**Three Lessons in Shopping Sustainably**

By Sarah Finley Purdy

Modern life is not inherently conducive to living sustainably. The earth is undergoing environmental crisis, while workers are underpaid and sometimes enslaved to provide the conveniences we demand in the West. Considering the prevalence of environmental pollution, climate change, modern day slavery, and disproportionate access to fare wages, shopping ethically for the things we need can begin to feel like a daunting task. I have been realizing with increasing urgency that I have an obligation to align my buying practices with my convictions.

What I consume and how much is important. I try to utilize Instagram or style blogs to find content that further educates and inspires me to buy slow. Clearing my feed of fast fashion accounts has cut down on my desire to give in to seasonal sales or impulse buys. The same goes for my email inbox – unsubscribing can enable you to live a whole new life as a consumer.

It's been refreshing to discover so many types of people communing over this topic. Within the slow fashion online community, there is a much greater degree of body acceptance and responsible fiscal habits – quite in direct contrast to the average influencer or model. An emphasis on caring for what you have and wearing what you already own stands in stark contrast to the fashion calendar’s devotion to endless new collections a year.

Dr. Joanne Entwhistle profiled “Instagram mums” in a 2018 presentation entitled “New Models of Diversity.” The crux of her research centered around the fact that diversity is not happening inside fashion and Instagram has enabled mothers to redefine fashion while subverting the traditional system. In this broad summation of her work, I see parallels to the slow fashion and sustainable communities. They, too, have the ability to redefine fashion and its core values for themselves. By bringing fashion down to a personal level, and highlighting its true function, style and utility are pushed to the forefront. Personal style is central, counter to the fashion industry's trends. Beautiful fabrics and the people who make them are celebrated. Clothing is cherished, not merely used and tossed away.

As I have attempted to change my shopping habits over the last year, here are some key things I’ve learned:

1. Consider Materials

Organic and natural fabrics are gentler on skin and more durable over time, compared to many synthetic and man-made alternatives. Garments discarded in landfills often break down only after decades, as the nature of synthetic fabrics and dyes is not biodegradable. Clothing made from material such a polyester or rayon will release microplastics in to water every time they’re washed, posing a threat to local water systems. Buying organic and natural fabrics such as cotton, silk, and wool, will enhance your wardrobe, prolong the life of your clothes, and seriously cut down on pollution.

1. Buy Slow, Second Hand & Local

For years, I have relied on thrift and second-hand stores for my clothing; they are still the primary way I add to my wardrobe. Whether in person or online, I love the thrill of the hunt! Thanks to an increased awareness in sustainability, the second hand market has been gaining serious traction over the past few years. There are now second hand shops to match most price points, tastes and needs. Shopping this way within your community also supports charities and small business owners who need it now more than ever. While shopping at your nearby Target or Zara may be more immediately convenient, purchasing staples like jeans and sweaters second hand does long-term good for your community and the earth. Part of living more sustainably is acknowledging that what we need likely already exists, and having the patience to seek those things out.

1. Consider your Social & Financial Status

Not everyone has access to sustainable and ethically made clothing. Buying second hand may present unique challenges for certain bodies. If saving up for a slow fashion or vintage piece isn’t in your budget, don’t feel guilty. You can still buy sustainably by being intentional about your purchases. Buying a better quality fast fashion piece, such as shoes made with durable materials, that can be worn 5-10+ years, is a much better use of resources than a pair that will wear out after a year or two. And even if that is not within your financial reach, educating yourself is a priceless tool. Commit to using your time to build awareness for struggling garment workers or join in efforts to clean up a local park or waterway.

Taking steps towards sustainability is not an overnight change, but requires a thoughtful building of new buying habits. I think the best advice is to shop your conscience with the information and budget you have at hand. As our purchasing power ultimately effects the world at large, knowledge is key.