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An Environmental Ritual for Our Times

By Frank Ackerman

I'll begin with a confession: I worked for ten years at an environmental research group in Boston. Not only did we study recycling, we also had our own in-house paper recycling program. There was plenty of paper to recycle: In the course of our research, we were constantly receiving, reviewing, and creating documents; after their short useful life was ended, we had to remove most of this paper to make room for the next project. Like most of the staff, I kept a recycling bin close to my desk.

For many years, our recycling program accepted only white office paper. Fax paper, colored paper, glossy advertising, and other types of paper had to be thrown out. From time to time we received elaborate reports with colored-paper inserts or chapter dividers between the white-paper text sections. When I was done with such reports, I usually removed the staples or tore apart the binding, separated and discarded the colored pages, and recycled the remaining white paper. But one day, rushing to meet a deadline on an important project I was managing, I tossed an entire small publication, printed on mixed colors of paper, into the trash.

Minutes later, as luck would have it, a friend who was working on the same project came into my office. Almost immediately, she spotted the publication I had just thrown out, scowled, and pulled it out of my trash can. "I thought you believed in recycling," she said sadly, as she began ripping out the colored pages so that the remaining white pages could be recovered.

Like my co-worker and me, millions of people do believe in recycling and act on that belief on a regular basis. "In the first week in November 1992, more adults took part in recycling than voted," says Jerry Powell, editor of Resource Recycling magazine. The same will undoubtedly be true in November 1996. Recycling, according to Powell, is "more popular than democracy."

Both the extent of recycling and the speed of its expansion are remarkable. By 1994 there were more than 7,200 curbside recycling collection programs in the United States, serving more than 40 percent of the population; virtually all of these programs were less than six years old. In addition to curbside collection, materials are also recovered through countless drop-off centers, commercial and office programs, and other channels. One study estimated that 21 percent of all municipal solid waste was recycled or composted in 1992, up from 10 percent just seven years earlier.

Why do we recycle? Rarely is there a monetary reward. In most towns, no one pays you to put out your recyclables at the curb. Our office recycling program did not pay us for the documents we saved from the trash can. We do it because we consider it worthwhile to reduce the need for landfilling, or to save energy and materials. In short, we recycle because we believe it is the right thing to do, because it is good for the environment.

In an era of cutbacks and conservatism, recycling is an impressively pure and widespread form of altruism, a commitment to the greater good. In one sense, such altruistic public behavior seems out of

step with the 1990s, as individualistic, selfish voices have increasingly shaped the contemporary discussion of economic policy. But it is a mistake to regard recycling solely as an economic policy. The commitment to recycling actually echoes another trend of the times, as moralism and professions of faith have become more and more prominent in social and political debate.

Recycling as Religion

Suppose that we view recycling as akin to a religious practice, an organized expression of widely held ecological values. The language and symbolism of recycling support this view. Like the routinized ritual observances that characterize most religions, curbside recycling provides the opportunity for the weekly offering and collection. After collection there is the modern miracle of transubstantiation, as old packages and papers come to life again. In states that have deposits on beverage containers, it is common to speak of the process of redemption.

The image of recycling as religion pervades the news media. "Boston has been slow among cities and towns," said the Boston Globe, "to get religion on curbside recycling, but starting this morning the administration is pursuing its new trash program with all the zeal of a convert." A Wall Street Journal article, titled "Curbside Recycling Comforts the Soul, But Benefits Are Scant," observed that recycling "makes people feel good. For many, a little trash sorting has become a form of penance to acknowledge that the values of our high-consumption society don't always nurture the soul."

Those who do get religion, the true believers, often display intense commitment to a higher objective, even at the cost of considerable personal effort. I know someone who drives back and forth across the Bay Area in California to find recycling centers that accept small quantities of hard-to-recycle household goods. The environmental damage she does by driving so far almost certainly exceeds the good she does by recycling a little more. I've heard more than one story of domestic conflict, in households that already recycle all the big, easy things, about the urgency of reusing or recycling a few additional items. Often, when people hear that I am studying recycling, they ask my permission to throw out one or another marginally reusable or recyclable product. I am not alone, it seems, in wanting to confess my sins in this area.

