

Traci Failla

Beware the Plastic Ocean

When I was young, if I wanted something my mother always said, “No, we don’t have the money for that.” It didn’t matter how much something cost, if she didn’t approve the item or service, it was always due to tight finances.

Of course, this frequently wasn’t the real reason she turned me down. It was convenient in that it required little explanation, and I swear she sometimes said it when things were free. I remember busting her on this during a shopping trip to Hudson’s, our local department store, where some free item was being offered. She laughed, but I still went home empty-handed.

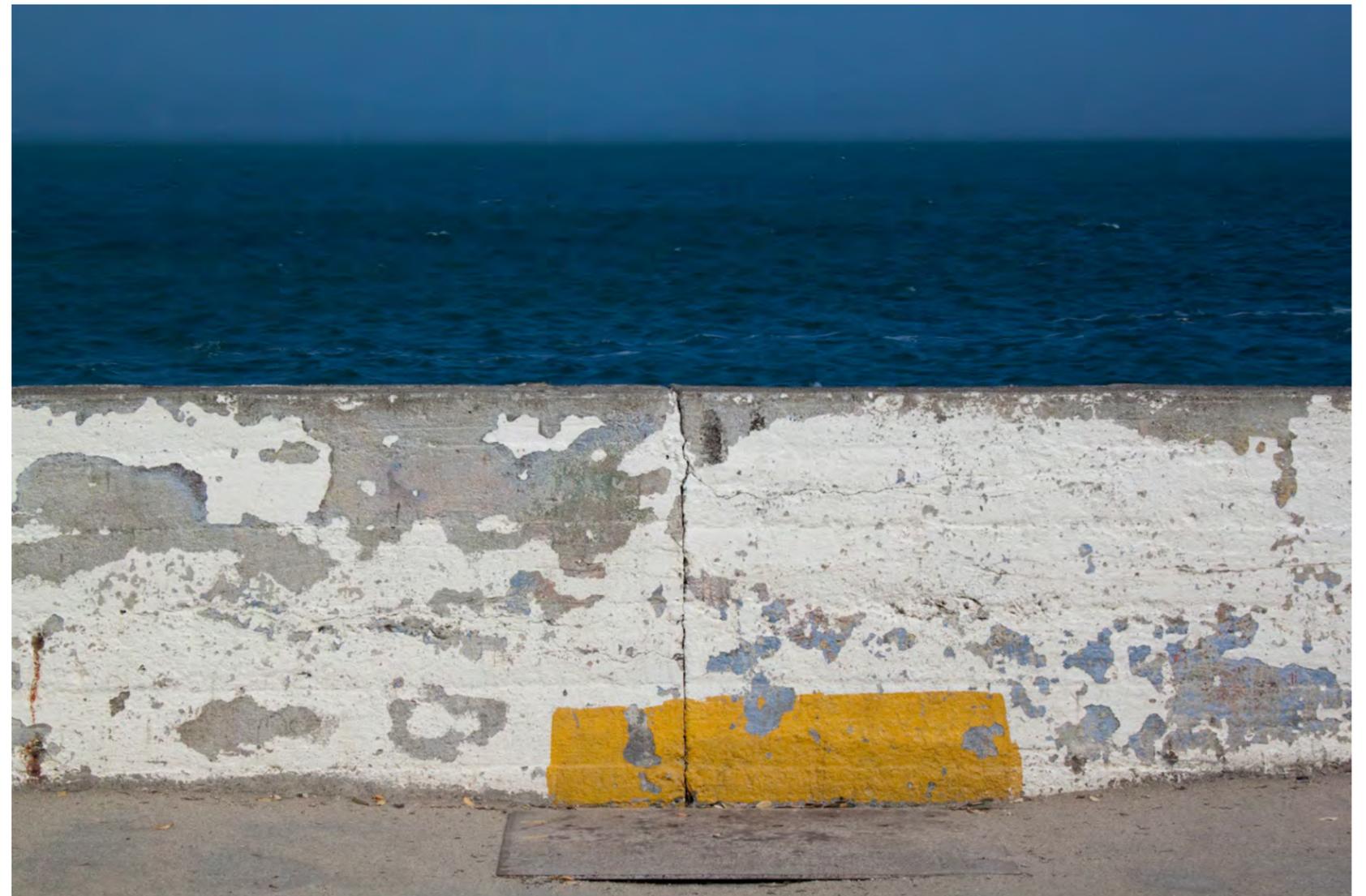
I realize now that on some level this excuse was true — true in the sense that money was on my mother’s radar whenever she considered purchases. I have something similarly concerning now that I have children. It’s called the Plastic Ocean.

I am referring to the term used to describe the havoc plastic pollution is wreaking on the world’s waterways. I show my kids photos of plastic bits washed up on a beach on the Big Island in Hawaii. I talk about the mass of garbage traveling around the Pacific Ocean. I describe the debris inhibiting life on coral reefs. All of this falls into the category of the Plastic Ocean, and my children have learned that it not only impacts our environment but also their ability to talk me into buying anything that I believe represents unwise or excessive use of plastic. I admit to using it, too, simply to avoid purchasing something.

