

From “Excess” to “Enough”

Shifting the Culture of Consumption



by

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INTRODUCTION

We here in the United States enjoy an unparalleled level of affluence – far higher than any people in history and far higher than at least 5 billion of the other humans who now share this earth. Since 1940 we Americans alone have used up as large a share of the earth’s mineral resources as all previous generations combined.¹

Certainly everyone is a consumer. Every human takes sustenance from and returns waste to the environment. But as the characters in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* discovered, some are more equal than others. In North America our affluence gives us the opportunity to **over**consume. We support ourselves by using up past wealth (oil and coal), drawing from the resources of other regions and borrowing from the future.

Overconsumption can be defined as taking more than we can productively use or more than the environment can sustainably support. For the ordinary consumer, “sustenance” means access to clean water, food, education, health care and reasonable security. But for the overconsumers, it has come to include such things as owning microwaves, VCR’s, cars and leisure gear for every occasion; eating fatty meat; drinking bottled beverages; using throw-away products; living in spacious, private, climate-controlled homes; traveling in motorized vehicles; and having the luxury of choosing our possessions on the basis of style, not just necessity. The 260 million consumers in North America are but 5 percent of the world’s population, yet consume about 30 percent of the world’s resources² – clearly more than our fair share. This profligacy is not lost on the people in the developing world, who repeatedly challenge us by pointing out that our overconsumption is compromising the global ecosystem as much as or more than their burgeoning population.

The Hidden Costs of High Living

But few of us *feel* like overconsumers. We have become so accustomed to our daily lives, from morning coffee to watching the evening news, that we are blind to the social and environmental costs of these seemingly simple pleasures. Where were the coffee beans grown? How did they get to our grocery stores? Who assembled our bathrobes? Where was the metal for our television components mined – and at what environmental expense? The fact that we simply pay money for these daily miracles tends to erase awareness of the impact of our lifestyles on the rest of the world.³

Creeping overconsumption has become our way of life in the United States. ***In fact, the right to consume has become the centerpiece of the American Dream.*** More is better. Excess is success. Yet ironically we report being no happier now than we were in 1957 when our level of material wealth was much lower.⁴ In fact, our social fabric is fraying. In the last 21 years our quality of life has gone down by 52 percent (as measured by The Index of Social Health)⁵ while our per capita consumption has risen by 45 percent.⁶

Carrying Capacity

At a global level, our extravagance is backfiring. Our product-oriented lifestyle is being actively marketed, through the media, to the rest of the world. People in the emerging economies are racing towards the opportunity to fill their minds, their bodies and the earth with the same mix of chemicals that has brought us the luxuries we now enjoy, from microwaves to cellular phones – not to mention refrigerators and cars.

It would be unfair to deny them their time at the trough – and we like to see ourselves as fair. But if they *do* develop along the lines of our consumerist model, we may well overshoot the earth's carrying capacity – the number of individuals that can be indefinitely supported, at a given level of consumption, without irrevocably degrading the environment. Considering current disturbances in the ecosystem, carrying-capacity experts estimate that the planet can support between 1 and 3 billion humans with a satisfactory standard of living.⁷

We must find a way to limit our excess and maintain or increase our quality of life, while sharing our best knowledge and technologies so that the world's people can increase their standard of living in a sustainable way. With the current global population at nearly 6 billion and growing, *all* of us clearly need to curb our population growth – *and*, we in North America need to reduce our perceived needs. If we don't, future generations will condemn us for our shortsightedness and greed. This apparent no-win situation must be resolved – preferably gracefully, before nature does it brutally.

How has an intelligent people like ours painted itself into such a corner?

The Wrong Road Map

We are driving our economy – both personal and national – using the wrong road map. This map has no destination, only a route called “more is better.” And there are no roadside rest areas, because no matter how much we accumulate today, we still want more tomorrow. We are chasing a mirage. We have only an “on” switch – and no indicators that tell us when to stop and say, “Ah, I have enough.”

Why have we so easily relinquished the values of peace, moderation and justice in favor of excess for the few and poverty for the many?

- Some people blame overconsumption on advertising, with its estimated 3,000 competing consumer messages delivered to our cortex each day.⁸
- Many cite the profit and growth imperatives of capitalism as the generating forces.
- Some believe that overconsumption is an addiction, a biochemical imperative. There is even a drug that can treat it, so it must be a valid disease!⁹
- Recently attention has focused on the problem of weakened social bonds. Malls have replaced town squares, daycare substitutes for parenting, and car alarms supplant watchful neighbors. Money is the glue holding together a society that has lost its integrity.

On a deeper level, we've bought into the notion that consumption can fill all our needs. The basic human needs for material security and comfort are real and can be purchased – but beyond a certain point, consumption of more, better and different stuff tends to be substituted for the harder-won yet more-enduring values of love, peace of mind and contribution to others.

Clearly we need a bridge over the chasm between the world we have and the world we want to leave for our children and grandchildren. In this paper we've just examined and questioned the more-is-better road map – the first step toward designing and building this bridge. The next step is facing the reality of how far afield more-is-better has taken us.

FACING THE FACTS ABOUT OVERCONSUMPTION

Overconsumption is accelerating the destruction of our environment and the depletion of our resources

In September 1995, 2,500 scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that there is a discernible human influence on global climate likely to cause “widespread economic, social and environmental dislocation over the next century.”¹⁰

- Air and water supplies are becoming toxic.^{11,12,13}
- In recent decades nearly 11 percent of the earth’s fertile soil has been so eroded, physically compacted or chemically altered that its capacity to grow food has been severely reduced or entirely lost.¹⁴ We are losing our finite topsoil at a rate that is almost 20 times the earth’s capacity to restore it.¹⁵
- In the last 200 years the U.S. has lost 50 percent of its wetlands, 90 percent of its northwestern old-growth forests, 99 percent of its tallgrass prairie and up to 490 species of native plants and animals with another 9,000 now at risk.¹⁶
- We are using renewable resources like water and forests faster than nature can restore them.¹⁷ Many nonrenewable resources, including fossil fuels, will become scarce before the middle of the next century.^{18,19}
- For every dollar spent, the equivalent of one pint of oil is extracted and burned.²⁰

Overconsumption is accelerating the deterioration of our social environment and *decreasing* quality of life

The lure of material possessions has brought increased personal debt with its attendant stresses. More hours on the job to support our lifestyles means less time for our families. Less time and attention for our children contribute to increased crime and violence and to teen suicide. And the gap between rich and poor keeps growing.

- 75 percent of all Americans report that they are torn by the conflict between their jobs and their desire to spend more time with their families.²¹
- Of Americans earning \$30,000 or more, fully 70 percent say they would give up a day’s pay each week for an extra day of free time.²² People clearly feel they don’t have time for a life.
- 90 percent of all divorces are caused by problems related to money.²³
- The number of young people who think they have a very good chance of achieving “the good life” has *dropped by half* since 1978.²⁴
- Child abuse, teen suicide and the high-school drop-out rate are all increasing.²⁵

Our excessive personal consumption models an unsustainable, and often unachievable, lifestyle to the global community

- The 3.3 billion members of the global “middle class” enjoy a decent standard of living on an income (\$700-\$7,500 per year) lower than the official poverty level in the U.S. (\$7,740 per capita per year).^{26,27}
- The average amount of pocket money American children have – \$230 a year – is more than the annual incomes of the world’s half-billion poorest people.²⁸

- The U.S. exports 100,000 to 200,000 hours of TV programming to Latin America, Asia and Europe, whetting the appetites of millions with scenes from “Baywatch,” “Dynasty” and “Dallas.”²⁹
- The possibility that all the world’s people could live like Americans: **zero**.³⁰

Personal excess supports excess at corporate and government levels – and vice versa

Extravagance, funded by debt, is built into every level of financial activity – from personal to national. At the personal level, 1.1 million people are expected to file for bankruptcy in 1996.³¹ The average 50-year-old has only \$2,600 in savings.³² In subtle ways, this fiscal irresponsibility at home encourages institutional abuses. The more-is-better mentality allows us to tolerate wars over oil and corporate practices that are wasteful, polluting and unethical. How can we effectively protest corporate greed or Pentagon waste when we are in denial about our own personal excess? If we can’t say “no” to Nintendos for our children or new gadgets for ourselves, how can we expect CEO’s to say “no” to exorbitant salaries, or our government to say “no” to deficit spending?

