

EPISODE 561

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: How much trash do you think you toss each day? How many plastic items do you really own? Check your fridge and cupboards, my guess is we amass more waste than we really realize and that we really want. Welcome to So Money everyone, I'm your host Farnoosh Torabi and our guest today is here to inspire us to make small changes to live a so called "zero waste lifestyle".

Her name is Lauren Singer and she apparently only produced, get this, only produce enough waste in the last four years, to fit a 16 ounce mason jar, can you believe it? Her lifestyle has caught the attention of the New York Times, vogue and me. I saw her doing a live Facebook feed on the New York Times Facebook page and I was like, "I need to talk to this woman, she sounds incredible."

She is the creator of the blog, Trash is For Tossers and founder of the organic cleaning product company, the Simply Co. Lauren graduated from NYU with a degree in environmental studies before starting her own company, she was the sustainability manager at the New York City department of environmental protection.

In our conversation, Lauren and I chat about how and why she decided to change her habits and live a zero waste lifestyle, it was a decision, she wasn't raised like this, it's just what she decided. What does that even look like? Take us through a day Lauren and I want to know, when you wake up and when you have lunch and you know, you commute to work. How has this lifestyle shift helped her finances? And stay tuned to the very end, Lauren's giving a special discount to So Money listeners on her website.

Here is Lauren Singer.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Lauren Singer, welcome to So Money. Looking forward to learning about how to live, as you say, a zero waste life. Welcome to the show.

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LS: Thank you so much for avenging me on.

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FT: I first learned about you on Facebook. I was doing multiple things on my laptop and of course Facebook window is always open and up pops a New York Times live Facebook live with featuring you in your kitchen talking about all the ways that you are living a zero waste life and I got really intrigued, thought you were fabulous, thought you had some great advice, thought that I could never be you.

But it was still very inspiring because just in some of the ways that you were talking about, how you create your own cleaning products and your own toothpaste and what you do when you're traveling and how do you actually still maintain a zero waste life when you're 30,000 feet above in the air.

What I would love for you to first share with us is how, and you're very young, you're still in your 20's, you live in New York, how you decided this was going to be your lifestyle? Because it wasn't necessarily how you were raised, you decided this upon yourself in your college years that you wanted to live a zero waste life and then tell us what does that actually mean?

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LS: Sure. So I definitely was not raised like this at all. I had a very typical American upbringing. I ate lots of fast food and, you know, lots of junk food and grew up with just average parents that

had your typical outlook on the environment and sustainability. None of this was really predisposed for me.

Everything kind of started as far as getting into sustainability when I was in high school actually. My senior year, I read Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, which was all about DDT, this pesticide that was really detrimental for human health, the environment and the animals and it really opened my eyes to the idea that humans can have a negative impact on the environment.

When I went to college, I at first was going to study journalism, realized that that wasn't for me and I ended up studying environmental science because it was something that I was really excited about, really passionate about. Through that process, I watched a documentary called *Gasland* and *Gasland* is all about hydro fracking, oil and gas drilling and it was my second kind of awakening to the fact that human beings can have a really detrimental and catastrophic impact on the environment.

So I spent a lot of time protesting and lobbying in Washington DC and to my family's dismay, skipping class to go and talk about why fracking in the oil and gas industry was the worst and I was constantly talking about environmental issues and prosthelytizing to my mom about why she should eat organic food.

All of that kind of came to this peak my senior year of college when I was in the last class that environmental study students had to take. It was called an Environmental Study's Capstone course and in this class, everyone in there had been briefed on environmental issues and environmental topics and sustainability and science for the past four years.

There was a girl in this class who every day would bring this big plastic bag with a plastic clamshell full of food, plastic fork and knife, a plastic drink, plastic bag of chips and she would kind of eat everything and then just throw it in the garbage. I remember sitting in this classroom like staring at her just thinking that like, "I think that you're the worst person that's ever graced this earth."

Because here we are learning about all this things that we can do to make the planet more sustainable and she's literally consuming all of this junk and plastic and throwing it in the trash.

The entire semester was me kind of just like eyes glazed staring at her which I guess was like pretty creepy from her perspective.

