

# Stuff-Love

BY LAURA SINGLETON

Though advancements in our technology are making current levels of consumption, by Americans in particular and the developed world overall, more hazardous than in the past, our excessive love of stuff is not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction. Why are we unable to rein in our greed?

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A European observer summed up with a certain amazement the insatiable drive for consumption he witnessed during a visit to the United States: “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.”<sup>1</sup>

Did he make his trip during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s in Silicon Valley? The Reagan-inspired “Greed is good” Wall Street run of the mid-1980s? The flourishing post-war prosperity and Madison Avenue heyday of the 1950s? The feel-good expansiveness of the Roaring ‘20s? Sorry, wrong century!

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous Frenchman who penned these words, visited America in the 1830s, before Ivory Soap floated or Tony the Tiger growled his first “GR-R-R-eat!”, before McDonald’s had “served” even one of those billions and billions of burgers, let alone cranked out a Happy Meal, and before any of the many Pepsi Generations later embodied by Britney had seen the light of day. The timing illustrates that the phenomenon of rampant American consumerism, despite current rhetoric, has deep-seated roots. As de Tocqueville acknowledges, its beginnings preceded his day as well.

“At first sight,” he writes, “there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance. But it is a spectacle as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it.”<sup>2</sup>

Restlessness amid abundance, after all, isn’t a bad way to characterize the attitude that brought down Eden. “There is nothing new under the sun,” the saying goes, which also reminds us of the signature phrase in Ecclesiastes. That book, along with the life of Solomon itself, certainly proves that ancients didn’t hesitate to test the rewards of materialism to find happiness “under the sun.” The prophets spend at least as much time chastising Israel for acquisitiveness as for idolatry—debunking in the process the tendency of current environmentalists to equate nature religions with earth-healthy consumption habits and blame our ecological sins on those Johnny-come-lately, patriarchal monotheists. Stuff-love, in fact, seems rooted in the brand of idolatry described in Romans 1:25—worship of created things rather than the Creator. Regardless of how the good things come to us, there is still only one original Source, and we miss the boat when we place our trust anywhere else.

#### **HAZARDOUS TO OUR HEALTH**

Ancient though the problem may be, advancements in our technology for consuming make current levels of consumption, by Americans in particular and the developed world overall, even more hazardous than in the past. In 1830 we gobbled up the virgin forest with axes, human hands and backs (including immigrant or enslaved labor, of course), and horse-carts or oxen. Today, our weapons of choice include bio-engineered agricultural mutants, nuclear reactors, multiple motorized (and fossil-fuel-powered) vehicles and tools, plus an ever-expanding array of persistent and deadly chemicals, giving us the power to inflict much more rapid and insidious damage. In literature on the by-products of our selfish habits, this overblown consumption is projected as a culprit in environmental ills from global warming to species extinction. On a purely financial basis, higher and higher personal spending, including the service of consumer debt, drains disposable income that might otherwise contribute to social needs like healthcare and education.

The favored scapegoat for this overheated consumption engine, of course, is business. Increasingly, reproach is visited on the free-market system itself, particularly in combination with American ideals of personal advancement and growth. The fabled “Protestant work ethic,” it seems, has been superseded by an equally dutiful drive to consume for the sake of economic growth, an impulse no longer checked by whatever religious moorings exerted at least some influence in earlier eras. Keeping the economy expanding, of course, is the mechanism that enabled so many Americans to attain a higher standard of living than their parents. Who

knew that the growth machine might threaten the ability of one's great-great-grandchildren to live, period?

Even academics in the fields of business and economy, generally bastions of defense for free-market concepts, are becoming heralds of concern. Harvard economist Juliet Schor, one of the most prolific writers on patterns of American over-consumption, points out that the traditional "utility theory," which is used to justify market systems as inevitable maximizers of good, breaks down if consumers strive after ever-higher, unattainable standards of material wealth, leaving themselves chronically unsatisfied.<sup>3</sup> (More stuff may make us happier for a while, she says, but when our desires catch up and outstrip what we can afford to buy, we're stuck in unhappiness.) Since, she argues, this is in fact the situation for present-day Americans, we are not necessarily "better off" just because the economy is expanding. Business school faculty, who might not be expected to weigh in on the hazards of out-of-control individual consumption, realize the threat posed by the manifestation of that behavior in *particular* individuals—namely, corporate CEOs. Business academics know that confidence in markets depends upon confidence in their fair and unimpeded operation, and the latest scandals have revealed a system of corporate governance with limited accountability and seemingly limitless potential for exploitation by those at the top. Legal remedies can only go so far, and many perceive a need for real changes in the attitudes and assumptions common to many corporate leaders. Accordingly, you have articles like "Beyond Selfishness" in last fall's *MIT Sloan Management Review*, co-authored by an international triumvirate of business faculty representing Harvard, Oxford, and McGill Universities. They challenge contemporary truisms like trickle-down economics and the sanctity of building shareholder value, arguing that human relationships and social conscience must have their place in business decision-making. The collapse of communism, they argue, should not leave the opposing camp triumphant: "If capitalism stands only for individualism, it will collapse too."<sup>4</sup>

