

Recycle THIS!

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By Robert Levin

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Earlier today I received a notice advising me that the recycling program in my neighborhood has been "rebooted" and that I will henceforth risk "serious fines" if I fail to sort and, in the case of jars and bottles, RINSE my garbage before leaving it out.

I hate to come off as a bad sport, but I've got to tell you: In all these years I've never once sorted or rinsed my garbage and there's no way I'm going to start now. I mean, what exactly IS this shit? I don't even sort and rinse the stuff I keep!

Let me try to explain something here. I would never have had a problem with the chore we've been assigned if a vital need to conserve essential natural resources was the given it's assumed to be and if the claim that recycling saves significant quantities of natural resources was true. But the importance and value of recycling is dubious at best. Summarily ignored, a number of reports (including one in The New York Times) revealed early on that, in fact, we're not running out of the substances recycling is intended to save. What's more—and this applies to nonbiodegradable materials that end up as landfill as well as to organic elements—even the industry's own published (and doubtless exaggerated) figures make it clear that what the recycling process manages to salvage is of no real consequence.

So while I'll allow that self-immolation would constitute a disproportionate form of protest, I have to say that reacting with less than indignation to so gratuitous an imposition would also be inappropriate. (Particularly when you consider that nowhere in the notice was there mention of a tax rebate for performing what, if it's to be performed at all, should properly have been a function of the Department of Sanitation from the beginning.)

It's obviously not as dramatic, but this recycling business had always reminded me of the so-called "oil crisis" of the late seventies. Remember that? Remember how we were told flat out that after decades of witless gorging on a finite resource we'd all but depleted the world of fossil fuels? Remember how, to

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be sure that we got the message, we were made to endure frantic weeks of gasoline rationing and reduced thermostat levels?

(I know that my senator then, Senator D'Amato will want to cut in here to tell me this was before "Jurassic Park" came out and that at the time we didn't realize we could make more.

Yessir. That's an...interesting...point. But, and with all due respect, SIT THE FUCK DOWN!—it's beside the point I was making. Okay?)

The point I was making is that the whole thing was a setup to get us to accept inflated petroleum prices. There was, it turned out, enough oil left under just the backyards of Kuwait's Emir and Mobil's CEO to run our quadrant of the galaxy AND keep Pat Riley splendidly coifed for another century or

two.

Now I'm aware that it's not that easy to resist scams like this, even when they've been run on us before and there is good evidence to belie the premise on which they're based. Being mortal, knowing that—at any time and in any number of ways—the most terrible thing that can happen is definitely going to happen, we are obliged to grant at least the possibility of substance to all but the most patently ridiculous warnings of an impending catastrophe. (And, having been handed at birth a sentence reserved for the worst of crimes, we're not only primed to accept the blame for catastrophes, but more than ready to suffer a little redemptive inconvenience as well.)

Still—Jesus!—as difficult as it may be to defend against our innate susceptibility to manipulation, we could make a better effort. At the very minimum we could reduce the frequency with which we're victimized by keeping the batteries fresh in our bullshit detectors and never forgetting that, more often than not, the "emergencies" we're presented with have an agenda behind them.

Recycling, for example, isn't about saving the planet. (And no, it's not even about making money for somebody—not really.) It's about winning the personal salvation (indeed, the recycling) of the limited and earnest types who proposed and continue to insist on it. These people are coming from the secret hope that if they suck up to nature by not wasting any of it, nature will return the favor and arrange to perpetuate their existence in some other package once their current status expires.

Well I, for one, don't appreciate it when people conscript me into the service of their personal immortality projects, especially when they masquerade as humanitarians.

It's not that I would, for a minute, begrudge them such a reward. But given its size I think they should be forced to earn it on their own, with no assistance from the rest of us. I can't speak for nature, of course, but if they stopped by my place a couple of times a week to do their sorting/rinsing thing that would certainly impress ME.

I didn't say anything about them coming into the house. Along with the trash, I'll leave my garden hose unraveled behind the shed. They're more than welcome to go back there and rinse anything it pleases them to rinse.

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Robert Levin is a former contributor to The Village Voice and Rolling Stone and the coauthor and coeditor, respectively, of two collections of essays about rock and jazz in the '60s: "Music & Politics" and "Giants of Black Music."

Plastic Recycling Confusion

By David Leonhardt

Plastic Recycling Confusion

by: **David Leonhardt**

CONSUMER ALERT: do not mix your food container lids. A yogurt container lid is NOT the same as a margarine container lid, even if they look the same. How do I know this? Well, here is my story.

We live in a very hoity-toity county. Sure, it might look like just farm country. A lot of the houses might seem a little worse for wear. But we are very picky about what plastic we recycle. We recycle only those numbered 1 and 2.

In case you did not know, your plastics are numbered. On the bottom of most containers, there is a number, usually from 1 to 5. I suppose 1 is the best, since anything with a number of 3 or more just is not high-class enough for us to recycle.

Sooner or later, it was bound to happen. My overactive curiosity got the better of me and I emptied the fridge to try to figure out this plastic numbering thing. What else does one do in the middle of the night when his newborn doesn't want to sleep?

My wife came down to the kitchen. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Just snacking," I replied.

She scanned the table, covered with yogurt, hand cream, cream cheese, plum sauce, juice, shampoo, and an empty ice cream bucket. "OK, I'm not actually eating any of these," I admitted. "I'm looking for numbers on the bottom to see which of these containers is high-class enough for us to recycle."

"You are NOT recycling our brand new tub of margarine," my wife declared. "And that juice jug is supposed to last us a few more years."

"Of course," I said in my most believable comforting tone. "It's just a curiosity thing".

"Oh, one of those," my wife sighed.

"You see, both the yogurt and margarine containers are made of PP."

"PP?" my wife asked.

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"Yes, PP. Plastic number 5, also called Polypropylene."

"Oh. That's a relief."

"But the lids are not the same. The yogurt top is a number 4, whereas the margarine top is a number 2."

"You mean the lids are not made of the same plastic as the containers?" my wife exclaimed.

"Exactly," I replied. "And not the same as each other. There must be a reason they use for the yogurt top a plastic of such poor upbringing that our recycling program rejects it. It might be dangerous to mix them up."

"That's silly."

"Then why else would they need three different plastics for two simple containers that are used for essentially the same purpose under the same conditions?"

My wife turned around to leave. "Wait," I cried. "There's more."

"I was afraid of that."

"The parfait container has no number. Does that mean it's undercover? The lid is a 4, which means we can switch it with the yogurt lid, but not with the margarine lid."

"The parfait container is clear. You can see through it. Maybe they can't recycle see-through plastics."

"Exactly what I thought," I exclaimed. "But look at your shampoo. It's in a clear bottle, a number 1. But the matching conditioner, which is not clear, is in a number 2."

"That makes sense," my wife assured me. "Maybe."

"Not really. Number 2 is used in the margarine lid, the big ice cream bucket and the vitamin jar. Besides, here is another margarine container made of clear plastic, and it is also a 5 with a 4 lid."

"This is way too confusing," my wife said. "We have a baby to attend to. She just can't seem to sleep."

"With all our containers mixed up like this, who knows what the world is coming to," I cried. "No wonder she can't sleep."

The author is David Leonhardt, The Happy Guy. To receive his satire column weekly in your inbox, sign up at

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