

PROFILES



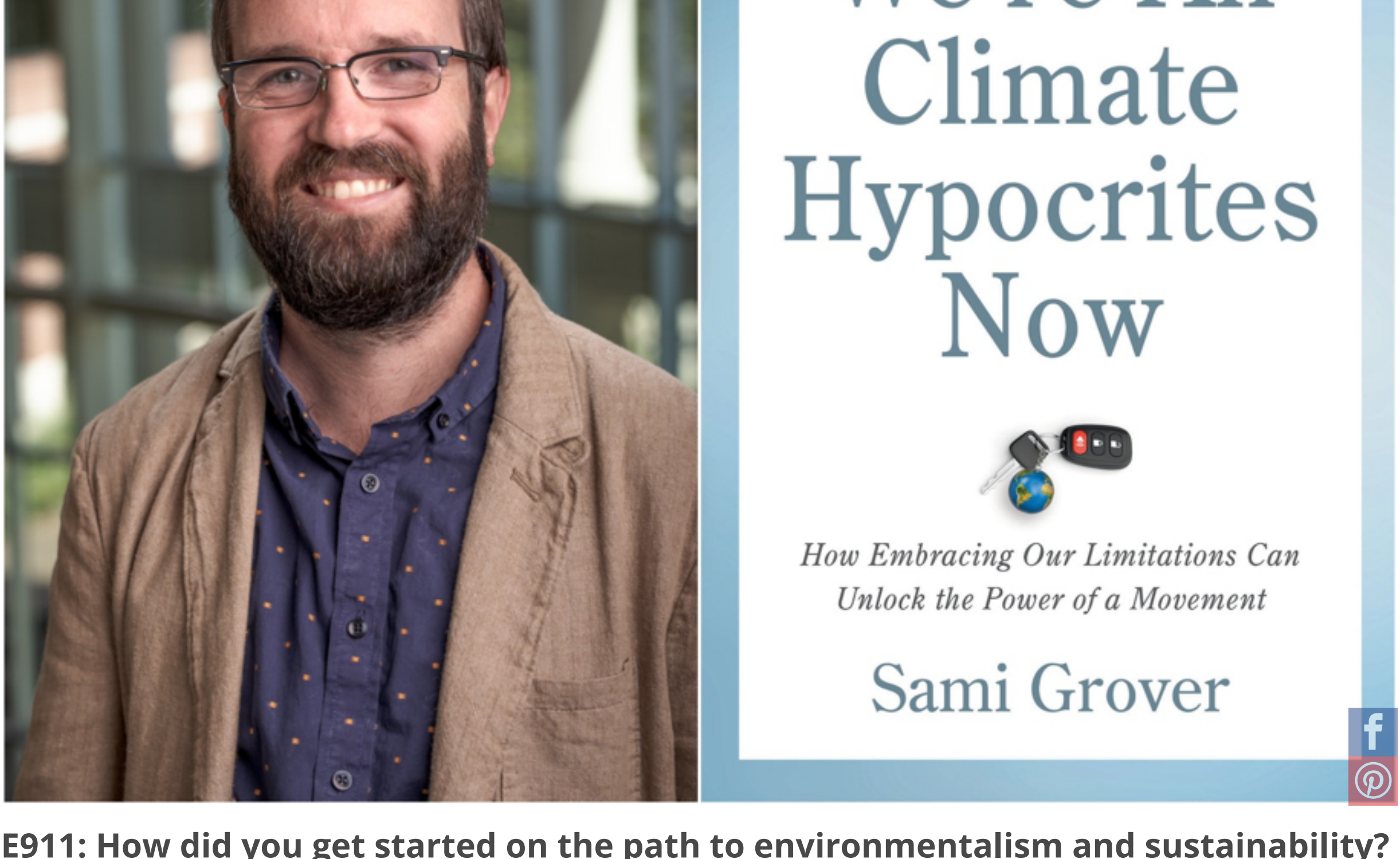
Ask an Eco Expert: Sami Grover

by Sheri Radford / Oct 12, 2021

The climate writer uses a tongue-in-cheek approach to deal with a serious topic

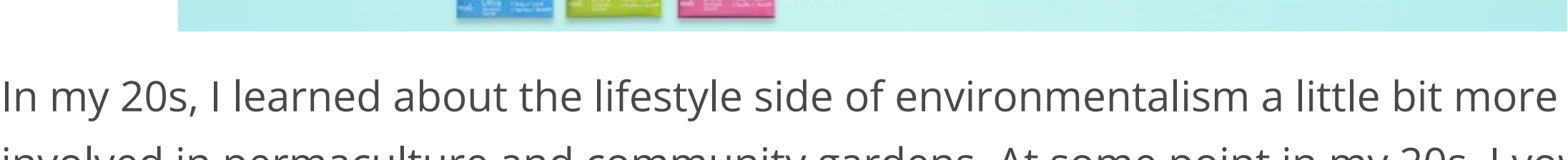
Over the years [Sami Grover](#) has written more than 2,000 articles for [Treehugger](#), but he's also an eco-hypocrite—and he's pretty sure you are, too. His newly published book, *We're All Climate Hypocrites Now: How Embracing Our Limitations Can Unlock the Power of a Movement*, examines how millions of imperfect but dedicated individuals can make a difference in bringing about meaningful change.

We talked with Sami Grover about the usefulness of shame and guilt, how environmentalists judge each other constantly and more...



E911: How did you get started on the path to environmentalism and sustainability?

Sami: I've been involved in environment and climate stuff since I was probably 14 or 15. My friends were bunking off school to go raid their parents' liquor cabinets, and I was bunking off school to volunteer at [Friends of the Earth](#). That gives you all you need to know about my level of rock 'n' roll.



In my 20s, I learned about the lifestyle side of environmentalism a little bit more and got involved in permaculture and community gardens. At some point in my 20s, I vowed never to fly again. I took the last flight I was ever going to take—and promptly fell in love with an American. That screwed up my principled stance and brought me to the place where I decided that flexibility is an important part of sustainability.

