

Fixing Things

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Whenever you fix something to extend its useful life, you have conserved energy and natural resources and protected the Earth in more ways than you might credit. Especially if the repair is inexpensive, effective, and durable, the environmental *and* financial benefits can be substantial and long-lasting. In many respects, this article relates to earlier essays (December – *Being Frugal*, February – *Recycling and Environmental Damage Avoided*) and underscores the need to question societal norms about what is “good” [new, shiny, pristine] versus “bad” [old, worn, well-used]. I also hope to strengthen your resistance to the consumerism (and the related deluge of manipulative marketing) that afflicts our society and, in consequence, the Earth. Fixing things, instead of mindlessly replacing them, returns us to a time when daily life did not generate a “waste stream.”

As I have done in earlier articles, I will be using examples to make my point. And once again, my father, Ted, makes an appearance as a central character. Eight years ago, when he died at age 90, we received a beautifully written note from Bishop Wissemann, expressing his condolences. In it, he said “I think of my parents every day and grow in appreciation for all they did for me.” I must admit, I was a bit surprised and humbled by this statement by someone in his 80’s. Then again, I had also been thinking about my parents every day in recent years (file by title under “worrying” ...with a bag in the trunk of my car for the 2 am phone call). Then it dawned on me that Bishop Wissemann’s statement was meant to assuage our grief *and* gracefully turn our attention, in his inimitable way, to a stage of life when we would better understand of our parents’ legacy.

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A few weeks after we moved into our home in West Suffield, CT in August of 1997, my parents came over from Kingston, NY for the first of many visits. Not long after they arrived, my father announced that he left a roll of “really good” sheet metal in our barn. He had been saving it for years after they dismantled a backyard swimming pool. I thanked him (unenthusiastically, I suppose) and thought to myself “...*great*, now he’s going to start bringing junk along on every visit.” He said, “it’s heavy gauge aluminum and better than anything you could buy ...you’ll need it for something one of these days.” After they left, I put it up in the rafters. I didn’t want to be disrespectful and chuck it, but I wanted it out of my way. I was bracing myself for the next installment—probably glass mayonnaise jars filled with random mixes of nuts, bolts, and screws.

About fifteen years later when I was rebuilding our deck, I found the source of an occasional leak into our basement—a broken plastic cover that was supposed to prevent rain, snowmelt, and roof drainage from entering a window well. After muttering about poor design, shoddy workmanship, and the cheap, brittle plastic, I thought to myself, “I should go to a home center in Enfield or West Springfield to see what I can find to make the repair. I didn’t want to buy another junky plastic cover and there wasn’t enough space to use exterior plywood and roll roofing. What I really needed—but did not expect to find—was a wide, sturdy, and flexible piece of sheet metal that would not rust. Heavy gauge aluminum would be ideal, but I knew roof flashing was only 18” wide. Just then the proverbial light bulb went on. I got the dusty roll of sheet metal down from the barn rafters and the 80-year-old tin snips inherited from my grandfather (via you-know-who) out of the bottom of an old toolbox. Ten minutes later, the permanent waterproof cover was in place and, with a combination of love, appreciation, and embarrassment, I also remembered what my father said ...juxtaposed with the following quote attributed to Mark Twain.

“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

As I was putting the remainder of the sheet metal back in the barn (in a more accessible place), I could not help but wish he brought me a bigger roll. It was six months after he died, but in describing the chain of events to my mother, brother, and son, we shared a happy and poignant “I told you so” memory. I thought of all he did for me ...and still do.

Later that summer I went to hardware store in town to buy a replacement tub for a wheelbarrow I had purchased there about 15 years earlier. It’s a family-owned, old fashioned store with a surprisingly large inventory and a huge assortment of loose hardware. By that I mean, you can buy any imaginable screw, bolt, nut, washer, or pin in whatever quantity you need. (No overpriced little plastic bags with too few pieces or giant containers of 500 to choose from. No searching high and low for a store employee ...to confirm they do not have what you need.) If you only need five sheet metal screws, just bring the old one along to match the diameter, length, and thread count. If you can’t find it, ask George or one of his employees ...or they will ask you (“Did you find what you need?”) if you dawdle too long in the narrow aisles. This small store is a monument to Yankee thrift, ingenuity and self-reliance and a time before problems were reflexively “solved” by disposal and replacement. The customer says ... “I’m trying to fix a _____” and the staff, especially George, wants in on the project and the challenge.

