

In the Shadow – Reusing and Recycling

Since Deloris and I both come from farm backgrounds, we have pretty strong tendencies when it comes to “making do.” We find it easy to save something with the hope that we might have a use for it some day. Five gallon buckets, lumber scraps, old nuts and bolts. Have you heard the term Amish Tupperware? Deloris has lots of little plastic containers that came with peanut butter, lunch meat, cottage cheese, you-name-it. Of course they’re reusable! They can store leftovers in the fridge, save beans for next spring’s seed, hold shredded zucchini in the freezer.

My African friends are no different, but the items they reuse sometimes will vary from what we’re used to. It has been observed that Rwanda is the cleanest nation on the African continent. Though I can’t totally verify that statement, I can certainly attest to Rwanda’s lack of litter. By the same token, I’ve been in some of the neighboring countries and I would hardly consider them filthy. Even DR Congo, for all it’s struggles, isn’t terribly trashy – which I would attribute to the need to reuse and repurpose.

The ubiquitous 0.5 and 1 liter water bottles are used to hold homemade fruit drinks and for selling gasoline to motorcyclists. I’m accustomed to reusing five gallon plastic buckets; here it’s a common sight to see yellow 20 liter vegetable oil jugs used for carrying water (nicknamed “jerry cans”). When they wear out/get holes in them, the side is cut open and they can carry stones or mortar for construction. The terminal use for a jerry can is when a child gets it and fastens wheels on to make a cart.

A big plus for Rwanda is the government’s prohibition on plastic shopping bags. You know, those annoyingly flimsy

bags that rip a hole when you lift them out of the car to carry in the house. One writer claimed that their average lifespan is about 12 minutes. LOL. At least 32 countries globally have bans on the use of them, including 18 in Africa. A plastic bag in a goat stomach is quite unhealthy. One of the more recent laws to be enacted is Kenya’s, which imposes fines of up to \$19,000 and four years in jail for “making, selling, or importing” plastic bags! I’m wondering if their concern is to protect the environment or to fill the government coffers. Americans use something like 100 billion plastic shopping bags/year. Sigh.

I’m not writing this as a global warming alarmist tirade. Please. I’m just an old farmer that hates to see things wasted. There’s a pile of scrap steel outside our farm shop. We can dig around in it and find just the right piece to fix the baler. When the pile becomes unwieldy, we load it up, haul it to the recycling yard, and come home with a few bucks for the trouble. We save glass bottles, plastic jugs, metal cans so they can be recycled too. Cardboard boxes work great in the garden to keep out weeds between the rows.





It has always amazed (disgusted) me how much food is wasted in the US. As a child I was shocked to see other children throwing most of their school lunch into the trash. Now I watch as people walk out of a restaurant leaving half or more of their meal behind. Before coming to Africa, Grace had worked in a couple of local eateries. I don't want to gross anyone out, but her coworkers would actually set uneaten/untouched food from the tables aside so she could take it home to eat. Grace comes from a long heritage of "waste not, want not." No wonder she fits in so well here in Africa.

The other day I bought a few items at the little hardware store here in the village. The owner put them in a sack that had been cut from a much larger cement bag and sewed (all the sewing machines here are treadle operated) into a very suitable, durable and reusable sack.

For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Rwanda.