I've been on that journey ever since, which actually relates to the book. While I believe that individual action and behaviour change matter, I think it's very, very hard to pursue perfection within a society that encourages the opposite. So it leads to this idea of rethinking not necessarily *whether* individual action matters, but *why* it matters, if that makes sense.

E911: After writing thousands of articles about environmental topics, what finally prompted you to write this book?

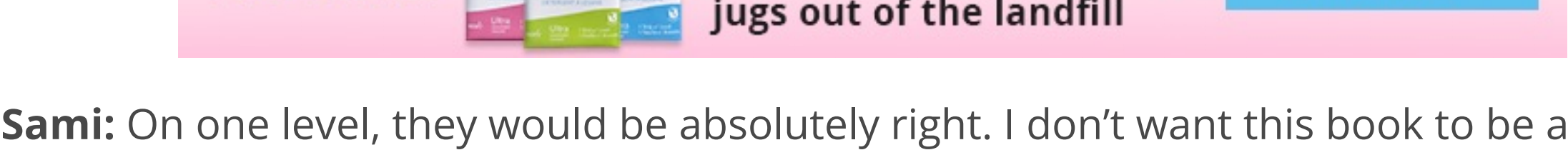
Sami: People talk past each other a lot on this topic. There are folks who go deep into “I will achieve a zero-carbon footprint and go dumpster diving and eat vegan.” Then there are folks who take the stance of “It's the systems that matter. It's politics. It's our tax structures.” The folks who go down the deep-green-vegan-dumpster-diving route feel attacked by the folks who are saying it's the systems, and the folks who are saying it's the systems feel judged by the folks who are going the deep-green-vegan-dumpster-diving route.

One of the things I dig into in the book is that vegans get a bad rap for being judgy even when they're not. We don't deal very well with people who are better at living into our values than we are.