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FT: You just gave her the stink eye from across the room the whole time.

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LS: Totally. One day after class I went home to make dinner like I did every other night, but what was different was I opened my fridge and for the first time, I saw something that I guess I had never realized before which was that, everything in my refrigerator was packaged in plastic.

My salad greens and my milk and, you know, any kind of pre-made food and drinks, everything was packaged in plastic and I had this moment of like, oh my gosh, what's happening? And I started looking around my apartment and all of my beauty products were packaged in plastic and my cleaning products were packaged in plastic and most of my clothing was made of plastic because I was participating in fast fashion.

I had this moment like, "Wow, I am such a hypocrite. I've been getting mad at this girl for so long for making this plastic trash, but I was just as bad and contributing to this plastic pollution," and it was completely nonsensical because I had been protesting against the oil and gas industry for two years at that point but I was actively supporting them through the purchasing decisions that I was making.

So that led me to decide, "Okay, I can't just talk about this and not do anything. I'm going to go plastic free," and then through that process of going plastic free, I learned about the zero waste lifestyle and was like incredibly empowered because my goal in life is to help to create positive environmental change.

Living a zero waste lifestyle for me was the way that I could really align my day to day life with my values for environmental sustainability. So it's been almost five years since that happened and I've been going strong.

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FT: First of all, what is fast fashion? You mentioned that, it kind of glazed over me.

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LS: Fast fashion is basically just like think of H&M, forever 21, old navy, those stores that kind of just like assembly line out clothing for really low prices, really low quality. You maybe wear it once or twice, it's really inexpensive, if it get's ruined, you just toss it, it's usually made from synthetics.

Then behind that in the supply chain, you have really low wages for the people that are making it, really low standards for the agriculture that's producing it. It's just all around like a pretty negative, cyclical process. Yeah, that contributes to a lot of fossil fuel based clothing. Things that are synthetics.

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FT: SO some of the no, no with the zero waste lifestyle, you can't shop at H&M, you can't get anything with plastic that comes with...

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LS: It's not that you can't, it's more, "I choose not to" and I always try to approach any changes in my life that I make from that perspective. Because saying "I can't" makes me feel like I'm punishing myself but saying "I choose not to" is something that to me is much more of a philosophical backing.

I choose not to because I don't want to contribute to child labor, unethical wages, poor environmental standards, and high landfill output. So for me, whenever I do anything, whether it's your waste or my eating habits, I always approach it from a, I choose not to instead of like I can't.

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FT: Walk me through your typical day, and kind of capture your lifestyle for us so we can visualize this as best as possible. When you wake up in the morning, when you go to brush your teeth, when you apply makeup, when you go to make breakfast or buy breakfast, when you get to work, how are you choosing to live a zero waste lifestyle? Because we make so many decisions throughout the day, right? It's all routine now to us, we don't think that we're choosing or we're deciding but we are.

So tell me how you're consciously living this lifestyle, at least take me through lunch time.

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LS: Sure, I wanted to — I realize that I forgot to tell you how I define zero waste and that's pretty important.

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FT: Yes. I was trying to define it for you, I can't shop at H&M? Great.

[0:10:20.3]

LS: Cool. So for me, I define zero waste as anything as living a lifestyle where I don't send anything to the landfill. That means I don't just disregard or discard anything so I don't put anything in the garbage, I do recycle and I do compost though but I only recycle as a last resort because even the process of recycling is really energy and water intensive. I try to avoid doing that and just avoid packaging in things that need to be recycled all together.

For me, a typical day is just a typical day, it's just me making choices that are different and like you said, everything we do, we're making choices whether we realize it or not. When you wake up in the morning like I do and you brush your teeth, you choose to do it with the toothpaste and

the toothbrush that you use. For me, instead of using a plastic toothbrush and packaged toothpaste, I use a bamboo compostable toothbrush and toothpaste that I make myself.

I wash my face with a package free soap and moisturize with a package free moisturizer and then I put on my clothing, all of which I've prepared just at second hand stores or clothing that I've had since high school and I definitely still have clothes from high school that I wear and then I leave my house, walk to the train, get on the subway and will head to work. On the way, typically I'll stop and get a cup of coffee and I do so in my reusable bamboo cup that's package free.

