

Dispense with Disposables

By Joanne Poyourow

Dispose of it. The entire “use it once” concept, from packaging, to paper plates, to the infernal “paper or plastic” question. Just say No to extra packaging, styrofoam, unnecessary bags. Just say No to disposable cameras, disposable cell phones, use-it-once toys.

The old saying “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” had a nice rhythm to it. But it leaves out two important elements: Rebuy (the purchase of reused things, or things made from recycled goods), and the fact that there really is a hierarchy to these R’s.

“Recycle” is truly the least preferable. Unfortunately, it is the one our society appears to be embracing most readily, with our aluminum cans, our glass, and now our #1 and #2 plastics. Recycle requires resources - usually fossil fuel/greenhouse gas producing resources - to haul away, melt down, reform, re-warehouse and redistribute. Often recycling programs are subsidized in order to keep them afloat. Most materials we send to recycle are then bundled and sent overseas to be processed into raw materials (more fossil fuels and emissions). And the concept of Recycle perpetuates our cultural mythology that “use it once” is okay.

Reduce (and precycle) means to consider the wisdom of the item in the first place. Do you really need the brand which is laid out on a styro tray, shrink-wrapped in plastic? Can you buy from the bulk bin, perhaps with a reused bag?

Carry a canvas bag, which is Reused and Reused and Reused, trip after trip to the market. Reach for a reuseable kitchen towel rather than a paper towel. Use both sides of paper in the office, and Rebuy by selecting recycled stock in the first place.

Let’s say that more plainly: “use it once” is not okay. Disposable *anything* says that it is acceptable to take from the earth’s bounty, use-it-once, then cast it to a garbage heap of miscellaneous slowly-decomposing or non-degradable discards. Our earth’s resources, our grandchildren’s resources are worth more than that.

No, switching to canvas bags won’t save the world. But the pause to think, the awareness and habit-retrenching required to switch to canvas is practice of a discipline.

Just as we call meditation a Practice, just as my children’s daily violin is called Practice, so we must cultivate the Practice of awareness and habit-retrenching. Canvas bags are merely one way to do it.

The pause when we hesitate at the grocery clerk’s inquiry “Paper or plastic?”, the pause when we decline the farmer’s market proffered plastic bag, these are golden moments. These are the split second when we can once again revisit the principle of Sustainability. We can revisit Arthur Waskow’s constantly moving standard in which the test is: Are we constantly doing what is more respectful, less damaging to the earth than we did last year?

Then we become able to apply this Practice to other purchases, other consumer decisions, other lifestyle issues, our transportation habits, our voting decisions ... That is how Dispensing with Disposables can begin to save the world.

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WHAT CAN I DO?

- * Emphasize “reduce” and “reuse”, understanding that “rebuy” and “recycle” are less preferable to reduction in the first place. Eliminate the “disposable” mindset.
- * Reduce: Eliminate household disposables wherever possible, in favor of reuseable versions: kleenex (handkerchiefs), paper towels (dishtowels), paper napkins (cloth napkins), feminine products (gladrags, menstrual cups), baby wipes (terry wipes), plastic baggies (reuseable jars, dishes), saran wrap (pot lids, inverted plates, cloth napkins).
- * Reduce: Select brands with less packaging. Buy bulk when possible. Petition favorite brands to reduce their packaging, and to use recycled and recyclable materials for that packaging which must remain.
- * Reduce: Opt-out on junk mail and catalog mailings whenever possible.
<http://www.newdream.org/junkmail/optout.php>
- * Reduce: Fashion purchases, and personal care items, such as makeup and “beauty” products. Fashion, in and of itself, is founded upon a disposable mindset. More on that later (or you can refer to p.195-197 of *Legacy*)
- * Reuse: Seek second hand clothes, especially for children. Select durable toys which will outlast several children. Pass outgrown clothing and toys on to other families.
- * Reuse: At parties, use real plates, forks, napkins. Particularly at casual parties, your guests will notice - a perfect opportunity to discuss Sustainability! An acquaintance told me her grandmother and grandmother’s sisters all shared their dishes back and forth, so that anyone holding a party would have enough plates. Time to re-embrace this elegant custom.
- * Reuse: If you must do the Starbucks routine, take your own reuseable mug. (more on coffee later) Take a mug into the office for your personal use. Encourage your office to use real dishes rather than paper cups or (gasp!) styrofoam. At my husband’s company’s German office, they do not have disposable plates. The parish in Los Angeles where we hold the [Environmental Change-Makers](#) meetings has a bevy of mugs printed with the church name for coffee-hour use.
- * Reuse: Use canvas bags for most shopping. Reuse the few paper and plastic bags you do acquire.
- * Rebuy: Buy toilet paper with high recycled content (Trader Joe’s and Seventh Generation offer 100% recycled).
- * Rebuy: Select copy/printer paper with high recycled content (Staples offers 100% recycled copy paper. Local paper companies such as <http://greenfieldpaper.com/> offer recycled and more-sustainably-produced paper products). Buy refurbished print cartridges and recycle when used (Staples will recycle them). Direct your company’s purchases toward recycled products (example: <http://www.greenerprinter.com/>).
- * Recycle whatever you absolutely cannot precycle, reduce or reuse. Check your city website for updates in the list of things which can be recycled through the city program. Petition your business or apartment waste hauler (in Los Angeles, these are private haulers) to offer recycling services.

How many more opportunities can you find to Reduce and Reuse, within the context of a contemporary urban life?

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