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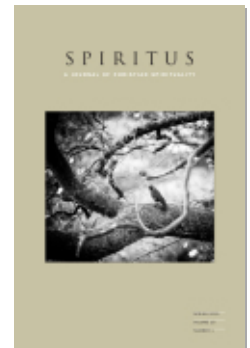
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# Of Trash and Treasure: Implications of Zero Waste for the Spiritual Life

RACHEL WHEELER

*While Earth's resources are finite, what is not limited is our desire to understand, to appreciate, and to celebrate the Earth. We do need endless progress, but not, however, in material development. Only an increase in aesthetic appreciation and spiritual experience can be without limit.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

Zero waste as a concept to describe industrial waste-free production has in the past decade been reimagined to describe how individuals and families in domestic settings might also practice a way of life that contributes nothing to landfills. This essay presents an introduction to the foundational work of Bea Johnson, a woman whose adaptation of her home and lifestyle to zero waste has influenced thousands of people worldwide through her blog, book, YouTube videos, public lectures, and articles about her work. Though zero waste is primarily a response to the damaged natural world, its spirituality may be adduced from accounts of how its practice has transformed practitioners' lives. That many of these practitioners are women allows for the consideration of the gendered implications of this particular ecospiritual practice. Further, that the maintenance of practitioners' communities is accomplished virtually in online forums and blogs constitutes a new set of sources for examining contemporary spiritual lives. In conclusion, this reflection argues that a spirituality of zero waste that utilizes "resurrection" as its primary motif brings together environmental activism and Christian spiritual practice, and models how other such eco-friendly practices may also be seen as having a spiritual relevance and even a spiritual basis.

## TALKING THE WALK

Environmental ethicists and ecotheologians aim at shifting moralities and concomitant activities toward enhancing Earth-human relations by changed reasoning. Moving, for instance, language about human responsibility in regard to the environment from models of "dominion" to "stewardship" generates

differing ethical activities of creation care. Such shifts in thinking are fundamental, though they sometimes leave corresponding activities up to the “thinker” to determine. Thus, David B. Lott in his compilation of Sallie McFague’s work can comment that her work “presses the reader more to new thinking rather than new action.”<sup>2</sup> Thinking anew of creation as the “body of God” is, indeed, important and McFague’s work has encouraged Christian consumers to more thoughtful engagement with their environments. This more thoughtful engagement can effect a “walking the talk” that integrates theory and praxis, leaving praxis largely up to the thinker.

“Talking the walk” is just as, if not more, important. That zero waste practice operates as a significant opportunity for speaking about the overlap between two often divergent communities—of environmental activists and of people of faith—involves disclosing the importance of thinking (ethics) as derived from experience, not the other way around. In this way, one walks first, then talks about it. This will sound reasonable to anybody familiar with Thomas Berry’s reflection in his book, *The Great Work*, in which he documents for himself the fundamentally transformative experience of observing a meadow filled with thick grass and white lilies. He writes, “A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Berry claims that the experience gave his life a moral compass: “Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good.”<sup>4</sup> Berry’s emphasis on this experience as a “magic moment” replete with opportunities to learn to cherish the earth and the particular places we inhabit has implications for those both walking and talking ecological spirituality: Experience comes first. The love that springs from cherishing familiar landscapes motivates behaviors, more than any argument.

The same is true in explaining why adoption of zero waste as an ecospiritual practice might occur. One need not theorize too much about why there are overflowing landfills, rampant pollution, and consumer appetites out of control today. One need only see the increasingly explicit imagery of overflowing landfills and polluted rivers and oceans that fill online sources as well as our own neighborhoods to be moved to incredulity first, and then pity and compassion. The establishment of waste sites is increasingly associated, we know, with issues of social injustice. And as one engages the work of a photographer such as Chris Jordan and his documenting of bird bodies gorged with plastic,<sup>5</sup> one may feel outrage and pity, so as to be spurred to action. This is how my own zero waste practice began, and it is likely not unique. Many other such examples of *experience*, rather than argument, leading to action might be offered: the vegan who fasts from animal products because of nauseating slaughterhouse and



Photo Courtesy of Sabine Van Straaten on Unsplash.

factory farm conditions; the person who buys a hybrid vehicle or eschews car ownership altogether because of fuel extraction methods that devastate natural habitats and cause wars over increasingly scarce resources. While it is possible that a person's discernment of dysfunction in Earth-human relations might be facilitated and even enhanced by participation in religious ritual, what seems especially important here to note is that the discerning experience itself, not theoretical discourse, leads to action aimed to redress injustice.

