# SUFFICIENCY: ENOUGH, FOR EVERYONE, FOREVER

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The name of the mean is sufficiency.

—Roman de la Rosa, 13th cent.

### *Vision*

*Consciousness blossoms forth from mindfulness. We feel growing within us a great peace and sense of security. We thrill as we recognize how little indeed is needful and from this recognition we claim our freedom. We no longer subject ourselves to overwork to acquire the merely perishable things that offer only perishable pleasures. Our homes are modest and easily cared for. This has removed from our lives all manner of hurry and unwanted stress. Our possessions are well-made, beautiful, and capable of being remade when necessary. Everywhere there is light and all this world now consciously runs on light---the light of the sun. The grimy, smoking machines of consumer culture have passed away along with the fear and drudgery they demanded. No one slaves for more when all know how much is enough. In the practice of moderation we discover security and justice because scarcity disappears along with mindless craving and the forces that drive mindless craving. We learned that security cannot be found by hoarding up material things, but only in peaceable relationships with each other and with the Earth. We're secure when Gaia is well. We trust Gaia now to provide for us as she has for four billion years and we help her do so; but we no longer torment her for her riches. Her riches are safest when in safe keeping by her. The most admired among us is the one capable of the greatest happiness on the slenderest material means. We no longer ask our Elders the secret of a long life, or of how to procure affluence. We ask them: "How did it come to pass that you were so very happy and left so much love, but such a small mark on the world? Teach us how to be remembered."*

Ever since the Sophists of ancient Greece started teaching their followers how language could be skillfully manipulated to persuade their listeners, the meanings of words have been molded to serve the agendas of their speakers. George Orwell's political satire *Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagined a world in which the meanings of words had been turned inside out to buttress a totalitarian state. In modern times, this practice has evolved into a science used by both propagandists and advertisers—the latter merely being the propagandists of consumption. One effect of this take-over of language in service of the consumerist agenda is that it makes any proposals in favor of reducing consumption sound negative by comparison.

For example, the word "frugal" means "careful, sparing, economical, avoiding excess." These seem sensible enough practices, but in consumer culture frugality mostly denotes a sort of stingy selfishness, a lack of generosity. "Austerity" means "sternness of manner, severity of judgment, severe self-discipline, and severe simplicity" but is commonly used today to refer to any measure of self-discipline that a government or public authority might impose on itself to avoid operating deficits and debt. The implication is clearly that any gesture of self-control is an exercise in

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"severity." "Prudence" is scarcely ever used today, probably because it sounds too close to "prude" or "prudish," but it means "sound judgment, circumspection, sensibleness, wisdom, discernment, knowledgeable and skillful." "Temperance" which today implies a joyless, rigid self-denial actually means "rational self-restraint, self-control, moderation, due proportion, mildness, forbearance, dispassion." But what is wrong with such values apart from their potential to moderate consumption and hence profits? If we had all learned to practice these a little more, would we have had to endure the far harsher medicine of the economic train wreck of 2008? Yet in consumer culture, people who pay their entire credit card balance every month are known in the industry not as frugal or temperate, but rather as "deadbeats"—a term formerly applied to those who were "worthless, sponging idlers; loafers". One CNN economic commentator referred to people trying to save more and reduce their debts as "misers" the actual definition of which is "a person who hoards wealth and lives miserably in order to do so." (All definitions from Brown, 2007) Yet it has been widely recognized that consumption enabled by excessive spending and easy credit was a major factor contributing to economic hardship following the 2008 financial collapse.

What we might call "definition creep" also afflicts the voluntary simplicity movement as it strives to help its various audiences understand the paradox that "less can be more." Centuries ago the wisdom of moderation was expressed in phrases like "holy poverty," "austerity" and "asceticism." In later centuries, these words were softened to "frugality", "temperance" and "prudence" until lately we prefer "balance," "simplicity" and "sufficiency." Since consumer culture has had a century in which to reframe public narratives about the good life, and these have all been cast in terms that make ever increasing consumption sound like something wired into the human genome, any other point of view must make way against stiff headwinds. Education consultant Alan AtKisson (in Andrews & Urbanska, 2010: 101-106) has even proposed the Swedish word "lagom" which he defines as "somewhere north of sufficiency but still south of excess" because any other synonym for moderation, e.g. "enough," "sufficiency," etc., still just sounds too dirge-like when compared to all the peppy tunes churned out by consumer culture. Lagom is preferable, AtKisson argues, "...because it speaks more to what people actually want." And what people actually want is *more.*

Note the trend line revealed by the changes in these words. It's the trend that is our challenge, not the specific words. Every attempt to soften the language of moderation in order to increase one's audience ratings seems to ratchet in the direction of "just a little more." But it's precisely this incessant desire for just a little more that forms the pivot upon which our survival now turns. We lose sight of this as individuals and as a society especially when the progression from less to more happens gradually over several generations. But Earth's memory is long and every one of our excesses leaves a mark in her body, some of them indelible. Neither the importance nor the magnitude of this challenge can be underestimated. Somewhere it is written that toward the end of his life Mahatma Gandhi observed that of all the vows he took the most demanding was that of "voluntary meagre eating." Self-control is the most extreme of all sports.

It's only fair then to unpack some of consumer culture's own claims about itself. Today, consumption is considered an economic virtue if not a public duty. Former President of the United States, George W. Bush, urged us all to go shopping to fight terrorism. But only a century ago, "consumption" was a synonym for tuberculosis, not a national security strategy. Our modern term "credit" came into vogue when consumer culture just couldn't shake the negative connotations of "debt." People, it seems, enjoy being given credit more than they do being plunged into debt. The very goal of consumer culture, which is universal affluence, ignores the definition of affluence which is "more than enough; abundance; excess beyond need." If we think about it, that which is beyond what is needed can only be one thing: waste. So to the extent that our governments and corporations turn all their thought toward the one goal of promoting an affluent society, they promote a society of profligate wastrels, of which we have abundant evidence.

Only for a society afflicted with affluence does the question of how much is enough become urgent. Once we evolve past the boundaries of bare subsistence, we come upon a much broader territory haunted everywhere by another threat to our survival just as lethal as poverty. Our most pressing challenge is no longer how to alleviate poverty, but rather how to consume appropriately so as to conserve our humanity and the ecosphere. So unlike the challenge of privation is the challenge of affluence, it catches us unawares. We are ill-equipped to meet it because our economy was developed initially to resolve the problem of poverty, and then later to generate wealth for its own sake. No one worried about addictive consumerism. We can scarcely perceive what is happening. Our traditional discourses are useless. The times require that we see and respond differently.

