

Reduce-Reuse-Recycle. We have been encouraged to do this for how many years? I am so accustomed to seeing and hearing this phrase that I guess I assumed that many of us were trying our best to accomplish these “three R”s. I thought we were trying our best to do this because we had become convinced it was the right thing to do. Watching the Hemlock Lane Landfill in Halifax be capped this spring got me to thinking, though.

Did we think that most people were recycling and, so, we could slip a bit, if need be. After all, we’re not perfect, some of us are really busy and, so, the really good recyclers can make up for us.

Or, were we recycling because we had to? Perhaps our local by-laws required recycling or, at least highly motivated it with “pay as you throw” programs. The strong point of those programs is that, although the official town bags may seem expensive, recycling is free. You would think that people would want to “throw away” as much as possible for free. I can tell you, though, that I have witnessed people expending time and energy to avoid both spending money for special bags and recycling, including burning their trash and leaving it at the roadside.

By-laws and regulations are great as the first step in educating people and for allowing the legal authority to follow-up with demands but they do not necessarily convert people. People convert to a way of thinking and behaving because they want to. They want to behave in such a manner for a variety of reasons, including they have become convinced it is the right thing to do.

Despite the fact that I have seen many creative ways of avoiding recycling, I have also witnessed from so many people a great desire to help the earth, to reduce global warming and to reduce overall national expenditures for getting rid of our refuse. It has been surprising and heartwarming to see people celebrating the return of or the improvement of recycling at the local level.

Kudos to Pat Crowley and her fourth grade class at Halifax Elementary School. They revived the recycling of paper by arranging the collection at the school and working with Abitibi, a company that delivers paper recycling bins. They collect the paper for free. Doesn’t that get you to thinking? Paper and cardboard are products to be reused at a profit! If someone can help us to recycle at no cost to ourselves other than a small time commitment for collection, then let’s go for it!

Kudos to Silver Lake Regional’s first ever Recycling Club. In its infancy still, it kicked off its birth by collecting unwanted paper programs at this spring’s Mr. Silver Lake Competition. Thank you to administrator, Ms. Lucy Record and science teacher, Mr. Cruzan for their guidance and stewardship.

Kudos also to the staff and the building maintenance crew at my Town Hall. I received the wonderful surprise and delight of a warm and welcoming response to the return of recycling at the Halifax Town Hall. It fell away for small reasons some years ago and now, people were approaching me in whispers, confessing their gratitude for its return. One woman confessed, “I was bringing paper and plastic bottles home and recycling them there.” Another office had fun with the project by posting “Champion Recyclers of The Week” on their office door. All offices were given laminated “Halifax Recycles” signs and the custodians asked for assistance by requesting that by the end of the week, paper would be brought to any one of a few key locations to assist with collection. This effort was coordinated with our Recycling Center so that paper could be collected and delivered for pick up at the most convenient time for that department.

It is just a start but we have to start somewhere. We have to for so many reasons. Did you know?

The State of Massachusetts currently exports (at great cost) 1.5 million tons of trash a year because we do not have the room or resources to handle it?

According to a Tellus Institute 2003 report “Waste Reduction Program Assessment and Analysis for Massachusetts”, more than half of our recyclable commodities (paper, metals, plastics, etc), and two thirds of compost-able organic waste (food and yard waste) still winds up in the trash.

Imagine that. Food and grass clippings are placed in plastic bags and thrown into landfills. As if that weren't embarrassing and awful enough, Americans throw away 10 to 30 % (depending on your sources) of the food they buy at the supermarket. This results in dumping the equivalent of more than 21 million shopping bags full of food into landfills every year. If they did not get around to eating it, they could have at least tossed it onto a compost pile.

It is time for us to Reduce what we buy, Reuse what we own and Recycle what we no longer want. It may feel like a new way of doing things, but it is really a return to the very old ways.

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