

Living Lighter

For generations, the American way of life centered on freedom and opportunity—the American Dream. The dream was rooted in the belief that, in a peaceful and democratic society, citizens were free to pursue their goals and honest effort would result in a satisfactory degree of material comfort. The idealistic notion that in America one might reasonably aspire to a better life for oneself and one’s family was a powerful symbol. It spoke not merely to personal aspirations but to our aim as a society as well.

Unfortunately, in the latter half of the 20th century, the traditional American Dream was overshadowed by a “more is better” focus that promoted not quality of life, but rather the unbridled production and consumption of stuff. While this simplified version

of the dream successfully boosted our economy’s material production and consumption, it has failed in more important ways. According to studies, all this material wealth didn’t make us any happier than we were before the boom. Worse yet, shifting the prize from well-being to acquisition actually endangers some of the very things we cherish, such as leisure time, time spent with family and friends, along with clean air and water.

More than 90 percent of Americans agree that we are too focused on working and making money and not focused enough on family and community. Fewer than 30 percent of Americans say that having a bigger house or apartment or nicer things would make them much more satisfied with their lives, while more than half say that spending more time with family and friends and having less stress in their lives would make them much more satisfied. More than half of Americans also say they would be willing to trade a day’s pay per week for an extra day off.¹



... Seán Sheehan
... Center for a New American Dream

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The “more is better” dream is unsustainable personally as it draws American families into a work-and-spend treadmill that depletes savings, clutters lives and decreases health due to increased stress and reduced exercise. It is unsustainable environmentally as it fuels a level of resource consumption with which the planet cannot keep up. The “more is better” dream, in fact, is denying our children their fair opportunity for comfort, security and a healthy environment.

Less Is More

Sustainable consumption is a new vision for our relationship with material resources that meets the needs of both present and future generations in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. It’s essential for a healthy global ecosystem and a just society offering all citizens the freedom, resources and personal security necessary to pursue their dreams, connect with the natural world and enjoy a high quality of life.

Percentage of Americans who say...

...we’re too focused on work and money and not enough on family & community:

90%

...having a bigger house or nicer things would make them more satisfied in life:

30%

...they would be willing to trade one day’s pay per week for an extra day off:

50%



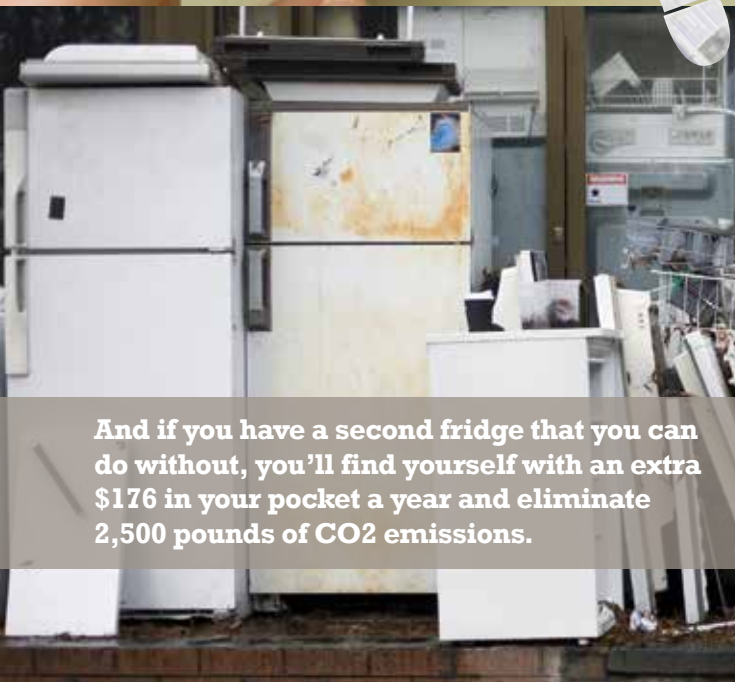
Students spend time out of the city at a retreat to learn about and connect with nature.

Some people jump into this new cultural vision with both feet. *Voluntary Simplicity* is an example of a social trend that emphasizes less is more. According to Duane Elgin, author of the book *Voluntary Simplicity*, the movement is defined as “living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich.”²

Others make a conscious effort to infuse sanity into the hyper-commercialized “hot spots” of American life: holidays, weddings and moving day. These folks are pioneering alternative gift fairs, giving homemade meals and babysitting coupons rather than adding another tie to the overstuffed closet. They’re refocusing the “big days” on the people and relationships that matter, rather than piling up debt and stuff for the sake of cultural expectation. They’re choosing to live in more convenient, though often smaller, homes



Turning the thermostat down 3°F in the winter and up 3°F in the summer can prevent nearly 1,100 pounds of CO2 emissions.



