

THE ZEN OF CURBSIDE RECYCLING

by Lenny Bass

It was my sixth gallon of water of the day. The temperature on the thermometer read 95 degrees and it was only 9:30 a.m. The water would go in and minutes later come pouring out through my pores, soaking me through. Lucille, the recycle truck, looked at me with contempt.

"Are you really planning to take me out on a day like this?" she groaned.

"Yes, Lucy, we have to. We have a whole neighborhood of recyclables to pick up."

"Well, tell people to wait until fall when things are a little cooler," she begged.

"Can't do that, Lucille. We've got to get the stuff now."

She sighed a bit more, and we went on our way. It was my seventh month driving a curbside truck for Recycle Ann Arbor. In every nook and cranny we ventured, Lucy and I searched for the oft-illusory treasure — glass jars, tin cans, newspapers, cardboard, motor oil, and old car batteries. Through rain and snow, sleet and drought, we had cruised through town together, our minds fixed on one goal alone — NO MORE GARBAGE!

We had long talks on quiet streets, near parks, where we would stop for lunch or for a rest. The day's heat seemed to make her conversational.

"You know that I started out as a city garbage truck," she said. "For years I would ask myself time and again... what is 'garbage'? What is this stuff that I am used for to haul away? Where does it come from? Who makes it? And why? What purpose does it serve? I was boggled. I knew that other terms for garbage were refuse, and waste — things 'unwanted' by the Ann Arbor community. But, I couldn't understand why I was needed to haul away that which is 'unwanted.' If it's not wanted, why is it made in the first place? For years these questions plagued me, and sometimes,



Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

...make it second nature!

especially at low points in the dead of winter, I would refuse to start. My life was a mystery with no meaning. Eventually I was retired from the garbage route and reconditioned to be a recycling truck. Even then, it all seemed like the same job as before because other garbage trucks were still as busy as before."

A tear leaked out from her sweaty carburetor. I tried to console her, giving her a quart of DW-40. She thanked me and went on, "Then one day, I met my guru, Zen Master Orendra, the oldest and wisest truck on the recycling fleet."

"You mean the beat-up recycling truck that is kept for spare parts?"

"Yes," she answered slowly, "Orendra helped me to understand that 'garbage' is nothing more than a human state of mind transformed into a physical 'reality.'"

"Whoa," I said, "that's pretty deep. What do you mean by that, Lucy?"

"What I mean is that you humans are a strange breed. The more you think you want and need in order to be happy in the way of material possessions, the more garbage you make.

You haven't quite figured out that the less you need, the less you are a slave to having things, the more content you would be inwardly. In that contentment, you can be happy with less, hence you would consume less and therefore make less garbage. This, in turn, would free up garbage trucks to do more meaningful things."

"Like collecting recyclables?" I asked.

"Exactly," she replied.

"Lucy, that's amazing," I exclaimed. "But tell me, what message should I give to this so-called 'strange breed'? I mean, how can we really put an end to the garbage crisis we face?"

"I would say," Lucy quietly replied, "that people must become aware of themselves. They must become aware of their values and beliefs and how they are living. People need to make the connection between their values and actions. For example, every person should do a study of their own personal garbage. Item by item, they need to look at what is there and ask themselves is this needed, or is it simply unnecessary convenience and waste? Examine every empty box, plastic bottle, wasted paper, diaper, or banana peel, and ask, how did this get here, and what lifestyle changes can be made to ensure that this item never ends up in a garbage can again? Until this kind of personal exploration takes place, person by person, I'm afraid that the garbage problem will only grow worse. So, Lenny, give people this message from me, Lucy the recycle truck — attaching ourselves to our garbage is no different than other choices in life. Good choices can greatly enrich the earth itself as well as the lives of people and trucks. Reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost!"

Lenny is a former Recycle Ann Arbor curbside driver and lives in the Zen Buddhist Temple. He continues to help with recycling as a substitute driver and friend of the trucks.