

## “Living Abundantly: A Holiday Message for All Year Long”

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In 1955, an economist named Victor Lebow wrote these words:

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,  
our ego satisfaction, in consumption....  
We need things consumed, burned up, worn out,  
replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.<sup>1</sup>

Is it just me, or is that terrifying?  
Our advertising culture has managed to convince almost all of us  
that we need *stuff* to make us happy.  
Bigger houses, more cars, bigger TVs, more clothes,  
perfume, vacations, toys, computers, power tools,  
swimming pools, cell phones—  
you name it, we’ve bought it,  
or at least we’ve fantasized about buying it!

Our advertising culture would have us believe  
the holidays in particular are all about *stuff*.  
Is this not true?  
My personal biggest pet peeve  
is that series of commercials for diamond rings  
with that slogan, “Tell her you’d marry her all over again,”  
where a handsome man presents his beautiful wife  
with a big diamond ring,  
and she sighs and looks into his eyes,

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Lebow, “Price Competition in 1955,” *Journal of Retailing* Spring 1955, p. 7.

and the music swells,  
and it's like she's never realized before  
how much her husband really loves her.

Can we just say, how stupid is that?  
I mean, I know it's hard for some of us to express our feelings.  
I'm from Minnesota; I know this!  
But, hello: calling all spouses!  
If you want the person you love to know how much you love them,  
you can just *tell* them and save your 3000 dollars!  
Believe me, they will get the message.

But that's not what the advertising folks want us to think.  
We've been brainwashed into believing we need *things*  
to express our feelings, our creativity, our love,  
our very being in the world.  
I don't exclude myself;  
I stand before you  
not as some perfectly pure and pristine non-consumer,  
but as someone who is struggling right along with you  
to resist that brainwashing,  
and get back to what truly makes us happy.

Intellectually we see the problem clearly enough.  
It is both a personal and a global problem.  
Personally, we see that we're part of a society  
in which the *norm* has become living beyond your means,  
and squandering your money on things that are not truly satisfying.

From a global perspective,  
we know, in a sort of abstract way,  
that all the stuff we are making and buying  
comes at a cost to our environment.  
But it's easy to forget, so let me share something with you:  
Believe it or not, the Worldwatch Institute told us 10 years ago

that people in North America  
have used up more natural resources since 1945  
than the entire human race used up  
from the dawn of history until 1945.<sup>2</sup>

Let me repeat that since it is so shocking:

*people in North America  
have used up more natural resources since 1945  
than the entire human race used up until that time.*

We and the world are due—*past* due—for a change.  
Bizarrely excessive abundance for a few people  
at the expense of the many—this is *not* the way we want to live!  
We want to live in a way that is healthy and life-giving,  
both for ourselves and for our world.

And yet it's so hard to break free!  
Just the other day I felt myself getting hooked  
by a specific little bit of stuff.  
Over Thanksgiving, John and I were visiting his mom in Chicago.  
While we were there,  
we helped her buy a new car to replace her 1992 Toyota  
which was on its last legs.  
So all last week we were enjoying driving around in this new car,  
with everything all spiffy and clean.  
And when I got home, the first time I got in *my* car,  
my awesome little Toyota which I love,  
I noticed the floor mats were kind of dirty  
and some of the stitching was unraveling  
on the one on the driver's side.

I saw this and I felt that little *ping* of discontent—  
you know how it goes,  
where something you've never paid any attention to before

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<sup>2</sup> Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 48.

all of a sudden catches your eye  
and you see there's something wrong with it,  
something not quite perfect,  
and despite your better judgment  
you are hooked by a desire for new stuff.  
Well, that's what happened to me:  
for the first time in my life, I became obsessed by *floor mats!*  
I swear I had never paid them any mind before,  
but now all of a sudden I had this idea that I must need new ones!  
I did online research.  
I thought about how nice it would be  
to have these spiffy new floor mats in my car.  
It was getting intense!  
But finally I caught myself and realized, is this stupid or what?  
All this craziness over a floor mat  
which actually exists to get stepped on and get dirty!  
If I got the new one  
I'd probably start obsessing over keeping it clean  
and doing really ridiculous stuff  
like trying to wipe my feet on the pavement before I got in the car.