Also noteworthy is the fact that increasingly one's experience of aspects of compromised Earth-human relations are virtual. We may experience litter along a favorite forest trail or note the lack of flourishing vegetation located too close to vehicles on a highway spewing toxic fumes in our everyday lives, but some of the most devastating documentation of ecological crisis is mediated through electronic means. This means of communication makes possible dissemination of new realities to which people of faith and environmental activists respond, and this means of communication is also creating virtual communities in which "talking the walk" is made possible. That zero waste has proliferated globally as an environmental practice in just a decade is due largely to the online communities forming to exchange information and strategize together. This new aspect of our experience and of our resources for scholarly investigation as scholars of Christian spirituality has been neither adequately expressed nor examined. Though our experiences are increasingly and perhaps troublingly virtual, such experience remains nevertheless experience and thus capable of manipulation and transformation.

### **ZERO WASTE AS ECOSPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

What is zero waste? The 2002 publication of William McDonough and Michael Braungart's *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* sparked the imaginations of millions through its reconfiguration of metaphors related to manufacturing. Instead of making things "from cradle to grave," designers, engineers, and manufacturers were urged to start thinking "from cradle to cradle," meaning everything they made (and associated byproducts) should not be wasted or end up in a landfill, but serve as generative material for new objects. Of particular interest to spirituality scholars is McDonough and Braungart's choice of epigraphs for their book. Included among a statement by a modern scientist, Albert Einstein ("The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation") and another by a contemporary indigenous leader, Chief Oren Lyons ("What you people call your natural resources our people call our relatives"), is a statement by Hildegard of Bingen: "Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars. Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings. Now, think."<sup>6</sup> Hildegard's imperatives

trace the path formerly described of prioritizing experience, the gazing before the thinking, or theorizing. First, she says: do! Be present!

*Cradle to Cradle* proposes an alternative vision to that proposed by many ecotheologians and environmental writers. Whereas the latter regularly advise recognition of limits, the writers of *Cradle to Cradle* want to celebrate the abundance of resources that our planetary home offers its inhabitants, humans, and other living creatures included. “What if,” they ask, “humans designed products and systems that celebrate the abundance of human creativity, culture, and productivity? That are so intelligent and safe, our species leaves an ecological footprint to delight in, not lament?”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, after describing “Why Being ‘Less Bad’ is No Good,” McDonough and Braungart urge us to consider a new model of eco-effectiveness, one that involves our consideration of a cherry tree, in imitation of Jesus’ imperative to his disciples to “consider the lilies” (Matt. 6:28, Lk. 12:27). This cherry tree flourishes while producing what seems profligate waste (blossoms falling, for instance), but in reality enhancing the environment of which it forms a part by producing fruit and then seeds that propagate new trees. Similarly, a building might be erected that “celebrates a range of cultural and natural pleasures—sun, light, air, nature, even food—in order to enhance the lives of the people who work there” and to not only minimize its impact on the surrounding environment but contribute to *its* flourishing alongside human flourishing.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in this context, McDonough and Braungart ridicule the idea of “zero waste.” It does not make sense when applied to natural systems as much of nature is, on the face of it, wasteful.<sup>9</sup> Were we to take our cue from nature, we would still create waste but do so more eco-effectively, that is, in a way that would benefit all members, human and more-than-human, of our communities. We would *use* our waste, rather than merely store it.

Though precipitating zero waste as an ecospiritual movement, McDonough and Braungart’s book was preceded by language of “zero waste” having already entered the discourse of Christian ecological spirituality in addressing consumption and climate change. In the early 1990s, Rosemary Radford Ruether was already diagnosing the historical, sociological, and theological problems leading to contemporary ecological crisis in her monumental *Gaia and God* and proposing, amid a number of concrete ecospiritual actions, the need to “terminate as much as possible all forms of disposable waste . . . Packaging needs to be greatly reduced, and wastes from consumer goods of all kinds recycled.”<sup>10</sup> Hers is an ethic of limitation. In the late 1990s, Berry was proposing a “reinvention of the human” that included divesting from dependence on petroleum and the pervasive disposability (plastics) it makes possible.<sup>11</sup> His also is an ethic of limitation. Both implicitly recommend a reconfiguration of our use of resources so as not to deprive the earth community of what it needs to flourish alongside human flourishing.

More recently, Pope Francis has advocated for avoidance of use of plastic and paper, among a host of related actions that can be promoted through education in ecological responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Material waste might seem a marginal issue in the spiritual life, and yet its presence and production in our day-to-day lives renders it a significant component of our experience, both material and spiritual. One of the goals for this essay is to invite more consideration about the role that material culture has in our lives, its impact on our spiritual experience, and how our spiritual lives are shaped through intentional reflection on such experience and practices prompted by and prompting renewed love and compassion for our environment and the others with whom we share a home.

So, what does zero waste look like? And why is it characterized here as an ecospiritual practice? First, zero waste is a bit of a misnomer, for hardly anybody who adopts a zero waste lifestyle achieves *zero* waste nor, per McDonough and Braungart, would we want to necessarily. To live is to create waste. Instead, the zero waste lifestyle serves its practitioner as an opportunity to live into an alternative reality, one that attends to the flourishing of both human and more-than-human populations. This can be done more or less perfectly and reminds us that ecospiritual practice, like traditional spiritual practices, may not have the kind of definable goals we have been taught to pursue.