Overconsumption is enslaving us. For some of us the slavery is to jobs we know are morally wrong; for some corporations it is to unethical practices; for us as a nation it is to alliances based on material desires rather than enlightened leadership. More-is-better plays itself out at every level of our individual and collective lives. No one calls the game because we believe the central premise, and because we’ve built a personal house of cards – credit cards – that requires our participation. H.L. Mencken, a penetrating observer of human foibles, once said: *“It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his income depends on his not understanding it.”* For Americans, it’s not only our incomes that are on the line, but our whole way of life.

It is critical to recognize that ***overconsumption is not serving us***. The solution to the carrying-capacity problem will come only when we have acknowledged that the old road map is getting us nowhere. It is making our individual and collective lives less manageable. From inner emptiness to environmental destruction, overconsumption is a global catastrophe in the making.

So What?

Yet most Americans don’t look out the window and *see* global warming. We don’t *see* the corruption that pervades our foreign aid. We don’t *see* any connection between our relative wealth and the wars and starvation brought to us daily by television. We may feel slightly guilty for having so much when so many have so little, but not guilty enough to feel motivated to slash our personal consumption by the 70 percent considered necessary for a sustainable future.³³ Without a straightforward way to cut the fat out of our consumption while still maintaining our quality of life, we will have little impetus to act.

The rest of this paper presents multiple ways out of the consumption trap – what *you* can do, what *we* can do collectively, what’s already being done, and where we’re headed.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

Overconsumption is a complex issue to challenge effectively in part because different people see the problem through different lenses. For some, it's primarily an environmental issue – they see waste, pollution, resource depletion and species extinction as the core of the crisis. For others, the problem is economic – they see deficit spending, debt and inequity as the emergency that must be met. Still others define the problem in terms of “quality of life” – they see human soul-sickness amidst plenty as the indicator that something is drastically amiss.

In addition, different people prefer different tools for change. Some see new technologies, from high-mileage cars to fusion energy, as the key to eliminating the problem of overconsumption. Others work diligently at the policy level, trying to fix depletion and pollution through taxes, incentives, minimum (and maximum) wage laws and improved public transportation.

The Power of Personal Change

There is, however, another way. It involves approaching the problem at its root. Those who depend on change happening through technological or political routes often dismiss or fail to recognize the power of individual choices in shifting the course of history. But every aspect of the old road map – every decision, every law, every technological breakthrough – was crafted by individuals. Each policy maker, each engineer and each politician is an individual. Yes, cloaked in their institutional roles, people can be narrow-minded and self-centered – but as they sit alone and quiet, free from the influence of cultural contexts, they *know* they are, first and foremost, ethical, compassionate human beings.

Tapping into that core of truth will give us the energy to change the culture of consumption into a culture of enough. We must make our values our allies and not simply treat consumption as a numbers game. Skeptics of grassroots activism, believing that change happens only through business or government, may not recognize that the cultural and political will for new initiatives is generated in the hearts and minds of individuals.

So, taking responsibility for challenging and changing the culture of consumption in our own lives is one key to creating a low-consumption, high-fulfillment society. Such self-empowerment is necessary, energizing, convincing and inspiring. It can take years, decades or even lifetimes to slog through the bureaucratic swamps necessary to change public policy. Relying on technological solutions that may or may not be found in the future is risky. But individual lifestyle change can begin as soon as an inner decision is made.

Personal change is ***energizing*** because it can happen literally in the blink of an eye. Changing a habit simply requires the choice to do so.

Personal change is ***convincing*** because if you “walk your talk” you are more credible. A story told about Gandhi illustrates this point. A mother traveled a long distance to bring her son to Gandhi, hoping the great teacher would be able to convince her child not to eat sugar. “Come back in three days,” Gandhi said. Though it was a hardship, the mother and son stayed three days in the strange city and then returned. “Don’t eat sugar,” Gandhi said. “Is that all?” the mother cried. “You could have said that three days ago.” “Ah,” Gandhi replied, “but three days ago I was still eating sugar.”

Personal change is ***inspiring*** because those who live well on less demonstrate that we can reduce our “standard of living” without sacrificing “quality of life.” Until we see models of another way of consuming we will be less likely to change our own ways.

Each one of us can be a powerful agent of change. By acknowledging this innate capacity, we add one more plank to the bridge between ***more*** and ***enough***. The next plank involves seeing our cultural environment clearly.

Myth vs Reality

Like fish that can't "see" the sea they swim in, we are often blind to the cultural context we bring to the question of reducing consumption in North America. We need to pierce through the cultural myths that make up the more-is-better mind-set.

MYTH: Overconsumption is natural

No, it isn't. The culture of mass consumption began early in this century as a deliberate strategy on the part of business, media and government to teach people to want what they don't need in order to increase markets for American products.³⁴ Many of us bought this story hook, line and sinker. We have been selling our lives and mortgaging our future so the economy can grow. Now *that's* not natural. Many Americans are so caught on the work-and-spend-and-work-and-spend-and-work-and-spend treadmill that they have no time to ask the very basic question: Is this way of life working for me? "Normal," columnist Ellen Goodman observes, "is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it."

MYTH: Standard of living equals quality of life

No, it doesn't. Our indoctrination as consumers has led to confusion between "standard of living" and "quality of life." Once we have enough for survival and comforts, our enjoyment of living (i.e., quality of life) actually suffers when we continue to focus on quantity of stuff (i.e., standard of living). Yes, novelty, higher pay and newer stuff may give us a momentary thrill, but they don't provide lasting satisfaction. Many Americans are actually discovering the personal benefits of down-scaling, such as being debt-free and having more time, more savings and financial security. The real bottom line is this: what matters most – family, friends and work – can't be bought.³⁵

MYTH: The cost of "the good life" is out of reach for most Americans

No, it isn't. How much does "the good life" cost? Most Americans answer, "More than I have now." In most cases they respond that way not because they don't have enough but because they fall short of the idealized life they see daily in the media – from food to furniture, from autos to adventure vacations. This condition has created a mass delusion that no matter how much one has, it should be more. Except for those who truly don't have enough, Americans are suffering from a "crisis of perception." Even though the median household income in the United States is around \$34,000 a year (meaning that half the households live below and half above that level),³⁶ numerous recent articles reveal that people *think* that a middle-class family income is \$50,000, \$75,000, even \$100,000 a year.

No matter how much people make, they *think* it's not enough for a decent, American middle-class life, so they *think* they need a tax break or a raise or a second household income just to make ends meet. The *real* inflation has been the inflation of desires and the inflated notion of what it means to be "middle class." Take housing, for example. Homes have doubled in size since 1950 while family sizes have shrunk by 25 percent.^{37,38} That means it takes two-and-a-half times the resources – building materials, fixtures, furniture and appliances (and energy to run it all) – to support each American. The average housing cost for this palace is \$790/month,³⁹ though many upwardly mobile Americans pay twice that for what comedian George Carlin calls "a box for their stuff." Egged on by advertising, given poor models by the popular culture, and supplied with deadly financial weapons – credit cards – the untrained American consumer is actually drowning in a sea of possessions.

