



Trashmagination Podcast #87 – My Good List

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

Today's episode is inspired by the podcast Simple hosted by Tsh Oxenreider, In that podcast, Tsh interviews guests about their "Good List" which are four items that are making life sweeter for them. The four items are a thing, a habit, a work of art and a philosophy. When I listen to her episodes, I think "how would I answer?" That's what I'll do today.

A Thing – Nice People in Stores

The first item on My Good List is a Thing that makes life sweeter these days. My Thing is going to be nice people in stores. I have been working hard to reduce the amount of stuff in our home, and that has involved trying to think creatively about where to bring unwanted items. For example, I had saved two glass vases from the trash. I hardly ever need a vase. I put them on Buy Nothing Reston but I had no takers. I called a flower shop and asked if they would be able to reuse two vases. At first they thought I was asking to buy two vases, but then I explained I was trying to keep two vases from landfill. They seemed delighted by my offer. They said no customers had ever brought them vases.

Now I'll tell a contrasting story. I have given away lots of clothes and thus I have lots of hangers. I took my wire hangers to a dry cleaning shop and as I walked in, the clerk behind the desk started shouting "No, no, no" so I backed out. At another dry cleaning shop, the clerk thanked me for the hangers. If I hadn't encountered the first dry cleaning shop, I might not have appreciated the second shop so much. But it's the reaction in the first shop that people dread.

There is a lot of messaging in the zero-waste movement about bringing your own containers to stores so that you can avoid single-use packaging. While I am very consistent about bringing my own bags and buying milk in returnable glass bottles, I have not made the switch to purchasing items in bulk with my own containers or asking the deli to put meat or cheese in my own container. It is the fear of that negative interaction that makes me hesitant. But I know to live with integrity, I should be doing that. If I can do it with hangers and glass vases, I can do it with food, right? I just need to remember the positive people to build up my confidence to switch over in other areas of my life.

One more note about nice people in stores - a Habitat for Humanity Re-store opened up in my community. I donated items and everyone working there was so upbeat. Hooray for the new Restore!

A Habit – Narrowing My Creative Reuse Collections

As I mentioned, I have been reducing the amount of stuff in my home. The next item on My Good List is a Habit.

A few weeks ago, I did an episode about the creative reuse artist Sayaka Ganz. A topic we discussed was how much time we spend curating items to be creatively reused. Sayaka collects mostly plasticware and metal. I made a list of items that I collect, and I realized that I collect perhaps 100 different types of items. Some collections are very large, like my fabric scraps. Some collections are very small, like bread tags. But they all take effort to clean and store. Earlier this year, I gave away my entire plastic cap collection, and that was a huge collection. But the recipients were appreciative and I haven't missed the collection at all. Since that was a positive experience, I felt I could do it again. And again!

The biggest collection that I tackled was t-shirts. I wanted to hook them into rugs or weave them, but I was never going to get through all the t-shirts. I gave away more than 12 large bags of t-shirts through my Buy Nothing Reston group. I kept only one container of them, only the most colorful ones.

There are three types of collections that I have been giving away. The first is raw materials, or items that I make into art, such as many plastic items, chopsticks, paint, jewelry, calendars, scrapbook paper, stickers, trophies, frames, glass balls, glassware, hockey sticks, rubber stamps, tissue paper, gift bags, craft foam, stuffed toys, bedsheets, stencils, curtain rods, greeting cards and knitting needles. I had friends ask if we were moving because I gave away so much stuff.

The second type of collection that I gave away was items I had made. This is more sentimental. I gave away many children's activities that I had designed to a Montessori school and a nature pre-school. I gave away Halloween costumes I had sewn. Once I posted on Buy Nothing Reston a photo of the cars we made at my son's birthday party from recycled materials, and another mother took those cars plus a bunch of raw materials because she wanted to replicate that exact activity at her child's birthday party.

The last type of collection was items that I think are valuable to the right person. For example, I had a box called my "gift box" where I kept new items to give as gifts, but most items had been in that box for more than 10 years, so I gave them away. I mailed a huge box of CDs to Decluttr [<https://www.decluttr.com>]. They paid me 10 cents per CD – but I was happy they took them instead of going straight to landfill. I even found someone to take our hermit crab and all its gear.

I still have many collections to give away, but I feel a big difference in my home. I emptied a closet and my husband painted it with a fresh coat of paint. But more importantly, all those collections were like a weight on my shoulders – the weight of too many creative ideas. If I spend all my time curating collections, I don't have time to make art.