The Plastic Ocean is serious business. According to an article in *Discovery News*, an ocean conservation group called 5 Gyres estimated how much plastic was in the ocean in 2010. The figure is incredible: 315 million pounds floating around, poisoning the water with toxins and endangering marine life. The group estimated that it would take 630 supertankers to scoop out that much debris. Unfortunately, there isn’t even one single ship equipped to do that.

To add to this threat, the average American household produces 600 pounds of garbage each year, and over half of that is synthetic. Despite opportunities for recycling, the majority of it ends up in landfills, and some of that eventually makes it to our waterways.

The Plastic Ocean is also an excellent reason to say no to a variety of items in the toy section or checkout aisles of kid-friendly retailers. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a



© Jody Magrady

total win. I win because I have a legitimate excuse for not purchasing the item in question. My kids win because they are not over-indulged (at that moment, anyway). The environment wins in a sense because I'm sending a message. It's a powerful excuse. My kids do not argue about the Plastic Ocean.

As an excuse not to open my wallet, the Plastic Ocean is effective for a variety of reasons:

"No, we can't buy that bag of jacks. Look, they are all plastic. This will end up in the Plastic Ocean."

"No, we can't buy that toy. Look at all of the packaging! Is this toy really worth destroying marine life?"

"No, we won't go in that convenience store. Think of how many poorly made plastic things they sell. They are all going to end up broken and in the plastic ocean."

When I shared this strategy with a friend of mine, she cautioned me about ecofear. Children don't always respond well to what can be perceived as doom-and-gloom information. They can be overwhelmed with the burden of responsibility, or just tune out altogether.

I totally get what she's saying. I often find myself challenged by the charge to change the world. I wish I could do more. We have friends who

"As an excuse not to open my wallet the Plastic Ocean is effective because it works for a variety of circumstances."

live on a sustainable farm in Texas Hill Country. They drive a car that runs on biodiesel fuel and understand how to build and maintain a mud house. I admire them for their efforts, but I know that I likely won't do these things unless I'm forced to by a natural (or unnatural) disaster, or a spouse who develops an unconventional midlife crisis.

I try to balance my warnings about plastic damage with a healthy appreciation for the natural world. Our kids love the vibrancy, space and peace of nature, but it's harder to make the trade-offs that come with reducing plastic. For instance, packing lunch is my weakness. Our freezer is filled with frozen, individually wrapped peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches for one of my more finicky eater's lunch box, and my kids eat Go-Go Squeeze fruit snacks more often than I'd like.

My son was born on Earth Day, so every year I try to incorporate good environmental practices into his celebration. We bought a set of reusable (and recyclable) plates, cups and utensils for his first birthday party, after a I had a mini (though private) panic attack in the aisle of Party City over the wastefulness of plastic forks. With the help of signage, repetition and a few rescues from the garbage bin, we've managed to keep most of them. Now many of our repeat guests know the drill. When you see the green plates, don't toss them.

A while back we held his party at a nature center on Earth Day. I was faced with a dilemma most parents have grown to dread -- stocking the goody bag. I have so many things to say about goody bags, but their worst offense is the items they always contain -- plastic Slinkys in the shape of hearts and stars that immediately tangle or break; rubbery hands that stick to the wall when thrown; mini pinball games that are too tiny for almost everyone's fine motor skills and end up crushed underfoot. All of this stuff is destined for our waterways, I fear.

On that Earth Day Friday, there was no way I could hand out a goody bag with such wasteful threats to the environment. I knew the kids were expecting something, and a note saying that we donated money on behalf of our son's guests was not going to do it. So I filled small pots with dirt and provided seeds to grow tomatoes or basil. From the kids' perspective, this wouldn't be much better than giving them nothing at all, so I included a full-size candy bar. I realized that the wrappers themselves weren't eco-friendly, but my guilt over a Milky Way would be mitigated by my satisfaction that I avoided the plastic tchotkes from Party City.

My son approved the goody bags, after expressing some doubt over the lack of toys. I've never been able to hide my opinion of goody bags, so he wasn't surprised that I was prepared

"I filled small pots with dirt and provided seeds to grow tomatoes or basil. From their perspective, this wouldn't be much better than giving them nothing at all, so I included a full-size candy bar."

to act on it. He knows, too, that he shares his birthday with the most observed day of environmental recognition.

The other kids were even less thrilled. When I began passing out the (paper) goody bags at the end of the party, one boy looked in and yelled, "This is the worst goody bag ever!" I hoped that at least the parents would understand when they heard the complaints on the drive home.

The Plastic Ocean has become something I consider for my own purchases. As our family thinks more about the impact of what we buy has on our environment, we spend more time thinking through how we spend our money. I feel okay -- even good -- about spending a little extra money on a particular brand if I know it's a company that practices good environmental stewardship.

We encourage our relatives to take a more-is-not-better approach to buying gifts for our kids. There are many more things we could do to improve on our goal, but it has put consumerism into context for us and taken our family beyond the basics of recycling and taking reusable shopping bags to the store.

I'm sure many of us have our weapons against excessive assault on our wallets. Too bad the Plastic Ocean is a legitimate reason. It'd be ideal if it was just something I made up.