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The Cost of Things

The other afternoon I casually laid a piece of a plastic coat hanger on the table and confessed to Paul that I had broken it *again*. Our young house guest mentioned, with obvious amusement, that it would be far easier to replace such an inexpensive item than to try to repair it. He's right, and wrong, at the same time.

To begin with, the hanger is one of a set which I got a year or so ago to fill out the number of hangers I need for my clothes. I would need only one hanger instead of the set I'd have to buy to replace it. But more important, Paul really seems to enjoy repairing such things as plastic coat hangers. I suspect he likes the challenge of returning the object to a useful role as well as testing his ingenuity in restoring it as inconspicuously and as skillfully as possible. He doesn't use pencil erasers and wire coat hangers in this repair, but those two things are his favorite means of repairing a great variety of broken household items, some of which are masterpieces of restoration.

Actually, I think Michael was talking about a generational culture clash. Although his background is far from affluent, he is the product of a way of living which calculates the cost as the first criterion in making a judgment. We - Paul and I - belong to the generation which was shaped by the depression. Even before the depression, in fact, my family was frugal in making the fullest use of things (*any* things). The old philosophy of making do with what we had was frequently invoked in my home even before the depression. Little girls' dresses, socks, and night wear were passed from child to child within the family or from cousin to cousin; little boys' wearable pants, shirts, and pajamas also were passed along until the individual pieces became candidates for cleaning rags. Long before it was fashionable to wear jeans with torn or patched knees, my brother wore patches on his play clothes, just as I wore not-quite-matching ruffles to extend a too-short skirt. Our children saw little of hand-me-downs and "making-do." Maybe manufacturers of children's clothes were skillful in planned decay. Our children, too, would be likely to buy a new set of hangers instead of repairing the needed broken one.

It's a mind-set, if you will, but I maintain that I get pleasure from replacing the ribbon binding on a blanket or zig-zagging a fraying dish cloth in order to continue using it. I must admit, however, that I'm glad that the collars on men's shirts can no longer be successfully turned and that the fibers in socks resist wearing, making my darning egg obsolete. The minor household repairs are a part of my character, I guess. I know my daughter-in-law winces when she sees the improvised replacement knob on my oven. I'm so accustomed to it that it never occurs to me to seek a genuine replacement that I'd have to buy.

When we were first married, we had a limited income which worked well for us so long as we didn't get involved in unnecessary purchases. Moreover, during a time of wartime scarcity of materials of all kinds, we were also products of the depression when money was scarce.