

## ***No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process***

By Colin Beavan

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Reviewed by

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In *No Impact Man*, Beavan documents his experiences and the lessons he learns while carrying out a lifestyle experiment. For one year, Beavan, his wife, and toddler lived an extreme-green lifestyle in New York City:

[W]e did our best to create no trash (so no take-out food), caused no carbon dioxide emission (so no driving or flying), poured no toxins in the water (so no laundry detergent), buy no produce from distant lands.... Not to mention: no elevators, no subway, no products in packaging, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV, no buying anything new... (p. 3)

The *No Impact Man* would be a beneficial text for first-year or transfer students as part of a common reading program. Selected books should be at an appropriate reading level for first-year students and of reasonable length (Liljequist & Stone, 2009, p. 92). At 274 pages, the text is far from daunting. While it deals with environmental issues, Beavan's book should not be considered solely as a proselyte text. Rather, the author's wit and personal anecdotes serve to entertain readers and engage them into its larger purpose in terms of questioning their view of civic duty and personal responsibility.

The criteria for selecting a book for a common reading program may include the following relevant themes for first-year students: connecting to the university community, persisting, overcoming obstacles, dealing with change (new people and places), acknowledging and dealing with different points of view, setting and achieving goals, and providing inspirational messages (Liljequist & Stone, 2009, p. 92). *No Impact Man* not only meets all of these criteria, but it effectively holds readers' interest and sparks discussions on many diverse topics, from the environment to economic conditions to personal wellness. Beavan relays: "For the first time in my life, I find people wanting to talk relentlessly about what I'm writing about—the No Impact project. My previous two books would sustain a

five-minute conversation. But about this book, about trying to live environmentally, about trying to live differently, everyone wants to talk" (p. 100).

Common reading programs "allow students to draw parallels between what they read and personal experiences, an important activity that engages students in academic learning" (Laufgraben, 2006, p. 2). According to Laufgraben (2006), common reading programs can help students with "(a) developing intellectual competence, (b) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, (c) exploring identity development, (d) developing multicultural awareness, and (e) developing civic responsibility" (pp. 1–2). *No Impact Man* provides plenty of content for discussions and inspiration to help first-year students progress towards these goals of a common reading program.

### Synopsis of *No Impact Man*

Although environmentally conscious, Beavan had a penchant for leather shoes and his 52-inch television. His wife Michelle, whom he had to recruit into his year-long lifestyle experiment, hails from an upper-middle class family with conventional tastes for consumer goods and reality TV. At times their differences clashed, but Beavan realized that while he expected his wife to conform to his views and avoid morally controversial products like fur, he was complacent about his own behavior: "I made the mistake of thinking that condemning other people's misdeeds somehow made me virtuous" (p. 6).

In 2006, Beavan became acutely aware of the changes in climate contributed to global warming. He heard the news of the rise in hurricanes and monsoons, of animals such as polar bears struggling to survive in the rapidly melting arctic ice, of the rising levels of trash and toxins, of the increasing shortages of clean drinking water, and the list of detrimental impacts goes on.

He acknowledged the situation, complained, and, like many, continued to live normally. Eventually, he noted that despite the current way of living freely (in terms of carefree use of resources) without concern for the impact on the environment, people are yet not happy. Realizing this, he wondered that "given the state of the world affairs, whether I shouldn't have been asking more of myself" (p. 5).

Beavan took action. He and his wife (along with their little girl and their dog—"Ten legs and a tail" as he likes to call his family) eliminated habits that had negative impacts on the environment (p. 30). If they couldn't eliminate a negative impact, they would make a positive impact—helping to remove garbage from the Hudson River, caring for newly planted trees, or donating to charity—to achieve balance. For one year, Beavan applied the following formula: "Negative Impact + Positive Impact = No Net Impact" (p. 15).

Beavan points out that his object in this experiment "wasn't bare survival" or asceticism (p. 148). His object was not to waste while not being miserable, and to find new ways to do things because the old ways were not working.

## Benefits to a Common Reading Program

### *Developing Intellectual Competence*

According to Laufgraben (2006), “many common reading programs revolve around small-group discussions, which emphasize critical analysis of a text and may later help students formulate written arguments and support claims about the text” (p. 2). Rich in polemic content, *No Impact Man* is a great tool to spark discussion and help first-year students develop intellectual competence by exercising their critical thinking skills.

