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Sustainability: An Old Idea with Renewed Relevance

I am not a product of my
circumstances. I am a
product of my decisions.

STEPHEN COVEY



AREN'T OLD ideas some of the best? Often, they are simple remedies for what ails us. Soak in a bath of Epsom salts to wean the tiredness and soreness from muscles. “Feed a cold, starve a fever”: we navigate a high body temperature with liquids and a stuffy nose with soups and starches. Upset tummy? Keep it white: eat simple carbohydrates like bread, crackers, noodles, and rice.

Most of us have grown up with maxims we heard our parents say. We’ve absorbed their meanings, but we may have wandered from their teachings.

“Waste not, want not.” It’s an admonishment as much as a lesson and can be read in different ways. One interpretation could mean: don’t use too much now so you have something for later when you need it. Here’s an example from my own life, despite good planning and best intentions.

During the pandemic, there were few outing options for my family. Luckily, we live just yards away from multiple entrances to Forest Park, a five-thousand-square-acre urban forest accessible from the West Hills of Portland, Oregon. When our youngest of two kids inevitably starts feeling cooped up and begins acting out, we pack up our snacks, walking gear, and water bottles and make our way to the forest for an hour-long walk. It always takes me by surprise how little legs are pained from doing the thing legs are put on this earth to do: ambulate. There is significant complaining along the way, lots of stopping for rest, and frequent requests for snack breaks. Inevitably, our kids gulp water from our Hydro Flasks

despite my admonishment, “Don’t drink too much. We’ve just gotten started. The water has to last the entire journey. Save some for everyone.” Do you think my children find me wise? Nope.

Most trips into the forest, we run out of water way before hitting home, and the refrain from my kids is the same: “I’m thirsty. I need water.” Yep, I hear you. Did you listen to me?

Another interpretation of “waste not, want not” is: don’t waste what’s useful. In classic French cooking, nothing goes to waste. The French will eat animal intestines, kidneys, livers, and tongues, and the list goes on. With a side of crusty baguette and a steamy dish of beans and flavorful sauce, unrecognizables become delicious. It is tradition in French cuisine to use the entirety of an animal, preparing the various anatomical parts to be served up in a variety of dishes that satisfy our hunger and meet our nutritional needs while honoring the animal sacrificed for our gastronomic enjoyment.

My maternal grandparents were working-class folk. They lived on a hilly plot of land in Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania. When my family used to visit them, which was at least every couple of months, my grandmother’s kitchen was a cauldron of cooking, heat, and bustle. Just above where their house sat, my grandfather had planted an expansive garden on the two acres of land he owned. He grew food all year round, and those earthly treasures were harvested and prepared into ever-rotating meals each season. It was at my grandparents’ house that I learned the art of canning foods, extending food harvested in the spring and summer through the winter, when fresh fruits and vegetables were hard to come by (and expensive).

I remember the glass jars, the metal lids with a separate piece in the center, and the rubber seals. I was fascinated by the wax plugs that my grandmother placed on the top of the canned food, so the fill stayed fresh and remained free of contamination. I was the designated runner in the house, the gal who was asked to run down to the storage area in the basement and grab x number of jars of this and that to be prepared and served at one of the bountiful meals my grandma always made. There was seemingly food for years down there: whole tomatoes, pickled beets, delicious fruit jams, and sliced carrots.

From a personal resilience standpoint, canning makes good sense: it's nutritious and economical. Most urban dwellers have food stocks that will last them fewer than three days in the event of an economic disruption. Here in the Pacific Northwest, everyone lives in anticipation of the Cascadia subduction earthquake that's been predicted to imminently happen . . . every year over the last half-century. When the event finally does happen, having a good stock of Earth's wholesome goodness locked in dozens of jars will alleviate any immediate hunger concerns (provided the jars don't break). Last year's pandemic proved that disruptions that are economic-, health-, and extreme weather-related throw our food supply into disarray.

We've moved away from axioms that espouse restraint, prize usefulness, and avoid waste to adopt new ones that amplify personal consumption. "Treat yourself," "You only live once," "You deserve it," "Why not? There's free shipping," now roll off our tongues as we scroll, click, and buy.

