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Elizabeth Kolbert

*Mythbusting the Link between Vitamin
C and the Common Cold*



By Willa Kerkhoff

Elizabeth Kolbert is a staff writer for the New Yorker. Her series on global warming, titled “The Climate Man,” won an award from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Her articles on the environment grew into Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man Nature, and Climate Change, which was later chosen as one of the 100 Notable Books of the Year by the New York Times Book Review. Her recent novel, The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction



There was a convocation talk on March 2 here in Oberlin and never in my life have two amazing people with such good intentions depressed me so thoroughly. The two people in question were David Orr, Oberlin environmental activist and Elizabeth Kolbert, a journalist for the *New Yorker*. Dr. Orr has an incredible background in both environmental studies and international politics, and is the executive director of the Oberlin Project, our campus effort to improve the sustainability of our campus. Ms. Kolbert is a Pulitzer Prize winner and advocate for communication about scientific issues of global importance. When Elizabeth and David walked onstage, I was both excited and sad. I knew that I was about to receive opinions and facts from two of the most reliable sources available, but I knew that nothing would be good.

I could spend time listing for you the facts that they shared that night. I could tell you that, for us to meet our (incredibly depressing) goal of keeping the warming of our planet to just two degrees celcius, we would have had to stop carbon emissions a long time ago. I could mention that, as described in Ms. Kolbert’s book *The Sixth Extinction*, we are facing a massive crisis of biodiversity on our planet. Coastal cities are destined to drown, land locked cities are destined to burn. There is a reason that climate change is one of the most significant bummers of our lifetime, a reason that it ranks alongside war and poverty on the list of “fun party conversation topics.” We know the facts, or we have at least heard the doomsday prophecies. What, then, is the next step? What can we do, other than completely freak out?

The answer is, according to both Elizabeth and David, “I don’t have the answers.” Now, for an anxious college student seeking reassurance, this was not the most fun to hear. I immediately started worrying about whether I had left the lights on in my dorm room, and so I nearly missed the greater message that this conversation sent. Truthfully, climate change is too big a topic for one night in Finney Chapel. It can’t be fully described or solved by just two people, even by two such determined and brilliant people. Climate change is, as Ms. Kolbert put it, “a symptom of the fact

that people change the world.” So at risk of sounding like an admissions pamphlet, I have to conclude that we have no choice but to continue to change the world and to change it for the better. We cannot wait for Elizabeth and David to solve this problem for us. We cannot count on some future crop of reasonable and educated politicians to implement the perfect policy initiative. We cannot wait for technology to deliver us the perfect energy messiah. When faced with such a massive problem, we cannot expect to solve it alone. We can only try to do many small things, and hope that we as a species still have the unprecedented ability to enact enormous change upon the world.

Also, as individuals, we can start buying up real estate in the Great Lakes area. With the coming catastrophe, Cleveland and Detroit will soon be the place to be. ●

“ Though it might be nice to imagine there once was a time when man lived in harmony with nature, it’s not clear that he ever really did.”

- Elizabeth Kolbert,
The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History