

DIFFERENT  
NOTIONS  
OF  
THRIFTINESS

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Everybody believes in saving something. Most people save money – for themselves or their children – even though some are spendthrift or wasteful, and others are penny-pinching. But what’s peculiar is each person’s sense of thriftiness in small matters.

I consider myself money-minded, and hardly ever buy expensive clothes, for instance, or other luxury items for myself. Yet I never pay any attention to prices of food at the supermarket (I guess because we don’t have a family), nor do I remember what I paid if asked. Richard, on the other hand, always looks at grocery prices and often goes out of his way to compare them and buy something at a lower cost. He also watches for rebates or coupons for special bargains from

newspapers and magazines (although not as assiduously as some people), while I never notice them at all. However, illegal or not, I save uncanceled stamps from envelopes (bothering to unglue them), and open unwanted charity mail to save and reuse their stamped envelopes! I also save used large envelopes, padded ones in particular (and so does Richard).

Independently of our different attitude towards food prices, Richard and I are almost the opposite in our feeling towards leftovers. I never throw any away (“because of the millions of hungry people”), whereas he would do it unhesitatingly if I didn’t fuss – but not as much as most Americans. The waste of food in this country, especially in restaurants where they now serve

enormous portions, is shocking to me. We always save leftovers for the next day, and I'll even wrap and put in the frig half a baked potato or a few green beans that one of us has not eaten. Richard claims that I keep old food until it gets bad and then we have to throw it out; but I know that I usually eat it and hardly ever forget something unless it gets pushed back in the frig and out of sight. I just can't stand throwing away anything, above all food. I guess I am more saving in resources than in actual money.

I am particularly parsimonious with paper, even from before the days of environmental consciousness and recycling. I save any unused paper napkins from restaurants or airplanes. I consume as few paper towels as possible, drying and

reusing the clean ones for further kitchen tasks (such as cleaning up the sink after evening dish washing); and I set aside the slightly dirty pieces for floor spatters or for wiping a greasy frying pan before washing it. To the contrary, our cleaning woman squanders wads of paper towel for a variety of jobs, and Richard thinks nothing of grabbing one or several pieces merely to wipe some water splashed on the counter. (In fact, the wasting of paper towel is one of our regular trivial subjects of arguing.) I am specially pained by the unbelievable waste of paper towels in every public toilet nowadays, as if nobody has read about rampant deforestation.

I wash and reuse as well pieces of aluminum foil that are in good condition (and sometimes even save

Saran wrap!). Not to mention all the plastic baggies that I rinse and use repeatedly, unless they become greasy or smelly, whereas most people throw them away with no second thought. I naturally recycle or keep and use for trash any plastic bags from shopping, and save cleaners' bags for drop-cloths or dust-covers (although I don't store as many piles of plastic bags as Marianne does). Yet, to make cleaning up easier for me, I waste aluminum foil by always broiling on it and covering all our oven trays with layers of it. On the other hand, scouring the broiler pan uses up so much water and detergents...

Coming back to paper, I save every scrap and cut it up for note paper, from half sheets to small rectangles for little notes or lists;

and I scribble as many memos as possible on every single sticky. But I am not as bad as Margaret who writes her poems on the back of type-written pages, or Ellen who for notes used to cut into small pieces almost every blank square inch of throw-out typescripts or junk mail.

Another constant subject of minor friction between Richard and me in terms of thriftiness is electricity. He scolds me every time I leave on my studio lights or, more frequently, a bulb and a fan in the bathroom. (Marianthe, of course, is fanatic about turning off lights and prefers to live in semi-darkness – although in Greece electricity is indeed more expensive.) I claim, as I read in O’Neil’s last play where father and son had the same

argument, that a bulb left on day and night uses minimal electricity, probably less than one spends on bulbs by turning them on and off. And our bathrooms have no windows, so they do need the fans for airing. Richard insists that all this is not a matter of cost, but of wasting energy, while I fuss about his waste of energy in air-conditioning, which I find unnecessary most of the summer – and actually unpleasant at the high level that most places have it set, even when it is not hot outside. I hate hotels and office buildings with fixed windows that condemn you to their polluted air-conditioned atmosphere and don’t allow you to freshen the room with outdoor air. Some hotels fasten their windows for good these days under the pretext of saving

energy, so that careless people can’t leave both the windows open and the AC on.

Speaking of amenities, waste of water is another subject of debate. Richard claims that I consume more water (and energy too) by washing the plastic baggies in order to reuse them – and he is probably right. Actually, I don’t do it to save money, but to prevent more pollution of the Earth (which is being swamped in plastic bags). Yet, by washing them, I waste clean water that depletes the Earth’s diminishing water supplies. I now do try to turn off the shower while I soap myself, or the sink faucet while I scrub dishes, or run the garbage disposal while rinsing glasses. And we try to pee one after the other in the same toilet to avoid flushing twice

(without leaving pee stinking in the toilet, as Oberlin students do!). Still, I cannot claim that I am careful enough. Marianthe on the other hand goes to the extreme of collecting the water from dish-washing to pour it in her potted plants, or even in the toilet instead of flushing – which she does in principle, to save money, rather than from awareness of the Earth’s increasing water shortage. In general, people in poorer countries who have grown up lacking in facilities are much less wasteful in resources than we are in the U.S.

Another saving peculiarity in most people regards the cost of gasoline – and not only recently when prices have soared. I can understand this in European countries where gasoline is so

exorbitantly expensive, or for persons who own expensive cars or more than one. But our small Subaru is among the most economical, yet Richard refuses to buy gasoline in an expensive area, and will go for miles, risking running out of gas, to compare prices in different stations and settle for the one that sells for a couple of cents cheaper per gallon. He actually is often fussy in comparing prices of other items in stores, and loves taking advantage of sales. He sometimes even buys clothing that he doesn’t need just because it is on sale! On the other hand, he does not think twice about spending four or five dollars for a bouquet of flowers (or even two) every time he shops for food, or coming back with several bottles of potentially

interesting wine whenever he goes to a wine tasting – although he definitely cannot resist them when they are good deals. He is hardly unique in this respect: obviously the public loves bargains, or else there would not be as many discount stores or “special sales”, and people would not buy so massively on the Net or struggle to get frequent flier miles for free travel.

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