

Like many other Canadians, I've become much more eco-conscious, packaging-wary and energy-minded.

But often I find that translating this state of mind into daily practice means conflicts and on-the-spot decisions. Last month, for instance, I decided to prepare a kidney bean dish from scratch using the hard dried legumes instead of opening a can of the precooked sort (riddled with sodium and packed in a full metal jacket to dispose of). Well, I presoaked those beans as instructed, but they still took hours of cooking to get soft enough to purée into a soup. I even made the bean water do double duty by throwing in some eggs to hard-boil. But as the hours passed and legumes would not give up their leathery toughness, I was racked with guilt at the wattage this one supper dish in one household was consuming!

Another thing: I was always taught to use the small stove burners to heat small pots, reserving large ones for large pots. The other day, I was boiling corn in a cauldron on a large burner, after which I wanted to do some asparagus in my tall narrow steamer. Dilemma: should I use the already heated large burner for the 10 minutes it would take for the spears? Or should I turn off the big element and heat up a small steamer-sized one? In the end, I went with the already hot burner, but was I right? I sure felt guilty watching that enormous element heat the skinny little steamer at its centre.

These little problems haunt me daily. As a child, I was taught to run the cold water tap to get rid of contaminants in the pipes before taking a glass of water. But isn't that wasteful in today's environmentally challenged world?

Across the street, there's a new baby in the house. Every few days, a gigantic white van pulls up, parks, engine idling, and delivers a batch of fresh cloth diapers. I wonder about all that diaper prerinsing and hot-water laundering, the loads of detergent, bleach and softeners. How does the cloth imprint compare ecologically with a similar number of paper diapers? What about the acres of agricultural land growing cotton in a time of world food shortages and rising rice prices? I'm sure it computes in favour of cloth, but I wish I knew just how.

A few years ago, I switched to doing my laundry in



cold water to save energy, but since some things don't come out as clean as with hot water, I tend to run the washer longer and sometimes I have to rewash items. How does all that balance out?

At our house, we've taken religiously to leaving off even hard-to-access light switches, ones we used to leave on with a low-watt bulb for safety reasons. I've had some recent stumbles in the dark — nothing serious so far, but someday a nasty fall could reduce my mobility or send me to the emergency room. The other day, as I turned around to snap off the light, I almost toppled down the stairs with my laundry basket. How does that factor into the equation?

Energy conservationists are now recommending that we shun our greedy clothes dryers and hang up our wash to dry outdoors. I've been doing this for years with towels and sheets (no flannel long Johns flapping in the breeze, fortunately) both to save energy and to gratify myself with the scent of air- and sun-dried linens. That's all well and good for me; my sons are grown and gone. But down the road lives a working mom with a toddler in daycare and two young kids in grade school. Her burden of doctor and dentist appointments, birthday parties and school events — not to mention boiling dried beans — must be tremendous. Should I expect her to lug baskets of wet laundry to the clothesline as well? How about conserving her energy?

Here in Ontario as elsewhere, the government has mandated the recycling of used alcohol containers by charging a refundable deposit on wine bottles and beer bottles and cans. What this means in Toronto is that on garbage nights a steady stream of scavengers goes noisily through the bags and bins, strewing trash over the sidewalks and disturbing sleepers. And the cash-strapped City of Toronto, which used to sell some of the glass back to industry, has lost a source of income.

While we're on the subject of cities and recycling, check out Lucie Turgeon's feature on how to make your community a healthier place to live ("Salubrious Cities," p. 16). And please write or email me about your adventures in environmental responsibility.

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