

## Beyond Diversion of Waste to Reduction

by Ralph C. Martin

In the last week, I've had two encounters with municipal waste management personnel in different cities. It was fascinating to see how recyclables are sorted and how various materials become available for re-use. We also observed how organic waste flows from our homes, to trucks, to sorting piles, to steaming compost heaps and eventually to mature compost for use as a soil amendment.

In January, the City of Guelph was recognized with the Ron Lance Memorial Award by Waste Diversion Ontario. In Ontario, in 2012, Guelph had the highest overall residential waste diversion rate at just over 67%, when the provincial average was 47%. This achievement is, appropriately, being celebrated.

There is no doubt it is better to divert waste from landfill by recycling or composting, than to just pile it up and bury it. The apparently cheap option of landfilling will eventually not be an option when we run out of landfill sites.

Nevertheless, the folks demonstrating how effectively recycling and composting systems can work, want us to meet the next challenge. It's too simplistic to be content with waste diversion from landfill. The diversion processes cost dollars, labour and energy. The most efficient way to address waste is to reduce waste.

As in all journeys to sustain we learn that one step leads us to knowledge about the next. Just because diversion is better than landfilling does not mean we should toss into recycling bags and organic waste bins with impunity. Reducing waste is an even better step than diverting waste.

Our recent surveys in Guelph also reveal some insights about how we as citizens relate to waste. My colleagues Mike Van Massow and Kate Parizeau have been analyzing survey data from 60 households, a subset of 270 households, where we weighed regular garbage, recyclables and organic waste.

Although a majority who answered questions felt guilty about waste, especially about food waste and excess packaging, there appeared to be a perception that waste is not a significant

environmental problem. Is this because recycling and composting are seen as complete solutions rather than as steps in the journey to sustain?

Wasting food in particular, was seen to be primarily a social issue rather than an environmental issue. I find this so interesting. Maybe parental admonitions, to clean our plates because people in poor countries are starving, have penetrated our social consciences. Maybe there is an inherent sense of justice about the inequalities associated with buying so much food that we end up throwing out an average of 20% of food per Ontario household, while at least 10% of our community members are food insecure.

Another pertinent survey response was a significant affirmation that it was up to individuals to reduce waste. There was an acknowledgement that stores and food manufacturers have secondary responsibilities to reduce food waste but the buck was expected to stop first with individuals.

If it's really up to each of us then what should we do to reduce waste? Surprisingly, about 40% of those surveyed did not have an answer to the question about how to reduce food waste. About 33% said meal planning would reduce it. No doubt planning can help householders match purchases to what is actually needed. Other specific suggestions were common to less than 10% of respondents.

Questions we could ask ourselves are: what is enough, and why do we routinely buy more than we need? The answers may be derived from spiritual and psychological deliberations as much as from social, political, economic and environmental considerations.

At this point I am inclined to turn to a Canadian poet and songwriter, Leonard Cohen.

*I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch,  
He said to me, "You must not ask for so much."  
And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,  
She cried to me, "Hey, why not ask for more?"*

A theme of the song, 'Bird on the Wire,' is freedom. Freedom may be the balancing of not taking so much of what is not needed and asking for more of what is needed. Confusion about what we need and what we don't, can impair freedom, especially as our intentions (with awareness or not) merge to consolidate with our actions.

How much do purchases of excess food and packaging and stuff impair freedom, individually and in our communities? Coping with too much waste is a liability on many levels. Why do we keep on generating so much of it? Do we indulge in excess, in dim awareness, because we are substituting for real needs, not yet explored?

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