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Michael Fitzpatrick '12: Earth Hour 2009: the hour without power

By:

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I hope everyone enjoyed his or her hour of darkness last Saturday evening.

For those of you who may not know what I'm talking about, Earth Hour is an annual event that takes place as part of the World Wildlife Fund campaign to promote energy conservation and curb global warming. At 8:30 p.m. on Saturday evening, millions of homes and buildings turned off their lights for one hour as a pledge to work toward reducing their energy consumption.

I discovered the Earth Hour campaign the way most college students do - a friend sent me a group invitation on Facebook. After doing my background reading, I quickly developed two distinct impressions of the campaign. I was pleased that so many individuals - nearly 840,000 Facebook members - still genuinely believed in energy conservation.

I will also admit that I was a little skeptical about the sincerity of all these people. It's not that I don't trust the movement; I questioned whether or not all of these attendees intended to keep their promise to the cause.

It didn't take long to dismiss my suspicions. Over 1 billion people in 90 different countries had planned to participate. Businesses and organizations were making pledges to turn off their lights, as well. But as my fear of insincerity faded away, I felt a wave of dissatisfaction fill the void. It's not like they asked much of us: We turned off our lights for one hour, and hopefully the governments of the world will pass a newer, stronger U.N. resolution for regulating our climate. So why do I feel like I haven't done anything?

As with most political movements, the purpose of Earth Hour involves spreading a firm message rather than producing any physical accomplishment. No one would expect to solve our energy problems by turning off the lights for one hour each year. However, by participating in Earth Hour, concerned individuals can demonstrate to the governments and people of the world how strongly they believe in sustainable energy practices.

Unfortunately, an annual event is simply not enough. Although the Earth Hour campaign has grown exponentially over the few years it has existed, its message will be lost by mid-April if the cause doesn't maintain its momentum. We shouldn't have to wait until Earth Hour 2010 to be reminded why energy conservation matters. We should be reminding ourselves every hour of every day.

The crusade to lower energy consumption isn't the only thing about which people need to be concerned. Resource conservation is just as important, but the Earth Hour campaign isn't exactly modeled to address practices such as water conservation, recycling or reforestation. If no one takes the initiative to give these important practices the same kind of publicity that Earth Hour gives energy conservation, then we'll lose sight of the big picture. Reducing our energy consumption is immensely important, but only if our world still has trees and potable water.

Finally, we shouldn't shun the idea of green technology. This is where the symbolism of turning off your lights for an hour becomes counterproductive. We should strive to release ourselves from this notion that we are dependent upon technology for our entertainment, communication and comfort. We should not, however, pursue a course that rejects all technology. By aiming to improve technology and using new science to reduce our environmental impact, we can avoid having to sacrifice all the benefits of technology along with its necessary evils.

Reducing our environmental impact is analogous to losing weight: One can reduce consumption (or diet), and one can improve the efficiency of their system (or exercise). Common sense tells us that dieting and exercising are not exclusive paths to weight loss; people treat them as such because they are too lazy to consider doing both. In fact, exercise and dieting are complementary. By the same logic, green technology and reduced consumption both improve our environmental impact, but we needn't treat them as exclusive solutions to our problem.

Earth Hour is a fine idea, but we can't let the campaign stop now that the hour has come and gone. Unless we continue to lower our energy consumption with the help of green technology, Earth Hour will have been a dismal failure. The true measure of our conviction will be demonstrated when we leave the lights off long after Earth Hour is over.

At 8:30 p.m. last Saturday, Michael Fitzpatrick '12 was writing this column

by flashlight.

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