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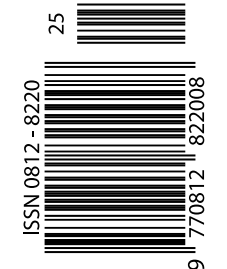
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According to the Australia Institute, a public thinktank, the vast majority believe Australia has become self-centred and materialistic. The Institute also points out that every year, Australians spend \$10.5 billion on things they either don't use or throw away. Materially, we may have more but happiness and harmony have been ebbing away. The tide is turning, though.

Changing focus

Pay packets in Australia have doubled over the past decade, according to treasury figures. Even the least well-off have experienced wages growth of 22 per cent. Despite this, more than one-third of the population are popping anti-depressant medications and a script for antidepressant medication is filled every two seconds (see 'Depression and Anxiety Special Report', *WellBeing* issue 106, October 2006). So what is behind the shift from a money-centric world view to one that places an emphasis on meaning and happiness? One theory lays the answer at the feet of the much-slandered Baby Boomer generation.

As the Baby Boomers realise there's more of their life behind them

Pay packets in Australia have doubled over the past decade. Despite this, **more than one-third of the population are popping anti-depressant medications.**

than ahead, they're on the lookout for more from the years to come. Daniel Pink in his book *A Whole New Mind* writes that it's a biological and psychological part of the ageing process. Pink says, as people mature their cognitive patterns become less concrete (left brain) and more abstract (right brain), which results in a sharpened sense of reality, increased capacity for emotion and enhancement of their sense of connection to a greater whole. In other words, as individuals age they place greater emphasis on qualities they might have neglected in the rush to build careers and raise families. Qualities like purpose, intrinsic satisfaction and meaning become a priority.

It would be a simplification of the current trend to say it's all about an ageing population, though. The surveys tell us that all people, young and old, are searching for more than economic prosperity. Maybe the whole world is getting a little more right-brain in its orientation. Maybe the collective consciousness is shifting, evolving. Whatever the reason, the question is, how do you achieve the meaning you seek?

Creating a meaningful life

Authentic relationships. Sustainable business. Purposeful travel. According to world experts, it's all about slowing down and creating more time in our lives. "Meaning is the new money of this century," confirms Mark Wuttke, who heads the Wuttke Group, a business development team with a focus on organic luxury and eco-chic. He says we are effectively "giving up" to "go up", by exchanging quantity for quality and success for significance.

"There is a definite turn away from material desires like luxury goods towards more emotional experiences," reports Pam Danziger, president of Unity Marketing and author of *Let Them Eat Cake: Marketing Luxury to the Masses*. "Affluent people want to spend their dollars on enriching experiences that will make a difference."

"Gross materialism and invasive, crass 'status' displays can be perceived as a wonderful thing, but at some point we wake up," adds Wuttke. "But we know we cannot continue the same level of consumption as it's not sustainable, nor does it buy us anything that really lasts or add any real incremental contribution to our lives."

According to Dr Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, the authors

MEANING IS THE NEW MONEY

BY JUDY CHAPMAN

FROM RELATIONSHIPS TO OUR
WORKPLACES AND THE WAY WE
TRAVEL, TODAY'S RESEARCH
REVEALS MONEY DOESN'T
HOLD AS MUCH CURRENCY AS
LEADING A MEANINGFUL LIFE.

AUSTRALIANS are looking for more fun, family and friendship and less money and "things". It's part of a worldwide trend toward a search for more meaningful lives. Where money was once the currency of a successful life, wealth is increasingly being measured in connection, sustainability and happiness.

Despite more than a decade of economic prosperity, Australians are searching for more. Consider the results of a survey undertaken

by Ipsos Mackay on behalf of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Although wages are rising and unemployment is low, 40 per cent of Australians say life is getting worse while only 25 per cent say life is getting better. The survey shows that people are searching for happiness, not a new Porsche or plasma TV.