But this is what our advertising culture does to us, you know?  
It shows us this ideal fantasy world of TV,  
commercials, lifestyle magazines;  
it trains us to look for any deviations from that fantasy world  
and interpret them not as plain old reality,  
the way the world actually *is*,  
but as flaws that we need to spend money on to correct—  
whether it be an aging floor mat  
or a washing machine that thumps when you wash the towels  
or wrinkles on our faces and gray hair on our heads.  
Basically our entire consumer economy depends on convincing us  
that reality,  
what actually *is*, what we actually *have*,  
is bad,

and the only way to find peace and contentment  
is to get rid of the old reality and buy a new one.

Of course the trick is, after you buy the new thing,  
it turns into the old thing, the thing that is no longer perfect,  
and the whole cycle starts all over again.

There is no *there* there behind that cycle of desire.

There is no perfection in our material life  
outside of the pages of those glossy magazines.

There's just life.

But isn't that life what we are *really* looking for  
underneath all the catalogs and clutter—

life abundant,

life abounding, with its dings and chips and flaws,  
and its incredible, breathtaking beauty—

a life of meaning, a life that matters,

a life which is sustainable,

in harmony with every other being on this planet,

a life filled with what *really* feeds us?

We've been immersed in these consumer messages for so long  
that it's hard to break free.

But actually, this might be exactly the right time to try.

During this financial crisis, now officially a recession,  
we know some people are truly hurting.

Even those of us who have a stable job and are basically fine  
are feeling anxious about the future.

It's a scary time.

We're worried about people we love;

we're worried about ourselves.

And yet, it's brought us a window of opportunity too.

Whatever else the economic crisis has done,

it has certainly forced a lot of us  
into slowing down, thinking before we spend,  
and perhaps spending a lot less on stuff of dubious real value  
which is exhausting the resources of this planet.  
We don't know how long it will be  
before the economy bounces back.  
But for the moment, the way of spend-spend-spend, buy-buy-buy  
is literally bankrupt.

One of the synonyms of that scary word "recession"  
is the word "pause." Another is "retreat."  
And indeed, this moment in our economic life together  
is also an invitation to take a step back,  
to analyze how we have been living,  
and to realize that if we focus our lives  
on acquiring more and more material stuff,  
past the point of any real need or even delight,  
that way of living is neither sustainable nor satisfying.

We've been given a chance to rediscover  
the real meaning of living abundantly:  
being good stewards of what we have,  
devoting our money and our time and our energy  
to what we really love,  
to those desires that are not soul-destroying  
but, rather, life-giving.  
That's where our freedom is;  
that's where our peace is.

Now you may be thinking, OK, that sounds really great,  
but can you be a little more specific?  
So I'd like to briefly suggest three practices  
related to money and possessions  
that I personally have found tremendously helpful  
both in times when money's been very tight

and when things have been more comfortable.

The first practice is actually incredibly easy:  
simply making a point of enjoying what you have.  
It's so easy to drift through life not really noticing what's around us.  
But if you stop and just take the time to notice,  
it's like a miracle,  
all the good things around us:  
the material stuff we call ours, like a favorite sweater,  
or a mug of hot chocolate,  
like the one pictured on your order of service—  
and by the way, I would definitely add the marshmallows—  
life is too short not to!  
And we can notice all the things that bring us joy  
that we don't have to own to enjoy—  
this beautiful sanctuary is one of my favorites;  
the roses outside;  
the ground under our feet and the sun shining down  
and the air that we breathe.  
And all the people we love—  
all the joy we get from connecting and being loved.  
There is so much to enjoy,  
regardless of how many points the Dow is up or down.

In this vein, I'd like to share with you a passage  
from my all-time favorite book about money.  
It's called *Your Money or Your Life*,  
and this is a passage about the enjoyment that comes from  
practicing the old-fashioned virtue of *frugality*.  
This is what they say:

“[F]rugal shares a Latin root with *frug* (meaning virtue,)  
*frux* (meaning fruit or value),  
and *frui* (meaning to enjoy or have the use of).  
Now we're talking.

Frugality is **enjoying** the **virtue** of getting good **value** for every minute of your life energy and from everything you **have the use of**.

