

At this point in my life, I am trying to decipher what is important to me and how I want to spend my time. I realize that, like many people my age, I have become caught in the web of consumerism-- the pressure to buy the newest phone or to own the coolest clothing. These items complicate my life more than they help me. My life has become chaotically filled with stuff that I do not use. I have had to move houses many times in my life, undergoing the relieving yet stressful process of purging and sorting my possessions each time. In deciding what to keep, I am always alarmed by the amount of things I do not use. I spend the money that I work so hard for on things that do not benefit my well-being.

Our society places emphasis on public consumption rather than benefits to the individual. What if we did not have to worry about huge mortgages and crazy credit card bills? If we did not buy so much stuff, what else could we spend our money on? How would our lives be different? Our country has become engulfed in debt from people thinking they need things that they don't. We have over 59 trillion dollars in US total debt, a number that is rising every second (U.S. National Debt Clock). In the modern era, our lifestyles, as well as economies, have relied on excess consumption. Desire is inscribed in human beings-- after we get the things we think we need, we move on and search for other things that we do not have. Our economy has been centered on the idea that the more we buy, the better our economies are and the better our lives will be. However this model is not working. Depression is becoming more and more common and our economies have reached near collapse many times. Even if our current economic model did make our market stronger and people happier, for the American economy to continue exploiting the amount of resources that we are using today, we are using more resources than we have. Humanity would need five Earths to continue producing the resources needed if everyone lived the same as Americans (Mankind Using Earth's Resources at Alarming Rate). Many people are not thinking sustainably or responsibly, but solely striving to reach short-term desires. We have more stuff than at any time in history and we are still dissatisfied. The more we have, the more we want. Why are our lives consumed by consumerism?

The media gives us many ideas and statistics about the problems in the world, planting beliefs and ideas into our heads on how we should live our lives and be more present. The "facts" keep coming and pretty soon, our ideals and morals do not match our actions. We get caught up in our daily lives and the issues that seem dire at the moment. Pretty soon choosing what outfit to wear the next day becomes more pressing than the sustainability of our Earth. We can tell ourselves that we do not need things to be happy or to thrive, but at a store, confronted with bright packaging and attractive advertisements, our ideals go out the window.

As modern consumers, we walk into a store and something catches our eye: a dress, a piece of furniture-- anything. Automatically, the consumer begins to visualize the product in her or his life, envisioning its improvements to our daily routines. We have been led to believe that one more item will make us successful and happy. We create a link in our minds connecting material goods with success. The bigger the home, the more expensive the cars, and the newer the inventions, the better and more successful our lives will supposedly be. We build up clutter that adds chaos to our lives, complicating rather than simplifying our days, creating debt and pollution. Consumers have been exposed to the social and media pressures that cloud our judgment regarding our necessities. We must re-consider which elements in our lives actually help us thrive and succeed and which just distract. We need to start living to live, not to accumulate.

The good news is that living simply can be easy. A single action towards simplicity, however small, can change our lives dramatically for the better. If we spend the time, money,

and energy in ways other than shopping and playing with our purchased products, we could get more out of life and begin to consider what actually makes us happy, thriving, fulfilled people.

One of the biggest challenges in anyone's life is to determine what is truly important and how to achieve it. Our culture has created a proxy answer to this question. Consuming has helped to fill the void of happiness in many people's lives and even begun to simulate what we believe to be happiness. We buy for numerous reasons but mostly, consumers have been led to believe that purchasing items will have a direct and positive impact on their lives and will ultimately help them to be the people they aspire to be.

Living simply means having the ability to focus on a few important aspects of our lives so we are able to pinpoint our necessities, and to focus our energy, time, and resources into what is truly vital. We all observe and take part in the materialistic cycle of our society, which places enormous pressure on the individual and the society to make purchases. We get consumed by the opinions and judgments of those around us. It has been said that we express ourselves through what we wear. Though perhaps not completely accurate, what we wear or own can share one's social, political, or economic standing. This theory has been used to make us believe that we can change our lives by changing what we consume. Our judgment becomes void as people constantly make assumptions about others' lives based on what they own or wear. Who wouldn't have the newest inventions if they could? We live in fear of how we are perceived. Our imaginations have become our enemy. When we can imagine it, we can want it; If we want it we should have it; and if we should have it we need it.

We consume to fill holes in our lives. These voids can range from small and subconscious to gaping holes that consume the person. Consumerism is a tool to make people conform to a personality they may not inherently identify with. We feel that when we have more, we are more-- that we have greater importance or impact in the world through what we own. Many people shop when bored because it gives a feeling of responsibility and ownership. Paradoxically, we have been taught to believe that the more we have, the simpler our lives will be. However this is often not the case-- the more stuff we have, the more stress and responsibility we are forced to take on. The more we own, the more meaningless things to think about and take care of, the less freedom we have to do what really counts like being connected to your surroundings. We can spend our energy on friends, family, nature and expanding our knowledge.

We look for reactions around us: hidden desire, envy, or even a spark of connection. This is human nature. However, in today's culture, we can instantly become part of a club or be like another person with the simple purchase of an item. We try and find ways of exuding qualities of those we look up to onto ourselves. We create the mentality that having the same products as someone will make us more like them.

Additionally, we often forget that the price of something is not the only cost. When consuming we often overlook durability, necessity, origin, or environmental impact. Products have been designed and propagated by the profiteers, designed to make money and then break so we have to buy more. All of the waste and production of new products adds to the pollution. While technology and science support our current lifestyle, they are also detrimental to our future. Our landfills expand with cheap materials that become completely unusable.