In the *Herald* survey, health was the most important factor contributing to happiness for 18 per cent of Australians, followed by community and friends (8 per cent), and religious/spiritual life (5 per

cent). Only 4 per cent considered money and their financial situation the most important factor in their happiness, while work fulfilment and a "nice place to live" were each cited by 2 per cent of Australians as the key to wellbeing. Women give a much higher priority to family relationships (67 per cent compared with 51 per cent of men) as the main source of happiness, and men are more likely to cite community and friends (11 per cent compared with 6 per cent of women). (SMH Sept 16, 2006.)

of *Affluenza — When Too Much is Never Enough* (Allen & Unwin, 2005), throughout history sages have counselled that happiness is not a goal but rather a consequence of how we live, and that it comes from being content with what we have. However, we have been sold a different message: that we will be happy only if we have more money and more of the things money buys. The good news is, human experience and scientific research do not always support this belief.

The authors conducted an extensive research on *Affluenza* and found a self-deception or “deferred happiness syndrome”, whereby people persist with the belief that the sacrifice they undertake (work, stress etc) will pay off in the long run. Hamilton believes that as many as 30 per cent of the population are making this trade-off and that they’re doing it through fear. This fear operates when, for example, consequences of changing jobs are unknown. It’s settling for the devil you know, however, that can stop you discovering heaven on earth.

There’s no doubt we are living in a fast-paced time. According to Hamilton, even the image of the laid-back Aussie has become a myth. Australians reportedly work the longest hours in the developed world. Another irony, they report, is that, while Australians have

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never been healthier, we are more anxious and worried about our health than ever.

Yet there’s also a rising trend in “downshifters”: people who make a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption to pursue other life goals. “They are motivated by a desire for more balance in their lives, more personal fulfilment and more time with their families,” explains Hamilton.

The authors conducted a nationwide survey of downshifters and found that nearly 90 per cent were happy with the change in their lifestyle. Hamilton says they reported improved health, spending more time with family and friends and inner contentment. Added to this was stress relief, personal freedom and recovering the joy of living. In fact, they found that downshifters often said the change opened up their lives to opportunities that would previously have been closed off to them.

The eco-preneur

For Horst M Rechelbacher, who founded the international beauty brand, Aveda, and more recently, Intelligent Nutrients, the future belongs to the eco-consumer, or what he calls the eco-preneur, a practitioner of enlightened capitalism.

In his newly released book, *Alivehood*, Rechelbacher urges everyone, before it’s too late, to become aware that all the elements of our planet are in business together for the purpose of sustainability. He says that for humanity to bring about a nurturing, environmentally aware and sustainable future, each individual needs to wake up.

“Businesses can provide us with an opportunity to do more than enrich ourselves. They can provide us with an opportunity to serve. We can enrich others with products and services that are healthy and non-toxic, that make them feel good and improve the quality of their life.” Rechelbacher adds that anyone engaged in business has a great and diverse responsibility not just to shareholders but to all living beings and to future generations.

“We need lifestyles where there is zero emission and no waste, where everything is used and reused without producing toxins. I believe one of the best ways to start a new, sustainable business is to first change

our lifestyle; then let our new lifestyle become our business.”

The good news is that sustainable companies can have a competitive advantage. According to Rechelbacher, businesses report reduced costs, enhanced profits, increased employee loyalty and morale, a reduction in staff turnover, new product innovation and an increase in market share when they conduct business in a way that improves the health of planet and people. “All the good we do in life lives long after we have gone,” adds Rechelbacher.

Meaningful travel

The philosophy of a meaningful life has also infiltrated the way we travel. A good example of this is the emerging trend towards voluntourism, whereby people add community responsibilities to their travel itinerary. The predictions are that this non-profit sector will play a major role in the 21st century. Imagine rebuilding temples in Nepal, teaching English to children at orphanages in Laos and rebuilding schools in Thailand as some of your options. This is the face of future travel and it’s beautiful.

Kelly May from The North Andaman Tsunami Relief (www.northandamantsunamirelief.com) says she has experienced first-hand how people are no longer content with just visiting a country; they want to give something back. “Right now, we have 11 University of Birmingham students with us for six weeks who have been involved in everything from mangrove reforestation to waste management, beach conservation and helping guides improve their tourism skills.” It’s true, too, that through helping others we can help ourselves in very real ways.

Eco-tourism is another trend growing at a rate of 5 per cent per year. Also described as responsible tourism, it’s defined by the International Eco-tourism Society (TIES) as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the wellbeing of local people”. Through eco-travel, you learn how to minimise your impact on the planet through programs that promote recycling, reuse of water and helping to create economic opportunities for local communities.

