

Introduction

“I’d buy organic food if it weren’t so expensive.” “I’d buy compact fluorescent bulbs if they cost the same as regular light bulbs.” “I’d buy a hybrid car if it cost the same as other cars.” If any of these statements could be yours, you are not alone. But you are misinformed. Sadly, many people think that making the green choice is making the more expensive choice. Although this can be true, it doesn’t have to be. Yes, it costs more to buy an organic frozen dinner than it does to buy one that contains conventionally grown and, often, artificial ingredients. But the ecothrifty choice is the one that saves money and is better for the environment. The ecothrifty choice for dinner is one that is cooked from scratch. An organic frozen dinner is not environmentally friendly with its two or three layers of packaging, some of which are not even recyclable or biodegradable.

“But I don’t have time to cook!” “I don’t know how to cook.” “After working a hard day, I shouldn’t have to come home and cook.” Madison Avenue marketing executives and advertisers have driven home the ideas that cooking is difficult and time consuming and no one should have to do it and that we are all entitled to eat whatever we want, whenever we want it, without having to do anything other than hand over a few dollars. Television shows like *Top Chef* have turned cooking into a spectator sport, and how can the average person compete with that? Gone are

the days of Julia Child telling everyone that they can cook. How much is your time worth? For most of us, time at home is worth exactly zero dollars because no one is paying us when we are not at the office. Since I'm a freelance writer, the more time I spend at my computer, the more I get paid, but I can't spend every waking hour at the computer. As it is, I already spend too much time there, and my body rebels with all sorts of aches and pains. I need to get up, go outside, walk around, and lift stuff. I can join a health club and pay someone else for the privilege of moving my muscles and sweating in their space, or I can garden, take care of animals, cook from scratch, and do things that actually pay me indirectly in terms of money saved and health improved.

I have been running the numbers for years, and although some things may not make a big impact on my bottom line, I'm usually excited about how much money I'm "making" by doing things myself rather than buying them, especially when I am substituting for high-priced items. If I were to buy the raspberries that I use in my raspberry crisp, it would cost \$20! And if I bought that whole dessert from a bakery, they'd probably charge at least \$40 because they need to make a profit, but honestly, I've never seen a dessert like my crisp for sale because raspberries are just too expensive. No one would put six cups of raspberries in a dessert because they know they wouldn't be able to sell it and make a profit. And my raspberry crisp is made completely from organic ingredients and with very little added sugar, which not all bakeries do. To me, this is priceless.

I could list lots of activities where your time winds up being "worth" \$30 or more an hour, which is a good rate for time that otherwise would not pay you a cent. How much are you paid to surf the web, watch television, or play video games? When something is being sold for less than it would cost me to do myself, there often is a very unpleasant reality behind the product price — factory farms, sweat shops in third world countries, illegal immigrants being exploited, or products of such poor quality that they wind up in landfills far too soon. Our cheap food and our cheap stuff are not really cheap at all.

Cooking and food are not the only examples of our giving control to big corporations to take care of us. Gradually we are letting go of all

sorts of simple skills. We don't do the math to conclude that a compact fluorescent light bulb will save us money in the long run. We won't consider giving up the heated leather seats to buy the hybrid car at the same price. We continue driving to work instead of using mass transportation or living close enough to walk or bike. In today's world, no one needs to be inconvenienced or to know how to do anything — except spend. You can buy anything you need or want, and you can use all your free time pursuing leisure activities and watching television, where you are exposed to more advertisements encouraging you to want more and buy more.

When advertisers tell us what we want to hear, we believe them without question. It is a well-known phenomenon that communication scholars call confirmation bias. When you believe that your time is too valuable to cook, you will believe that eating out is a good deal financially when an advertisement tells you it is. Conversely, if you really like eating fast food, you will ignore everything negative that you hear about it.

Throughout history, cultures have focused on the attainment of wealth. For individuals and countries, the goal has been to have more land, more money, and more power. And in the past hundred years, we can add corporations to the equation. Just as countries conquered and annexed smaller countries two hundred years ago, big corporations take over smaller or weaker corporations today, creating bigger and more powerful corporations. And we are all helping them by buying their products, whether we need them or not. In many cases, buying one product creates a problem, which then can be solved by buying another product. Making poor nutritional choices often leads to medical conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Although physicians are clear that dietary changes can reverse these conditions, many people would rather continue to eat poorly and take costly medication, which may cause side effects, such as impotence, which will be solved by taking yet another medication.