If we think of our individual actions as a lever for systemic change, we don't actually have to go 100 percent in order to make a difference. You don't have to give up flying in order to find common ground with those who have given up flying. You don't have to be a vegan in order to find common ground with people who are vegans.

The only task we have is reducing our societal carbon footprint. That's the only carbon footprint that matters, ultimately, and your efforts to reduce your own carbon footprint ought to be geared towards where they are most likely to bring everybody else in the right direction. For some, that's really extreme. For others, it's not even worrying about your own personal carbon footprint. And I think both are valid.

E911: What if a critic says you're just trying to justify that you still want to fly and eat steak?



Sami: On one level, they would be absolutely right. I don't want this book to be about my absolution because my absolution doesn't matter. Some of the actions that are currently being taken are more about performative absolution than they are about actually fixing the problem.

If someone wants to judge me for flying, I'm okay with that, as long as the judgment moves me closer towards not flying. There are times where shaming might be really useful in our movement. The trouble is that the more we shame everybody, the less power shame has. Where can we deploy shame to have the biggest possible leverage?

When environmentalists judge each other all the time, we end up sounding like the adults in Charlie Brown. It's just “Mwa-mwa-mwa-mwa.” Whereas if we're going to use judgment on flying, then the most sensible place to start is private jets, business-class fliers and frequent fliers.

Shame works best when it's a subset of society that is being shamed, and when they're on the edges of social norms. If you're trying to shame people for something that everybody else is doing, it doesn't work very well. We probably should all stop flying. But I'm not going to stop flying to go see my mom. I'm just not. And that's the same everywhere. Let's start where we can have the biggest leverage, and then gradually that also shifts everybody else's behaviours.

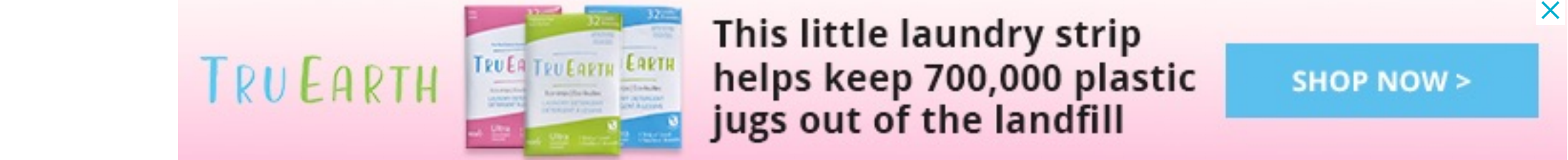
The book is about living in those grey areas, recognizing we're not going to be perfect, but also not allowing that to be an excuse to do nothing. I'm totally okay with people saying, 'you should do this, you should do that.' The only thing I have no time for is someone saying, “You can't be an environmentalist if...” That's a no-no. You can't be an environmentalist if you tell other people they can't be an environmentalist. That's my only rule.

E911: How is shame related to guilt?

Sami: The same as figuring out why shame is useful, I think we need to figure out why guilt is and isn't useful. I think it's useful to feel guilty about the things we're not yet doing. It's useful to kick us into action: “I feel bad about my climate impact. Therefore, I should do something about climate change.”

At some point you have to say, where is the guilt useful? Where is it guiding me? And where is it holding me back from doing something important?

I'm actually glad Al Gore flew around the world giving his talks. I don't care about his personal carbon footprint. I think it was really important to do. So it's not that you shouldn't feel guilty, it's just that you should keep it in check and not allow it to cloud where you can be the most effective.



Shame is useful. Guilt is useful. Anger is useful. Reconciliation and cooperation are useful. We need the entire toolbox. We just need to be a lot smarter about which one we use, and who is the right person to do it.

We need to stop dictating to everybody else that there is one right way to solve this problem. Nobody's solved it yet. Nobody's even close to having solved it yet. We all need a little bit of humility.