Coinciding with these emerging trends is the launch of Lonely Planet’s *Code Green* book that tracks 100 of the world’s best responsible travel experiences. It looks at everything from budget backpacking to serious luxury, all linked by three defining principles: tread lightly on the environment, immerse yourself in the culture and have a positive economic benefit for the local community.

“Most important are places where sustainability and tourism are inseparable,” reports Lonely Planet co-founder, Tony Wheeler. “In many cases — from African wildlife to whales — it’s tourism that is the ultimate guarantor of a species’ survival.”

Creating time for meaning

Mark Wuttke describes the emerging mindset of our times as “slow soul consumerism”. He says, “Consciously exchanging quantity for quality, success for significance and things for experience is how many of us are choosing to create more time, balance, purpose and meaning in our lives.”

There is a rising trend of “downshifters”: people who make a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption to pursue other life goals.

Clive Hamilton believes it’s spending more time with family, friends and community that ultimately makes us happier and workplaces of the future will be reshaped to allow us to reclaim our time. The realisation that a slower life can be a better, happier life is spreading.

The Slow Food movement was a reaction to the opening of a McDonald’s restaurant on the Spanish Steps in Rome in the late 1980s. Slow Food is about taking pleasure in preparing and eating food and drink, and being mindful of the quality of the ingredients used; it’s an antidote to the ubiquity of fast food.

Within a decade, Slow Food gave birth to Slow Cities, which has a charter requiring member cities to preserve their local identities by careful environmental and infrastructure planning, encouraging the use of local produce and supporting production based on cultural traditions in the local area.

Slow is changing its connotation from negative to positive as people realise it’s from the luxury of time that meaning emerges.

Your Wellbeing Manifesto

On a political level, the Australia Institute has drafted a Wellbeing Manifesto. The manifesto declares: “There is widespread community concern that the values of the market — individualism, selfishness, materialism, competition — are driving out the more desirable values of trust, self-restraint, mutual respect and generosity ... Many people feel alienated from the political process; the main parties seem too alike and think of progress only in material terms.”

The manifesto calls on governments as well as individuals to take action to boost wellbeing. Detailed in the manifesto are nine steps governments can take to establish a “wellbeing society”. These steps include ensuring fulfilling work is available, making the environment a national priority and building communities.

On a personal level, you can begin to develop your own “wellbeing manifesto”. Here are some ideas to help you get started. Take time for the following things:

- Love — foster your relationships with family and friends.
- Eating well.
- Enjoying quiet time — meditation, reading, contemplation.
- Play.
- Engaging in fulfilling work.
- Making “enough” money.
- Getting involved with your local community.
- Resting — sleep.

Spending more time with family, friends and community ultimately makes us happier. The realisation that a slower life can be a better, happier life is spreading.

As the 21st century unfolds, the question facing Australia and countries around the world is not how they can become more economically prosperous. Rather it is about how we can build vibrant societies in which meaning and connection are not casualties, but cornerstones. Make yourself part of that process. ☺

Resources

Alivelihood: www.alivelihood.com

The Australia Institute: www.tai.org.au

The Wellbeing Manifesto: www.wellbeingmanifesto.net

Judy Chapman is the author of three books on spas and wellbeing and the former Editor-in-Chief of *Spa Asia* magazine.

ACNM Naturopathy Student

Australian College of Natural Medicine

Brisbane 302 Water Street Fortitude Valley Qld Australia 4006 Phone: 61 7 3257 1883 www.acnm.edu.au info@acnm.edu.au	Melbourne 368 Elizabeth Street Melbourne Vic Australia 3000 Phone: 61 3 9662 9911 info@acnm.edu.au	Perth 170 Wellington Street East Perth WA Australia 6004 Phone: 61 8 9225 2900 info@acnm.edu.au	Box Hill 2A Cambridge Street Box Hill Vic Australia 3128 Phone: 61 3 9890 5599 info@acnm.edu.au	Gold Coast 1 Nerang Street Southport Qld Australia 4215 Phone: 61 7 5503 0977 info@acnm.edu.au	College of Natural Beauty 302 Water Street Fortitude Valley Qld Australia 4006 Phone: 61 7 3257 1883 beauty@acnm.edu.au
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