

CHAPTER 11

FUTURE SHIFT
THE REBOOTING OF
AMERICAN LIFE

Future Shift: The Rebooting of American Life

THE MAJORITY OF THIS BOOK HAS BEEN FOCUSED ON THE PRACTICAL side of economic survival. Yet subsistence alone shouldn't be your only concern. For many of us, the greater challenge will be finding fulfillment at a time of diminishing expectations. The gut-wrenching economic convulsions of the present may one day be perceived as a historic turning point. In the near future, Americans will be forced to contemplate a whole new approach to how we live, work and spend our time. The transition will be far from painless, but those of us willing to creatively adapt needn't fear the future.

Humans are creatures of habit, and shifting over to new ways of doing things rarely comes easily. However, one needn't be a pessimist to sense that major changes are on the horizon. The fact is we may no longer have a choice. The consumer-driven lifestyle that has dominated our lives for the past quarter-century is simply no longer sustainable. As historian Andrew Bacevich has observed, the "prerequisites of the American way of life" have long "outstripped the means to satisfy them."¹ Global warming, fuel scarcity, our nation's financial woes and other pressing issues will force each of us to radically alter how we live.

We will also need to rethink the role of government in our lives. In the years to come, an increasingly greater percentage of our tax dollars will be redirected toward servicing the exorbitant debts our politicians have amassed over the past two decades. To maintain current operations, the federal government is already piling on \$2 billion in debt each and every day. The National Center for Policy Analysis has stated that unless there is serious reform or additional tax revenues generated:

By 2012, the federal government will stop doing one in ten of the things it is doing now.

By 2020 the federal government will cease doing one in four.

By 2030, the federal government won't be able to perform half of the services it currently provides.²

The day has long since passed when we could expect our nation's dysfunctional political class to look after our interests. We will need to become more resilient, self-sufficient and better prepared. Adaptability and the ability to thrive amidst diversity are two of the most vital assets in our evolutionary tool kit. We can take comfort in the fact that each of us has the innate ability to transcend difficult circumstances and live rewarding, purposeful lives. Now might be a good time to take a long, hard look at what you consider important. Perhaps there's a more sustainable path to a more satisfying life. Should you have any lingering doubts, let's take a closer look at where our consumer obsessions have led us.

A Nation of Shoppers

MEET KRISTINE ROGERS, AN ADDICT. THE SUBURBAN MOTHER OF FOUR isn't ashamed to admit her costly habit drove her family deeply into debt. However, her unsavory life of excess wasn't triggered by any sordid, drug-fueled high, but by a children's clothing manufacturer known as Gymboree. Over a frantic two-year period, her obsession with outfitting her children in every possible Gymboree design and color combination escalated to a \$400-per week shopping habit that entailed spending eight hours on the Internet each and every day looking for bargains and hard-to-find items. "Online, it felt like Monopoly money," she later told *Money* magazine. "I'd get a rush, a physical high," she added. "It got so bad that just thinking about shopping, I'd start shaking."³ By the time Rogers figured out that she might have a problem, she'd run through \$50,000, and her children's closets were stuffed beyond capacity.

She isn't alone. You might say there's a little bit of Kristine Rogers in each of us. Statistics indicate that approximately 8% of the population is seriously addicted to impulse buying, and there are probably just as many borderline cases—but they simply haven't maxed out their credit cards yet.⁴ Here's the interesting thing: We rarely hear our politicians engaging in any sanctimonious finger-wagging about spendthrift shoppers. You might call it the respectable addiction. While our entire economy is being kept afloat by consumer spending, materialism has become something akin to a national imperative, a sort of credit-fueled panacea for whatever ails us. Who can forget a recent president's exhortation that Americans go shopping in the aftermath of the worst terrorist attack on American soil in history? Or as a former Federal Reserve governor once explained, "If we all join hands and go buy a new SUV, everything will be all right."⁵

When we aren't being prompted by our politicians to march in lockstep to the nearest megamall, we're being bombarded each and every day with literally

hundreds of slickly-produced, highly persuasive pitches for myriad products and services that we usually don't even need. In the popular mind, advertising offers us a direct link to the so-called "good life": a conflict-free existence where attractive, intelligent and perpetually-grinning consumers have achieved supreme bliss through buying everything from the right oven cleaner to the newest model SUV. While few of us believe that we make our choices at the promptings of Madison Avenue behavioral specialists, we have on a certain level internalized the underlying message that our state of happiness is directly tied to how many luxury goods we own. Unfortunately, this fanciful alternate reality has taken a decisive toll on the quality of life in America.

