

Borrowing Happiness¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: From The Stuff Index

Annie Leonard²

- Number of items in the average U.S. supermarket: more than 30,000
- Amount Americans spent on shoes, jewelry and watches in 2004-2005: *\$100 billion*
- Amount spent in that period on higher education: *\$99 billion*
- TV commercials seen per day by the average U.S. child: *110*
- TV commercials the average American sees by age 20: *nearly 1 million*
- Added consumer spending a year for each 5 additional hours of TV watched per week: *\$1,000*
- Municipal solid waste produced each day in 2007 by the average American: *4.6 pounds*
- Number of electronic products thrown out in the U.S. every year: *about 400 million*
- The U.S. has 5% of the world's population but consumes 30% of the world's resources and creates 30% of the world's waste.
- If everybody consumed at U.S. rates, we would need 3 to 5 planets.
- The average U.S. person now consumes twice as much as they did 50 years ago.
- We each see more advertisements in one year than people 50 years ago saw in a lifetime.
- In the U.S., we spend 3-4 times as many hours shopping as our counterparts in Europe do.
- Average U.S. house size has doubled since the 1970s.

Sermon

One of the happiest times in my life was during my early twenties, when I lived for a while at the Abrahamic Community in East Lansing Michigan. There were five full-time volunteers who lived with up to seven guests who needed shelter from homelessness. None of us had much money—we shared one old car between us, we wore clothing from the thrift store, or from donations that people gave to the house. One of our activities was to go to various restaurants and stores in our neighborhood asking for the foods they were about to throw away—big tubs of soup, days old bread, even ice cream treats with broken cones. We served a lunchtime meal for 20 homeless persons, and we always ate what our guests ate.

I was remembering this time in my life, this past week, while reading a book called *The Overspent American*. Author Juliet Schor was exploring the rise of consumer debt in the

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2 Compiled from <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=19745> and http://storyofstuff.org/pdfs/annie_leonard_facts.pdf

US, and looking at the pivotal role of the human need to belong and to fit in and to measure up. Back in the 1950s, it was called "keeping up with the Jones's." There was a tone of judgement attached to that characterization—a moral judgement against status-seeking and envy. But this need to keep up with the neighbors also spoke to a deeper human need—to belong to community, to be welcomed by those we saw as our peers.

However, what Schor found in the late 1990s was that people were no longer trying to keep up with their neighbors—with whom they had likely shared a common level of income. Rather, they were now comparing their lifestyles to television celebrities and sit-com settings. The American Dream was no longer a modest house in the suburbs, with a picket fence and a car in the garage. Now, it was necessary to have a house twice as big with several bathrooms, two SUVs, color TVs for every member of the family, a VCR, and a personal computer. Of course, that was ten years ago; today the list of "needs" has expanded to include flat screen TVs, TiVos, laptops, iPhones, Wii game players—and on and on.

Television was pivotal in changing how we looked at our lives and our possessions. If we are average middle class Americans, or poor or working class Americans, we are constantly exposed to comparisons in which we can never measure up. It isn't just the ads. Most television sitcom characters, for example, live in houses or apartments and have clothing wardrobes that they would not be able to afford, at the salary levels of the jobs they occupy in their fictional worlds. All of us began to measure ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, against the lifestyles of the very upper middle class and beyond. More and more people began to use borrowing to be able to buy more and more.

This is especially poignant in the lives of children. Now, it is no longer enough to have a pair of new jeans—there is intense pressure to have the right brand of jeans. It is no longer enough to have a pair of sneakers—there is intense pressure to have the right brand of sneakers. Marketers spend billions of dollars influencing the desires of young people. Nathan Dungan writes of youth today, "With this generation—what you wear, what you eat, and where you shop determines who you are."³ Consumerism affects every corner of their lives.