This need is especially acute in the field of politics where nearly all the debates, and all the reportage, continues to be mired in language and worldviews that are no longer relevant. From the perspective of mindfulness, simplicity and sustainability, the traditional divide between right and left politics mostly misses the point. Through the 19th and 20th centuries, political debate turned on whether a laissez-faire market capitalist or centrally managed economy was the best means to a goal both sides shared—an affluent society—whether called "democratic consumerism" or a "workers' paradise" makes no difference. Today, it happens that the laissez-faire capitalist system made a large number of us affluent before the centrally managed economies did, but both were blind to the disutilities of over-consumption. Now the debate should not continue to be about the best means to achieve the goal of affluence, but rather about the wisdom and sustainability of affluence itself.

If we are not aiming to build an affluent society, what are we aiming to build? I propose that we want an off-ramp that takes us to a different road than the one we are currently traveling. Consumer culture frightens people into thinking that life is a highway with only one lane and no off-ramps. Behind us lies poverty, primitivity, superstition and suffering. Ahead of us lies the promised land of—well, of what? More of what we already have. More affluence; more things; more speed and power and noise; more competition and overwork; more pollution and more conflict; more booms and recessions and depressions. What consumer culture cannot imagine is that there might be an off-ramp leading neither back to poverty nor onward to more of this. Such thoughts would come from a different paradigm, a different consciousness, something that consumer culture doesn't understand and can't control. But the truth we have discovered is that neither poverty nor affluence is sustainable. We need an alternative to both.

## 2. AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE FAMILIAR CATASTROPHE: MINDFULNESS AND SUFFICIENCY

Elsewhere (Burch, 2012) I have argued that the practice of mindfulness can be associated with the growth in us of a desire for a materially simpler way of life. This comes about partly because mindful awareness is sweet and once having tasted it, we're inclined to want more of it. Living amidst many distractions makes this more difficult. So we simplify to help maintain mindful awareness. Also, mindfulness awakens in us a sensibility for the many ways we are interdependent with other beings. Attending responsibly to these relationships is made easier by simplifying the outer baggage of our lives. We've become sensitized to the potential for violence inherent in owning things and are beginning to desire a less violent way of life, which thus implies owning fewer things, especially luxuries.[2] Our search for well-being is shifting from extrinsic to more intrinsic, non-

[2] The link between affluence and violence is not always obvious. Suffice it here to note that nearly all economic production and consumption activities incur violence of one sort or another, most of it structural rather than direct. This violence is especially egregious when luxury consumption is involved, because the consumption serves no inherent need other than status display and profit. Note also in Hawken (2007: 84),

material sources. We're developing insight into the dynamics of desire and how futile is the pursuit of goods to try to satiate desires which cannot, by their nature, be satiated. Finally, mindfulness practice helps us discover the experience of things in their depth rather than only in their number. We take time to look more deeply into the ordinary experiences of our lives with the result that we see and appreciate them more. This deep experiencing and appreciation evolves naturally away from the need for many material possessions, and toward more attentive care for what we do have, and more sensitive awareness of when we have too much.

Since almost everywhere production and consumption of material things incurs environmental impacts (extraction of resources, expenditure of energy, generation of waste and release of toxins), it's obvious that consuming less results in a smaller ecological footprint, which amounts to a more sustainable way of life (Robert, 2002). The "eco-logic" of simple living is very straightforward: less stuff = less environmental impact. I therefore argue that *any future sustainable culture will have mindfulness practice as one of its foundation stones, and voluntary simplicity as another---a freely chosen lifestyle one aim of which is obtaining a maximum of well-being on the minimum of material consumption.* While we can certainly commit to simple living just by choosing it, this choice seems to be deeper and more tenacious when rooted in mindfulness practice. It's only through such a practice that we come to know, profoundly and personally, why we are adopting simplicity. Upon these two, then, rests everything else.

I want to nuance a bit this idea of simple living guided by mindfulness of sufficiency. First, we will get confused if we equate consuming less with spending less. Money and consumption are only very loosely related. Earth really doesn't care how much or how little money we spend. What matters to her is the mass of resources we harvest, the energy we liberate in the process, and the toxicity of what we make and discharge into the world. Neither does Earth care much whether we are Christians or Muslims or Buddhists, or whether or not we appreciate art, or can run a marathon, or spend our holidays playing scrabble. The non-material aspects of human cultures are relevant to the sustainability challenge in so far as they influence our decisions about how we use the resources, energy and toxic materials our economy produces which in turn have real effects on the ecosphere. Islamic fundamentalism, for example, is of no consequence to the sustainability of the Earth until we start launching aircraft carriers and depleted uranium munitions, or we start burning oil wells, that have direct environmental impacts. It's always the translation of our beliefs into material effects that contributes to or detracts from our longevity on Earth, not the beliefs themselves, which are psychological not biophysical in nature.[3]

Second, whether I use the term "simple living" or "sufficiency" as I plan to use both, the associations that these words have in pop culture with a sense of limits, of restraint, etc., are inescapable. I really have searched without much success for alternative words that have more positive connotations in the dominant culture. I think this has also been true for others who are working on this subject. So stated tersely, if you have an issue with the idea of any sort of restraint, discipline or limit applying to your behavior for any reason whatever, that's something you will just have to deal with. Our oldest wisdom traditions have consistently recognized that restraint is required in some areas of life in order to secure maximum well-being in the whole of one's life. The

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how many of the major historical figures who promoted nonviolence were also advocates of simple living (Gandhi, Thoreau, Gregg).

[3] There are certainly some perspectives that suggest a tighter relationship between what we think and how those thoughts come to manifested at the level of physical reality which should not be entirely dismissed. Rupert Sheldrake's theories about morphogenetic fields (Sheldrake, 1988), more recent extensions of quantum entanglement to the realm of how observer effects might influence the outcome of events at the day to day level of reality (See: Leamon & Vicente, 2004) and the perennial teachings of many spiritual traditions respecting the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm all represent intriguing strands of inquiry which nevertheless exceed the scope of this book.

exercise of self-control, of moderation, and the capacity to recognize and respect limits does not drain the joy or pleasure out of life: On the contrary, it is an essential requirement for joy and pleasure. I'm more than open to contrary arguments that striving for sufficiency as contrasted with either poverty or affluence is a bad idea. I'm less sympathetic to those who just feel "uncomfortable" with any talk of limits, or those who rabidly oppose them on ideological grounds, without first examining the merits of a more moderate way of life or without offering any tangible reasons for their "discomfort". Extinction can be uncomfortable too.

