

## To Trash or To Treasure

By Michael A. Schuler

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### Part One

#### An Actor's Perspective

##### Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man*

I was raised dirt poor, wearing pants my mother sewed out of old gunny-sacks, but I pity kids today who are being raised in such a way that they'll be hard-pressed to enjoy the simple things, to endure the long commitments, and to find true meaning in their lives.

Poverty didn't kill my soul. Poverty can destroy a person, yes, but I've seen prosperity kill many a soul as well. After so much ease and comfort and mindless consumption of commodities, how do we even know that anything resembling a soul is there anymore?

We're not nearly as strong as our mothers and fathers were. I mean, to endure—to just simply stand up under the strain for a lifetime of what someone like my mother had to put up with. But she endured because she found comfort in her *commitments*. She stoked the fire and she tended the farm and she washed the clothes and she baked the bread, but she found *satisfaction* in that. ... She didn't flick a switch and have the lights go on and electrical power rush at her command to wash the clothes, to heat the oven. She couldn't just turn on the water and let it run out of the tap. What she had instead—commitment—was even better.

What a life for a woman: getting up before the sun and working until darkness fell, washing her dishes and scrubbing her pots by candlelight—and that's if she was lucky enough ... to own a candle. Even the small convenience of a *candle* was a gift. You can't imagine what a gift that was in my mother's time. If she had half dozen candles in the house, she would light only one per night and let it burn maybe so much and then put it out. She would tend it with such care—savor it, conserve it.

Now her kids and her grandchildren—they're so accustomed to convenience that they can't find any pleasure in such small delight. So, a little hardship is a good thing. But then, how much? It's a difficult tradeoff, especially when we're talking about our children.

### Reflections 1

Last Thursday found our small family found itself driving south to spend Thanksgiving with my aunt

in the English-style cottage my grandfather had built and in which she and my father were raised. It's a charming but rather snug little home, barely large enough to accommodate the 19 hungry relatives who showed up eat dinner and watch the Packers and Lions butt heads on my aunt's vintage television set.

There was nothing unusual or fancy about the occasion. The meal was much the same as ones my grandmother prepared in that same kitchen for over fifty years. Turkey, stuffing, turnips, potatoes, giblet gravy, an assortment of pies, relish trays, and rutabaga—dishes consistent with my childhood recollections. However, I did note the presence of alcohol, which my teetotaler grandmother would have frowned upon. Despite its conventionality, the holiday proved delightful as our family re-engaged with relatives we see too infrequently, in a setting that holds many precious memories.

On the trip down to Dixon, Illinois I made a point of exiting the Interstate at Rockford in favor of Illinois Route 2. It is a lovely, meandering drive beside a river that is part of our own watershed, and I especially appreciate that along that 35-mile stretch of highway the history of the upper Midwest is writ large.

Just north of Oregon, for instance, an imposing statue of the Sauk Indian chief, Blackhawk, sits on a high bluff, gazing perpetually down at the river on whose banks his village once stood. Further south, the home and blacksmith shop of John Deere, inventor of the steel-tip plow, still stands in Grand Detour. This new tool enabled 19th century white settlers to break through the tough prairie sod and establish farms, eventually displacing the Indians who had lived and thrived in that region for centuries.

Round another curve on the river road and two enormous concrete cooling towers belching clouds of water vapor come into view. The Byron nuclear power plant was completed in 1987 and supplies 2 million homes with electricity. From digging sticks to steel plows to nuclear power in less than 200 years, to me the magnitude of that change is staggering.

Are we better for it? In a great many respects, certainly. But for every "improvement" there can be and often is an accompanying loss. Despite its ruggedness and lack of amenities, Blackhawk loved

his people's way of life. For decades he fought to protect it from the hoards of white settlers who were eager to claim and "develop" this new territory. Today, corn and soybean fields stretch as far as the eye can see, and brightly illuminated shopping malls do business far into the night. Do such changes really betoken a higher quality of life?

Something else kept running through my head as I gazed wistfully out the car window on Thursday—the words to an old song. It is one of the few songs about Thanksgiving that has enjoyed enduring popularity. It goes like this:

Over the river, and through the wood,  
To Grandmother's house we go;  
The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh  
through the white and drifted snow.

Over the river, and through the wood—  
Oh, how the wind does blow!  
It stings the toes and bites the nose  
As over the ground we go.

Over the river, and through the wood,  
To have a first-rate play.  
Hear the bells ring, "Ting-a-ling-ding,"  
Hurrah for Thanksgiving Day!

Over the river, and through the wood  
Trot fast, my dapple-gray!  
Spring over the ground like a hunting-hound,  
For this is Thanksgiving Day.

Over the river, and through the wood—  
And straight through the barnyard gate,  
We seem to go extremely slow,  
It is so hard to wait!

