day long.

There’s no question that going green is definitely the hot topic both in the media and in our immediate conscious, as we race to catch up with other countries who are clearly doing more to solve global warming.

An environmental activist and artist will soon be creating a temporary art installation in Salem, demonstrating the relationship between climate change and sea levels. For years, he helped golf courses incorporate landscaping practices to match the color of their brilliantly gleaming grass. Over lunch the other day, he told me that “people who had no clue before are trying to explain the whole thing to me!”

It’s no secret that green marketing is a booming business, based on what most marketing is based upon: our insecurities. It shines a light on our miserable shortcomings and illuminates a path to move beyond them.

The makers of cars, cleaners, dog foods and everything in between are trying to take the emerald way, either coming up with new products or making environmentally savvy claims, using the same lexicon of green buzz words, for the old ones.

A research and development engineer for a medical products company located north of Boston recently told me that green marketing is, more often than not, muddling the issue and confusing the public more than anything else.

Even as I write this, Google suggests buying “ecologically responsible” wedding bands and acquiring a green MBA degree. Don’t get me wrong. As the outreach coordinator for a nonprofit organization that promotes alternative commute modes, trust me, I’ve jumped onto the green bandwagon. Not a day goes by that the word doesn’t escape my lips. It’s sexier and easier to say than “alternative commute mode” and immediately gives people some kind of idea what we’re about.

Fortunately, Green Guilt (and public demand fueled by skyrocketing gas prices) is pushing policy and influencing the government to finally fund Amtrak and other passenger rail in this country. Barack Obama is co-sponsoring this Senate bill, which invests in trains that, with fingers crossed, could possibly connect our country as well as the highway system once did.

Still, on a recent morning at a Salem coffee shop, a former colleague confessed that despite rising gas prices, she got fed up with her long commute by T and commuter rail from Somerville to downtown Salem and went out and bought a car!

“I’m going to hell,” she said with a smile.

Thanks to Green Guilt, choosing to rebel is much simpler than it once was, when all it requires is driving one’s vehicle.

*Dinah Cardin is former staff writer for the Salem Gazette and the principal of Fireheart Communications.*