The Price of Profligacy

WHEN WE LOOK AT THE SHEER SCOPE OF HOW MUCH DEBT WE HAVE accumulated in such a short time, there is simply no historical precedent. In 1975, as Americans struggled with a severe recession and soaring unemployment, the ratio of outstanding household debt to disposable income was 62%. Today, that number has surged to over 120%, while savings are still at record lows.⁶ When we include unpaid mortgages, 2008 Federal Reserve estimates indicate that American families have absorbed a gargantuan debt load that now exceeds \$2 trillion.⁷ When we deal with these kinds of large numbers, it's easy to forget that there is a direct human cost to our material obsessions. In an age when financial pressures account for the majority of divorces in the U.S., we could be looking at an epidemic of broken homes. Moreover, many individuals may have to put off retirement due to the being burdened with these kinds of pressing debts—and the young may not enjoy the same benefits enjoyed by previous generations.

However, our financial woes are only the tip of the iceberg. Let's take a cursory look at one of our most precious commodities: our time. According to *Take Back Our Time*, a non-profit dedicated to ending the nation's "workaholic, time-rushed culture," the average American today works one month (160 hours) more than they did in 1976.⁸ Indeed, just 14% of American workers take a vacation of two weeks or longer.⁹ All too often, consumer debt has an insidious ratcheting effect: the more we owe, the more it ramps up pressure to work longer hours and earn more money. Thus, it is unsurprising that many employees simply can't say no to additional hours, unscheduled overtime, cancelled vacations and other workplace demands on their limited free time.

In previous years, absenteeism used to be a frequent complaint of corporate managers: someone was always calling in sick to nurse a hangover, go to a ball game or simply enjoy a bit of much-needed downtime. Today, the inverse

is true: the new threat is called “presenteeism.” Human resources managers are growing alarmed about workplace illnesses spread by feverish, coughing and sneezing employees who simply can’t afford to take a day off. As over 40% of American workers have no recourse to paid sick time, many have little choice but to keep on working when sick—even if it means running the risk of infecting co-workers.¹⁰

The fact is, a lot of us simply can’t afford to lose out on a day’s pay. When you’re barely keeping your head above water and struggling with a burdensome mortgage, credit card debt or blowing all your disposable income at the mall, a reduced paycheck simply isn’t an option. Yet this frenetic, treadmill-like pace is only making our problems worse. Indeed, Americans report feeling anxiety and depression far more than Europeans, and this may have a great deal to do with our overall lack of free time.

Our outsized appetites have even impacted how we choose to live. In the 1950s, when families were larger and people were on average far happier than they are today, the average home size was a mere 950 square feet. Today, the norm is well over 2,000 feet, and we still don’t have enough space to hold all of our cherished “stuff.” Renting out storage units is now a \$22 billion-a-year industry.¹¹ Meanwhile, the fuel-efficient compact cars of the ’70s and ’80s have been replaced on America’s highways by gas-guzzling SUVs, the dream car of every mall shopper. Yet all of these possessions have left many of us overworked, stressed out and fearful about the future.

Happiness Unbound

SO WHY DO SO MANY AMERICANS FEEL SO EMPTY WHILE SURROUNDED by so much material abundance? What exactly is the so-called “good life”? These questions are far from insignificant. Our ability to maintain a positive, hopeful outlook will have a direct bearing on how we contend with our nation’s economic difficulties and the changes on the horizon. Fortunately, in recent years the mental health establishment has been focusing more on the underlying psychology of what makes us happy. Over the past decade, researchers working in the nascent field of positive psychology have conducted a number of studies dedicated to unlocking this elusive state of mind. These initial findings have destroyed a number of long-cherished beliefs and brought the nature of human contentment into sharper focus.

