

My journey to zero waste began in 2012. Back then, I was working as a French teacher in Canada, and I felt that many of us struggled – individually and as a community – to live by the standards of our school's sustainability mission. After a rather depressing Clean-up Day at the end of my first school year teaching there, I decided to investigate local initiatives and alternatives to reduce our waste and consumption.

I came across Bea Johnson's Zero Waste Home blog and book and became very admiring of this French environmental activist living in the US. She produced so little waste each month that she could fit it all in a 1-litre jar. Johnson lives by the core principles of the 5 R's: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Rot (as in compost). By refusing what she does not need, reducing what she consumes, reusing and repairing what she owns, recycling what can't be refused, and composting what can be, she has been managing, for over 20 years, to throw hardly anything in the waste bin.

While throwing away so little waste seemed like an impossible goal for me, Johnson's experience inspired me to reduce my waste as much as possible, step by step. I changed the way I did my grocery shopping: I started going to bulk stores and brought reusable bags and containers to the market and all other food stores. I replaced my cosmetics sold in plastic packaging by solid alternatives or refillable ones. For my period, I tried every alternative to regular tampons and pads: the menstrual cup, reusable pads, period panties and even the free flow instinct. When our child was born, we used cloth diapers and reusable wipes. I also started making more things myself, including greeting cards, cleaning products, cosmetics and all sorts of food. I even experimented with no-poo – NO! it doesn't mean I stopped emptying my bowels but simply that I stopped using shampoo! – and I started bringing my own spoon to eat take away ice cream from a tub as well as a sealable mug and compostable tea bags on my travels.

These are only a few examples, among many, of the zero waste options I have tried and embraced and sometimes let go off over the years. As I became a parent, with less time, energy and mental space, it became more challenging to do it all. The reality is that being a zero waste and sustainable consumer in a society that is not, can be extremely challenging and is not always possible. So, I had to prioritize; among the zero-waste alternatives I adopted over 10 years ago, there are many that I would never consider dropping out and others that I have learnt to be more flexible about, depending on the circumstances. At first, being less rigid about my zero-waste lifestyle, made me feel guilty every time I threw away something that I knew I could have refused in the first place.

However, that sense of guilt eventually diminished a little. When I was asked to write a book about sustainable living, I did quite a bit of research about waste production, and I realised that in the grand scale of things, putting so much pressure on individuals to reduce their waste made little sense. In its latest report published in 2024, the French Agency for Ecological transition found that in France, in 2020, French households were responsible for 11 % of the waste produced that year, while companies were responsible for 21 % of it and the building industry for 68 % of it. I don't know what the exact numbers are everywhere, but a quick search has shown me that they are about the same in many parts of the world.

Looking further into waste production also made me realize that from an environmental perspective, only trying to reduce the volume of my garbage bag made very little sense. Behind everything we use there is so much resource waste and harmful processes which we do not see as consumers but that we need to consider if we really want to live sustainably overall. Waste, pollution and health hazards aren't just in our bins. They're in the products we consume: the synthetic clothes we wear, the chemical-full cosmetics we apply on our body, the toxic non-stick pans in which we cook our food, the actual food we eat, and much more. Focusing only on what is in our bins should not take the focus away from what is inside the packaging.

12 years ago, before letting any new object or product enter my household, I started asking myself the following questions: Where will this product and or/its packaging end up when worn out or empty? What will be the environmental impact of this product when it is discarded and when it breaks down? Later, I also started adding the following questions to my list: How is it made? Who is it made by? Where is it made? Is any of this sustainable? These questions have helped me reconsider my needs and embrace a more minimalist lifestyle.

My waste never fitted in a 1-liter jar and probably never will but starting this zero-waste journey changed my life in many ways : I became vegan, I stopped wearing make-up, I stopped waxing/shaving as much as before and completely stopped removing hair from certain parts of my body, I downsized my wardrobe (it's about twice or 3 times smaller than it used to be!), I stopped flying for touristic purposes, I embraced second-hand options, I stopped consuming non-seasonal and non-local fruits and vegetables, I stopped eating chocolate every single day, and much more...

You may wonder how I went from simply wanting to reduce my waste to making such changes in my lifestyle. It's quite simple really: I think that in many ways, what we put in our bins is not just a reflection of what and how much we consume but also of some of the ways society's ideologies such as capitalism, specism or patriarchy have shaped our beliefs and lifestyle choices. My journey to zero waste was a very educational and reflective one that freed me from many beliefs (No! I do not need to eat animals to be healthy), from many societal pressures (No! I don't need to shave or wax my body hair, nor to wear make-up to feel presentable), from social expectations (No! I don't need to have a different outfit for every special occasion!) and it helped me make healthier, more sustainable and ethical choices by consuming way less but better-quality products. It helped me reassess what was truly important to me and become more aligned with my values in my day-to-day life.

It also gave me a sense of responsibility for what I consume, for what I throw away and for what I will leave behind when I'm not longer on this planet. It also gave me the impulse to do more on a collective level, by informing people, running workshops, boycotting brands and companies, signing petitions, going to demonstrations, writing to politicians, and so on.

One of my first zero waste action was to start wearing a menstrual cup. Never did I think that this would be the beginning of a much bigger journey of self-reflection, self-empowerment and activism. So why don't you try swapping your shower gel bottle for a soap bar. It may take you on an exciting journey too!