Here in North America, we have unlimited choices for consumption. But in the Netherlands, where my family lived for four years, the idea of limited choice is a happy societal norm. Whereas in US food stores you can find a full-length grocery row of energy bars, jams, cereals, and dried pasta, in an Amsterdam grocer, energy bars may not exist, jam and cereal options may be limited to three, and the pasta displayed may be one of each type. Brand diversity is typically limited to three or four per product category. In the fresh food section, instead of five types of oranges, just one will be displayed. Food groups and product categories are represented, but the brands and options are curated. If I still lived in Amsterdam and went to the store to buy alternative meat protein for my dinner, I would likely find one brand in three preparation forms.

Stores there act like showrooms. You go into a store to buy a crib for your baby who will be born in the coming months, and you can decide among five or six crib options but you cannot go home with a crib. You place an order for that crib that will take eight weeks to reach your house. Same for buying a mattress. You go to the mattress store and pick a model, and then wait eight weeks to

receive it. The funniest (and most frustrating) experience I had living in Amsterdam was my many jaunts to the local hardware store. I'd go in because I needed garbage bags, a hammer, some picture hooks, light bulbs, a lock . . . everyday items. My hardware store in Amsterdam often had bare shelves where these items should be. I'd walk in, look around, ask if they carried these items. Yes, they carry them, but they are currently out of stock. A new supply will be coming in, when? Next Thursday, we think. I was flummoxed. I could never understand why these basic items weren't *always* in stock. But that's how the Netherlands rolls.

I bring up a country whose consumption practices seem old-fashioned to make a point that the ways people shop and consume goods there have an inherently sustainable quality to them. In our world, gripped by climate change and wracked by extreme weather events, old ideas ring true. Going back to basics is critical. So, a few axioms to kick us off:

Keep choices simple.

Limit over-buying.

Make things last.

For a country that was built a thousand years ago on land claimed from the Zuiderzee (North Sea), the Dutch know how to secure, endure, and thrive under challenging circumstances. From Europe and other regions around the world, we can learn different approaches to living and adopt those that make practical sense and are fundamentally self-sustaining. I want to talk about three ideas in particular.

"Make Do with Less" Made Way for "More Is Better"

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It's a uniquely American phenomenon to make everything bigger. A small soda at the movie theater is now sixteen ounces. Remember when a small drink or cup of coffee started at six ounces, rose to eight ounces for a medium, and topped off at twelve ounces for a

large? How about the supersizing of French pastries? In Paris, you walk into a boulangerie and can purchase a croissant for breakfast that fits into the palm of your hand. Here in the US, that same “butter” croissant can often be the size of your face. In Italy, you can order a yummy gelato in a cone on a warm sunny day. That refreshing treat will be one small scoop that fits perfectly into the diameter of a sugar cone. Here, a kid’s-size cone from Ben & Jerry’s is two oversized scoops stacked one upon the other and carefully tamped down into the cone so the weight of the ice cream doesn’t tip the whole piece over.

“Bigger is better!” is the universal truth extolled across America at fast-food restaurants, movie-theater counters, and car dealerships and in our love of “big box” retailers. We happily order a Double Quarter Pounder burger at McDonald’s because it’s a deal and we think we need it: a burger with not just one but two quarter-pound beef patties symmetrically complemented by two slices of questionably real cheese slices. We order our movie snacks without much thought and select the large cola drink because it’s “just a dollar more” than the standard size, a mere twenty-six ounces of sugary soda to wash down our candy and imitation-buttered popcorn.

In Europe there are no multiple-sized sandwich options to purchase. Here, Subway, the national submarine sandwich maker, offers customers three sandwich sizes to accommodate how hungry we feel we are. That trend has expanded across all manner and type of food chains.

We are a country of oversized and over-the-top. Take America’s consumer truck “invention”: the Hummer. This tank turned expensive SUV was a 1990s postwar darling among the rich and wanting to be seen. The military vehicle, the Humvee, was created to protect its contents—soldiers—during wartime. It was an effective machine: heavily reinforced and nearly indestructible, if not very efficient. The consumer iteration was likely to see nothing more dangerous than traffic jams around congested US cities. Even though the Hummer averaged less than ten miles per gallon,

a horrendous energy efficiency metric, people bought the vehicle in droves.

Shopping at a Sam's Club or Costco is a uniquely American phenomenon. It is at once enticing, intoxicating, and utterly effective in swaying consumer behavior into the realm of the unreal: to have individuals buy groceries and basic home goods in bulk—three, five, and even ten times more than the amount required—to save a few dollars. Here's the kicker, though. This buy-in-bulk mentality tends to have two divergent paths. Either bulk goods purchased, like fresh foodstuff, go bad before they are consumed, or there is a slow (or quick) slide into a mentality of abundance where we justify using more than we need because we have so much taking up space and needing to be used and we spent less on the items than the value we arguably assign to them.