I'll get to my office, I'll work typically I'll have lunch that I bring in this stainless steel containers that I have. I'll bring food from home. If I do eat out, I typically like to go and sit somewhere and eat because it just makes me feel like I'm getting out of my office and I'm not becoming completely comatose. Otherwise if I do get food delivered and I do it from places that I know deliver with paper bags, fill plastic and completely compostable packaging.

I'll bring that home and compost it later in the day. Then when I get home, I typically just make my food from food that I buy or ingredients that I buy at the farmers market or package free or at the coop, also package free, then I'll prepare my food for the next day and you know, clean up the same way I got ready with my bamboo toothbrush, my home made products.

If I shave my legs, for instance, I'll do it with a stainless steel safety razor instead of a plastic razor. All of this little alternatives and most of them are just one time purchases but I just replace single use disposable items with and that's kind of how I get through my day the same way I would have if I wasn't living a zero waste lifestyle, it's just my choices and the things that I'm using are a little bit different.

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FT: I understand that you have produced only so much waste in the last four years that it fits inside a 16 ounce mason jar?

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LS: That is correct, yeah.

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FT: Incredible. What are some things that you have found are very difficult to work around?

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LS: The things that I still have to buy packaged are contact solution and contact cases and then my contacts tacks. I am insanely blind, I am like, I have this aversion to glasses because I really can't see that well and if I have glasses on, I can still be blind like around the outside of my glasses. I know it sounds totally crazy but that's just why I prefer wearing contacts but interesting is that loom just created this take back program where if you use their contacts or their cases or their contact solution, you can actually send it back to them and they'll fully recycle everything for you. So there is a solution to that so it doesn't become landfill trash.

The other thing is just things that come in to my life without me intending for them to. For instance, if I have a film crew at my house, sometimes they'll bring gaffers tape, which is like a thick, almost like duct tape that they'll use to mark the spot of where their camera is. If they leave my house, typically they leave that there and so that's something that goes into my jar, it's not something that I intended for, but it's something that I end up with. So it's what I like to call circumstantial trash.

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FT: I remember on the New York Times Facebook live interview, the reporter asked you about travel. You mentioned you take the subway, you obviously must fly from time to time. Does that bother you that you can't get around that? Because well that's not perhaps, you're not leaving... that's not anything that's going to a landfill potentially but it is leaving a bigger carbon footprint than say walking or taking a bicycle.

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LS: The thing with commuter transport is that those airplanes and those trains are going to fly or move whether or not I'm on them. So there's really nothing that I can do to control that, you know, unless all of us boycotted airplanes and trains but that's not realistic and that's not practical. So what I like to focus on is my output that I can control. I can control how often I fly if I do anything to compensate for the emissions that arise when I fly. I can control what I do with my trash but I can't control the airline industry, I can't control the MTA.

So only things from my end and so what I try to do is just being mindful of the decisions that I make, ask myself, "Do I really need to be flying to this place?" If I do, what can I do to compensate for that and that's how I don't get frustrated with any of that. Flying and taking the subway and taking cars are only considered negative because they run on fossil fuels and fossil fuels have a really large environmental impact.

But in the future, hopefully, we'll have solar powered airplanes, we'd have trains that are electric as opposed to gas run. We'll have cars that are completely electric and hopefully grid systems that are run on renewable energy and not coal, nuclear, or gas, or oil and so none of these systems will actually be negative because they'll be running on renewable resources as opposed to fossil fuels and things that are really environmentally detrimental.

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FT: How has this lifestyle improved your life in terms of your health and your finances?

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LS: In so many ways. Really when I first started doing this the only reason was to align my day to day actions with my values for environmental sustainability and I didn't think that there would be any externalities whatsoever. I didn't even care, really. It was something that I wanted to do and I am pretty impulsive when it comes to something that feels good and exciting and so I went for it but what I realized was so many amazing things happened.

Like through not buying packaged food products and through shopping at the farmers market I was actually eating a lot healthier because most of the things that you buy in supermarkets that are packaged are food products and not food. They are things that don't really have an expiration date. They are things that are processed that have high sugar and low fiber. So things that aren't necessarily great for your body.

