

Wasting Away: Paper, Plastic or Canvas

by Jody Russell

I lived some years ago in a small fifth-floor attic apartment in Copenhagen, high up in an old brick building. The sloping roof line angled alongside my window where I could watch the pigeons lined up in the afternoon sun, cooing and preening. The whole apartment was angles and crannies, challenging my ability to hang pictures, or even walk sometimes. The kitchen was quite small, with a tiny refrigerator, similar to what American college kids might have in a dorm room.

My days were simpler then. I got around town with a bicycle lent to me by a friend. It was a rusty piece of metal, with foot brakes, red, but barely so with the effects of being outside so long. It had a metal basket hanging off the handlebars. My only wheels.

I biked to the bakery for the day's bread. I biked to the grocery for the day's milk and eggs, meat, vegetables, cheese and fruit. But I only bought what I could carry home on my bicycle. At the grocery store, bags were extra -- you bought them with your groceries. I would buy a few once in a while, and then re-use them until they grew holes. I learned to stuff my backpack. I learned to think about it.

It was so simple.

It seems a long time ago, those days in Denmark. I still love to grocery shop. Byerlys and Kowalskis fill their aisles with such inviting food. Vegetables lined up so neatly, apples red and green and yellow, organic...bananas, kiwis, avocados and melons....and food to try...new brands, new flavors, new packaging. I still shop frequently, not freezing my food. Every few days, I'm back at the store. I do love to buy groceries. I'm a regular at the grocery store, truth be told.

There is a drawback.

I'm inundated with paper bags. I have a LOT of brown paper bags. Even a small trip to the market yields three paper bags and about six plastic bags. I come home, I haul in the bags, I empty the bags and

put away the food. It's a flurry of paper. The dog scurries under the table to avoid the errantly tossed bags. She's not one for disorder. The paper bags fly around the kitchen as I toss the empty ones out of the way. When the groceries are put away, I deal with them...find the creases, flip 'em around, fold them nicely, flatly, and stick them into one unfolded bag. Out to the garage. Three days later, repeat. And again. I claim to "recycle" my paper bags. I stick my recyclable newspapers into some of them. Three days later, more bags. Tossing them into the garage, watching them take over a small crevice between the garbage cans, watching them take over a corner of the garage. I have paper bags EVERYWHERE! It's embarrassing.

But wait. What happened to that simple life? What happened to my ecological spirit? I drive a fuel-efficient car, I don't water my lawn, I use organic non-phosphorus fertilizer, I shut the faucet while I'm brushing my teeth, I walk to school open houses....what's with all those grocery store bags?

There is a solution.

Last week, I made my journey to Byerlys as usual. I shopped as usual. I bought 12 Braeburn apples, placing them loose in the cart. I bought ice cream, natural vanilla. I bought cinnamon bread. And everything else we normally eat in three days. But this time, I remembered seeing some canvas bags hanging near the chocolate. I bought three of the bags at \$6.99 apiece. And then, when the bagger asked, "Paper or plastic?" I replied, "canvas." All my groceries fit perfectly into the canvas totes. I have gotten a few funny looks at times, but the good feeling of not wasting the paper feels great, and well worth it.

It's a small change, I admit. Maybe it won't make a huge impact on the environment. But it's a start. An attitude shift. And really, so simple. Think about it.

Now what am I going to use for my newspapers on recycling day?