Recycling as religion arises from shared values; its public rituals reaffirm those values. But the ecological beliefs that form the basis for this behavior are complex and many-faceted. What accounts for the emphasis on recycling in particular? Despite studying it professionally for several years, I find it hard to argue that waste management is our most urgent environmental problem. At most, it is one among many issues that clamor for our attention. Other problems pose more serious threats to our well-being than the disposal of solid waste.

What distinguishes recycling is not its importance, but rather the ease with which individuals can participate, and the visibility of actions taken to promote the common good. You may care passionately about the threat of global warming or the destruction of the rain forests - but you can't have an immediate, perceptible effect on these problems. When a 1990 Gallup poll asked people what they had done in connection with environmental problems, 80 to 85 percent answered that they or their households had participated in various facets of recycling; a majority of respondents had taken no other significant action.

If Recycling Is the Answer, What Is the Question?

The years of the most rapid growth in recycling - the early 1990s - were also the years in which the most popular justification for recycling vanished. In all but the most densely populated parts of the country, it became dear that there was no immediate landfill crisis. The false alarm in the 1980s was due, in part, to a simple error: Data on landfills are sparse, and many early accounts merely compared the numbers of landfills closing and opening each year, without considering their size. Since huge numbers of small landfills are closing, while small numbers of huge ones are opening, there have even been increases in disposal capacity in some states.

Nor, unfortunately, does recycling reliably save money for municipalities - that is, it does not always reduce total waste-management costs compared to the alternative of throwing everything in the trash. In my forthcoming book, Why Do We Recycle? Markets, Values, and Public Policies, I estimate that an average curbside recycling program reduced municipal costs by $5 per household in 1995, when material prices were unusually high, and increased costs by $21 per household in 1993, when prices were low. Thus the average program seems to fluctuate from year to year between a small municipal cost increase and an even smaller municipal cost savings.

Despite these limitations, which are noisily pointed out by conservative critics of recycling, large and growing numbers of people continue to act as if they think that recycling is worthwhile. In response, should we try to persuade people that enthusiasm for recycling is a mistake, that it is time to go home and learn to love garbage disposal? Or should we look beyond the trash can for a more complex picture of the motivations for continued recycling, even in the absence of a crisis?

The issues of garbage and recycling have become part of contemporary culture, and even appear in recent fiction. In the novel Closing Time, Joseph Heller's sequel to Catch-22, the aging and somewhat hypochondriacal John Yossarian attempts to convince his doctors that, despite the lack of visible evidence, he is actually desperately ill. Yossarian's mind wanders freely from personal to social ills, among which garbage is quite prominent: "Another oil tanker had broken up. There was radiation. Garbage. Pesticides, toxic waste, and free enterprise." Later, Yossarian yearns to persuade another doctor that the universe is unreliable and depressing, since "there were holes in the ozone, they were running out of room for the disposal of garbage, burn the garbage and you contaminate the air, they were running out of air."

Taken literally, Yossarian's seemingly global grievances reveal the local origins of the book. The novel is set, to the extent that it occurs in any recognizable locale, in New York City; Joseph Heller lives on Long Island. These are among the areas where the landfill crisis remains most acute (or will be, when the city's huge Fresh Kills landfill closes), and where incineration, as an alternative to landfilling, has been most actively and controversially promoted. In a story written from, or about, another part of the country, Yossarian would have a different list of complaints.

On a deeper level, Yossarian's plight is an appropriate image even for non-New Yorkers. He is sure that something is wrong, and that garbage is somehow involved. He is unsure whether it is an individual physical malady or a social or environmental malaise. He is desperately and unsuccessfully seeking the advice of experts in diagnosing the problem. Outside the hospital, Milo Minderbinder, the endlessly entrepreneurial quartermaster of Catch-22, is still prospering in the marketplace by knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. Although Yossarian goes to work for Minderbinder's vast enterprise, he is never quite satisfied, always looking for something more mysterious and meaningful in life.

