

Frugal ...the Best Sense of the Word

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I ask the honors students in my “Voices of Conservation and Sustainability” seminar to define “frugal.” There is always a pause when you ask an unexpected, open-ended question, but in this case ...*crickets*. I wait, glance around the room, do my best to project an open, expectant, and encouraging expression ...more *crickets*, some squirming, no eye contact. After another uncomfortable pause, I try to encourage them by noting ... “That’s OK, frugal is not a common word. Just say the first thing that comes to mind ...anyone?” Invariably, some brave soul will quietly say “cheap” in the form of tentative question. They really don’t want to be disrespectful or sound cynical. Their classmates are relieved and some involuntarily nod in agreement (...a few millimeters, in slow motion). I thank them and most smile nervously. Frugal equals Cheap *is*, to be sure, the most common 21st century definition. However, I ask them, and you, to consider some more positive and constructive traditional synonyms.

A few generations ago, being frugal—thrifty, creative, economical, careful, cautious, provident, sensible, not wasteful, consciously thankful, et cetera—was a sterling virtue. Bringing this philosophy back to the forefront of our consciousness is, I believe, a very effective way to reduce our environmental impact and honor our obligations to posterity. It’s also a very satisfying, proactive way to deliberately reject the addictive consumerism and aggressive marketing that invades our daily lives. Here are some examples:

Cereal Bags – Several years ago in another seminar I asked the students to describe someone who really inspired them to be good stewards of the environment. Expecting to hear “exam question answers” (e.g., Wangari Maathai, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Wendell Berry, etc.) I was pleasantly surprised when Hannah sat bolt upright and said, “My grandmother! She’s amazing. She has a huge garden. She fixes all kinds of things. She washes out cereal bags and uses them for everything, over and over again. She will *not* buy plastic bags.” The love and respect that shone in her eyes was endearing and inspiring to me as well as her somewhat startled classmates. In cultural contrast, if I asked young people in an indigenous community the same question they would simply say “the Elders.” They also would try to diplomatically mask their surprise that anyone would need to ask something so obvious.

Did you know that NASA includes cereal bags in the emergency supplies on every spacecraft? Why? They’re remarkably tough and versatile. You’ve probably tried to rip one open with a substantial amount of force—with no effect. If you pulled on the bag with much more force it probably ripped suddenly and scattered cereal all over the counter and kitchen floor. Having learned the hard way, I reach for the scissors and cut the bag open just below the top seam. Ever since the fateful Apollo 13 mission, NASA engineers have tucked a few cereal bags into the crew cabin to fix leaks, repair windows, and patch spacesuits. If this sounds far-fetched, that’s because I made it up. NASA doesn’t use cereal bags—but they should, like Hannah’s grandmother ...and me ...and, hopefully, you.

Many of you know that I like to bake bread. I call it my “edible hobby.” My paternal grandfather, a German immigrant, was a baker by trade. He died when I was a very young boy, but I feel connected to my family’s heritage when I bake—especially if I’m making a European rye or pumpernickel. I usually double the recipe because I find it easier to knead the larger quantity of dough. More importantly, it’s nice to end up with three or four loaves after you



make a small pile of dishes and heat the oven. One to eat, one or two to freeze and have on hand, and one to give away. Some breads will keep well for a few days in a bread box or brown paper bag, but the other two or three loaves need to be wrapped. For many years, I used aluminum foil or plastic wrap and always felt guilty about the waste of energy and materials they entailed. Then I started to use zip-lock freezer bags. They can be washed and reused several times, but then the zipper doesn’t seal, or the side seam splits, and into the trash they go. They’re also quite expensive. The instant I heard “cereal bags” I knew what to do. They are food safe, tough as nails, easily washed and air-dried, readily folded for storage, and durable enough to use many times. We all have dozens of twist ties in a tin

or jar in our kitchen, so closing them tightly is easy too. Problem solved. Waste avoided. Creative reuse. When I double [cereal]-bag bread for the freezer it keeps better than any other method or material. Why didn't I think of this earlier?

