

BARD STUDENTS JUMP IN A CREEK

Bard is a college in Dutchess County; it's also a character class in the game Dungeons & Dragons. Much like the people who play dungeons and dragons, Bard is somewhat cut off from the rest of the world. Sequestered in a beautiful sprawling campus of extravagant buildings and manicured vistas, the tenants at Bard College seem to want for nothing. In the past colleges and their students have been at the vanguard of left wing political thought. And, while it's no exaggeration that the performance of the left wing in American politics has been disappointing, if not moribund, Bard is a college with a reputation of fostering liberal politics. The Princeton review in its ranking of colleges said, "When conservatives complain about PC campuses and ultraliberal students, they might well be specifically describing Bard," and lists it as number two of the "ten most politically liberal colleges" in America. Mills College in Oakland California came in first.



I was recently lucky enough to make a visit to this bastion of liberal arts education to get a glimpse of the future of the American left wing. I had high hopes since the world is in the last years of an environmentally driven apocalypse. It's not just this crisis, but that the right publicly favors an apocalypse which they describe as "the rapture," that makes the work of the young left so important. It's the youngest, after all who will suffer the most, environmentally, from the current one party system.



I was immediately alarmed as I entered the school to see that "thinking" was segregated to one side of the campus.

In a press release, I was informed that "climate activists" at Bard were "alarmed by rapidly accumulating evidence of global warming," and had decided, in association with keepwintercold.org, to protest by jumping in a creek that runs behind the school. Ok it's not the Weather Underground Still, I was hopeful. Perhaps a crowd of determined people would already be working to avert the disaster looming in their own future and caused by their own ancestors. Raising money, taking names, running for office, calling out politicians on their record, offering points of view not heard on television. I would see a boycott, some commies, a socialist or maybe a few people planning to overthrow a corrupt government (though not planning the violent overthrow of the American government, which is illegal). I wandered around the campus lost in admiration of its splendor and also lost because I wasn't clear on where exactly the "plunge" was going to take place. Although "raising awareness" is an article of faith among most left wing organizations, I was hard pressed to find a student within the walls of the campus who knew anything about the event, much less where it would be. However I did run into some very nice people and one guy with the beginning of a van dyke who had kind of a fake English accent. "I have no idea, my good man." Eventually I was directed to a circular community garden on a low hill where activists would soon be assembling. They arrived, a little late but very charming. Devoid of the ugly desperation of the Christian right, these "local climate activists" were relaxed and comfortable. A group of about 15 complete with towels hot chocolate and mulled cider. A fire was started and we sat around for a little while making small talk. Me, another reporter, the students and a dog.

Eventually I was directed to a circular community garden on a low hill where activists would soon be assembling. Everybody seemed very nice and they all understood the general concept of global warming. One student named Ben Bliumis, who seemed energized by the opportunity of talking to the press, was emphatic that small changes in lifestyle were the solution to the problem of global warming. Driving smaller cars, using more efficient light bulbs. He spoke easily and for a long time. Interestingly he did not seem to be involved in the creation of the event but was prepared to do his part and had brought a towel. Perhaps his most memorable quote was delivered with eye contact and all the gravity that a discussion of the end of the world deserves; “words are important.” Anyway, the organizer of the event, Emily Dingman soon led us all to a deep pool in the creek on this unusually warm 45-degree day. Unusual but no record, 1927 had temps in the high 50’s up in Albany 51 miles to the north. I was impressed by the bravado of this group who stripped down to their underwear and prepared to go swimming, and not just because of the way they ignored the ice floating in the water and snow on the banks of Sawkill Creek, but also the way they ignored the stench of human waste and the sewage treatment plant only feet away emptying into the very pool they had chosen. Words may be important but I believe deeds count for more, so I give credit to Emily who broke the ice by jumping in first. The other seven or so followed and photos were taken. Back on the hill, fresh with a sense of accomplishment, the future of the environmental movement warmed themselves by their fire. Unfortunately very few outside of this group was aware of their “action.” Further if they had better publicized their “plunge” I’m not sure it would have served to create even a perceptual change for the better. Widely reported it could have further isolated the environmental movement from anyone outside its own walls. “Wacky rich kids with nothing better to do” could have been the impression generated. It took the environmental movement many years in the sixties to recover from propaganda that “the environmentalists” were not serious and that environmentalism was a hobby of the wealthy. That was a hurdle, not a vehicle for change. You don’t need to be a weatherman to know the climate’s changing, but even today, in spite of almost universal understanding that weather is changing and widespread disappointment with the Greater Republican Party, the Green Party is marginal in this country.



