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COMMENTARY: Let's stop squandering our future and stop wasting resources

From fresh produce to old clothes, why an old adage is still good advice

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A Nicaraguan boy picks through garbage for something salvageable. - Hermes Rivera / Unsplash

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By Allison Petrie

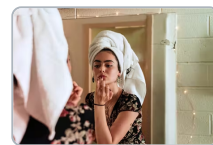
"Waste not, want not," a saying first recorded four and a half centuries ago, is anything but dated; in fact, it's in need of urgent attention.

We generally acknowledge that we are a wasteful society and are now coming to grips with the consequences. We have a lot to answer for, considering the love and respect shown for natural resources under the stewardship of Canada's Indigenous peoples. Shamefully, the irony of our current situation is that Indigenous communities are among those most seriously impacted by our mismanagement.

Garbage has always given me a sense of alarm, if not futility. Walking back and forth to school as a kid, garbage day activated the overwhelming sense that our town, and possibly the whole world, was out of control when it came to garbage disposal. Twenty-six weeks of the year, a whole town deposited truckloads of waste at a landfill site. So did all the other towns and cities in the province and the country as a whole. Who knew what was happening throughout the rest of the world? At what point would we run out of room for garbage?

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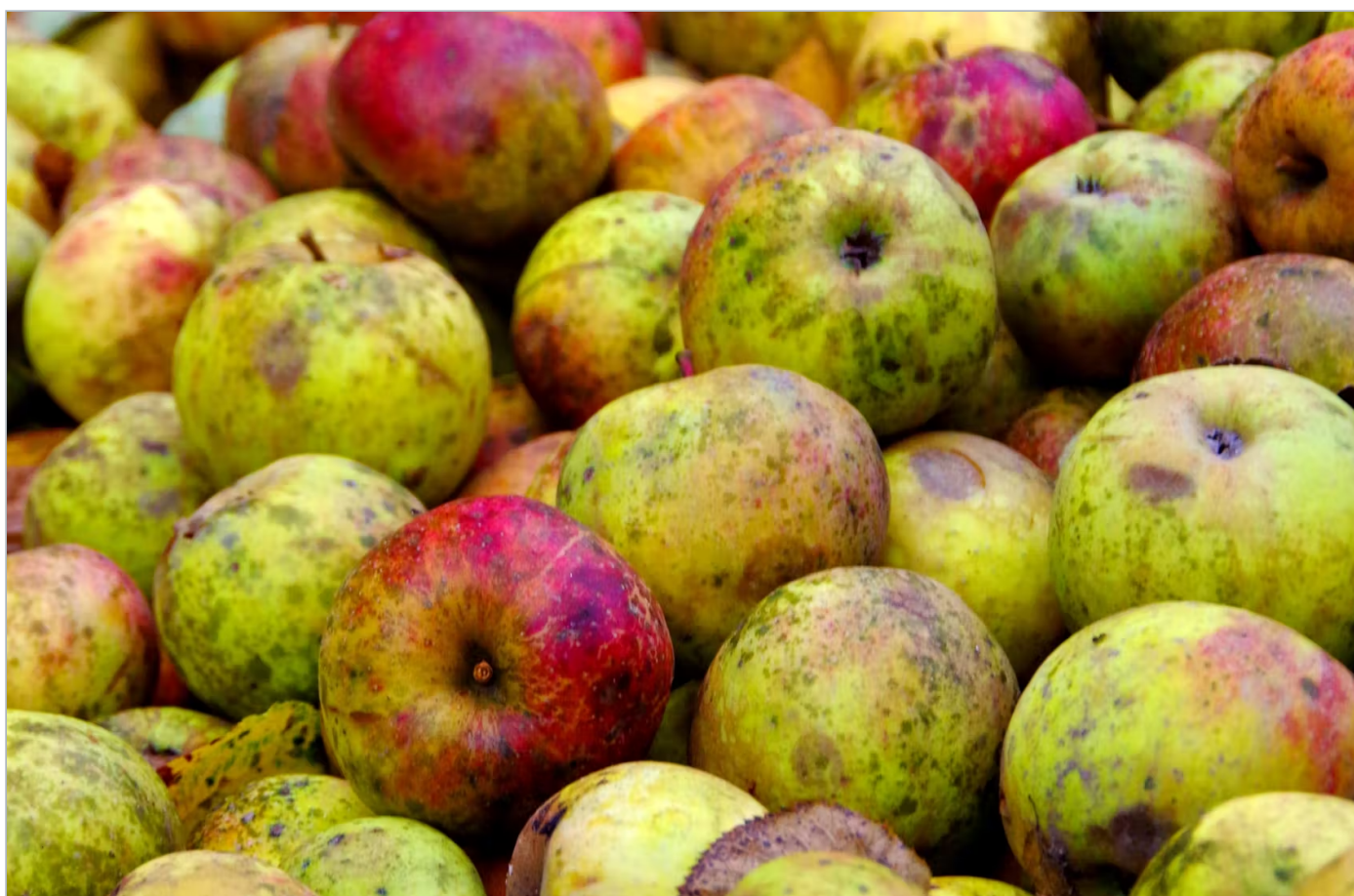


The essential question that bothered me as a kid is still unanswered. Landfill capacity is a worrisome issue, to the point where launching garbage into space is not just a matter of speculation.

The very children whose future we are endangering are showing us how this is done...