So through living this lifestyle actually pretty radically changed my diet and so I started feeling a lot better. I started losing weight. I was eating seasonally and actually that consumption pattern helped me saved money too. A lot of what you pay for in a product when it's packaged is the actual packaging and so by shopping packaged free, I was actually saving a lot of money and in addition to that, I was making shopping lists so I wouldn't have an impulse to buy things that I didn't need and by sticking to that shopping list I also saved a lot of money.

Then the other things are like my health definitely improved because I wasn't using or I am not using toxic products and making all of my beauty and cleaning products myself now so I know exactly what is going into the products that I'm making. In the United States we basically have super relaxed regulations on any of our beauty and cleaning products, and so we really don't know what's in them and there could be up to 85,000 industrial chemicals that are put into the products that we are using.

Thing like formaldehyde, carcinogens, endocrine disruptors and I just didn't want to participate in any of that. That's why I make all of my own products and I have seen a difference in my skin. I see a difference in how I feel, but on top of that, I just save so much money, which is something that I didn't expect. Because there is this predisposed idea that living sustainably means being wealthy or spending a lot of money. But to me and in my experience that's so untrue. I've actually saved so much money and you don't have to be wealthy and in addition, saving all these money it has helped me start my company because I had the financial freedom to do so.

So I save money by doing things like buying things package free, by asking myself, "Do I really need this? Is this necessary for my life?" By doing things like not buying new clothing and buying second hand. For instance like a new pair of jeans could be \$200 or so dollars which I find absurd. Buying a second hand pair of jeans you can get it for five, \$10 the same exact

brand. So right there I am saving \$190 on something that is pretty essential, a pair of jeans to wear every day and that's just one example of how easy it is to save money.

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FT: And you talked about how this is actually led you to entrepreneurial endeavors. So talk about the Simply Company or the Simply Co. I know that while you don't have to be wealthy to live in this way it is in the beginning at least time consuming. You have to do your research, you need to learn how to mix things correctly if you want to make your own toothpaste and some of the big complaints that you were hearing was, "Listen Lauren, I want to live the lifestyle that you got but I don't have the time." So talk about how your company is addressing those concerns.

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LS: Sure and at this point I kind of consider myself to have two companies and the first one I guess is my blog, Trash is for Tossers, and the reason I started it was because I personally really love doing research and I love diving into things and learning about how systems work but I know not everyone is like that. So that's why I started my blog to provide people with the recipes and the tips and the tricks on how to live this lifestyle without having to invest a lot of time.

But I still heard from people through my blog that they wanted to make a lot of the products that I was making myself but they really didn't feel like they had the time to do it and when I was done with college, I was actually working as sustainability manager at the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and it was a really good job and I was running my blog but I was getting these emails from people saying exactly what I just said, that they just didn't have time to make these products and they wanted recommendations for some things that they could buy from stores.

So when I started looking I found that there were beauty products that really aligned with what I was making, they had sustainable packaging, minimal ingredients. So I was pretty happy to recommend some brands. But when it came to cleaning products, I just didn't find the same thing. I started looking more into the cleaning product industry and learned that cleaning product

manufacturers in the United States don't actually have to disclose the ingredients of their products on the product packaging and there are all of these umbrella terms that can be used like perfume and fragrance that basically disguise upwards of 2,000 different chemicals and ingredients that can be used for fragrance.

That's because those things are considered trade secrets and a lot of those ingredients are things like formaldehyde and toxins and things that I just wouldn't want anywhere near my body or my home and I found this very conflicting and so I started thinking about the products that I had been making and laundry detergent was one of them and I was making it with just three ingredients. It's effective, it's safe, and I saw an opportunity to provide people with products that I feel that we all deserve, ones that are safe for our homes and our bodies and the environment.

And so I quit my job and launched my company, The Simply Co, at first through a Kickstarter to provide people these products in a way that was convenient for them and also in a way that aligns with my values of zero-waste and sustainability. So we package in glass jars that are completely refillable. We screen print the jars instead of putting labels on them because labels even if you recycle them end up in landfill. I have completely plastic free shipping practices.

