

DIY—Why?

MARIANNE PETERS

My daughter Claire bent over the saucepan, sniffing the bubbling yellow goo. “Is that soup?” she asked. “Nope, I’m melting Fels-Naptha soap for detergent,” I said. “I can make five gallons for just pennies, and it only takes about ten minutes!”

“You’re cooking *soap*?” Giving me a sympathetic glance, she walked away, shaking her head.

All right, not everyone cooks up soap. But with a recession pinching our pocketbooks and environmental worries pricking our ears, more of us buy less, make do, and even seek out everyday solutions that our parents and grandparents employed. Suddenly it’s hip to be thrifty. The Do-It-Yourself (DIY) craze has spawned television channels dedicated to tackling domestic projects from painting to plumbing.

Personally, learning to DIY encourages me to seek cheaper, creative solutions and shrink my carbon footprint, engaging my brain and feeding my soul. As handy as I would like to be though, it’s not always easy. Manufacturers use strategic “planned obsolescence” to make goods cheap and disposable. When our microwave died, it would have cost just as much (maybe more) to repair it than to replace it. Many objects are designed to be handled only by “experts.” When I dropped my smart phone in the sink last year, I had to send it back to the manufacturer and spend two hours on the phone sorting out a replacement. There was no handy neighborhood cell-phone repairman.

When we can re-purpose or mend

objects we own, we lessen our reliance on imported goods, resulting in fewer fossil fuels for shipping, fewer resources for manufacture, and less waste. Do you have worn-out furniture? Try a fresh coat of paint. Need new accessories? Recover pillows or make seasonal decorations out of natural materials from your backyard. If you are not a seamstress, handy person, or designer, find someone local who could show you how to DIY. I don’t sew very well myself, but I have had lots of help from my mother, who does.

Recently I picked up a magazine full of DIY tips and projects: making funky lamps out of old books, “upcycling” by reusing or repurposing objects, and skills people have forgotten about. One spring my daughter had worn out the knees of her jeans. Reluctant to buy pants she might grow out of by summer’s end, I found cute iron-on patches at the fabric store to conceal the holes. Kate loved her “new” jeans!

Figuring out solutions can be time-consuming—no doubt about it. Yet focusing my whole body on completing a project, whether cooking a meal for my family or painting the bathroom, has a centering effect, perhaps because I’m using my hands or doing one thing at a time.

In fact, we were created to use the hands God gave us, and when we don’t, we begin to disengage from our physical lives. In his essay “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” Matthew Crawford writes, “A decline in tool use would seem to betoken a shift in our mode of inhabiting the world: more passive and more dependent. And indeed,

there are fewer occasions for the kind of spiritedness that is called forth when we take things in hand for ourselves, whether to fix them or make them.” Tackling DIY projects is good for our pocketbooks and our planet, but it is also good for our souls.

DIY books can be found at many libraries and hardware stores, and there are many websites dedicated to whatever project you are willing to tackle. Google your topic to find instructions and YouTube video tutorials. A couple of my favorite websites include DIY Doctor (www.diydoctor.org.uk) and *Mother Earth News* (www.motherearthnews.com). ■

Recipe for Homemade Detergent

Ingredients:

1 bar of soap (Fels-Naptha, Ivory, or other pure soap), shaved or grated
1 cup of washing soda (Arm & Hammer makes some)
½ cup of Borax

Boil 4 cups of water in a large saucepan on the stove, then lower to just below boiling, gradually adding grated soap and stirring until all is dissolved. Set a 5-gallon bucket in the sink and put 3 gallons (11 liters) of hot water into it. (I use a kitty litter bucket with a lid.) Add the soap and water mixture from the saucepan, stirring a bit to melt any remaining shards of soap. Then stir in washing soda and Borax until all is dissolved. Leave the mixture to cool overnight, which will result in a gelatinous mixture. I use about ½ a cup of the detergent in my front-loader to do a full load of slightly soiled clothes (a cup if the clothes are really dirty). The detergent is low-sudsing, so it works well in front-loading washers.

Source: www.thesimpledollar.com

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.