Those of an older generation can recall when our parents told us to “waste not, want not.” They knew the truth of their words in their bones, speaking with conviction from the lived reality of two World Wars and a Depression. It was an expression of faith and hope — the least one could do to secure the future.

I recall my mother being given worn-out coats to take apart and refashion into smaller ones for us. Her creativity was amazing. Similarly, food economy meant that summer produce was preserved for winter, leftovers became delicious soups, and bits and pieces of bread were transformed into sweet puddings. I know there are still some who practise these habits, but consider how many unused items from your refrigerator end up in your garbage bin, unless you compost.



So much still-edible food is wasted, without being composted. - Emma Van Sant / Unsplash

Are we encouraged today to maintain vigilance about food waste? When we consider the availability of fresh produce from all sectors of the globe, the convenience of frozen products, the aggressive marketing of fast-food chains and delivery services, we must admit that, generally speaking, we are challenged when it comes to an awareness of and respect for food conservation.

Watching our waste

Each country has its own story to tell about the complex web of food waste and the associated environmental impacts. In Canada, research reported on household food waste in 2022 by the National Zero Waste Council revealed the astonishing result that 63 per cent of the food Canadians throw away could have been eaten. It was reported that for the average Canadian household that amounts to 140 kilograms of wasted food per year — at a cost of more than \$1,300 per year! This in a country where Food Secure Canada estimates that almost 2.5 million Canadians live without secure access to food.

It's not just about food, though. Consider also the squandering of the human time and energy used in producing the food, the resources of land, water and fertilizer, fuel for machinery and the transportation of food, and other capital costs.

This squandering also impacts our environment in many ways, including deforestation and greenhouse gases emissions, an analysis of which may be found in the 2021 summary report of the United Nations Environment Program, *Food Wastage Footprint: Impacts on Natural Resources*.

The introduction of recycling has offered hope for the future, including protection of the natural ecosystem and the maintenance of a stable global economy, making more circular the former “take,” “make,” “use,” and “dispose” linear paradigm.



“At what point will we run out of room for garbage?” Allison Petrie asks. - Bakhrom Tursunov / Unsplash

Recycling corruption

The addition of “recyclable” as a category in waste-management systems ensures that we organize our waste accordingly into the appropriately coloured plastic bag, to be whisked out of sight and out of mind. However, recycling — dubbed by author Adam Minter as “the New Global Garage Sale” — isn’t happening as we may naively suppose. There are bureaucratic, technical and economic barriers, explored by Italian academic Alessio Amato in an editorial, “The Circular Economy Challenge,” but also the perhaps inevitable corruption. When you feel up to watching some disturbing evidence of this, if you haven’t already, check out the April 20, 2022 edition of “The Fifth Estate’s” exploration of Canadian recycling companies caught shipping illegal, unsorted household waste to developing countries.

Alarming statistics about the billions of tonnes of garbage accumulating in landfill sites and oceans may be difficult to relate to, but not the graphic images of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and the beaches of other continents littered by our used clothing and plastic waste. The waste depicted in this documentary footage includes the further waste of opportunity for quality of life, good health

and a sense of personal dignity for the women in India, for example, who desperately attempt to earn a living, at the equivalent of about three dollars a day, sorting our waste for what might be salvageable, and Indonesian children who clean up plastic litter that originated here.

Activism is key

Yes, we waste resources and products as individuals and as a society: food, agricultural land rezoned for housing developments, and species through over-harvesting and destruction of ecosystems. Considering the total picture, including the associated pollution and climate change, we are also wasting that most precious commodity: time. The clock is ticking.

Fortunately, activism is gaining ground to counteract the passive gloom-and-doom attitude in the face of all the waste and corruption. Rather than sighing “if only...” we are tackling the problem with the power of the collective “I” in “if.” I can practise lifestyle habits of good food economy; carry reusable water bottles; avoid plastic-packaged products; shop with reusable grocery bags; and take advantage of local farmers’ markets. I can recycle what no longer works, donate used goods, buy secondhand items, and reduce my use of paper.

Singly, this may seem inconsequential to the point of the ridiculous, but collectively we can and do make a difference. Collectively we can muster up the courage to speak up when change is needed, and to initiate and contribute to the conversation with friends, local activist organizations and political representatives.

The very children whose future we are endangering are showing us how this is done, not only prominent leaders such as Greta Thunberg, but also youth in our local schools whose initiative is inspired and inspiring. Let’s listen. Let’s back them up. Let’s not waste our opportunity and obligation to make a difference.

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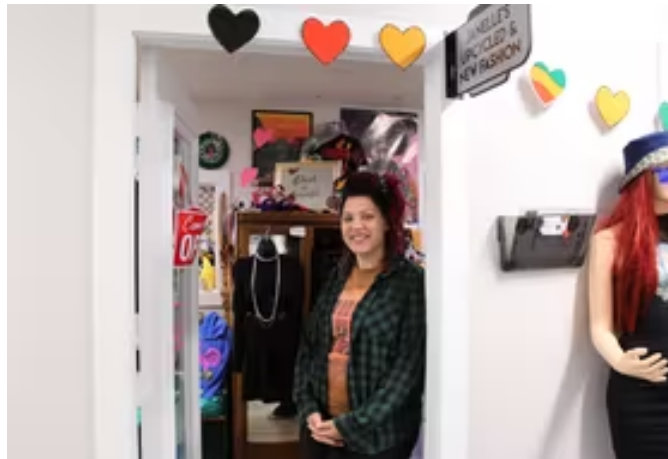
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