We spend our lives working, trying to be successful and happy, which we have learned to associate with money. To become "successful," people often have jobs that help them reach their goals, but not always doing things that make them happy. People spend their whole lives working to buy products. What if our jobs did make us happy? And instead of working in a

constant “pursuit of happiness,” we lived in the moment-- simply. Could we redefine what a good job is and change the criteria for success? I have heard many people say that they work to provide for their families. Perhaps we could change the meaning of “provide” to imply spending more time and giving more care to our loved ones, rather than focusing on earning money to purchase things for them. The immense pressure our culture puts on earning money to “provide” has actually been proven detrimental to our well-being. Over the last 45 years as consumption has risen, the number of suicide has increased 60%. (Suicide Statistics) Japan, considered one of the most advanced societies in the world, also has one of the highest suicide rates. So is “advancement” really moving us forward as humans? Or are we complicating our lives unnecessarily?

We do not need excess to thrive, succeed or be happy. Simple living can be accomplished by simplifying lifestyle in terms of morals, friends, family, and living with fewer material items. We can prove that the model of excess is not needed to thrive and does not uphold personal or global integrity. When we live simply the little joys in life become that much more meaningful.

People of this society have lost many of the simple and natural joys of being alive, particularly through a growing disconnection from nature. It is hard to find entertainment that doesn't cost anything, so we have begun to assume that that the only things worth doing are things we have to pay for. Malls and shops have replaced Parks and churches. We know more brand names than we know our neighbor's names. Our senses of fun and enjoyment have been shaped more by media and propaganda than by personal values. Today, even being in nature has been exploited for profit.

The definition of happiness, by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy. If I think back to the times in my life when I was truly happy, I do not remember buying a new shirt or even wearing it. Even though in that moment, consumption may have been simulating happiness for me. When I think of happiness, I think back to moments with friends or family-- interesting conversations, long walks, swimming in the ocean, or spending the whole day making art. I do not need ten swimsuits, fifteen pairs of shoes, or an iPad Mini to do anything that gives me true fulfillment.

For a long time, people have found great benefits to living with little. Today, when I hear that people are unhappy, I often hear the causes being tied to things like, work, or bills. If these things make us unhappy, why do we continue pursuing them? This cycle is flawed and needs to be changed. Contrastingly, some of the feelings attached with living simply are freedom, power, or joy. Albert Einstein once said; “everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” We can find a way to live with what we need, not what we want.

The difference between a want and a need is fairly simple: A need is something one physically cannot live without, whereas a want is something one would like to have. For example, when a consumer is confronted with drinking water or soda, they know they need water, but when confronted with something sweet, the unhealthy choice can seem more desirable in the moment. The line between desire and necessity become increasingly clouded, dictated by what we think will improve our lives. Technically, on a physical level, our needs are food, water, and shelter. Henry David Thoreau expressed the importance in simplicity in the book *Walden*. He believed that there were two distinct ways of resolving ones dissatisfaction with material goods. The First was to to acquire more and the second was to desire less. The first way has become more common in many of today's lifestyles. Though he preferred the second and chooses to consume less. Thoreau lived by the second path and spent his energy and time getting

rid of all that was un-useful pointing out that what is not needed is a disadvantage. However, there are some exceptions-- things we buy that make our lives easier and make us much more capable of focusing on what we want. The struggle is choosing between what we actually need to live a better life and what we think we need but actually clutters our life.

After centuries of cultural and consumerist expansion, perhaps people can begin to work backwards and realize that simplicity could benefit us. Geronimo advised his people not to “confuse satisfaction with the size and shape of your shelter.” (KAS-KI-YEH). The vision of the American dream is often a nice house with a pretty car in the driveway. We push ourselves to reach the American dream hoping that happiness will come with it. Today, people are proving the power of simple living. By starting a revolution of living in tiny houses and spaces, people like Jay Shafer, the creator of Tumbleweeds Tiny Home Company, have dedicated their lives to re-envision the way we live, pushing the limits of what a home is, and while proving that humans do not need so much junk.

The Dalai Lama is one of the true pioneers of simplicity. He said, “If one's life is simple, contentment has to come. Simplicity is extremely important for happiness. Having few desires, feeling satisfied with what you have, is very vital: satisfaction with just enough food, clothing, and shelter to protect yourself from the elements. And finally, there is an intense delight in abandoning faulty states of mind and in cultivating helpful ones in meditation.” What he means here is that perhaps one only needs to have the physical essentials plus a good social stance to be happy. Less is truly more.

Another example of innovation in working towards simplicity is the “100 thing challenge,” a way of life that author Dave Bruno introduced to the world. It is a simple idea: if we downsize to owning just 100 personal items that we deem completely necessary, we can gain so much. Bruno has helped ignite the flame under our “stuff”. Today more and more people are joining the revolution.

In a future of simplicity, I imagine a life for myself without clutter; a life that does not revolve around consumption, where the few things I have truly add value to my life; where I can value the things I do have and gain a larger understanding of them. There are many steps and decisions that I will have to take to get there.

Imagine living in a place where all your necessary possessions had a place. Imagine the ease of getting ready in the morning, knowing where everything was. Instead of buying copious amounts of unwearable clothes, you could begin with purchasing only items you truly loved or needed. Imagine not having to panic about paying credit card bills at the end of the month. Imagine living in a home where every part of it was used. Living simply changes first an individual's life, then can inspire the world. If we simply choose to own fewer items, our economy, lifestyles, and morals as citizens will begin to change.

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