I've already suggested that the consistent practice of mindfulness can grow in us an awareness of our desire for a simpler way of living. This desire is not something that is put there by mindfulness practice, but rather something already in us that mindfulness practice reveals. The aim of a more sustainable culture, at the material level of things, is *sufficiency in the provision of material needs.* Sufficiency stands between destitution on the one hand, and wasteful affluence on the other, but it is probably much lower on the food chain than is our current level of affluence. Affluence seems to have no psychological limit at all, even though pursuing affluence clearly has environmental and resource limits. A synonym for sufficiency is "enough." Not "barely enough" or "barely sufficient" but something that has a bit wider margin than the bare minimum required. This is the case because the wisdom granted by experience reveals that life includes variation and change. It sends us ups and downs. Our individual lives need some margins for sake of resilience and flexibility. While mere survival may be possible on barely sufficient resources, flourishing requires something more than the bare minimum of consumption. Therefore, sufficiency is not synonymous with a bare minimum. It is our very concern that present and future generations be able to flourish that partly motivates our present practice of sufficiency. Moreover, individual consumption is only part of the sustainability equation. At least as important are how many individuals are consuming, and the ecological efficiency of the technology being used to produce consumer goods.[4] We should also note that valuing sufficiency includes valuing beauty. There is no reason why the goods, services, and dwellings that provide sufficiently for our lives cannot also be beautifully made and comfortable to live in. Making something beautiful and making it well may take more time and forethought, but it certainly doesn't necessarily require greater expenditure of resources, energy, or use of toxic materials. In fact we will discover that making things well includes making them to last which will have the effect of actually reducing material consumption even as we increase beauty and well-being in our lives.

[4] The relationship among these variables is described in Merkel (2003). Total environmental Impact (I) equals Population (P) times Affluence (A) times Technology (T), or I = P x A x T. This concept is useful because it transcends the debate about population control, technical development, or consumption reduction being "silver bullets" if applied individually or ideologically to the sustainability challenge. The equation clearly illustrates that even if population was limited or reduced, we might still overshoot planetary carrying capacity if our expectations for consumption are unrealistic or if our technology is inefficient or environmentally toxic. Correspondingly, even earth's present human population might be supportable if our consumption expectations are modest and we do all within our power to make technology more efficient and environmentally benign. Technical development by itself will not likely be sufficient to meet the sustainability challenge if population continues to grow and consumption expectations remain unlimited. Current public policy discourses, however, tend almost exclusively to focus on promoting technical development---because that is where most profit can be made---or to a lesser degree on population control, which is seen as a developing country issue by commentators who live in developed countries. More or less entirely taboo is any analysis of over-consumption and the desire for affluence and how to address them. Even scholars and diplomats from developing countries who point out over-consumption in developed countries as an environmental threat, continue to promote economic growth in their own countries and demand assistance from the North to continue to do so.

### 3. WHAT IS SUFFICIENT?

But what exactly is "sufficient" material consumption?

At the physical level, sufficiency is fairly easy to describe. Here we are in the realm of what 20th century psychologist Abraham Maslow called "deficiency needs"—or those things without which physical survival is threatened.[5] The average human adult requires about 11,000 liters of clean air per day. Lacking air, we die in five or six minutes. We also require about 2 liters of clean water for drinking, and perhaps 100 liters more per day for bathing, cooking, washing clothes, and other essential personal uses.[6] Deprived of water, most people die in less than seven days. An average adult also requires about 2,200 calories per day of food which includes all minerals, vitamins and trace nutrients necessary for health.[7] Healthy adults can live without food for a month or two provided water is available. Obese adults can live far longer provided vitamins, minerals and electrolytes are available. In North America today it is excessive caloric intake, not starvation, which poses the greatest risks to our physical well-being. In addition to these, we also require access to technology that can moderate variations in temperature and exposure to the elements. For most of us this need is met by either clothing or shelter or a combination of them. A naked human adult has difficulty surviving over the long term in temperatures hotter than about 35 C° or cooler than about 15 C°. Clothing needn't be stylish to serve its purpose as we witness every day in the garb of the homeless.[8] But authorities do suggest that a minimum of about 25 square meters of living space be available per person within a building to avoid conditions of crowding that otherwise contribute to the spread of diseases like TB and influenza.[9] All of these needs can currently be provisioned at very low cost even through a market system without supplementing them by foraging, production for own consumption, hunting and gathering, or dumpster diving. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada—not a place known for its mild climate!—basic survival needs in 2010 could be met for about $11.00 per day.[10] This is by no means to say that such a life would be enviable in any other aspect than its freedom from the need to generate a large income. This gives us occasion to point out that the sort of "simplicity" we are advocating is certainly a life with a higher level of consumption than that required barely to meet subsistence needs. But we should also note the perennial truth that the Greek philosopher Epicurus (d. c. 270 BC) pointed out: "The

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[5] All statistics found at: http://www.canadaimmigrants.com/Winnipegliving.asp

[6] Water—cost -- $ 0.0018 at current (2009) Winnipeg water rates. Adding another 100 liters per day for hygienic purposes (NOT essential for survival), increases cost to $ 0.09 per day. Dasani Water, $1.80 / 600ml; daily requirement would cost $5.40 for drinking alone.

[7] Food—On a vegetarian diet, all nutritional requirements could be met for about $3.00 per day. Average food expenditure for Winnipeg household for 2009 was $6,553; assuming 3.5 persons per household, annual per capita food expenditure would be $1,872 or $ 5.17/day.

[8] Clothing to allow adaptation to a greater range of temperatures and activities can be procured for about $360 per year, or $1.00 per day. [Average value is 6% of household income, for Winnipeg for 2009, $68,642, assuming 3.5 persons per household, annual per capita clothing is $1,177 or $3.22/day.

[9] Shelter—Four adults sharing a two bedroom apartment for $774/mo would spend $6.45 per day. Average shelter expenditure (including household operation costs) for a Winnipeg household for 2009 was 35% of average household income ($68,642) or $24,025. Assuming average family size of 3.5 persons = $24,025 / 3.5 = $6,864 per person ($19.07/day).

[10] Total dollar cost to sustain one human being meeting needs through a market system and not own production, foraging, hunting-gathering, etc.: $ 10.54 per day—$ 316.20 per month. At current minimum wage (2009 - $9.00/hr), this can be obtained for 1¼ hours of labor per day. The corresponding figure for the average Winnipeg household based on total consumption expenditures would be $65,074 / 3.5 persons per household / 365 = $50.93 or $1,527.00 per month.

wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity."