The long-held belief that purchasing power dictates happiness can be traced back to the rise of behavioral psychology in the mid-20th century. The behavioral theorists who held sway in the Cold War era believed that our innate drive to acquire material possessions was a Darwinian survival mechanism

encoded in our DNA. The wealthier we became, the behavioralists believed, the more likely we would attract a superior mate and produce healthy, intelligent offspring. Thus, it was concluded that we were simply hardwired to feel happiness when we had material wealth, and sadness when we didn’t—our survival depended on it. This questionable model of human behavior would go on to shape advertising for decades to come. However, what we know today about human happiness challenges this long-held belief.

While it is commonly believed that the epitome of fulfillment is to be wealthy, young and intelligent, research reveals a far more complex picture. The super-rich aren’t any happier than the rest of us, older people tend to be more content than the young and there is no direct correlation between one’s IQ and ability to be happy. Perhaps our greatest mistake is confusing pleasure and happiness. While the momentary joys we may derive from sex, chocolate, television or a shopping trip may add sparkle to our lives, these activities are no substitute for authentic, lasting happiness. Martin Seligman, who is considered the intellectual father of positive psychology, contends that our sense of well-being rests upon three specific criteria: engagement, meaning and pleasure. “The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to happiness, joy, rapture, comfort and ecstasy,” he writes, “leads to legions of people who in the middle of great wealth are starving spiritually.”¹²

What he means by engagement is simply that individuals who possess deeper and more meaningful connections to their families, friends, co-workers and neighbors tend to be more satisfied with their lives. Seligman points to a 2002 study he conducted at the University of Illinois with his colleague Edward Diener. The two scholars found that the most common attribute among the small percentage of students who enjoyed a high level of happiness was a strong commitment to spending time with friends and family.¹³

Yet this isn’t the whole picture either. Humans also require an overall sense of purpose to their lives. When we cannot derive any sort of meaning from our daily existence, it is often difficult to feel hopeful about the future, much less the present. For example, a penniless street artist who believes he is contributing to his country’s cultural betterment or pursuing his artistic vision may be happier and better adjusted than a well-to-do attorney who hates the legal profession.

The search for meaning in our lives also has a great deal to do with how we deploy our strengths and aptitudes. When these skills aren’t given a creative outlet either in our work or our spare time, life begins to lose its luster. A perfect example of how we can derive happiness from our strengths is the concept of *flow*. The term was first coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi roughly two decades ago to denote the “optimal psychological experience.”

Flow experiences are those memorable (and often life-changing) moments when every atom of our existence is dedicated to a particular task to the point where self-consciousness evaporates and time literally stands still. Think of a mountaineer scaling a particularly challenging rock face, a novelist working through an inspired passage or a parent successfully teaching his or her child to walk for the first time. When we have these exhilarating experiences, we feel like we are masters of our own fate and that life's great challenges can be overcome. Above all else, we seem to obtain these singular moments when we are exercising our signature strengths.

Think about the last time you had a serious flow experience. It probably didn't involve keying in your PIN number at a mall cash register or jockeying for a parking space outside Best Buy. Indeed, we can see that happiness and consumerism are often at odds with one another. For far too long we have substituted the ephemeral pleasures of buying "stuff" for a more lasting happiness. However, we can take great comfort in the fact that even if we must accept a reduced standard of living, so long as our basic needs are met, there is nothing stopping us from enjoying our lives to the fullest. In fact, there is already a small but growing minority of Americans who have already come to this important realization.

Where Consumer Culture Wanes and Real Life Begins

YOU MIGHT SAY LAURA GARDINER IS SOMETHING OF A CULTURAL mutant. The Chicago resident works part-time at a job she loves, isn't in debt, avoids shopping malls and spends her free time in more fruitful pursuits like volunteering for causes that she deeply cares about. Although she's still in her twenties, she has already paid off her student loans and resides with eight other tenants in a three-apartment housing unit operated by the Allium Collective, an activist group dedicated to bettering the planet by embracing simpler, more energy-efficient lifestyles. While she admits to the infrequent craving for eating at her favorite local restaurants, Gardiner has turned the prevailing wisdom on its head and carved out a meaningful life for herself on her own terms and without all the consumerist baggage. Here's the best part: unlike the rest of us, she's not worried about what's going to happen to the economy or how she will cope with financial disaster. It's simply not an issue. "I have the resources to survive," she told *Time Out Chicago* in a December 2008 interview. "Should everything fall apart, I have a support network."¹⁴

