

# “Action has always been *my healing tonic.*”

THE PSYCHOLOGIST **MARY PIPHER** UNITES CONSERVATIVES AND LIBERALS TO DEFEND NEBRASKA'S ENVIRONMENT ONE SMALL, SWEET ACTION AT A TIME.

BY SHANNON WIANECKI

**IN THE SPRING OF 2010**, Mary Pipher saw her world turn inside out. After weeks of freakish rain, much of Nebraska, her childhood home, was declared a flood disaster area. In July, temperatures in the state soared to 115 degrees. Evidence of climate change had reached her doorstep. Elsewhere around the globe, news on the environmental front was catastrophic: Russian peat bogs were burning for the first time in memory. Monsoons in Pakistan drove 14 million people from their homes. And, of course, the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill had poisoned the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile, another oil company planned to lay 2,000 miles of pipeline across North America, straight through Nebraska's pristine Sandhills grasslands. Pipher realized that the Keystone XL pipeline would pass within 10 miles of her son's house. A future spill could contaminate her grandchildren's drinking water.



**Dr. Mary Pipher** is a clinical psychologist, an environmental activist, and the author of nine books exploring how American culture influences mental health. *Reviving Ophelia*, her investigation into the societal pressures plaguing adolescent girls, became a runaway success. She has twice received American Psychological Association Presidential Citations for her work. She returned her 2006 citation in protest of the association's acceptance of controversial interrogation techniques used in U.S. military prisons. She lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she organizes potlucks, poetry readings, and pie bake-offs to protest the Keystone XL pipeline.

Rather than disappear into grief, the spitfire, tousled-haired grandmother galvanized it into action. She hosted a potluck for friends, who came up with simple strategies to oppose the pipeline's construction. Their grassroots efforts not only helped participants stave off feelings of hopelessness but grew into a national campaign that reached the White House. Pipher, a clinical psychologist and author, describes the process in her latest book, *The Green Boat*. She calls it a mental health argument for activism.

"I have never been able to tolerate stewing in my own anxiety," says Pipher. "Action has always been my healing tonic."

Pipher has been called a therapist at large to our culture. Her earlier books delve into the tremulous self-esteem of adolescent girls and the rocky integration of refugees into American society—topics with both personal and civic relevance. Her latest work tackles climate change. Rather than a recitation of doomsday facts, it's a self-help guide to surviving an uncertain future. Using her own experience of defending the Nebraska prairie as a blueprint, she outlines the transition from denial to awareness and action. Healing the planet and healing ourselves are deeply congruent processes, says Pipher.

Her recipe for activism is novel; it involves less pulpit pounding and more celebrating.

"As a mother and a therapist I learned that shouting 'Wake up!' doesn't work," she says. So instead, she has hosted poetry readings, music and art festivals, barn raisings, and other gatherings that encourage camaraderie within her community. "We wanted to make it fun. Nebraska is a very

Hope is not about outcome. **It's about the belief we are doing meaningful and important work.**

conservative state, and we didn't want to be called protesters or troublemakers. We wanted to have fun things that Nebraskans like."

So far it's been working. Politically conservative ranchers and farmers have united with liberal conservationists to defend Nebraska against what they call the corporate bullies. "Republicans and Democrats started getting along," says Pipher, "because we knew how to message this without being political. We really appealed to basic values like love of the land, clean water, and our children's future." Add apple pie to that list and you've got some serious traction.

The Grandmothers' Apple Pie Brigade emerged out of Pipher's attempts to gain an audience with Nebraska's governor, Dave Heineman. She and a few other grandmothers regularly delivered baked goods, garden bouquets, and note cards to the governor's office, thanking Heineman in advance for calling a special legislative session to debate the Keystone XL pipeline—something he did not want to do. Eventually, he did call the special session, and the women got an hour of face time with him.

The brigade's latest initiative is even more charming. Rocking for the Future encourages people to "rock" for a sustainable future in rocking chairs. "How can you possibly not like someone in a rocking chair? It's such a gentle kind of activity," says Pipher. "If you put rocking chairs along the 2,000 miles that the Keystone XL pipeline is slated for, you can sit in a rocking chair all winter long." Which is what her brigade plans to do if necessary to prevent the pipeline's construction.

Pipher doesn't labor under the illusion that she can save the world, but by engaging in small actions toward that purpose, she suggests that we can save ourselves. "Hope is not about outcome," she says. "It's about the belief we are doing meaningful and important work."

Documenting her personal response to climate change in *The Green Boat* was a difficult but therapeutic and even blissful journey, says Pipher. "My optimism for the human race has increased working on this book," she says. "We don't have much time. We have 10 years at most to address the CO<sub>2</sub> levels. But we don't need much time. A real change in consciousness could change the world overnight.

"Disasters offer humans the chance of transcendence. They give us the opportunity to grow into bigger selves." ◀

## Inspiration for Action

- **Organize a climate change action group in your hometown.** Host a potluck and talk about the causes of carbon pollution and your responses to this crisis. Spend as much time (or more) talking about solutions as you do about problems. Commit to a few simple actions. Meet regularly to celebrate triumphs.
- **Join the Grandmothers' Apple Pie Brigade.** This fun-loving group is dead serious about addressing climate change and stopping a potential polluter: the Keystone XL pipeline. Can apple pies, lemonade stands, and rocking chairs help save the planet? Help find out by enlisting at [applepiebrigade.org](http://applepiebrigade.org).