What is sufficient for mere physical survival is thus quite easy to identify as is knowing how much is "enough." We pretty much know when we've drunk enough and eaten enough and breathed enough. We know when we are warm and safe from the elements. The limits imposed by nature—the size of our stomachs and bodies, the measure of our physical appetites—are not easily exceeded to any significant degree. Moreover, unless human numbers are exceedingly large, meeting these needs is not even particularly problematic from a sustainability perspective.

Even though the survival needs listed above are non-negotiable in that they must be met somehow, from a sustainability perspective, it still matters a great deal just how we meet them. If our 2 liters per day of required fluids consists of tap water or wine flown in from France or Argentina makes an enormous difference to environmental impacts. Whether our 2,200 calories per day are coming from locally grown vegetables and grains or we insist that it must be sea foods caught in S. E. Asia, or beef pastured in Brazil incurs very different ecological footprints. But in these matters we are already moving away from that which is minimally sufficient for physical survival and into a realm of desires that are learned from and shaped by our culture.

The next category of needs for which we must make sufficient provision pertains to our psychological and social well-being. Clearly, even our physical survival can be threatened if certain social and psychological needs are not adequately met. Children in orphanages, for example, if not stroked and cuddled enough, and lacking the opportunity to "bond" with an older caregiver who authentically loves them, will fail to thrive and sometimes even die. Moreover, despite our popular habit of celebrating the rugged individualist, people don't do very well if left alone. Solitary confinement is our most severe punishment for wrong-doing. So interdependent are we that in aboriginal cultures, banishment from the community often meant death. Today the epidemic of depression afflicting elders in our society can often be traced to loneliness.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the psychological and social needs I'm outlining are included in his "safety/security, love/belonging and esteem" needs categories. We need to feel both physically and emotionally safe. We need sexual gratification, the affection and esteem of others, experiences of beauty, education and intellectual stimulation, secure and meaningful work, meaning and purpose in life, and many of us need offspring. How "much" of these is enough is rather hard to specify, or whether they can even be measured at all. But the human capacity for contentment clearly suggests that we are capable of finding enough esteem, safety, sexual pleasure and love, at least for limited periods. Lacking these experiences (and they are *experiences*, not *things*) we may fail to develop our full humanity and emotional maturity, and sometimes we even fail to thrive physically. It is highly relevant to note that human beings were obviously capable of meeting all of these needs for hundreds of thousands of years before the invention of consumer culture. Meeting our psycho-social needs does not require Facebook, or McDonald's, or a Lexus. The genius of consumer culture is that it convinces us that such things are necessities.

Since we were capable of meeting our psycho-social needs before the invention of consumer culture, and even before the invention of market exchange economies, it should be fair to say that the economic cost of meeting these essential needs is very low or zero. Since little or no material consumption is required, living a life that is psycho-socially rewarding for us is thus clearly sustainable as well. The mere fact that we did survive and thrive and manifest psychological well-being for several hundred centuries clearly proves, I think, that human well-being is only loosely related to material consumption. That there are many aboriginal cultures extant today whose members achieve a healthy adulthood without the "benefits" of living in a consumer culture provides further evidence in support of our conclusion. Thus it is clearly possible and there is ample precedent, both historical and contemporary, to claim that people can live at low levels of material consumption and experience high levels of personal development and psycho-social well-being.

So what is consumer culture then? What were we thinking when we invented it? And what can we do about it now, if anything?

As soon as we move into the realm of consumer "culture," we are obviously talking about a human artifact. This is something we invented, or perhaps some of us invented for their own purposes and then foisted on a naive humanity—although I find this conspiracy theory implausible for reasons I will explain below.[11] The power of consumer culture resides in the fact that some of us have struck notes that easily resonate in the rest of us such that we cooperate in our own oppression.

Any economy must meet our basic physical needs or the economy itself will disappear because its customers will perish. The demand for the goods that fill these needs is intrinsic to our human nature. But we use material goods to assist with meeting or expressing many of our psycho-social needs as well. This capacity human beings have to substitute need satisfiers is the key focus of consumer culture development. We need love and esteem. But we can learn to perceive a diamond ring as evidence that someone loves us, and we can use diamond rings to express our love. How a psychological experience as rich, warm, complex and essential to human nature as love can become associated with a colorless, hard, cold, bit of stone attests to the miraculous ability we have to teach ourselves to believe almost anything. So I recognize the realm of consumer culture to begin just over the border between where we meet our psycho-social needs directly through the intrinsic reward of relationships on the hither side, and the yonder side where we start substituting extrinsic material things for relationships through enculturation. Consumer culture teaches us to want what it wants us to want by offering us substitutes for what we really want. As others have pointed out, these substitutions can be significant for many people (Segal, 1999). If we have not been fortunate enough to find real love in life, the services of a sex trade worker might be consoling on occasion, as might owning a pet, or collecting long lists of "friends" on Facebook. The pleasures and distractions that material things can offer are certainly significant.

Consumer culture's happy place, however, is the realm of learned needs and desires. In the early years of the 20th century, when cheap mass communication teamed up with mass literacy, mass production and the science of persuasion through marketing and advertising, we have the birth of consumer culture per se. Consumer culture goes far beyond the inherent human need for material things necessary to our survival or even to our comfort. Consumer culture makes a science of creating learned needs. Since humans are capable of learning almost anything, there are no practical limits on what people can be taught to want. We can learn to spend our hard earned money on pet rocks. We will spend it on a "brand" to signal our status or taste. We will spend it on ideas like "security" or "choice" or "options." Because learned needs are psychological rather than material, we get no clear signals from our bodies that the need has been met. So it can be refocused through advertising, fads, regulations, and social comparison giving the captains of commerce a nearly limitless field in which to make a profit. On top of all this, we humans can want something and not know consciously that we want it. We can be learning something and yet not consciously be aware that we're learning it. All of these aspects of the relation between people and the stuff we consume is relentlessly exploited for profit. The whole range of activities associated with this way

[11] The idea that most of us are unwitting victims of conspiracies of advertisers, capitalists, and even governments intent on using consumerism to narcotize the masses and cement their own power is not new. See: Durning (1992) in which he argues that it has been the commercialization of television, the advertising industry and the appropriation of public spaces to commerce that induces high levels of consumption. These enterprises are clearly under the control of a minority and secretive elite whose interests are conflated with market capitalism. See also: Curtis (2002) a documentary dealing with the conscious development of consumerism from the theories of Sigmund Freud and their application in the development of public relations by Edward Bernays and propaganda by the Nazis. The documentary concludes with the clear implication that hyper-consumption is a sort of political opiate that pacifies the masses in democratic societies and is used by political parties to maintain their hold on power.

of being in the world is probably what distinguishes consumer culture from all other cultures of history. In consumer culture we don't consumer to live; we live to consume, and we strive to make each other consumer even more.