The book brings into focus many of the current national and global environmental dilemmas, economic concerns, and moral issues lending students plenty of opportunities for the “practice of academic freedom and the potential of open debate” (Laufgraben, 2006, p. 2). For example, Beavan presents a “debate about collective versus individual action” (p. 16). He questions, who is to blame for today’s environmental crisis—individuals or corporations? Beavan points out that Germany “has a system called ‘extended producer responsibility,’ a policy that requires producers to be physically or financially responsible for their products, including the packaging, after their useful life” (pp. 66–67). On the other hand, the author also presents plenty of arguments for why an individual can also be held accountable for current environmental conditions. Students may discuss whether personal accountability is fair in terms of a large number of global issues, not just environmental. They may discuss controversies in the past that found resolution from either the efforts of individuals or of larger entities (e.g., suffrage rights and other freedoms gained over time, laws regarding trans fat in restaurant menu items, or initiatives to save near-extinct species).

Other topics of discussion arising from Beavan’s book include consumption—determining what is necessary and what isn’t (pp. 148–149)—and deprivation versus finding alternatives that are better for individuals and the environment (p. 167). Plenty of discussion topics arising from this text allow students to examine dual or contrasting viewpoints on current affairs. This lends to opportunities for discussion, writing exercises, and research, if desired. Students may discuss potential drawbacks, if any, of Beavan’s methods. For instance, when criticized for being against progress in his pursuit of environmental efforts, Beavan replies, “Keeping things the way they are is not progress.... I want more progress, real progress” (p. 98).

In addition to academia, university life includes being “informed about current events” (Liljequist & Stone, 2009, p. 100). As first-year students transition into the adult world, Beavan’s text can help them to become aware of some contemporary issues that are part of the “post-high school” world. Students will likely not be overwhelmed by the exposure to current events as Beavan’s discussion on environmental concerns is buffered by the simplicity of his writing style and language, which is conversational and exoteric. The increased awareness will help students to make informed decisions concerning the environment, personal health, and economy.

## *Establishing Interpersonal Relationships*

According to Laufgraben (2006), “When common reading programs involve students, faculty, and the greater campus or surrounding community in the intellectual activity of reading and discussion, students become engaged in a campus-wide learning environment” (p. 4). This reasoning is in keeping with Beavan’s urging that people reach out and connect with each other. At the beginning of his project, he says, “We have too little connection with something bigger, and so we have no sense of meaning....I became excited about the possibility of breaking through our societally endemic isolation and connecting to our community and to some larger sense of purpose” (pp. 8, 26).

Beavan explores the psychology of being happy and discovers that satisfaction is linked not to acquiring new things, but to having “strong social connections,” finding meaning in one’s work, exercising one’s talents, and having “a sense of some higher purpose” (p. 26). This message is especially important in today’s turbulent economy. His treatment of the subject of social connections over material acquisitions also echoes the family and conservation values from the Depression era (p. 37).

Beavan points out that people want to feel loved and accepted, and that involvement in community or society might help to reach that fulfillment. He says, “Michelle and I noticed that what we wanted on the surface—the minibike or the ‘normal’ ranch house—were just proxies for what we really wanted: to fit in. We wanted to be loved. We wanted not to feel what we imagined that everyone else didn’t feel—insecurity. We wanted to feel accepted” (p. 70). First-year students may relate to his message and find positive ways to resolve feelings of loneliness and isolation often felt when arriving at a new campus. They will be encouraged and perhaps motivated to reach out to their new community, and to discover resources in their college town that support any new ideals and goals they may acquire from their common reading text.

Beavan’s text also inspires individuals to consider leadership roles within their community. He declares:

What’s wonderful about the human race is that we move forward together. We like to be part of the flock. We go where the flock is going, and this is wonderful, because to be part of the flock is to feel the love of community, while to move outside the flock is in some ways a rejection of love. The problem is, while we all move together with the flock, none of us takes charge of where the flock is going. (p. 186)

This message is in keeping with the goals of a common reading program, which fosters interaction and involvement in campus and community activities.

## *Exploring Identity Development*

Beavan’s lifestyle experiment and the lessons he learned from his “year of inquiry” (p. 15) can inspire first-year college students as they endeavor to shape

their identity. For instance, Beavan feels “uprooted” at the end of his year-long experiment and the subsequent end to his rules for living environmentally (p. 212). He reflects, “Sometimes a group of rules and living traditions has the benefit of connecting you to some larger sense of community and meaning. Without the rules of *No Impact*, who am I?” (p. 213).

As students transition from high school to college or from one college to another, they may feel a similar sense of being “uprooted” from their familiar environment and structure. Discussion of this text within a common reading program may reflect on this feeling of uncertainty and relate it to the author’s own insecurity as he wondered, “Who could possibly understand the strangeness of the transition I’m going through? I mean, it is more than just the project that has ended. It is my identity. My entire identity has disappeared. .... What am I today?” (p. 213).

Besides being able to relate to Beavan’s experiences in terms of examining one’s identity, first-year students may also discuss ways in which the author overcomes his insecurities. One way that Beavan does this is by acknowledging his immediate limitations—“The idea was not to become an environment expert and then apply what I’d learned. The idea was to start from scratch—with not a clue about how to deal with our planetary emergency—and stumble forward. To see what I could find out. To see how I evolved” (p. 22). Like Beavan, first-year students may “find no well-blazed path to follow” (p. 22), but they may be encouraged to not be afraid as they stumble forward and find their own way.

