

Think About It.

by Kristina Blank Makansi for Think: Less.org

How much stuff do you really need to live a rich, full, and enjoyable life? How much space does it take to comfortably house a family of four? How many cars do you need and how big do they have to be to get you safely to and from where you need to be? How many suits or pairs of shoes or handbags or sets of golf clubs does one person need to be happy?

Is there something inside us, something intrinsic to being human, which makes us want more? From McMansions and king-size master bedroom suites, SuperGulp sodas and Grand Slam breakfasts, to Excursions and Hummers, we in America—and increasingly, around the world—want more of everything big. Why? Does a bigger house necessarily mean a better person lives inside it? Do 15 pairs of black pumps mean we're more responsible citizens? Does driving a Hummer really mean we're like nothing else? Are we just using more and bigger to attract possible mates? To warn potential rivals, guard our territory, or display our earning superiority? In this, the 21st Century, are we really that tied to our evolutionary past?

Think about it. In our modern society, everything uses electricity. Everything we eat, wear, and use was grown, sewn, or manufactured with the assistance of electricity. And, the electric power we need to live our modern lives and enjoy our modern conveniences is produced principally by burning coal or splitting atoms. In fact, together, coal and nuclear make up 70% of all the electricity used in the United States. And, although the US accounts for only 5% of the total world population, we account for about 26% of the world's total energy consumption. We in America want things big—and we don't like people telling us we can't have what we want—no matter how much energy we have to use.

But, the problem is that people around the world, people in China, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America—places where the population is growing exponentially—want to have and enjoy the same goods and services that we enjoy. We've exported our movies, our music, our cars, and our clothes and now, as incomes rise and hopes are kindled, the American way of life that we've projected around the world is being embraced by billions of people who want what we have. They may not like America's politics, but they want America's lifestyle.

Today, our planet supports approximately 6.6 billion people. Out of all those people, less than 20% live in what are referred to as developed countries. In fact, the 10 nations with the highest standard of living are host to a mere 8% of the total global population. That leaves 80%, or about 5.3 billion people, struggling to get through the day, improve their lives, and someday, maybe, achieve a standard of living that approaches what they see on TV, in movies, or on billboards.

We're not Malthusian doomsayers. In fact, we are fervent believers in the idea that technological developments, inventions not yet off the drawing board, and ideas not yet formulated will go a long way toward alleviating much of the population and resource pressures our little blue ball is experiencing now or will experience in the future. But, it doesn't

take much imagination to understand that if even a small a percentage of the 1.3 billion Chinese or 1.1 billion Indians begin buying their own cars, living in bigger homes, moving to the suburbs, building highways, driving farther to work, eating Whoppers and Big Macs, buying and running big screen TVs, refrigerators, washers and dryers, etc., that it will make an impact on our global environment. Because each step they take toward becoming participating members of the modern, global economy is dependent upon electric power.

Now, we're sure you see where this is going. The vast majority of scientists around the world believe that our modernization and industrialization has contributed to global warming through increased emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂). If we're going to need a lot more electricity to power the lifestyles of billions of people as their societies modernize, we're going to be pumping a lot more CO₂ into the atmosphere. At least at the rate we're going now.

So, what do we do? We can't tell them they can't have what we have. We can't hold back progress or put the genie of globalization back in the bottle. Nor would we want to. Indeed, their progress holds much promise for the future of the human race. But, things can't continue as they are without paying the price of potentially irreversible planetary impact.

As a society, we must invest in clean technologies to generate power and promote efficiency and conservation. But, technology can only get us so far. If we have the opportunity to buy a more efficient car, do we buy one for every member of the family, thereby canceling out whatever efficiencies might have been gained? Well, many of us would do exactly that.

So, the drive for technological advancement must be accompanied by a new way of thinking about how we live. For the last 50 years (and many would argue for much longer), America has been the cultural role model for the world. Cultural colonization is evident as we see Nike t-shirts on Iraqi children running from the scene of car bombs and American movie stars celebrated as saviors in remote African villages. Now it's time to change our cultural tune.

The prevailing idea that you can have it all is coming at a heavy price. The new idea—Think: *Less!*[™]—can shift the cultural conversation and pay long-term dividends for our environment. Responsible, forward-looking Americans can model the idea that a hybrid is just as sexy as a Hummer. That a smartly designed, LEED Certified house is sexier than a sprawling estate that needs its own power plant. That buying eco-friendly products, reducing, reusing, and recycling, buying high-efficiency rated appliances, walking or riding a bike for short trips instead of driving, switching to fluorescent light bulbs and then turning out the lights can go a long way toward living more rational lives in respect for our environment.

Thinking "less" is a tall order, however. Our economy, our jobs, and our culture are all infused with the more, more, more mentality. We have to confront this pervasive mentality and acknowledge that changing our patterns of consumption will have repercussions. For instance, if we all decide tomorrow to dramatically cut our electricity consumption, we will need less coal (50% of our electricity is generated from coal), which will lead to job dislocations in coal mining dependent communities, a reduction in the tax base of coal dependent states, and a

subsequent reduction in services provided to citizens of those states. It is our responsibility to figure out how to turn the big ship of consumption around without destroying livelihoods.

We believe that the key is incremental change—person by person. Individual choices in the marketplace will drive the economic shift. The government has a role to play in encouraging investment in research, development and deployment of more efficient technologies, but real change must come from us. Each of us. We're calling for a paradigm shift in the way we think about consumption. Using less and reducing our individual planetary footprint must be personally rewarding—not just a status symbol or a hammer that the affluent hold over the heads of those with less means. Unless Think: *Less!* is integrated into a person's ethical and moral fabric, virtually all initiatives are doomed to failure subject to indignant accusations of hypocrisy, the sheer weariness of sacrifice, or the vicious cycle of rising and falling energy prices that inevitably leads to a loss of interest in all things efficiency related.

The bottom line is that we're all in this together. The consequences of human progress have been staggering—both on the positive and the negative side. But human progress doesn't stop here. We've got to face our collective future within an ethical framework that embraces respect for our fellow man as well as respect for our environment. Think: *Less!* is not a solution to all the world's environmental problems, and it may not even be the sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy. But, we believe that in order for each of us to change our footprint on the outside, we have to change our imprint on the inside.

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