

# Healing Ourselves and Healing the World: Consumerism and the Culture of Addiction

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## Abstract

*For many people the meaning of their lives is derived through consumerism. Hence, any shift from a consumer to a conserver society is often met with both resistance as well as denial. However, as subsystems of the larger social and biophysical systems we are progressively being forced to change the way we live and consume. What has been referred to as ‘affluenza’ is an addictive condition whereby many are substituting their true needs with addictive behaviors. This article explores the parallels between addiction and unsustainable growth, as well as highlights the growing trend where people are creatively redefining growth.*

**Keywords:** Addiction, Consumerism, Integral, System, Sustainability, Environment, Affluenza, Needs, Narratives, Values

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“The optimal pattern of consumption, producing a high degree of human satisfaction by means of a relatively low rate of consumption, allows people to live without great pressure and strain and to fulfill the primary injunction of Buddhist teaching: ‘Cease to do evil; try to do good’” – (Schumacher, 1973)

## World in crisis

In May 2013 it was announced that CO<sub>2</sub> levels had reached the 400 ppm level and then a year later in late March 2014 the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued the warning that unless climate change is taken very seriously human security and our collective well-being will be at risk (Semenuk, 2014). Concerns regarding climate

change underscore the growing realization that the Earth's ecology is a complex and interacting system that is subject to non-linear and often sudden shifts from one state to another (Bright, 2000).

In turn, as the larger social and biophysical systems in which we are embedded become unstable, collapse and reorganize, so does the likelihood for humans at the local and individual levels to also be strongly impacted by these systemic changes.

Ecology, which is the study of the relationships between organisms and their environment, is arguably a subversive science, because it undermines the common notion that humans are separate from the world around them. Moreover, the recognition of the inseparability of a viable economy from a viable ecology certainly brings into question the whole notion of material and consumer growth as a prime indicator of human progress.

Consequently, the limitations and imperatives of the planetary ecology are at odds with the very underpinnings of modern industrial society. Recent ecological footprint models suggest that there is already a fifty percent ecological overshoot in terms of the globe's biocapacity. Humanity now requires the equivalent of one and a half planets, both to provide the renewable resources as well as absorb the levels of waste we now produce (Moore & Rees, 2013).

### **Enlightenment values and the industrial expansionist world view**

With the rise of modernity Western society began to define itself in terms of Enlightenment values. Assumptions such as the ability of science wedded to technology for harnessing nature's resources to end problems of human scarcity and suffering became the norm. As well we came to believe that "progress" was to be equated with the satisfaction of material wants and the fostering of a consumer-oriented society. Out of these Enlightenment assumptions arose the current industrial/expansionist worldview where nature is essentially seen as a storehouse of resources to be employed for the satisfaction of ever-increasing material needs by an ever-increasing human population. Consequently, this equates material growth with development which, in turn, is regarded as a prerequisite for human happiness and prosperity. Related to these are the beliefs that any problems created by previous technologies can be solved with new technologies (the technological fix), the need to define ourselves in terms of material acquisitions, and the role of a *laissez-faire* market to determine what is in the best interests of a consumer population. The expansionist worldview and its corresponding Enlightenment values have now become global in scope (Taylor, 1992).

And herein lies a major problem. The modern ego identity has developed systemically with the rise of the modern industrial/expansionist worldview and its attendant Enlightenment-based underpinnings. Consequently, any threats to these values and the economic and political policies that follow from these will also be regarded as a threat to the ego identity. Indeed, as the larger economic, societal, and biophysical systems become more unhinged and unstable, so too will the subsystems that make up these systems – be they at the human or biophysical levels.

### **Ego identity in crisis**

In terms of complexity theory – as both biophysical systems as well as social and individual systems experience higher levels of stress and perturbation the

initial tendency will be for those systems to attempt self-maintenance so as to resist whatever destabilizing forces they may be encountering. However, if self-maintenance and maintaining the status quo is not an option, the system may either bifurcate downwards, losing its current integrity, or reorganize at a more resilient and integrative level of systemic organization (Laszlo, 1996). As ecosystems and social systems experience higher and higher levels of stress, we are witnessing a dramatic increase in the number of people now questioning their own values and meanings – not only because of the current systemic challenges to the existing industrial/expansionist world view but also to their very real sense of ego identity and life purpose.

