

Of Rags and Bags

I've had a lifelong affinity for frugality and the quirky habits that go along with squeezing every possible bit of value out of what I own. I cut tooth paste tubes in half and scoop out the remains. Some of my clothes are very old, and lately, I've quit tossing used tea bags into my compost pile because I've found a way to give them value. Using up and re-using defines me, I guess,

Maybe it's because I grew up in the suburbs of London before and after World War II when scarcity was a fact of life. Or maybe it's in my DNA, inherited from an English grandmother who was widowed young and raised four children on practically nothing. "I'm a widow with four children," she would explain to sales clerks, always with the expectation of a lower price for her purchase. Whatever it is, I think it satisfies something deep inside me to see how long an item can remain useful and to figure out new ways to use things that would otherwise meet their end in the trash heap.

When my mom married an American businessman working in London, he took her to meet his family in New York for their honeymoon. Because my mother spoke so vividly about it, I can picture her even now, in the kitchen of my American grandparents' high-rise apartment, watching horrified as my grandmother dropped a dozen egg yolks down the drain in the course of making an angel food cake.

In the post-war years, eggs were so scarce that when my dad traveled from London to the Netherlands on business, he brought home, on the boat and by train, twelve dozen eggs. They were placed carefully into a bucket of gelatinous goo called water glass that preserved them for a long time. We treasured those eggs, sharing some with our neighbors, and making the rest last as long as possible.

Several years ago I bought my son Jeff a birthday card that was so funny that I didn't sign it. Instead I wrote him a note on a separate piece of paper suggesting that because this was such a great card, I wasn't going to mess it up by signing it. He could use it to send to someone else. In a few days it came back to me with "consider it used" scribbled across it. I saved it and sent it to him for his birthday the next winter. The next summer, he sent it back to me--and on it went for ten years.

My love affair with compost is related to my penchant for making things do double duty. I get a kick out of depositing food scraps in a corner of my yard and watching them, with the help of worms, weather, and a little water, turn into a nutritious, aerating addition to my garden. That which once had no value, in time, becomes something of value.

I still own a red nylon windbreaker that has been part of my wardrobe for fifty-seven years. A relic of my learning-to-ski days in Seattle, it was given to me by my parents when I was thirteen. Back then, a ski day including bus ride, tow ticket and lesson cost eight bucks. My jacket, I admit, is a little worse for wear. A yellowed shoelace replaces the original drawstring for the hood. Seams gap open here and there, causing little wisps of fraying red fabric to dangle from a sleeve and a shoulder. On the pocket flap, I prize the small holes where tow tickets were once stapled. I never removed a single ticket, letting them pile up, one on top of the other, proud reminders that I was indeed a skier.

I wore my jacket, not long ago, on a wintry bicycle ride. Good thing I wore Old Red, I said to myself as the wind came swooshing low along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. I keep this jacket because it still keeps me warm, and also, I think, because it brings back memories of those early days on the slopes of Snoqualmie Pass that kindled in me a lifelong passion for the outdoors and honestly earned exhaustion. By now, my jacket has a long history, and is, perhaps, on the way to becoming a personal legend.

When I moved with my family from Seattle to Philadelphia at age sixteen, my jacket went inactive. There were no ski slopes nearby and my lame attempt to play lacrosse on a high school team did not require a windbreaker. After graduation I spent four years in college in the middle of Ohio where ski slopes were an even more remote dream. My jacket languished in the back of my dorm room closet and my only exercise was walking the mile from the dorm to campus and back again.

I had a chance to ski again when I married and moved to Boulder, Colorado. My jacket served me well in the years that followed as I clung to one wobbling small child after another snowplowing down bunny slopes clutched in a "V" formed by my screaming thighs.

Soon nylon wind breakers were eclipsed by down, Gortex, polypropylene and polar fleece. Where a heavy sweater under a windbreaker was once sufficient, now it seemed you needed a "system" consisting of several layers of just the right kind of wicking, waffled, wind resistant fabric.

The kids grew up and went off to ski on their own and I took up different sports. I sweated up Pikes Peak and down the Grand Canyon on my two feet and from Iowa to Maine on two skinny wheels. Like an old friend, my jacket stuck with me.

