

'New-new' just doesn't fit her recycling style

July 22, 2007

I can't remember the last time I bought a new dress. Or a new blouse, pants, jeans or shoes. Not "new-new" anyway. The fashions I'm fond of aren't purchased in conventional retail outlets. They come from thrift shops.

To some people, secondhand outfits are -- pardon the pun -- unsuitable.

Not me. I'm pleased to slip into a gently worn skirt or button up a soft sweater someone else gave away. I find thrift-shop shopping -- whether it's for clothing, household items, appliances, books or the myriad other treasures waiting to be discovered in secondhand stores -- to be far more than an exercise in frugality. It's a way of life: eco-friendly, affordable and fun.

Mention recycling and most people envision bins filled with aluminum cans, glass jars and plastic bottles. But what about torn jeans, stained shirts or out-of-style fashions? Clothing tossed in the trash bin doesn't -- poof! -- magically disappear. It ends up at the county dump. With our landfills filling up at an unprecedented pace, it seems senseless and unnecessarily lazy to throw away last year's outfit and those stylish but blister-producing shoes when alternatives are so readily available.

Give them to a thrift shop.

If you think clothing stacked in the back of the closet is too bad to be any good, think again. Even thrift shops recycle. They sell their threadbare, torn or dirty donations to rag sorters and textile materials recovery facilities (TMFs). The TMFs then turn the fabric into wiping and polishing cloths or fiber to be used in new textile products. Everything is salvaged, down to zippers, buttons and hooks.

Even clothing too damaged to become rags gets reused. Those fabrics are sent to a fiber converter that turns them into filler for mattresses, pillows and cushion stuffing. Some become carpet underlay, insulation for houses, deck panels and sound-deadening materials used by the automotive industry. The next time you get into your car, truck or van, look at the roof liner, door panel, under the hood and in the trunk. Nearly 80 pounds of the material in every automobile started out as someone's unwanted garments.

Many items donated to thrift shops make their way around the world. According to a municipal solid-waste report by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, about 61 percent of clothing recovered for secondhand use is exported to foreign countries. Savers, the nation's largest for-profit thrift chain with two of its 200-plus stores in the Orlando area, recycled 160 million pounds of clothing last year by sending it overseas.

Not only does the recycling of unwanted garb provide a means to help others, it enables givers to support charitable organizations that reflect their principles.

There are secondhand stores throughout every region sponsored by a broad spectrum of charitable groups. Animal lovers can support Humane Society thrift shops.

People who want to fight hunger can give goods to local food-bank resale shops. There are thrift stores to support women's shelters, children's homes, local hospitals and churches of most denominations. There are also large national nonprofit chains such as Goodwill Industries

International, Habitat for Humanity and the Salvation Army, plus for-profit companies such as Savers. All are in business to keep landfills free of unnecessary waste while supporting worthwhile charitable causes.

But even with all those options, many people still find it too inconvenient to bundle up and take their unwantables to a thrift store or drop-off center.

They'd sooner throw out an item than take the time to drop it off at a local recovery spot. It's too bad curbside pickup of textiles isn't part of the local recycling network in Central Florida like it is in other counties across the nation.

According to a report by Gary Liss & Associates for the California Integrated Waste Management Board, municipalities in Carroll County, Iowa, St. Paul, Minn., San Jose, Calif., and Somerset County, N.J., already have in place regular curbside collection of fabric-based materials.

Years ago when our family lived on Cape Cod, the town dump had a wonderful "swap shop" at the landfill facility. Anyone who had an item to give away could leave it in a tightly packed but well-organized wooden building. Dump-goers could browse the shop, taking away reusables that caught their fancy. I wasn't the only town resident who repeatedly returned from dump runs with a trunk filled with "new" treasures.

Unfortunately, swap shops like the one I frequented in Orleans, Mass., are few and far between.

Much as I'd like to wave a magic wand and create similar free-exchange services in every community, I know that's not going to happen.

What can happen is the growing realization that giving away is better than throwing away, and that "buying used" can be a money-saving, socially conscious and environmentally friendly thing to do.

It can also be fun.

On a recent trip to my favorite thrift shop I spent a pleasant hour poking through racks, bins and shelves filled with the discarded detritus from other peoples' lives.

My search yielded the following treasures: a "new" best blouse (\$2); two pairs of name brand shoes (\$1.50 -- on sale, two-for-one); three silk ties for my son (99 cents each).

To paraphrase a MasterCard commercial -- total purchase: \$6.47.

The little way you can make a big difference: Priceless.

For information online:

Institute for Local Self Reliance, www.ilsr.org/recycling/textile report

Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/msw/textile.htm

California Integrated Waste Management Board,
www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Publications/LocalAsst/31002005.doc