MYTH: Our economy depends on overconsumption

No, it doesn't. Contrary to popular belief, overconsumption, along with debt and our low savings rate, has *weakened* our economy. Any healthy economy must have a significant amount of home-grown investment capital – which is produced, in part, by individuals' savings – to maintain and build roads, support schools, fund cleaner and more efficient technology, etc. All our major economic competitors – Germany, Japan and other Pacific Rim countries – have savings rates well over 10 percent.⁴⁰ Our current anemic savings rate of 4-5 percent leaves us dependent on foreign capital to fund our infrastructure and development.^{41,42} To stay in the game, we at least need to return to our old postwar norm of an 8 percent savings rate.^{43,44} If Americans did that, the U.S. could sell its debt to U.S. citizens.

While the debt itself is dangerously high, the cost of selling it to the Germans, Japanese and Saudis is even more so. When we compete on the world markets for money, interest rates are raised to attract foreign capital; those interest payments then go overseas, robbing us of the investment capital we so badly need. In addition, since the interest on Third World debt is pegged to U.S. interest rates, any small increase in our rate ends up punishing our debtors.

Leading economic observers like Lester Thurow of M.I.T., Charles Schultze of the Brookings Institute and Alfred E. Kahn of Cornell assert that our economic health depends on consuming less and saving more.⁴⁵ Kahn asks, "Can we find the political will to slow down our consumption spending collectively?" Schultze concurs: "We must save and invest a higher fraction of our national income." Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve Board, told the House Budget Committee that one of the three most important problems in this country is our lack of savings.⁴⁶

MYTH: I don't have to save money because ...

- Social Security will take care of me.
- my company pension will take care of me.
- my kids will take care of me.
- I own a house, and real estate always appreciates.
- instead of saving up for purchases, I just use my credit card.
- it would require self-deprivation and I don't like that.

Sorry. Savings is the name of the game in the 90's. "SAVE!" the Departments of Labor and the Treasury warned in the summer of 1995, "Your retirement clock is ticking."⁴⁷ A major brokerage firm, Merrill Lynch, is also sounding the alarm about the low U.S. savings rate and has urged each political party to develop a platform encouraging America to become a nation of savers once again.⁴⁸ Since money saved is money not spent on consuming, these initiatives can have a profound effect on overconsumption.

While numerous Americans have sobered up from the 80's binge, many still ignore all warnings.

- An estimated 55 million Americans play the lottery regularly, trying to finance their future through Lady Luck.⁴⁹
- In the 36 states that run the lottery, sales of lottery tickets increased nearly 12 percent in just one year between 1994 and 1995.⁵⁰

So many facts presented in this paper point to an absurd and embarrassing possibility:
Americans no longer know how to save money.

The contradictory findings from a 1995 survey sponsored by the Merck Family Fund begin to show why.^{51,52}

- 88 percent of the 800 adults surveyed agreed with the statement, "I believe that protecting the environment will require most of us to make major changes in the way we live."
- Unfortunately, 48 percent said that even now they aren't able to buy everything they really need. So nearly half don't see any fat in their spending.

- But wait a second – 77 percent agreed that, “If I wanted to, I could choose to buy and consume less than I do.”
- And almost 90 percent said they should spend less money so they could save more.

Here’s the insanity that has made Americans the world’s greatest spendthrifts. They know they *should* change. And they even know they *could* change. But they also *think* they can barely squeak by financially!

MYTH: What I buy is nobody’s business but my own

Oh yes it is. While private property is considered one of the most cherished “rights” we have, is unlimited consumption really a right? “I’ve worked long and hard to earn the ability to buy what I want, and *nobody* gets in the way of my right to buy anything I please.” As population skyrockets and resources dwindle, the tension between individual rights and the common good will only intensify. We all depend on the biosphere. Yet to say it belongs to all of us would still be an error. We are all *part* of it.

If we spoil the global commons, the resulting suffering will befall rich and poor alike. Skin cancer from sunlight unfiltered by the ozone layer in Australia (and eventually the rest of the planet) does not distinguish between the wealthy and the poor, the big property owners and the drifters. Ripples from our overspending affect the entire web of life. Money spent equals resources consumed and pollution created – even if technologies are developed that minimize the environmental impact per dollar. Everything we buy turns the wheels of industry one more round. We live on a world with limits – limits that will define our choices for centuries to come. It’s a new ball game.

MYTH: Technology will save us

Not necessarily. Exciting research is underway on new sources of nonpolluting energy, new fuel-efficient engines, well-designed houses that heat and cool themselves, pollution abatement, ecological restoration, “living machines” that purify sewage and new uses for recycled products. All are valuable – but not sufficient. Mandating an energy-efficient car won’t help if we keep making *more* cars and driving *more* polluting miles. In the Seattle area, for example, even though miles-per-gallon have doubled in the last decade, passenger-miles-driven have also nearly doubled, leaving us no better off.⁵³ Creating a sustainable future requires a new way of *thinking*.

MYTH: The government will save us

Really? The government has powerful tools for steering the economy and human impact on the environment. Through laws, actions can be mandated or prohibited. Through taxation, beneficial actions can be rewarded while damaging actions can at least become more costly. Compliance, however, is not guaranteed, and often the player with the best-paid lawyer wins. Not only that, the government is now particularly vulnerable due to its level of debt and deficit spending. If people do not *choose* to live sustainably, it will be very hard to make them do it. Given the lag time between inception of an idea and government adoption, we can hardly depend on the government to save us.

MYTH: Business will save us

How can it? While green consuming and socially responsible investing are interesting and growing innovations, they are still part of the more-is-better mentality. We are still trying to solve problems with products – and turn a profit while doing it. Sensible, human-scale innovations *do* exist – for example, local currencies and barter, community-supported agriculture, and supporting your community by supporting local enterprises. But we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that the job of business is to make money. Don’t ask a fox to guard the chicken coop.

MYTH: One person can't make a difference

Yes, one person can. There is no “they.” There is only “us,” a society of individuals making personal and collective choices. Consumers, legislators and CEO’s are all individuals who can change their minds and thus change the world, no matter what they did yesterday. Overconsumption, like overpopulation, occurs one transaction at a time, so we must work to transform people’s perceptions and values, and not just depend on business, technology or government. In all our roles, from producers to marketers to consumers, we can make better choices – choices that are both good for us and good for the earth. If we do, the world *will* change.

Interested in quantifying how much of a difference an individual can make, Wouter Biesiot from the University of Groningen in northern Holland has painstakingly studied inputs and outputs from the standard Dutch household. His research shows that simple changes in household consumption can take us up to a stunning 50 percent of the way to sustainable consumption.⁵⁴ He analyzed the energy consumption of Dutch households and discovered that 54 percent of it came from production, packaging and delivery. Reductions at each level make a big difference. That’s why eating locally grown, unpackaged, fresh foods in season doesn’t just keep you healthy – it keeps the earth healthy, too. Likewise, buying durable products and fixing them is another choice any consumer can make.

“It’s just as simple as that; it doesn’t require new technologies,” he said at an international meeting on consumption.⁵⁵ “All production takes place on behalf of consumption. And if we change something about that consumption, the whole structure ‘upstream’ has to change. The channels of distribution have to change, industry has to adapt to the new demands that will develop in the household.” From Biesiot’s point of view, the consumer is in the driver’s seat. Conscious consumption could take us easily half of the way towards a sustainable society – and it’s a game anyone can play *right now*.

