On Dumpster Diving

Lars Egne

I O N G B E F O R E I began Dumpster diving I was impressed with Dumpsters, enough so that I wrote the Merriam-Webster research service to discover what I could about the word “Dumpster.” I learned from them that “Dumpster” is a proprietary word belonging to the Dempsey Dumpster company.

Since then I have dutifully capitalized the word although it was lowercased in almost all of the citations Merriam-Webster photocopied for me. Dempsey’s word is too apt. I have never heard these things called anything but Dumpsters. I do not know anyone who knows the generic name for these objects. From time to time, however, I hear a wino or hobo give some corrupted credit to the original and call them Dipsey Dumpsters.

I began Dumpster diving a year before I became homeless. I prefer the term “scavenging” and use the word “scrounging” when I mean to be obsolete. I have heard people, evidently meaning to be polite, use the word “foraging,” but I prefer to reserve that word for gathering nuts and berries and such which I do also acquire. I am not scavenging to survive the tenuity. “Dumpster diving” seems to me to be a little too cute and, in my case, inaccurate because I lack the athletic ability to lower myself into the Dumpsters as the true divers do, much to their increased profit.

I like the frankness of the word “scavenging,” which I can hardly think of without picturing a big black snail on an aquarium wall. I live from the refuse of others. I am a scavenger. I think it a sound and honorable thing, although if I could I would naturally prefer to live the comfortable consumer life, perhaps—and only perhaps—as a slightly less wasteful consumer owing to what I have learned as a scavenger.

While my dog Lizbeth and I were still living in the house on Avenue B in Austin, as my savings ran out, I put almost all my sporadic income into rent. The necessities of daily life I began to extract from Dumpsters. Yes, we are from Dumpsters. Except for jeans, all my clothes came from Dumpsters. Boom boxes, candles, bedding, toilet paper, medicine, books, a typewriter, a virgin male love doll, change sometimes amounting to many dollars; I acquired many things from the Dumpsters.

I have learned much as a scavenger. I mean to put some of what I have learned down here, beginning with the practical art of Dumpster diving and proceeding to the abstract.

WHAT is safe to eat?

After all, the finding of objects is becoming something of an urban art. Even respectable employed people will sometimes find something tempting sticking out of a Dumpster or beside one. Quite a number of people, not all of them of the bohemian type, are willing to brag that they found this or that piece in the trash. But eating from Dumpsters is the thing to avoid being the dilettante from the professionals.

Eating safely from the Dumpsters involves three principles: using the senses and common sense to evaluate the condition of the found materials, knowing the Dumpsters of a given area and checking them regularly, and seeking always to answer the question “Why was this discarded?”

Perhaps everyone who has a kitchen and a regular supply of groceries has, at one time or another, made a sandwich and eaten half of it before discovering mold on the bread or got a mouthful of milk before realizing the milk had turned. Nothing of the sort is likely to happen to a Dumpster diver because he is constantly reminded that most food is discarded for a reason. Yet a lot of perfectly good food can be found in Dumpsters.

Canned goods, for example, turn up fairly often in the Dumpsters I frequent. All except the most phebic people would eat them directly. The problem is that when canned goods are among the safest of foods to be found in Dumpsters, but are not utterly footprint.

Although very rare with modern canning methods, botulism is a possibility. Most other forms of food poisoning seldom do last harm to a healthy person. But botulism is almost certainly fatal and often the first symptom is death. Except for carbonated beverages, all canned goods should contain a slight vacuum for the Del sake a can even if it came from a Dumpster. Canned goods are among the safest of foods to be found in Dumpsters, but are not utterly footprint.

To extend that botulism occurs on of course, it can occur in cans on pantry shelves as well as in cans from Dumpsters. Need I say that home-canned goods found in Dumpsters are simply too risky to be recommended.

From time to time one of my companions, aware of the source of my provisions, will ask, “Do you think these crackers are really safe to eat?” For some reason it is most often the crackers they ask about.