And if you have a second fridge that you can do without, you'll find yourself with an extra \$176 in your pocket a year and eliminate 2,500 pounds of CO2 emissions.



Visit your local farmer's market or co-op and look for place-of-origin labels in the grocery store to choose local at the market.

and apartments rather than “driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to a job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it,” as columnist Ellen Goodman once put it.³

What We All Can Do: Steps for Living Lighter With Big Outcomes

What can we do every day to support and nurture an American Dream that upholds the spirit of the traditional dream—but with a new emphasis on sustainability and a celebration of non-material values? Seemingly small steps do matter and, when taken collectively with others, can really add up, for example:

1. Trim your household energy use: About half the energy use in an average home goes to space heating and cooling. Turning the thermostat down 3°F in the winter and up 3°F in the summer can prevent nearly 1,100 pounds of CO2 emissions and save over \$100 per year.⁴ Replacing your inefficient refrigerator with an Energy Star model will save \$665 over the next five years, and if you have a second fridge that you can do without, you'll find yourself with an extra \$176 in your pocket a year and eliminate 2,500 pounds of CO2 emissions.⁵ Compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) are four times more efficient and last up to ten times longer than incandescent bulbs. And light-emitting diodes (LEDs) last up to ten times as long as CFLs, use only two to ten watts of electricity and are mercury-free.⁶

2. Eat local and sustainable: Buying local food not only helps local farmers thrive, it also reduces energy consumption. The average food travels from pasture to plate an estimated 1,200 to 2,500 miles.⁷ Even when they are not organic, small farms tend to be less aggressive than large factory farms about dousing their wares with chemicals. Visit your local farmer's market or co-op and look for place-of-origin labels in the grocery store to choose local at the market. Beyond supporting local farmers, look for organic products and humanely raised meat.

No Impact Man: Is Living a Zero-Waste Lifestyle Possible?

In today's society it's incredibly difficult to reduce the amount of trash we create. Look around and you will see trash everywhere (even before it's officially “trash”): paper towels, newspapers, throwaway coffee cups, disposable diapers, plastic water bottles, food packaging. In fact, 80 percent of the products sold in the US are designed to be used once and then thrown away.¹ Every American generates an average of four and half pounds of trash per day.

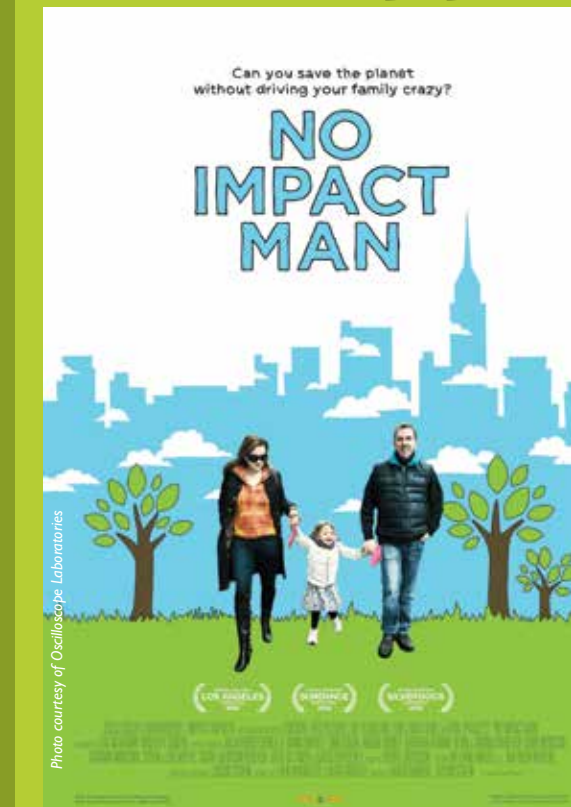
Reducing the amount of garbage we generate would require some extreme lifestyle shifts. One New York City resident wanted to see if it was possible. A self-described “liberal schlub,” Colin Beavan, aka “No Impact Man,” got tired of complaining about the world's problems without doing anything about them. Beavan and his family decided to attempt a zero-waste lifestyle for a year. His efforts to live without making any net impact on the environment were chronicled on his blog, in a book and film. No trash, no carbon emissions, no toxins in the water, no elevators, no subway, no products in packing, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV were just a few of Beavan's goals.²

