## **Commentary**

## A 'No *Mottainai'* Incidental Environmentalist

## By KENJI G. TAGUMA Nichi Bei Times

I used to think that my mom was the cheapest person in the world. I cringed with embarrassment at the thought of taking greatly overused paper bags for my school lunch — you know, crinkled up to make the most abused dollar bill look crisp.

Then I started to realize that she just didn't want to live beyond our means, a not-so-wealthy family of seven living in the countryside of West Sacramento. There were just too many mouths to feed in a single-income household, particularly when that single income depends on the seasonal harvest of tomatoes.

Perhaps her living through the scarcity of wartime Japan also informed mom's desire to reuse just about any and everything.

All the times we had to carefully unwrap our Christmas presents, in the hopes of reusing the wrapping for yet another year. Today, to not be able to tear right into presents would spoil the fun for the three-year-olds.

Other items she saved: tofu containers, meat trays, wooden chopsticks, desiccant packages, boxes, paper bags, or the reused Clorox bottle hanging on the clothesline outside, used to store clothes pins. Also, she uses pie foil pans to hold the water for many plants.

Too many to list, much less remember.

In discussing this with staff, I've come to realize that a lot of things my mom does, at near age 77, allows her to do her part to reuse and thus save the environment in her own way.

She always discards eggshells in a special basket under the kitchen sink. I didn't know what she really did with them, or the coffee grounds kept near the same area, but now I understand due to a Website that my brother Mark informed me about (www.backwoodshome.com/articles/nyerges44.html).

Through the Website, I learned that eggshells are 93 percent calcium carbonate and contain "about 1 percent nitrogen, about a half-percent phosphoric acid, and other trace elements that make them a practical fertilizer."

My eldest sister Carol in Nagoya, Japan chimed in with her own eggshell tip: "I use the thin lining of the shell to put on my face to take out dirt which clogs the pores on my nose," she wrote via e-mail. "You should see it when I peel it when it gets a little hard, there are a lot of dirty stuff on it!"

What about the coffee grinds? The same site provides some insight:

"Coffee grounds can be particularly useful in the garden, or, at the very least, added to your compost pile. Used coffee grounds contain about two percent nitrogen, about a third of a percent of phosphoric acid, and varying amounts of potash... Analysis of coffee grounds shows that they contain many minerals, including trace minerals, carbohydrates, sugars, some vitamins, and some caffeine. They are particularly useful on those plants for which you would purchase and apply an 'acid food.' such as blueberries, evergreens, azaleas, roses, camellias, avocados, and certain fruit trees.

One thing that has provided my nieces and nephews hours of cheap fun are all of the *kamaboko* (fish cake) blocks that my mother saved. I still don't see how we could have eaten *that* much *kamaboko*.

Nevertheless, those boards helped



FUN WITH KAMABOKO BLOCKS

— Mom, niece Maki, and a kamaboko
block tower. courtesy of M. Sharon Taguma

to build many wooden houses, and some awfully tall high-rises, which would come crashing down if one lacks engineering acumen.

According to my sister-in-law Alice in Mountain View, Calif., the *kamaboko* blocks even found their way to the San Jose Betsuin Japanese language school. "One year she gave us close to 200 *kamaboko* boards," said Alice. "We spray-painted them shiny black, and brought them to Japanese school for all the kids to use for their cultural projects. (We used them for the base of the *hina-ningyo* displays and also the base of the *koinobori*)."

Alice recalled other reuse habits as well. "My favorite from mom—cut the top half off paper milk cartons and use the remaining as coasters for bottles," she said.

Ah, I remember, like for the *shoyu*, rum and cooking oil bottles that had the propensity to dribble little streams of residue.

"She made pillow cases from rice sacks and used old newspaper to wrap veggies to give away," Alice added.

I don't think mom ever bought any chopsticks, really. She saves all of our chopsticks after we eat at a restaurant, and even takes the chopstick wrappers home to use as bookmarks!