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**MODERN AFFLICTION OR ENDURING ADDICTION?**

With distress, scolding, and tons of constructive advice raining down on us from the experts, however, why are we consumers—whether afflu-

ent CEOs or average Americans—generally unable to rein in our greed? The search for answers to that question in our day has spawned a barrage of lawsuits attempting to find someone (preferably with deep pockets) to blame for the adverse outcomes of our bad choices in consumption, from cigarettes to fast food. The common enemy is usually advertising, elevated to a power of otherworldly stature, a very demon that has seduced us,

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dragging innocent, duped Americans unwillingly into the abyss of consumerism. Without such influences, apparently, we'd all be content to live like the Amish. Writes one environmentalist: "It has taken relentless, well-crafted persuasion—and occasional coercion—to override the common values of frugality and sharing."<sup>5</sup> Most anyone

who's seen two-year-olds play, however, knows that coercion generally must be applied to *induce* sharing, not the other way around. One can only marvel at how the brilliant advertising elite managed to eradicate those "common values" so quickly in pre-literate toddlers.

Not everyone, in fact, tries to pin all the blame for excessive consumerism on outside influences. The book *Affluenza*, despite naming the consumer bug so it sounds like something you "catch," actually begins its section on causes for the virus with a chapter titled, yes, "Original Sin," discussing the Judeo-Christian perspective, among others, that finds selfish desires rooted in the human heart. Even author Richard Dawkins, an adherent to "orthodox Darwinian theory" (his term) finds enough evidence to posit an original cause for those desires in *The Selfish Gene*. Natural selection, he argues, favors the selfish individuals in any species, and thus the ones who are out for themselves are the ones still around to pass their chromosomes along to those who come later. From Dawkins' perspective, of course, this is all just a naturally-explainable phenomenon written into our DNA, but it seems rather like a case of a "rose by another name."

Does our disposition toward selfishness, however it got there, absolve advertisers who practice conscious deception? Of course not. Do they sometimes employ tactics for targeting and persuasion that, while short of outright deceit, stretch ethical standards? Yes, indeed. However, the reality is that advertisements work because they exploit something that is in us already and can be exploited. James Twitchell puts this argument clearly in his book, *Lead Us Into Temptation*: "The academy has casually passed off as

'hegemonic brainwashing' what seems, to me at least, a self-evident truth about human nature. We like having stuff."<sup>6</sup> Twitchell, while recognizing all the persuasive tactics employed by modern advertising, rejects the often-drawn distinction between "real" and "false" needs (the latter being the kind typically alleged to result from manipulative ads). From his perspective, all material needs beyond mere subsistence are by definition "wants." You can't have a "false want," because its legitimacy is defined by the act of wanting itself. If we seek self-confidence with our tooth whitener or status with our automobile, it's because that's what we really want—namely, to purchase our self-image like a commodity. We can't put all the blame for this on the advertisers.

Our innate disposition toward wanting and consuming becomes even more evident when we examine popular plans for reducing consumption, which themselves seem suspiciously "stuff-like." The whole "simplicity" movement has spawned its own line of books and magazines, as publishers and advertisers always recognize a niche market when they see one. A summer issue of *Real Simple* (cover price \$3.95) featured an advertisement for a Toyota mini-van on the back, while *Organic Style* (cover price \$4.50) sported a similar ad for a Subaru Forester. Elaine St. James' series of books on "living the simple life" constitutes a classic franchise, offering brand extensions that would be the envy of any product manager at Procter & Gamble. The book *Affluenza*, itself first a documentary series aired on PBS, pokes fun at its own expense with a cartoon of a viewer watching the show and intently taking in its messages about American over-consumption. His response to the obligatory "For a tape of this program, send check or money order to..." promotional announcement is to pop up eagerly and say, "I'll need two!"<sup>7</sup> And, yes, there is a *Frugal Living for Dummies*, the unmistakable stamp of a trend whose time has come. Among the helpful hints on its front cover "pocket card": Go for basic cable rather than premium.

#### **A HIDDEN DANGER**

All of the foregoing, of course, illustrates what anti-consumption advocates are up against. Most Americans, to be blunt, like the lifestyle we have. As an illustration, one writer said she took an informal poll of female friends and family about whether they would be willing to give up the fossil-fuel-consuming, chemically-enhanced conveniences of modern life and go back to the soap-making, water-hauling, wood-chopping realities that chained women to the home and shaped our great-grandmothers' way of life. Given several options to choose from, one of her friends preferred "instant death" over the prospect of turning back the clock.<sup>8</sup> Anti-consumption advocates realize they are swimming against a powerful tide. An action group called "Enough" acknowledges that a major challenge for them is "how to sell the message about the negative impact [of our patterns of excessive consumption] on workers' lives, the environment and the Third

World, without wearing a hair shirt.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, an anonymous reviewer of one of St. James’ books at the Barnes and Noble website made this enthusiastic recommendation: “If you are looking to simplify and make some quality of life changes but are not necessarily ready to buy everything in bulk and shop only at thrift stores, this is the book for you.” Underneath it all, the comfortable-enough-to-be-popular message to simplify

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sounds a bit like, “Try to cut down the credit card debt and buy organic, but hey, no one’s expecting you to go crazy here. Keep your basic cable.”