The Jevons Paradox comes to mind here. William Stanley Jevons was an English economist during the Industrial Revolution around the mid- to late nineteenth century. He observed that with increases in coal efficiency, which was the standard fuel of the day, instead of there being a reduction in use, more coal was being consumed. Hence, the paradox: as efficiencies are made in a resource; the unintended consequence is consumption of that resource increases. The Jevons Paradox can be applied to a whole host of contrary outcomes; for example, people tend to eat more low-fat ice cream than full-fat, leading to increased weight gain. Or people who buy more stuff at a lower price tend to also consume and waste more than individuals who shop in a more measured way only “for what is needed.”

We love and fully embrace our bulk discount megaretailers such as Walmart and Target. Don't buy two kiwis, buy this package of sixteen. Need some lip balm? Don't buy one, buy six with this pack. At the retail counter where sales are rung up, the sales assistant will proffer, “You want another? You'll save twenty percent!” Usually, I reflexively say, “No, thank you.” I don't like to buy in bulk, except when it comes to vegetable stock and tomato sauce. You can never have too much of either. But the constant prompt makes me do

the math: I'm not saving; I'm spending more money. And for what purpose? Do I need double the hand sanitizer I thought I needed? Do I really need a second pair of fuzzy slipper socks?

Capitalism teaches us that more benefits us, as well as society as a whole. It's a growth mentality run amok.

In our lives, we sometimes go through big, scary systemic shocks that compel us to rethink how we act and consume. The Great Depression lasted ten long years in the US. Both my mom and dad were Depression-era babies, having been born in 1937 and 1939, respectively. I've read about how tough that time was. Out-of-work men and boys riding trains across the country, women waiting in bread lines for food to sustain their families, farmers abandoning their fields because the proceeds of harvesting weren't worth the effort.¹ My mother's grandfather lost his fortune in the stock market crash of 1929. He was a devastated man.

I remember how my father's parents would keep every pack of sugar, salt, and pepper; pocket every extra ketchup sachet; and gather in a paper napkin individually wrapped butter packets when we ate in a restaurant together. My brothers and sister and I would snicker about how they silently pirated away these small gems of food. We didn't understand why, until we saw where all that "booty" went: their home kitchen. Mum-mum, my grandmother, once opened her freezer in front of me, and there were mounds of individually wrapped little butter pats in there, just waiting to be eaten at some later date . . . or never. Yes, she hoarded butter long after the Depression ended and life became comfortable. Waste not, want not.

During World War II, Americans were asked to make all kinds of personal sacrifices in support of the collective good. The war effort required commandeering manufacturing plants to ensure that war goods were in sufficient supply for the soldiers who were fighting on the front lines. The government rationed all kinds of consumer goods—meat, sugar, firewood, and medicine—asking people to make do with less. People were asked not to drive during the war, and "pleasure drives in the countryside were more or less

outlawed.”² Gas that ran cars was redistributed to the war effort. So, too, the rubber of car tires, which was repurposed to insulate all types of war machines. Americans sacrificed. There were grumblings, but all in all, individuals understood the need for the rationing. We can make do with less and be well.

More recently, we lived through the twin global health and economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remember those first days and weeks, when bread, milk, tissue paper, paper towels, toilet paper, wet wipes, and hand sanitizer were out of stock on most grocery shelves or, if they were in stock, rationed to just one or two items per person? The message was: don’t buy more than you need; spread the love; leave stock for others. As the year progressed and we found ourselves at home, quarantined or in rolling lockdowns, working virtually and juggling all the elements of our lives from inside our houses, we began to consume differently.

We cooked and ate at home more often.

We planted gardens with our favorite food items.

We bought fewer clothes.

We purchased less makeup.

We stopped buying jewelry.

We made do with a messier hairdo.

We groomed less because we went out less.

We stopped driving our cars.

Of course, we had upticks in other types of purchases:

- Face masks
- Take-out food
- New electronics to be productive at home
- Video-streaming services for entertainment to escape with
- Booze (well, at least for the non-teetotalers among us!)

