

Seven Reasons I'm Learning to Do Things the Old-Fashioned Way

by Ann Gilbert

I spent an hour plucking the leaves and blossoms off a large arugula plant. I hadn't heard of arugula until I saw it listed as one of the ingredients in a plastic carton of organic spring mix. Actually, my husband noticed it first and planted some in our organic garden. It grew over two feet tall, and when it began to fall over, he brought it into the house—a bundle of green, leafy stalks tipped with small white flowers.

"Process this," he said. "We'll eat it in our salads." (We eat salad for lunch usually five times a week.)

I sat on a stool at the work table, plucking away, dropping the stems on the floor and packing the leaves and petals in the empty spring mix carton saved for the purpose. After a short while, I began to ask myself, "Why?" Even if I filled the box, what was the point? A box of organic spring mix costs us less than \$5.00, and it looked like I'd be at that task for an hour. I was working for less than minimum wage, processing a plant whose name I could barely pronounce. I wondered how many people would think me odd. Why was this important to me?

1. Action

The work pleasantly gave me plenty of time to ponder such a question. The activity engaged my mind and body in a manner that soothed, satisfied, filling an innate need for purpose so often expressed in activity, and yet without stressing me. The physical and mental activity harmonized. I welcomed the ability to accomplish something while being allowed—even encouraged—to indulge in what my grandmother called "wool-gathering," and I might term "surfing the mental web." In stripping the stalks of leaves, I stripped away assumptions of what made my time worthwhile and came up with more reasons to continue my simple task.

2. Administration

Actually, stewardship came to mind rather than "administration," but stewardship is a word most people can't relate to unless they're used to the Biblical concept. We know our garden doesn't belong to us. Our property doesn't belong to us. Legally, we own the property and we planted the garden, but all that a slave owns belongs to his master, and we are bondslaves of Messiah Y'shua, our Master. He has placed us in charge of this acre of land and the living creatures—plants and animals—that inhabit it. We're stewards, administrators that are directly answerable to the owner for how we handle His assets. Our Creator gave us this arugula and made it flourish. We're responsible to Him for what we do with it. If we waste it, He might decide not to trust us with more—arugula or anything else.

Waste is commonplace in this country (U.S.), but I can't imagine it pleases GOD or makes the world a better place. Some businesses thrive on wastefulness since people have to buy more of what they prodigally use or toss. Neglect, overindulgence, discarding something simply because it no longer appeals to us—these are all forms of waste. At some point, wasting becomes synonymous with placing little or no value on a life. It's easy to forget this principal, say, at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Behind closed doors, people prepared the food that lies uneaten on the plate. They spent a part of their lives to provide that which was thoughtlessly tossed in the trash. Going back even further, farmers labored to grow the food that never fed anyone because it was wasted, wasting their labor.

Mothers used to tell their children to eat the food on their plates because there were starving children in the world who would go to bed hungry, and it was a sin to waste. Granted, children given huge helpings and forced to finish every bite could have weight problems and food traumas, but that doesn't mean they should pile food on their own plates, take two bites and then complain they don't like the taste or they aren't hungry for anything but dessert. Granted, an American child who finishes her meal isn't feeding the starving child across the globe, but the American child needs to be made aware of her privilege, caused to consider the other child's lack, and not be allowed to treat those less fortunate with disdain by wasting what so many would prize. Life has worth. Even the life of an arugula.

3. Preservation

History has worth, too. What is history but the lives of people whose bodies have turned to dust but whose souls have eternal worth? In preserving old ways, such as growing food, preparing and storing it like people used to do so that it retains its nutrients, finding food growing wild, making soap and other basic things with my own hands, kneading and baking bread—to name just a few old-fashioned tasks I'm trying to learn—I am preserving the knowledge and experience of generations that have gone before me. I am refusing to deny their contribution, to write off their lives as worthless to me. I don't want to rob the next generations of the rich heritage of life that has gone on before them; nor do I want to think of myself more highly than my Third World brothers and sisters, who praise our Lord for a crust of bread they had to work hard for. If I am not grateful for the crust of bread or the stalk of arugula and the strength to bring food from the earth to the table, I am not better than them; I am more pitiable.

4. Preparation

Given the instability of the world's economy, the recent history of this country's Great Depression, and the Bible's prophecies of what it may cost some day to buy and sell, I don't want to waste what could, in such times of crisis, save my life—or the lives of my grandchildren. During the Great Depression, folks on the farms, with the exception of the Dust Bowl, fared better than those in the cities. I want to be prepared. Who knows what the future holds? For thousands of years, people lived happily working with their hands that which was good. Today's American culture is a recent phenomenon, and not everyone in the world lives like we do. Many—most—rely on tasks like mine: harvesting the arugula.

5. Actualization

Harvesting the arugula makes real to me the relationship I have with people I will never know. It makes me feel ... more human. In the simple tasks I do that were once commonplace, I find a common bond with women and men who lived and worked long ago and with women and men who live and work in places foreign to my mind and experience. I'm not talking about anything mystical or tangible. Emotional perhaps. Perhaps it is a placebo—learning old ways and practicing them—but much of the apathy or antipathy I am tempted to feel toward people fades like a festering sore having the balm of Gilead applied to it at last.

I gather the remains, the stalks strewn on the floor beneath my stool, and put them in a bag to carry to the compost bin: nothing wasted. I feel a part of the process of life. My relationship to all of creation seems more concrete in those moments when I take part in the

natural cycles of planting, nurturing, harvesting, processing. I take in and give back, like breathing.

6. Appreciation

I marvel at how well-planned, finely orchestrated, is my Father's creation. Though it groans as I do to be clothed with incorruption, so much of what He pronounced "good" still can be appreciated. I praise Him for the bounty, that one arugula plant could fill a whole container with food—enough salad greens for many days, even at the rate we eat them. I praise Him for the beauty of the arugula and all the other plants that grow on the acre He has placed under our care. My heart expands, and as I think of all these things, I begin to appreciate people more. I appreciate what they have to teach me, what they share with me. Most of all, I appreciate Adonai Eloheynu, the LORD my GOD. I gaze down at my work table, covered in tiny bits of green and white like fine dust, and I praise Him for letting me see what is golden in that dust.

7. Satisfaction

As I place the plastic box in the refrigerator and clean my work space to make way for the next task, I sigh with satisfaction. If anyone had asked me more than a year ago if it would be worth my time to work for \$4.00 an hour, I would have laughed the idea to scorn. Now I know how to measure my life in other terms.

Am I saying that when I work for money, doing a job no one could have conceived of mere decades ago, that I'm missing out on GOD's best? Am I saying that all people should flock to the farm and live off the land to get in touch with reality? Of course not. At any given moment, all of us who are Christians must be able to say that what we are doing is worthwhile because our Master bids us do it. He knows the future and shares it with us in the Scriptures. We need to be prepared for that future. If we ask, He will show us how.

I am saying that learning old skills before they become extinct has taught me much more than I expected. I encourage all of us to set aside personal preferences and cultural biases—whether American, European, African, Asian, or Australian—in order to embrace whatever task the Lord puts before us to do.