Indeed, one blogger refers to practicing zero waste as an “asymptote,” a curve that approaches zero but never actually gets there,<sup>13</sup> evoking for some perhaps Gregory of Nyssa’s asymptotic *epektasis*, or eternal progress toward the Divine.<sup>14</sup> Rather than characterize these ventures of living with a goal-less goal as failure, both modes (zero waste and *epektasis*) alert us to the dynamism of material and spiritual life. Zero waste practitioners are getting as close to producing no waste as possible, with, for instance, their annual unavoidable production of garbage equaling what can be held in a pint-sized jar. This quantification of one’s waste achieves almost cultic status among practitioners communicating in online communities, as the jar’s contents—relics of inadvertent “failure” during the year—are shared and scrutinized in an almost confessional way.<sup>15</sup> Zero waste is a lifestyle devoted to producing as little waste that will end up in a landfill or the oceans as possible. This affects nearly all a zero waste practitioner’s decisions: regarding diet, clothing, housing, travel, entertainment, work. In essence, such a practitioner refrains from any activity that will produce non-recyclable waste and this single parameter influences all one’s decisions about what to do—and who to be.

I have been following the work of one woman, Bea Johnson, since *Sunset Magazine* featured her family in its Winter 2010/11 issue. Subsequently, Johnson has made zero waste her business. She travels regularly worldwide to promote the lifestyle, all the while maintaining her own zero waste practice through the vicissitudes of travel which, for many, incurs the greatest use of

disposable products. In her travels, Johnson visits businesses committed to zero waste, many of which are bulk grocery stores opening in European cities. From the beginning of her adoption of zero waste, Johnson has blogged regularly about her own journey with zero waste, offering suggestions to inspire others to take up the practice. In 2013, after some resistance given the inevitable waste incurred by traditional publishing methods, Johnson published a book, *Zero Waste Home*, which has been translated into more than a dozen languages, a helpful indicator of where the practice seems to be gaining a following.<sup>16</sup> It is useful at this point to repeat that without information technology and virtual communities this movement would have neither taken hold nor continued to grow as it has. Websites and online applications have been created to locate and promote zero waste grocery stores. Blogs and online communities have created virtual space for practitioners in transcultural locations to discuss problems and solutions, and to motivate one another when discouraged.

In terms of motivating others, Johnson has consistently championed the environmental, health, financial, psychological, and aesthetic benefits of zero waste. These benefits may certainly be interpreted as propaganda for her lifestyle; however, they may also be interpreted as illuminating the diverse ways she interprets how her family's asceticism facilitates spiritual transformation, a transformation that has come about as a result of prioritizing experience over possessions and of valuing Earth and continued life upon it as a hoped-for reality in light of which one's own way of being in the world is intentionally altered. It is in this way that her practice becomes *ecospiritual*. An ecospiritual practice combines the best of ecologically-motivated behaviors with that conducive to one's own spiritual well-being and the reconfiguration of one's place in the earth community. Though Johnson has rarely reflected on the explicitly religious dimensions of her practice of zero waste—and, indeed, this omission is one reason this present reflection has evolved—one can yet see traces of religious identity and spiritual awareness in her writing, as in the writing of her readers.

For instance, her book and blog posts document Johnson's involvement with church life. She mentions her mother's activities as organized around church and domestic life, and notes the formative gestures regarding thrift that Johnson recognizes as deriving from her mother.<sup>17</sup> Another memory involves using language of church ritual to describe partaking of her grandmother's canning goods from a jar from which Johnson and her cousin sipped as if it were a chalice at church.<sup>18</sup> In other blog posts, she describes her church's Sustainability Fair<sup>19</sup> and her church's Christmas boutique which boasts used items donated by church members.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, Johnson traveled to Europe where among many of her venues for promoting zero waste, she spoke with students at the Catholic University of Lille. A picture from this talk on her website is



captioned with the words, “And for the first time, I spoke about how zero waste has reaffirmed my faith.”<sup>21</sup> During the same trip, she reports having given a talk in a church in Bern, Switzerland, and comments: “I preach about the zero waste lifestyle all over the world, but I never expected to do so in an actual church!”<sup>22</sup> Finally, Johnson writes of how zero waste has allowed her to discover a new sense of meaning and purpose, and reports that her life has been transformed by her adoption of zero waste, using language of “sanctuary” to describe how one’s home should be and can be, given adoption of zero waste.<sup>23</sup>