So I really try to create a company that embodied everything that I believe in as an individual and now we're just hoping to expand our product line and grow from there. To really show people that we should be looking at the ingredients that are in our cleaning products and in our laundry detergent. Because our clothing and our sheets and our towels are on our body all day long and that affects our health just as much as eating organic food or using organic beauty products.

[0:24:00.8]

FT: Looking at the mason jar where you crammed four years' worth of trash, it's a lot of Chinese food condiments. I'm just looking at the labels now I'm like, "That looks like soy sauce to me, like a soy sauce wrapper." So what were the things that you could not recycle?

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LS: Surprisingly there's actually no condiment wrappers in there. The only wrapper that there is Annie's macaroni and cheese.

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FT: Really? I am looking on a Twitter page. Okay.

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LS: Yeah there is an Annie — so I go visit my dad and my dad has a six year old and a two year old and they eat organic food but some of it is prepackaged and I was there and was totally ravenous and there are a couple of instances where I ate Annie's and I had to put those little packages in my jar and this was a couple of years ago. I know better now to go and prepare and buy some food to bring there if I go visit them.

But yeah, some of the other things in there like produce stickers. There are some produce stickers that are made of paper and you can compost them but there are some that are made of plastic and you cannot. So those end up in landfill. There is a sock, like one of those socks if you ever go and try on shoes at the store those little plastic stocking socks, there's one of those. There's some saran wrap, there are some dead hair ties because my hair murders hair ties.

What else is in there? Oh yeah, there's a lot of little plastic thingies that connect price tags of clothing onto the actually item with clothing an even though I shop second hand, second hand stores still use those little thingies, I don't even know what to call that?

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FT: That's what I think I thought were soy sauce wrappers.

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LS: Yeah, totally. It's just a bunch of little thingies. I don't even know what I call it. I have no idea what to call them.

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FT: Well, we have a couple of minutes left and I want to ask you Lauren what are two easy steps that our listeners can take as they get warmed up to this idea? If you are listening and you are like, "I can do this or I want to do this. This sounds intriguing," what are some simple substitutes that we can make in our own lives today starting now that wouldn't necessarily cost time or money? I'm sure you get this question a lot, right? You've got to start small, start somewhere.

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LS: Yeah.

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FT: So, where should we start?

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LS: I would suggest thinking about something that's a single used disposable that you use in your life like maybe you go out for coffee every day or maybe you get cocktails and there are plastic straws in your life. Just think about your routine, think about what you are throwing away and then find a way to simply avoid that. So if you get coffee every day, a really simple easy solution to integrate into your life is using a reusable coffee cup.

On top of that, you could also save money by making that switch because very often coffee shops will give you a 25 cents discount if you bring your own cup. Another one is if you get cocktails at a bar, you could ask for the cocktail but without a straw. Straws are just a single use plastic, they are pretty avoidable. They're not really necessarily so that's an easy switch to make. If you use plastic bags, a super easy switch to make is just having a reusable bag with you at all times.

Keeping one in your purse or in your briefcase or in your car. I actually use a reusable bag in place of a purse. I am not a purse person so that's a really simple one for me. Trying to even make your own products, I have lots of DIY recipes on my blog. I also have a whole list of alternatives. I think the best thing to do is just find something that sounds really easy to you and then do it and once you accomplish it and maybe two weeks down the line, once it's integrated into your life and you feel good, try something else.

I definitely don't recommend to try to take on a whole lifestyle all at once. It's impossible to change your habits of your entire life in a day and you can't go zero waste in a day, you can't go zero waste in a week, you can't even go zero waste in a month. You have to change a lot of your habits and a lot of the ways that you are doing things and so it is a process. I consider the best way to be like baby steps one step at a time and doing things that feel easy so you feel like you're really winning and accomplishing something.

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FT: Lauren Singer, thank you so much for stopping by and we will definitely visit trashisfortossers.com. So much good information there from recipes, to advice, to letting us into your life and showing how you're making a difference and good luck with the Simply Co. and wishing you continued success.

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LS: Thank you so much.

[END]