It has been at times emotionally and logistically challenging to give away these items. They are not objects that I feel comfortable bringing to Goodwill because they are odd items and I worry they would throw them directly in the trash. Here are three ideas that have helped me let go of my possessions:

- 1) The first idea is to say, "It is not helping anyone having this in my home." I am releasing these objects to be played with by other children or worn by other women.
- 2) The second idea is that I tell myself that this is like an onion. I will peel away each layer of my possessions one at a time. There are layers underneath but I can only peel away what is right in front first. The world is abundant and I will have enough energy to keep going to the next layers. I will also believe that if I give something away, and really miss it, I can collect it again in the future.
- 3) The third idea is "no more cardboard boxes." When I put items in cardboard boxes, I can't see them anymore and they just pile up. But I also won't buy any new transparent plastic boxes. I have a cap on how much I can keep based on the number of transparent plastic boxes in my home.

I feel better when I give items to enthusiastic people. I have been using my skills at marketing to make my items look really appealing. Here are tips I have learned to make my items more popular on Buy Nothing Reston:

- If you put clothing, scarves or jewelry on a mannequin, people are far more likely to ask for them.
- If you put an object in the photo like a pen to show the size of the item, people really appreciate it.
- If you find someone who is your size and they like one item of your clothing, there is a good chance they want a whole bunch of your clothing.
- It's better to offer similar items as a group because people want to get more items in one trip.
- Tell people to search for your name in the group and ask for more of your items.

I have had people tearfully thanking me for items and it's such a relief to me, I feel like I should be thanking them.

I have been listening to three podcasts while on my decluttering journey - The Art of Decluttering, Spark Joy and The Sustainable Minimalists. Listening to podcasts while you declutter is like having a long pep talk as you work.

A Work of Art – Fundraising Quilts

Next I'll talk about a work of art. This summer, I attended my 30-year reunion at Pearson College which is an international school that I attended as a teenager. The mission of Pearson College is to build world peace by having young people from around the world learning in this intimate, special place.

If you have ever attended a reunion, you know the school asks you to donate towards the school. The 100 people in my year are now working together to raise one full scholarship for a current student.

I wanted to make the fundraising effort more fun. A few years ago, my taiko group had the honor of performing in California. We fundraised to get all of us flying across the country. I sewed a quilt where each person who donated would have their name sewn on the quilt. A quilt is such a great way to talk with people about a fundraiser. Rather than just saying, "Please give money," you can say, "look at the new square on the quilt!" and people look for their names.

I offered to sew a similar quilt for this fundraiser. It is a physical manifestation of an ephemeral item which is a scholarship. We can give the quilt to the scholarship recipient so she feels our support with a physical item and not just financially. I decided to make each block a hexagon because it's joined on 6 sides by other blocks. It represents how we are connected to many people all the time. It reminded me of a honeycomb and the community of a hive. I also wanted the quilt to be sewn in light, warm colors so the names and messages stand out. I gathered all my honey-colored scraps.

The quilt idea originates from American history when European settlers arrived in the United States. When they left their friends and families, women would make quilts filled with signatures and poems. They knew they would likely never see each other again. These quilts were called Autograph quilts [http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/friendship.htm]. In this case, we are going to give the quilt to the student we sponsor, and she will take it on her life journey.

A Philosophy – "They Process Less Than Half of What I'm Saying"

Next I'll talk about a philosophy that I'm keeping top-of-mind right now. And that philosophy is "They process less than half of what I'm saying." This philosophy originates from the fact that my children have ADHD, and they often don't hear what is being said. This happens at home, school, everywhere. When they realize they don't know what is going on, they often try to act like they know what's up, and sometimes they get caught in a lie. Whether they are caught or not, it is a stressful and anxiety-filled life.

When my children don't process what I'm saying and then do behaviors that make life more difficult, I feel unseen and unloved. The philosophy of thinking "They process less than half of what I'm saying" is helpful. I imagine what it would be like if I could not communicate with someone 50 percent of the time. They were trying to help me, but I have no control over when that 50 percent blackout is going to occur. It would be very upsetting. I would want them to be really patient trying to help me find out the information that I missed.

I am trying to think of myself as a reservoir of potential energy for my kids. I want to help them find the 50 percent that they missed. If I want them to hear me say I love you 10 times, I have to say it 20 times.

A lot of my career has been focused on communications and marketing. It is Marketing 101 to repeat messages. It is Marketing 101 that you have to get creative or your message will not stand out in the blur of life. Another big part of my career has been project management. I'm used to adults not following through on the tasks that they committed to do. I believe that many or most adults only process less than half of what is being thrown at them due to overwhelm.

When it comes to creative reuse, if I want to inspire you to find the energy to do it, I will have to tell you a lot of stories.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what is on your Good List and I will do my best to process the whole list and not less than half of it. You can reach me at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see trash as a source of art in your life!