The arrival of COVID-19 forced us to live life differently. Yes, it was often painful to be forced to change so much so quickly. But unanticipated silver linings revealed themselves among the chaos and uncertainty:

- I saw my husband all day, every day.
- My family took almost daily impromptu walks in the forest together.
- My husband shared home and family responsibilities with me.
- I bonded with my pre-teen daughter. We lunched together daily and took afternoon strolls through the neighborhood.
- I worried less about how I looked. Listen, I'm still vain, but I went from coloring my hair every eight weeks to quarterly, and wearing far less makeup and minimal jewelry.

Here's the short of it. Doing less and having less does not have to equate with being worse off. It does not have to equal sacrifice. Less can be better. A few things can be enriching. We may have to force ourselves to experience those happy unintended consequences of trying a different way of being.

A sustainable life is a new way of living in this world. For you, it may initially carry the mental moniker of sacrifice, doing without, less-than, hardship, not fun. But sustainability is none of those things. It is a marriage of what you value with what is valuable for sustaining the world you know and love. It is a life well lived and imbued with meaning. It is taking a light touch that is the right combination of satisfying your needs while considering the needs of a collective community.

"Made to Last" Made Way for "Made to Be Replaced"

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How many times have you bought a hair dryer thinking you'd have it forever, only to find two years later that it has mysteriously stopped working? It usually has something to do with hair getting trapped in some chamber and a burning smell. Or, a buildup of lint in the mesh on the backside of the nozzle. Who knows. I'm

surprised, because hair dryers are simple machines. You'd think they could handle a little hair and lint.

Here's another example I think most of us can appreciate: your home printer (if you even have one!). My printer is of the ink-jet variety from HP. On average, my home printer lasts about one and a half to two years, maximum. Something always breaks, and every troubleshooting guide fails. Or the manufacturer stops supporting the software for their particular model after a certain period, rendering it useless. Ca-ching! Go purchase another.

The same goes for my relatively "old" iPads. We own two, both under five years old. Problem is, they are bumping up against that inevitable date when their operating systems won't be supported by Apple. Our last iPad, now more than eight years old, was one of the "walking dead" electronics. At some point in the last two years, we were afraid of updating its operating system because we knew that when we did, we'd lose the use of the device. Crazy, right? The operating system was made obsolete by the company that made it.

We've moved at hyper-speed from "made to last" to "made to be replaced." Materials can't be repaired because their blend is shoddy—not repairable—by their very nature. Electronics manufactured and bought by individuals are designed to be "retired" within a certain number of years, the shorter the better. Planned obsolescence is a deliberate demand strategy employed by product manufacturers. Companies don't support their brilliant electronic creations because they don't want to support you not buying another brand-new machine to replace the old. The jig is up: newer is better; old is out.

"Multi-Use" Made Way for "Single-Use"

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Goodness, I used to love my Ziploc bags. With little kids in my life, plastic sandwich, freezer storage, and snack bags were like my cool little kitchen treats. There's a size for everything, and every bag has a unique function. They zip. They lock. They double lock. I mean, the product extensions on these plastic babies are endless!

How about the boon in single-serving packaging of food items? We have “snack pack” single-serving sizes for everything: cookies, crackers, peanut butter, instant noodle soup, Lunchables, nuts, dried fruits. And the killer of all these options is that they are wrapped, bathed, secured, packaged, and ensconced in plastic. The “promise” of plastic’s coming ubiquity is alluded to in one famous scene from *The Graduate*, a movie set in the 1960s, when Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) is pulled aside by Mr. McGuire (Walter Brooke), a friend of his father’s, to learn about the future of plastic.

Mr. McGuire: I just want to say one word to you. Just one word.

Benjamin: Yes, sir.

Mr. McGuire: Are you listening?

Benjamin: Yes, I am.

Mr. McGuire: Plastics.

The Belgium-born American Leo Baekeland invented the very first form of plastic, Bakelite, in the early 1900s. From there, the variety and types of (fossil-fuel-derived) plastics exploded, starting with the invention of Scotch tape by 3M in 1930. As companies in Europe and the US learned how to make plastic more malleable, invented injection moldings and extruders to shape melted polymers, and discovered new types of plastics such as polyethylene (PE), the use of the material became commonplace in consumer goods packaging. Ever since, plastic production and pollution have proliferated.

Before plastics, we operated in durables and valued longevity. We learned to “make do and mend,” and we understood reusability equated with material usefulness. Post-World War II, we moved quickly and steadily away from durable and long-lasting to disposable and one-use in the materials we used, the products we bought, and the food we ate.