Johnson has been called the “priestess of waste-free living,”<sup>24</sup> a telling phrase given some of the imagery of chalice and sanctuary described above. Indeed, the phrase suggests that there are quasi-religious, quasi-ceremonial, quasi-mystical elements to her work inaugurating a movement of this kind: it is countercultural in requiring a practitioner to cultivate and exercise meticulous attention to detail and intellectual investigation to not only chase down details of a product’s composition and creation but to also create new ways of engaging material objects. To stretch the metaphor, something about what Johnson has started is transformative in the ways a priest facilitates the transformation of elements involved at the Eucharistic table, for instance. Producing no garbage is “like some kind of amazing magic trick.”<sup>25</sup> This turn of phrase from the *New York Times* coincides with how Michel de Certeau describes everyday practices as subversive, “clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the ‘strong.’”<sup>26</sup> Such practices allow one to identify oneself in relation to the prevailing culture, and resist unthinking collaboration with what Pope Francis and others have characterized as a “throwaway culture.”<sup>27</sup>

Concretely, zero waste entails making consumer decisions about what kinds of materials one will allow into one’s life, and how. Johnson’s mantra has become the fivefold, “Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rot.”<sup>28</sup> The primary directive here being “Refuse” means that one makes daily choices about *not* buying certain articles and foods that come packaged. Given the contemporary context, this one decision can entail a great degree of self-denial and restraint. Even more fundamentally, such restraint considered within the framework of asceticism becomes constitutive of the practitioner, indeed, the “making of the self.” As theorist Richard Valantasis has argued, “Ascetic performances revise the understanding of the self, the society, and the universe by directing them intentionally toward an alternative mode of existence within a dominant environment.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the performative aspect of zero waste practice is achieved in a twofold manner: both within one’s physical and virtual communities, and as a witness to an alternate world which the practitioner would like to live in, and thus does despite what reality is readily available to the practitioner in terms of waste disposal.

Stepping back from unquestioning creation and disposal of waste results in “revision” of one’s place in the universe and how one’s decisions affect others, and it also encourages one to consider more deeply what is important. For instance, though self-denial might be one frame to apply to the practice of zero waste, another frame might reveal how the practice engenders creativity. At one point, Johnson admitted to not being able to give up butter which came in a non-recyclable, non-compostable wax wrapping. Did she express regret about this “failure” in her ascetic performance? No. Rather, she used the opportunity to explore other ways she might accommodate her perceived need to both consume butter and remain committed to her practice of zero waste. Her solution: she refrained from disposing of these packages and collected them to use for art projects.<sup>30</sup> This example drawn from Johnson’s experience is helpful in describing how zero waste is not meant to be an oppressively restrictive practice. When experienced in light of habits to which we have grown accustomed, zero waste might at first seem uncomfortable and time-consuming. Johnson’s creativity illustrates how accommodation of flourishing works in multiple dimensions and is a complex reality requiring discernment and compassion, neither a privileging of nor subversion of human flourishing at the expense of others’ flourishing. Her creativity also serves as a reminder, important within the ascetic context that this practice may disclose, that experience of pleasure is a legitimate human need and was met, for her, not only in the continuation of a specific consumer habit but also in the creativity required to not let that habit contribute to compromising the habitats of other beings.

### **RHETORIC OF TRANSFORMATION: ZERO WASTE PRACTITIONERS**

Zero waste practitioners are sharing their experiences converting to zero waste publicly in online communities. Their mutual encouragement is not only aimed at documenting their challenges and joys at adopting zero waste but also to persuade others that doing so is important. The use of technology to frame these experiences and the immediacy of online presence has done much to fashion the current picture and practice of zero waste. And, it is worth noting that because of zero waste’s seemingly restrictive quality, not yet drawing that many practitioners, finding online support to maintain one’s own practice has contributed a great deal to making the adoption of this rather difficult practice possible for many people, including myself.

Throughout online accounts of zero waste practice, a recurrent word is *experience*, defined by Sandra Schneiders as the object of investigation within spirituality studies.<sup>31</sup> Granted that Schneiders means “experience” within the context of a life of faith, we may question whether looking at experience of a practice like zero waste yields the kind of material from which we can come to conclusions about a person’s spiritual life and transformation. Observations

of practitioners of zero waste disclose that they document their *experience* of being transformed through awaking to the impact they have through their choices to contribute or refrain from contributing waste to an already waste-laden world. From this awakening, one progresses to carefully choosing that their interactions with material objects will not be wasteful. Supplemental to that transformation of experience, concepts such as waste and disposability take on new resonance in light of zero waste practice, as the consciousness of individuals is expanded to regard not only material objects, but people and relationships as well, as not disposable.

Several guests on Johnson's blog over a period of five months in 2012 provide us with a picture of the contemporary practitioner of zero waste and with insight as to how zero waste facilitates transformation. Sandra, a guest blogger, writes that zero waste does not mean deprivation: "if anything it has actually opened up more opportunities." She writes:

Healthier meals, more time to spend with the family, a home that feels uncluttered and comfortable to live in, money savings, learning to buy smart instead of buying a lot. More importantly, it has taught me that the choices I make each day do add up to a difference. Naysayers may discourage my efforts by saying one less plastic cup will not save the environment, but they are missing the point. Making the choice every day to not produce unnecessary waste shows me that I can shake up my old routine, that change is possible, that I can live with less waste.<sup>32</sup>

Sandra's comments show that she has learned experientially that change is not only possible but that it happens incrementally. This realization is fundamentally about how faith is born, as something that allows one to trust that one's actions will lead to something as yet undisclosed.