Pack a Trash-Free Lunch — I'm quoting David Suzuki, the well-known Canadian scientist and environmental activist. In one of his essays he notes that most of us pack "trash" [single use plastic bags] in our lunch. Why? ...the usual reasons: they're light, cheap, and work well enough for the few hours between packing and eating a lunch. Then, of course, they're trash. Why not buy a few good quality, food safe plastic containers? Why not re-use the food-safe containers we cart home from the grocery store (e.g., ricotta cheese, sour cream, and many others)? If you have access to a microwave, buy a good quality tempered glass bowl or container with a tight-fitting top or cover to re-heat leftovers. I've been doing this for several years and find that it prompts me to pack a healthy lunch with more moderate portion sizes too. When I think of all the years I used "baggies" and the 1,000s I sent to the landfill, it reminds me to more alert to this kind of "hidden in plain sight" frugal environmental stewardship. It's not just the disposable bags, but the box they came in, the truck that hauled them to the store, the factory that made them, and the oil well and the forest from whence they came.

Passive-Convection Clothes Dryer (hangers)—Wash shirts and pants. Tumble them in the dryer for a few minutes to remove most of the wrinkles. Carefully place them on hangers, then on the shower rod to air dry. This will humidify your house, reduce or eliminate ironing, maintain the appearance and finish of your clothes, and substantially extend their service life. You will be saving 90 to 95% of the energy used by a gas or electric dryer to complete a full cycle. I still dry towels and a few other items. A drying rack is a good investment for many small items (e.g., socks).

Solar-Advection Clothes Dryer (outdoor clothesline)—For serious drying (e.g., blankets, sheets, curtains, rugs, etc.) from April through October, wait for "good drying day" as our grandmothers did and hang your laundry outside. The combination of sun and wind (even a light breeze) is remarkably effective and fast. And don't these thermodynamic terms make doing laundry sound more scientific and trendy?

Electric Water—If you have dehumidifier, you used a substantial amount of electricity to run that machine to extract water vapor from the air. This is worthwhile to prevent mold and unpleasant odors in your basement, but it comes with a substantial environmental price. Many years ago, I was visiting my parents for the weekend and doing what I could to help. I was just about to dump the dehumidifier water in the kitchen sink when somewhere behind me, my mother issued an emphatic ...*"Please* put that water on the laurel by the front door." When I turned sheepishly to look at her, the silent micro-eye roll said "...my own son, a grown man, with a family and a Ph.D. in forest hydrology and water resources engineering, needs to be *told* not to waste water ...*honestly*." Since that fateful gaff, I diligently collect the water from our dehumidifier in two 5-gallon pails and water the trees around our house. They use that fancy "electric water" for photosynthesis and growth—removing carbon dioxide from the air, emitting oxygen, and cooling and beautifying our immediate environment. I look up and send a quick "Hi Mom" heavenward when I'm walking back to the house with the empty buckets.

2% Per Year List

1. Reusable shopping bags
2. Drive rationally
3. Don't "burn" electricity
4. Be frugal
- 5.

One of my mentors in graduate school at the University of Minnesota, Prof. Hans Gregersen, was internationally known for his work in environmental economics and management. He frequently observed that Americans simply do not value "a dollar of damage avoided" in the same way as "a dollar new production." A dollar is a dollar. In fact, a dollar's worth of environmental damage usually costs *much* more to clean up, sometimes thousands of dollars, when we find our health is threatened by air and water pollution. That said, it's not as easy to quantify the environmental and economic benefits of the examples listed above as I've done in

earlier articles. I'm not being lazy or glib when I ask, why bother? Americans comprise less than 5% of the world's population but, on an annual basis, account for about 25% of global energy and natural resources consumption *and* generate about 30% the global waste stream. I think these are the only shameful statistics we need to confirm that accepting personal responsibility and being frugal (...careful, sensible, provident, not wasteful, consciously thankful) is the right thing to do.