WAKE UP!!!

As self-aware and self-responsible humans, we can leave these old myths behind. They come from a different era, when we believed that nature was limitless and indestructible, that individualism and enlightened self-interest could hold a society together and that material progress was a sign of divine favor. These myths are not helping us create fulfilling lives for ourselves or a world we want for our children and grandchildren. It’s up to us to base our lives and our choices on reality, not fables.

The can-do American character has faced tougher work than this. When science showed us the danger of being couch potatoes, of smoking, of eating too much fat, we responded with lifestyle changes. When women became aware of the many ways they had relinquished their power to participate in politics and business, they gained their voice in every sector of public life. Every person’s choice to shed the idea of “more-is-better” and proudly live within the ample and equitable boundaries of “enough” will impact every sphere they influence – business, government, education, city planning. “Enough already!” will become the battle cry of a constituency that sees clearly that “more” is taking all of us to the brink of disaster.

Personal Action

I. Learn how to consume less and save more

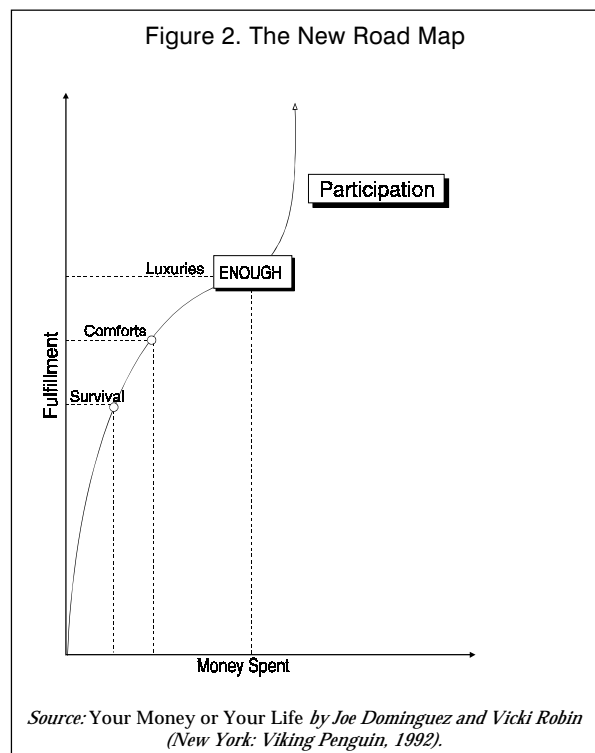
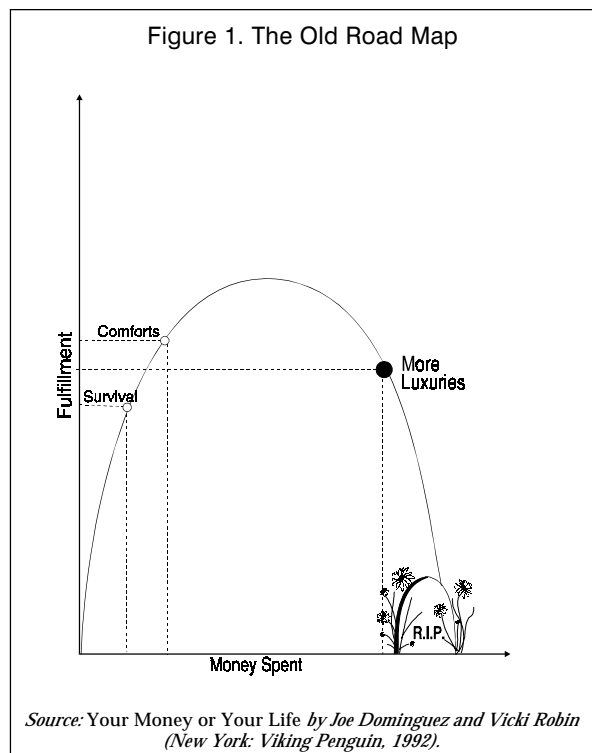
But *how* do we save? Saving money requires spending less, yet many of us contend that every penny is spent on necessities. We think reduced spending means increased hardship. We think it is scrimping, cutting corners. These are not notions the current crop of Americans warm up to easily, especially given the consumer mentality, the easy credit and the materialist imperative that has co-

opted the American Dream. In order to relearn the art of saving money, we need tools that will show us how to spend less and enjoy an equal or better quality of life.

Tool: Discovering how much is enough

If more isn't better, then is less better? Not necessarily! Everyone must discover for themselves how much is enough. This process of observation and evaluation gives an unshakable platform for rational consumption. One tool for making this assessment is the Fulfillment Curve, taken from the book *Your Money or Your Life* by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin.⁵⁶ The curve shows how, in the process of securing basic survival needs (food, clothing and shelter) and comforts (adequate education, health care, transportation and amenities), we unconsciously assume that further increases in standard of living will automatically improve quality of life. (Thus, the birth of a myth.) Meanwhile, at a certain point increased consumption no longer brings increased fulfillment, but by then we have been so thoroughly inducted into the more-is-better mentality that we fail to notice. The new items often cost us inordinate amounts of time and energy as we work to pay for them, learn to use them, worry about them, clean and maintain and repair them, feel guilty about having them when others have so little, and ultimately dispose of them. This toll of time, worry and complexity decreases our quality of life. And what is the outcome of this progression? The one who dies with the most toys is still dead, having perhaps sacrificed the most important parts of life (family, friends, community participation, leisure) to the process of acquisition (Figure 1).

The point of maximum fulfillment could be called *enough* – having everything you want and need but nothing in excess. In fact, once *enough* is reached, the energy liberated allows fulfillment (quality of life) to go higher (Figure 2). Many Americans – from every income bracket – have too much stuff. Every one of us could benefit from doing an inventory of our possessions and evaluating which items contribute to our well-being and which are just clutter.



Tool: Unraveling the mystery of money

Just as money makes it easy to ignore the many transactions that took place to bring a product to our door, it also tends to suppress the awareness that we pay for money with our time. There are so many American cultural myths about money – more than can be plumbed here. We *think* money will bring us power, prestige, romantic success, victory over our enemies or the loyalty of our friends. Money alone, however, is powerless to do any of that. The only universally true statement any one of us can make about money is: *money is something we trade our life energy for*.⁵⁷

We buy money with our time. Once we see that, we are open to asking the question, Am I getting my “life energy’s” worth? When we take into account the hidden costs in time and money of our jobs (commuting, clothing, daily indulgences, etc.), what is our *real* hourly wage? For many of us, that real hourly wage may be a half or even a quarter of our supposed salary. And once we know we’re selling our precious life for \$5 or \$10 an hour, we have a powerful tool for evaluating our purchases. “Is this item worth the hours I (or a family member) invested in the workplace? Will it make me happy in the long run? Is it taking me in the direction of my larger life goals and purpose?” Using such a yardstick, every penny spent eventually contributes to quality of life.

This definition of money also suggests that the *less* one spends, the *more* hours of life one has. That’s true, but not necessarily immediately. Forgoing a shopping spree does not automatically yield a free Friday. But in the long run, it opens up time and opportunity for exploring nonmaterial forms of fulfillment.

These two tools – so simple and obvious when you think about them – are basic to the new ways of thinking that will catalyze social, cultural, economic and environmental revolutions and lead us to a sustainable way of life.

Savings beget savings

Learning to save means learning how to spend less while living better. And savings beget savings. Buying with cash instead of credit saves interest charges of up to 20 percent. Researching purchases for quality and durability and keeping possessions in service longer means fewer are needed over the course of a lifetime. Buying used – with discrimination – means that the earth has to offer up one less new product. Sharing resources with your neighbors or co-workers (like carpooling to work) lowers expenses and increases the sense of community so many people crave.