Gardiner offers a good example of how we can unshackle ourselves from the borrow-and-spend lifestyle and still live life to the fullest. Laura is part of a

small but growing "voluntary simplicity" movement that may take on a new relevance as Americans rediscover the art of frugal living. However, saving money and living on less is only a part of the simplicity concept, as it is also rooted in the belief that we can live more fulfilling lives when we rid ourselves of the time-wasting complications that materialism brings into our lives.

Many who have scaled back their lifestyles have come to the realization that working less and having fewer possessions has actually improved every facet of their lives. When you're not overworked, fretting over bills or spending all your time buying things on the internet or at the mall, you have more time to spend with friends, family and neighbors. When you're only focused on basic necessities, you simply don't worry anymore about your prized new laptop crashing or the new SUV getting scratched. Stepping off the consumer treadmill can also be a launching point for self-growth, as you can devote more time to relationships, exercising more, catching up on your reading and the creative pursuits you've long wanted to explore but never had the time to.

Mention the word "frugal," and most of us will think "tightwad" or "miser." However, no one is telling you to live like a Trappist monk. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with enhancing your life with the occasional luxury or the modern conveniences that add a spark to our lives. However, the key is striking a balance between our material wants and the innumerable pleasures that we often neglect in the mad scramble to acquire more possessions. Those who embrace simpler lives would simply prefer to eat a nutritious, low-cost meal at home with friends and family than eat at an overpriced restaurant chain. If they get the urge to see a movie, they'd rather bicycle to the library and rent a DVD for free than drive to the megamall and incur the added expense of paying for gas, parking, tickets and refreshments.

Why buy something brand new that can be purchased used or repaired? This kind of self-reliance is highly valued among simplicity adherents. Growing your own fruits and vegetables, learning how to do your own home and auto repairs, and living off-grid are examples of how these individuals are creating a more authentic lifestyle that will make them particularly resilient during turbulent economic times. Take a good, long look at how you allocate your time each day. Are you giving yourself adequate space to unwind? Are you spending your evenings glued to the television set or computer? Is there a hobby, activity or pastime you used to really enjoy doing that you've dropped because you simply don't have the time? Every spare moment you have on this earth is crucial—try to think of ways you can add more joy to your life without spending money.

Work to Live or Live to Work?

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING FACETS OF THE SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT is how these individuals are changing the way Americans perceive work. It is well worth remembering that there were futurists in the late 1960s who predicted that advanced automation and labor-saving devices would reduce the American work week to a mere fourteen to twenty hours by the year 2000. Unfortunately, at some point we seem to have taken a wrong turn. And we don't enjoy the same job security and benefits that once existed for previous generations. Perhaps you're one of the fortunate ones who truly enjoys your work, and finds it both challenging and meaningful. However, far too many of us are simply going through the motions to pay the bills. If you're unhappy with your current situation, and feel your skills are being wasted in performing mindless drudgery, maybe it's time to rethink how you perceive work.

When you disconnect from the rat race and radically lower your standard of living, the suffocating pressures to earn more money suddenly vanish. Simplicity advocates call it "breaking the link between work and wages." Instead of allowing your monetary needs to dictate what you do for a living, you have the option of choosing something that will best utilize your skills and provide you with a creative, worthwhile outlet for your time. This doesn't mean slacking, either. Some people who have "downsized" have started their own businesses and put in even longer hours, but they are often doing something they truly enjoy.

Laura Gardiner, who we mentioned earlier, is a perfect example. Her frugal lifestyle allows her to make ends meet with a part-time teaching position that she enjoys. The rest of her time is her own. She has no outstanding debts and affordable rent, and thus few worries. While this might not be the most opportune time to leave your job and embark on a new career or small business, especially when there is widespread unemployment, it's still an important first step to begin to view work as something beneficial to your life and not a strict necessity. Indeed, you may still find employment opportunities that you never knew existed when you're no longer contending with an economic straitjacket.