Like Sandra, relocation, an increasingly common contemporary experience, awakened Parastoo, the second blogger, to how many superfluous goods her family owned. Parastoo, however, also experienced foreclosure and bankruptcy and described how these devastations to her family's economic stability initiated her adoption of zero waste: it seems, she wrote, "the more we lose, the happier we get."<sup>33</sup> Her experiences of foreclosure and bankruptcy seemed to act, for Parastoo, as modern-day equivalents to the "dark night" John of the Cross describes as disruptive of one's world and triggering substantive change, as one moves cautiously into a period where certainties are stripped away. In this very setting, however, happiness emerges.

Another guest blogger, Sarah, emphasizes the necessity of levity and self-mocking as a form of communication with others, who are perhaps understandably put off by people engaging zero waste and other sustainability practices; it is not hard to hear the virtue of humility sounding through this blog-



Courtesy of Ethan Sykes on Unsplash.

ger's comments, and of her ability to connect with others through the seeming strangeness of the practice she has adopted. She seems to not take herself and her practice too seriously, as she notes the frustrations that occur as she seeks to connect with others in her immediate community through the practice, and finds no interest. She describes initiating numerous community engagement activities that were met with no or little response. Growing discouraged, she remains invigorated by the challenge of sharing zero waste practice, something she knows to be valuable and requires a spokesperson.<sup>34</sup> Her experiences of isolation, tenacity, and hope reveal what many experience as they embark on a spiritual practice in response to a felt need that others do not understand. The model of transformation indicated by Sarah's story is that of integrity and self-honesty when one's values do not align with others' values.

Finally, Lindsey writes of the formation of community through eschewing packaging and buying directly from those who grow and produce such foods as fruits, vegetables, cheese, and bread. Significantly, Lindsey describes this grocery shopping as happening with her mother after church on Sundays. Her attention to her behavior in the grocery store has been prepared by religious community. Lindsey describes the process of grocery shopping as one of making meaningful connections with people, rather than picking a package up off a shelf wholly disconnected from the hands and lives of those who made and packaged it, and she describes this process of making connections as "unspeakably human." For her, the barrier of packaging serves as a meaningful symbol of other barriers erected between ourselves and the people with whom we share life. Adopting a zero waste lifestyle allowed Lindsey and her family to be transformed in their understanding of how they are connected with others; she suggests, "waste-reduction is a lifestyle that can heal more than our landfills" and "as we get rid of our trash, we will find that we have more room for one another."<sup>35</sup> Insight indicated by Lindsey's story is of the material limitations adopted by zero waste practice yielding to abundance in other aspects of one's life. Each of these guest bloggers reveal experiences that have social and spiritual dynamics initiated by intentional manipulation of how they interacted with material culture.

Zero waste requires that a person reflect on the ease of procuring packaged products, and the difficulty of doing things an "old-fashioned" way. Interactions with material objects and others often involves satisfying one's desires and the convenience of pre-packaged foods is impossible to deny. Indeed, often the convenience is justifiable when a person understands the work made possible by convenience as more important than the waste incurred. This aspect of zero waste practice draws on issues related to other time-consuming, ecologically-motivated ascetic behaviors. When the time takes one away from other legitimate work, especially legitimate work in the service of others, can

such time be justified as sustainable? This is one of the main obstacles to the wholesale adoption of zero waste, and worth considering. And yet, zero waste practitioners are reflecting, too, on the costs—economic, psychological, and spiritual—involved in creating a culture where material desires are sated as soon as they are recognized.

### **GENDERED IMPLICATIONS: INCIDENTAL OR NOT?**

It will not have escaped the notice of careful readers that most of the people cited within the zero waste movement are women; indeed, many of the theorists of ecological spirituality as it has evolved in the past century and present day are women. This is significant. Though I did not set out to observe only women's stories and cite their voices, it just happens that most of the people available to research such a topic as zero waste are women. Though men's voices have appeared to advocate simple living, voluntary simplicity, and minimalism, there appear to be several reasons why they are not as visibly present in the zero waste online communities. First, contrasting these lifestyles (minimalism and zero waste), we see that many of the men involved in cultivating an intentional minimalist lifestyle are young, single, not tied down to one location, one partner, one job. Elevating the virtue of detachment to an all-time high, these men might in fact be practicing zero waste, but their emphasis is on not defining their masculinity by ownership. Instead, some of these writers self-define as untied down to one particular form of life, as still mobile, and as exalting this as a chief virtue identifying their lifestyle. On the other hand, women involved in zero waste practice are those most responsible for their households; that is, most of them are married, often have children whose future they are concerned about and concern for whom shapes their practice, and take primary responsibility for grocery-shopping, using cleaners in their home, buying and making clothing—all of which behaviors are implicated in the production of waste.