Students transitioning from high school to college usually feel overwhelmed by the changes, and discussions arising from Beavan’s text may help guide them in that aspect as well. Students will relate to Beavan who relays that once he began the extreme environmentally-conscious lifestyle, he realized just how difficult his task was. He felt like a “neophyte...just making his first steps into environmental living” (p. 53). To facilitate his transition, Beavan eases his family into the project by stages.

Stage one was trying to figure out how to live without making garbage: no disposable products, no packaging, and so on. Stage two involved traveling only in ways that emitted no carbon. In stage three, we would figure out how to cause the least environmental impact with our food choices. Then we’d proceed through stages involving making as little environmental impact as possible... (14–15)

Similarly, first-year students may be encouraged to ease into their new environment and community by slowly trying new things. Discussions may ensue about the steps students may take to keep making progress in assimilation without doing too much too soon. For instance, first-year students may start by physically locating where their classes will be held before the semester begins. They can also attend floor-sponsored activities within their residence hall to begin making connections and learning about resources.

## *Developing Multicultural Awareness*

Gaining an increased awareness of environmental and social issues will help first-year students to begin the journey to developing multicultural awareness. Beavan's book talks about not only national issues, but global implications of individuals' actions. He stresses the significance of shifting one's thinking from self to a collective experience:

[W]hat if instead of just me, it were we? By this I mean if we, as a culture, treated resources as precious, might we not begin to act and feel as though this life we lead together ... might be precious, too? .... it is no longer an "I" problem. It's a "we" problem. Something we get to deal with together. We will together injure our lungs as we inhale the diesel particulates produced.... We will together drink the water laced with battery acid that has leaked from landfills. We will together suffer the greater chance of cancer as we breathe in the dioxins produced by incinerators. Now that I have disposed of my throw-away products, you see, my convenience has become the entire race's inconvenience. (p. 47)

This perspective that one plays an influential role within the larger, global community may be new to many first-year students, but an important concept to introduce early in their transition.

Other topics within Beavan's text that may prompt discussions related to multicultural awareness include references to world religions within philosophical context. Additionally, the author discusses steps that other cultures are taking to help the environment. For instance, reusable net grocery bags are ubiquitous in France; furthermore, "China, South Africa, Ireland, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Uganda, and Tanzania had already taxed or restricted plastic bags into virtual extinction" (p. 53).

## *Developing Civic Responsibility*

Liljequist and Stone (2009) point out that common reading programs can help "with transitioning from high school (the teachers telling us what to do) to college (the teachers not holding our hands)" (p. 100). This sense of increased academic responsibility may also be translated into civic responsibility. *No Impact Man* provides an opportunity for discussing how the first-year students can deal with their increased personal responsibilities and be mindful of their actions which could impact the welfare of citizens in their greater community.

Beavan wonders, to what degree are individual citizens responsible? He discusses a number of institutional measures put into place to check environmental impact (such as the "extended producer responsibility" in Germany). Beavan also talks at length about an individual's duty to his or her social causes (for instance, the wide influence of his own *No Impact* project). Passivity versus action is an important theme in the *No Impact Man*:

[T]he whole project is about not waiting around to see what might help. It is about stumbling forward and beginning to try to make a difference, rather than

sitting around wondering if I can make a difference....So whether it's human nature or industrial systems that need to change, when it comes to saving the world, the real question is not whether I can make a difference. The real question is whether I am willing to try.... Am I willing to try? (p. 67–68)

Beavan consistently advocates making active, informed choices to reduce the feeling of helplessness within a community; he emphasizes the significance of mindful decisions and actions. During the year of forgoing products that have negative impact on the environment, Beavan's wife deliberates, "It's not that we'll never use it again. It's that we're doing this yearlong experiment in order to decide if we will" (p. 155).

As part of the discussion during a common reading program, first-year students may examine their own everyday actions and consider the impact they have on their community. Students could then be encouraged to locate alternative resources that support their choices, helping to bring them another step closer toward developing civic responsibility. As Beavan notes, "the question isn't whether or not I make a difference. The question is whether I want to be the type of person who tries....Do you want to be the type of person whose nature it is to try, or do you not?" (pp. 182, 205–206).

## Summary

As a common reader, Beavan's text has the potential for providing plenty of relevant material for discussion and program-related activities. Most likely, this book will not have been assigned in high school, so there is little possibility of first-year students having to reread the text if used within a common reading program. Entertaining and informative, *No Impact Man* can offer first-year students a fresh perspective on their roles and responsibilities in the new community.

## References

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