

Chapter 9

Made to Last

Part 5 : Re-use is better than recycle

Since not recycling just creates more rubbish, but recycling can require tremendous energy expenditures, it makes much more sense to avoid recycling, and instead re-use stuff whenever possible, as people did in the past - for example, continuing to use an umbrella as an umbrella through repeated repair, and so forth. I know that re-using umbrellas sounds pretty stingy, but in the past people were forced to live frugally, and there are any number of similar examples.

Nowadays most liquid products come in plastic or metal containers, and you rarely see the wooden barrels or tubs that were so common in the past, except as presents or ornament. In the Edo period, even sinks were shallow wooden tubs.

Incidentally, the barrels used to store products of fermentation such as sake, soy sauce and miso were invariably made from cross-grained slats to prevent leaks, while tubs, such as those used for sushi (vinegared rice), were normally made of straight-grained slats to help absorb excess water. Both barrels and tubs are made in the same way, with a round base being slotted into a cylindrical arrangement of slats which is then held together tightly by hoops to prevent leakage of the contents.

The hoops used traditionally in Japan were made of woven bamboo strips, and so tended to stretch and loosen in time due to the constant strain and moisture to which they were exposed. These days, barrels with loose hoops would just be thrown out, but in the past there were specialized artisans (effectively a subset of coopers) who made a living from replacing old barrel hoops with new ones.

In the Edo period, there were merchants who specialized in the buying and selling of the masses of barrels circulating. In fact this was a major business at that time, and since the merchants would have bought barrels in various conditions of disrepair, I imagine that they would have employed fulltime coopers to carry out all the necessary refurbishing.

According to a historian's survey, the sake barrels being shipped from the Osaka and Kyoto area were all of a certain size that was much larger than the size used in Edo, and so it seems likely that Edo barrel merchants also used coopers to dismantle such large barrels and turn them into the smaller size used in Edo.

Lots of Edo period pictures of coopers remain, including those depicting traveling coopers walking along roads humping big bunches of bamboo strips together with the tools of their trade. These traveling coopers made a living repairing barrels kept in ordinary households, and since almost all watertight containers in those days were wooden barrels and tubs, and every household must have boasted at least a few such containers, there was no doubt a very sizable population of coopers in every Edo period city addressing a high demand for repairs.

In an age when everything was handmade, it was invariably the maker of the product who repaired it as occasion demanded, and so in addition to making things sturdily (since flimsy things wouldn't have found customers), people also made them easy to repair when eventually they did break. In large cities where the distribution of goods was well developed, there was of course no guarantee that the maker of a certain product would be living in the same locality as end users, but the form products take tends to converge as it evolves, and so artisans other than the original manufacturer were able to carry out repairs and restoration work. For example many of the paulownia chests refurbished by our neighborhood chest

maker had not been made by him or his workers, but because such chests were made according to certain principles and methods shared by all such craftsmen, they were able to carry out such work without any problem.

The cities of the Edo period boasted large numbers of specialized repairmen, and many of them plied their trade by wandering around neighborhoods, lugging their tools and calling out their services so that anyone in need of them could just pop out and call them over.

In addition to the paper lantern repairmen and coopers mentioned above, repairmen in the Edo period included knife sharpeners, locksmiths, and specialized menders of clogs, sandals, pots and pans, pottery, and even abacuses and bamboo pipe stems, to mention but a few. The pot and pan menders used bellows to create a hot enough charcoal fire to fix holes by welding, while the pipe stem menders specialized in unclogging tar-filled bamboo stems of traditional smoking pipes, and the pottery menders used refined rice flour as a glue to put cracked pottery back together, firing the repaired pieces to harden them.

This may all sound like a very distant world, but the fact is that pan menders were still going around Tokyo neighborhoods as recently as 1965. I remember how one such artisan did a great job of mending a hole in an alumite pan of ours with aluminum rivets, showing how artisans adapted their traditional skills to new materials too.

Pipe stem menders too could still be seen on temple festival days in downtown Tokyo into the 1960s. Elderly knife sharpeners used to call at our home up to the mid-1980s. They would spread out a mat on a quiet roadside, and then take their time sharpening all the kitchen knives they had entrusted with from the surrounding households.

There were still a great many of these artisans making a living repairing everyday items very cheaply right up until about twenty to thirty years ago. Thanks to them, all sorts of sundries were used to the hilt, which meant that there were fewer items requiring recycling.

It's of course a matter of choice whether you consider such a lifestyle to be pitiful or admirable, but the fact is that in our super-crowded society, there are fewer and fewer places to dispose of our waste, and it is becoming increasingly clear that recycling in the modern way requires an astounding amount of energy. We're entering an age in which, whether sorry or admirable, we have no choice but to make things to last, and to use them as long as possible.

What on earth is "the economy" if a chair that breaks apart in five years earns more plaudits for its contribution to the economy than a table that lasts a life time? I'm a rank amateur where economics is concerned, but if economics legitimizes the generation of prosperity through this method, then clearly the Edo period, when our ancestors lived just by exploiting recent solar energy, was a ridiculous age.

However to our Edo period ancestors, economic growth was not a top priority, and they tried to use things as long as possible simply because it made sense. Even if this makes no sense from the viewpoint of economics, the result was a stable society and a marked lack of environmental destruction.

I read a newspaper article about a famous economist who won the Nobel Prize in economics for his research on how to make money on hedge funds - which are effectively huge gambles - without getting burned. The funny thing was that the article ended up informing readers that the economist belonged to a group that lost everything in hedge funds.

It's hardly surprising that such a dubious science is more likely to belittle rather than praise the way people of the Edo period maintained a unique economy on what was a tiny amount of natural energy, but

even if a big country like America still has breathing space, our country of Japan, one of the most crowded in the world, just can't afford to take such a lackadaisical attitude.

If maintaining this economy of ours depends on creating huge amounts of stuff that we could well do without, and then consuming as much as possible, such an economy is fundamentally flawed. And if current economic science legitimizes such an economy, then that science too is flawed.

On April 12, 2004, Japan's Ministry of the Environment designated 25 of Japan's approximately 35,000 invertebrate species as extinct, and a further 319 as being threatened with extinction. The animals populating this Earth are dying out as a result of human activity. No doubt the economy couldn't care less about the little bugs and beasts that are part of our ecosystem, but people need to wake up to the fact that such an attitude poses a threat to our own survival. We need to revive the attitude of the people of the Edo period who just took it for granted that using things as long as possible just made sense.

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