

## Garbage – Our Gateway to Action Louise Schwartz, Recycle Alternative

In 1988, garbage became my Gateway to Action. I had an awakening, I call it my ‘garbage epiphany’. It drove me to re-think my relationship with garbage and to start *The Recycling Alternative*, collecting recyclables from the commercial sector.

While recycling is mainstream now, and in fact legislated through landfill bans, 1988 is before blue boxes and at that time only ‘early adopters’ were doing it at home or at work.

My ‘garbage epiphany’ occurred while visiting a friend in Seattle. In addition to being an ‘ahead-of-her-time’ Vancouver Parks Board Green Party candidate in the 1986 Vancouver municipal elections, she was an early adopter in other areas as well and had started a recycling program in her housing complex.

She casually pointed to her ‘green box’ (used in Seattle) on the porch as we entered her home – and this was the Great Turning for me. The euphemism we all know and use of ‘THROWING AWAY’ came crashing down around me. In just one gesture toward the ‘green box’ I suddenly understood there was no ‘AWAY’. I was ‘AWAKENED to GARBAGE’!

At that moment I knew my behaviour had to change-I could no longer continue to follow the accepted paradigm. The euphemism had been exposed and my own small contribution to the larger environmental picture of sustainability was about to start at home, under my own kitchen sink.

In addition to causing me to re-think and change my relationship with my own lifestyle residuals, this ‘garbage epiphany’ was driving me to ACTION beyond the confines of my home. Garbage had become my gateway to action, and challenging the ‘throw away’ euphemism had planted the seed for what would become Recycling Alternative.

So from the perspective of one who has personally experienced an awakening to garbage, as the catalyst for change, I’d like to focus on ways we can collectively activate more change through taking an honest look at our trash, our lifestyle residuals and challenging the euphemism of “THROWING AWAY”.

Worldwide, the current ‘solid waste management plan’ is founded on the premise of ‘THROWING AWAY’. An environmental snapshot of our landfills, our manufacturing practices, our industrial, commercial and residential waste streams is undeniable evidence that the global waste-sector strategy based on “THROWING AWAY” is failing miserably.

Moreover, since ‘AWAY’ doesn’t exist, our lifestyle residuals are smothering the planet’s land, oceans and air. The consequence of not acting on the solid waste reality looms supersized and suppurating on our land and seascapes:

In Canada, between 2004 and 2006, we had an 8% increase in the amount of garbage being ‘disposed’, arriving at almost 30 million tonnes, or about a tonne per person.

In the past, “THROWING AWAY” encouraged us to collectively turn a blind eye to our individual, immediate impact on the environment. “THROWING AWAY” allowed us, trans-culturally and trans-globally, to ignore our opportunity and our responsibility to actively

contribute to environmental solutions. And in the most localized way- right under our kitchen sinks, with the waste we bring into our homes and then have to 'dispose' of.

***So, what can we do to make Garbage our Gateway to Action? How can garbage be the foundation of at least one element of our activism and involvement in our own Change? What can I do to make my lifestyle residuals, my garbage, part of the solution rather than part of the problem?***

I expect that most of us are already 'reducing, reusing and recycling' and maybe even composting. We carefully control what we bring into our homes, ever mindful that it is our responsibility to dispose responsibly of our 'lifestyle residuals' and that they are not going 'AWAY' when they leave our curbside, whether in a blue box or garbage can.

So I'd like to focus on two areas: the Private Garbage Gateway and the Public Garbage Gateway, as agents of change. In other words, let's brainstorm about ways to Be the Change individually and collectively, through our relationship with garbage.

- a) What can we do in our own lives 'under our kitchen sinks'; and
- b) How can we assist and guide the Great Turning collectively, on the broader social scale, through legislation, public education and cultivating behavioural alternatives to 'Throwing Away'?

### **BEING THE CHANGE - INDIVIDUALLY**

1. Handling your residuals
  - Become intimate with your garbage. Know our garbage – Know yourself!
  - Practice the 3 R's
  - Compost
  - Do an in-house waste audit to determine ways to further reduce and eliminate waste. How close can your household get to ZERO WASTE?
2. Purchases
  - Let your retailers and suppliers know what you want/don't want
3. Plastics and Packaging
  - What plastics am I bringing into my home?
  - Is it possible to eliminate packaging from my waste stream?
4. Neighbourhood Clusters and Action Teams
  - Can we help to awaken our neighbours and friends by inviting them to be part of the solution, just by working with their garbage?
  - Can we help others feel engaged in effecting change by challenging the 'THROW AWAY' euphemism, and tackling something as immediate and individual as their garbage.
  - Can we educate our neighbours about the landfill bans introduced by the City of Vancouver in Jan 2008?
  - Can we educate our neighbours on plastics?
  - Can we consider consolidating some of our neighbourhood waste that is not included in the Blue Box program? For example, collection and drop-off of certain products to depots (such as batteries, paints, soft plastics etc)
  - Can we Compost-Pool? (i.e. collectively organize around composting?)

## **BEING THE CHANGE - COLLECTIVELY**

1. Public Purchasing Practices
  - Let our suppliers and retailers know what we want/ don't want
2. Packaging
  - Leave it at the counter. This will send a clear message to retailers and manufacturers and was a very effective strategy in Germany in the 90's
3. Landfill Bans
  - Participate in METRO Vancouver workshops; consultation on ZERO WASTE
  - Can we help METRO raise awareness by requesting neighbourhood workshops?
4. Legislation and Stewardship
  - a) EPR – Extended Producer Responsibility
    - Can we help to drive government to legislate manufacturer packaging? For example, is the product fully recyclable in our current programs, and if not, what stewardship or 'return to sender' programs does the manufacturer have in place?
  - b) Post-consumer and procurement legislation on packaging
    - Can we encourage government to legislate that packaging be made from post-consumer product (food and medicine sometimes an exception)?
    - Can we CLOSE THE LOOP LOCALLY, by encouraging government to give incentives for manufacturing locally produced post-consumer products? This will also help to stimulate local, green economy.

***Which of these are we already doing? Are there any we can become more involved in?  
Can we choose one action Individually and one action Collectively?***

Change comes about when the private and public agendas converge. Our job as citizens is to actively engage in the change we want to see manifest and encourage others to do the same. In tandem with this, the role of government is to respond to the shift citizens are initiating, by finding the legislative tools to implement the change and support further empowerment and broadening of sustainable or just action.

Transforming our relationship with garbage both individually and collectively, can be the catalyst for change far beyond our own homes. Taking action to challenge society's 'Throw Away' euphemism will drive the global changes needed in terms of industrial practices, producer responsibility, manufacturing and government legislation that acknowledge 'away' is actually 'right here'.