

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the green and luscious city of Seattle during the 1970s was idyllic, but the real joy came in the summertime, when my family and I piled our camping gear into our station wagon and headed for the stunning North Cascades mountains. Since this was in the days before DVD players in the backseats, during the drive I'd look out the window and study the landscape. Each year I noticed that the mini-malls and houses reached a bit farther, while the forests started a bit later and got a bit smaller. Where were my beloved forests going?

I found my answer to that question some years later in New York City, of all places. The Barnard College campus where I went for my environmental studies classes was on West 116th Street on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and my dorm room was on West 110th Street. Every morning I groggily trudged up those six blocks, staring at the mounds of garbage that line New York City's streets at dawn each day. Ten hours later, I walked back to my dorm along the emptied sidewalks. I was intrigued. I started poking around to see what was in those never-ending piles of trash. Guess what? It was mostly paper.

Paper! That's where my trees were ending up. (In fact, about 40 percent of municipal garbage in the United States is paper products.¹) From the forests I knew in the Pacific Northwest to the sidewalks of the Upper West Side to . . . where?

My curiosity was sparked. I couldn't stop there; I needed to find out what happened after the paper disappeared from the curb. So I took a trip to the infamous Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Covering 4.6 square miles, Fresh Kills was one of the largest dumps in the world. When it was officially closed in 2001, some say the stinking mound was the largest man-made structure on the planet, its volume greater than that of the Great Wall of China, and its peaks 80 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty.²

I had never seen anything like Fresh Kills. I stood at its edge in absolute awe. As far as I could see in every direction were trashed couches, appli-

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ances, cardboard boxes, apple cores, clothes, plastic bags, books, and tons of other Stuff. You know how a gory car crash scene makes you want to turn away and stare at the same time? That is what this dump was like. I'd been raised by a single mother of the post-Depression era who instilled in her kids a sense of respect for quality, not quantity. Partly from her life philosophy and partly out of economic necessity, my youth was shaped along the lines of the World War II saying: "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without." There just wasn't a lot of superfluous consumption and waste going on in our house. We savored the things we had and took good care of them and kept them until every last drop of usefulness was gone.

So the mountains of perfectly good materials that had been reduced to muck at Fresh Kills made no sense to me. It felt terribly wrong. Who set up this system? How could those who knew about it allow it to continue? I didn't understand it, but I vowed to figure it out. After two decades of sleuthing, when I'd figured it out, I called it the Story of Stuff.

Interconnections

The Story of Stuff journey took me around the world—on research and community organizing missions for Greenpeace, Essential Action, the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), and other environmental organizations—not only to more dumps but also to mines, factories, hospitals, embassies, universities, farms, World Bank offices, and the halls of government. I stayed with families in Indian villages so isolated that my arrival would be greeted by desperate parents running up to me asking "Are you a doctor?" hoping I happened to be the international medic—on her *annual* visit—who would be able to cure their child. I met entire families who lived on garbage dumps in the Philippines, Guatemala, and Bangladesh and who survived on the food and material scraps they pulled from the stinking, smoldering heaps. I visited shopping malls in Tokyo and Bangkok and Las Vegas that were so big and bright and plastic that I felt like I was in *The Jetsons* or *Futurama*.

Everywhere I went, I kept asking "why?" and digging deeper and deeper. Why were dumps so hazardous? Because of the toxics in the trash. And why were there toxics in the trashed products to begin with? Answering that question led me to learn about toxics, chemistry, and environmental health. Why were dumps so often situated in lower-income communities where people of color live and work? I started learning about environmental racism.

And why does it make economic sense to move entire factories to other countries: how can they still sell the product for a couple of dollars when it's

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traveling so far? Suddenly I had to confront international trade agreements and the influence of corporations on governmental regulations.

And another thing: why are electronics breaking so fast and why are they cheaper to replace than repair? So I learned about planned obsolescence, advertising, and other tools for promoting consumerism. On the surface, each of these topics seemed separate from the next, unconnected, and a long way from those piles of garbage on the streets of New York City or the forests of the Cascades. But it turns out they're all connected.

The journey led me to become what people call a systems thinker. That means I believe everything exists as part of a larger system and must be understood in relation to the other parts. It's not an uncommon framework: think about the last time you came down with a fever. You probably wondered if it was caused by a bacteria or a virus. A fever is a response to a strange element being introduced to the system that is your body. If you didn't believe that your body was a system, you might look for a heat source underneath your hot forehead or some switch that accidentally got flipped and raised your temperature. In biology we easily accept the idea of multiple systems (e.g., circulatory, digestive, nervous) made of parts (like cells or organs), as well as the fact that those systems interact with one another inside a body.