Over the river, and through the wood—  
Now Grandmother's cap I spy!  
Hurrah for the fun! Is the pudding done?  
Hurrah for the pumpkin pie!

Here we have a simple song about the unadorned pleasure of traveling in an open, horse-drawn vehicle through the countryside for the humble purpose of reconnecting and celebrating with one's family. But consider the context in which it was written. Its author, Lydia Maria Child, was a social reformer, author, and Unitarian. Born almost 200 years ago in New England, Lydia and her husband, David, were staunch opponents both of slavery and the American government's unfair policies toward Indian tribes like Blackhawk's.

Although Lydia Maria Child was raised in a well-to-do family, her radical social and political views were not considered respectable, and this

dampened the public's enthusiasm for the books she wrote. Her husband's legal practice suffered for the same reason. As a result, the couple spent much of their life struggling to make ends meet. Of luxuries they had few; Lydia and David lived by and for their *commitments* and accepted poverty as the necessary price of following their conscience.

This, then, is the context in which "Over the River and Through the Woods" was written and in which it ought to be understood. It is a song in which wealth, luxury, and lavish living have no place—a song that underscores the delight that a bracing sleigh ride and the warm embrace of family can bring.

In her book, *Depletion and Abundance* Sharon Astyk correctly observes that "having too much can prevent you from enjoying things fully." Most of what we really need in order to feel deeply nourished as human beings has little to do with the size of our bank account. Intimacy, imagination, good work to do, intellectual stimulation, a sense of belonging, opportunities to celebrate, spiritual enrichment—none of these come with a high price tag. But unless we recognize their importance, we're not likely to commit much time to them. Instead, we'll keep breaking a sweat and incurring more debt to maintain or upgrade our material standard of living.

Over a century and a half ago the environmental pioneer John Muir was brought to Wisconsin by strict Scotch parents who relied on ingenuity and hard labor to produce just about everything the family needed. As a youngster, Muir learned to make do with very little, but he discovered in the Wisconsin woods and prairies a source of inspiration and joy that sustained him for his entire life. As a mature man he was once asked whether he ever envied a particular railroad tycoon, E.H. Harriman, who was said to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Not a bit, Muir responded. "I'm better off than he is because I have all the money I want and he hasn't."

Perhaps the life of *real* abundance begins when we are able to say "enough" and say it with genuine conviction.

## Part Two

### A Child's Commitment

#### From David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*

My family's ten-day visit to the Brazilian rain forest took place in 1989, when my daughter Severn was nine years old. As we flew away from the village where we had been staying, we could see the

encroachment of gold miners who were polluting the rivers and destroying the riverbanks, and the farmers burning the forest down in a desperate search for land to grow food on.

Severn became alarmed about the future of her newfound Brazilian friends, and upon returning to our home in Vancouver, she started a club called ECO—the Environmental Children’s Organization. Five ten-year old girls began to speak out about the beauty of tropical forests; the animals, plants, and people who inhabit them; and the need to protect them.

Two years later, Severn told me that she wanted to take ECO to the Earth Summit that would be held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Hundreds of organizations from around the world would be represented there to discuss environmental problems and look for solutions. “I think all those grown-ups will be talking about our future,” Severn said to me, “and they need us there to act as their conscience.”

I protested that it would be very expensive, that Rio was polluted and dangerous, and, besides, it was unlikely that children would be heard. I promptly forgot about the conversation, but two months later Severn proudly displayed a \$1,000 check from an American philanthropist whom she had contacted, made out to ECO. In the months that followed Severn and her friends raised over \$13,000—an amount I had agreed to match. It was enough to take five children and three adults to Rio.

At the Earth Summit, ECO registered as a non-governmental organization and rented a booth along with hundreds of other groups. They set up a display of pictures and posters, handed out brochures about ECO and talked to many people. Soon reporters and television cameras appeared looking for interviews from these five twelve year-olds from Canada. Eventually word reached Maurice Strong, the conference organizer, and he invited Severn to give an address to the entire assembly.

She wrote her speech with input from her fellow ECO members and rehearsed it over and over. Some of what she said was this.

“I am only a child and I don’t have all the solutions, but I want you to realize, neither do you. You don’t know how to bring back an animal now extinct and you can’t bring back a forest where now there is a desert. If you don’t know how to fix it, please stop breaking it.

“In my country we make so much waste; we buy and throw away, buy and throw away. Yet northern

countries will not share with the needy. Even when we have more than enough, we are afraid to lose some of our wealth, afraid to let go.

“You teach us how to behave in the world. You teach us not to fight with others; to work things out; to respect others; to clean up our mess; not to hurt other creatures; to share and not be greedy. Then why do you go out and do the things you tell us not to do?”

“My Dad always says, ‘you are what you do, not what you say,’ so if you really love us, please make your actions reflect your words.”

