*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**It’s better to be frugal than cheap**

I am a penny-pincher, always have been and always will be. An old habit that is too late to change at my age.

I envy those lucky folks who win millions of dollars in the lottery. How wonderful, from a penniless chap who has to worry about how to pay the monthly bills to become a millionaire overnight! Wow, what a delicious thought indeed. No more worries about mortgage payments, monthly bills, car payments, insurance … (did I miss anything?).

Yes, it is a tempting thought; yet I have no idea what to do with the millions if I ever won the lottery. For a guy who doesn’t own much, I have everything that I’ll ever need. So, what to do with the millions of dollars? It is very sad indeed that I have to think about it. Oh well, everyone can dream; but I’ll never go out and buy lottery tickets. Just the thought of being a millionaire gives me nightmares.

I love teaching cooking classes. Never ever did I dream that I would start doing that at my retirement age. Just to see the smile on the students’ faces is worth all the tea in China.

I think it was in one of the classes that I was explaining to the students that we can make delicious gourmet food with cheap ingredients; and in that sense, I am quite cheap when it comes to spending money. Then one of the students corrected me and said, “No, Peter, you are not cheap by any means. I think you’re just being frugal.” It just hit me, so I am being frugal instead of being cheap. But what’s the difference?

So, I looked it up, and my, there is a big difference, and I’m glad to learn that I am frugal, and not cheap. What a relief! Well, just what is cheap?

Cheap and stingy go hand in hand — it has a negative image, referring to folks who have money, yet afraid to spend it; or worse, to share it. They are reluctant to part with their possessions; and oftentimes, they will take advantage of others in order to save a penny.

And that reminds me of a book that I read in high school. It was called “Silas Marner,” by George Eliot. Hong Kong was a British colony then, and all schools were required to study English history and English literature. I had problems with regular English already, and then I was forced to study old English, what a nightmare!

I forgot all the details, but the story was about this miser named Silas Marner who acquired a small fortune (maybe 30 pieces of gold, I forgot how much). That was all he had, and he just couldn’t part with it. His satisfaction in life was when he counted the pieces of gold every night before he went to sleep. He could never spend any of it, not to mention sharing it with others. However, something happened later which totally changed his life. I will finish the story later before I forget what frugal is.

Frugal has a more positive image — it implies that a person is willing to do something to save money; however, the reward is to get something more valuable in return. It is a savings strategy that is quite admirable.

My wife is a perfect sample of being frugal. She frequents the thrift store often, and many times finds quality items that would have cost 10 times more in regular department stores.

What surprises me is that sometimes she will pay full price shopping online. When I questioned her reasoning behind this, she explained to me that even though the prices in the thrift store are lower (as the merchandise is used), the quality of the products is the same. So, after cleaning and careful sanitizing, you get practically the same products, but at a much lower price. And the money that was saved can be used for other things, like a little online shopping.

Also, she explained that it is fine to buy cheaper products, but they don’t last as long as products with quality brands. Yes, I can relate to that. I’ve bought shirts and shoes that would fall apart after one season. By the third season, I would have spent much more than if I had some quality products to start with. Smart woman, that’s why I married her.

So now that I understand the concept, I understand that being cheap is not necessarily a good virtue, and it doesn’t mean that you will end up saving more money by being cheap. Now that I know more about being cheap, it reminds me of some of my friends in the past who would fit into the definition of “cheap.”

This was back in high school and a bunch of us would go for a bite after a soccer game or whatever; rather than paying individually, we would split the bill amongst us. Somehow, there was this guy (who was from a wealthy family) who would take advantage of the system. After the meal and before the bill came, he would sneak out and use the bathroom. When the bill came, we would divide the total with the headcount and each one would chip in and pay the total bill.

This “buddy” would show up as we were all leaving. He didn’t even mention just what his share was. Our group finally caught on to his “cheap act,” and he was not allowed to leave the table until we collected his share. Later, every time when we got together, no one would notify him. So, he had some short-term gain by taking advantage of his buddies. But what did he gain in the long run?

To finish the story of Silas Marner the miser. His most treasured gold coins were stolen from him one evening. Can you just imagine how he felt? His whole world just came apart. No joy. No hope. There was nothing left to live for. As in a miracle, he came across an abandoned orphan girl. Against his nature, he adopted the girl, and his whole world changed afterward. Though he lost his possessions, he had gained something totally priceless by watching the girl grow up to be a woman. He had her love and her affection, something that money could not buy. What a story.

I will always watch my pennies, but I am going to be frugal from now on. I will be resourceful and find ways to save money, but I will not be cheap.

Hey, maybe we can afford a vacation with all the savings. On second thought, we are already on vacation living in the Northwoods.

Hmm, maybe Chicago?