In school we all learned about the water cycle, the system that moves water through its various states—as liquid, vapor, and solid ice—around the earth. And about the food chain, the system in which, as a simple example, plankton get eaten by small fish, which get eaten by bigger fish, which get eaten by humans. Between those two systems, the water cycle and the food chain—even though one's inanimate and the other is made of living creatures—there's an important interaction, as the rivers and oceans of the first provide the habitat for the creatures of the second. That brings us to an ecosystem, made up of interrelated inanimate physical parts and subsystems like rocks and water, as well as all the living parts like plants and animals. Again there are systems within systems. The earth's biosphere—another word for the planet's entire ecosystem—is a system that exists inside of that much larger thing that we call the solar system.

The economy functions as a system, too, which is why there can be a domino effect inside it, as when people lose their jobs and then reduce their spending, which means that factories can't sell as much Stuff, which means that more people get laid off . . . which is exactly what happened in 2008 and 2009. Systems thinking as related to the economy also explains a theory like "trickle-down" economics, in which benefits like tax cuts are given to the wealthy so that they'll invest more in businesses, which would hypotheti-

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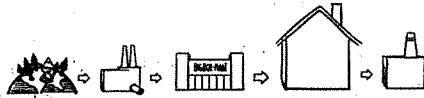
cally in turn create more jobs for the middle and lower classes. If you didn't believe these parts (money, jobs, people across classes) operated within a system, there'd be no basis for the trickle-down theory, or for beliefs about the interplay between supply and demand. All these examples assume inter-related parts within a larger system.

Another way to say that everything exists as part of a larger system (including systems themselves) is to say *everything is connected*.

It's funny: Most people's professional paths start with a general interest that becomes increasingly specialized with years of education, training, and on-the-job implementation. There's powerful social and professional validation for increasing specialization like this. I, however, took the opposite path: I started with a fascination—and outrage—about garbage, specifically about the bags of the Stuff piled up on New York City's Upper West Side. After getting a degree in environmental science, I got a job with Greenpeace International, which paid me to track the destination and the impact of all the waste loaded onto ships in the United States and sent abroad. My whole job was about investigating and stopping the international dumping of waste.

I will forever be grateful to Greenpeace. Founded on the Quaker principle of bearing witness—the idea that seeing wrong-doing with our own eyes creates a moral responsibility to inform others and take action—Greenpeace provided me with a laptop computer and rudimentary training and then set me loose upon the world to bear witness to waste trafficking and tell everyone what I saw. However, like most institutions, Greenpeace divided its work into specific issue areas that left us working in silos, disconnected from one another: toxics, oceans, forests, nukes, marine ecosystems, genetically modified organisms, climate, etc. The organization cultivated a strong culture of specific expertise. For example, the toxics people knew a scary amount about toxics—even the interns could rattle off the molecular structures of chlorinated organic compounds and explain their environmental health impacts—and they single-mindedly pursued their issue to the exclusion of everything else. Back then, we didn't spend much time understanding the connections between the problems we were each working so hard to solve.

CHAPTER 4



CONSUMPTION

So here we are. All sorts of Stuff is lining the real or virtual shelves of stores, ready to slip into our shopping carts or be assembled and shipped according to our desires. Enter the consumer. Stage left, stage right, storming stores and online shopping portals, armed with credit cards and freshly cashed paychecks. This stage of the game is What It's All For—at least that's what we're told. For a moment, as the almighty consumer makes her selection from a long menu of choices, the entire world revolves around her. She experiences a surge of power as she trades her hard-earned money for a piece of Stuff and becomes its owner, either meeting a need, indulging a whim, shifting a bad mood—or maybe all three at once. "When things get tough, the tough go shopping," as the bumper stickers used to say.

Lots of our favorite characters and cultural icons surround themselves with signature cool Stuff. Where would 007 be without his latest gadget, his perfectly tailored suit, or his (insert your favorite model of future car here)? What would the Oscars be without the gowns? How could we love Carrie Bradshaw without her outrageous brimmed hats and designer shades and glossy shopping bags full of ruffled dresses and sky-high heels? Would we recognize Holly Golightly without her infatuation with Tiffany's? We're attached to these characters' possessions and obsessions as much as to their personalities; it's all part of our national mythology. It only makes sense that we'd get attached to our own Stuff.