For people to accept the legitimacy of such things as climate change and ecological breakdown they are also going to have to confront their own consumer and capitalist values – as well as their own consumer addictions. Often this is just too much to ask. This has become apparent with respect to those who deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change. As Naomi Klein has noted, many political conservatives and climate change deniers may well understand the long-term consequences of having to accept the science that they wish to reject for it implies “the kind of deep changes required not just to our energy consumption but to the underlying logic of our economic system” (as quoted in Hamilton, 2013, p.87).

Richard Slaughter (2010), futurist and integral practitioner, claims that a single question now confronts us all – “how should we respond to a world slipping deeper into crisis each and every year?” (vii). Slaughter goes on to point out that the most common response to this question is either denial or avoidance – while the minority that does take this question to heart tends to focus on the outer symptoms and ignores the deeper psychological, cultural, and spiritual levels which also need to be addressed. Indeed, the environmental crisis is not so much a crisis in the environment but is more importantly a crisis of individual and collective values and culture. In many ways, the outer collective landscape is a reflection of the inner collective mindscape and climate change and other pressing environmental issues need to be addressed in light of those deeper needs that excessive consumerism all too often is a mask for. For as the environmental philosopher Alastair McIntosh (2008) has noted: “Rather than evolving a healthy balance between inner and outer lives, Western societies have been turned inside out...Our outer lives are hyperactive and there’s a corresponding emptiness, even a deathly nihilism, at the core...Inner climate affects outer climate because inner hubris drives outer hubris in a spiral of mindless economic frenzy” (p.9).

## **Pursuing false needs**

In 1987 the Brundtland Report had popularized the concept that sustainable development means meeting the needs of present and future generations. Yet it only defined needs in terms of basic subsistence – e.g., employment, food, energy, housing, water supply, and health care (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, pp. 54-55). But human needs transcend subsistence ones and include affection, love, and belonging; individual, collective, and cultural security; the need to be able to participate in groups and political institutions; the need for a certain level of leisure and personal freedom; and the need for transcendence and feeling of connection to the larger Cosmos (Taylor & Taylor, 2007b, p.12).

Driving the unsustainable economy is the unsustainable culture of the consumer

society. It creates false needs for power, status and wealth instead of meeting real needs for meaning, community and deep connection to both others and nature. Moreover, false needs are often attempts to substitute for the real need that is lacking, as for example when status symbols take the place of affection or belonging.

Advertising creates the illusion of scarcity where people try to satisfy their emotional and spiritual needs through consuming things they don't need (Hamilton, 2003). And as McIntosh (2008) has succinctly pointed out: "Consumerism blocks... interrupts the very journey of life. It keeps us narcissistically at a childlike level of immaturity, seeking only the next fix" (p. 176). Many of these goods are produced in the economically poorer regions of the world where real scarcity exists and people do not have access to the resources they require to meet basic subsistence human needs for food, shelter, health and education.

### **Consumerism as addiction**

We are now collectively on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, we are faced with the unsustainability of consumer culture and the growing ecological imperatives to cut back and engage in the "degrowth" of our economies (Assadourian, 2013). On the other hand, much of our modern ego identity and meaning is derived from what we own and how much we can acquire. And yet in an interconnected world, as the larger systems become progressively destabilized our own addictions and precarious sense of meaning and identity are also coming apart.

From a systems perspective addictive behavior is not only an individual issue. It is very much contextual. The noted physician Gabor Mate (2009) lays out the shortfalls of the mainstream approaches to "fixing the addict" and instead points out how addiction is a response to one's larger social and environmental context. In many cases true needs are not being met, consequently requiring the individual to cope through self-medication, whether through substances or compulsive behaviors. What has been referred to as "affluenza" (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005) is an addictive condition whereby many are substituting their true needs with addictive consumeristic behaviors. Arguably the individual who is not seeking to fill his or her inner void with consumer goods makes for a relatively poor consumer in terms of growth economics.

