

## 16. Consumption and Waste

U.S. culture is consumed with consumption. A typical U.S. person owns several million things in a lifetime: homes, cars, toys, packaging... On average, we buy and consume several dozen things per day.

A simple meal for one at a fast food restaurant may include a burger, with bun, cheese, lettuce, tomato and pickles, its packaging, fries, their packaging, several catsups and salt for the fries, in their packaging, a drink, a cup, ice, a top for the cup, a straw, packaging for the straw, condiments for the sandwich, their packaging, a bag to put it all in, plastic utensils, each in packaging, several napkins, and maybe a cheap plastic toy, in packaging. That's 30-40 things. What's not in the garbage when we go we excrete later.

We own them maybe half an hour. That doesn't count items consumed upstream in the packaging and preparation of that meal, packaging for the packaging, oil for the fries, gas for the drive to and from the restaurant, energy to cook the food and air condition and light the restaurant, energy used in shipping everything to the restaurant, soap in the bathroom, cleaning supplies, employee uniforms...

We buy and consume outrageous quantities of stuff: clothing, furniture, cosmetics, toiletries, homes, art, food, drinks, electronics, entertainments, toys, carpets, kitchenware, towels, beds, bedding, rooms for the night, flowers, restaurant meals, tools, equipment, packaging, cars, rental cars, airplane flights, trash bags, alcohol, taxi rides, cigarettes, diapers, auto supplies, cleaning supplies, office supplies, shoes, belts, jewelry, gizmos, watches, school supplies, backpacks, purses, feminine supplies, clothing, coffees, drugs, machines, candies, magazines, drinks, bathroom supplies, transportation and all kinds of services. Most of it is fleeting. It soon goes to the dump, or, if we want to feel less guilty, to recycling. Nah.

For most of us, the rabid consumption is conditioned, programmed behavior. We just do it, without a lot of thought. We get wrapped up in what we are consuming, rather than whether we are consuming. What we consume becomes part of our identity, our sense of self-worth. We think the car we buy and drive is an expression of who we are, which is kind of pathetic. We aspire to avoid consuming things considered low class, and instead consume things considered high class, so we think better of ourselves. We compare what we consume with what they consume in a bizarre, meaningless competition of egos.

Some now have grotesquely huge and ostentatious homes, that just keep getting bigger, in which a person or couple occupies enough space and consumes enough energy for a small community. We want one that's bigger and even more extreme, so we can feel better. We compete to throw the most flamboyant and pretentious weddings and parties, so others will envy us. We value wine and art because they're expensive, not because we actually like it. Many women constantly seek "look at me" clothing, jewelry and shoes, which attract attention and jealousy, to feel better than others, then feel we can only wear them occasionally, because it is too gauche to be seen wearing the same thing twice. We want to be able to pay ten times more to fly first class rather than coach, so we are elite.

We insistently and self-righteously want it to be bigger, louder, pricier, classier, newer, faster and glitzier, to satisfy our egos, rather than seeking to meet our basic needs and be free to grow our beings. We suffer from epidemic obesity because of obsessive consumption of foods and drinks. We produce titanic mountains of garbage we dump into nature, ignoring destruction of our natural environments. We run ourselves into exhaustion to produce money to feed our rapacious and expanding desires. There is no such thing as enough. If we're satisfied or rest, we're lazy. If we don't care about relentless

consumption, we're losers. If we're not consuming more than others, we're failures. If we're not constantly shoveling more and different stuff into the gaping maws of our never sated egos, we're dull.

Truly, we are killing ourselves and our planet with all of this relentless and greedy consumption and the astounding volume of waste it produces. Ultimately, it doesn't make us better. It's unimportant. What's important is what we make of ourselves; our values, character and integrity; our relationships; our sense of security and belonging; our experiences and the wisdom and growth they produce; our states of being; beauty, appreciation and contribution; environments, spiritual well-being and evolution.

We desperately need to degrade our value and practice of senseless, gluttonous, conspicuous and growing consumption, which diverts and perverts us, and promote values of moderation and eliminating or reducing waste, which conserves health, nature, living systems, beauty, time and well-being.