I never gave a thought to getting rid of Old Red until I was presented with a stylish red fleece pullover at a marathon in Steamboat Springs, Colorado in 2000. Here was some worthy competition for my oldest piece of clothing that by now had arrived at the half-century mark. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to relegate my frayed red rag to the dumpster, or even the Goodwill pile. We have too many memories together. So I keep my grand old rag, a symbol of good times and some would say irrational frugality.

I try not to let my "hang onto it" propensities get the best of me. I like to think of myself as a minimalist--as someone who keeps only what is needed and useful. I believe collecting stuff for its own sake is a disease with dire consequences--frustration, outrageous consumption of valuable time, inefficiency and often full-blown depression. I have friends who have been trying to pare down their possessions ever since I've known them, all the while shopping away which compounds their dilemma.

I love these friends, and I think I understand them. The hardest things to get rid of, next to the things you think you might need one day, are things that have been given to you by a good friend, things that conjure up fond memories, trigger a story or recall a wedding, vacation or accomplishment. How can you throw away the chipped pottery bowl a son made in kindergarten or the blurry black and white photos your uncle took in Singapore?

Every toss requires a painful decision, one we may never be ready to make. Despite my determination to give new life to twisty ties, rubber bands, old shoelaces and yogurt containers, two things help me to toss when it's time. I moved a lot when I was a kid and I live in a very small house. Moving forces one into the throw-out mode. The need for living space does the same.

I used to throw away my used tea bags without a twinge of guilt. I drink lots of tea. I grew up with a mom who believed that a cup of tea could cure anything-- sore throats, stomach aches, hypothermia--even insomnia. Every day two or three bags ended up in my compost pile. I can't believe that for so long I did such a stupid wasteful thing.

These days I keep my tea bags and beg my friends to save theirs. Rejuvenating tea bags has become my passion--one that satisfies my "re-use" gene and feeds a wary, ever-lurking entrepreneurial bent as well.

I started making tea bag art when I fell in love with a design on a used tea bag glued to a note card I received. The greeting read, "Once filled with tea...Now filled with love." One day in a fit of faux creativity, I slashed open a Celestial Seasonings tea bag I'd soaked to extinction, and shook out the soggy contents. A slightly stained square of porous fabric pinched together at the edges by a tiny serrated border remained, dangling from my fingers.

Please know that I earned a "C" in art every year I was in school until I didn't have to take art any more. Even so, I possess some limited skills with a pen which includes making very small dots and drawing lines.

What I do with tea bags, glitter and paint, is not art, but it is *something*--craft, dogged perseverance, procrastination from more onerous tasks--I don't know. What I know is that I can spend hours designing and creating artsy little squares and rectangles that look surprisingly pleasant mounted on a note card and surrounded by a simple gold or black inked frame. Sometimes I add words like, "Old Bags are Best," "Old tea bags never die. They just get dressed up," or "Happy Bag Day."

I began to experiment with different kinds of bags. Celestial Seasonings seemed the best choice as they are unencumbered by staples and strings and are a convenient, square shape. But I discovered that stringed and stapled bags work just as well. Some bags come to me after a week or so in a plastic bag, vaguely smelly and beginning to mold. The stains on these aged bags inspire abstract designs. The first time I saw pink bags, stained by hibiscus or red zinger tea, I was ready to reject them. But I found that the deep pink provides a dramatic background for black and silver markings.

Finding enough raw materials has been my most pressing issue. Some people just don't take me seriously when I ask them to save tea bags. Others forget. I made a foray into my compost pile to see if I could rescue a few bags. No luck. Tea bags disappear quickly, probably a special treat for worms.

I've sold enough "oldbags" so that I now have a few coins to keep me supplied with blank notes, glitter, markers and glue. But I'll never be able to drink enough tea to supply my

needs. I may resort to begging at restaurants. Meanwhile, there are *no* bags flying out my back door into the compost pile, and I'm consuming more tea than I ever have in all my life.

It's easy to exchange money (if you have enough) for new clothes or for printed note cards. But I think I'll go on using and re-using, hanging on to my old clothes and saving tea bags to make note cards. And maybe, in some small way, the world will be a better place.