

COMMENTARY

When is Enough Enough?

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

When is enough enough, or am I just out of touch? I *am* aware that this is a time of unprecedented prosperity and economically the government and business are letting the good times roll. Who would want to be critical of people's new found wealth, a bustling economy, full employment and an affluence that seems to feed off of and flow back into the economy?

As I hear about how well people are doing, I'm glad for them. But, then I read about some side effects of these heady economic times and I just shake my head in dismay. For example, a recent headline read, *Gargantuan saltwater fish tanks delight—at a price*. And what a price, --\$23,000 was the price of one, \$80,000 the price of another! That doesn't count the fish that cost up to \$700 each to stock those tanks.

Then, another headline predicted that *Even three-car garage may not be big enough*. That article said, "the generation that believes life is too short to suffer inconvenience has now decided that two- or even three-car garages are not enough."

"Wallowing in space is an affordable extravagance," one homeowner told *Newsweek* magazine a few months ago. "There is also evidence that "garage-mahals" may be making a comeback—all thanks, of course to...the economy," the *Washington Post* said in a recent article. Additional storage space is becoming "an outright necessity for overspent consumers," the article explained.

Doesn't it all seem outrageous, especially in a world where \$2,000 can cover the yearly salary for a doctor at a health clinic in a squatter settlement in Ecuador or just \$50,000 can build a shelter to house homeless girls otherwise headed for prostitution on the streets of Morelia, Mexico? When more than one billion people live on less than one dollar per day and more than 3 billion on less than two dollars per day? When approximately four million American children under age 12 go hungry and about 9.6 million more are at risk of hunger according to estimates and more than 500 million people worldwide are malnourished?

Now, it is easy to lay a guilt trip on a prosperous society and to shame those who have money into giving to the needy. After all, there is no end to the list of good organizations doing work to help the poor.

But, what is bothersome about all of this is the way we live when so many are in need. Do we really need an \$80,000 fish tank—or a \$23,000 one for that matter? Do we have to build a three or four car garage so we can just store all of the stuff we aren't using? What other extravagances do we indulge in just because it's hard to spend all of that money?

What does it say about our society when we parade our excessive consumerism in the same newspaper that reports on starving children in Korea or the murders of street kids in

Brazil? Can we be content to buy another television or automobile when mental health and social service organizations are leaving the disturbed and needy on the streets to shoot at children in schools and churches and scrounge in trash cans for food? Can we really complain about small things such as a long wait at a bank or a sold-out item in the grocery when some women walk for eight hours a day to carry water for their family's survival?

Perhaps we have come to the point where we must examine our own actions and motivations. With so much luxury time and wealth, how can we use our resources to provide a helping hand? What about the possibility of matching what we spend to pamper ourselves with a contribution of time and money to one of those charitable organizations? Certainly we can exhibit more compassion and a little more responsibility in the use of what we have.

SIDEBAR:

The British relief and development agency Tear Fund recommends the following for those who wish to get a handle on their spending and do something significant with their surplus:

1. Draw up an extensive list of the luxuries you expect to enjoy in a normal month, including video rental, movies, sports, meals out, CD's, etc.
2. For one week, keep an accurate account of all your actual expenditures on luxuries.
3. At the end of the week, add up the total you spent on all luxuries and send an equal amount to an organization that is targeting the needs of the poor. You can decide how long you want to do this, for a week, a month, a lifetime!

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