



How Will I Explain Peak Oil to My Son?

Posted by [Glenn](#) on August 12, 2013 - 12:18am

I haven't written or commented on TOD in quite some time, but the experience carries me forward everyday. I always came at peak oil not from an "if" or even "when" but "then what do we do"? At Kyle's invitation, I brought my personal blog, [Peak Oil NYC](#), to The Oil Drum in September 2005. Peak Oil NYC was about what peak oil meant for my hometown and America's largest metropolitan area. This later evolved into TOD:Local with other writers from different parts of the world bringing their perspective to the group and then the TOD: Campfire. I wrote for 4 years on The Oil Drum and then the inevitable crush of competing work, family and other volunteer interests overcame my capacity to produce and generate new relevant content. I felt in many ways that I had said what I had to say on the subject and the site was going in a more technical direction.

The local neighborhood environmental group I founded in 2006, [Upper Green Side](#), has largely achieved it's original goals - there are thriving Greenmarkets, protected Bike and Bus lanes protecting cyclists and speeding buses past traffic congestion. All steps in the right direction - people are more connected to local food and can travel faster and safer by sustainable modes of transportation. And now the people that made all that happen have moved on to different projects and different neighborhoods.

My current local sustainability endeavor is a Political Action Committee focused on livable streets issues in NYC: [StreetsPAC](#). We've endorsed [15 local candidates](#) that filled out questionnaires, interviewed with us and passed muster to be a livable streets champion for the next city government that will take office in January 2014. Just starting a dialogue with these future elected officials has been enormously helpful in changing the tone of the conversation around topics like bike share, parking reform and traffic enforcement.

But I recently thought about what peak oil means for my son(s) and how I should talk to them.

My son was born at 24 weeks gestation after my wife went into spontaneous labor. That's right on the border of viability and only in the last 20 years or so would he have been able to be saved. We spent 5 months by beside his isolette in the NICU. Although his twin sister did not make it, his mere survival, nevermind his only slightly delayed development is a true modern miracle. It is not lost on me that this miracle was something that could not have happened before the modern economy has built up around oil. The question is: will the other side of the peak allow for such miracles? This is very much up in the air.

Now I'm expecting another son (this week in fact!). So how would I explain peak oil to them?

I think I would start by saying that energy is a means to an end. Cheap, abundant and dense energy sources like oil and natural gas have obvious benefits that we have used in some ways that are amazing like advancing medical research, diagnostics and development of a wide range of pharmaceutical products that help people live longer and more productive lives. On the other hand you have the vast squandering of precious energy resources on the sprawling suburbs that ring most cities around the world. As energy becomes more expensive, less abundant and less

dense, things will need to evolve and adapt. Burning oil and natural gas for transportation, generating electricity and heating seems to be a poor allocation of a precious resource. Living more densely in cities or modified suburbs centered around a rail station makes much more sense in a post peak oil world than living a car dependent exurb.

Second, I would explain that what makes people happy (aside from good health and adequate nutrition) is not necessarily having lots of "stuff". I might have them watch the [Story of Stuff](#) to see that a materialistic treadmill is not a path to happiness or a sustainable planet. I might also show some graphs of how income and GDP are not correlated with society's overall happiness, life satisfaction or overall well being after a certain point. A society with less stuff and more social capital could be a much happier place to live.

Finally I would conclude that while I think it's totally possible for a post peak oil world to be a happy, health and fulfilling time to live, it's possible that decisions at a macro level may not make that easy. If government is either too weak to act or acts in the wrong directions or if corporations have no better incentives than to only think in terms of short term profitability or if generally people collectively resist the changes that are necessary to adapt, it will harder for people to live happy and fulfilling lives. But that just means that they will have to become more self reliant and find their own independent path to happiness.

I hope that all of you have learned as much as I have from the past 8 years of The Oil Drum. I think it was the right decision to close the site down and take time to reflect on everything we've discussed here and think about what actions we can each take to help our corner of the world, or even just our family. I hope there is another group of thinkers that creates something like TOD 2.0 for the next generation. My bet is that it would be much more about the financials/economics of resource depletion or how we might re-envision our entire economic system around human well being instead of how much stuff we produce and consume.

Until then, if you live in NYC and you see someone wearing a [StreetsPAC](#) shirt, thank them and support our candidates.



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