

Our affluent society is too ready to waste food

by Ralph C. Martin

I crawled up the ladder to the higher branches of a snow apple tree for the umpteenth time. My pail wasn't large and this time I didn't want to fill it too quickly. My hand followed my eye to the choicest apple within reach. I plucked, swiveled my flexible eight year old body on the ladder, leaned back against the top rung and chomped. Fresh apple pulp gave way as juice spread over my tongue. Below, my cousins and siblings were climbing and stooping to pick and then pour apples into bags for the apple butter haul to Wellesley.

I noticed my uncle Addison approaching my tree so I took another quick bite, tossed the half eaten apple and got back to work. "Were you eating this apple" he asked a moment later. Yup, he was pointing to my apple. I nodded. "Come on down, pick it up and finish it." "But there are so many apples all over this orchard and they're going for apple butter anyway." "That doesn't matter. If you start to eat a perfectly good apple, then eat it all. We don't waste."

Last fall, the Value Chain Management Centre of the George Morris Centre, based in Guelph, published a report, Food Waste in Canada, www.georgemorris.org/GMC/Publications/ValueChainManagement.aspx# We waste 40% of our food in Canada, at an annual cost of \$27 billion. This waste is 2% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and more than the total GDP of the 32 poorest countries in the world.

My uncle Addison and others who lived through the depression knew about valuing and respecting food. They understood that an attitude of gratitude for what we have will become many small actions to prevent waste.

A few years after my apple lesson, I began 4-H projects in corn and beef clubs. The narrative then, as now, among many in production agriculture is that the global population is growing and we must plan for how we can responsibly feed them. The thing is that everyone, not only farmers, can make a contribution to this effort. The less food wasted, the less we need to produce.

It is true that the amount of required food is related to the number of people in the world. In addition, the amount of required food is a function of how much is consumed by each person and how much is wasted by each person. Although estimates vary, an average Canadian goes through several times as much food as an average Bangladeshi.

The book, *The Soul of Money*, by Lynne Twist, provides insights on the theme of sufficiency. If we appreciate what we have, we are more likely to know when we have enough.

On page 67 of her book she states, “when you let go of trying to get more of what you don’t really need, it frees up oceans of energy to make a difference with what you have. When you make a difference with what you have, it expands.”

Perhaps we are hardwired to consume or hoard as much food as we can in case we encounter famine or hunger. We obviously can learn to overcome short term gluttony and waste and then store what is needed in a manner that will retain food value.

In our busy lives, there is a temptation to act as if we are too busy to worry about how much food we buy. It’s second nature to buy large quantities at a lower price per gram even if we realize some grams will never survive as food. Many fridges in Guelph are jammed with good food and then cleaned out to make room for the next round. We consume only some of the food before each cleaning.

Healthy food is the stuff of life. It is worth slowing down to plan purchases according to menus that we intend to prepare. Shopping attentively for food can be a real contribution to sustainability. The food we ingest becomes part of our bodies, part of ourselves, who we are, how we feel and how we can contribute.

Food plays a role in our attitudes and our long term health. There is a reciprocity of respect. If we respectfully grow, process, distribute, sell, buy, prepare and consume food, then food will help us to do well. Wasting food today becomes a growing problem for tomorrow. Valuing food today and acting accordingly, is an investment for tomorrow.

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