Our culture might be compared to the amniotic fluid in which we develop from conception onwards. Even in utero we may have heard Mozart coming through the walls, but certainly after we are born, we're immersed in an ocean of social messages arising from the larger culture that are teaching us what matters and what doesn't, what we should want and what we should dislike, what we must do to "win" and how detestable it is to "lose." Much of this is taken in at a time in life when we cannot, for developmental reasons, reflect critically on what we are learning. We're busy making our arms and legs work, mastering our toilet training, and learning one or more new languages. We don't have the time or mental capacity to question or debate the rules of a game we're still learning to play. So it's during this period that we learn to look for contentment and happiness through the satiation of desires, without really distinguishing whether our desires are innate or learned. We discover that unsatisfied desires are unsettling and uncomfortable, and even when they are temporarily sated, we anticipate with fear losing the objects that answer our desires even temporarily. We learn to try to possess, control, defend, and compete for these need satisfiers. And whether in pursuit of objects that satiate desire, or in trying to conserve the temporary respites we enjoy, we are dragged into competitive struggles with others that rarely add to our contentment; instead, they just ignite new rounds of craving. And consumer culture is always standing in the wings, offering us everything we think we need in this fruitless quest.

Not only does consumer culture provide the material things we actually need, and also the things we've been taught to want, it forces consumption. Perhaps the greatest myth current in "developed" countries with consumer cultures is the idea that we are, on account of our material affluence, freer than any previous generation. Somehow all this consumption is supposed to liberate us to realize our dreams, a dream that too often turns out to be what author Salmon Rushdie has called an "empire of obesity and trivia." In fact, North Americans in the 21st century work more hours every year than peasants in the Middle Ages who didn't have the benefit of all our "time saving" technology (Schor, 1992). Far from using science and technology to liberate ourselves from toil, in the hands of consumer culture, it is applied to design products that wear out faster than they must, a practice called "designed obsolescence." This forces us to replace goods which otherwise might have lasted, hence condemning us to work more, produce more, pollute more and waste more. We also write building codes, zoning regulations, and a myriad of professional codes of practice and occupational regulations in such a way as to require building larger homes than we want, farther from our workplaces than they need to be, and that force consumption of all sorts of special equipment, clothing and training activities that have little or no relevance to working more effectively. Mass communication is used to shape fashions, spark fads, and set trends that continually move the goal posts of what is considered "decent" or "basic" to a healthy life. The same mass media also frighten people into buying security systems even as crime rates are dropping, and all manner of personal protection devices for home, work and school. Large pharmaceutical companies are busy medicalizing and medicating all sorts of conditions which are normal to human aging such as wrinkles, reduced erectile function, and "skin tags" even as they leave unattended the need for new antibiotics to treat actual diseases. There is even a medication to treat "restless leg syndrome" rather than simply getting up to take a walk. The complete enmeshment of North American urban planning with the automobile is legendary and forces nearly everyone, at great financial cost, to operate their own personal global warming machines just to get from place to place. And all of this is mostly under the control of undemocratic, publicly unaccountable, corporations guided by a single motive: maximization of profit—which prime directive is also written into law.

In the meantime, the captains of consumer culture are also busy neutralizing any alternatives to themselves. International trade agreements like NAFTA and the WTO place severe restrictions

around any economic deviations from the rules they themselves mandate. Some of these commit signatories to the treaties to continue supplying exports at historic levels once these levels have been established, even if this means depriving their own populations from needed resources. Development of more sustainable alternatives to our current technologies, goods and services is also made more difficult by more liberal patent and intellectual property protections than in the past—the effect of which are to lock competitors and generic manufacturers out of markets as long as possible.[12] Corporations also routinely eliminate competition and alternatives to their own product lines both by acquisitions and mergers that absorb competing firms, and also simply by destroying the basis for future competition as was the case when a cabal of auto manufacturers, oil companies and tire makers joined forces to buy up and then decommission metropolitan transit companies that competed with automobiles. General Motors is also notorious for recalling and crushing all of its EV-1 first generation electric cars in the late 1990s on the pretext that there was no market demand for them at the time. In fact, it was at least partly because such cars require almost no aftermarket service, a major profit centre for car companies (CBC NewsNetwork, 2010).

What can be the meaning of "sufficiency" in such a culture? Many of the forces of science, technology, innovation, and corporate power reinforced by government policies and the armed violence of the state collude, consciously or unconsciously, to make our individual lives as precarious, demanding, and insecure as possible. We sense this every day, even if we don't connect the dots as we've tried to do just now. All of this aims to keep us earning and buying, which is the motor of consumer culture. Is it any wonder then that most of us think of "sufficiency" as something quite precarious, frightening and joyless?

## 4. Bringing Mindfulness and Sufficiency Together

One response to the death spiral of consumer culture is mindfulness practice. Mindfulness practice can help us develop insight into how desires arise in us, how futile it can be to think that trying to satisfy desires will lead to permanent contentment, and how interdependent we are with the ecosphere and with other people. Mindfulness also helps us develop insight into our own mental activities, feelings, imagination, memories, and thoughts.

Bringing more mindfulness to our physical appetites can certainly contribute to better health and a greater exercise of environmental responsibility as we become sensitized to overconsumption, even of what is essential for us. But I think the greatest relevance of mindfulness practice to our sustainability dilemma is precisely in the realm of psychological needs, and especially learned needs—the desires most systematically preyed upon and exploited by consumer culture. Bringing to these experiences of distraction and desire a sense of calmness, penetrating insight, and consciousness of what we really need, physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually—this can help us connect with a natural, spontaneous and wholesome wisdom within ourselves about what is good for us and good for the whole. Continually refreshing this awareness of what is good

[12] The effect of the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement—a pact among Canada, Mexico and the USA to liberalize trade relationships) has been in some instances to undermine the regulatory and guardian functions of the sovereign nation-states by imposing a super-ordinate claims and resolution process which is unaccountable to the citizens of the signatory countries (DePalma, 2001). There has also been a great deal of debate concerning "TRIPs" addenda to the free trade agreements (Trade-Related Intellectual Property agreements) which have the effect of subjecting signatories' intellectual property rights regimes to a lowest common denominator standard that works largely to the benefit of major economic players and which also has the effect of stifling innovation and technical development by corporatizing information (McLeod, 2001; Shiva, 2001; Chataway, et. al., 2000; King and Stabinski, 1999).

for us through on-going mindfulness practice will give us basis enough for deciding what to do and what to cease doing (right action).