E911: Does your book's sense of humour spring from a desire to get more people to read it, or is your take on the world just naturally funny?

Sami: It's a bit of both. I am a little bit of a class clown. And I also think we are dealing with this just terrifying topic.

Climate people are some of the funniest people I know. And often when new people come to this topic, there's fear and anxiety. They're like, how can you do this, day in and day out? And then there's also, why are you laughing at this? And that's valid, but we are going to be in this for the rest of our lives. There's no plausible version of this where we're not, even if we get to net zero tomorrow. We will be facing the consequences for at least 20, 30, 40 years on some of it, and thousands of years on other elements of it. We may as well enjoy the ride, whatever it is.

My only concern is I don't want to make light of it, because ultimately it's *not* funny and it's *not* okay and it *is* terrifying.

E911: I read that you're obsessed with human waste. What's up with that?

Sami: You'll have to call my therapist.

I think there's great symbolic value in trying to figure out what we do with the stuff we don't want to talk about. Nothing we do with our human waste is logical or well-designed right now. It's a massive waste of resources.

E911: How do you keep coming up with all the ideas for the thousands of environmental articles that you've written?

Sami: Are you familiar with Mary Hagler's work? She's a terrific writer. She said recently that the best thing about climate writing is that it touches literally everything on the planet. Therefore, you get to write about literally everything. You can pick any object and ask, what's the connection to the climate crisis? We're not short on problems in the world.

My most popular article was about beer that's served inside a dead squirrel. Don't ask me why that's the most popular.

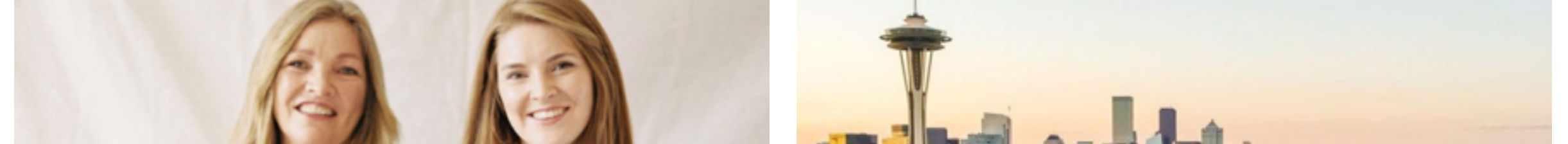
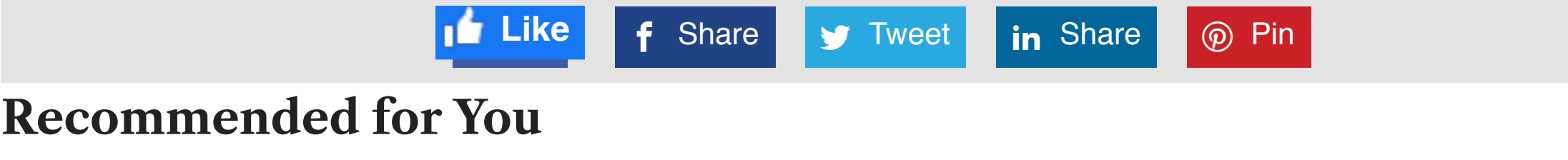
E911: If everything can be an environmental topic, how do you narrow it down to just one topic each day?

Sami: Part of that is just being a little bit scatterbrained. This is what is interesting and fun to me today.

That also comes back to the book. One of the core things we have to do as individuals is sustain our energy to fight the climate crisis. You need to be interested and excited about what you're doing in order to stay in it. So that means either wherever you've landed, you have to find passion in that, or you have to follow something you're interested in until you find that place where you can act on climate.

If you're really into food, that's a good place to start. If you're really into cycling, that's a good place to start. If you're really into cars—I know a lot of people hate cars, but we're going to have them for a while—that's not a bad place to start.

Mary Hagler said that the worst thing you can do on climate is nothing. So find that place to start.



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