So how do you begin? The transition won't be easy, and may require keeping your current position, going back to school, pursuing job training or taking a few survival jobs until you've found your niche. The more you reduce your reliance on credit, limit your outgoing cash flow and increase your savings, the more breathing room you will have to pursue more challenging job opportunities. "Downshifters," as they like to call themselves, advise people seeking a change of work to do what they call a "SWOT analysis"—i.e., analyze your

strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threat factors, and try to assemble a realistic list of job or entrepreneurial possibilities. If you're serious about changing your life, you may also need to rethink your current mode of living.

Downsize Your Lifespace

MAYBE THIS SOUNDS LIKE YOUR PLACE: THE FRONT DOOR CAN HARDLY close because of the stacks of unread magazines, newspapers and junk mail piled near the entrance. The living room coffee table is buckling under the weight of various items of bric-a-brac, remote controls, books, DVDs, used dishes and other random objects. The bedroom is even worse. Piles of clothes, both clean and freshly laundered, take up most of the available floor space. The bed itself has become a sort of de facto hanger with jackets, blankets, robes and other items draped across the bedposts. The closets are stuffed beyond capacity. The storage space in the garage area is so filled with exercise equipment, rarely-used tools and other possessions that slamming the door is enough to set off an avalanche.

There's a reason why Americans are requiring bigger and bigger lodgings: We simply can't fit all of our belongings into a traditional apartment or small-sized home. A severely cluttered home or apartment isn't just a safety issue—it can become a mental health issue over time as well. "People's homes are a reflection of their lives," says Peter Walsh, a psychologist who specializes in helping people organize their lives. "It's no accident that people have a huge weight problem in this country, and clutter is the same thing. Homes are an orgy of consumption."¹⁵

Like modern-day hunter-gatherer tribes, literally millions of American families have amassed so much stuff that their homes come closer to resembling a deranged modern art display than a suitable place to live. Some have become so ashamed at how cluttered and disorderly their homes have become that they no longer feel comfortable inviting friends, neighbors or family over to visit. In essence, they are buying themselves into hermetic isolation.

The disorganized sprawl also takes a heavy financial toll. The more stuff we acquire, the more likely it is that we will have to pay additional rent or a costlier mortgage because we can't fit all of our possessions into a cozy one-bedroom apartment or smaller-sized home. There is also the added expense of renting a storage unit when you run out of places to stash your hoard of possessions. Clutter is also mentally and physically exhausting. Even the simplest household chores can take hours when you can never find anything. However, what is most insidious about excessive clutter is that it can often turn your home into a prison. At a time of great economic uncertainty,

flexibility is important. Relocating at a moment's notice to pursue a job or move into a cheaper place is virtually impossible when you're terrified at the thought of even trying to organize and pack up your numerous belongings. It doesn't have to be this way.

If you're inundated with clutter, your life will be that much harder during difficult economic times, and you'll be that much more resistant to make any significant changes to your lifestyle. Perhaps it's time to liberate your household and start fresh. If you get your possessions under control, you'll find that your day-to-day life won't seem as unmanageable, that it becomes easier to concentrate and that you will be open to any number of alternative housing options and employment possibilities. If you're having trouble getting started, try following some of the suggestions we've included below:

Start a "Never Used" Pile: We all have possessions that we rarely use, but we've convinced ourselves that we simply can't do without them. While there are certain items that fall into this category that you'll want to keep, like a first aid kit, a flashlight or tools, there are other possessions that are simply taking up space. Start a pile of your belongings that you've never once used. Chances are, the majority of these items are simply taking up space. Have a garage sale and sell them, throw them out, barter them or donate them to charity. You'll be glad you did.

The "Wait and See" Box: Some of your purchases may have only been used once or twice, and you're simply not sure whether to throw them out. Create a "Wait and See" box and fill it with any objects you might not be sure about. Mark the date each item was placed in the box. Anything that's been in the box for six months or more that hasn't been used has to go.

