

Bethany Jorgensen, May 2022

Beyond the shipwreck in a bottle: What stories for future generations?

Now I truly believe that we in this generation must come to terms with nature, and I think we're challenged, as [humankind] has never been challenged before, to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature but of ourselves. Therein lies our hope and our destiny.

- Rachel Carson, 1972

How would I respond to my own question?

What vision would I conjure for future generations of Menorquines, living out their lives in the days to come, here, on this island? As island, the world refracted.

Carl Sagan's 'Pale Blue Dot' comes to mind. Standing in the ebbing tide, I behold the tiny sand-scarred plastic pellet in the palm of my hand. The sun is setting on the Mediterranean. And on this precious, swiftly-melting planet? The only home we have. Where everyone and anything we have ever loved, leaned into, longed for, laughed with is. Or has been. Or will be. Or will be? Along with all we have lost, all we have learned. This is where it has all happened for us humans. Home.

I close my hand securely around the plastic pellet, and slip it into my pocket.

It came from earlier that afternoon, during the picnic. After mushroom hunting that morning in the living heart of Menorca's forests with the Cardona family -Eva, her 5-year-old triplets, her brothers and their sons- we joined friends and family on Sant Tomas beach. The unseasonably hot October day was enticing enough for swimming. Walking along the beach, assessing its condition, I admired the Mediterranean glimmering clear turquoise, and was lulled by the waves washing up alongside and over my feet. Wave by wave. Step by step. Breathing together. Accompanying.

Regrouping for our picnic lunch, we adults contentedly lounged on the sand chatting while the kiddos capered. As we sat and talked, I began absentmindedly picking microplastics from the sand. Soon others began doing the same. Some of the young ones joined in as the afternoon shadows extended toward evening. The microplastics here at mid-beach were not immediately evident on the surface to the naked eye. It took just a little shifting, lifting out a handful of sand, and sure enough, two or three teeny plastic pieces would appear. A practice of tenderness, as though we were grooming, massaging the beach itself. Running our fingers gently through the sand we watched for pellets and fragments to emerge, deftly then plucking them out. Someone found a washed up plastic bottle, its label wreathed in graceful ripples of Arabic. We plunked the plastics we found into it for safe keeping, noxious toxic little pills. It remained on my work table throughout my stay. Drops in the ocean. A shipwreck in a bottle.

Visits like this one to the beach with the triplets and other members of Menorca's current and future generations bring into sharp relief what is at stake behind efforts to bring about a world without plastic pollution. What is more delightful than watching young kids romp across the

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sand and frolic in the waves? And yet I know those waves and that sand harbor a form of pollution that has been there since before they were born and even if they live 100 years, the most cutting-edge science we have suggests it will be there still. And for their children's lifetimes, too. And it is likely to get much, much worse.

“Ah, but we cannot be all doom-and-gloom about it, now, can we? People don't want to hear it. It's demotivating.” So say the science communication experts. And I see their point. But when and how then, I wonder, do we tell the truth to ourselves, to each other, and to our children, the future generations from whom we are borrowing this planet?

People talk about the mess we're in with plastics like a problem to be solved. As if we could just get someone smart enough to sort out the algebra, the algorithm, and poof – plastics solved! After over 10 years of working to understand plastics, I see this 'problem-solution' mentality as one of the major contributors to where we are stuck. It keeps us from fundamentally recognizing what we are talking about when we talk about plastics and plastic pollution: the plastic system -at once intimate in the everyday and intricately globalized- and the plastic mentality that comes with it.

But the advertising moguls and industry executives who convinced our parents and grandparents to make the shift to this new wonder material proved societal practices and values can be shifted. The question is, what will it take to shift them again toward sustainable futures and livable lives? Will we muster the courage, know-how, and restraint to demonstrate our maturity and mastery of ourselves?

Depends on the stories we tell.