



## A Mothers' Movement for Future Generations

Cancer survivor Heidi Hutner worried about how to raise a baby girl in an increasingly toxic world. Why she, and others, are convening the Women's Congress for Future Generations to make the earth safe again for our children.

by Heidi Hutner

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A hand-painted replica of Gustav Klimt's "Mother and Child."

Photo courtesy of Fabulous Masterpieces.

Eighteen years ago, a year after my mother's death from lymphoma and heart disease—almost to the day—I was diagnosed with cancer: Hodgkin's disease. Five years prior to my diagnosis, my dad also died after a long battle with melanoma. It metastasized to his brain.

All that cancer so close to home was my wake-up call. I knew something was wrong, and I knew it couldn't just be genetics. Maybe the lymphoma was connected to Hodgkin's, but what did melanoma have to do with my cancer or with my mother's? And what about my maternal aunt, who had breast cancer?

Suddenly, everyone else I knew seemed to be getting cancer, too: neighbors, children, friends.

Maybe, I thought, it all had to do with the poisoning of our environment, with toxics and radiation. This concern nagged at me as I went through the grueling "healing" process of a cancer patient.

A few years later, I became pregnant. I was overjoyed—I had waited so long to become a mother. It was all I wanted.

In post-Fukushima Japan, men typically talk about jobs, economics, and energy, while women talk about radioactive food and water, cancer, and children's enlarged thyroid glands.

At the same time, I felt guilty in trying to become pregnant. What, I wondered, might I pass on to my little one, and how could I protect her from all the environmental hazards in our polluted world? What dangers coursed through my own veins?

I knew that my ability to protect my baby daughter was limited. Sure, I did some substantial post-chemo cleanses, ate as well as I could, and used non-toxic products on my body and in my home. But no matter how much I did as an individual, the unbounded nature of pollution meant that my blood would carry toxins right through the placenta and into her growing fetal body, and my breast milk would transmit pollutants after the birth. And after birth, well, we live in a polluted world: with mountaintop coal removal and fracking; sacrifice zones; radioactive waste, leaks, and accidents; genetically modified food; pesticides, PCBs, and more.



### Film Trailer: Living Downstream

A documentary that follows ecologist and cancer survivor Sandra Steingraber, as she explores the seemingly unnatural causes of cancer.

None of us can fully keep the pollution out. The realization that my own daughter's safety and health—and all children's health—was and is in peril scared me mightily.

This revelation set me off on a journey from cancer survivor and ordinary English and women's studies professor, to environmentalist and mother who writes, teaches, and marches for the rights of future generations.

My post-cancer and early motherhood questioning led me to read the work of Rachel Carson, Sandra Steingraber, Helen Caldicott, Alice Stewart, Petra Kelly, Winona LaDuke, Vandana Shiva, Wangari Maathi, Joanna Macy, and Carolyn Merchant, among other women environmentalists, scientists, historians, activists, and writers. A common call for all of these remarkable women is a concern for the safety and health of children and future generations.

Most are mothers.

It seems that women, in embodying the "first environment" for new generations, have a unique understanding of how dangerous things have become for our children; how precariously things hang in the balance.

Perhaps it is for this reason that I often notice a female majority at environmental rallies and events. In post-Fukushima Japan, for example, moms make up a large portion of environmental movement. There, it is often men who talk about jobs, economics, and energy, while women talk about radioactive food and water, cancer, and children's enlarged thyroid glands.

Women, in embodying the "first environment" for new generations, have a unique understanding of how dangerous things have become for our children.

Future generations deserve safe wombs and breast milk, and clean air, water, and soil. They deserve a livable climate and healthy, non-genetically modified food. Future generations—including rivers, oceans, mountains, forests, deserts, and the innumerable species—deserve to live as they have for centuries.

These are basic rights, and yet our children, and all beings, are losing them.

That's why I'm going to the the Women's Congress For Future Generations on Sept 27-30th in Moab, Utah. I'll be joined by nearly 200 people—including men—of varied skills, wisdom, and experience, including elders such as Joanna Macy and Mona Polacco, young activists from Peaceful Uprising, and environmental lawyers such as Carolyn Raffensperger and Polly Higgins.



### Soccer Moms Face Off Against Monsanto

A grassroots coalition of California citizens has an initiative on the ballot to require the labeling of genetically modified organisms. While Monsanto and other corporations have spent tens of millions to silence them, the initiative seems likely to succeed.

My goal in participating in the Women's Congress is to help co-create a safe present and future home for all living beings; to work together to build an ethic of guardianship that we hope will enable us to co-exist peacefully, safely, and non-exploitably on this precious planet. We want to leave a safe home for those who are already here, and those who are yet to come.

In Moab, we will craft a Declaration of the Rights of Future Generations and the Responsibilities of Present Generations through art, song, word, meditation, and vision.

We will forge a vision of ecological civil rights, and bring this ethic of guardianship back into our many home communities through continued gatherings, political actions, and other forms of expression.

Today, my daughter is an active and healthy teenager, yet my fears about her health and the health of the future generations persist. My own cancer history weighs on me still—I want to be here for my daughter for as long as possible. I do all that I can to stay healthy, and I feed and give my girl as much organic food and non-toxic products as she will allow (she's a teenager, after all).

I also spend my days spreading an environmental ethic to my students in the university classroom and in my writing to the public and through street activism. Yet it feels like I can never do enough to protect my own family, and the earth, and all beings. Cancer rates are higher than ever, and global warming and climate concerns, among the many other environmental crises, increase yearly.

So I join my powerful allies in Moab to devise stronger and ever more effective deeds, words, and actions to increase, instead, our potential for a safe and healthy future for all.



Dr. Heidi Hutner wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas and practical actions. Dr. Hutner is Director of Environmental Humanities at Stony Brook University, where she teaches about Environmental literature, film and media. Read more of her work at her blog, *Ecofeminist* and *Mothering Ruminations*. Follow her at @HeidiHutner.

### Interested?

- For more information and registration, please go to: Women's Congress For Future Generations. Follow us on Twitter: @wccfg; Facebook Page; Facebook Event.
- In Japan, a Mothers' Movement Against Nuclear Power  
The Fukushima disaster has brought a powerful new demographic to Japan's anti-nuclear movement: mothers.
- Eve Ensler: Freedom Starts With a "V"  
The "Vagina Monologues" author on why knowing your body can shake up the world.
- Spiritual Environmentalism: Healing Ourselves by Replenishing the Earth  
Wangari Maathai: What role does spirituality play in our work to heal the earth?
- Occupy 2.0: The Great Turning  
Michael Nagler on building a movement to build a new reality.

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