

Do good lives have to cost the Earth?

by Phoebe Barnard

Do good lives – satisfying, purposeful, fun-filled – really have to ‘Cost the Earth’?

This is the theme, and title, of one of several wonderful books I’ve read recently (edited by A Simms and J Smith, published by Constable). It’s an eclectic series of essays by well-known people in the UK – thinkers, doers, business people, journalists, novelists, politicians, designers and behaviourists ... the late Anita Roddick of The Body Shop; Hilary Benn, doyenne of British liberal politics; Larry Elliot, economics commentator ... and so on. It’s a refreshing array of views on Western society.

Our society has become something of a cult, worshipping material wealth and the high life, rather than the good life. We admire unstable ‘celebrities’ like Paris Hilton or Kate Moss, rather than achievers like artists, poets, engineers, activists, scientists, writers... We are now so driven by materialism—so consumed by consumerism – that we hardly notice what’s wrong. That is, until we start to feel hollow and dissatisfied.

Those of us in ‘the working class’ also feel dissatisfied, personally and professionally, by the onslaught of information and lack of time. More than money, we crave time and mental space. We spend long hours making more money, commuting, shopping, paying taxes or balancing our budget (if we do). In our personal lives, we see too little of our children, get too little exercise, hardly know our neighbours. In our work lives, we suffer from information-overload, deadline-stress, grant applications, client deliveries... On both fronts, time is scarce.

Does this sound perverse? To millions of people, it increasingly does.

Above the level of income needed to meet our basic needs, you might be surprised at how thin is the link between wealth and happiness. For the far too many people in South Africa living without regular meals or a safe place to sleep, life is extremely stressful. But it’s well documented that a person’s ‘life satisfaction’ depends on income only up to a very modest level. Then, wealth becomes essentially irrelevant to happiness. More important are the quality of your upbringing; the happiness of your family, your friends and community; job-satisfaction; good health; and spirituality. Whatever your income, these are the aspects of a ‘good life’.

Many people work so hard that they hardly notice the world around them, their children growing up, or their parents growing old. Some are motivated not by

a higher purpose, but by paying off debts incurred to buy a bigger home ... a second home ... a fancier car. Few are truly happy – indeed, some are desperately unhappy, with relationships suffering from their financial ambitions, even if they disguise it by material extravagance.

To some, sustainable living still seems like deprivation – the spartan fringe-lifestyle of a few earnest people in sackcloth and sensible shoes. It’s not. You can live sustainably and still indulge in dark chocolate, bodysurf at sunset in the golden sea, have great sex, and laugh with friends until you cry. You just live lighter, buy local, and ditch the travel-intense, energy-intense activities which stress us all out. Increasingly, a wonderful range of people – fun-loving, iconoclastic, fashionable, serious, passionate, irreverent, trendy, spiritual – are calling the values of our hyper-consumption society into question.


It’s not easy for some, when the daily barrage of marketing tries to persuade us that we’re inferior if we don’t live extravagantly and spend on the latest chic cars, homes, weddings or plasma TVs. But the ‘tipping point’ towards a more sustainable society is close at hand. As a public speaker on climate change and ecosystems, I meet an amazing diversity of people these days who tell me their experiences of sustainability. They don’t fit stereotypes. Some are 20-something journalists with fashionable hairdos and i-pods. Some are community activists from Khayelitsha. Others are trendy editors, small-scale entrepreneurs, fruit-industry export strategists, or industry CEOs. There are as many different

‘good lives’ as there are people to lead them.

It’s happening ... ‘times are a-changing’. All we need to do is streamline our own lives, and stand up against politicians and companies flogging ‘20th-Century policies’, ‘bling’, or SUVs. The South African Cabinet in July adopted a world-breaking policy direction – the first for a developing country – for low-carbon economic development. This is extraordinary, and something for which we should all thank them.

In this Sustainable Living series, we’ve tried to weave the big and the small ... future scenarios and bits of philosophy ... with practical tips on a range of things people can do to live more lightly and sustainably themselves.

As debt relief campaigner Ann Pettifor, Executive Director of Advocacy International, says, “The world really does not have to be this way.

We can change it.” 



photograph by S Blakeman

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