

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

The power of one dollar

During a season when many of us are contemplating spending our hard-earned dollars on everything ranging from necklaces and lingerie to DVD players and video games, it is imperative to reconsider the value of \$1. In other words, we need to ask ourselves, "How far can \$1 go?" or, "What can \$1 buy?" In answering such a question, I expect many to respond, in one of the following ways. "A dollar? Pht." Or, "Good luck." Or, "Give me a break, a dollar can't even get you a gallon of gas these days." Call me the extreme optimist but a dollar can go quite a long way, even in today's world.

My grandfather, who was born and lived in New York City nearly his entire life, taught me a valuable lesson. Once he said, when I was merely a tot, "Kids today don't even pick up change because they don't understand the value of money." And although this comment revisits my consciousness every time I see a penny resting on the ground and compels me to pick it up, the wisdom contained in this short quotation also represents a way of thinking that speaks volumes about our current society's general misvaluing and underappreciation of money. If we could individually and collectively realize what potential each one of our dollars has, we might be able to conquer the vast majority of maladies that our world now faces.

Whether you are celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or some other holiday this December, you likely feel compelled by generosity, compassion, guilt or the media to spend considerable sums of money on gifts and charitable contributions. Televisions and newspapers are full of commercials advertising the newest gadget that will bring pleasure to you or someone you like. Hordes of organizations also take advantage of the season's spirit and bombard mailboxes, phone lines, and store entrances with pleas for donations.

For many of us it is very gratifying to give our hard-earned money to people that we love, to causes that we feel connected, or to those that are less fortunate. Yet, given that all of us have limited funds, it makes sense that we make the most of our giving and think carefully about each and every \$1 that we pass on this holiday.

But what can \$1 buy in our society anyway? A typical laundry list of common items that cost approximately this amount in a typical convenience store includes: a

20-ounce soda, a comic book, a super-sized candy bar, a lottery ticket and a can of chili. Albeit incomplete, this list is representative of those consumables that our population uses (and disposes of) in short order. The purchaser might not even get "home" before an item in this price range is long gone — digesting in his/her stomach with the inedible parts all too often deposited curbside. Given the frequency and rapidity with which many of us "waste" \$1 in similar fashion, it is no wonder that \$1 doesn't seem to be anything worth worrying about. Yet, a closer look reveals how much \$1 can do.

[Unveiling the curtain.] One "lousy," "measly," "stinking" \$1 bill is extremely valuable. Amazingly, approximately one billion people (nearly one in every six humans) live on less than one dollar per

day. Believe it or not, one crisp or wrinkled U.S. dollar (or its equivalent) can feed a family, can protect people from debilitating diseases, can save children from preventable death, can "save" land from unsustainable development, can provide tubfuls of potable water, and keep a person warm and comfortable. Are you still pessimistic about the power of \$1? Let's look more closely at these seemingly far-fetched claims.

First, one dollar can feed a family in many developing countries for several days. Consider that Vietnam, one of the many poor countries in the world, gets the equivalent of 10¢ in foreign currency for every pound of rice it exports. Clearly then, in their home country, a Vietnamese person can purchase much more than ten pounds of rice with \$1. Similar prices can also be found for other staple crops (including wheat and maize) that provide important

nutrients and sustenance for huge numbers of people the world over.

Second, one dollar can prevent unwanted pregnancies as well as the spread of AIDS, one of the more debilitating diseases in our society. In the U.S., a typical condom can be purchased for about 50¢ when bought in bulk. Thus, conceivably, one dollar's worth of condoms might prevent two unwanted pregnancies (or consequent abortions) and/or two additional people from obtaining the retrovirus HIV. And since the

"true" cost of manufacturing and distributing condoms must be much less pricey in other global markets, one dollar can definitely have much more benefit elsewhere. The importance of the need for greater attention to this matter becomes more evident when one considers that, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, 49 percent more people in the U.S. each year are dying because of AIDS than because of homicides (Miller).

