

LIVING DANGEROUSLY: OUR COMFORTABLE SOCIETY

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Imagine the taste of a freshly-ripened tomato, sliced, added to a salad containing all sorts of fragrant veggies, cheese, and crushed nuts. Following a few days of fasting, this plate is delicious beyond description. Imagine, however, if you have just devoured a few hamburgers: would the aforementioned salad taste just as good? I think not, since everything is relative. The person who must walk several kilometres to work each day appreciates receiving a bike as a means of transport; however, an individual who is accustomed to the comforts of a luxurious car will undoubtedly snub this same bicycle. As mentioned before, everything is relative.

We take so many things for granted. Most people complain if their faucets do not produce enough hot water. Only a generation ago, since our grandparents had to transport heavy buckets of water from the well or river; they would have been very grateful to have access to running water of any kind or temperature. Sometimes, I feel quite annoyed when my shirts are not pressed properly, or my pants do not have the right crease. When these thoughts enter my mind, some of past wilderness survival episodes immediately come into focus: the shivering, numbing cold when obtaining any type of garment was a welcome relief; sharp creases had no meaning under these circumstances.

In today's society, these accounts seem heroic, almost bordering on madness or pathological behavior. At one time, the good life (a.k.a. the comfortable life) was thought to be an obstacle to our union with God. Our forefathers fasted, prayed, and abstained from materialism in order to be closer to their Maker. It appears that this concept has changed: comfort is now the cornerstone, the key component which drives our modern economy.

The comfortable society therefore justifies our rapacious need to devour any available natural resources to feed a seemingly insatiable appetite for material goods, thereby keeping third-world countries in destitution. As a culture, we have internalized this lifestyle to such a degree that we no longer think about it as being an abnormality. When we feel inner discomfort, we are sick; when we suffer external discomfort, we're considered to be paupers, the poorer members in the community.

There are few people, including those belonging to religious orders, that are willing and/or able to kick their material habits (the one exception are members of Mother Teresa's order who consistently turn down gifts of plush furniture, comfortable carpeting, and electrical appliances). Most of us living in Canada and the United States are too dependent on dishwashers, TV sets, stereos, cars, designer apparel, and fancy restaurants. Has this standard of comfortable living become the modern equivalent of the golden calf? Has its glitter blinded us, thus creating a state of spiritual corruption in the West and temporal death for others inhabiting planet Earth?

Perhaps the salvation of this planet rests with our youth. As David Suzuki has repeatedly stated, the upcoming generation rests on the threshold of

global salvation or destruction; it's the last generation that can effectively turn the fortunes of our ailing planet around. Within 30 years, our tropical rainforests will be gone; many aquatic organisms residing in our sick oceans will disappear; the ozone layer will be damaged beyond repair; our topsoil is being washed away at an alarming rate; acid rain is killing more and more lakes and forests; urban pressures on wilderness habitats are increasing; potent insecticides\pesticides continue to disrupt the fragile web of life ... and the litany of environmental sins continues to expand unchecked and seemingly unabated.

Can schools teach children conservation ethics? Can they effectively counter slick ads portraying the good life? Can we, as educators, point out the need to change our western lifestyle? In order to do so, I believe that two fundamental changes must take place within our communities; these require the church, home, and school to act as a spiritual trinity, and to work in concert.

1. Our planet as a spiritual presence. In early societies, tribal elders passed on the knowledge, ethics, and spiritual beliefs of their culture on to the emerging generation. Besides dealing with abstract ideas and concepts, they dealt with practical issues such as the need to respect and care for their physical surroundings. Elders stressed the need to have respect for their environment, since these immediate, geographic ecosystems ultimately gave them life and sustenance. If these were desecrated or destroyed, the people were in jeopardy of dying themselves; they were part of, not apart, of their world; they considered themselves as intricate members of the web of life; as such, they were part of the food chain, and in communion with the animals and plants that gave them life, shelter, and substance.

The teachings of the elders included practical advice on caring for the land as well as esoteric, spiritual matters. They combined dogmatic religious information with the sanctity of the land.

It is in this area that we fall short. In most cases, we do an excellent job at instructing our wards the religious tenets of our faith; seldom do we include any temporal aspects. St. Francis of Assisi is the personification and embodiment of the amalgamation of these two principles: besides being a priest who celebrated the teachings of Christ, he called upon the sun, moon, wind, plants, animals, and water to give Him glory and praise. He rejected his comfortable, material possessions and surroundings; instead, he deliberately espoused begging for his paltry, physical needs.

2. Social justice. Going hand in hand with the first point, we need to address and re-examine our present lifestyle, and how this consumer, comfort-driven way of life is directly responsible for the pillaging of our natural resources. As a direct result of Western society's obsession for the good life, many third-world people are kept in virtual bondage to feed our obese desire for material goods. Children in Singapore work 14-hour days to manufacture designer jeans for our sartorial needs; in Central America, small, independently-owned garden plots are torn up to make way for mega, internationally-owned plantations. These huge agri-businesses produce cheap bananas, coffee beans, and chocolates for Western markets. In South America, rain forests are systematically burned, thus turning vast jungles into grazing lands needed to sustain huge herds of cattle; this beef is destined to become ground meat for a well-known, international hamburger chain.

Any thinking, rational human being must realize that something is terribly wrong when a mere 10 per cent of the population, consisting primarily of Western society, consumes 90 per cent of the earth's natural resources; this is a travesty of social, moral, and ethical justice.

As educators, family members, and Church leaders, are we up to the challenge? Are we willing to "*Walk the talk*"? We must truly educate the youth of today; holding sporadic "starvation banquets" is not enough! Individuals must know that the advertising industry has created an illusion, a mirage that we, as a society, are blindly following. Slick ads have hatched many plots to make us buy any number of products. We're presently living on borrowed time, living on the backs of the oppressed majority. It's ludicrously obscene when a mere 10% of the earth's population (Western society) consumes 90% of this planet's resources!

I hope the answers to these queries are positive, otherwise the lifestyle we know, love, and come to expect will ultimately come to a violent, rapid, and cataclysmic end.