

And These Thy Gifts

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This is an essay about avoiding food waste—an important way to mitigate climate change.ⁱ When food is dumped in a landfill it rots and produces methane (CH₄), a very potent greenhouse gas. We'll begin with a “how to” list I developed from a number of sources and personal experience. My spouse and Creation Care partner, Donna, has used this commonsense approach for many years. I do too ...but her planning, decisions, diligence and skill makes it easy for me.

1. Take stock of what you have on hand (refrigerator, freezer and pantry) and plan meals before buying more food.
2. Make a shopping list, limit impulse buying, and carefully consider the net value of bulk purchases.
3. Store food properly, and carefully, to avoid spoilage and accidental waste.
4. Avoid preparing and serving American restaurant-sized (XL or XXL) portions.
5. Save—and make a deliberate point of eating—leftovers (e.g., take them for lunch). Freeze them if necessary.
6. Be creative with wilted vegetables (e.g., soup, stews, omelets) and overripe fruit (e.g., smoothies, baking).
7. Cut out unappetizing areas in fruit and vegetables and carefully use all of the “good” part.
8. Avoid clutter (i.e., unintentional microbiology experiments) in your refrigerator, freezer and pantry.
9. Treat expiration and sell-by dates as guidelines, not deadlines or imminent health threats.
10. Keep track of what you throw away or compost, to avoid repeating this form or type of food waste.

The remainder of this essay is a Lenten meditation on being thankful for the gifts we enjoy and mindful of the needs of others as the moral, ethical and spiritual foundation for the suite of actions listed above. Lent is an especially meaningful time for each of us—in our own way—to focus on minimizing food waste.

About 40% of the food that is produced and purchased in the U.S. is thrown away. This shocking statistic should inspire each of us to avoid any share of this appalling waste. How is such profligate waste possible? ...a major part of this Creation Care problem is the sheer abundance, ready availability, and reasonable cost of food. “Value is a function of scarcity” is the phrase economists and psychologists invariably cite as a key predictor of behavior. The imbalance between a seemingly limitless supply (typical American grocery store), choices to satisfy almost any whim, and the purchasing power of a dollar (relative to many other currencies in many other parts of the world) is a recipe [*sic*] for widespread food waste. Perhaps a centering prayer would help to break the cycle? “Grace” ...what a perfectly appropriate name.

Every faith tradition has a prayer to precede meals. Some add a prayer at the end of the meal. Most, if not all, pointedly refer to food and drink as “gifts” emanating from God or the Creator.ⁱⁱ In the formal Anglican tradition: “Bless, O Father, Thy gifts to our use and us to Thy service; for Christ's sake. Amen.” In the Roman Catholic tradition: “Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.” When I was a boy my mother made a point of having each family member say grace at suppertime at least once a week. We did so for many years to please her and show our appreciation for the meals she made (especially pies or brownies ...which you could see on the kitchen counter out of the corner of your eye if you needed divine inspiration). As teenagers, we said this prayer with all the feeling of a weary auctioneer—in a race to discharge our duty and begin eating. When this pattern emerged and proved impervious to correction, my mother wisely reclaimed the family responsibility, and with a measured, sincere and reverent tone tried to ensure the message was fully heard. At our kitchen table, my wife Donna always says grace and I must admit there are times when I need to be more fully present in this prayer. I *am* sincerely thankful for the quality, quantity, diversity and healthful nature of the gifts I receive on a daily basis ...but also know I could do more. For example, writing this reminds me to pause and add a silent grace before breakfast and lunch. Saying grace should be sufficient to make us mindful, thankful and diligent. However, I also must admit that the primary reason I abhor food waste has more utilitarian and experiential roots. I have come to regard this perspective to be a gift from my parents and am happy to note this legacy has been successfully transmitted to our children.

My mother was an excellent cook but every once in a while, she made something that one of my brothers or I *really* did not want to eat. My father was a mild-mannered, soft spoken man, yet he was ever alert to this attitude problem. At the slightest sign of dissatisfaction, he would invariably say ... “when you get hungry enough, you'll eat it and be glad to have it.” We were expected to clean our plates and did so—this was not negotiable with our parents, grandparents, aunts, even indulgent uncles. We knew, in principle, that wasting food was a sin. We also thought to ourselves “when I grow up, I'm only going to eat what I like.” It never crossed our minds that there might be a time when we would not have enough to eat. It's funny, 50 years later I can remember a long list of favorite meals but only one thing I really loathed — liver. I now know that my father was right, and I would, in fact, eat liver (...after 30 days on a life raft in the North Atlantic).

