

Promoting participatory solutions to our problems (23, 02, 13)

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Over the years, I have discovered that the problem with menial work is the way that it's presented. Upon reflection, it's obvious that we are subjected to billions of boring tasks throughout our lifetime. Brushing teeth, taking out the garbage, preparing meals, filling the gas tank, shovelling snow, applying sun tan lotion, visiting most relatives, going to the dentist, purchasing tires, watching TV, cheering for the Leafs and on and on and on.

Believe it or not, we can often learn new tricks from our children. For example, I have observed how my daughter has cleverly introduced the concept of eating nutritional food to her children. When I was a kid, my eating habits were dreadful. Of course, in those days, bigger was better so my mother seemed more intent on encouraging volume. To be fair, her issue was cost, and because her funds were limited, she had to be resourceful. And for her, the happiest times occurred whenever the entire family sat at the table. For me and my brother, the happiest time was to get away from the table, on to the more pressing moments in our lives like reading comic books.

My daughter has internalized the concept of spin. She wants her children to be healthy, and to eat good food, and to my amazement, they eat lots of nutritional vegetables and fruits. They also eat yogurt, but it's not plain yogurt; it's "special yogurt." The moment that something is branded as "special," that item becomes attractive.

Those who practise Zen, tend to brand all menial work as "special." Drawing water and chopping wood are as important as going to the opera. Their lives are simple, but in that simplicity sits profundity.

What got me thinking about this was reading about the recent Florida python hunting contest that drew hundreds armed with weapons of every description – machetes, guns and clubs. These people willingly amble amidst alligators through the Everglades in search of huge snakes. Why? Because the clever folks at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission initiated "Python Challenge 2013," a month-long contest open to hunters and non-hunters alike. Participants actually pay a \$25 entry fee for the privilege of hunting snakes. Also, they must complete an online training course to help identify pythons as opposed to Florida's cute native snakes. We don't want any mistakes out there in the wild.

Just like my daughter's "special yogurt," the state wildlife agency has spun this tedious work into a contest with a prize of \$1,500 for the most pythons captured and \$1,000 for the longest python! Amazing! They actually make money on the proposition through the fees which are more than enough to offset the prize money.

Think about municipal applications with town-sponsored contests. Most towns are already into gardening contests which help present a tasteful, scenic view for visitors and residents alike, but why not venture further? A prize for who has read the most books in the public library! Another for best snow shovelling, most litter collected, least garbage, most total miles walked for exercise, most visits to a seniors' home, most food donated to the poor, etc., etc.

Like the good folks in Florida, the name of the game is to promote awareness of various problems and encourage participatory solutions. In their case, it's the threat to their ecosystem by these huge Burmese pythons, native to Southeast Asia. Last year's record catch was a snake measured over 17 feet long that weighed 165 pounds. With no known predators, the only check on these nasty fellows is through contests such as this. Officials say that 500 people have registered thus far from 32 states! Can you see future tourism posters: "Forget Disneyland! Come to the Florida Everglades. Catch and KILL snakes!"



Of course, we must be careful with these sorts of promotions. They might get out of hand. A "Kiss the Most Seniors" contest would certainly fly, but it would not be appropriate to sponsor a "Drink the Most Wine" contest throughout Niagara.