The Ethics of Sufficiency and the Dignity of the Future

There is nothing mysterious about the meaning and value of recycling, even in the absence of a landfill crisis or an immediate opportunity for profit. Waste disposal is not the whole story; a stronger case for recycling rests on its benefits in resource use and manufacturing. The products we buy and discard are made by industry, and the process of manufacturing most goods has far greater environmental impacts - for example, much greater toxic emissions - than disposal of the same things in modern landfills. Recycling is good for the environment because making almost anything out of recycled material causes lower industrial emissions than making the same thing out of virgin material. Using less stuff in the first place is even better for the environment than recycling.

Recycling and waste reduction also minimize the use of irreplaceable natural resources. Paper, in theory, can be made from trees grown on sustainable, carefully managed tree plantations; so far, this possibility has escaped the attention of much of the forest-products industry. Metals cannot be grown; burying them in landfills reduces the useable supply of metals for posterity. Plastics, interestingly enough, could be made on a sustainable basis from renewable materials derived from plants, but so far this possibility has escaped the attention of everyone but a few scientists. Plastics today continue to be made from nonrenewable fossil fuels.

The widespread commitment to recycling rests in no small part on the belief that we must conserve materials for future generations. And this belief, in turn, suggests a broader set of questions about our relationship to material accumulation in the present. The endless pursuit of more consumer goods and services is neither ecologically sustainable nor personally satisfying. While it is important to recognize that a majority of the world's population, and a sizable minority within the developed countries, suffer real material deprivation, it is equally important to see that the majority of us in the richer countries already have enough. This does not mean that we have solved all our economic problems. Almost all of us are to varying degrees "deprived" of economic security, meaningful work, creative leisure, public services, and a healthy environment but to raise such issues is already to leave the paradigm of private consumption behind. Most of us are not deprived of food, shelter, fashionable clothing, or consumer electronics. Indeed, seeking to satiate social deprivations through individual consumption keeps us on a treadmill of rising expenditure but stagnant satisfaction.

To create a sustainable future, it will be necessary to act on the understanding that there is such a thing as "enough," and that many of our remaining needs must be addressed through social change rather than private spending. Growth of incomes and consumption will remain desirable for those who are really poor; meanwhile, the increasing numbers who are not poor will need to develop an appreciation of sufficiency in private consumption. Although it is hard to see how to get there from here, arriving at stability in levels of consumption could be a liberating experience.

A life of moderation, avoiding the extremes of either obsessive competition and accumulation on the one hand, or material deprivation on the other, could provide the freedom to pursue social goals and personal self-development, as Jerome M. Segal argued recently in these pages (see "The Politics of Simplicity," TIKKUN, July/August 1996). Surely the good life entails the development of many human capabilities, including an awareness of and connection to our social and environmental context. The urge to recycle may be viewed as evidence of that extended connection, a statement of responsiveness and responsibility toward one's surroundings.

Participation in recycling is, in addition to its more literal purposes, a ritual of environmental belief. It is all the more valuable for being one of the few rituals that is shared widely throughout an increasingly fragmented society. Rituals at worst become empty forms, at best renew our dedication to a much greater common purpose; recycling as ritual of environmental commitment is no different in this regard.

A narrow, market-oriented critique of recycling is being heard with increasing frequency. The Milo Minderbinders of the world have concluded that recycling cannot make an immediate profit, and are ready to abandon it and move on. Yet the fundamental reason to reject the free-market critique is that neither the motivation for recycling nor the environmental benefits it provides can be measured in dollars and cents. As the philosopher Mark Sagoff has observed, the things we value most, such as love, religion, and preservation of our natural and cultural heritage, have a dignity rather than a price. Recycling is one small but valuable step toward a more dignified future.

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