"Those chopsticks she brings home (the cheaper ones) are used as kindling to start their fires," reminded my sister Sharon. "I still collect those Styrofoam containers for mom to use for our *bentos*. Mom still rinses out Ziploc bags and plastic wrap to re-use, which I do too... she hangs the bags on the side of refrigerator for quick drying."

One recent discovery added to mom's reuse repertoire...She makes a lot of her coveted *futomaki sushi* every month for church, or on other occasions. Along the way, she came across a nifty packaging idea: using boxes from plastic wrap or aluminum foil to pack her beloved *sushi* rolls. How simple, yet ingenious! Her friends even donate their expended foil and wrap boxes.

So there you have it. My mother is no longer just the "cheap" daughter of a family of seven kids who tries to save pennies wherever she can by finding clever ways of reusing.

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She has epitomized, to me, the cultural concept of not being "mottainai" (wasteful).

By coming up with ways to help reduce her carbon footprint — intentional or not — she has proven herself to be quite an environmentalist.

小さいころ自分の母親は世界で一番ケチな人だと信じていました。何度も何度も繰り返し使われてしわくちゃになったランチバッグでお弁当を持たされるのは本当に恥ずかしかったものでした。だんだんと成長するにつれわかってきたのは、母は、西サクラメントの片田舎にすむそれほど裕福でないの7人家族が、収入以上の生活をしたくなかっただけであったということです。ひとつの収入源で食べさせていくには多すぎるほどの家族で、しかもその収入源というのがトマトの収穫という期間限定のものでありましたから。また母が物資の少ない戦時中の日本で育ったこともなんでも繰り

母の溜め込んでいたかまはこの板は、甥や姓たちに何時間もの楽しい時間を与えてくれました。それにしても僕たちは、どうやってあんなにたくさんのかまぼこを食べたのだろう? そのかまぼこ板を使ってたくさんの木の家や、上手に作らないと倒れてしまうものすごく高いビルを作ることができました。カリフォルニアのマウンテンビューに住む義姉のアリスによると、かまぼこ板たちはサンノゼ別院日本語学園でも使われたということです。「ある年にお義母さんに200個もの板をもらったのよ。それをスプレーで真っ黒に塗って子供たちの工作の雛人形やこいのぼりの台にしたの。」と教えてくれました。

アリスも母の再利用術を思い出すのに一役買ってくれました。「一番印象に残っているのは牛乳パックの下半分を使ってコースターにしたことかな。」 そうだった! しょうゆやラム酒、調理用油などたれて汚れやすいものの下に確かに敷いてあったのです。「お米の袋で枕のカバーを作ったり、古新聞で野菜を包んであげたりしたわね。」とアリスはつけ加えました。

母は一度も割り箸を買ったことがなかったのでないかと思います。僕らが外食して持ち帰った箸を残らずとっておきました。箸袋も持ってかえってきて、本のしおりになりました。「安い割り箸は火をおこすのに使ったじゃない。」と姉のシャロンが思い出させてくれました。「発泡スチロールはお弁当用に、お母さんのためにとっておいてるわ。私もそうだけどジップロックもラップも洗って何度も使うし、冷蔵庫の横に干してあるわよね。」

最近母の再利用術のレパートリーが一つ増えました。母は毎月教会やその他の機会に、皆がほしがる太巻きをつくるのですが、その入れ物にラップやフォイルの入っていた箱を使うすばらしいアイデアを考えつきました。なんて簡単ですばらしいアイディアでしょう! 母の友達でさえもが使い終わったラップの箱をくれるのだそうです。

そうなんです。母はもう一銭でも浮かそうといろいろ知恵を絞って再利用した、七人兄弟の中で育ったケチな娘ではなくなったのです。私にとって、母は「もったいない」という文化的概念を最も実践してるお手本のような人なのです。いろいろな方法で地球への影響を少なくしようと努める母は、本人がそれを意識してるかどうかは別にして、まさしく環境保護主義者にほかならないのです。

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