Fifteen Minutes: One of the biggest obstacles to getting rid of excess clutter is that it is such a daunting task. The minute we start to envision all the work the process entails, it's all too easy to put it off for another day. Try clearing up your home in small increments. Spend fifteen to twenty minutes each day decluttering, and you'll soon begin to see a difference. You can also try reducing the clutter in just one small section of your home or apartment each day, and then continue enlarging your clutter-free zone.

Another Set of Eyes: Some possessions have a great deal of sentimental value to us, but to a disinterested onlooker, these treasured mementos are simply garbage. Keeping a collection of over 700 Star Wars action figures or twenty-seven copies of that newspaper edition that printed your letter to the editor might make sense to you, but to a friend or relative these personal keepsakes are just taking up space. Invite someone over who doesn't have the same emotional attachment to your possessions to help with your decluttering efforts. It might result in some hurt feelings, but in the end, you'll get some much-needed perspective.

Set Guidelines: Let's assume you've completely cleared up your apartment and that it's now a well-organized living space. Unfortunately, after a few mall trips, a spending spree at the used bookstore, and several days of accumulated junk mail, you're suddenly falling into the same trap. Try to create some ground rules for yourself that will inhibit any further hoarding. For example, make a rule that for every new possession you bring into your home or apartment, you have to cast away two items you currently own.

Adapting and Thriving

CASTING ASIDE YOUR CURRENT LIFESTYLE AND PURSUING A MORE scaled-down existence won't happen overnight. Old habits often die hard. Nevertheless, you must always remember that resiliency breeds confidence. Once you've taken the first tentative step toward greater self-sufficiency, you may find that many of your fears were largely illusory. There is no denying that Depression 2.0 will impact each of us in both small and significant ways. Yet we must keep in mind that the economic dislocations of the present day are but a symptom of the major changes that are looming on the horizon.

We often forget that the "Green Revolution" of the late 20th century that allowed American food production to reach unheard-of levels was largely powered by cheap fuel. Modern fertilizers rely on an abundant and inexpensive source of natural gas. Irrigation systems require fossil fuels, and the majority of pesticides are derived from petroleum. Should fuel scarcity become a permanent fixture in American life or should global petroleum markets become

destabilized, America's legendary abundance may become a relic of a bygone era. Yet oil isn't the only consideration. The onset of global warming will only further complicate the picture.

Important agricultural regions like China and Argentina have both experienced severe droughts that have greatly impacted food production. Indeed, in Australia lack of rainfall has been a recurring problem since 2004. According to a recent report, "The drought has been so severe that rivers stopped flowing, lakes turned toxic and farmers abandoned their land in frustration."¹⁶ And American isn't immune. In California, a reduction in the Northern Sierra snowpack has triggered a serious water shortage and one of the state's worst droughts. Texas, Florida and Georgia are also contending with inadequate rainfall and water shortages, which will greatly impact agricultural efforts. Should the crisis spread, we could witness food shortages.

Expecting top-heavy government bureaucracies to address complex problems of this magnitude may no longer be an option. However, the growth and emergence of resilient communities dedicated to sustainable living offer a hopeful alternative. The advent of community and backyard gardening initiatives, citizen preparedness efforts, alternative currencies, co-housing arrangements, bartering clubs, ecovillages and other innovations offer a promising glimpse into our post-carbon future. Indeed, thanks to advanced social networking technology, connecting with like-minded individuals and organizations in your area has never been easier.

The day may come when each of us will play a larger role in the economic life of our communities. We may find ourselves supporting local farms through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, lending our skills to neighborhood time banks, bartering our homegrown produce at farmers' markets, and spending our money with alternative currencies as opposed to inflated greenbacks. Indeed, these small-scale endeavors may one day supplant the traditional marketplace and provide critical goods and services at a time when credit is scarce and the currency is unstable.

Historically, Americans are a resilient people. Throughout our nation's history we have repeatedly shown our ability to pick up and rebuild in the face of wars, economic depressions, and countless tests of our national will. When we put our differences aside, work together, and deploy our creative talents, there is no limit to what we can accomplish. Depression 2.0 and the ensuing challenges of the 21st century may loom large in the public imagination. Nevertheless, we needn't fear the future so long as we possess the resolve and the imagination to squarely face what lies ahead. •

Notes

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