Several times a week we were told there were millions of people in China and India who would love to have a fraction of what we ate every single day. The terrible famines of the 1960s clearly upset my parents but were distant and incomprehensible events to three young boys. Then again, I was pretty sure that kids in China or India didn't play outside in the snow all day. So they probably didn't need to eat (1) a large bowl of oatmeal with milk and brown sugar, two pieces of buttered toast and orange juice for breakfast, (2) a bowl of cream of tomato soup, about 10 or 15 saltines, one or two grilled cheese sandwiches, an apple or banana, three homemade cookies, and one or two large glasses of whole milk for lunch, (3) some kind of snack at 3 or 4 pm when you came inside to take off the third and final set of wet clothes and were not allowed to go out again, then (4) dinner at about 6 pm ...some kind of potatoes, beef, pork or chicken (fish or pancakes on Fridays), a vegetable, a salad, two large glasses of whole milk, and a homemade dessert. If you looked pathetic enough, had growing pains in your legs (...from drinking a half gallon of whole milk), or both ...you could (5) have a bowl of corn flakes, Wheaties or Cheerios before you brushed your teeth and went to bed (*"Honestly ...you would think we didn't feed you (and/or) ...do you think we're made out of money?"*). I'm now quite sure that as a 70-lb, 10-year-old boy I was consuming as many calories as three or four construction workers in China or India (...then and now).

We cleaned our plates and thanked our mother, but my father, Ted (born in 1922), took it to extremes. A few grains of rice, a few drops of salad dressing, a few crumbs or sesame seeds ...if he could see it, no amount effort was spared to eat it. With a piece of bread—carefully saved for the end of any meal with sauce, gravy or broth—his plate was cleaned to the molecular level. As a know-it-all-teenager I was certain this tedious operation was completely unnecessary. Now I'm certain there were *many* times (as a child and in the US Army during World War II) when he did not have enough to eat. He generally knew where his next meal was coming from. As child and a teenager, it was the kitchen table of a German immigrant family of seven in a cramped, cold-water flat. From late-June 1944 (when his field artillery unit landed in Normandy) until May 1945—through France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia to V-E Day—it was a K-ration or a rock-hard chocolate bar from his musette bag or whatever the cooks would sling into your mess kit and ladle into your canteen cup as you shuffled through the chow line.ⁱⁱⁱ He might not have known what and when his next meal would be, but as a kid during the Great Depression and a soldier during the winter of 1944-45 he knew, with certainty, that he would be hungry almost all the time.



Fishing, camping and canoe trips inspired my father to new heights of plate cleaning. Sleeping on the ground in a canvas tent with a tarp and an Army blanket, and eating hash, beans, stew, rye bread, and boiled potatoes made the mid-1960s seem like the mid-1940s. Any hesitation with gooey, burnt pancakes or scrambled eggs garnished with campfire ash was met with the usual refrain ... supplemented with “What’s the matter, not good enough for you?” and a little laugh.

- | 2% Per Year List | |
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| 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. | |

About ten years later (1978) I was sitting in wet snow during field training at Fort A.P. Hill in northern Virginia. It had been a full week of “infantry [hypothermia] weather” and we’d been getting one C-ration a day—green cans in a little box, totaling 1,200 calories. They were made in 1953 for the Korean War (...and loaded with preservatives).

At least half of our 175-man company had bad colds, and a few people had been medevac'd with immersion foot or the flu. None of us had any dry socks left or could feel our feet. Our first sergeant knew we weren't going to last much longer without some hot chow. So, without any of the proper requisition forms he “persuaded” the cooks at the post mess hall to bring out some real food. With cold rain dripping off my helmet on the grey and white haute cuisine in my mess kit and into the lukewarm coffee in my canteen cup, I clearly heard my father say ... “when you get hungry enough, you’ll eat it and be glad to have it.” I did ...I was ...and I’ve never thought about food the same way again. I related [confessed] this event to him while home on leave and we shared a little laugh. He never said, “I told you so.” Our shared experience rendered it completely unnecessary.

Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ © January 2020

ⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_\(prayer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_(prayer))

ⁱⁱⁱ A rifle squad from the 347th Infantry Regiment, US Army, La Roche, Belgium, January 13, 1945 (Library of Congress)