

Pioneers of an Awakening Culture

An interview with Duane Elgin by Sarah van Gelder, Editor, in *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, Summer/Spring 1996, Seattle, WA.

SARAH: How did we get to the point where buying and possessing things has become so important to us? What need is it fulfilling in our lives?

DUANE: Since World War II, we've seen the most massive experiment that's ever been undertaken in programming the psyche of a civilization. And it has worked. The advertising culture has succeeded in creating identity consumption — a sense that our meaning in life depends upon the significance of what we consume.

A retail analyst, Victor Lebow, who promoted consumption as necessary to our economy in the post-war period, was very clear about this. He said “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate.”

I think people are having a very tough time separating their sense of spiritual identity from their consumer identity. And, there's a conscious blending of the two by advertisers to make it seem as though our spiritual or soulful significance is manifest in our consumption.

SARAH: Could you say more about the effects that this reprogramming of our psyche is having on us as individuals and on our culture?

DUANE: The effects are so pervasive that we don't see them. They are just accepted — like the air we breathe. Advertising is creating a lethal addiction. Overconsumption is not a matter of taste, it's a matter of survival. We're promoting a mass psychology that will result in our own ruin. This is not good mental health!

Jung defines schizophrenia as mistaking the dream for reality. We have been so inundated with the televised-generated version of the American Dream (each person watching roughly 25,000 commercials a year) that we have mistaken it for reality. We're literally going crazy — on the one hand knowing we need to learn to live with less, and on the other hand being continuously encouraged to consume ever more. We are being divided against ourselves. Something has to give.

SARAH: Besides your work in voluntary simplicity, you've also been very involved in media activism. What is the connection between the two?

DUANE: I feel, that the future of the species will depend to a large degree on the future of communications. If the mass media presents a shallow, secular, and consumerist view of the

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world, then we will be more inclined to allow the destruction of the global environment. Then, a majority may not see, until it is too late, that we live within a sacred universe. In my view, our collective use of the mass media will need to be infused by a sacred sense of reality if we are to reconcile ourselves to living sustainably on the Earth. We need communication that comes from a place of compassion if we are ever going to collectively envision and then reach agreement around a common pathway into the future.

George Gerbner (professor of communications and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement) says that to control a nation, you don't have to control its laws or its military, all you have to do is control who tells the nation its stories. Television tells most of the nation most of its stories most of the time.

If television is our social brain, then American television currently has the highest level of intelligence that beer and car commercials can buy. And this dumbing down of the U.S. public is happening at the very time when we face unprecedented social upheaval and change. As people have really tried to live out the television dream, and seen how hollow it all is, they are becoming deeply cynical about it and saying, "I don't care how many more ads you show me, I don't believe them anymore. I don't know what to believe, but I just don't believe it anymore."

SARAH: But it does still seem to be working. There are still millions spent on advertising and people still seem preoccupied with getting the latest high-tech gadget or car or clothes.

DUANE: We're literally becoming schizophrenic – divided against ourselves. On one hand, we believe the advertiser fiction; on the other hand, we don't believe it. Here's how I'd summarize the polls: about 75 percent to 80 percent of the public say, "We're going to need to make major changes if we're going to live sustainably on Earth." I find it very significant that such a large fraction of the overall public recognizes that, like it or not, there are great changes ahead. Next, about 60 percent of U.S. adults say, "Not only do we need to change, we want to change." Still, this is largely rhetoric as most are sympathetic but disengaged – still waiting for the starting gun to go off.

Then, about 25 percent are actually doing something by changing the way they live – perhaps by not taking the job promotion that would require them to move somewhere; maybe one of the partners in the relationship will stop working or take a lower-paying job that's closer to home. These are the so-called "downshifters" that are disengaging from the rat race of our consumer society.