I have had many opportunities in the past to speak with individuals, groups and the media about simple living and sustainability. I'm often asked what people must do to have a calmer, more centered, less debt-ridden and consumptive life. Mostly what these people are used to hearing is a list of normative prescriptions—new "commandments" if you will—of what they need to do to be "saved" from the consequences of living in a consumer culture. They are often disappointed when I tell them I don't have any such thing. All I can suggest is a method by which they might discover their own answers. But it will take some time, persistence, and diligence on their part.

And this is the best proposal I can make here. We need to establish the personal habit of cultivating mindfulness every day. We also need to connect with others who will help us learn how, help us sustain our practice, help us teach our children, help us celebrate and be loyal to what mindfulness reveals to us. And from this place of lucid stillness, we can discover insight into everything arising within us, including our desires to consume. We can interrogate them one by one: Where did they come from? What do they want? Is what they want something that will contribute to our well-being and that of the whole, or will it merely be a temporary pleasure or distraction from what is really well for us? How will pursuing this desire affect the great web of being in which we are members? Is this desire something we recognize spontaneously as a healthy one, or is it something that's being forced into us, something that feels emotionally harsh in any way, something we're being taught or cajoled into servicing? And who benefits most if we pursue this desire? Is it authentic, or is it merely something arising from the myriad of power, pleasure and control fantasies of the ego? If we learn to take this time to parse the desires that arise in us, we will at least be conscious in our choice of life or of self-destruction.

Well meaning and intelligent people may disagree, and you may disagree, that we are so subject to learned needs or to their manipulation. Maybe Thomas Hobbes' view of human nature still carries weight with you as it does with so many contemporary economists. Maybe mindfulness doesn't matter a whiffle because human nature is a seething cauldron of numberless desires which are inherently insatiable and no amount of insight will change it. But this still leaves us in the same place. We still have the same problem. Insatiable human appetites are driving us up against the immovable limits of the ecosphere and resource supplies. Whether we've been taught to want more and more, or it is wired into us, it comes to the same thing. Our survival and well-being requires that we moderate our consumption. It seems to me that job one is recovering this value from our cultural memory (because it certainly isn't new), giving it priority of place and maintaining it there. When it comes to reminding ourselves of the things we need to keep in mind every day, that's what cultures are for. We need a replacement for consumer culture, and I propose one based on mindful sufficiency. But I also hasten to add that I think this will be a joyful and loving culture as well since a great deal of the violence, stress and suffering we endure every day arises from consumer culture itself and would be transcended by adopting a different narrative of the good life.

## 5. MINDFUL SUFFICIENCY IN PRACTICE

There are a great many ways that a culture of mindful sufficiency can be built up in practice. It naturally implies a changed perspective of education, technology, politics, economics and community development itself. Imagine that at some point a great awakening occurs that human civilizations are in peril and something has to be done. It's not hard to picture then that all the means we know of would be recruited to meet the challenge of survival. We can visualize social marketing campaigns, education reform, regulation of design obsolescence, reclamation of the language of frugality and prudence, and a wide array of economic and social policies that are at least not prejudicial to simple living as is now the case. But for the balance of this essay, our focus

will be on our lives as individuals and how mindfulness of sufficiency might find practical application.

### 5.1 *Mindfulness of Waste*

We discovered above that the very meaning of the word "affluence" implies waste. Waste is the primary product of consumer culture. To produce more than is needed is to produce waste. To consume more than is needed is to compromise one's health and well-being as when we encourage addictions by consuming too much food or drink. What good does it do us to have lights on in unoccupied rooms? Or to have rooms with no use? Or to waste water during bathing or laundering our clothes? Thus the first focus of mindfulness practice in service of sufficiency is to become mindful of what we waste, how we waste it, and then to take steps to eliminate waste. Waste is consumption without utility. Waste is especially egregious when we plunge ourselves into debt to achieve it. It makes no sense at any level other than conspicuous display to impress others—we have so much wealth we can even waste it! No such attitude toward material things could be acceptable in a sustainable culture.

The focus of mindfulness practice in reducing waste is upon both the things we authentically need and also the comforts and luxuries we enjoy. Our intention everywhere is to reduce waste wherever we find it. Very skillful here is adopting technology that can increase the efficiency with which we use energy and resources. Efficiency measures reduce the energy and materials needed to deliver a specific benefit or perform a certain function. A shower head, for example, that uses 30% less water to get you just as clean is a more efficient device than the one using more water.

Another way of reducing waste is in the selection of the things we choose to consume. Many spend considerable time shopping around for the best price on an item they want. Probably less time is spent even considering whether the item is something the need for which is arising authentically from our daily round of living, or comparing the operational features of the item to assure that they fit well with what we need, or investigating how the item was made, where it came from, and the effects it had on other beings making its way to us. Thus we can reduce waste by spending some time to select the most functional, best made, most environmentally friendly product we can find for the need we've discerned. Considering all these things will certainly slow down the shopping process, which itself can contribute greatly to sustainability and personal well-being.

Yet another way of reducing waste is the familiar advice to recycle. When things we own reach the end of their useful life and cannot be repaired or reused for some other purpose, then recycling as much of the materials as possible is another way of avoiding sending valuable resources to landfill that will have to be replaced with virgin materials.

### 5.2 *Mindfulness of 'Stored Value'*

Even though we may become skillful at reducing waste, we can also bring mindfulness to what I call "stored value." This refers to all the goods we have in storage in one form or another. It is estimated, for example, that 50% of food is wasted in processing, transport, supermarkets and kitchens worldwide in any given year, much of it having been lost because portion sizes are too large, people are overeating to begin with, or the food surpasses its "best-before" date while still in storage. In the United States, a country which generally enjoys the best in food conservation technology and inventory control at wholesale and retail levels, still loses as much as 30% of its food, worth US$48.3 billion annually (Stockholm International Water Institute, et al., 2008).

