

go out and shop, as if bankrupting themselves would secure economic prosperity and freedom.

What Consumerism Is Doing

Cultural observers note the consumer overload, the "Affluenza" afflicting many—appearing as stress-related symptoms such as headaches, hyperacidity, heart palpitations, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability—all harking back to a lack of "margins" in the American lifestyle.¹⁶ Many lack space for rest and reflection and suffer from "possession overload," from having too many objects to pay for, care for, and find space for, and too little time or room for family and friends. The rate of clinical depression in the United States is ten times what it was before 1945. "By contrast, Old Order Amish, who avoid most of the amenities of our society, suffer depression less than a fifth as often."¹⁷

To be sure, religious communities resist consumerism more successfully. The Mennonite writer Doris Janzen Longare's little book *Living More with Less* has been revised, and is filled with suggestions for lives full of people and human values rather than possessions.¹⁸ Duane Elgin's classic *Voluntary Simplicity* draws deeply from religious traditions both Western and Eastern.¹⁹ John F. Kavanaugh, author of *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, writes as a Jesuit priest.²⁰ Even those who write on this topic from a secular perspective emphasize valuing people and other parts of creation over the objects humans make. Freedom from the rat race of consumerism serves the public good: "Citizenship requires a commitment of time and attention, a commitment people cannot make if they are lost to themselves in an ever-accelerating cycle of work and consumption."²¹

The economy is usually measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But many have pointed out what a poor measure of well-being this is, since it rises with increasing health care premiums, military expenditures, and disaster cleanup costs—which all reflect instability and misery rather than prosperity. Several states have adopted other measures. Maryland, for instance, uses the Genuine Progress Indicator, which includes not simply

economic but also social and quality-of-life variables such as leisure time, ecological health, and safety.²²

Consumerism is not just a danger to middle-class well-being and a rival to higher values. As its proceeds have enriched the already wealthy, income gaps have widened. Greed has a way of cloaking itself in contempt, of saying, "I worked hard and earned this; it's nobody's business but my own," that is to say, "God will not seek it out" (Ps. 10:4). Yet the poor watch the same TV commercials as the wealthy, and feel pressure to buy name-brand items they cannot afford, and to finance these purchases through consumer credit that can cost meals, health, and homes. Such pressure is increasingly exerted on the very young. When psychologically sophisticated advertising convinces children to measure their worth by possessions, it's difficult for them to understand why they should suffer deprivation while their TV "friends"—beautiful models and actors—live glamorous, thoughtless lives.

Still more insults await the poor. Factories creating luxury goods are positioned among the world's poorest, often emitting toxins into their air. Working conditions in these factories are often dire and dangerous. And it's not only factories and their waste that end up next to the poor, but also landfills where discarded possessions lie. Western disposable items exported for profit to developing countries lacking in recycling or even trash collection become mountains of diapers and rivers of plastic bottles.

What consumerism does to the natural world is yet another story. Writer Annie Leonard began studying the cycles of consumerism during college, when she noticed the piles of trash awaiting pickup on the streets of New York City. She followed the trash to the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, whose peaks were eighty feet taller than the Statue of Liberty.²³ The waste she saw there inspired her to research the life cycle of complex products as they are mined, manufactured, transported, consumed, and discarded. She found that at every step in this process, from the extraction of raw resources to the production of goods, from their distribution to their consumption and final disposal, the

ecological waste was far greater than we may think. Yet most people have learned to take such practices for granted, presuming that the ecosystem contains infinite capacity to heal itself from all we throw at it.

Finding the Road Less Traveled

The problems with consumer culture are much less frequently heard than the marginal merits of one breakfast cereal or one luxury car over another. If we know less than we ought about the consequences of our lifestyle for the natural world, our neighbors, and ourselves, we need not feel guilty. But once we become aware that slavery to consumption is neither normal nor healthy, once we realize that it is largely the result of others' calculated greed, once we glimpse ourselves not as slaves to human idols but as citizens of communities and responsible, productive, creative adults, we are freer to make choices about what, or whom, we will serve. We are freer to let go of materialism and to cultivate constructive alternatives. Once we recognize the disconnect between shopping and contentment, once we learn reluctance to buy what we will only discard, we can mindfully choose a new relationship between ourselves and our belongings. Things will no longer possess us. Rather, the things we choose to own can become tools for our service of God and creation.

Few people worldwide have homes as large and belongings as numerous as Americans'. Except among those who struggle for necessities, surprisingly little relationship exists between goods and happiness. I have met families in the world's poorest nations, in Haiti, Nepal, and India, for instance, whose possessions are meager by American standards, but whose strength is immeasurable, families living in tiny quarters with few of the comforts Americans consider basic, among whom love, kindness, and generosity reign. To say this is not to romanticize poverty, but rather to suggest that there is something we in America can learn from how others live, something that our spiritual ancestors knew but that we have mostly lost. Proverbs 30:8-9 sums up material need in this way:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
 give me neither poverty nor riches;
 feed me with the food that I need,
 or I shall be full, and deny you,
 and say, "Who is the LORD?"
 or I shall be poor, and steal,
 and profane the name of my God.

Voluntary simplicity goes against the stream of our own neighbors, our own families, our own habits. We cannot choose what seems like deprivation. But as we see how much junk is tripping us up, how thoroughly homage to material belongings interferes with abundant life, we will seek a different kind of abundance. Elizabeth Canham, the Benedictine oblate whose words began this chapter, goes on to say, "Our question may be, "How do I share the many resources available to me and cease to be dominated by the obsession for more?"²⁴ She comments:

The desire for simplicity leads some of us to value skills nearly lost and to search out natural expressions of creativity. When the rediscovery of these skills emerges . . . from a yearning to express the divine within ourselves, then we learn to live more simply and to pray in a more integrated fashion. Our creativity will become our prayer, born of simple attention to what is around us.²⁵

Finding God

Isaiah 2:2-4, discussed above, envisions the nations streaming to God for help turning from destruction to fruitful employment. In Matthew 6:25-34, immediately after framing God and money as opposing deities, Jesus offers sound advice against the anxiety of consumerism: "Look at the birds" whom God feeds, and "consider the lilies of the field" whom God clothes in bright array. Stop being anxious about material needs, but "strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things

will be given to you as well" (v. 33). Drawing closer to God, we find gratitude, we seek to learn, and we trust that our needs will be provided. We enjoy the adventure of living freer from encumbrance and closer to God, other people, and creation.

In the past four chapters we have examined several pervasive contemporary assumptions: the assumption that our present lifestyle is here to stay and need not be reexamined; the assumption that humans may dominate creation with impunity and need not live within limits imposed by the earth's resources; and the assumption that consumerism is the happiest and most fulfilling lifestyle possible. We have also outlined alternative visions. We have glimpsed the adventure of adapting to changing realities. We have heard the invitation to enter humans' rightful place in the larger created world. And we have seen that abundance is available elsewhere than commercial culture. Next we will examine particular ecological issues: food and agriculture, toxic waste, and climate change. How we handle these will determine our legacy, the world we bequeath to our children and our children's children.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What is your mental image of pride? Of idolatry? How do you think these operate in our culture?
2. What do you see in the contrast between Isaiah 2:2-4 and the rest of the chapter? What does it mean to use human-made tools in service of God and others?
3. To what extent do you think humans can live independent of service to God or to idols?
4. Consider Saint Augustine's statement that "the heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." What does it mean? How have you experienced it?
5. Have you ever had "buyer's remorse"? What does it feel like? What might it have been like to have passed up that particular purchase?
6. If your house burned down tomorrow, what would you miss or replace?