Addiction can be thought of as repetitive behavior negatively impacting the fulfillment of one's other life supporting needs. Moreover, the addictive cycle involves stunted developmental processes, whereby the individual has not been afforded the social context necessary for maturation. Indeed, Mate (2009) has noted, "it is no coincidence that addictions arise mostly in cultures that subjugate communal goals, time honored tradition and individual creativity to mass production and the accumulation of wealth" (p. 391).

### **The existential vacuum**

Hyper-consumerism also leads to an erosion of meaning or inner directedness. Victor Frankl (1992) calls this the "existential vacuum", a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness where one is subject to the pernicious whims of a culture that has lost its way. Frankl describes addiction as "one aspect of a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from the frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our

industrialized societies “(p. 141). Concurrent with both Mate and Frankl, we propose an integral framework for recovery, where the resolution of addiction is not found in “fixing” the individual, but rather in the creation of appropriate environmental and social contexts that supports the progressive actualization of people’s genuine needs. Here, attention and care is emphasized on both the inner world (beliefs, memories, mind-states and emotions) as well as the exterior physical arena.

From this perspective, consumerism is a maladaptive coping strategy to ease the deep existential discomfort associated with the void of disconnected individualism and separation. Indeed the drive to consume well beyond one’s essential needs is a form of self-soothing. In his work on integral theory and addiction, John Dupuy (2013) argues that addiction is a counterfeit for the real quest for wholeness. He notes that addictive behavior is characterized by three basic drives: i) the escape from egoic suffering, ii) the enhancement of pleasure, and iii) the search for transcendence away from one’s feeling of separation towards a greater sense of unity and wholeness. Dupuy goes on to argue that while each of these drives is healthy – the addictive focus is not (p.163). These same drives also underpin the consumer’s “need” for self-medication through the acquisition of more and more possessions. However, it is very often when the addict has reached bottom, the chaos of the “dark night of the soul”, this is when the search for something more integrating is allowed to be entertained.

### **Crisis as danger and opportunity**

Research in the field of adventure therapy has posited that it is contexts of disequilibrium that allow for the opportunities of healing by unsettling habituated behavior patterns and promoting the adoption of healthier ways of being (Taylor, Segal & Harper 2010). Arguably we are now at a time in our collective history when we are experiencing greater and greater levels of systemic social and environmental disequilibrium and chaos. Consequently, we are experiencing both at the individual and collective levels new opportunities for reorganization and integration. And while the first response for many is both the denial and the reassertion of habitual behaviors as well as the arguments for the continued entrenchment of the industrial/expansionist worldview, it is this very experience of chaos that is “the mother of our individual and collective evolution” (Dupuy, 2013, p.166). One of the principles of chaos theory is that the trajectory of a system experiencing a high level of disequilibrium can be easily be impacted by even a very small perturbation. A useful analogy is that of a ball-bearing and a series of peaks and valleys. Times of relative systemic stability are akin to a ball-bearing in a valley. Here only very strong outside perturbations can affect its location. However, times of high levels of systemic disequilibrium are akin to a ball-bearing perched precariously on a peak. At such times even very small perturbations and stresses have the potential to destabilize the existing state and determine the ball-bearing’s trajectory into one valley or another. Similarly, we are now at a time in history when even very small groups of people and communities with sufficient intent and focus can make a significant difference in helping to determine the direction of the larger social systems and even biophysical systems in which they are embedded.

Three major “perturbations” now taking place are: i) narratives of hope, ii) the shifting of collective values, and iii) the move towards local and decentralized ways of living.

### 1) Narratives of hope

In times of stress the stories we attribute to our experiences are critical for determining our relationship with hope and ultimately our actions or inaction.