We really want to believe we can have it all. We can avoid cooking, eat junk food, and stay healthy. We also want to eat fresh tomatoes, bananas, avocados, peaches, and every other imaginable fruit and vegetable

twelve months a year, and we want it all for a cheap price, even if the food has to travel three thousand miles or more to get to our plates. We don't want to do physical labor, but we do want to drive ten miles to the gym, where we will spend thirty minutes walking to nowhere on an electric treadmill. We want cosmetics that keep us looking young without giving us cancer. We want a clean house without actually having to clean it. While we complain that we don't have any time, we are watching television somewhere between almost three hours¹ and five hours per day.² We ignore the fact that it takes more time to get in the car, drive to a restaurant, wait to be seated, wait for food to be served, and drive home than it would take for us to cook and clean up in our own kitchens. We complain that we don't have enough money to eat healthily, but we are spending less of our incomes on food than at any time in our history. Americans spent 42.5 percent of their incomes on food in 1901, almost 30 percent in 1950, and only 13 percent by 2003, and 42 percent of the money we spend on food is spent away from home.³

But according to a growing number of researchers, the party is ending. We are suffering from unprecedented levels of obesity, cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, and other maladies. Landfills are full, and no one wants a new one in their backyard. Our financial systems are crumbling, from the biggest corporations to average families. Some say food prices will double or triple in the next few years. As the price of oil skyrockets, the price of everything else will follow because if you bought it, a truck brought it. And in our increasingly global economy, the majority of the things we buy were brought to this continent by a ship. Our modern food system is dependent on diesel fuel to run tractors and combines. Fertilizers and pesticides are petroleum based. Plastic packaging is manufactured from petroleum. Cheap appliances now built in Asia require transportation to North America where we purchase them.

Are we doomed? No. There is a lot we can do to save money, conserve our resources, and live a healthier lifestyle. In my first book, *Homegrown and Handmade*,⁴ I wrote about how you can grow your own food and fiber, and while those activities certainly help you live a more ecothrifty

life, they are pretty big projects. There are many little things you can do on a daily basis to improve your life and protect our environment. One thing you can do — over and over again — is to simply start questioning things that you have always assumed to be true. Maybe your time is not too valuable to cook dinner. Do you really always need to buy new clothes rather than used? Does your child really need the latest plastic gadget from China? Maybe you wouldn't mind drying a few things on a clothesline rather than in a dryer. Could better time management help you save money by avoiding impulse purchases when you are in a hurry?

The most important thing we need to do is to stop making excuses for ourselves to overeat and overspend on things we don't need. This can be hard to hear, and it is the opposite of what marketers have been telling us for decades. When my children were young, I remember spending \$40 on paper products — tablecloth, napkins, plates, and decorations — that were thrown away after being used once for my son's birthday party. A tiny voice in my head at the time questioned what I was doing, but the Navy officer's wife in my head wanted to keep up appearances. What would have been the consequence of not buying those items? Nothing negative. I would have saved \$40, and a big bag of garbage would have been kept out of the landfill.

The brain always supplies us with excuses when we do something that makes us think twice. In the case of the birthday party, I was an officer's wife, so I thought I had to do things a certain way. Other excuses might include a lack of time or support because you work long hours or are a single parent. Situations like these certainly present challenges, but they can often be overcome. Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right!" Everyone has his or her own personal set of challenges. To overcome your challenges you have to think beyond the marketing ads. As long as you let Madison Avenue tell you how to spend your money and your time, you're a pawn in the marketing game, making others richer. The good news is that you can stop playing that game whenever you are ready.

Are you ready to save money, get healthier, and stop sending so much trash to the landfill? Don't worry — you don't have to move to

the middle of nowhere. You can get started wherever you are living. This book offers suggestions for living an ecothrifty life, but this book is only the beginning. Once you start thinking about what you do in your daily life, you will undoubtedly come up with many more ideas that will work for you. Don't worry if you can't implement all of the ideas. Picture this book as a giant intellectual buffet. Take what looks good to you and leave the rest. The important thing simply is to get started. As the saying goes, "A trip of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Are you ready to take that first step?