With so many opportunities to save money, it seems increasingly odd that so many people find it hard to make ends meet. Saving money, whether it’s for a future purchase or to seed a comfortable retirement, becomes the natural thing to do, and ultimately those savings can help rebuild our communities. Savings can bring greater personal security, a more stable economy, a less-degraded environment and a saner way of life in America. Building savings and ensuring a decent retirement income, independent of shaky pensions or social security, benefits you, the economy and the planet.

By getting out of debt, building financial security and rebalancing our lives, we consume less. By preserving our resources, both tangible and intangible, we are demanding fewer resources from the planet. By saving our personal life energy we are also saving the life energy of the earth. An elegant link develops between our everyday behavior as consumers and our desire to live within our own means and the means of the earth. People like the ones surveyed by Merck will experience the ethical congruence that comes from acting on observations like, “We focus too much on getting what we want now and not enough on future generations.”

2. Learn from three decades of good work on the population issue

Once compassion entered the population debate, new, effective solutions began to appear. The same thing can happen as we face the seemingly difficult task of convincing overconsumers that there is a better game than “more.” Individual human beings *choose* unprotected sex or unfettered spending, usually because they want something. The population issue isn’t a cut-and-dried matter of reducing the number of births – children *mean* something to people. Likewise, reducing consumption isn’t just about tightening our belts – stuff *means* something to us. We think spending money is a measure of our personal worth, a ticket to admiration and a way to “happiness.”

Every possession, like every child, wanted and well-cared-for

Breakthrough thinking about population happened when agreement was reached that every child should be wanted and well-cared-for while honoring the freedom of each individual and couple to choose family size and spacing. Let’s apply the same thinking to the problem of overconsumption: every possession should be wanted and well-cared-for while honoring people’s freedom to consume. In such a scenario people could purchase whatever they could afford, use for personal and/or social good, enjoy to the fullest, and maintain until it’s used up or disassembled for reuse or recycling. People would be discouraged, however, from living beyond their means, buying items they neither use nor enjoy, or discarding things before the useful period of service is over. No more sport shopping – going to the mall as entertainment, buying things to relieve boredom. No more clutter. No more credit-card purchases that you’ve forgotten about by the time the bill comes. What could be more sensible than a policy of “every possession wanted and well-cared-for?”

Delayed consumption

Delayed *conception* has been successful as a way to reduce the number of births per woman per lifetime. What about delayed *consumption* – waiting until we have a clear need before we buy something? This action alone would reduce the passage of stuff through our lives. Take cars, for example. Thirteen million new cars are sold in the U.S. each year.⁵⁸ It boggles the mind to imagine the resources required: plastic for dashboards, foam rubber for seats, steel or fiberglass for bodies, synthetic rubber for tires, glass for windows, etc. If you replace your car every 2 years, and your lifetime as a driver is 60 years, you’ll go through 30 new cars in your lifetime. Keep each car just 2 years longer, and you are responsible for 15 fewer cars. Keep each car for a total of 6 years and you are responsible for 20 fewer cars – that’s a 67 percent reduction! And a 6-year-old modern car that has been well-maintained is *not* old.

Delayed consumption could also mean waiting until we have the money – cash! – before we buy something. You can imagine the revolutionary effect *that* would have in people’s lives – and on the rate of extraction of resources from the earth. One financial education organization even offers credit-card “condoms” to put a speed bump into our race towards impulse buying.⁵⁹

Economic abstinence

The ultimate birth control is abstinence, and it is an option that is being taught increasingly in high schools today. What might *economic* abstinence look like? With sexual abstinence we can wait long enough to see if it’s real love or a passing desire. Economic abstinence might be the same – separating ourselves from passing fancies to see if we even remember them a month from now. It doesn’t mean saying “no” forever; it means just giving ourselves time to see if the desire is real – and the bank account sufficient.

Here are some questions you can ask, when contemplating a purchase, to create space between you and any appetite you may have for more, better or different stuff:

- Do I have enough money to buy this? (If you don't, you're out of the game. Don't even read the following questions.)
- Did I want this before I entered the store or read the ad?
- Do I have something at home that will serve just as well?
- Can I borrow or rent this for the few times I'll actually need it?
- Am I trying to buy my way to my goals, instead of learning the skills that would get me there?

Every possession wanted and well-cared-for, delayed consumption, and economic abstinence are compassionate ways to approach Americans whose brains are so sodden with commercialism that they have lost their way to real fulfillment.

3. Reconsider the choice to reproduce

In a fascinating paper, "The Environmental Consequences of Having a Baby in the United States," Charles Hall and colleagues at State University of New York calculate the impact of each American on the world's ecosystem in terms of waste generation, mineral consumption, energy consumption, ecosystem alteration and food consumption, as well as examining the impact of our consumption on the extinction of other species and indigenous cultures.⁶⁰ Taken, as it were, in one swallow, our impact is staggering. In our lifetime each American will consume an average of 1,530,000 pounds of minerals, 4,000 barrels of oil, 54,000 pounds of plant matter and 64,000 pounds of animal products. Each of us will produce over 3 million pounds of atmospheric wastes, 23 million pounds of liquid wastes and 3 million pounds of solid wastes. This is our personal Environmental Impact Statement. Hall and colleagues conclude by saying:

Many Americans are looking for ways in which they can protect the environment for the sake of this and future generations. The success of [many] such aspirations... [is] outside the influence of most individuals. But the decision to create a child is within the influence of an individual. We would like all potential parents to be aware that, more than any other decision they may ever make, their decision on whether or not to create a child will have the largest impact on our global environment. We conclude that the most effective way an individual can protect the global environment, and hence protect the well being of all living people, is to abstain from creating another human.⁶¹

Given what children mean to us, experts agree that it is difficult to be objective about the choice to reproduce. Having children is considered both a gift and a "right." But more and more people are choosing *not* to reproduce and even to question the "biological imperative." Is the desire to have babies genetic? Even if it is, can that desire be rechanneled into other forms of nurturing?

Clearly, as Hall and colleagues point out, raising children in an already well-populated world need not and perhaps cannot be the central calling of every person or family. If the pervading sense of millennial urgency for fundamental global change is correct, some people, instead of having children, could adopt the *earth* as their child, and put their full energy into making it a healthy home for all life. Perhaps the biological imperative can have a new meaning: it's time to start mothering the earth.

Reach Out to Others

Anchoring the habits of sustainable consumption into our own lives is just half of our responsibility. Personal transformation is an essential first step, but it's not enough. To turn the tide of overconsumption in North America we must become change agents in the culture. This may take some of us into areas of citizenship we rarely, if ever, exercise. We'll find ourselves talking with our friends about these issues, writing letters to the editor, conducting meetings with our congresspeople and facing one of the scariest things in life: public speaking. All of it is necessary.

I. We must break the silence and talk publicly about overconsumption

It is through speaking out that we bring our relationship with money and materialism into the realm of public discourse. This is the next step in taking responsibility for the carrying capacity of the planet. Do not be deterred by the conspiracy of silence, timidity, fear and aversion. Do not be afraid you will offend someone – your constituency, wealthy contributors, overpaid executives, etc. Do not let your personal financial problems stop you from speaking out. Be willing to cast the first stone – not at others but at overconsumption.