That question always makes me angry. Of course I would not offer my companion anything I had doubts about. But more than that I wonder why he cannot evaluate the condition of the crackers for himself. I have no special knowledge and I have been wrong before. Since he knows where the food comes from, it seems to me he ought to assume some of the responsibility for deciding what he will put in his mouth.

For myself I have few qualms about eating from crackers, even though they sometimes be discarded when the item is found with many others, including something that are obviously perfectly good. Some students, no doubt, think a small bag of defrosting a freezer by chucking out the whole lot. Not only do the circumstances of such a find tell the story, but also of course seem perfectly safe to me, the mass goods with excluding of course the obviously rotten. Many are discarded for minor imperfections which can be pared away. Leafy vegetables, potatoes, celery, and some similar things may be contaminated by liquids and may be impractical to wash.

But especially, hard candy, is usually safe if it has not drawn ants. Chocolate is often discarded only because it has become discolored as the chocolate de-emanulates. Candying after all is one method of food preservation because pathogen do not like very sugary substances.

All of these foods might be found in any Dumpster and can be evaluated with some confidence largely on the basis of appearance. Beyond these are foods which cannot be correctly evaluated even to eating the item, if it is not eaten at once. I began scavenging by pulling pizzas out of the Dumpster behind a pizza delivery shop. In general prepared food requires caution, but in this case I knew we got the shop closed and went to the Dumpster as soon as the last of the help left.

Such shops often get prank orders, carrying out “pranks.” But because help seldom stays long at these places pizzas are often made with the wrong topping, refused on delivery for being cold, or cut up in smaller pieces. The pizzas are discarded boxed up because inventory is kept by counting boxes: a boxed pizza can be written off; an unboxed pizza does not exist.

I never placed a bogus order to increase the supply of pizzas and I believe no one else was scavenging in this shop. But the people in the shop became suspicious and began to retain their garbage in the shop overnight.

While it lasted I had a steady supply of food, sometimes warm pizza. Because the shop did not want the source of the pizza, and because I visited the Dumpster regularly I knew what was fresh and what was yesterday’s.

The area I frequent is inhabited by many affluent college students. I am not here by chance; the Dumpsters in this area are very rich. Students throw out more clothes and other garbage than all the homes of all the people in town. It is one of the most prosperous areas in the world. I find it advantageous to keep an eye on the academic calendar. The students throw food away all the time. They break their diets because they do not know whether it has spoiled or will spoil before they return. A typical disc is a half jar of peanut butter. In fact, the very fact that peanut butter does not require refrigeration is likely to spoil in any reasonable time. The student does not know that, and since it is Daddy’s money, the student decides not to put on the list.

Open containers require caution and some attention to the question “Why was this discarded?” But in the case of discard from student apart-
I have learned that scavenging gradually, on my own. Since then I have initiated several companions into the trade. I have learned that there is a predictable series of stages a person goes through in learning to scavenge.

At first the new scavenger is filled with disgust and self-loathing. He is ashamed of being seen and may lurk around, trying to duck behind things, or he may try to dive at night.

(In fact, most people instinctively look away from a scavenger. By skulking around, the novice calls attention to himself and arouses suspicion. Diving at night is ineffective and needlessly messy.)

Every grain of rice seems to be a maggot. Everything seems to stink. He can walk all over the found can, but he cannot erase the stigma of eating garbage out of his mind.

That stage passes with experience. The scavenger finds a pair of running shoes that fit and look and smell brand new. He finds a pocket calculator in perfect working order. He finds pristine ice cream and canned soup, frozen, more than he can eat or keep. He begins to understand: people do throw away perfectly good stuff, a lot of perfectly good stuff.

At this stage, Dumpster shyness begins to dissipate. The diver, after all, has the last laugh. He is finding all manner of good things which are his for the taking. Those who disparage his profession are the fools, not he.

He may begin to hang onto some perfectly good things for which he has neither a use nor a market. Then he begins to lose the note of the things which are not perfectly good but are nearly so. He mates a Walkman with broken earphones and one that is missing a battery cover. He picks up things which he can repair.