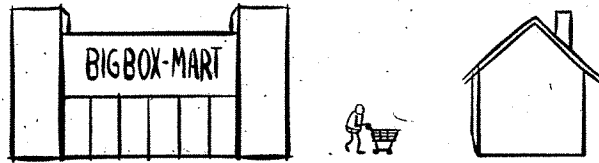
Before I go any further, I want to say that I'm not against *all* consumption. One irate viewer of *The Story of Stuff* film e-mailed me and said, "If you're against consumption, where did you get that shirt you're wearing?"

Duh. Of course everyone needs to consume to live. We need food to eat, a roof over our head, medicine when we're sick, and clothes to keep us warm and dry. And beyond those survival needs, there's a level of additional consumption that makes life sweeter. I enjoy listening to music, sharing a bottle of wine with friends, and occasionally donning a nice new dress as much as the next person.

What I question is not consumption in the abstract but *consumerism* and *overconsumption*. While consumption means acquiring and using goods and services to meet one's needs, consumerism is the particular relationship to consumption in which we seek to meet our emotional and social needs through shopping, and we define and demonstrate our self-worth through the Stuff we own. And overconsumption is when we take far more resources than we need and than the planet can sustain, as is the case in most of the United States as well as a growing number of other countries.

Consumerism is about excess, about losing sight of what's important in the quest for Stuff. Do you remember Jdimytai Damour? In November 2008, on Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year, the holiday shopping season kicked off. Across the country, people left their Thanksgiving dinners early to sleep in their cars in store parking lots hours before scheduled store openings, which in many places were moved up to 5:00 a.m. Shoppers began gathering in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart in Valley Stream, New York, at 9:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving evening. By 5:00 a.m., when the store was scheduled to open, a crowd of more than two thousand people had gathered. When the doors opened, a thirty-four-year-old temporary worker from Haiti named Jdimytai Damour—his friends called him Jimbo—was overwhelmed by the surging crowd. He was knocked down, and witnesses said people just walked over his body to get to the holiday bargains. Emergency medical technicians who arrived to help were also jostled and stepped on by the shoppers. Damour was pronounced dead just after 6:00 a.m. He died of asphyxiation; he was trampled to death.¹ An employee in the electronics department, who was in the store during the stampede, reportedly commented, "It was crazy . . . The deals weren't even that good."²

And this took place in a recession year, against a background of growing economic insecurity, rising gas prices, mounting consumer debt, collapsing mortgages, and increasing unemployment. Retailers had been worried that Black Friday revenues would suffer. Instead, Damour suffered the ultimate loss, and America kept on shopping. We are a society of consumers, we're told. We shrug and nod and accept this as a fundamental truth. It's just human nature, is more or less what we tell ourselves.



And boy do we shop. Globally, personal consumption expenditures (the amount spent on goods and services at the household level) topped \$24 trillion in 2005,³ up from \$4.8 trillion (in 1995 dollars) in 1960.⁴ In 2004–05, Americans spent two-thirds of our \$11 trillion economy on consumer goods, with more paid for shoes, jewelry, and watches (\$100 billion combined) than for higher education (\$99 billion).⁵ According to the United Nations, in 2003 people worldwide spent \$18 billion on cosmetics, while reproductive health care for all women would have come to \$12 billion. While eliminating hunger and malnutrition would have cost \$19 billion, people spent \$17 billion on pet food in the United States and Europe combined. And our tab for ocean cruises came to \$14 billion, although it would have cost just \$10 billion to provide clean drinking water for everyone.⁶ In 2000, teenagers alone (twelve to nineteen years old) spent \$115 billion; the same group controlled \$169 billion in 2004.⁷ The hundred-acre Mall of America—the size of seven Yankee Stadiums—is one of the top visitor attractions in the United States.⁸ The average American has 6.5 credit cards.⁹ The average U.S. supermarket contains thirty thousand items.¹⁰ As of 2003, the United States had more private cars than licensed drivers.¹¹

In the average middle- to upper-middle-class American's 2,000-some-square-foot home,¹² you'll find: several couches and beds, numerous chairs, tables, and rugs, at least two TVs, at least one computer, printer, and stereo, and countless books, magazines, photos, and CDs (although these last, like vinyl and tapes before them, are a dying species now, destined for the dump); in the kitchen there will be an oven, a stove, a refrigerator, a freezer, a microwave, a coffeemaker, a blender, a toaster, a food processor, and endless utensils, dishes, storage containers, glassware, and linens (or at least paper napkins); in the bathroom, a hairdryer, a razor, combs and brushes, a scale, towels, medicines and ointments, and bottles and tubes of personal care products galore; in the closets, dresses, sweaters, T-shirts, suits, pants, coats, hats, boots, and shoes and everything in between. (In 2002, the average American acquired fifty-two additional pieces of clothing, while the average household was throwing away 1.3 pounds of textiles every week.¹³) The average house also contains a washer and dryer, bicycles, skis, other sporting

equipment, luggage, garden tools, jewelry, knickknacks, and drawer upon drawer of crap both relatively useful (like staplers, Scotch tape, aluminum foil, candles, and pens) and entirely pointless (like novelty key chains, gift wrap, expired gift cards, and retired cell phones). We've got so much Stuff that, according to builders, families often buy a home with a three-car garage so that one-third of that space can be dedicated to storage.¹⁴