Here is a transcript of two noteworthy transactions.

Me: Hi George, how's it going? Can you order a new tub for one of the black metal wheelbarrows for me?

Owner [**George**]: No.

M: Why not?

G: Why do you want a new tub? Did it rust through?

M: Yeah ...I thought it was a little thin when I bought it, but I expected it to last longer.

G: Me too. I have the exact same wheelbarrow at home, and it rusted through. I fixed with fender washers.

M: How about ordering two tubs; one for me, one for you?

G: Can't do it. A replacement tub costs more than brand-new wheelbarrow. I've complained about it until I'm blue in the face. They won't budge, and neither will I until they lower the price.

M: Where are the fender washers?

G: Right side, halfway down, bottom row ...get the 5/16" by 1 1/2" diameter.

M: Thanks George. I'll see you in few weeks for some paint.

Five years later, 8 am, Saturday, Father's Day weekend, 2019

M: Hi George, how's it going? Can you order a new tub for one of the black metal wheelbarrows for me?

G: No. You should just go to the Evil Empire and buy a new wheelbarrow with a plastic tub.

M: Can't do it.

G: OK then, Aisle G, left side, bottom shelf ...get a roll of aluminum flashing and four more fender washers [he remembered the first repair job and correctly assumed I would be re-using the original washers on one side of the thin flashing].

M: Thanks for the tip, but I have some sheet aluminum from an old pool that my father saved for me.

G: That'll work even better. But you'll still want four more fender washers.

M: Thanks George. I'll see you in few weeks for some paint.

It's just a wheelbarrow—to move gravel, stone, soil, bark mulch, composted manure, firewood, and transplants. I really don't care what it looks like as long as it does the job. The manufacturer hoped I would leave it out in the rain so I would have to throw it away and buy a new one every ten years. Now, I am already more than ten years ahead of their [disposable society] game, with a customized [*sic*] one-of-a-kind wheelbarrow that will probably last as long as I do. It will need a squirt of oil on the axle from time to time. The wooden handles could use a coat of varnish the next time I have a little left over from another project. I could even get fancy and use up the tail end of spray paint cans on the outside of the tub. It was fun to fix it on Father's Day weekend with that "really good" sheet metal as an ad hoc tribute to my Dad.

So, if possible, find an old-school family hardware store. Buy some duct tape, 5-minute epoxy, waterproof wood glue, or machinists wire, as needed, and save some wire coat hangers (my Dad's favorite) for all kinds of creative repairs. Buy a dust mask, palm sander, wire brush, and good quality spray paint to refinish those nice old metal lawn chairs. (The tools and materials will cost less than one new chair and be ready for your next project.) Type "how do I repair a _____?" in the YouTube search box before you throw "_____" away. Since it is already broken you have nothing to lose by trying to fix it. Who knows, you might even astonish your children and grandchildren with how much you learn in the next seven years.

Furthermore, when you fix something you will have the satisfaction of avoiding unnecessary waste and environmental damage. You also will appreciate the "found" money—why not use it to help make the world a better place? (Hint: Trees!)

While reduce-reuse-recycle is an easy and memorable slogan, I think we should embrace the heavy-duty 1930s version — ***"use it up, wear it out, make do, do without"*** — that guided and sustained earlier generations.



2% Per Year List

1. Reusable shopping bags
2. Drive rationally
3. Don't "burn" electricity
4. Be frugal
5. Active Hope
6. Diligent recycling
7. Abhor food waste
8. Trees!
9. Composting
10. Fix things
- 11.