Finally, about 10 percent of U.S. adults are "upshifters" that have gone even further and are pioneering a new way of life that is more sustainable, satisfying and soulful. They're making a whole-pattern shift in their lives that grows out of an ecological awareness and the sense that "I'm here as more than just a consumer to be entertained; I'm here as a soulful being who wants to grow. I want to have meaningful work, a meaningful life with my family, a meaningful connection with my community, and a meaningful sense of spiritual development." That 10 percent is about 20 million people, and it's almost two-to-one women to men.

So, women are disproportionately represented among the pioneers for this new culture and consciousness. My sense is that men are more locked into associating their self-esteem with their consumption. I also think men are more likely to measure their sense of power and significance by a car, a house, or clothes. Their natural interest in seeking status and dominance has been successfully transferred into the material realm by advertisers like Victor Lebow.

Whereas women see more of life connected with relationships – family, community, and so on. As we move into an era of ecology, which is an era of inter-relationships, women are more pre-adapted psychologically, I think, to find meaning in that world. So, it's an easier transition for the feminine kind of archetype in consciousness than it is for the traditional masculine.

SARAH: It's interesting that you say that. When we were researching this issue, we held a focus group in Seattle of people involved in the voluntary simplicity effort – mostly women as it turned out. Several people said they thought that women's attractiveness to men is far less dependent on their financial status than men's attractiveness to women. So perhaps at least some women have greater freedom to move into a different value system. And perhaps women also unknowingly put pressures on the men in their lives, expecting that they will be the breadwinners.

Duane: Yes. There is the implicit expectation; it's often assumed that if you're a man, you're going to be a good breadwinner.

SARAH: What's the connection between the small incremental choices people are making to change their way of living and the possibilities for a new civilization to emerge?

DUANE: About two-thirds of the economic activity in this country is based upon consumer purchases and, even a small shift in consumer activity creates tidal-wave reverberations throughout the economy. Seemingly small lifestyle changes can accumulate into big impacts when multiplied by millions of consumers or citizens. Small changes are beautiful. Little changes can accumulate into a tidal wave of change!

Arnold Toynbee looked at the rise and fall of over 20 civilizations and summarized civilizational growth with his Law of Progressive Simplification. In accord with this law, Toynbee said that the essence of civilizational growth is not power over land, or power over people (and I think now he would also say it's not how much we consume.) The essence of a civilization's growth is its ability to transfer increasing increments of energy and attention from the material side of life to the psychological, spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic.

SARAH: One of the things I was struck by in your book, *Voluntary Simplicity*, was the irony that the material abundance of the modern age could provide all of us with an opportunity to live a more reflective life and a life that's free of the threat of poverty. But this possibility can only be realized if we can become less emotionally and spiritually attached to that material abundance.

DUANE: Yes ... all these delicious paradoxes. That's right. We have to see that we're being consumed by our consumerism instead of being supported by it. We're in a watershed with the American dream, which, in its hyper form is a relatively recent phenomenon that has been around

only since World War II. We're seeing the end of that dream and, as it crumbles, a new vision for humanity is in the process of invention and formation.

What is emerging is not a "new American dream" but a more conscious and purposeful "central project" for the entire human family. The central project of the human family is to somehow come into harmony with three core "ecologies" — physical, social, and spiritual. I think of these as three "S's."

One "S" stands for a more sustainable way of life — a way of life that's in harmony with the Earth's physical ecology. The second "S" is for a more satisfying way of life — one that's in harmony with our social ecology — with other people, our work, our community, the rest of the world, members of the opposite gender, and so on. The third "S" stands for a more soulful way of life — one that is in harmony with the spiritual ecology, however described.

The human family is fast approaching one of the most pivotal points in the entirety of human evolution — the point at which we consciously recognize, for the very first time, that we are inextricably a single "species-civilization," a single planetary family whose destiny is intimately intertwined. Knowing this, we then have the choice of moving toward a new central project for the human family — that of discovering and building a sustainable, satisfying, soulful way of living upon the Earth.