Perhaps more than at any other time in recent history we need to have positive narratives of hope. As the theologian and environmentalist Palmer (2013) has said, “Environmentalists have stolen fear, guilt and sin from religion, but they have left behind celebration, hope and redemption” (Palmer quoted in Assadourian, p.297). Or as the environmental writer Assadourian (2013) notes: “The problem is that fear without hope, guilt without celebration, and sin without redemption is a model that fails to inspire or motivate (p. 296).

Macy and Johnstone (2012) claim there are three simultaneous stories defining this period in our collective planetary history. They are Business as Usual, the Great Unravelling, and the Great Turning. As we are confronted by the limits to growth and challenges to our consumerist way of life, the business as usual story is no longer tenable. Many who hold to these first two narratives either resort to avoiding the issues, a form of psychic numbing, or become completely overwhelmed with the problem and hyper-focused on the unraveling of ecological and social systems. The former leads to a state of denial or apathy, and the latter to a state of fear, panic, hopelessness and often paralysis. Their positive alternative vision is the idea of the Great Turning. This is similar to Raskin et al (2002) and their idea of the Great Transition. From this narrative, our current epoch is seen as a time where people are waking up to the destruction of affluenza and consumerist addiction and are increasingly joining together in defense of preserving life on planet Earth. This narrative of hope allows people to see themselves as active participants in the positive transformation of their own lives and the world around them. Hope in this sense is not a noun, or something that is possessed, but rather a verb, present and possible through conscious action and participation in creating a better world (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Without this positive narrative though, making meaning of this period of crisis and the inevitable pain and suffering that are part and parcel of disidentifying with consumerist values and making change would not be possible. Again, the result would likely be more consumerism and either apathy or despair.

Macy (1998) organizes the diverse practices of the Great Turning into three distinct dimensions: i) holding actions, ii) structural analysis and alternative practices, and iii) shifts in values. Holding actions are the practices that focus on defending and preserving the planet’s many ecological processes struggling to remain vibrant and intact. Examples might include protecting endangered species or protecting watersheds and sensitive ecosystems through political, legislative, and direct action. While critically important and often the most visible, these actions alone are not sufficient to bring about a viable and sustainable society. Structural analysis includes the challenging tasks of examining and exposing the underlying and mostly tacit mechanisms perpetuating the injustices and ecocidal repercussions of industrial global capitalism. Through increased understanding and demystification of the underlying structures, energy can be directed to developing innovative and inspiring ways of organizing political, social, and economic relations that promote a more sustainable and just future. Finally, none of these practices can be maintained without shifts in the underlying values sustaining them. This third dimension, arguably the most critical for bringing about long-term shifts in planetary-human relationships, focuses on changing perceptions of reality and challenging many of

the strongly held values that currently underlie definitions of ‘success’ and ‘growth’ in Western society.

## **2) Shifting values and their appropriate translation**

Interestingly, tens of millions of our fellow global citizens are now eagerly adopting the consumer Expansionist Worldview model (Taylor & Taylor, 2007) – witness India and China as well as growing parts of the Middle East and Latin America. Historically, the rise of capitalism and ego-based individualism were powerful forces in the questioning of traditional values. Being able to act in one’s own self-interest and acquiring material success through entrepreneurial excellence and enterprise have been, and continue to be, significant ways of helping many people around the world to break free from authoritarian hierarchies and to question what are viewed as oppressive traditions – be they from the church or state. Arguably, elements of these competing worldviews are now being witnessed in the recent “Arab Spring” movement and in the current Ukraine crisis.

It is important to recognize that there are hundreds of millions of people who still hold to more traditional religious values, hundreds of millions who are striving to become part of “modernity” and the consumer worldview, and many millions who are now beginning to espouse a post-consumer or an emerging “ecological” worldview. Chris Riedy (2009) an Australian researcher of values connected with climate change has argued the need to recognize that people see the world through very different value orientations. Hence, to have any meaningful discussion with respect to moving towards a post-consumer society, we need to be able to respectfully “translate” the sustainability message in terms of the worldview orientation people are coming from. In other words, we have to find ways of translating the drive for market place values and individualistic and competitive needs in ways that minimize hyper-consumerism while, at the same time, helping to further larger social and environmental needs. In turn, it is also critically important to be sensitive to another’s religious sensibilities and to be able to appropriately translate the need for a more sustainable lifestyle in light of traditional religious texts.

