



Why the fuck am I recycling?

To recycle or not to recycle, that is the question. Or certainly a question that, with all this talk of fake and real solutions, a lot of us are asking. Not necessarily out loud, but in that secret doubting place inside us every time we drag our paper and plastic to the curb. Why, *really*, am I doing this? How, in the face of the vast planet-destroying inertia of industrial civilization, is my little drop in the recycling bucket doing any good at all? And come to think of it, what really happens to all this stuff once it leaves my curb?⁵¹

These doubts dogged Jamey Hecht, and they dog me across all that I do to reduce my carbon footprint. Besides recycling, I also compost. I rarely use the A/C except on the worst summer days. I live in a tiny apartment in a multi-unit building in a big city, so I get good efficiencies on winter heating. I don't have kids. I bring my own shopping bags to the grocery store, and I try to re-use the plastic bags (and water bottles) I inevitably end up with anyway. Knowing that the livestock industry is a huge contributor to deforestation and global warming, I don't eat red meat or poultry, except for turkey once a year on Thanksgiving. My microwave is a second-hand donation from a friend, and it's worked fine for the last 15 years. I don't own a car. To get around the city I mostly walk, bicycle, or take the subway. And I've gotten my flights down to a relatively modest two per year. I've got my footprint slimmed down so far I'm like a feather on the Earth. A resource-intensive, middle-class, American feather.

And why do I do all this? I have a friend who takes ten flights a month for work. Is reducing my flights to two per year—or even to zero—going to make any difference? Americans put 100 billion (that's "billion" with a "B") plastic bags into landfills every year. How are the handful I reuse going to change that? And yet I feel I must do these small things.

Only a global ban on single-use plastics is going to stop the plastic pollution killing our oceans.⁵² Only a hard cap on fossil fuels, the whole-sale adoption of renewables, along with a few other large-scale systemic interventions, is going to reduce carbon emissions at the speed and scale needed. Anything I do to slim down my footprint is just pissing into the wind. But piss I must. Why? It makes me feel better. It gives me a sense

of agency. It models good behavior. But more than all this, I think it's actually a kind of prayer.

Every returnable bottle I take back to the grocery store, every soup can I rinse out and put in the recycling bin, is a secular offering. A sacred vote of confidence in the future. A moral act that aligns my habits with my values, and keeps me on a principled path. It's an act that maybe matters less for its direct material impact, than for the work it does upon me, the recycler.

But what really happens up the chain, after we ritually rinse off our filmy milk jugs and fold our newspapers and place them in the bin, and then carry our offerings—always on Friday morning, the mandated day of deliverance—to the curb to meet their remaker? *Forgive me Earth, for I have sinned* we whisper into our recycling box confessionals. The catechism of the three Rs is gospel. We say it like a rosary *Reduce-Reuse-Recycle* over our paper and plastic offerings. Our perfectly sorted box will be first to the curb, and the eco-pieties—or tragic eco-waywardness—of our neighbors will be duly noted. Will our plastic and paper waft up to heaven and be heard? The ways of the recycling authority are mysterious indeed.

Most of us realize there's some degree of self-trickery and social performance going on here. We know that fierce political action at the scale of the problem is what's really needed, and we're only recycling to keep up appearances, to stay on the right side of some vaguely felt karmic accounting.

But, the three Rs *can* actually make a difference. The Jump, (take the jump.org), an eco-responsibility movement that launched in 2022 under the slogan, “Less Stuff; More Joy,” aims to achieve 25%⁵³ of the carbon emissions reductions needed to stay under 1.5°C by encouraging citizens of wealthy nations to make six shifts in their individual consumer behavior:

End clutter—Keep products for at least seven years.

Travel fresh—Try not to own a personal vehicle.

Eat green—Follow a plant-based diet.⁵⁴

Dress retro—Try not to purchase more than three new clothing items per year.

Holiday local—Keep flights to one every three years.

Change the system—Take at least one action (anything from peaceful protest to switching to a green energy supplier) to nudge the system.⁵⁵

Except for flying about six times too frequently, and buying a few too many pairs of underwear, I'm happy to say that I check most of these boxes. I'm also happy The Jump recognizes that not everyone is in the same position to pursue the program. They're founded on the notion of "equal access but different responsibilities," and suggest that "trying is enough, just start."⁵⁶

Yes, Reduce-Reuse-Recycle is only a fraction of what we need to do, and recycling is only a fraction of that fraction, but with the future of the planet at stake, fractions of fractions count. So, let's get cracking on the big system-wide changes we need, but let's also recycle, let's hold on to our appliances as long as we can, let's fly less, let's try to go vegan (or at least "consume no animal products before dinner," as author Jonathan Safran Foer modestly suggests).⁵⁷ Let's slim down our footprint wherever possible.

Doing so is not only good spiritual practice, it's smart politics. Because when our opponents can't trash our ideas, they try to trash our character—often, by cynically turning our own eco-morality against us. You want to be able to say to those people, "Yes, I recycle, thank you very much. Now let's talk about eliminating that \$423 billion dollars in fossil fuel subsidies..."⁵⁸

I've still got some work to do on my three Rs, but when I carry my big bag of clinking aluminum and clunking plastic to the curb, when I bicycle uptown instead of grabbing a Lyft, when I dump my compost into the weekly city collection bins on top of a big pile of mulchy garden and kitchen detritus from hundreds of my neighbors, I feel slightly more aligned with my values. I'm not walking my whole talk, but I am walking a few steps of it. It brings me into better integrity with myself and my values, and models that integrity to the larger world.

The father of a good friend of mine was dying of cancer. He took up a macrobiotic diet and meditation, not because he thought it would make a difference, but because he wanted to demonstrate skin in the game. It was a "votive act" to show he wanted a cure; a therapeutic gesture, unlikely

to make a difference to anything but his own peace of mind. He wanted “the consolation of thoroughness”—the idea that at least he tried with all his might.

Our situation is not so different from his. As we face our planetary crisis, we don’t know whether anything we’re doing will make enough of a difference, but we owe ourselves, our planet, our children, and all future generations this same consolation of thoroughness. Maybe this is why the fuck we recycle.