We must explore together issues of lifestyle and excess. We must change the question from “How much can I get?” to “How much is enough?” We must begin to talk about it by asking additional questions, such as:

- When is personal consumption a matter of public concern?
- Can I buy whatever I can afford if I worked for the money to buy it?
- Can I buy what I can't afford if I can “pay” for it with a credit card?
- Is advertising ethical that preys on the insecurities of teens – or adults for that matter?
- Is it right to encourage Third-World citizens to smoke the tobacco and use the pesticides we've recognized as lethal?
- Why are we, the most affluent nation on earth, suffering from a host of social ills?

We have miles to go. We can barely talk about money. We hide behind the concept of “growth” because we hope it will keep us from facing inequity. We'd rather run our economy more like a gambling casino (where everyone has a chance of winning big but few people do) than like a family where everyone has responsibilities and is nourished. Adopting sustainable lifestyles might shake us to our roots, but the good news is that what will shake out is the dead weight, stale dreams and excess possessions we can't even fit in our houses.

2. We must learn about the effects of overconsumption and teach what we know

Read and learn from experts and spokespeople for the new economics (see Resources). Investigate where the products you buy come from and make a conscious choice about what you will and won't support with your consumer dollars. Pursue information about which products might be the most environmentally friendly while at the same time questioning whether you need one more thing anyway! Convene and attend conferences on sustainable consumption and sustainable livelihoods. Discuss and debate. Learn about the *real* cost of our lifestyle in terms of time on the job, resource depletion and pollution.

As we discover for ourselves how much is enough for a good life, we can use every opportunity to introduce it into the public dialogue. Network. Every letter we write, every conversation we

have, every encounter is an opportunity to share what we've learned and help yet one more prisoner release themselves from the "more-is-better" prison. For example, promote and celebrate the new international holiday: **Buy Nothing Day**. It's the day after Thanksgiving in the U.S., which has been our biggest shopping day of the year.⁶²

Write letters to the editor, create curricula if you're a teacher, teach adult education classes, lead study circles. Talk to political candidates, talk to the media about good stories you hear. Make your voice heard. Write brochures, pamphlets and books about the issue. Volunteer with local or national organizations that are educating the general public about overconsumption.

Use your publications and media opportunities to educate the public on the links between overconsumption and your particular area of expertise in global concerns – be it population, resources, species survival, or economic justice. If you don't consider yourself an expert in a sustainability-related field, think about your job or profession. You'll probably find that what you do in some way influences the speed with which resources flow through the economy.

3. We must debunk the myths

What will you do when you hear someone spouting one of these invalid myths? "I don't have to save. I just charge it." "It's my money and I'll do with it as I please." "I'll feel better after a little mall-hopping." Will you stay silent? (After all, it's your best friend talking.) Will you speak up? How can you get through without sounding judgmental? As you face and erase the myths from your own life and discover that living sustainably *is* living well, the belief system based on more-is-better will look increasingly strange. So debunk the myths – verbally, in writing, over the radio, anywhere.

4. We must reframe the game

Let's talk about what we're *gaining*, not what we're losing. Instead of talking about cutting back and doing without, talk about having more time, getting out of debt, building savings and having financial security so that if you were to lose your job you wouldn't also lose your house and car. Talk about how the best things in life aren't things. Make overconsumption sound uncreative and frugality smart. It's easy, because it's true.

A culture of consumption is a culture of depletion. The word *consumption* itself means using up, destroying, wasting. We squander our personal energy on the job in order to afford our lifestyle. We compromise our integrity when we base our standard of living on debt instead of savings. We use up our creativity and love on material pursuits, while our relationships with family and community languish. None of this is necessary.

5. We must provide tools

People do not change because they are coerced by law, shamed by religion or sold yet another ideology by a marketer with a product (frugality as the flavor of the day, complete with special notebooks or computer programs to buy for tracking expenses). People change because they recognize and use the available tools to construct a better, more authentic life for themselves (see Resources). Without such tools little social change can occur. People will tolerate only so much hand wringing and statistics bashing before they turn off. But once a secure bridge is in place between the old and the new, many will cross willingly.

6. We must change public policy

Once people see consumption with new eyes, there are policy options that can support this transformed awareness. When people feel empowered to live equitably within our ecological means – and see this as a tremendous adventure rather than an odious imposition – new policies will become politically feasible.

New Road Maps for Public Policy

Three powerful policy analysis tools are now available. They help people intuitively understand the consumption issue and they allow legislators to test policy options.

The Ecological Footprint

One of the most useful tools for evaluating policy options is the Ecological Footprint, which was developed by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees of the University of British Columbia.⁶³ Also termed “appropriated carry capacity,” it is an accounting tool that calculates the area of productive land needed to support the lifestyle of an individual or a population indefinitely. It brings to light an embedded flaw in Western thinking that has led us to believe that the economy (our capacity to provide for ourselves and our well being) is separate from the earth. Subject to serving our needs, nature is viewed as a holding tank for our resources and a repository for our waste. Not true! The economy is within nature, just as we are – the flaw only made space for our plunder. Only now are we learning that there are limits to growth.

The Ecological Footprint is both analytical and educational, equally useful in building public awareness of these limits and helping decision-makers make wise choices in the present for a distant future. Central to the Footprint is the recognition that our urban lifestyles draw on resources from many parts of the earth. In measuring the footprint of their own population center, the Vancouver, B.C. region, Wackernagel and Rees determined that their fellow citizens were drawing on an area about 19 times larger than what was available for food, forestry products and energy.

What a vivid way to recognize that we are living far beyond our means, when “means” is defined as the capacity to support ourselves indefinitely within our own ecosystem! And what a strong call for change the Footprint demands. How can the burgeoning middle class around the world also enjoy our lifestyle without completely depleting the resources of the earth? In fact, Wackernagel and Rees calculate that it would require *three* earths for everybody on the planet to live the lifestyle of North Americans. Ecological stability and social resilience both depend on the human load being smaller than the earth’s carrying capacity. This provides a natural way to measure policies: do they tend to decrease our footprint, increase equity and offer people a better quality of life?

Environmental Space

Friends of the Earth in the Netherlands has developed a similar concept, called Environmental Space – the economic throughput (the stuff that is produced, consumed and thrown away) that could be sustained indefinitely.⁶⁴ Without mincing words they start off by facing the fact that we in the Northern countries consume too much and too quickly and produce too much waste. While it is only fair that the developing countries want to match our level of affluence, the current “Alpha” consumers – us – don’t want to cut back by the 70 percent that Friends of the Earth determined would be needed for an equitable sharing of the earth’s natural wealth. Looking ahead to the year

2010 they determined that the people in Holland would need to reduce consumption of energy by 60 percent, fresh water by 38 percent, aluminum by 80 percent, wood use by 65 percent, and land devoted to agriculture by 45 percent. That's a tall order – unless you look at the quality-of-life rather than the material side of these changes.

For example, mobility doesn't have to depend on cars: through better planning and efficiency, people could be given equal or better mobility at a fraction of the energy consumption. Products would be redesigned to be more durable and more easily recycled. Everything would be produced or grown as close to home as possible. Energy consumption per product would be lowered. And waste would be seen as a resource for new manufacturing processes (closed-loop processing). How would these changes feel? Not bad! Consumers would eat less meat, travel less by plane and more by train, and live in better-insulated houses with more efficient appliances. In an equitable world we might **all** have a better quality of life.

