

## More for Less

by Richard Evanoff

The irony about our modern infatuation with unlimited economic growth is that we always end up getting less for more. We work harder, produce more, but end up with less meaningful jobs, less satisfying human relationships, and less free time to enjoy all of the goods and services we're producing. Meanwhile, our unceasing economic activity is producing horrendous amounts of waste and contributing to the ecological devastation of the planet. The more we produce, the worse off we become. You'd think people would wake up and see that the solution is for us to produce less, not more, and to more fully enjoy the things we already have.

If we're to bring ourselves back into some kind of harmony with the environment there has to be change on at least two levels. The first is personal. We have to move away from overconsumptive lifestyles towards sustainable lifestyles. We have to find, as the title of Bill Devall's book on deep ecology suggests, lifestyles that are "simple in means, rich in ends." Voluntary simplicity is nothing new on the planet. For thousands of years seekers from both the East and West have fled the corruption of civilization to find their true inner selves in the wilderness. But we don't necessarily have to become Taoist sages or desert saints to lead ecologically sustainable lifestyles. Simplifying life is, as Thoreau suggested, a matter of driving life into a corner, living deliberately, fronting only the essential facts of life. What do we *really* need to achieve happiness and fulfillment? Can we move from lifestyles that are manipulated by advertising and social pressure to "have more things" towards lifestyles that are based on genuine individual autonomy and community spirit?

The second type of change we need is structural. If we only focus on changing our personal lifestyles, we won't be able to get

### Quote

"Nobody got rich or famous from it. Many people think 'Let's invent something and be rich.' But to succeed is not necessarily the same as being successful. I suggest patience and hard work. I also tell members to invent a product that consumes itself, that uses itself up, so customers will buy more. That's being realistic."

— Ms. Kokonoe Toshiko, 90-year-old honorary president of the Japan Women Inventors Association (quoted from "Women Widget Makers of Japan," in the June 11, 1993 *International Herald Tribune*)

very far in having a really sound environment. Maggie Suzuki, one of JEM's editors, once told me about a meeting she had with an official from the Ministry of Construction. She was trying to persuade the official not to pave over an important wetland with concrete. The official told Suzuki that he fully supported the environmental movement, as evidenced by the fact that his family recycled their milk cartons. Whether or not he would support saving the wetland, however, was an entirely different matter. Environmentalism for this official was purely a matter of changing lifestyles, not a matter of promoting sound environmental policies.

## Our tendency to look at "saving the environment" as simply a matter of changing our personal lifestyles misses the full enormity of the problem.

Our tendency to look at "saving the environment" as simply a matter of changing our personal lifestyles misses the full enormity of the problem. Take recycling, for example. In days past, I bought soft drinks in glass bottles that could be returned to the store for a deposit. These days when I go to my local supermarket, all the soft drinks are in non-recyclable plastic containers. Committing ourselves to recycling means nothing if the goods we are forced to buy at the supermarket cannot be recycled. The problem here is not that we as consumers need to change our personal lifestyles, but that we as a society need deep structural changes in the way our economy is organized.

Do we, as ordinary citizens, have the power to make these changes? Well, here are a few things to consider. Who is paying for all the megaprojects being done, for example, by the Ministry of Construction and other government agencies? Taxpayers. Given the fact that it is we the taxpaying citizens who are subsidizing all of these unnecessary development projects, there's room for a real tax revolt here! What I would like to know is why, for example, my local city government has enough money to turn rivers into concrete canals and to build roads and sewage systems for new housing developments, but not enough money to buy forested land for public parks? What are our local governments' priorities, and who decides them? If our modern form of government (in both Japan and the West) is presumably democratic, why do most of the decisions our governments make provide more benefits to big business, construction companies, and developers than to

ordinary people like you and me? One only needs to look the Sagawa Kyubin scandal in Japan or the savings and loan debacle in the U.S. for the answer to that one. It's time that we the people took back control of our supposedly "democratic" form of government.

Now consider the case of the soft drinks in plastic containers. Who pays to produce all these containers? Who pays to dispose of them in already overfilled waste dumps? We do. When I buy a soft drink, I'm interested in the contents not the container. Why do I have to be buying all these plastic containers that simply end up as garbage? Occasionally I may keep a container or two — they're good for storing emergency water and make excellent canteens for hiking. But I have absolutely no use for the rest of them. My personal solution has been to simply stop buying soft drinks unless I need the container too! And if anyone would like to join me in boycotting soft drinks in plastic containers, we could start a *movement!* (Maybe call it the "Alice's Restaurant Anti-Garbage Massacre Movement" or something.) MacDonald's was recently pressured into discontinuing using Styrofoam containers by concerned consumers, and the same consumer pressure can be applied to all the wasteful economic activities corporations engage in that we end up paying for. We can also lobby for stricter environmental laws that would *force* companies to change their habits, rather than having looser environmental laws that *force* us as consumers to be accomplices to the crimes of consumerism and waste. We have the power, but only if we use it. (And when we start applying the same pressure as worker-producers rather than simply as consumers, things will *really* begin to change.)

What I'm suggesting is that instead of getting less for more, we should start getting more for less. Less concrete, more parks. Fewer plastic beverage containers and more of the real thing. Less time spent at meaningless jobs mindlessly producing unnecessary products, more time doing meaningful work that really makes a difference in society. Less time consuming all those unnecessary products, and more time developing lifestyles based on personal growth and better human relationships. Less "economic growth" to line the pockets of the rich while society as a whole continues its downward spiral, and more energy going into activities that are genuinely *uplifting*. □

100% Recycled Paper  
and Notebooks  
Natural Foods

**Chubu Recycle**

Tokugawa 2-11-17 Higashi-ku Nagoya  
461

(052) 931-3304; Fax: (052) 931-0505

Ask for George