

Making Peace with Plastics

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Plastics must have seemed like a miracle when they first appeared. My husband, a physician, couldn't do his job without them. They have brought advantages to our lives.

But plastics—so flexible, so disposable—have begun to exact a toll. In her book *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash*, Elizabeth Royte comes to this conclusion: it's better to avoid using plastics because trying to make, use, and dispose of plastics sustainably is nearly impossible.

Plastics are made from ethylene, which is derived from non-renewable resources such as natural gas and crude oil. The industry categorizes plastic into seven types by number. The higher the number, the less recyclable it is. For example, the plastics used in items such as soda bottles and milk jugs are usually #1 (PET) and #2 (HDPE, or high-density polyethylene); the numbers are stamped into the bottoms of the containers, surrounded by the familiar chasing arrows. Plastic formulas with numbers higher than #2 aren't easily recycled in many communities.

Recycled plastics don't retain the predictable qualities of "virgin" plastics. Aluminum recycling, for instance, is a closed-loop system; recycled aluminum has the same qualities as virgin aluminum and is inexpensive to recycle. By contrast, new plastics are cheaper than recycled plastics. Instead of turning old plastics into new plastics, we just keep making more virgin plastics. Many of our old plastics are shipped overseas to Asia

for processing into cheap goods that manufacturers in turn ship back to us.

Ann Leonard, who has written extensively about environmental issues, is quoted in Royte's book: "True-closed loop recycling has no new resource input and no waste output. And that's virtually impossible with plastic waste because its chemical structure changes when it's heated and the quality degrades. We're just delaying its eventual dumping."

In our consumer-driven, disposable culture, using plastics sparingly may sound ridiculous. But consider these facts from Royte's book: plastics never degrade, Americans trash forty million plastic soda bottles *a day*, and fragments of plastics have been found in the stomachs of sea turtles, albatrosses, and other animals worldwide.

Although certain industries necessarily rely on plastics, we can easily reduce our use of plastics. When possible, buy materials made from glass, paper, or metal. When you have to buy plastic, look for the #1 and #2 markings, and then recycle. Avoid buying anything disposable, which is usually plastic or inside a plastic container. For example, instead of disposable wipes, I use my own rags. And although it may be tempting to opt for disposable utensils when I have a large gathering, I use my own dinner plates, flatware, and cloth napkins, not plastic plates or paper napkins (which come wrapped in plastic). I try to remember to carry my own travel coffee mug.

Plastic food packaging has become excessive: does sandwich bread need

to be double-bagged? Whole foods in general are less packaged than processed foods. What did we do before plastic grocery bags? They are everywhere now: under my cabinets, in my garage, clinging to branches, rolling across the street like tumbleweeds, gumming up ditches, and floating down streams. I carry cloth bags to avoid bringing more home.

Avoiding plastics is hardest when it comes to my kids. Many toys are plastic, but they break more easily than those made of sturdier materials, and they are usually not recyclable. Plastics are used extensively in marketing to children, particularly through restaurant franchises hawking cheap toys from the latest animated movie. Nowadays, my children come home from birthday parties with more plastic than I sent with them, tucked into plastic gift bags. While we can't eliminate plastics from our house altogether, we try to avoid the fast-food trinkets, and I am trying to help my kids learn to think critically about these issues too.

Once in a while, at a craft show, I'll pick up a hand-carved wooden bowl or a piece of pottery and enjoy its satisfying heft, an authentic human touch that no plastic could mimic. It reminds me that we are all shaped by God's hands, particularly gifted to care for God's people and God's world. Thinking critically about our use of plastic is one way we can all care. ■

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