The average North American household also stores considerable quantities of all sorts of goods and materials in various cupboards, closets, sheds, garages, out-buildings, rented storage facilities and sometimes second or third residences such as cottages, seasonal homes or time-shares. The first decade of the new millennium witnessed explosive growth of 81% in self-storage facilities in the US alone (Self-Storage Association, 2007). We can also witness a steady increase in the number of garages included with new houses as a function of age. Single car garages were the norm from the invention of the car until the 1960s when double car garages became common. By 2000, triple or even quadruple car garages were being built, seldom to store cars per se, but rather all the other vehicles like boats, snowmobiles, personal watercraft, golf carts, trailers, campers, recreational vehicles, quads, and all their parts, accessories and service add-ons that seem to be required. Closets are jammed with unused clothing, unworn shoes, the remnants of forgotten hobbies, and unfulfilled New Years resolutions. Kitchen cupboards bulge with unused or seldom used dishes, seasonal or holiday dishes, and single food appliances like waffle irons, wiener warmers, popcorn poppers, bagel toasters, and electric carving knives. Basements are jammed with the remains of hobby and craft endeavors, abandoned exercise machines, rusting bicycles and every manner of sporting goods. Most of this sits precisely where it is because, while the denizens of consumer culture work harder than ever for the money to buy all this stuff, our most common complaint is a lack of time even for sleep or exercise or proper nutrition. So we are exhausted working for all the things we don't have time to use. Most important from a sustainability perspective, however, is the fact that all these goods represent resources that, because of the fiction of "private property," we deny the use of to others. This means that either they must forego the use of them hence impoverishing their lives, or else must find means of obtaining their own copy of what we hide in storage, thus increasing demand for resources, energy, etc., with all the attendant ecological costs.

I'm not advocating that people part with things that bring real value into their lives merely to satisfy some abstract ideology of simple living. But it's a principle of natural justice that if someone is suffering from the lack of something that I have it in my power to provide, there is also a moral obligation upon me to provide it. Apart from the moral imperatives that surround the mere possession of wealth (not something we hear much about these days), there is the practical matter of the waste implied in remanufacturing and re-consuming goods which are already available in the world simply hiding in storages the contents of which their owners have probably mostly forgotten. As practitioners of simple living, this is a wonderful opportunity to start inspecting our hordes and meditating honestly on why we are keeping this thing from others? Just as in the matter of bringing mindfulness to all our consumption choices, we can equally do so respecting all of our decisions to possess something. Why do we own this? What purpose does it serve? Where did it come from? What use might it be to others? From what motives is our possession of it occurring? When all of these considerations are brought into our mindfulness practice focused on what we have in reserve, we will see right away how much room there is for change. We may also discover the truly liberating feeling in an opportunity to pass on to someone else something they genuinely need while liberating ourselves from that particular impediment to the freedom of our inner being.

Possession is a privilege; also a burden; also a responsibility. St Benedict of Nursia (Chittister, 1992: 104-106), the founder of Western monasticism advised his monks:

> The [monks] will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected. Cellarers should not be prone to greed, not be wasteful and extravagant with the goods of the monastery, but should do everything with moderation.

If we consider our homes, indeed the Earth itself, as a "monastery"—a community most essentially defined as a school for spiritual development—then we can benefit by bringing this attitude of sacredness to all our possessions. In this light we can reflect, without self-blame, but simply to

cultivate awareness, how are we treating the goods of our monasteries? Do they belong in our basements and garages or might they be more life-givingly deployed somewhere else. As the 20th century Tennessee philosopher/farmer Wendell Berry (1981: 281) observed:

> We must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration.

### 5.3 *Voluntary Simplicity*

It is possible to aggressively reduce waste without making many significant shifts in our lifestyle. We make all the same consumption choices, we continue to seek the good life in terms of extrinsic material possessions, but we "green" them up (green consumerism). It has long been known by product manufacturers that the existence of recycling programs actually increases the consumption of products whose containers can be recycled because it relieves consumers of the guilt they feel for generating waste. We can add to this the great cleansing that goes with passing along all the goods and resources we kept stored away for any number of reasons that we now no longer find convincing. When, however, we consciously and deliberately refocus our consciousness toward voluntarily reducing our consumption of material things for reasons rooted in our mindfulness practice, then I say we are beginning to practice voluntary simplicity. Among other things, this involves switching attention and effort from amassing extrinsic material possessions to cultivating intrinsic sources of well-being instead.

For centuries people have gaped uncomprehending that a life guided by mindfulness and sufficiency might hold more reward than a life in pursuit of affluence. They firmly believe that if a little of something is good, more is better, and more without limit must be best of all, despite any experiential evidence of their own to the contrary. The craving for more and more is the voice of our evolutionary past still alive in us.

Voluntary simplicity has many definitions but what most share in common is the discovery that a good life is created by voluntarily limiting consumption of material things to that elegant sufficiency necessary for the maximum of well-being. From this point of view, it has always appeared highly irrational, and indeed self-destructive, to pursue material wealth for its own sake, or consumption without regard for its effects on oneself or others. Material things are means to sustaining our lives in service of the purposes that give them meaning, not ends in themselves. Simple living rests on discernment of sufficiency rather than the blind pursuit of affluence. The cultivation of mindfulness is essential to discerning sufficiency as well as directing consciousness toward those goals and values that truly provide for well-being. Paradoxical as it may sound, sufficiency assures enough for everyone, while affluence promises poverty and chaos—as we are now seeing every day. As the famed British economist E. F. Schumacher (1973: 42) remarked:

> For the modern economist this [principle of sufficiency] is very difficult to understand. [S/he] is used to measuring the 'standard of living' by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a [person] who consumes more is 'better off' than a [person] who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption."

To actually work, voluntary simplicity has to be voluntary. It has to begin with a personal and conscious choice to live differently, in spite of public opinion to the contrary, and every day, in spite of what our instinctive appetites prompt us to want. This is not to say that simple living is contrary

to Nature, but that it draws upon different natural capacities than those engaged in meeting basic survival needs or pursuing extrinsic sources of pleasure. We certainly have appetites for pleasure and material comfort, but we also have an "appetite" for reason, wholeness and living in a way that is life-affirming.

Simple living has to be voluntary because there are no historical examples of imposed simplicity (such as that of the Puritan sumptuary laws) that have been sustained for very long (Shi, 1985: 8ff). And it must be voluntary because the historical examples which have persisted for many centuries (e.g., Benedictine monastic life—1500 years; Quaker simplicity—400 years; Buddhist monastic simplicity—2,500 years) have all involved free consent based on reason, experience, and personal commitment. Finally, voluntary simplicity must be voluntary because any simplicity we live involuntarily is something from which we will always be trying to escape—such as the poverty and deprivation many people experience today as a result of the 2008 financial meltdown, war, environmental disasters or personal tragedies.

For skeptics, the most irritating thing about voluntary simplicity is that there are lots of examples of people who have, and are, living it. It's not a theory or a utopian ideology. Many of these people were, or could have been, "winners" in the general scramble for more. Gandhi was a lawyer and could have been affluent, but vowed to own nothing that could not also be owned by the poorest of his compatriots and worked to build a nation instead. Siddhartha Gautama was already a king, but left it all to search for Nirvana. John Woolman was a successful tailor in 18th century New England who had to keep scaling his business back to free time for prayer and preaching which mattered more to him than success in business. Thomas Treherne wandered the English countryside in ecstasy wearing leather and eating bread and water because he wanted to study happiness and how little might be necessary to getting it. Francis of Assisi left his father's lucrative rag trade and a lifestyle of wenching and singing to reshape Medieval European monasticism. Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptist had no place to lay their heads, but tramped the Judean countryside teaching the joy of God's love and mercy. Seneca was richer and smarter than the emperors he served but chose to live the threadbare life of a Stoic philosopher. All these were real people.

