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Earth and Spirit: The Lenten paradox

by Rich Heffern



-- Jon Krause

I like those lists of tips for more frugal living that appear in magazines and newspapers when hard times are upon us: Pay off your credit card every month. Sun-dry your clothes. Insulate your attic. Keep your car's tires inflated. Eat way less meat.

My favorite is one I've never personally adopted: Contract with the state police to notify you when a deer has been killed on the highway. Make sure you have a freezer to store it in.

Amy Dacyczyn's book *The Complete Tightwad Gazette*, a rich compendium of tips and advice from her

monthly newsletter, *The Tightwad Gazette*, was reported to be the most stolen title in the state of Maine's public library system last year.

The present economic crisis has made these tips and suggestions even more mainstream. Despite bailouts and stimulus packages, we regular folk need to fend for ourselves in the midst of the chaos.

There is something Lenten about them also.

We must now, as never before, take a deep breath and a look at our lives and simplify what we do. The Lenten season is excellent practice and preparation, always has been.

We live in a culture of activity and consumption today of such frenzied proportions that we run the risk of harming ourselves as well as the planet. We cannot go on reaching out for more unsustainable economic development and growth -- fueled by scientific endeavor and ensuing technologies -- as if it were a religious duty that we were committed to following, no matter the consequences.

Reversing to more frugal living is a well-trodden religious path as well.

A story tells that the great Buddhist saint Nagarjuna moved around naked except for a loincloth and, incongruously, a golden begging bowl given to him by the king, who was his disciple. One night he was about to lie down to sleep among the ruins of an ancient monastery when he noticed a thief lurking nearby.

"Here, take this," said Nagarjuna, holding out the golden begging bowl. "That way you won't disturb me once I've fallen asleep."

The thief eagerly grabbed the bowl and went off, only to return next morning with the bowl. He said, "When you gave this bowl so freely last night, you made me feel very poor. Please teach me how to acquire the riches that make this kind of lighthearted detachment possible."

It's the kernel of the idea of simple prosperity, finding wealth through a sustainable lifestyle. Real abundance, the abundance of personal contentment and equanimity, can only be cultivated in the fertile ground of simple living that celebrates cooperation, not competition. It implicitly recognizes the needs of all people to live in a fair and caring world by reaching out to greater humanitarian and egalitarian ideas.

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Living a sane, generous and ecologically responsible life does not mean complete self-sacrifice, privation and austerity. On the contrary, it should mean a richer, more interesting, more creative, fuller, longer and healthier life. It's a living, breathing, rambunctious paradox, but all manner of good things emerge from the dynamics of simpler living.

But we Christians already know deep down in our bones that Lent leads to Easter.

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