

2/1/2021

What Did Mom Used to Do?

Ellen C. Wells



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For you, it is February. For me it's still early January, and I'm still working on easing into my resolutions. I know, I know ... I have been known to poo-poo New Year's resolutions in this column. Or at least to encourage you to think about your "I'm going to lose 15 pounds!" declarations in a different, perhaps more forgiving way. Resolutions, intentions, calls to action—whatever you want to call them, I wish you strength and perseverance. You got this, as the kids say nowadays.

I became inspired, or I should say compelled, to take up my big intention for 2021 last fall. My part-time job as a seasonal land steward was, in all honesty, more trash pickup than trail maintenance, especially for a few of the easier and more accessible field and forest paths. I would routinely return from a trash sweep with one large filled trash bag. Most of the debris were discarded single-use plastic drink containers (Dunkin', I'm looking at you).

Some I found 10 ft. off the trail, obviously hurled there by the drink consumer. What the heck? The situation made me sick to my stomach (as did some of the other less mentionable items that ended up in my trash bag).

That's it. No more single-use plastic containers in my life! Or at least a lot fewer. And they must be recyclable.

Ah, there's the rub. I've lived in cities for the last 20-plus years and have had the luxury of curbside trash and co-mingled recycling pickup. That's where you place your glass, aluminum, paper and plastic all in the same bin. This makes the prospect of recycling more amenable for the average citizen. For the last year, however, I've lived mostly in a small town that has a transfer station (a.k.a. the town dump) in addition to the option of paying for trash pickup. I opted for the transfer station. In that time, I've learned a lot about what is actually recyclable and what isn't. Items I would casually throw into my big blue bin and imagine having a second life as a water bottle—nope, not accepted at the transfer station. For example, those plastic clam shells carefully holding cherry tomatoes? Not accepted. Asked why I can throw them in a big blue bin but they aren't accepted at the transfer station, a worker informed me that plastic purchasers have too much supply and are no longer buying it. The curbside pickup folks take all of the plastic as a courtesy—and then trash it. At least that's the deal in my neck of the woods.

This recycling and sustainable living thing ... it's complicated.

Intending to lead a more eco-friendly life, last fall I bought a subscription service to a company that sells sustainable and eco-conscious home products. Each month I am to receive a sample product in the mail, and the company's hope is that I will find the product useful and purchase more of it. When I received my first product package, I was

just so excited to see how this product was going to revolutionize my life. And opening the package I found ... five dish cloths. Cotton. Organic cotton, in fact. These are to lower my use of paper towels.

Back when I was a kid, it was one of my jobs to wipe off the dinner table and kitchen counters with a dish cloth. Mom had a big stack of them. Likely not made in Sweden from organic cotton, but still, my mother routinely used dish cloths rather than paper towels or sponges for cleaning up spills and crumbs. They're washable and reusable, after all. Sure, I had gotten away from using dish cloths and instead would wipe counters down with a sponge or towel. I was thankful for the reminder that dish cloths exist and are a perfectly suitable kitchen tool.

More importantly I was thankful for the reminder that making a change doesn't have to be toward something more complex, and that "old" techniques are sometimes the solution we've been looking for all along.

If you are encountering a hurdle as you work towards something new for this year, as yourself if the solution is a lot easier than you first imagined. And then go ask your mother what she used. **GP**