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The parable of the sack and the wastebasket

Rich Heffern | Oct. 20, 2009 NCR Today

It is not always simple to live simply. It takes energy and skill. Conflict and tension between many opposing factors must be steadily and uncomplainingly borne and confronted creatively. At times it feels like a complex chess game in which one weighs and balances the consequences of an array of moves or choices against the background of countermoves, trying to achieve the position on the board that best honors both our commitment to simple living and all of our other responsibilities, as parents, citizens, spouses, members of communities.

Often it's a matter of making trade-offs or truces, plea-bargaining, or just deciding in which battles we can prevail and in which it might be wiser to retreat or surrender.

What's more, in all kinds of ways, our consumer society mounts hurdles and roadblocks in our path. A television comedienne I saw once talked of visiting the mall to buy a wastebasket for her new apartment. The clerk put the new basket into a sack. She carried the sack home and then threw it into the wastebasket she had just bought after installing it in a corner. "What am I doing?!" she yelped and threw up her hands.

Hers is an apt parable for what we're up against. One can't really blame the clerk, the store ... or anyone in particular. Such wasteful policies and practices are the result of countless incremental decisions and choices made thoughtlessly by all of us over a long period of time, the end results of which are fast destroying our planet's life support systems. The reversal of such destructive ways, if it happens, will no doubt result from countless incremental decisions and choices made thoughtfully over time. Individual efforts do finally add up.

Part of our job description as simple living people is to keep at this task. It's an important one. We must describe with our lives the future we want to see for our children. It may or may not be enough. The jury is out, and no one knows what the verdict will be.

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