

The Zen of Washing Dishes

By Dan Phillips

There are many ways to do dishes, not the least of which is to simply discard the dirty dish and start with a new one. Or, time-honored in bachelor sectors, the dog does it for you and even dispatches leftovers. I've even seen a dirty plate refrigerated for several days' use, with each additional use acquiring a bit of default seasoning—a kind of cumulative cuisine.

But most mainstream Americans either use a dishwasher (since as Americans we don't deserve to do dishes), or the less glamorous hand-washing technique. There are many battles that I simply won't win, but if I clatter enough, I might just plant a few seeds here and there.

Dishwashers gobble lots of water and lots of energy—12 to 20 gallons per load. But they also sterilize dishes better than hand washing. So, whether you use a machine or wash by hand, you need to be smart about it.

Long ago, in a brief spurt of passion, my wife announced that there are seven parts to a meal—planning, shopping, preparing, serving, eating, cleaning up, and putting away. And she demanded that everyone in the family participate in more than just one of those. And she was right.

This was the beginning of my dishwashing epiphany. Simply the eating of a meal was underpinned by many significant activities, and is no different now than it was in the dark ages. Further, it is akin to the Zen of motorcycle maintenance and the art of archery. And if you really plumb the topic beyond its mundane luster, it reaches into the deepest of primal bents and defines who we are in a very revealing way. If we participate in only the most pleasant part of the process, we miss connections to other parts of our lives and our relationship to the world.

We're lucky to be Americans. We can plan any kind of a meal we can dream about and be reasonably certain we can pull it off. We can find even the most exotic ingredients within a 50-mile radius. Tools to prepare it and the appropriate recipes are widely available. We can serve it on dishes that were available only to royalty not four hundred years ago and then we can relish the feast, like royalty. We have hot water at the ready to clean up, and cupboard space to return the paraphernalia. Americans didn't invent this quality of life, but we have certainly perfected it.

But every part of that process is predicated on an infrastructure that is driven by the perceived abundance of our natural resources. Every mile we drive to get a particular Greek olive, every BTU used to cook, or that was used to manufacture our utensils—and of course the water we use—all of it relies on the depth of the American infrastructure. But, of course, as we have been reading in the news, those natural resources are

beginning to wane just a bit. And many of those resources have simply disappeared in some parts of the world.

So, we might ask ourselves, should we turn off all the lights, sulk, and concentrate on feeling guilty? Should we start eating only the dandelions in our lawns? None of those. What we can do is cultivate the Zen of washing dishes.

After driving 50 miles for Greek olives, ready yourself for preparing the meal. Draw some dishwater—as hot as you can stand, with a detergent that performs with beefy suds, but fill the sink only half full. Then as each utensil is used during preparation, wash it during slack times of preparation, saving the rinsing until after a few items have accumulated. Then rinse the items over the wash water. Put in the rack for drying. If spots on the dried dishes ruin your day, perhaps you can go the extra mile and dry them with a towel as they hit the drying rack. And as you use each utensil, reflect on how marvelous it is that you were able to do that with such convenience. Four hundred years ago it wasn't quite like that.

Then enjoy the meal like it was your first in days. Really enjoy it. Don't just consume—dine. Even if it is just chili. Tweak each bite with a bit of cracker, or, save the most succulent for last to crown the meal. Reflect on just how amazing it is that you are able to even have a Greek olive.

Clean up is a commitment to how much you enjoy the dishes you have. But there will be less clean up, since you have been busy during preparation. When you're finished, reflect on your royal lineage, and maybe even give a thought to what the poor people might be doing at that very minute.

But let's also say that you're a dishwasher kind of person. It's ok. Really. I have a dishwasher, although rarely used. But don't run the machine until it is loaded to the gills as per manufacturer's instructions. You must scrape food off the dishes before loading, but don't pre-wash. Hand-washing detergent and dishwasher detergent are two different animals, and you'll get a bit of scum left on your dishes if you hand wash first.

Now, some things just don't do well in the dishwasher. Your fine stemware or crystal, for instance. Or cast-iron or aluminum pans, or the variety of other things that are not "dishwasher" safe. You'll have to hand-wash them. This, of course, leads us to that nagging logical issue: "If you have to draw dishwater anyway, why not swish through the entire batch and skip the dishwasher?" Ok. Humans are not always logical—that's what makes us interesting.

But rational or not, it certainly is disgraceful to hand-wash before machine washing, or run a machine half full. It reveals how little we know about our equipment, our resources, our perceived bounty, and why we are so resented around the world. We have very few reasons to whine about anything, and especially if we didn't vote in the last election.

If we can't wash our own dishes in a responsible manner, perhaps we don't deserve dishes.