Second, culturally we still find an implicit association between the female and the earth body through both providing human food, an association revealed most tellingly by Caroline Walker Bynum in her examination of medieval culture.<sup>36</sup> When women have responded to litter on the face of the earth, it has not been primarily for aesthetic reasons. On the contrary, this response is motivated by self-defense and an empathetic quality more characteristic of women's than men's experience. Women's ability to see litter as a mutilation of their own body, and even of the body of God per McFague's formulation,<sup>37</sup> motivates them to step back and refrain from contributing further to such damage, and even to reverse such damage when possible. This makes zero waste an important practice adding to our repertoire of everyday practices that let us live into a new reality, to embody demonstrably our understanding of

the interrelatedness of earth and its living creatures. Based on the rhetoric of transformed experience detailed by guest bloggers on the zero waste website moderated by Johnson, we can see that practicing zero waste enables us to begin to relate in a different manner with the rest of creation, our fellow human beings, and ourselves. Up until this point of the discussion, little has been said of God. Does zero waste as an ecospiritual practice enable a person to relate to the sacred in a different manner? Considering the implications of deep incarnation, it appears it does. Deep incarnation helps Christians, in particular, think through the divine quality of all of creation, to consider a more thorough sacralizing of all creation than that accomplished by Christ's experience within the human body.<sup>38</sup> The ecological sensibility cultivated by such a concept helps us understand that what we do in care of the earth and its inhabitants, we do in relation to God.

Third, we might consider the profound resistance that women rather than men have voiced in regards to dichotomizing material and spiritual experience and practice documented by Sarah McFarland Taylor in her *Green Sisters*. This enormously fascinating book contains interviews with many contemporary Catholic religious women committed to transforming their communities to more sustainable forms of life. As vowed religious women, many of these "green sisters" have adopted ecologically-motivated ascetic behaviors, in addition to their traditional forms of spiritual practice. These behaviors demonstrate a wide range of awareness of how human beings impact and are impacted by their surroundings. Sisters have called these behaviors by various names, including "social sacraments" and "practical disciplines."<sup>39</sup> When questioned by Taylor, however, as to what constituted these behaviors' "spiritual dimension," several green sisters objected to the formulation of the question itself, arguing that raising the question in that form continued to reinforce old dichotomies of flesh and spirit. One sister, for instance, is quoted as saying, "The doing of [daily ecological practices] is the spiritual dimension . . . The doing of it generates the spiritual dimension that claims its own expression." Another sister affirms that ecologically-motivated practices "AFFECT [HER] SPIRIT . . . and therefore [are] a practice of [her] SPIRIT."<sup>40</sup> Women's creation of and involvement in movements like zero waste constitute important evidence of empowerment by questioning the status quo. Does the destruction of natural habitats through the storing of waste have to be the only way human beings relate to their environments and the material objects they interact with? Might not a reconfiguration of everyday habits render more visible to ourselves and each other the reverence due our environments and the others we share them with, a reverence we experience any time we step out our front doors? Might not practices constitutive of such reconfiguration demonstrate a living into the reality of resurrection?

## PRACTICING RESURRECTION

Not only does zero waste undermine the dominant “throwaway” culture, it also serves as a means of restoration. A Canadian promoter of zero waste practice, Shia Su, recommends that practitioners of zero waste extend Johnson’s fivefold mantra of “refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot” to countless words, all designating a repetition or return. Some such words are: rethink, repair, reclaim, repurpose, rebuild, recover, reflect, reinvent, reevaluate, respect, responsibility.<sup>41</sup> For me, *resurrect* has become an important metaphor for this work as a concrete means of expressing what we know of our world as a closed system: our trash does not just disappear. Instead, its materiality makes its home in a specifiable place in our world and, usually, in places out of sight of the most privileged peoples. With increased use of communications technology, we are reminded visually of the truth that we do inhabit a closed system and are thus “soiling” our own and others’ habitats by letting our garbage pile up in the sea and in the earth. As McDonough and Braungart remind us: “Everything . . . is designed for you to throw away when you are finished with it. But where is ‘away’? Of course, ‘away’ does not really exist.”<sup>42</sup> The concept “cradle to cradle,” as opposed to “cradle to grave,” reconfigures waste as metaphor through “resurrection”: old rubber tires become soles for shoes, yogurt containers become toothbrushes. What might have ended its “life” once a single use was realized, is given new life as the raw material for something else, giving production of and the use of goods a cyclical and potentially endless “lifespan” that is better for Earth than burdening the planet as storage for waste.

Going beyond the general ethico-religious dimensions of zero waste, I would like to consider how Christian spirituality, with its central motif of resurrection, informs zero waste practice. There is a balance in the spiritual life suggested by the two poles of crucifixion and resurrection that is of paramount importance in this context. The paschal mystery involving crucifixion means a kind of dying to the self that has been repeatedly lifted up in the Christian spiritual tradition as a necessary precursor to transfiguration and resurrection. The oscillation between deprivation of what is harmful so that what is helpful is able to flourish is an important way in which asceticism has been seen to function usefully and optimally in the spiritual life.