Third, as we enter the 21st century, one dollar spent could do wonders to impact the current three million children worldwide who die each year because of vaccine preventable diseases; translated, this is six children per minute. Fortunately, many vaccines are inexpensive to prepare and provide to needy children. In fact, according to a recent health report issued by several leading medical programs in the United States, the provision of a full course of vaccinations to children in Bangladesh (a small, highly populated nation bordering India on its eastern side) for three major killers (i.e., diphtheria, tuberculosis, and measles) costs less than \$1 (Khan and Yoder). According to another international health agency, it would cost only 35¢ for every human on earth (or \$7 per U.S. citizen if our country were to absorb the entire cost) to provide proper immunizations to all the children in the world. Obviously, \$1 spent on child immunizations would greatly reduce human suffering on this planet.

Fourth, one dollar can protect land from unnecessary development and ecological damage. In Knox County, agricultural land is typically sold for about \$2,000–3,500 per acre. At this price, one dollar buys a plot of land with dimensions of two feet by two feet. Seemingly small, a plot of this size, if conserved, might be home to thousands of blades of native grass, a host of native wildflowers, a slew of different spiders, and a passageway for many large fauna as well. Overseas, in locations where the U.S. dollar is strong, a much larger plot could be "saved" from reckless development. The conservation of land in key biological areas, particularly in the rainforests where more than 50 percent of all living species reside on ~6 percent of the world's land surface,

will have a major impact on slowing down the mass extinction that is occurring worldwide; a future article will deal specifically with this paramount problem. Since we, in the industrial world, have such influence on the destruction of diverse habitats overseas via our "need" for tropical hardwoods and hamburgers (the meat of which often comes from many thousands of miles away), it seems very reasonable that we help promote conservation activities as well.

Fifth, one dollar can provide plentiful amounts of treated tap water for our homes and workplaces. As noted in last month's article, yet still an unbelievable figure to digest, one dollar pays for nearly 1,000 gallons of municipal water in Galesburg. Well, without going into the details of how many showers or dish washings this is, surely \$1 has the power to provide plentiful amounts of healthy, nourishing (remember the minerals that one gets in the local water supply) and refreshing H₂O. Once again, if \$1 can get us so much usable water, consider how much clean water less fortunate people elsewhere could obtain for a "measly" dollar.

Lastly, a dollar can keep folks warm during the sometimes brutal Midwestern winter. Locally, many of us remember last winter when natural gas heating bills skyrocketed to levels unseen in recent memory. In simple terms, a \$400 heating bill works out to about two hours of heat for every dollar expense; on less frigid months, many more hours of heat are provided by \$1. In short, a \$1 "extra" contribution on your next heating bill will make some neighbor's life much more comfortable and pleasant. A dollar can also get people warm garments (such as a scarf, hat, or sweater) at local thrift shops found downtown. Undoubtedly, one of the most effective ways to protect oneself from potential hypothermia (a condition that impacts elderly folks much more readily) is to wear many layers. One dollar can buy at least a few of these. Therefore, \$1 can go part of the way to keeping us warm during this holiday, something everyone definitely desires.

In summary, one single dollar has the power to make a considerable impact on our local and global communities. If we all begin to appreciate this power, there is no question that our individual dollars can make the lives of humans better. Collectively, the combined strength of our individual dollars can reshape the world. Certainly, there are people locally and internationally that aren't getting basic human necessities — i.e., heat, clean water, immunizations, etc. — and at the same time many of us have a dollar (maybe more) to spare for the benefit of humanity. Perhaps the world would be a more peaceful place if fewer members of our species weren't so deprived. Remember, \$1, often thought to be a mere pittance, has tremendous ability to make our community and our world a happier, more harmonious place.

Works Cited

Khan, M.M. & R.A. Yoder. (1998) *Expanded Program on Immunization in Bangladesh: Cost, Cost-Effectiveness, and Financing Estimates. Special Initiatives Report No. 6. Partnerships for Health Reform.*

Miller, G.T. (2001) *Environmental Science Working with the Earth. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.*



Give the picture perfect gift

- Film and digital cameras for everyone — in all price ranges
- Photo albums, frames, camera accessories
- Custom framing of your heirloom picture
 - Enlargements up to poster size
 - Kodak reprints while you wait

**MIDWEST
PHOTO
SERVICE**

SERVING WESTERN ILLINOIS SINCE 1946
158 N. Broad St. Galesburg
342-6149