



Trashmagination Podcast #61 – Minimalism

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Last month, I was interviewed on the podcast *The Sustainable Minimalist*, hosted by Stephanie Sefarian [<http://mamaminimalist.com/category/podcast/>]. It was episode 37 of that podcast [<http://mamaminimalist.com/037/>]. I encourage you to go listen to that episode because Stephanie is a great interviewer! But in the meantime, I'm going to share some tidbits of what we discussed.

To give some context, Stephanie's podcast is for people who are simplifying their lives or learning about minimalism. A stereotype of minimalism is that the main goal is to reduce your possessions and downsizing your home. That can be a big part of the process - but it is just one facet of minimalism. It can also mean simplifying your schedule by learning to say "no" to commitments and being intentional about how you spend your time and money.

Stephanie asked how one might work towards a minimalist lifestyle if you also want to pursue creative reuse as part of an environmentally-conscious lifestyle. Just like there are stereotypes about minimalism, there are stereotypes about creative reuse. People imagine that to make items from recycled materials, you must store crates of recyclables in your home, which would not seem to align with minimalist goals.

So to start, I think it's helpful to clarify why we do creative reuse. There is certainly an artistic motivation in my case, but there is also a goal of taking responsibility for the waste that my family produces.

My family consumes some products which create trash which are challenging to recycle through municipal recycling programs. Plus now many recycling programs for plastics cannot keep up. We are on a journey to remove those products from our lives, but it's a gradual process. I also think that making trash and recyclables into art is a fun way to have the conversation with people rather than just being doom-and-gloom about reducing what you produce.

So then I described the process for how someone could set up systems for creative reuse in their home without overwhelming themselves with crates of recyclables. Here are the steps:

- Step 1 – Figure out what you want to collect
- Step 2 – Store what you collect in a way so you don't forget about it
- Step 3 – Getting rid of collections that you realize you are not going to creatively reuse either because your interests have changed or you are moving somewhere and can't store it anymore.

How do you know what to collect?

- Look at the trash and recycling items your family generates - If products you buy come in packaging that doesn't compost, and you want to keep buying that item, then you are faced with a dilemma for what to do next.
- Start a Pinterest board of ideas for what you could do with that material – Do you feel inspired by the ideas you see in the world for that material? If not, and it doesn't cause you to think of your own ideas, that is likely not the material you should collect.
- Match a "making skill" to the trash/recycling material - Not many classes teach how to make items from recycled materials, but there are many art, craft, sewing, woodworking, sculpting and other similar classes. I look at the trash/recycling material and then evaluate which skills could be useful to transform that material. If the item is

flexible, perhaps sewing or weaving is a good option. If it is hard, perhaps woodworking or sculpture are a good option. Anything you make with new art and craft supplies can likely be made with recycled materials if you are willing to experiment. I call this the "material sciences" part of the process.

- Only collect items that delight you - I love weaving plastic bags, sewing juice pouches, building with colorful plastic caps and quilting with fabric scraps. I love denim, ribbons and flexible food packaging. I don't love plastic containers, wood, cardboard, wine corks, glass or rubber inner tubes. But I know people who do love those materials. Collect materials that you love even before you make something from it and then make friends with people who want the rest. I may never be fantastic at woodworking, but I know woodworkers. I am constantly contacted by artists asking for help collecting specific trash & recycling materials.
- Tell your friends what you are collecting - If I only made items from my own trash, I would never get anything done. That's because I don't go through enough shampoo bottles or yogurt containers or whatever to make the items I want to make. If you can gather enough materials quickly, you are more likely to complete the project and move on. This can reduce the space these items take up in your home as you wait to gather enough.

How to store materials until you use them

- Clean and deconstruct - Make materials as small as possible. For a wooden clementine box, remove the staples. For a toothpaste tube, squeeze out the paste, cut the bottom and side, then flatten it. For jeans, cut out the panels of denim fabric, then roll up the seams and waistbands. For fabric scraps, iron them flat and stack them with similar colors and sizes in ziplock bags. This helps you see at a glance whether you have enough of a material to make the project, and to ensure nothing smells or gets moldy.
- Set maximum collection amounts - If I am collecting plastic caps, once I have a box full of black caps, I stop collecting or I give away a sub-set of the collection to a creative reuse store, artists, teachers, Buy Nothing etc.
- Set maximum "keep" times - If something has been sitting in storage for more than a year for example, I might decide that is the time to give it away. Inevitably, the day I decide to give something away, that is when I come up with the perfect project idea to use the materials. Setting that deadline unleashes a big creative energy.
- Store in clear containers - If you can see it, you are more likely to use it.

What to do with collections you decide you don't need anymore

- Many trash and recycling items can have value if they are in quantity, clean and stored neatly - To do many creative reuse projects, you need to collect enough of a type of trash or recycling items so that you don't have to stop mid-stream to create your item. It's sometimes hard to know exactly how many corks you need to make that bath mat for example. The people who value these collections are creative reuse centers, teachers, community centers and people via your local Buy Nothing group. If you gather more than you need for a project, there are people who likely want them. Recently I saw a post in one of my Facebook discussion groups called Journey to Zero Waste by Amber Upshaw where she shared how she sells collections of clean recyclables on eBay. The collections included prescription bottles (40 for \$16), baby food jars (100 jars for \$50), toilet paper rolls (100 for \$19), Tic Tac containers (12 for \$5) and egg cartons (30 for \$12).
- People might want your recycled material collections if you show how to use the materials - This does not mean you need to invent every project. You can search on Pinterest for project ideas. This is what I do when giving collections to teachers. I have already created a Pinterest board for the material back in the research phase when I was deciding whether I wanted to collect that item. I share the Pinterest board with the teachers and maybe even point out which projects are age appropriate for their students.
- Design projects around materials - When I was collecting plastic caps, I collected gray ones at a rapid rate. I designed a small robot project. When I did a tabling event for kids, I drilled enough caps to make 500 robots [<https://trashmagination.com/26-maker-faires-and-community-events/>]. That cleared out my entire gray cap collection. I could have made a more colorful cap project but I specifically wanted to clear out the gray caps which I found less useful for most designs. This is an example of designing around the materials.

The Importance of Creative Reuse for Families

To wrap up this episode, I want to touch on one more topic that Stephanie and I discussed. Many of Stephanie's listeners are interested in simplifying their lives because they are parents. They want to be great parents by focusing on what is most important even though family life can be very busy.

This reminded me that I think creative reuse is also an important part of parenting. So many kids are not learning how to make or fix things. When families do creative reuse projects together, the kids see that they can fix broken items and find value in items that many other people throw away. Since kids are not taking home economics or wood shop very often, it falls to us as parents to incorporate those skills into our family life. So I hope families can find a way to experiment with creative reuse. When we fix things, it saves us buying new ones and throwing away old ones, which is a great minimalist goal.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what you think about minimalism and creative reuse at trashmagination@gmail.com. Check out the podcast *The Sustainable Minimalist* podcast as well.

Until next time – may you build a life that encourages both minimalism and creative reuse!