In case you think that this is a way of life reserved for spiritual athletes, know that there have been, and are, tens of thousands of historically obscure Puritans, Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, monastics of every tradition, Cathars and philosophers, poets and social reformers, New Catholic Workers, Cynic philosophers and Jesus Freaks, back to the landers and Hara Krishnaites, Franciscan Tertiaries and Benedictine Oblates, wanderers and minstrels, soldiers and Samurai, and ordinary people—the "multitude at the margin" as it were—who have lived this way too and found it deeply pleasing. These are the people who most annoy the moguls of marketing. They are discovering through their own experience what is necessary for a free and happy life and what is not. This is not a matter of adopting an ideology. It is a matter of simply paying attention to our daily experience and taking it to heart.

### 5.4 *The Question of Luxury*

Before leaving the discussion of sufficiency, it's fitting to address the question of luxury. For most citizens of developed countries, consumption long ago ceased to be about basic needs, even though Jerome Segal has argued convincingly that even in countries like the United States, there are still some basic needs which go unmet (Segal, 1999: 45-72). But setting aside for a minute questions of policy, the technology, energy and material resources have been available to solve the basic "economic problem" for much of humanity at least since the last decades of the 19th century with the broad implementation of electrification and adoption of fossil fuels as prime mover energy

sources. From that time onwards, a larger and larger fraction of household income has shifted toward discretionary purchases of luxuries rather than need-related purchase of necessities.

Detractors of simple living are eager to portray it as a joyless, comfortless exercise in asceticism, even though its most eloquent proponents consistently argue the opposite:

> It would be an error to suppose that the simplicity we seek has anything in common with that which misers impose upon themselves through cupidity, or narrow-minded people through false austerity. To the former the simple life is the one that costs least; to the latter it is a flat and colorless existence, whose merit lies in depriving one's self of everything bright, smiling, seductive. (Wagner, 1903: 139)

Clearly, however, luxury consumption presents more of a problem both for maintaining a mindful approach to living and also a sustainable livelihood. Huge environmental impacts are currently incurred to procure luxury goods like gold, diamonds and other "precious" stones, luxury foods like high meat diets, coffee, tea, chocolate, and other luxury expenditures like over-powered, over-sized cars, houses, boats, and wardrobes. Most people do not go into debt for their next meal, although they almost certainly will for their car, house, vacations, and bling. There is no question that for many people these goods bring great pleasure and for nearly everyone, at least some of them do. I'm not a proponent of asceticism for its own sake and I enjoy a good meal, warm clothes and a hot shower as much as the next person. I'm also completely confident that a sustainable livelihood can be fashioned that includes enough of most of these things.

But among the many figures of history who point out that consumption entails responsibilities, few are as eloquent as John Ruskin (1996: 63):

> It is impossible to spend the smallest sum of money for any not absolutely necessary purpose, without a grave responsibility attaching to the manner of spending it. The object we ourselves covet may, indeed, be desirable and harmless, so far as we are concerned, but the providing us with it may, perhaps, be a very prejudicial occupation to someone else. And then it becomes instantly a moral question, whether we are to indulge ourselves or not. Whatever we wish to buy, we ought first to consider not only if the thing be fit for us, but if the manufacture of it be a wholesome and happy one; and if, on the whole, the sum we are going to spend will do as much good spent in this way as it would if spent in any other way. It may be said that we have not time to consider all this before we make a purchase. But no time could be spent in a more important duty; and God never imposes a duty without giving the time to do it. Let us, however, only acknowledge the principle; once make up your mind to allow the consideration of the effect of your purchases to regulate the kind of your purchase, and you will soon easily find ground enough to decide upon.

If other examples of this general principle are needed we have only to look at diamond mining, made notorious because of "blood diamonds" coming from conflict regions of Africa and procured largely by forced labor or extortion. But even in North American diamond recovery operations, it is only the economic return from 1.5 carats of recovered diamond (300 mg.) that is needed to justify digging and processing a metric tonne of rock and gravel, all of it using fossil fueled machinery and some of it occurring in ecologically sensitive regions (Campbell, 2003).

Equally appalling is the energy and fresh water being squandered to retrieve oil from the bitumen tar sands in the Athabasca region of Alberta in Canada. When first extracted in the 1940s, light Saudi crude, some of the easiest oil in the world to reach, required no water and the investment of only one barrel of oil equivalent in energy to extract 130 barrels of oil for market. In the tar sands case, however, millions of liters of water are polluted in the recovery process which itself consumes one barrel of oil to produce only two barrels of crude. It is also 1.25 to 1.75 times more green house gas intensive to extract than conventional oil. The difference in these two ratios,

1:130 in Saudi Arabia compared to 1:2 in Canada represents one of history's most extravagant investments of energy which is consumed disproportionately in luxury motor vehicles (Alternative Energies…, 2011).

Thus without being austere or negatively ascetical, we must suppose that a lifestyle of mindfulness and sufficiency will also interrogate luxury consumption as perhaps the most important class of discretionary choices that represent avoidable harms. In consumer culture, the only limit on our luxury consumption is our income, and easy credit often raises even that. The choice to consume luxuries is never represented by consumer culture within the context of all the other considerations we've cited that arise from mindfulness practice: our interdependence with others; the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic sources of well-being; a deepened appreciation for ordinary experience; a deeper sense of living in a moral universe; heightened awareness of the dynamics of desire, and so on. It seems reasonable therefore to recognize that some luxuries are more luxurious than others. Since what we are discussing is how to sustain a rich and rewarding life over the long term, not how to make ourselves worse off, we scarcely wish to exclude enjoyment of some comforts and luxuries along the way. But this cannot be determined solely by income. We need to situate such decisions within the context of interdependence, nonviolence, inter-generational and international equity, and environmental sustainability. If we are to live here for the long haul, we must be mindful both of the pleasures of luxury consumption and of its costs—which are considerable. Our willingness to pay these costs should not a badge of economic masculinity or privileged status, but rather a symptom of the depth of our addiction to pleasure. Our responsibility is to be informed, mindful, and deliberate in our choices knowing all the time that it may not be us who pays the price for any given luxury indulgence—it may be other species or future generations.

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