Genuine Progress Indicator

The final innovative policy tool making headlines today is an alternative to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP): the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) developed by the San Francisco organization Redefining Progress.⁶⁵ The GDP assumes all economic activity is good for the economy and good for people; thus, illness, environmental clean-up after disasters and other catastrophes become profit centers. The GPI modifies the GDP with measures of well-being and sustainability, taking into account both the environmental and social impacts of a growth economy. While the GDP has risen steadily in the last 40 years, the GPI has declined hand-in-hand with the nation's social well-being (measured by The Index of Social Health), both of which peaked in 1973.^{66,67}

Each of these tools – the Ecological Footprint, Environmental Space and the Genuine Progress Indicator – help us to grasp collectively what we are learning as individuals: more is not always better. If politicians, academics, funders and media professionals maintain a personal skepticism or remain unwilling to question their own lifestyles, their leadership will infect the public debate about consumption. This, again, is why it is so important for individuals to change and act.

The President's Council on Sustainable Development

Change **is** happening, albeit slowly, at the public policy level. In response to the Earth Summit (1992), President Clinton formed The President's Council on Sustainable Development to make policy recommendations that would contribute to a vibrant economy, a healthy environment and social equity, all at the same time. The Council in turn created a Population and Consumption Task Force, which developed an ambitious policy agenda for curbing U.S. consumption.⁶⁸ The goals they articulated include:

1. Reduce the amount of primary materials (including energy) used in the U.S. economy.
2. Achieve patterns of consumption, savings and investment that will contribute to long-term economic prosperity, environmental protection and greater social equity.
3. Provide consumers with the information, services and opportunities needed to make informed choices in their selection and use of goods and services.
4. Expect every American to contribute to sustainable development by understanding and upholding ethical principles of global stewardship.
5. Make cleaner, more efficient technologies available to reduce material use and achieve sustainable development.

The policies recommended by the Task Force to achieve these goals centered on:

1. Shifting federal and state tax codes to reward savings and conservation and discourage excess consumption and environmentally damaging activities.
2. Educating consumers in financial literacy to encourage savings and personal economic stability.
3. Educating consumers on the environmental consequences of their consumption choices.
4. Moving to a new type of materials economy that discourages use of virgin resources and encourages efficiency and reuse.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

If we had to depend on the political process alone for the necessary changes, there might be reason for dismay. But observing the vitality of the shift in our culture from “excess” to “enough” gives ample reason for hope. Overconsumption is being seen as wasteful, harmful, unnecessary and unfulfilling by ever-greater numbers of people. The Merck Family Fund survey cited earlier showed that 28 percent of Americans had voluntarily reduced their incomes in order to have more free time – and very few regretted the choice.⁶⁹ The Trends Research Institute in Rhinebeck, N.Y. estimates that by the turn of the century more than 15 percent of the Baby Boomers will be living more simply – curbing excess in favor of more time for self, family and community.⁷⁰ In a *U.S. News & World Report* survey, 48 percent of respondents said they had taken steps in the last five years to simplify their lives, and 51 percent said they want more free time, even if it means less money.⁷¹ According to Paul H. Ray of the San Francisco consumer research firm American Lives, a growing constituency of intellectuals, spiritual seekers, social activists, environmentalists and participants in progressive causes like the women’s movement now make up 24 percent of the U.S. adult population (44 million people!).⁷² ***This is the hothouse where the new ideas for the next millennium are being shaped.***

And last, but not least, the success of our book, *Your Money or Your Life*, says that people are looking for ways to extricate themselves from debt and financial insecurity. Over 600,000 copies are in print and for more than a year it has been on the nation’s premiere list of hot money books – the *Business Week* best-seller list.

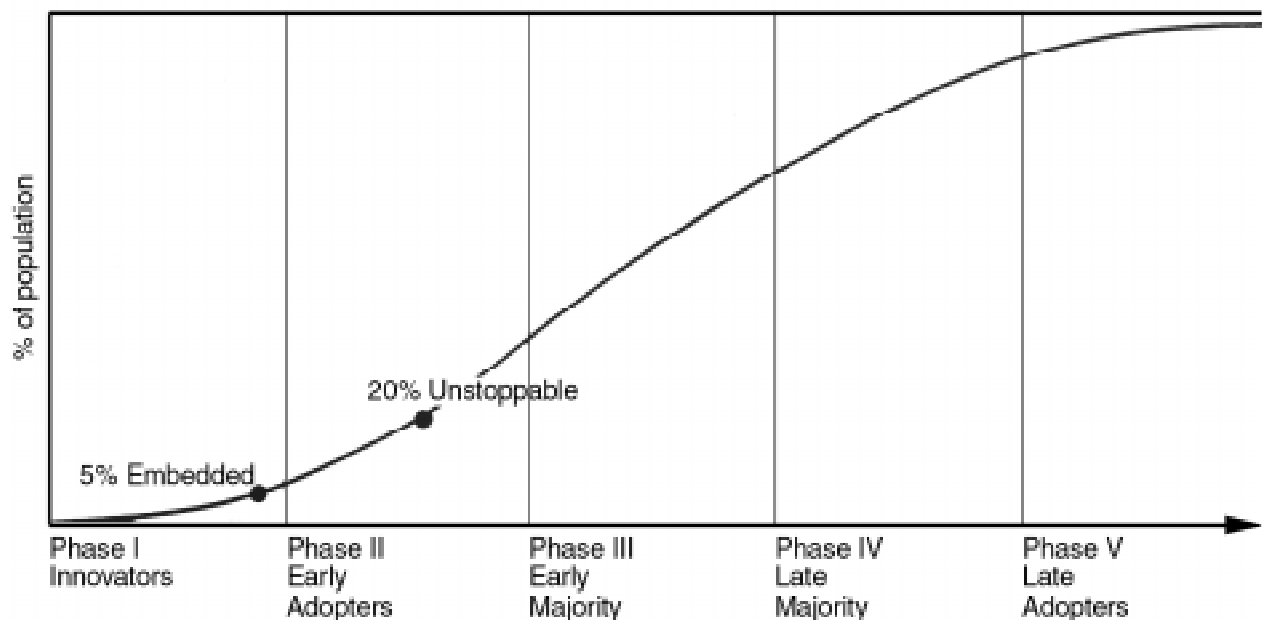
In addition to the work of the New Road Map Foundation, there are dozens of journals and newsletters devoted to simple and frugal living, and organizations around the country that provide education in living well on less. As noted earlier, both business and the government are encouraging Americans to save more of their income. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan keeps pounding the message home: “I, and others, have long argued... that the essential shortcoming of this economy is the lack of saving and investment.”⁷³ Meanwhile, the movement toward consumption taxes is aligning normally polarized interest groups into an improbable but strong coalition. Such departures from politics-as-usual show that a new constituency is being born, naturally organized around a new world view of a finite earth where we must coexist peacefully, sustainably and equitably – or suffer the consequences.

Every discipline, every sector of society is engaged in this shift away from excess and back to balance. Schools are teaching media literacy. Churches are exploring stewardship, not dominion, as humanity’s right relationship with the natural world. Foundations are actively seeking ways to fund projects designed to define overconsumption and activate solutions, including academic conferences, television documentaries and public policy development. Public relations and advertising specialists are busy creating anticonsumption commercials and developing exciting “sound bites” that show the benefits of frugal living.

While the Mall of America is still making headlines as a chic destination for wealthy travelers, a constituency sufficient for change is growing. The innovation adoption curve developed by Everett Rogers shows why.⁷⁴ According to his research, a new way of thinking or behaving goes through distinct phases on its way to being adopted by a society. Once approximately 5 percent of the population (the innovators) pick it up, it becomes “embedded” in the culture – i.e., the idea becomes familiar. If the innovation is then accepted by another 15 percent of the population (the early adopters) it tends to become “unstoppable,” and the rest of society will incorporate it as their own (Figure 3). What began as a radical idea becomes common knowledge. This model is useful to change agents in two ways. First, it says that we don’t have to change everyone in order to change the world. Second, given the findings of the Trends Research Institute, Merck Family Fund, *U.S. News & World Report* and Paul Ray’s research, it shows we are already well on the way to the numbers needed for an unstoppable social movement.

