

# Neva Say Neva

Neva Goodwin, ecological economist, answers *Grist's* questions

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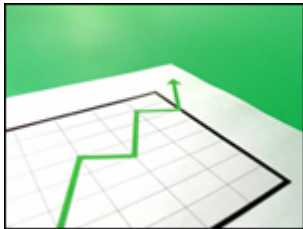
**Neva Goodwin.**

**Q: What work do you do?**

A: I'm an economist, and codirector of the [Global Development And Environment Institute](#) at Tufts University.

**Q: How does it relate to the environment?**

A: My overall goal is to affect what people are taught when they take economics courses, and to change the kind of economics that's subsequently in people's heads when they make policy, or vote as citizens. The kind of economics that I hope people will be learning and using 20 years from now -- even 10, or five, years from now -- will support a much more realistic understanding of the dependence we humans have on a healthy environment, and of the ways that our economic activities affect both the social and the physical environment, for better or for worse (today it's usually for worse, but it doesn't have to be that way).



**Q: How can we best measure what matters?**

A: To give just one example: standard economics textbooks *all* repeat that there are essentially three kinds of economic activity: production, exchange (or distribution), and consumption. In the textbooks on which I'm the lead author, we make the point that this leaves out an essential fourth activity: resource maintenance. How can you produce

bicycles, cars, or anything if you don't maintain your production tools and machinery? How can you exchange goods and services if you don't maintain the social and physical infrastructure -- laws and communications systems? How can you "consume" (that's the term that's used) the pleasures of leisure time (music, cooking good food, athletics) if you don't maintain a healthy home and body? How can you produce, exchange, or consume anything at all if you don't maintain a healthy ecosystem, with clean water and air and other essentials for human existence?

**Q: What do you *really* do, on a day-to-day basis? What are you working on at the moment?**

A: Recognizing that my overall goal is an ambitious one, I'm pursuing a broad and varied strategy. As one piece of the strategy, I work on writing textbooks for use in college classrooms. I have been surprised to discover that I really enjoy writing textbooks; it's like putting together the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle -- especially challenging when a piece is missing and has to be invented -- and I've had great colleagues to work with.

For teachers who are not ready to adopt a text that is not virtually identical to all the others that have evolved from Paul Samuelson's [Economics](#), I oversee the writing of teaching modules, downloadable for free from [our website](#), which can be used to structure a class, or a week's worth of classes, around such topics as climate change or tax policy, or to insert into a mainstream micro- or macroeconomics course an overview of the environmental issues that are missing from the standard presentation. (These have been downloaded by teachers -- and others, such as people in NGOs -- in about 85 countries.)

Reaching out to researchers and other readers, in academia and elsewhere, I have edited two book series. One, ["Evolving Values for a Capitalist World,"](#) deals with questions like how to steer different elements in a society toward a more long-run vision of what matters; various approaches toward corporate responsibility and irresponsibility; or how to understand the relationship between rich and poor, in terms of what kinds of assistance are and are not useful. The other book series, ["Frontier Issues in Economic Thought,"](#) is designed to lure researchers, through irresistibly convenient summaries of fascinating articles, into areas such as ecological economics; the consumer society; the difference between economic goals and normal human conceptions of well-being; the changing nature of work; inequality; and the social and environmental sustainability of economic development.

Those are my intellectual pursuits -- the things I really like to do. Then I also spend a

certain amount of time in administration at the institute (something I don't feel I'm especially good at) and, alas, fund-raising. Writing proposals can be a creative act -- but I'd rather be writing textbooks or editing other things.

**Q: What long and winding road led you to your current position?**

A: My undergraduate degree was in literature. If I had been told back then that someday I would be an economist, I would have thought that was nuts. When I look back, though, I can see signs of it long before I knew where I would be heading.

In 1971, when my children were ages 3 and 1, I spent a year in France, rather isolated from adult companionship. Before leaving this country, I had stopped at the U.S. statistical office. You might well ask: Why would a young mother and aspiring novelist do that? It was because I was so conscious of the value of parenting, home health, and nutrition activities, and other kinds of homemaking -- now known as "caring labor" -- as among the essential activities for any society; and I was also painfully aware of the low value our society places on such work. It seemed to me that there was almost an inverse relationship between pay, which in our society is closely correlated with respect, and the importance of different kinds of work for the quality of life. Home-based caring labor is normally paid nothing. People who do the actual work of raising food, along with grade-school teachers, social workers, nurses, and others who contribute most to society's health and well-being, come close to the lowest end of the pay scale.

I had an idea that I called "robbing Peter to pay Paula" (sexist, I admit, but based on reality), which was about levying a tax on all income; the money raised would go to pay for the work people do in their own homes to create the basic environment for healthy, happy children and adults. I spent a good deal of time that year studying the Statistical Abstract of the U.S. Census, 1970 (my great find from the statistical office), figuring out how much of the gross domestic product would have to be taxed out and recycled back in to provide even minimum wages for this essential work. (The answer came out at a little over 25 percent. I've later learned that other such calculations have been made, generally coming out between 20 and 33 percent.)