For those really taking the plunge into the rustic life, there’s also some danger that such deliberate countercultural downshifting can turn into its own form of self-indulgence. Bill

McKibben, in an essay contemplating why he opposed even an environmentally-friendly method of delivering his community from the summer menace of black flies, writes about this reverse consumptive behavior. “I consume inconvenience, turning it into a pleasurable commodity; it becomes the fuel for my own sense of superiority,” observes McKibben. Much as the new magazines and books illustrate, this consciousness is just another version of consumers banding into a lifestyle category. “Instead of defining ourselves by what we buy,” he suggests, “we define ourselves by what we throw away.”<sup>10</sup>

As many a monk finds out, even asceticism carries the hazards of pride and the potential for corruption by our selfish motives. This is partly because, as writer Martin Marty notes, “To disdain what is on earth to be consumed is not purely and simply virtuous.”<sup>11</sup> Marty illustrates this point with a traditional Hasidic story about a man who takes a vow of asceticism, believing that depriving himself of all earthly pleasures is a sure ticket to Paradise. He eschews art, social events, wine, women, song, and the like, and does achieve his desired after-life destination. Unfortunately, he is tossed out of Paradise in three days because he doesn’t have a clue about the delight and enjoyment that’s going on there.

Neither unbridled asceticism nor unbridled acquisition is a proper response to the challenges of consumerism. God, after all, created much stuff for us to enjoy, pronouncing it “good” when the work of creation was finished. On the other hand, God commanded limits on our possessiveness. The forbidden fruit itself was both edible and delicious, but God placed it beyond the boundary of our appropriate gathering.

As Christians, our challenge is to understand those appropriate boundaries on our consumption while accepting the reality that life under grace gives us no easy place to check for “rules.” The church can present invaluable opportunities to explore these concerns and solutions with one another. Tellingly, the “voluntary simplicity” movement has at its core a “small group” component, offering the kind of emotional support for constructive life change that churches, at their best, provide.

### **CHANGE WON'T BE EASY**

The fundamental requirement for fixing over-heated consumerism is to stop looking for others to blame and accept responsibility for ourselves. Even then, however, history suggests that change won't be easy.

Sometime in the late 300s, the great Christian leader St. John Chrysostom preached to his congregation in Antioch a series of seven sermons on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The truths he stressed reflect issues that still plague our thinking about materialism. He challenged, for example, the fallacy that health and wealth are signs of God's favor, reminding hearers that lasting rewards (and punishment) come hereafter. Over sixteen centuries later, his description of the Rich Man's easy life offers a strong caution to contemporary Americans: “Everything flowed to him as from a spring...he was drowned every day by the waves of evil and did not take notice of it.”<sup>12</sup> This alone should warn us away from piecemeal approaches to reducing consumption that keep us safely in our “comfort zone” but clearly offer no comfort about our ultimate security. Unfortunately, even such powerful preaching apparently had a limited impact, as, by the seventh sermon, Chrysostom found it necessary to begin with a caustic preamble. He was quite upset, it seemed, at the report that so many church members were back out cheering the chariots at the local race track!

The story only illustrates that no amount of scolding, even from the preacher called the “golden mouth,” will change our behavior if we don't want to be changed. This prompts us to recognize the parallel: Though advertisers should of course be held accountable for deceit and pressure tactics, it remains true that the most persuasive commercial, be it ever so subtle, can't ultimately make us do something we don't want to do either.

### **NOTES**

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 508.

2 *Ibid.*, 509.

3 Juliet Schor, “What's Wrong With Consumer Society? Competitive Spending and the 'New Consumerism,’” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999), 49.

4 Henry Mintzberg, Robert Simons, and Kunal Basu, “Beyond Selfishness,” *MIT Sloan*

*Management Review* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2002), 69.

5 Stephanie Mills, "Can't Get That Extinction Crisis Out of My Mind," in *Consuming Desires*, 203.

6 James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 273.

7 Joel Pett, cartoon in preface to *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, by John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001), xiii.

8 Jane Smiley, "It All Begins with Housework," in *Consuming Desires*, 168.

9 John Desmond, *Consuming Behaviour* (Basingstoke, England and New York: Palgrave, 2003), 91.

10 Bill McKibben, "Consuming Nature," in *Consuming Desires*, 92.

11 Martin E. Marty, "Equipoise," in *Consuming Desires*, 184.

12 St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, translated and introduced by Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, N Y: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 131.

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