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Recommended for Earth Day: ‘Recycling is garbage’ from the NYT in 1996; it broke hate mail record

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Tomorrow is Earth Day and to recognize that annual environmental holy day, I recommend reading the classic 1996 New York Times Magazine article titled “Recycling is Garbage” by New York Times science columnist John Tierney, especially if you’re one of the millions of Americans who suffer from “garbage guilt” — one of the religious components of recycling according to Tierney.

Tierney’s controversial argument that he made back in 1996 is this: recycling may be the most wasteful activity in modern America, especially if we value of the opportunity cost of everybody’s time at the \$15 an hour that everybody now wants to the minimum hourly wage an unskilled worker can be paid. “Rinsing out tuna cans and tying up newspapers may make you feel virtuous, but it’s a waste of time and money, a waste of human and natural resources.” Now you can understand why Tierney’s article set the all-time record for the greatest volume of hate mail in the history of the New York Times Magazine. Here are some excerpts of the John Tierney classic “Recycling is Garbage” (emphasis added):

On recycling as a religious experience:

the public’s obsession wouldn’t have lasted this long unless recycling met some emotional need. Americans have embraced recycling as a transcendental experience, an act of moral redemption. We’re not just reusing our garbage; we’re performing a rite of atonement for the sin of excess.

On resource scarcity:

We’re [supposedly] squandering irreplaceable natural resources. Yes, a lot of trees have been cut down to make today’s newspaper. But even more trees will probably be planted in their place. America’s supply of timber has been increasing for decades, and the

nation's forests have three times more wood today than in 1920. "We're not running out of wood, so why do we worry so much about recycling paper?" asks Jerry Taylor, the director of natural resource studies at the Cato Institute. "Paper is an agricultural product, made from trees grown specifically for paper production. Acting to conserve trees by recycling paper is like acting to conserve cornstalks by cutting back on corn consumption."

Some resources, of course, don't grow back, and it may seem prudent to worry about depleting the earth's finite stores of metals and fossil fuels. It certainly seemed so during the oil shortages of the 1970s, when the modern recycling philosophy developed. But the oil scare was temporary, just like all previous scares about resource shortages. The costs of natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable, have been declining for thousands of years. They've become less scarce over time because humans have continually found new supplies or devised new technologies. Fifty years ago, for instance, tin and copper were said to be in danger of depletion, and conservationists urged mandatory recycling and rationing of these vital metals so that future generations wouldn't be deprived of food containers and telephone wires. But today tin and copper are cheaper than ever. Most food containers don't use any tin. Phone calls travel through fiber-optic cables of glass, which is made from sand — and should the world ever run out of sand, we could dispense with wires altogether by using cellular phones.

On "human time" as a precious, non-renewable, scarce resource:

The only resource that has been getting consistently more expensive is human time: the cost of labor has been rising for centuries. An hour of labor today buys a larger quantity of energy or raw materials than ever before. To economists, it's wasteful to expend human labor to save raw materials that are cheap today and will probably be cheaper tomorrow. Even the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental group that strongly favors recycling and has often issued warnings about the earth's dwindling resources, has been persuaded that there are no foreseeable shortages of most minerals. "In retrospect," a Worldwatch report notes, "the question of scarcity may never have been the most important one."

On the enduring myth that "it is better to recycle than to throw away":

That enduring myth remains popular even among those who don't believe in the garbage crisis anymore. By now, many experts and public officials acknowledge that America could simply bury its garbage, but they object to this option because it diverts trash from recycling programs. Recycling, which was originally justified as the only solution to a desperate national problem, has become a goal in itself — a goal so important that we must preserve the original problem. Why is it better to recycle? The usual justifications are that it saves money and protects the environment. These sound reasonable until you actually start handling garbage.

Update: Last year, John Tierney wrote an update to his 1996 "Recycling is Garbage" article, and it appeared in the New York Times on October 3, 2015 ("[The Reign of Recycling](#)"), here are a few excerpts of that update:

Recycling has been relentlessly promoted as a goal in and of itself: an unalloyed public good and private virtue that is indoctrinated in students from kindergarten through college. As a result, otherwise well-informed and educated people have no idea of the relative costs and benefits.

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As a labor-intensive activity, recycling is an increasingly expensive way to produce materials that are less and less valuable.

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[Even though it's so wasteful] why do so many public officials keep vowing to do more of it? Special-interest politics is one reason — pressure from green groups — but it's also because recycling intuitively appeals to many voters: It makes people feel virtuous, especially affluent people who feel guilty about their enormous environmental footprint. It is less an ethical activity than a religious ritual, like the ones performed by Catholics to obtain indulgences for their sins.

Religious rituals don't need any practical justification for the believers who perform them voluntarily. But many recyclers want more than just the freedom to practice their religion. They want to make these rituals mandatory for everyone else, too, with stiff fines for sinners who don't sort properly. Seattle has become so aggressive that the city is being sued by residents who maintain that the inspectors rooting through their trash are violating their constitutional right to privacy.

It would take legions of garbage police to enforce a zero-waste society, but true believers insist that's the future. When Mayor de Blasio promised to eliminate garbage in New York, he said it was "ludicrous" and "outdated" to keep sending garbage to landfills. Recycling, he declared, was the only way for New York to become "a truly sustainable city."

But cities have been burying garbage for thousands of years, and it's still the easiest and cheapest solution for trash. The recycling movement is floundering, and its survival depends on continual subsidies, sermons and policing. How can you build a sustainable city with a strategy that can't even sustain itself?