



Column Amy Domini

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Simple steps

ABOUT 50 YEARS AGO, THE NEW YORKER PUBLISHED a cartoon that tickled my father's funny bone, so he got the artist to give him the original. It featured two men looking at a large flip chart on which was drawn a five-story urban type of building, such as you might see in any city. One man was explaining to the other, "It is designed to use modern energy-efficient technology, with windows that open to let cool breezes in." Because of that cartoon, I know that people have been talking about the lost art of energy savings for 50 years or more.

When you start looking at the many ways to preserve energy that the typical Victorian knew but that we have forgotten, it gets a bit disheartening.

My neighbor used to have those outdoor awnings covering each of her windows. When you walked into her house on a hot summer's day, the temperature dropped fifteen degrees. That's because the glass in the window magnifies heat from the sun. If you don't let the sun hit the window, you get a much cooler house. Then she'd open the windows at night to let the cooler air in, closing them again the next morning.

I'll admit, I just don't like air-conditioning. Somehow it just feels wrong. So I began this article with cooling ideas, but there are other energy savers that have fallen from use. Refrigerators keep getting bigger and bigger, and really, they use energy that our forebears didn't have so didn't waste.

A friend of mine grew up in a house built in 1699, with a cellar, not a finished basement; it had a dirt floor. The family had one room down there with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Fresh eggs were stored there for a month or more. Potatoes, carrots, beets, winter squashes, along with apples and pears and grapes, sat in baskets on the shelves. Jars of jam could be left happily for several years with wax poured over the top. The melted wax

adhered to the top of the jelly. Since nothing could get in, not even air, there was no mold, so no germs. Even with the door closed, it got enough heat from the kitchen so that nothing froze, but much could be stored there that today would have to be refrigerated.

I'm not trying to make a case that the world should return to dirt floors in the basement. We are creatures of the generation we grew up in. But it is important to remember that we're not taking the simple steps we could be taking to do our own part in the fight to save the planet from extinction. Climate change is too big a price to pay for personal convenience. So let's get serious about the steps we can take.

First, let's change our lightbulbs. Electric lighting accounts for roughly 25 percent of the energy the average home uses. Yes, the newer, more efficient bulbs cost more up front, but estimates say they save you \$20 over the lifetime of the bulb. I don't argue that lower cost is a reason to swap; I only use it to point out how much extra energy the old bulbs are wasting.

Next, let's think efficiency when we consider the purchase of a car. My city has cars you can rent by the hour, and I've found that these work fine for most every need I have. But I do live in a city. If you need a vehicle, at least check the fuel efficiency and factor that into your calculation of the real price of the car. The new electric cars get the miles-per-gallon equivalent of roughly 60 to 120. In other words, they cost you less to fuel (a lot less), and they don't pollute as you drive.

My last thought will surprise some. Let's buy more secondhand. As a society, we create an awful lot of new stuff, and making new stuff uses energy. So does shipping new stuff, packaging new stuff, and lighting the stores that sell new stuff. Buying secondhand is fun and an adventure. It supports local owners and nonprofits. But importantly, it saves energy.

That cartoon on the wall is 50 years old and is as amusing today as it was when it was drawn. We giggle at the thought of claiming that opening windows is the height of new technology. But there is an important message there.

Sometimes simple steps are important. ■

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