I remember sitting with tears running down my face as I looked, in the statistical abstract, at the figures for farms -- the number of farms declining every year. I knew how much heartache went with the loss of most of those farms. (Total farm acreage, by the way, hasn't declined; this is a story of big farms absorbing small ones.)

I guess I should have known, when the statistical abstract could move me to tears, that I was headed for a career change. But it wasn't until 1975, when I was 13 years out of college, that I went back to Harvard to do pre-calculus, econ 101, etc. -- and on up through a Ph.D. at Boston University.

The question that motivated me, to start with, was: Why don't wages reflect the real value of work to society? The question that continues to motivate me is: How can we change the socio-economic system so that our human values will be better reflected in the signals we give, which in turn determine the character of that system?

**Q: How many emails are currently in your inbox?**

A: I try desperately to keep the number down below 500. I don't do email when I'm on the road, and every time I come back I have to fight back down from 600 or 700 -- with three-fourths of the new messages being spam. (I've got a good new spam filter, which helps.) Then I get a warning from Tufts that I'm about to be over quota. I don't like adding to the amount of technology I have to grapple with, but I think I'd better get something like a Blackberry to be able to keep up when I'm out of town.

**Q: Where were you born? Where do you live now?**

A: I was born in New York City -- and never liked it. When I moved to New England at the age of 15, arriving on a fall evening, I sniffed the air and said to myself, "I've come home." I live in Cambridge, Mass., and am still in love with New England. (It's all a matter of taste and personal history: my son has taken the reverse journey, back to New York, and loves it.)

**Q: What's been the best moment in your professional life to date?**

A: This past January I was at the American Economic Association conference, where I presented a paper on Wal-Mart, and where Houghton Mifflin was displaying our new textbook, *Microeconomics in Context*. Three publishers asked me to turn the Wal-Mart paper into a book, and several people I didn't know came up to me and said, in tones that I interpreted as admiration, if not awe, "Oh, are *you* the author of that new textbook?!" The publisher response was icing on the cake; the personal reactions were something I've been looking forward to for a long time!

**Q: What's your environmental vice?**

A: I have so many, I don't know how to choose. I'm nowhere near living a sustainable lifestyle -- too many plane trips, too many electricity-sucking gadgets. (But I am planning to put solar panels on my roof next year and send some juice back to the grid.)

**Q: What are you reading these days?**

A: I've just discovered a delightful Russian detective-story writer, Boris Akunin ([\*The Winter Queen\*](#) is the first in a series) -- very Russian, quite zany. Every day I read a few poems. I've been memorizing some Edward Lear ("The Quangle-Wangle's Hat"), but in terms of serious poetry I always come back to Edna St. Vincent Millay as my favorite. I've almost finished [\*Collapse\*](#), by Jared Diamond. It's a wonderful book, but somehow I can't make myself read the last chapter. I think I'm afraid that either he will be optimistic, in which case I won't believe him, or pessimistic, in which case I'll be depressed.

**Q: What's your favorite place or ecosystem?**

A: I won't say, because it's already being destroyed by too many people discovering it! But I was there last week, watching the beavers, who were watching me (they're very curious). There was more tail-slapping than usual, probably because there were a lot of little ones zooming around the pond like whirligig beetles, not obeying their elders' cautionary signals.

**Q: What's one thing the environmental movement is doing particularly well?**

A: It's great that environmentalists are increasingly recognizing that, in this world full of *Homo sapiens*, you can't bring health to the rest of the ecosystem without taking equal care for the well-being of this powerful, if sometimes foolish, species. Bucky Fuller had a little poem which I'll try to quote:

Environment to each must be

    Everything there is, but me.

Universe to each must be

    Everything there is -- and me.

In these terms, environmentalists are now embracing the universe -- nature *and* people. That's really good.

**Q: What's one thing the environmental movement is doing badly, and how could it be done better?**

A: The movement should be looking for common values wherever they are to be found. It needs now to go beyond the social concerns I just cited. Yes to taking care of people and nature at the same time, but we also need to respect constructive values even where we find them mixed in with others we can't swallow. If someone is against abortion rights or doesn't believe in evolution, but also believes that corporations are doing harm by promoting materialist values, figure out how you can get into a conversation about the last of these elements. If someone is pro-gun and anti-government, but cares about preserving swordfish for sportfishing, we need to work harder to find the commonalities. Not all, but many sport fishers care about something larger than just having fun.

**Q: If you could institute by fiat one environmental reform, what would it be?**

A: Well-thought-out pollution taxes, with an emphasis on taxing production of greenhouse gases.

**Q: What are you happy about right now?**

A: Last weekend, while I was watching the beavers (a delight in themselves), I heard spring peepers and thrushes -- and the white-throated sparrows are singing in Cambridge on their way north. A spring infusion of beavers, peepers, thrushes, and white-throats can balance out a lot of bad stuff.