

12-8-2019

Plastic Fast

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Plastic fast

BY MAUREEN SCHLANGEN

A S LENT 2019 APPROACHED, I CONSIDERED what I would do to grow spiritually and practice justice, service and stewardship.

For a few years, I have lamented the state of creation and our role in environmental degradation. While I have always cared for the Earth, I couldn't deny that as a consumer, I was part of the pollution problem, particularly when it came to plastic. I'd seen the pictures of giant ocean garbage patches. I'd seen the pictures of dead sea birds, their distended entrails clogged with colorful plastic exposed by decomposition. And while marveling at nature every time I rowed or ran along the Great Miami River, I'd seen hundreds of bottles, bags, toys and trash, washed, blown or thrown there by accident, chance or utter indifference.

In the era of *Silent Spring*, the first Earth Days and the "Keep America Beautiful" campaigns in the 1970s, littering was just the tip of the pollution iceberg. It still is. The bigger problems are demand and production. *National Geographic* reported that worldwide, we produce almost 500 million tons of plastic every year — and about 40 percent is tossed after one use. According to the nonprofit Plastic Oceans, more than 8 million tons of plastic go into the oceans each year; production of plastic water bottles alone has grown from 3.8 billion in 1996 to more than 500 billion in 2017.

So was born my Lenten fast: single-use plastic.

I was off to a good start, I thought. I had long since given up plastic grocery sacks, having grown exasperated at seeing them whipping in bare branches along roads and rivers. Bags in trees are common enough to have earned their own nickname "witches' knickers." Bottled water was easy to quit; so were straws. But what would I put produce and bulk items in at the grocery? How would I cover leftovers or pack sandwiches?

These were easy enough to fix: I bought a set of fine-mesh bags for produce and bulk items; I started storing leftovers the way my grandmother did, in a regular bowl with a plate as a cover; for my lunch, I washed the sandwich bag I'd used on Fat Tuesday and reused it over and over, then bought a set

of nifty beeswax-covered cotton wraps. For leafy vegetables that might wilt in the dry air of the refrigerator, I started rinsing and reusing shopping bags I'd saved.

The first visit to the grocery presented unexpected challenges. My mesh bags eliminated the need for produce bags, but those represented but a tiny fraction of the plastic in the produce section. Why, I asked myself, was it necessary to ship grapes and tomatoes in vented plastic bags? Was it necessary to package traffic signal-colored bell peppers together? And why did they cost less? If marketing could convince people to buy three peppers, I reasoned, couldn't new marketing messages convince people to buy them without the plastic?

In the meat coolers, I faced miles of plastic film wrapped around hundreds of polystyrene trays. When I went to the meat counter, where items could be wrapped in paper, my heart sank when the meat cutter handed over my salmon in another plastic-wrapped polystyrene tray. I would need to make a habit of requesting paper or bringing my own container.

In the cheese case, I encountered a horror I hadn't foreseen: Beautiful mounds of fragrant, butter-colored wedges, all tightly wrapped in single-use plastic. Curses! A plastic fast is one thing; a cheese fast is quite another. I had to make a concession, but I committed to disposing of the plastic properly and storing the cheese in beeswax wraps, reusable containers or waxed paper.

For all the times I received single-use plastic against my will, I reused it or recycled it as much as I was able. While the recycling bin is not the right place for a lot of single-use plastics, many grocery stores accept used plastic film such as dry-cleaning bags; deflated bubble wrap; plastic shipping envelopes; and the plastic wrapping around toilet paper, napkins and paper towels. See plasticfilmrecycling.org to find a collection point.

During my journey, my environmental lamentations didn't subside, and the fast continues.

But it seems I've become ... an evangelist.

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