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Hugh Macdonald is temporarily indisposed, so I am holding the editor's quill for him until he's back onboard. More precisely: I'm curating the content, and Stephen Zuluaga is doing the online posting part.



Here is a blog post I did in 2007 and just stumbled across on Wayback Machine. As relevant today as it was 15 years ago.

A tale of three brushes

My early childhood was in post-war (WWII, that is!) Britain. We were a far from wealthy household. I remember clearly how in our family we had things that were a permanent part of the household - things like potato peelers and dish brushes, crockery and linen. These things simply were. A potato peeler or dish brush would last for year after year, and it was quite an event if one had to be replaced. Take the dish brush. It was made with a wooden handle and real bristles. The red paint would gradually peel off, reducing it to bare wood, but that brush would just keep on going. It was so familiar and comfortable it was practically a member of the family.

Fast forward 50 years or so.

My wife needed a new dish brush the other week. The old one was at least 6 months old and disintegrating (despite most of the dish washing being done by machine). So off she goes to X-Mart (make X=K, X=W, whatever) and comes back with a card containing 3 (three!) dish brushes. Three dish brushes with plastic handles and Nylon bristles.

Now, I bet that making each of those modern hi-tech brushes consumed many times as much of the Earth's resources than just one wood and bristle brush 50 years ago. Petroleum derived plastics, huge amounts of energy produced by burning filthy coal, fancy packaging (card, printing, wire and plastic ties) etc., etc. And each of those 3 brushes will last a fraction of the time of the old fashioned model.

Does this make sense? Am I any happier, any more fulfilled, because I am now the proud co-owner of not one battered old wooden dish brush but 3 shiny multi-coloured brushes? Will plastic and nylon make my dishes any cleaner than wood and bristle?

Is this just the rambling of a silly old fart? Or am I right to be worried about a world where we make and discard junkier and junkier goods at an ever accelerating rate, frenetically transferring the world's resources from mines and oil wells to garbage tips and atmosphere with no real net benefit gained along the way?

Posted on January 1, 2007 (And yes, even 15 years ago it would seem I was a silly old fart!)