My daughter’s words electrified the conference, and on the last day the organizer, Maurice Strong, quoted Severn to remind the delegates why they were there.

## Reflections 2

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In her remarks before the Earth Summit Severn Suzuki alluded to the wastefulness that she had observed in Canada, the United States, and many other areas of the developed world. Most of us can hardly imagine what it would be like to depend solely on candles for light at night, much less to ration their use to ensure a dependable supply as Sidney Poitier’s mother did.

For us, energy is such a familiar commodity that we don’t even remember to turn off the lights when we exit a room, or to shut off the water heater when we leave for vacation. But because we are *not* more thoughtful about such things fully two-thirds of all the primary energy produced in the world today is simply wasted—it goes up the chimney or out of the tailpipe unutilized and lost forever.

We waste food as well as energy. A recent U.S. Government study estimates that as much as 40% of all the *food* grown in our country is lost or thrown away—hundreds of billions of dollars worth every year. Research indicates that at least half this food could be safely eaten by humans or animals.

The same study analyzed food discarded by restaurants, stores, and private households. 14% of what researchers found in dumpsters and garbage cans was in its original, unopened packaging, not out of date and was perfectly edible.

When it comes right down to it, we can go a long ways toward preserving our way of life and protecting the environment if we could learn to be less wasteful. “Perhaps,” Sharon Astyk writes, “we’d do well to follow the advice our grandmothers gave us: Eat your leftovers.”

We have gotten ourselves into a pickle because we take so much more than we really *need* from the planet, and *waste* so much of what we take. This pattern of behavior has to change because a significant proportion of what we are plundering simply cannot be replenished. As Severn said to the delegates at the Earth Summit: How do you bring back an extinct animal or recharge an empty aquifer a half-mile under the earth? So what happened to those practical virtues that our ancestors lived and swore by: stewardship, thrift, prudence and frugality?

Before she composed "Over the River and through the Woods" Lydia Maria Child wrote a best-selling book entitled *The Frugal Housewife*. Most books on housekeeping published in the early 1800s were aimed at wealthy women who could afford to employ servants. But Child wrote her book for the lower-income American wife who needed practical advice on how to maintain a pleasant, comfortable home on a modest budget. It focused on the art of making more out of less.

However, if there truly is a patron saint of frugality it is probably Benjamin Franklin. Avoid the purchase of "fineries and knickknacks," he admonished in an essay entitled *The Way to Wealth*.

You may call them "goods" but if you do not take care, they will prove "evils" to some of you. . . . Remember what Poor Richard says, "Buy what you have no real need of, and before long you may be forced to sell your necessities."

For both Franklin and Lydia Maria Child successful, sustainable living meant avoiding extravagance and embracing the common-sense virtues of thriftiness and frugality.

In recent years this has not been an easy idea to promote. Being a careful steward of one's resources, living within one's means, and daring to be unfashionable in a fashion-conscious society can mark one as a bit of an oddball. Some of us are old enough to remember Jack Benny, a comedian whose thriftiness became a running gag and made him the country's most notorious cheapskate.

At a time when American incomes were on the rise and people's hunger for consumer goods was growing, Benny was someone we laughed at. Today,

however, his may be precisely the philosophy we want to reconsider. In a world of limits beyond which there will be no more, the only rational choice "is to make the most and the best of what we already have," Wendell Berry writes.

What this implies is renewed emphasis on "frugality," a virtue that can be broken down into three components: Use it up. Wear it out. Make it do. The good news is that frugal living is economically sensible and environmentally friendly living, as well. If they could speak to us, it is almost certainly the way our great-grandchildren would have us live.

Frugality is easy to understand but for people who like to buy new stuff, hard to put into practice. But we can try. *Use things up*. Find some other application for material and articles that have outlived their original purpose. Consider how articles like hardware, broom handles or old T-shirts can be converted before throwing them into the trash.

*Wear it out*. I've got dress shoes in my closet that are still in decent shape after 23 years, and a dark suit that has served me well for 500 weddings. I bought these items because the styling was simple and timeless, and they could be worn without embarrassment until they literally wore out. Wearing something out also entails making repairs: resoling those shoes, fixing a still serviceable appliance rather than discarding it, as we've done any number of times.

*Make it do*. "We have to avoid the notion that we can buy our way out of our problems," Sharon Astyk writes. When we are more willing to make things, find things, reuse things rather than rely so heavily on purchases, daily living becomes artful, and we begin to feel more competent and better about ourselves. This was, of course, precisely the point Lydia Maria Child tried to make 150 years ago in *The Frugal Housewife*.

So, as we enter the holiday season, let us remember that generosity can take many forms, not all of which require yet another orgy of consumption. Opt for simple, durable gifts; give your loved ones time instead of treasure; contribute freely to organizations that make our collective lives richer. Frugality isn't just about not spending; it is also about spending in ways that ensure both a happy present and a healthy future.