

[The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

What Do We Tell Our Children?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on March 1, 2009 - 8:43am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [campfire](#), [children](#), [original](#), [peak oil](#) [[list all tags](#)]

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(Editors Note: A reminder-TOD Campfire has 2 slots per week intended to host different content than our regular energy analyses/research/news. Wednesday pm will have essays on practical skills related to energy, food and local adaptations to resource depletion. Saturday nights short posts will be about 'big ideas' and uncomfortable questions not easily analyzed with charts or graphs. These essays are not intended to be 'answers' but to offer open-ended questions for this online community to discuss. Please email the editors if you have any appropriate contribution.)

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I recently got an email from a friend, who told her son I was an 'oil expert'. He had overheard a conversation about future oil shortages and asked his mom if she would email me - below are his questions and my response back (his mother is a homesteader, and has recently started to home school her 2 children).

“*When will the oil run out and how old will I (Parker) be when it runs out?*”

Dear Parker,

What an amazing question for a 7 year old to ask? It's not a simple answer, but since you asked, here goes...

Your grandparents have grandparents, and those grandparents also had grandparents, and if you imagine this repeated over and over, like 50,000 grandparents of grandparents into the past – that is how long humans have been using energy to live our lives. But for most of that time, we used the energy from just the SUN. The sun gives our planet all kinds of energy that we can use. It gives us warmth and heat from its rays, gives us wind from temperature changes, makes water evaporate which then falls as rain, which can be used for water-power, and all sorts of other uses (like drying your underwear on a clothesline or growing a Big Beef tomato plant in your garden). But since the time of your grandparents grandparents –only about 150 years ago, people started to use fossil fuels like oil and gas. Fossil fuels are just sunlight from a really long time ago that was captured by animals and little organisms and was buried under the earth when they died. Over millions of years, it decayed and turned into a black gooey fuel called oil, which can be made into gasoline and power engines. Gasoline is very cheap – it is about the same price for 1 gallon of gasoline as a gallon of milk. But it is very powerful. One gallon of gasoline (under \$2), can do the same amount of physical work as your mom can digging ditches, carrying wood, pushing a wheelbarrow etc. for about 500 hours, which is like working for 10 weeks in a row without stopping. When you look at it like that, oil and gasoline are almost like magic!!

Oil will never ‘run out’. But what will happen, and very soon, is it will become unaffordable for society to produce and pay for. The problem is that people born before you used a lot of the cheaper oil for silly things – things that either weren’t important, or didn’t last too long, like fast car races, wars, and garbage. Most of our society now depends on this cheap oil – food is grown using oil and gas based fertilizers and tractors. It is then packaged in plastics that are made from oil, refrigerated in containers that use gasoline, and transported in trucks all over the world. So oil is very important to how most people live day to day.

During your life, a great many changes will happen to the planet, and to the things we have become used to. I would say it is highly possible that when you turn 16, oil will be too expensive for you to even drive a car. To someone 7 or 17 or even 67, this might sound scary. But that’s only because they are used to it. We will have to figure out ways to live and enjoy our lives without this extra energy–the oil we found in the ground. We used just the sun for thousands of generations before. And you know what? For someone young like yourself, running out of cheap oil might actually be pretty cool. You have an amazing opportunity to be involved in the first ‘sustainability revolution’ on our planet. Sustainability means something that you can do over and over again each year without relying on energy that was stored underground from the ancient past (like oil, or coal). For example, growing pumpkins from the seeds of last years pumpkins and using chicken poop to fertilize them is something sustainable. Even if you don’t have oil, you will still have the sun, the wind, trees and water to provide food, heat and shelter and make things you need. There is still is a lot of oil left – it is just that it will cost a lot of money and other things we need to get it out. And remember, money is only worth something because people agree that it has value – it doesn’t have REAL value, like a chicken or a windmill or water in a barrel. But right now we can exchange it for stuff. In your lifetime that may not always be true.

Parker, you have an amazing advantage! First you are young, and aren’t too dependent yet on oil. But more importantly, your Mom has given you a big head start. Teaching

you about the land, and where food comes from, and natural stuff is very important. Living in the country gives you lots of chances to play and learn at the same time. Most kids don't get that opportunity and when oil becomes real expensive they are going to be scared and confused about things like where food comes from and such – they wouldn't know the difference between a chicken and an owl (I bet you do.) Try and learn as much as you can about how the natural world works. Because people too are part of the natural world.

So, to answer your question, oil is a great and powerful energy source, but it doesn't necessarily make people happy. To catch bugs, play with your sister and friends, have a meal with your family, tell stories, make music, go exploring, design an experiment, raise animals, dream and laugh – all these things don't need any oil at all. So if I were you, I'd be excited that the cheap oil is soon running out. Your generation will make an important mark on the future of our planet – maybe you will help out Parker! – if not, I'm sure you'll have fun and do great stuff in your own little corner of the world, wherever that may be. My only advice to you is to always be curious about how things work, always be playful and try to see the fun and joy in every situation, and don't worry about knowing everything or being good at everything –to be good at the things you are good at and like to do is enough– the world will seek you out and put you on a path. Oil is awesome, but we don't need it. Personally, I would choose a good friend anyday over oil...

Good luck,

Nate

P.S. Parker is a really cool name. Cool and strong.

His mom read the letter to him and I got this reply:

This is from Parker:

Thank you for the letter. I like how the sun makes oil in the earth. I learn that we can use the sun as energy by solar panels for our home. I heard that we can use the wind for energy, too, and I know that you can use fossil fuels for gas. I really like legos and I know that the oil is getting expensive so I am trying to find a new way to make oil and plastic.

Love, Parker

This is from Parker's mom:

...Thanks for taking the time to write the letter for Parker..I wish you could have seen his eyes light up as I was reading it to him...

There are over 57 million primary and secondary school children and young adults in America. None (that I know of) are mine, but a 10 year old girl and 9 year old boy in my life are dear to me. Their parents both see and understand the clouds forming on the horizon, yet have chosen to let their kids live normal lives (normal being typical American children in 2009, which I could argue

is anything but normal): full 5th grader schedule plus soccer practice, pinewood derby, Wii, cellphones, Facebook accounts, international travel, Pokemon cards, skateboards etc. Neither of these kids have any understanding about where oil comes from, that money is printed, where our food comes from, or any of the broader systems in which their lives are invisibly intertwined. That was certainly the case for me as well (until I was about 36). It is almost as if, in these two instances, that there is an unspoken pact to not discuss these subjects when children are present. Perhaps when they get a bit older.

If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do well matters very much. -Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five. -Groucho Marx

Don't limit a child to your own learning, for he was born in another time. -Rabbinical saying

Too often we give our children answers to remember rather than problems to solve. - Roger Lewin

I really wonder what to tell our young people about unfolding events - nothing? everything? What impact will the energy/credit fallout have on our education system? What does the future hold for them? College? Post-graduate? How much has cheap oil subsidized the expansion of higher education, and how much will it change in the future? How great is the gap between education and learning? What should we be telling our children about resource depletion, overpopulation, limits to growth, and our energy future? At what age do we start having these conversations? Is the bar for making lifestyle changes to prepare for the future higher or lower for ones children or oneself? Is this example just like everything else, that we have to wait for a crisis before changing our current path? What should we be teaching our young people, the future leaders and citizens of a post peak world? How will we train those in hard sciences to oversee our infrastructure? Do we need to dramatically change how we view education?



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