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Q&A with Thomas Friedman

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Thomas Friedman is a Pulitzer prize-winning columnist for the New York Times and author of the bestsellers "From Beirut to Jerusalem," which won the a National Book Award, and "The World is Flat," a look at globalization in the early 21st century. Yesterday he delivered a lecture for Earth Week titled "Hot, Flat and Crowded," which shares its name with his upcoming book, and sat down with The Herald.

Herald: Your last column for the New York Times compared today's environmentalist to Noah, who was charged with saving every species on the planet from a great flood. But, as you pointed out, this time "we're the ones causing The Flood." Is our responsibility to the planet made greater by the fact that we've endangered it?

Friedman: Yeah. We are the meteor who hit the dinosaurs for our generation. We're both the flood and we have to be the ark. Because of the nature of today's global economy, it's really like a monster truck with the gas pedal stuck, and we've lost the key. Therefore, as the ones driving that truck, we've got to find a way to do it in a much more - to use the vernacular - "sustainable" way.

Given the Biblical reference and your own Judaism, do you see environmentalism as a religious obligation?

No, not really. I see it as most of all as a generational obligation. We have an obligation to preserve this patrimony, and we have a self interest: If the natural world that sustains us goes, life is not really going to be worth living. I tend not to put things in religious terms that way.

You've argued that the green revolution has been spurred on by the "perfect storm" of Sept. 11, the Internet and Hurricane Katrina. Only one of these is an actual storm - how do terrorism and bandwidth relate to environmentalism?

I now have a different perfect storm, between global warming, global 'flattening' - which is that Internet thing - and global population growth. Global flattening obviously has created a context for more and more people around the world to compete, connect and collaborate - to plug and play - than ever before. And in the process they're raising their standards of living like never before. That's a blessing, for us and for them, as people are coming out of poverty and coming out of disease. But the implications are enormous because as they live like Americans, they consume like Americans. That's going to be a real challenge. Sept. 11 isn't really part of my thinking now.

Many students at Brown are already strong supporters of the environmentalist movement. What is the next step after increasing awareness for students looking to positively impact the environment?

You have to really understand how the energy system works. It's one thing to say 'Okay, I've taken my course on climate change, I get it, I buy it, I understand what's happening to the biosphere,' but do you know how a real utility works? Do you have any idea? If you don't know how a utility works, you really

can't effect change because utilities are basically the key interface between the energy supply here and the consumer, both industrial and residential, over there. It's in that interplay between the energy we generate and the energy we use that all the mitigation and remediation efforts exist. So if there isn't a class at Brown, "How a Utility Works," you can't be an effective environmentalist. If it isn't boring, it isn't green.

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