In thinking back to my young adulthood, I notice how my community became an emotional anti-dote to consumerism. As long as I was surrounded by people living simply—without expensive clothing or gadgets or possessions—I was perfectly happy to live that way too. My life was rich in meaning, in friendship, in music, in celebration. Later on, when I lived in a more mainstream context, the feeling of needing to own certain kinds of possessions, or needing to spend money on certain kinds of activities, began to return. All of us need to feel a sense of belonging, a sense that we fit it with those who might comprise our community of support and care. No wonder our country is awash in debt.

3 Nathan Dungan, *Prodigal Sons and Material Girls*, 2003, p.5.

Added to this is a vastly expanded access to credit. At the risk of sounding like an old fogey, I remember a time just a few decades ago when the only things you could buy on credit were those that could be repossessed by the company or were designed to produce later income to pay them off. Things like a home and a car, or loans for a college education or a small business. Now, even high school students with no jobs receive offers for credit cards, and credit can be used for every sort of purchase, from food to entertainment to medical care.

Consumerism and easy credit are important factors in the crisis of debt that we know today. But there are also other large forces at work. According to information from the Common Security Club training, for the last three decades, real wages (adjusted for inflation) have remained flat or fallen for the majority of people in the United States. One of the ways we survived has been to work longer hours, or add more workers from each household to the labor market. But the other way we've survived has been through borrowing—with credit cards, home equity loans, and when things get more desperate—payday loans. Some of that borrowing has gone to buy more stuff than we needed. But many people have gotten into debt because of “medical costs, broken-down cars, long commutes to jobs, or caring for needy family members.”⁴

It is a pervasive catch-22. Our economy of the last 50 years was designed to be a consumer economy. If people don't buy more and more stuff, the economy loses profit and jobs, and starts to decline. In 1984, the national savings rate—the percent of income saved after expenses, was 11%. In 2007, it was negative 1%. After the meltdown in 2008, the savings rate started to go back up. But there is enormous pressure to start shopping again.⁵

In *The Story of Stuff*, Annie Leonard says,

Shortly after the World War 2, these guys were figuring out how to ramp up the [U.S.] economy. Retailing analyst Victor Lebow articulated the solution that has become the norm for the whole system. He said: “Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption . . . we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate.”⁶

Leonard talks about how product obsolescence was purposely built into the economy. It means “they actually make stuff that is designed to be useless as quickly as possible.” She was “reading quotes from industrial design journals from the 1950s when planned obsolescence was really catching on.” She notes: “These designers are so open about it. They actually discuss how fast they can make stuff break and still leaves the consumer

4 Common Security Clubs, Session Two, “Living in Borrowed Times”, p. 12-13

5 More info from “Living in Borrowed Times.”

6 *The Story of Stuff*, at http://storyofstuff.org/pdfs/annie_leonard_footnoted_script.pdf p. 10.

with enough faith in the product to go buy another one. It was so intentional.”⁷ And since stuff really doesn't always break that easily, they came up with “perceived obsolescence” —they change the way stuff looks, so that everyone can tell if you don't have the latest in electronics or fashion.

Meanwhile, it doesn't really make us happy. According to some measures, in the U.S. our national happiness peaked sometime in the 1950s.⁸ In fact, it serves the economy if we stay dissatisfied and discontent—because then we will want to buy more stuff. Consumption is fueled by loneliness. What really makes us happy are time with family and friends, a sense of purpose, community, and the leisure to enjoy it.

How do we break out of the consumption cycle, and find real happiness? April Lane Benson, author of *To Buy or Not to Buy: Why We Overshop and How to Stop*, points to three potential spiritual resources for finding joy: understanding True Wealth, the practice of Simplicity, and the Japanese concept of Wabi Sabi.⁹

Paul Hwoschinsky, in the book, *True Wealth*, suggests that true wealth is created by engaging our unique non-financial assets: talents, hobbies, close connections with other people and animals, communion with nature. These are food for our neglected spiritual and emotional appetites, and give us vitality and fulfillment.¹⁰

