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Food waste is destroying the planet. Doing something about it starts at home

By [Sharon Kunde](#)

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On a recent Monday, my kitchen was full of breakfast options: apple-topped streusel, lemon poppyseed muffins, almond Danish. There were also ripe bananas, dented boxes of cereal and several cartons of eggs, each with one cracked and cemented in its cardboard divot, but 11 intact and gleaming.

The bounty came from the dumpster of a local grocery store. It'd been retrieved by my husband and two friends the night before. We'd keep what our family of four could eat — and there would be still be extra to take to a nearby food pantry.

Worldwide, a third of all food is lost or thrown away each year, according to the U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organization. This 1.3 billion tons of unconsumed food is increasingly recognized as a major ecological problem. Producing it wastes more than 1 trillion gallons of water and billions of pounds of petroleum-derived fertilizer. This loss maddeningly persists alongside widespread food insecurity. And much of the waste ends up in landfills, where it decomposes without air, releasing methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide.

When my family began our concerted campaign to reduce our carbon footprint a few years ago, we were surprised to find that food weighed in as our second biggest climate-damaging culprit (behind only airplane travel). By letting us take some of our food directly out of the waste stream, dumpster diving lowered our carbon impact. But it also heightened my awareness of the perversities of the global food economy.

It was suddenly striking to me how accustomed I'd grown to the complacency and excess of food shopping culture in the United States. In the 1990s, I spent several years living and cooking for myself in rural Mongolia. There, I toted home unpackaged produce in two reusable plastic grocery bags and yogurt in a small blue bucket I brought empty to the vendor every week.

But back in the U.S., massive displays of stacked fruit eventually ceased to boggle my mind. I passed over the package of strawberries with the squashed one on the bottom (which would end up in some lucky dumpster diver's haul). I looked for the biggest, most perfect sweet potato. At home, rather than eat food that had become unappealing, I let it mold, grow stale or dry out until I could throw it out without a second thought.

In short, I related to my food as a commodity, rather than as what it is: a miraculous substance with the power to sustain me and my family.

In its commodity form — each item interchangeable and visually perfect — food functions as a sign of needlessness. With so many cabbages or loaves of bread available, we can feed a fantasy that our hungry bodies need never suffer want (much less expire entirely). Eating food from the waste stream put me aslant of the exhausting rituals of consumer capitalism: shopping, hauling, unpacking, managing crammed cupboards and fridge. It reawakened me to the connection between perishable food, my fragile body, and the resilient but not limitless ecosystem in which both grow.

Food waste is not a structural inevitability; it's a bad habit that we can change.

Grocery stores — the primary conduit between farmers and consumers — are often the target of efforts to reduce food waste. In April, for instance, a report from the Center for Biological Diversity and the “Ugly” Fruit and Vegetable Campaign issued a report about grocery stores. It made many sensible recommendations, including marketing edible but unattractive produce, deploying new technology to monitor perishable food, improving poor expiration date labeling systems and more. Groceries could also stop overstocking produce to create that aesthetic of overabundance.

But in North America and Europe, the lion's share of food waste comes not from grocery stores (responsible for 11%), but from consumers (responsible for nearly 40%), according to the U.N.'s FAO. So in addition to advocating for practices in the food industry, we in the wealthy developed world need to cultivate a more sustainable personal relationship with food.

When you get right down to it, food is a strange thing: It's part of the environment, it's part of us, and then it's part of the environment again. When we gather, prepare, consume and dispose of it, we experience the tight weave of our bodies with the Earth. The fact that our bodies depend on and are part of the material environment can be disturbing to contemplate, but it can also remind us of how strange and wonderful it is to be, briefly, alive.

The 19th century American naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau worried that “devotion to sensual savors” turned our food into sustenance for “the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies.” For Thoreau, to enjoy the sensuality of eating was to feed only the part of us that dies.

For me, though, enjoying food can generate an awareness of my mortality — the worms that possess me — normally deadened by excessive consumption. Because of this awareness, I buy and throw away less, choosing instead to prepare, eat and finish what’s available. The decision to do so emerges not from feelings of guilt or sanctimony, but from the sense of the radical unlikelihood — the abundant gift — of my being here in the first place.

Food is part of the fleeting pleasure of being mortal on this Earth. Appreciate that. Value it. Buy ugly produce. Ignore the expiration date if the food smells fine. Use vegetable scraps to make stock. Compost. Plant a garden or a fruit tree. Ask the management at your grocery store about its sustainability practices and take your business elsewhere if you don’t like what you hear. Write to Congress about the farm bill.

When I asked friends who’d lived in Mongolia with me to help me recall what we’d done with leftover food, one replied: “Interesting, I don’t think I really had any food waste. Maybe bones, which went to the dogs.” Food waste is not a structural inevitability; it’s a bad habit that we can change.

Sharon Kunde recently completed her doctorate in English at UC Irvine.