McFague has used the phrase “cruciform living” to describe how contemporary Christians might better understand their ecologically-motivated behaviors as ascetic, necessary, and transformative. McFague calls this merely good discipleship, a mode of life that is “one of self-limitation, sacrifice, and sharing so that the neighbors, all God’s creatures, might flourish.”<sup>43</sup> She also recognizes this behavior as an appropriate self-limiting response to what we see of the natural world itself being crucified by the over-consumptive lifestyle of many in so-called developed countries. McFague writes, “Surely, in our time, the



natural world is joined in its oppression with Christ: it too is being crucified. Just as in the face of a suffering child, woman, or man, Christians see the face of Christ, so also there is a trace of that face in a clear-cut forest, an inner-city landfill, or a polluted river.”<sup>44</sup> This contemplative awareness of the truth of our actions and their impact on earth should lead to repentance and transformations: “We must begin to *live* differently,” McFague advises. “We must individually and collectively devise alternative ways of working, eating, cultivating land, transporting ourselves, educating our children, entertaining ourselves, even of worshiping God.”<sup>45</sup> This devising of alternative ways of doing things constitutes a resurrection made possible by crucifying former ways of doing things.

Zero waste and other ecologically-motivated practices are fresh iterations of a specific kind of behavior both contributing to and constitutive of spiritual growth. Though some ascetic behaviors have been deemed necrophilic for their oppressively self-denying, death-dealing aspects and appropriately looked at with suspicion by feminist theologians,<sup>46</sup> asceticism is enjoying a comeback in some theological writings, when re-envisioned as withdrawal from systemic behavior destructive of the environment and, indeed, of ourselves and our relations with one another. In this respect, asceticism recovers its significance as “training” the self to be a particular kind of being in relation to other beings.

In her book *Fullness of Life*, Margaret Miles lays the foundations for what she calls a “new asceticism.” She says, “We need . . . to construct with the tools recommended to us by the past a ‘new asceticism,’ some form of *attentiveness to life styles and practices* which will care for both soul and body and which are equally beneficial to each.”<sup>47</sup> This attending to both soul and body is important, as denial of the body in favor of the soul’s maturation has constituted a wrong turn in histories of Christian spirituality. Indeed, Miles steps cautiously back from use of the word “asceticism” to describe such attentiveness when she reflects on the many abuses engendered by those disdaining the body and material world in practices too dualistic to be consistent with an incarnational theology.<sup>48</sup> This is a helpful caution and cements a need for such new asceticism as restraint to be configured as *ecospiritual practices* that involve caring for ourselves—soul and body—and the earth, and that involve renewing and healing our relationships with our bodies, others, and the earth.

This construction is, indeed, being done, as demonstrated in this essay, and is constituted primarily through considering the repurposing of things in the zero waste movement. Certainly not all practitioners would adopt “resurrection” language to refer to this repurposing; however, that is exactly what it is: an attempt to exercise restraint in humanity’s devastating impact on the natural world and to even begin the work of repairing relationships with other creatures harmed by excessive pollution and trash disposal practices, and heal-

ing ourselves by acting in a way consistent with our dignity as human beings and co-creatures in a shared home.

In both McFague's and Miles' reflecting on contemporary spiritual life, we hear an invitation to consider how self-denial resonates with crucifixion and the resultant human flourishing with resurrection. Zero waste is a practice geared toward human life and flourishing. It requires attention to the lived reality of faith involved in knowing oneself part of an interconnected and closed living system. It requires living into this reality as a form of realized eschatology in which the resurrected life occurs now and is experienced as an event within this material framework, offering other inhabitants of a living planet opportunities to flourish alongside ourselves. As we share a mutual giving of bodies to the other, in human and animal life forms, we facilitate and assist each other's flourishing in the bringing to life and the relinquishing of life.

## CONCLUSION

What do we make of Jesus feeding the five thousand when he is reported as instructing his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost" (Jn. 6:12, NRSV)? Other translations use the language of waste: "Let nothing be wasted," the implication being that Jesus and his disciples gathered up what was left over, not just to indicate the generous nature of the miracle, providing more than enough for those gathered, but also to set an example for others. This biblical verse has been over-spiritualized to suggest variously the symbolism of the twelve disciples taking up the twelve baskets as anticipating their identification as keepers and distributors of the Eucharistic elements, or to suggest the radical communalism shared by the early faith communities as each made sure others had enough, or to suggest that "nothing" of our life experience is lost: dark nights, for instance, yield to dawn. As inspiring as these messages might be, the frank literalism of the Gospel of John's telling of this story suggests an alternative: that the story speaks to our substantial presence in the material world, and that we are invited to apply Jesus's instruction to "let nothing be lost" to our own substantial lives today.