Satish Kumar, editor of *Resurgence* magazine, writes about simplicity. He says: Simplicity is part of the 'perennial wisdom' promoted by many great thinkers and visionaries. Although sometimes people think simplicity means a kind of 'hair-shirt' lifestyle, that is not my view. Simplicity is a positive quality; when things are simple they are well-made, they last indefinitely, they are made with pleasure and they give pleasure when used. ...Simplicity requires less ego and more imagination, less complication and more creativity, less glamour and more gratitude, less attention to appearance and more attention to essence.¹¹

About Wabi Sabi, Benson writes:

[Wabi Sabi] accepts and embraces the patina that comes with age. In contemporary American culture, objects are discarded well before they reach this point; instead, something new is acquired. We're so busy trying to stay new, young, and unworn, constantly updating, upgrading, renovating, and attempting to reinvent ourselves, that we miss precious opportunities to form deep and abiding attachments to objects we already have — to say

7 Ibid. p. 10-11.

8 Ibid.

9 Excerpted at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=18655>

10 *True Wealth*, 1990. Referenced at website above.

11 <http://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article2790-Elegant-Simplicity.html>

nothing of the people we love. Wabi sabi acknowledges that nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.¹²

Wabi Sabi calls attention to the beauty of imperfect things.

For me, one of the strongest resources for combatting the temptations of consumerism is the practice of gratitude. The Tao Te Ching says, "Those who know they have enough are rich." Advertising is constantly putting our attention on what we don't have. Gratitude returns our attention to what we do have, to the many joys and blessings in our lives.

At the Awakening the Dreamer symposium, on November 5th, I learned a startling fact—it was presented with a visual representation as if the earth were a community of 100 people.

Think about where you might fit:

"If you have food in your refrigerator.....

Clothes in your closet...

A bed to sleep in...

And a roof over your head...

You are better off than 83% of people on the planet."¹³

We have been trained to use the financially wealthy as our reference point—but compared to 83% of the people of the world, *we are* the wealthy. Not even because of our electronics or our large houses, our toys or cars—but merely because we have food, clothes, a bed, and a roof. These are what all people need. But our having so much, when others have so little, also drains away our capacity for true happiness. For some people, giving to those who are in need, helps to shape a way out of consumerism, into deeper joy.

We are entering the weeks of the biggest onslaught of selling and buying of the entire year, the season of Christmas, and the other winter holidays that have been caught up into the gift-buying machine. It is painfully ironic that an overemphasis on material possessions and gifts has for so long invaded the holiday of Christmas. The birth of a child—with no home in which to lay down his head. The birth of a teacher who invited his followers to give away to the poor all that they possessed. But here we are—facing once again a cycle of advertisement, desire, consumption and debt.

Margy told me about an ad she saw—offering holiday loans for up to \$2500 which could be paid back over the next year. The pressures on children and parents are especially intense. I remember going back to school after the holiday break, and the conversations were all about—what did you get? I don't have the answer to how we resist these pressures—but I do think it has something to do with our connections to each other.

12 Excerpted at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=18655>

13 See more about Awakening the Dreamer at <http://awakeningthedreamer.org/>

I want to close these reflections with a reading from a children's story—*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, by Dr. Seuss.¹⁴ You may remember that the grumpy Grinch went into Whoville and stole all the gifts and the decorations and the trees and the feast. He was getting ready to toss them off a cliff. And then:

He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"
And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch's small heart Grew three sizes that day!

Just as the Who's down in Whoville found joy with each other, so we too need the bond of family and friends and community to break out of the cycle of over-consumption and debt. None of us can do it alone.

Conversation: I would like to take a few minutes to hear some ways that you may have found to move away from consumerism and overspending during the holidays...

Closing Words

Richard Fewkes

For the sun and the dawn, which we did not create,
For the moon and the evening, which we did not make...
For friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy,
For this gathered company which welcomes us as we are...
We lift up our hearts in thanks this day.

¹⁴ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, by Dr. Seuss, originally published by Random House in 1957.