Even so, our homes are overflowing, inspiring a massive increase in personal self-storage facilities. Between 1985 and 2008, the self-storage industry in the United States grew three times faster than the population, with per-capita square feet of storage space increasing 633 percent.¹⁵ And somehow despite this amazing abundance, we find ourselves drawn into stores like moths to flames, on the quest for yet more.

The Sanctity of Shopping

Shopping is a nearly sacred rite in the United States—in fact, in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, President George W. Bush included shopping in the daily activities that he said were the “ultimate repudiation of terrorism.”¹⁶ When our country was in shock and no one was quite sure what would happen next, Bush told us to hang our “America is open for business” signs in the windows and keep shopping.

Not to buy means to fail our workers and stifle the economy, say most economists and politicians; shopping is our duty. Those who dare challenge the ethic of consumerism have been declared unpatriotic or just plain loony. After *The Story of Stuff* film was highlighted in the *New York Times* in early 2009 for how many teachers were using it in classrooms to spark discussion about consumerism and environmental issues, conservative commentators accused me of threatening the American way of life, terrorizing children, and called me “Marx in a ponytail.” When Colin Beavan, aka No Impact Man, got press for the year-long project in which he reduced his New York City family's consumption to a bare minimum, he received hate mail, including an anonymous death threat! Henry David Thoreau, who in the mid-1800s wrote of living simply and in harmony with nature in *Walden*, was variously described by critics as “unmanly,”¹⁷ “very wicked and heathenish.”¹⁸ and an “unsocial being, a troglodyte of sorts.”¹⁹

Even many of the nonprofits and advocacy groups that work on issues related to consumption don't question it on a fundamental level. There are many excellent groups that focus on the *quality* of the goods we consume—fighting for fair trade chocolate over slavery chocolate, for example, or organic cotton clothing over conventional toxic cotton or PVC-free kids

toys. But few look at the issue of *quantity* and ask that tough question: aren't we consuming too much? *That's* the question that gets to the heart of the system. I am learning it is not a popular question.

Once upon a time the factors that contributed to our national economic growth included a broader set of activities, especially in extraction of natural resources and production of goods. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to consumption. In the 1950s, the chairman of President Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisors stated, "The American economy's ultimate purpose is to produce more consumer goods."²⁰ Really? Rather than to provide health care, safe communities, solid education for our youngsters, or a good quality of life, the main purpose of our economy is to produce Stuff? By the 1970s, consumption had taken a lead role both culturally and economically. Most of us alive today have been raised on the assumption that a consumption-driven economy is inevitable, sensible, and good. We are supposed to participate in this economic model without question. Nevertheless, it's been questioned and continues to be, by a growing number of people. Myself definitely included.

In the same holiday season as Damour's tragic death, the credit card Discover launched a new ad campaign. On top of the serene soundtrack of a simple tune being plucked out on a guitar, the voiceover says: "*We are a nation of consumers. And there's nothing wrong with that. After all, there's a lot of cool stuff out there. The trouble is, there's so much cool stuff, it's easy to get a little carried away. If that happens, this material world of ours can stop being wonderful and start getting stressful. But what if a credit card company recognized that? What if they admitted there was a time to spend and a time to save? . . . We could have less debt and more fun. And this material world could get a whole lot brighter.*"²¹

A credit card company challenging consumerism—I'd be thrilled if it weren't so obvious a ploy to win more customers during a time when people were anxious about spending and debt. But what really intrigues me about this commercial is the image sequence at the end: a father and son in the middle of a vast green field, then a couple with a dog on a wide-open beach, then a couple flirting on a park bench, and finally, a gaggle of giggling girlfriends pressing into the back of a cab together. What this tells me is that Discover Card, on some level, is perfectly aware of the actual truth: that it's not Stuff (even "cool Stuff") that makes us happy. It's time with our families, partners, and friends and the experience of the beautiful natural world that makes us happy.

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