At this stage he may become lost and never recover. Dumpsterers are full of things of some potential value to someone and also of things which never have much intrinsic value but are interesting. All the Dumpster divers I have known can testify to the point of trying to acquire everything they touch. Why not take them, reason, since it is all free?

This is, of course, hopeless. Most dumpster divers come to realize that they must restrict themselves to items of relatively immediate utility. But in some cases the diver simply cannot control himself. I have met several of these pack-rat types. They can hold onto the values of various pieces of junk verge on the psychotic. Every bit of glass may be a diamond, they think, and all that glitters, gold.

I have gained weight when I am scavenging. Partly this is because I always find far more pizza and doughnuts than water-packed tuna, nonfat yogurt, and fresh vegetables. Also I have not developed much faith in the reliability of Dumpsterers as a food source, although it has been proven to me many times. I tend to eat as if I have no idea where my next meal is coming from. But mostly I just hate to see food go to waste and so I eat much more than I should. Something like this drives the obsession to collect junk.

As for collecting objects, I usually restrict myself to collecting one kind of small object at a time, such as pocket calculators, sunglasses, or campaign buttons. To live on the street I must anticipate my needs to a certain extent: I must pick up and save warm bedding I find in August because it will not be found in Dumpsterers in November. But even if I had a home with extensive storage space I could not save everything that might be valuable in some contingency.

I have proprietary feelings about my Dumpsterers. As I have suggested, it is no accident that I scavenge from Dumpsterers where good finds are common. But my limited experience with Dumpsterers in other areas suggests to me that it is the population of competitors rather than the affluence of the dumpers that most affects the feasibility of survival by scavenging. The large number of competitors is what puts me off the idea of trying to scavenge in places like Los Angeles.

Curiously, I do not mind my direct competition, other scavengers, so much as I hate the can scrappers.

People scrappers can because they have to have a little cash. I have tried scrapping cans with an able-bodied companion. Afoot a can scrapper simply cannot make more than a few dollars a day. One can extract the necessities of life from the Dumpsterers directly with far less effort than would be required to accumulate the equivalent value in cans.

I have suggested, then, are people who must have small amounts of cash. These are drug addicts and winos, mostly the latter because the amounts of cash are so small.

Spirits and drugs do, like other commodities, turn up in Dumpsterers and the scavenger will from time to time have a half bottle of a rather good wine with his dinner. But the wino cannot survive on these occasional finds; he must have his daily dose to stave off the DTs. All the cans he can carry will buy about three bottles of Wild Irish Rose.

I do not begrudge them the cans, but can scrappers tend to tear up the Dumpsterers, mixing the contents and littering the area. They become so specialized that they can see only cans. They earn my contempt by passing up change, canned goods, and readily hockable items.

There are precious few courtesies among scavengers. But it is a common practice to set aside surplus items: pairs of shoes, clothing, canned goods, and such. A true scavenger hates to see good stuff go to waste and what he cannot use he leaves in good condition in plain sight.

Can scrappers lay waste to everything in their path and will start out with a pair of good shoes to the bottom of a Dumpster, to be lost or ruined in the mud. Can scrappers will even go through individual garbage cans, something I have never seen a scavenger do.

Individual garbage cans are set out on the public easement only on garbage days. On other days going through...
them requires trepassing close to a dwelling. Going through individual garbage bags without scattering litter is almost impossible. Litter is likely to reduce the public’s tolerance of scavenging. Individual garbage cans are not as productive as Dumpsterers, people in houses and duplexes do not move as often and for some reason do not tend to discard as much useful material. Moreover, the time required to go through one garbage bag that serves one household is not much less than the time required to go through a Dumpster that contains the refuse of twenty apartments.

But my strongest reservation about going through individual garbage cans is that this seems to me a very personal kind of object that one would object if I were a household. Although many things in Dumpsters are obviously meant never to come to light, a Dumpster is somehow less personal.