In order to reduce his family's trash output, Beavan introduced a number of lifestyle changes such as eliminating canned soda, bottled water, throwaway razors, food in takeout containers, paper coffee cups, disposable diapers, repackaged processed food and instead bought milk in returnable glass bottles, returning egg cartons to the market, carried reusable cloths instead of tissues and napkins, shopped from the bulk bins, used baking soda for toothpaste and deodorant, gave second-hand clothes to charities, and composted food scraps.³

It sounds extreme but Beavan said the project wasn't about becoming an ascetic or anti-materialist; rather it was about being “eco-effective” and finding the middle path.⁴ “From the very get-go, the No Impact project was about a happier planet, happier people,” said Beavan. “Far from depriving ourselves, reducing waste in our lives would move us closer to rather than farther from the lives we actually wanted.”⁵

As a result, the Beavans not only prevented about 5,000 pounds of trash from going to the landfill, they also noticed they were happier, spent less money on “stuff” and were healthier from eating less processed, packaged and pre-prepared food.

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from the editor



Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run a TV for three hours, and each ton of copy paper recycled saves the equivalent of 26 trees.



The US is the top trash-producing country in the world at 1,609 pounds per person per year. This means that 5 percent of the world's people generate 40 percent of the world's waste.

3. If you can't reuse it, recycle it and then buy recycled: Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run a TV for three hours, and each ton of copy paper recycled saves the equivalent of 26 trees.⁸ On the other side of the recycling spectrum, choose products with recycled-content materials along with recycled and recyclable packaging. New products made from recycled materials are coming on the market every day, such as paper products, clothing, toothbrushes, razors, housewares and home improvement products.



Try taking public transportation, carpooling, or doing more things that don't require driving.

4. Downshift your driving: The average American drives over 250 miles per week, burning more than a dozen gallons of gas, each of which releases roughly 20 pounds of CO₂ into the atmosphere.⁹ Try taking public transportation, carpooling or doing more things that don't require driving. Taking public transportation instead of driving one day per week would reduce your CO₂ emissions by 1,040 pounds per year.¹⁰

5. Get off the toxic train: According to a US Environmental Protection Agency-funded project, the ingredients found in one out of every three commercial cleaning products are potentially harmful.¹¹ These chemicals can cause significant health problems and also find their way into lakes, streams and other water bodies (some of which may serve as drinking water sources). Look for healthier alternatives—often labeled as “non-toxic” and “biodegradable.”¹²



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6. Watch your water: The average residential water use in the US is 150 gallons per person per day. In response to the country's decade-long drought, urban areas of Australia were able to go as low as 34 gallons of water per person per day. Native and adaptive plants along with efficient irrigation systems can significantly cut outdoor water use. Look for the US EPA's new WaterSense label for toilets, faucets and shower



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heads which reduce water use as much as 35 percent.¹³ It's time to take back the tap and say no to bottled water. US consumers buy more than half a billion gallons of bottled water every week, enough bottles to circle the globe more than five times. More than 17 million barrels of oil are used annually to manufacture water bottles—that translates to enough fuel for about 100,000 cars.¹⁴

7. Junk your junk mail: Credit card mailers and catalogs might seem insignificant, yet each year more than 100 million trees are turned into the 5.8 million tons of mail that end up as 450,000 garbage trucks worth of waste. And don't forget about the water and climate implications of paper

manufacturing—the production and disposal of all this direct mail consumes more energy than 3 million cars!¹⁵ You can find forms online to opt out of junk mail and reduce your portion of this waste. Visit donotmail.org and catalogchoice.org for more.

Of course, these steps are just a few examples. Look around your community or online and you'll see dozens more. It's vital to keep one eye focused on tackling the hyper-commercialized hot spots and leveraging opportunities to evoke systemic change, but let's not let anyone tell us that small steps won't make a difference. It's not an either-or situation; it's all hands on deck. And as Lao-Tsu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

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Seán Sheehan was an original staff member of the Center for a New American Dream (www.newdream.org), serving in a variety of management and communication capacities for more than a dozen years. He oversaw all of its online advocacy programs and campaigns, building a community of more than 100,000 individuals committed to shifting our cultural focus from “more is better” to one that inspires and empowers “more of what matters.” Sheehan currently works as the e-Vermont Community Director for the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