1969 The Weather Underground, formally The weathermen. Their name taken from a line in a Bob Dylan song “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

The weather channel has more of an impact on the politics of pollution.

As I left the gathering, sweating in my winter clothes, I couldn’t help remembering the climate activist’s slogan, “Keep Winter Cold” and thinking that



around Christmas time in America, values change. For Christmas it’s the thought that counts. Not the amount or depth of thought but the fact that somebody thought at all, even if it that thought was as fleeting and superficial as a hallmark card.

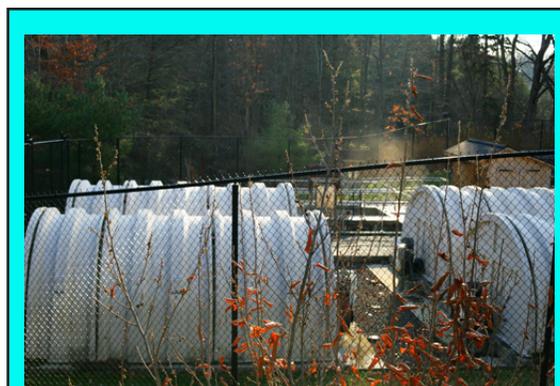
There is however, another side to the environmental movement at Bard and part of it is found in the “New Science Building.” Bard is a school to be taken seriously, and not just for their architecture or endowments. Witness their employment of Catherine O’Reilly, Assistant professor of biology, freshwater ecology specialist, and Contributor to the United Nations Climate Change Panel, Winner of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Ms. O’Reilly can be found in a modern glassy science building working after hours with a stack of papers to read and grade. I asked her about the “plunge” and the student “climate activists” and she responded that this sort of work might not promote an understanding of what causes global warming or how to slow down future global warming.

“The undergraduates can be somewhat idealistic; they know about global warming but may not have a true understanding of how it works.” However, she continued, “These are some of the smartest undergraduates I’ve ever encountered, they “catch on quickly.” To be a force for change in global warming students will need some background in science and Bard is one of the few places that require all students to study science as undergraduates.

How does global warming work? Will driving a hybrid car or using biofuels help? Not necessarily was the reply. That may be the inconvenient truth. For instance, she said, if you have an inefficient car and you buy a hybrid, what happens to the first car? If you sell it to a kid who drives more than you, you’ve now created a worse problem. Instead of one car in the world there are two and the least efficient one is being driven more than before. “People shouldn’t feel hopeless, the choices that people make about things related to energy, those are important choices and people should be making those kinds of choices – Like buying those (more efficient) light bulbs which are more expensive. You may not want them everywhere in your house but put them in those places where you have them on a lot.” However “some of these solutions could cause more ecological damage in other ways.” Including she say’s, the heavy metals that are mined to create the batteries for hybrids. “Things that I think are more disturbing are for example, the push to switch to bio-fuels; to grow more corn for more ethanol, to grow sugar cane for fuel, to grow palm oil for fuel, (in other words) this idea that we can compensate for our fuel usage by growing pants.” Ms. O’Reilly is concerned about the loss of native habitats when lands are devoted to a monoculture of biofuel crops. “We don’t need to find different fuel sources, we need to change our consumption of fuel, at least in the U.S.” Interestingly I was informed by Ms. O’Reilly that the greatest impact on global warming in the U.S. is from power plants. Efforts to reduce co2 emissions might be best directed at moving our own government to regulate and modernize power plants with existing technology in order to produce less pollution and greenhouse gasses. In 2005 the bush administration drafted “clean air” regulations to do just the opposite. The issue is complex, but the largest improvements may come from a change in large industry and government. Even so no changes are coming fast. The train is on the wrong track at full speed.

Even if we reduced emissions to a year 2000 level, inertia would keep our climate changing for 50-100 years before returning to the conditions of the year 2000. To give some perspective, while the problem of co2 emissions have recently come into the public vocabulary and was acknowledged by George Bush Jr. as being caused by humans only in September of this year, the effect was first postulated by a lonely Swedish

chemist and moon crater namesake, Svante Arrhenius, who at the age of 24 created work which would eventually win him the Nobel prize in chemistry. Later on in his life, at age 36 in 1895 after his wife left him and while spending a long Swedish winter burning coal to keep warm he authored a paper which predicted that due to burning fuel “we may hope to enjoy ages with more equable and better climate, especially as regards the colder regions of the earth, ages when the earth will bring forth much more abundant crops than at present for the benefit of rapidly propagating mankind.” He was right and wrong at the same time.



Smelly steam rises from the Bard sewage treatment plant.



Bard apparently doing its part by reflecting sunlight back out to space