I AVOID trying to draw conclusions about the people who dump in the Dumpsters I frequent. I think it would be unethical to do so, though, although I know many people will find the idea of scavengers ethics too funny for words.

Dumpsters contain bank statements, bills, shopping lists, and other documents, just as anyone might expect. But there are also less obvious sources of information. Pill bottles, for example. The label on pill bottles contain the name of the patient, the name of the doctor, and the name of the drug. AIDS drugs and anti-psychotic medicines, to name two types, have come specific and are seldom prescribed for any other disorders. The plastic compact cans for birth control pills usually have complete label information.

Despite all of this sensitive information, I have had only one apartment resident object to my going through the Dumpster. In that case it turned out the resident was a University athlete who was taking bets and who was afraid I would turn up his wager slips.

Occasionally a find tells a story. Once I found a small paper bag containing some unused condoms, several partial tubes of flavored sexual lubricant, a partially used compact of birth control pills, and the intimate specifics of a young man. Clearly she was through with him and planning to give up sex altogether.

Dumpster things are often sad–abandoned teddy bears, shredded wedding books, despair-of-sales kits. I find many pets lying in state in Dumpsters. Although I hope to get off the streets soon that Lizbeth can have a long and comfortable old age, I know this hope is not very realistic. So I suppose when her time comes she too will go to a Dumpster, perhaps in a better place for her. And after all, for most of her life her livelihood has come from the Dumpster. When she finds something inside that is specific and came from the Dumpster I let her have it. She already knows the route around the best Dumpsters. I like to think that if she survives me she will have a chance of evading the dog catcher and of finding her sustenance on the route.

Silly vanities also come to rest in the Dumpsters. I find a really nice nightskirt underneithower. I get a lot of materials from the Dumpsters. Evidently sorority girls, hoping to impress someone, perhaps themselves, with their mastery of a womanly art, buy a lot of embroidery-by-number kits, work a few stitches horribly, and eventually discard the empty case. I have cut out their stitches and turn the canvas over, and work an original design. Do not think I refrain from chaukling as I make original gifts from these kits.

I find diaries and journals. I have often thought of compiling a book of literary found objects. And perhaps I will one day. But with love I do not turn up exactly the thing I most want to find. Yet in spite of the principle of chance, scavenging and magazines most of the interesting tends to yield returns in some proportion to the effort and intelligence brought to bear. It is very sweet to turn up a few dollars in change from a Dumpster that has just been gone over by a wino.

The land is now covered with cities. The cities are full of Dumpsters. I think of them as modern tombs of self-reliance. In any event, after ten years of government service, where everything is geared to the lowest common denominator, I find work that requires much tentative and effort refreshing. Certainly I would be happy to have a singeare again, but I am not heartbroken to not have one.

I find from the experience of scavenging two rather deep lessons. The first is to take what I can and use it how I will. When I find this is as unobjectionable; a thing cannot be made useful, perhaps by trading, has no value otherwise fine or rare it may never be so for example, some art I think useful and valuable, but other art might be otherwise for me.

I was shocked to realize that some things are not worth acquiring, but now I think it is so. Some material things are white elephants that eat up the possessors substance.

The second lesson is of the transience of material being. This has not quite converted me to a dualist, but it has made some headway in that direction. I do not think any more, but certainly material things are longer-lived than other material things.

Once I was the sort of person who invests material objects with sentimental value. Now I no longer have those things, but I have the sentiments yet.

Many times in my travels I have lost everything the clothes I was wearing and Lizbeth. The things I find in Dumpsters, the love letters and handbags of so many lives, remind me of this lesson. Now I hardly pick up a small object wishing envisioning the time I will cast it away. This I think is a healthy state of mind. Almost everything I have now has already been cast out at least once, provoking what I own is valueless to someone.

Anyway, I find my desire to grab for the gaudy bauble has been largely satiated. I think this is an attitude I share with the very wealthy—we both know there is plenty more where what we have come from. Between us are the rat-race millions who have confined themselves with the objects they grasp and who nightly scavenge the cable channels looking for what they know not what.

I am sorry for them. □