The impact of this movement has implications far beyond our borders. The fact that North Americans are rethinking consumerism could have a profound effect on the middle class in developing countries where strong family and community ties are still intact. Perhaps they won’t pursue more-is-better as vigorously as we have.

Figure 3. Innovation Adoption Curve



Source: Beyond War: A New Way of Thinking (Palo Alto, CA: Beyond War, 1985).

PICTURE OF THE FUTURE

If you, the reader, have been engaged in this exploration of a new road map for consumption – at times perhaps disagreeing, often nodding, checking out assertions against your own experience – then it won't seem utopian to suggest that we *can* – right here in the midst of the 20th-century-version of the aging Roman Empire – create a sustainable future. Once the new ideas attract the political will to become the law of the land, people will begin to see the emergence of a fiscally sane society. Every sector of society will be reordered according to this new, sustainable DNA: from advertising to education; from economics to agriculture and food distribution; from home design and construction to medical technology and hospitals; from banking to land usage. To be more explicit, let's look at what we might have more of:

1. Savings

People will get out of debt and stay out. They will save up for major purchases and thus avoid finance charges. They will build up their savings and invest their nest eggs prudently. It is said that, because of debt, many Americans are just two paychecks away from homelessness. As a healthy household emergency fund (two to six months of living expenses readily available) becomes the norm, job loss won't be a catastrophe. It could even be an opportunity. Fear, worry and stress about paying the bills will melt out of the lives of financially secure people. Economic cycles won't threaten them. In fact, the economy will be stronger because of them.

2. Good relationships

Most divorces revolve around money issues. With a language and a methodology for dealing with shared finances, the family system will become healthier and more resilient. Relationships with neighbors and friends will strengthen as people realize they can economize by informally sharing resources – from lawn mowers to life skills. As people assume greater responsibility for their lives, fewer will need to draw resources from programs designed for the truly disadvantaged. Social tension bred of fear and resentment could ease.

3. New ways of working

With people less dependent on working long hours to support unnecessary consumption, they will have the courage to demand opportunities for creative – and more humane – work schedules: flex-time, longer parenting leaves, shorter workweeks, telecommuting, job sharing. Overall, working for money will become just one part of a rich and varied life. Unpaid work will once again be socially acknowledged and valued. Ordinary people will express their love and passion outside their paid employment through volunteering, parenting and dreaming up projects to enliven our world.

4. An empowered workforce

Employees with a healthy bank account would also be healthy for business. Workers with savings can challenge conditions and policies at their jobs, or leave fearlessly if they no longer want to be there. Either way, productivity could be increased because the worker either is engaged actively in the life of the company or is no longer deadweight. And, while it may seem obvious, it bears saying that the purpose of a job is to generate income. Workers who have learned to be frugal with their personal resources are more likely to detect and eliminate waste in company processes. Such a work force – empowered, honest, alert – is any employer's dream.

5. New ways of consuming

Planned obsolescence will seem insane, if not downright obscene. We will value quality over quantity. Refrigerators, sewing machines, cars, stereo systems, stoves, dishwashers and condos will be built to last. We would spend less time dealing with defective merchandise, and less time researching and buying replacements for products that died an early death. Eventually, Americans might even lose the label of “consumers” and become “citizens” again. We will again define ourselves by how we give of ourselves, rather than what we have.

6. More fun

Is consuming for its own sake (“recreational shopping”) really fun? Or is it like cotton candy, giving you false signals of satisfaction? Might people use hours liberated from mall grazing in more creative ways? Would we have more poetry, more intimacy, more music, more compassion, more picnics, more potlucks, more parents volunteering in the schools, more grassroots democracy, more skills learned, more laughter, more love and understanding... in short, more of what makes life worth living?

7. Healthier bodies

With less stress, more leisure, deeper relationships, less fast food, better rest at night and perhaps even delicious mid-afternoon naps, our bodies will find a balance that suits us. Given that so many of our personal money worries revolve around health care, such relaxation might add life to our years – and even years to our life.

8. A healthier environment

The new road map for consumption means a new lease on life for our earth. By learning to distinguish between necessary and frivolous consumption, people can significantly increase their joy-to-stuff ratio – and slow down the flow of products through their lives. Rather than “buying green” they will ask themselves: Do I need to buy this at all? Will it really help me perform my work better – or am I simply enamored of the latest technology? Will it significantly enhance my quality of life? Here is the core of sustainable consumption: people moving beyond tokenism to conscious, careful stewardship of their own resources (time and money) and the resources of the earth.

CONCLUSION

The time is ripe for turning the tide of overconsumption. We have a rich history of voluntary frugality. We have the personal motivation to lower consumption. We have the constituency for a movement toward healthy thrift. We have amongst us masters of persuasion. Surely we can create the public will to effect lifestyle change, policy change and ultimately change in every corner of community and national life.

If the old road map charted a territory called “more,” the new road map will guide us through the future where wise spending of limited resources is the norm. The terrain will be lush, not dreary. No longer mesmerized by mass culture, our senses will appreciate once again the beauty of nature, the nobility of life and death, the exquisite joy of loving one another. None of these pleasures is available through the prepackaged, ready-to-consume routes on the old road map. What will be required from each of us, in every role we play, is this: ***to know what is enough.***

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Alan Thein Durning, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), p. 38.
- ² Denis Hayes, "Eco-nomic Power," *Seattle Weekly*, November 10, 1993, p. 15.
- ³ See Alan Thein Durning, *Ecological Wakes: The Story of Six Everyday Objects* (Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch, 1994). This simple document reveals the natural history and life cycle of a cup of coffee, a newspaper, a T-shirt, and a lunch of French fries, hamburger and cola.
- ⁴ Alan Durning, "Asking How Much Is Enough," in Lester R. Brown et al., *State of the World 1991* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), p. 156.
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SOME RESOURCES ON OVERCONSUMPTION

Many of the resources listed here and on the following pages (**highlighted in green**) are available through The Simple Living Network.

Visit them on-line at: www.simpleliving.net
or call 800-318-7525 or 509-395-2323.

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About Vicki Robin

Vicki Robin is coauthor with Joe Dominguez of the national best-seller *Your Money or Your Life* (Viking Penguin, 1992), a book detailing a nine-step program for lowering personal consumption and increasing savings while *improving* quality of life. She has appeared on hundreds of television and radio shows, including “Oprah,” National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” and “Weekend Edition,” “Good Morning America,” “ABC World News Tonight” and CNN. Articles about her work have appeared in *The New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *Fortune*, *Money*, *Esquire*, *Working Woman*, *Kiplinger’s* and *People*. *Your Money or Your Life* has been translated into Dutch, German, **Spanish** and **French**.

Vicki is co-founder and President of **The New Road Map Foundation**, an all-volunteer organization, and a Founding Trustee of Sustainable Seattle. Vicki also served on the Population and Consumption Task Force of President Clinton’s Council on Sustainable Development.

Since 1970 Vicki has lived on an average of \$7,000 a year. All proceeds from her book and lectures are donated to projects promoting sustainability. **The New Road Map Foundation** (NRM) has been dedicated for over 25 years to lowering consumption in North America in response to the ecological and social costs of the U.S. lifestyle. NRM has published two highly successful booklets, *All-Consuming Passion: Waking Up from the American Dream* and *How Earth-Friendly Are You? A Lifestyle Self-Assessment Questionnaire*, and recently launched study guides for groups working with the program in *Your Money or Your Life* – one for general use and one tailored for Christian church groups.