## **3) The shift to the local: Small-scale capitalism and entrepreneurship**

Recent studies in positive psychology have shown that once basic needs are met – the acquisition of more and more consumer items gives only limited returns with respect to positive emotions. Further, it has been clearly demonstrated that the expansion of global corporate capitalism and economies of scale erode communities of their ability to build resilience systems and secure their own economic and social capital (Norberg-Hodge, 1996). Greer (2011) argues that the end of cheap and abundant fossil fuels will force many to decentralize and begin to produce more goods and services at the local level. The recent economic troubles in Greece have resulted in a wave of young unemployed people opting to return to their local communities and contribute to alternate economies and practices such as small scale agriculture.

In any move towards a post-consumer society there needs to be support for innovative entrepreneurship, the celebration of healthy forms of meritocracy and individualism, as well as the use of market-place instruments (small scale capitalism) as a major way of helping to deal with environmental and social issues – especially at the local and community levels. Rather than having *less*, for many this will

translate to *more* with respect to community and family relationships, time in nature, giving out to others, and time to express one's own unique creative capacities.

Consequently, the decline and collapse of the industrial/expansionist worldview also offers the possibility of having more time to grow in other ways than in terms of consumer wants. Growth is a powerful human drive – but growth for what? The enrichment and fulfillment of true human needs will be able to better flourish once the addiction to consumerism in the wealthy regions of the world has been lowered. For example, Schumacher (1973) has called for economies that are designed as if people matter and which are based on a “becoming existence” – ones which help us to overcome self-centeredness as well as better meeting our self-actualization needs.

## Conclusion

We began this article by claiming that over the next few decades we will undoubtedly witness the rapid decline of industrial civilization. Why? Because a viable economy is utterly dependent on a sustainable and viable ecology and the current industrial global economy has been designed to grow constantly and ignore the limitations of a finite planet. At this time humanity is now using more than 25% more renewable resources each year than the biosphere is producing (Taylor and Taylor, 2007). Issues such as climate change and energy shortages are impelling us to confront the issue of limits to conventional economic growth as well as our profound inseparability and mutual vulnerability with the larger social and biophysical systems of this planet.

We recognize that a voluntary transformation away from a consumer based culture and towards life sustaining practices is likely not going to occur, at least on a wide level. However, as the unraveling of ecological and social systems continue to increase, this will also allow for more and more people to question their own values and life meanings. In turn, those individuals and communities that have begun to experiment with the sustainable practices and more ecologically informed worldviews will be the seeds, or little perturbations that just may influence the trajectory of the collapse in more positive directions. Further, as the veil of ego-based individualism and frenzy of addictive consumerism is lifted, a rich network of ideas and practices may be ready to catch the fall, hopefully with enough resiliency to act as attractor points for a new level of cultural reorganization.

This is the silver lining to the Great Unraveling. Whether we acknowledge it consciously or not we are being affected by the larger systemic social and biophysical changes that are taking place around the world. As subsystems of these larger systems we are changing as they are changing – and conversely, as we change so can they. Individual and collective social systems rarely change without experiencing unsustainable levels of disequilibrium. As industrial society becomes progressively unhinged individuals and communities will be forced to experiment with new ways of living, both with each other and the natural world. Already, transition town initiatives (Hopkins, 2011), ecovillages, city revitalization projects (e.g., Portland Oregon), permaculture communities, downshifting and simplicity forum groups, local food and buy local initiatives are acting as social “attractor points” and as visions of hopeful possibilities. It is our hope that this time of transition will compel those living beyond their means to slow down and pay attention to the fertile inner landscape primed and ready for growth.



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