That's very interesting.

In fact, it's more than interesting.

It's transforming.

Frugality means we are to *enjoy* what we have....

Waste lies not in the number of possessions but in the failure to enjoy them.

Your success at being frugal

is measured not by your penny-pinching

but by your degree of enjoyment of the material world....

A frugal person might relish eating a single orange,

enjoying the color and texture of the whole fruit,

the smell and the light spray that comes

as you begin to peel it,

the translucence of each section,

the flood of flavor that pours out

as a section bursts over the tongue...

and the thrift of saving the peels for baking.

To be frugal means to have a high joy-to-stuff ratio.<sup>3</sup>

Let me just say, the Buddhists among us will probably recognize this interpretation of frugality as pretty darn close to the Buddhist ideal of mindfulness—again, paying attention and relishing the good that is right there under your nose—literally, in the case of that orange!

Now, we're all different people, and different things bring us joy.

So the second practice related to money and possessions

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<sup>3</sup> Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* (New York: Penguin, 1999 [new edition]), pp. 167–68.

is to search yourself and ask, what makes me truly happy?  
When you're tempted to spend some money on something,  
if you can delay at all, do it.  
Hold off, sleep on it, and ask yourself the next day,  
is this really going to bring me enough joy,  
or someone else, if it's a present—as it often is this time of year—  
is this thing really going to bring enough joy  
to warrant my actually spending this money?

In the case of those floor mats for my little car,  
the answer is probably not.  
On the other hand, a few months ago  
I spent weeks agonizing over whether or not to buy a Dustbuster  
to support my obsession with clean, un-linty bathroom floors.  
I finally got it, and, oh my gosh, that thing is amazing—  
I have no regrets!  
I personally try to be guided by one of my heroes,  
William Morris, one of the founders  
of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British Arts and Crafts Movement,  
who said, “Have nothing in your house  
that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”

We will all have different answers to this question—  
what really makes me happy?—  
but whatever your answer is,  
*use* it to guide how you spend the money you have.  
Especially over the holidays,  
let's think before we spend all this money on presents  
that we know from experience  
may not be nearly as joy-inducing  
as just spending time with the people we love.  
Let this holiday season be a time for discernment and restraint,  
not in a gloomy way,  
but in the service of joy.

Finally, I want to just touch on a third practice relating to money and possessions, which I'll definitely be talking about more in the spring, and that is *budgeting*— that basic task of keeping track of your income and your expenses, and having a plan so that they're in line. Budgeting is a word that has been much maligned. It carries with it sort of depressing connotations of deprivation, hardship, tightness, limitation, but I think budgeting is something else entirely. In good times, in times when you feel you easily have enough money, budgeting is another way of being mindful about what you have. It's a way of systematically asking and answering the question: how shall I use the power that has been given to me? Because money *is* power, and the choices we make about how to spend it are moral choices. In good times, budgeting lets us think about the impact we want to have on the world, for good or ill. It's a way of serving and protecting the world.

And in hard times, when money is tight and life feels scary, budgeting is a very important way of protecting ourselves. Some of you might remember the Laura Ingalls Wilder "Little House" books about growing up on the prairie. She wrote about the winters and the blizzards that came up that were so blinding that the only way you could be safe even just going the few steps from the house to the barn was by hanging on to a rope strung up from Point A to Point B. And likewise, in the blizzard of bills and debts and all the consumer seductions that try to suck us in, committing to follow a budget is like hanging onto that rope and saving your life.

Personally, the reason I budget as carefully as I do

is that I've found it is a great relief and a source of peace  
to make what you have, enough—  
enough not only for yourself but to share with the rest of the world.  
It's amazing how good it feels  
to be in that place of *enough*.  
There's so much more to say,  
but today let me just leave you with a final wish.

This holiday season, may you know peace abundantly.  
May you be at peace with your money,  
with your loved ones,  
and with yourself.  
May you know joy abundantly.  
May you live in a way that brings joy to you and to the world,  
for we can never have too much joy.  
May you know love abundantly,  
that joyful, peaceful love that is the most precious thing of all.  
May you have life abundant,  
full of freedom and power,  
for this is what we are born for.  
May it be yours.

Amen.