Glass, aluminum, and steel: these materials have near infinite lifespans. They can be melted and reformed into new products while retaining the qualities and attributes inherent within them. Said another way: they are highly “upcyclable” materials.

Plastic containers like Tupperware can of course be reused. But most plastics cannot be easily recycled today. When they are, most can only be “downcycled”: recycled into items of lesser quality than the original products. Milk jugs are incorporated into plywood fencing; PVC pipes are recycled into shipping envelopes; water bottles are chipped to make pillow stuffing.

Today, there are two types of highly recyclable plastics: PET/PETE (labeled #1) and HDPE (labeled #2). Think plastic water bottles for #1 PET plastic; milk jugs and clothing detergent containers for #2 HDPE plastic. The “oh my goodness” moment comes when we find out that just nine percent of all #1 and #2 plastic is actually recycled in America. The rest of that highly recyclable plastic material ends up in our landfills, polluting our land and off-gassing methane that goes into our air and heats up our environment.

Guess how much of the 14 million tons of plastic produced in the US is used just once and then thrown away in the trash? Have a number in your head? Forty percent: just under half of all plastic consumed is used only once.³

Does it make you want to use fewer Ziploc plastic bags? It did for me. The plastic bags I use now, I reuse religiously: use, wash, dry, and repeat.

Disposability seems to be our schtick here in the US. It’s a by-product of a consume-more culture that has emphasized a “buy more and faster” mentality for Americans. But if you start to look around, there are more options. Take Raz Mason, for one.



RAZ MASON

Always prepared with handy durables

RAZ MASON is a jill-of-all-trades: a chaplain, teacher, resiliency coach, and climate leader in Al Gore’s Climate Reality

Project. Raz lives in The Dalles, a rural town in eastern Oregon that falls in the "rain shadow" of Mount Hood. She's lived and worked bi-coastally: in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, as well as in Philadelphia and the DC metro area, and studied at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One thing Raz is: always prepared.

She and I met one evening for dinner at Andina, a favorite Peruvian restaurant of mine in Portland. As we ate, we talked about life and our respective work on climate solutions. The Peruvian cuisine is one of diversity, just like the culture and history of Peru. We both had agreed to share plates, and lots of them, so that she, having never tried the food before, could experience all it had to offer. We each ordered four plates. They were not small. Even though I usually bring my he-man appetite to nice restaurants, we were left with quite a bit of food that, if we decided not to take it home with us, would go to waste.

I don't like to doggy-bag my leftover food. I prefer to eat everything I order. But just as importantly, I didn't want to use the restaurant's disposable plastic containers and tops and a plastic bag to haul my leftovers home.

Raz asked, "Do you want to take the remaining food home?"

"Well," I said, "would you?"

Raz reached under the table and into her backpack, and she took out three glass containers. "These are for you," she said. "A gift for paying for dinner. You can use them to doggy-bag the food home." And that's Raz in a nutshell. Prepared, unfazed, and always sustainable.

When we asked our server if he would use our containers to pack up the food, a broad smile took over his face, mixed with amusement and knowingness. "Yes, and good idea," our server said. "I wish more people did just what you did right now."

Sustainability Defined

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At MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, great minds ponder the depths and definitions of sustainability. One of those definitions that resonates with me is by John R. Ehrenfeld, the former executive director of the International Society for Industrial Ecology and author of *Flourishing: A Frank Conversation about Sustainability*. For many years, he acknowledges, understanding and defining sustainability has not been easy:

The word “sustainability” itself is misleading. As a noun, it is meaningless in practice unless it refers to some *thing* that is to be sustained. It is, in fact, a question in need of answering: can we sustain growth? Can we sustain our population? Can we sustain our lifestyle?⁴

I like that an academic such as John seeks to make sustainability relevant to individuals and not just to nations, municipalities, and organizations. Because it is you and me who come together to organize. Human beings are the essence of those large institutions and organizational systems. We need to understand what sustainability is and how to enact it.

To be efficacious, we must absorb sustainability into our life so it is the very essence of who we are and what we stand for. We do this by aligning our values with sustainable actions and practices. We build the lifestyle we seek by making commitments to choices that reinforce our values. Through this intertwining series of choices and commitments, we become sustainable by embodying the practice of sustainability.

John defines sustainability as that which is flourishing, and measured by “quality,” not quantity.

Flourishing . . . comes when one can say that life’s cares are being attended to—when every human being is successfully caring for themselves, other humans, and the non-human world that is vital to our maintenance.⁵