To do so by way of zero waste practice is to convert trash into treasure. The allusion in the title to this essay evokes the vision of the interdependent earth community that zero waste practitioners affirm. We are diverse peoples and what we are unable to use and reuse ourselves, others might. This is no excuse for the continuation of certain kinds of waste, but rather an invitation to consider how whatever is produced as waste might be resurrected in a form useful for others. Similarly, we might consider how what others produce as waste we, too, might find ways to use thus remaining conscious that nothing in this material world endures a material loss but remains as part of our living system. To evoke imagery again from McDonough and Braungart's book, rath-



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er than experience earth as the gravesite for our belongings or for ourselves, zero waste practitioners are able to live into the reality of earth as *cradle* and human presence in this earth community as contributing to the coming to birth again and again of human and other life forms.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 132.
2. David B. Lott, ed., *Sallie McFague: Collected Readings* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 127.
3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 12.
4. Berry, *The Great Work*, 13.
5. Chris Jordan, “Midway: Message from the Gyre,” 2009-current, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/midway/#CF000313%2018x24>.
6. While William McDonough and Michael Braungart do not provide a citation for their epigraph, one source they may have consulted is Matthew Fox’s *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), where Hildegard’s words appear on page 68. The coincidence of interests between the writers is striking: Fox’s conversion of “original sin” to “original blessing” and McDonough and Braungart’s emphasis on abundance, not limits.
7. William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 15–16.
8. McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 73–75.
9. McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 77.
10. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 262–63.
11. Berry, *The Great Work*, 154–58.
12. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’ [On Care for Our Common Home]*, *Encyclical Letter* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §211, accessed October 16, 2017, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).
13. Chevanne S., NJ, “Approaching Zero Waste,” *Zero Waste Home*, November 2011, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://zerowastehome.com/2011/11/chevannes-story>.
14. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 111–120.
15. See, for instance, Lauren Singer’s website for an example of many online sources that demonstrate a person’s scrutiny of trash, <http://trashisfortossers.com/four-years-of-trash-one-jar-whats-in-my/> (accessed March 11, 2019). Similarly, the cover of Shia Su’s *Zero Waste: Simple Life Hacks to Drastically Reduce Your Trash* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2018) shows the author holding her jar as evidence of a single year’s production of waste.
16. Bea Johnson, *Zero Waste Home: The Ultimate Guide to Simplifying Your Life by Reducing Your Waste* (New York: Scribner, 2013). To date, *Zero Waste Home* has been translated into French, Quebecois, Korean, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Slovene, Czech, Italian, Polish, and Chinese. Editions in Macedonian and Latvian are in process.
17. Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 2.
18. Johnson, “Le Parfait: A Love Story or 14 Reasons Why I Use French Canning Jars,” *Zero Waste Home*, April 2018, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://zerowastehome.com/2018/04/12/le-parfait-a-love-story-or-14-reasons-why-i-use-french-canning-jars/>.

19. Johnson, "Progress!" *Zero Waste Home*, September 2011, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://zerowastehome.com/2011/09/21/progress/>.
20. Johnson, "A Zero Waste Christmas or Almost . . ." *Zero Waste Home*, December 2009, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://zerowastehome.com/2009/12/26/zero-waste-christmas-or-almos/>.
21. Johnson, "Zero Waste Talks and Bulk ( . . . Lots of It!)" *Zero Waste Home*, December 2016, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://zerowastehome.com/2016/12/23/zero-waste-talks-and-bulk-lots-of-it/>.
22. Johnson, "Zero Waste Talks and Bulk."
23. Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 9 and 11.
24. Michelle Slatalla, "A Visit from the Priestess of Waste-Free Living," *New York Times*, February 2010, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/fashion/18spy.html>.
25. Slatalla, "A Visit from the Priestess of Waste-Free Living."
26. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 40.
27. See, for instance, Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §§20–22.
28. Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 15–32.
29. Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 42.
30. Johnson, "Zero Waste Kitchen," *Zero Waste Home*, January 2010, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://zerowastehome.com/2010/01/zero-waste-kitchen/>. Here Bea writes of collecting her butter wrappings for use in art projects, since they could not at that time be composted or recycled. An update to her website indicates she has found a way to compost her butter wrappings.
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33. Parastoo, "Parastoo's Story," *Zero Waste Home*, February 2012, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://zerowastehome.com/2012/02/parastoos-story/>.
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36. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 269–276.
37. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).
38. "Deep incarnation" is described in Elizabeth Johnson's *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 196–99. She draws on conclusions reached by Niels Henrik Gregersen in his article, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 192–207.
39. Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 96.
40. Taylor, *Green Sisters*, 100–101. Capital letters belong to Maureen Wild, whose words are recorded in *Green Sisters*.
41. Su, *Zero Waste: Simple Life Hacks*, 32.

42. McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 27.
43. Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 23.
44. Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 175.
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