

Another Modest Proposal

By Dan Phillips

In pondering how we might pull our socks up as a sustainable culture, I often think that what must indeed happen is total depletion of our resources. At that point, as during the depression, we might start valuing every little scrap and exploiting every last crumb to its fullest potential.

What seems like centuries ago, my good friend Jonathan Swift addressed a similar issue and the concept is a good one.

Our strategies have simply been backwards. Instead of trying to conserve, all we need to do is garner the potential of corporate giants for gathering in money—through mind-numbing excess. By absolutely denuding every bit of our conventional resources, and making corporate giants obscenely wealthy, eventually we would run out of resources. At that point, since the large corporations are accustomed to making unseemly profits, they would scramble around to fill the void, develop new sustainable resources, and we'd be back on track—licking a wound here and there, but living in a mode that the planet could sustain. The procedures would be simple and pleasurable.

Instead of relentlessly searching for a vehicle that gets 50 miles per gallon, rather we would opt for the behemoths that get 7 miles per gallon. There would be no need to have such things as catalytic converters, for, after all, we want the atmosphere to choke us for this transition period. A little bonus here is that we would not need to spend money on tuning up our vehicles, because we would want them to die sooner rather than later, and also provide more volatile organic compounds for cratering our ozone layer.

In tandem with this, since trees help prevent greenhouse gasses, we would want to cut down all trees that simply are in our way, or maybe just for the sake of cutting them down. With landscaping generally, we would want to seek out non-native species—imported at considerable cost and resource—that need more water and fertilizer, thus requiring more gasoline-powered equipment to maintain them. This would help with degradation of the atmosphere.

Our houses could be pretty much the same, except we would want to increase a few habits. Leave lights on and only have water heaters that ran 24 hours per day. Skip insulation altogether, and get all the latest gadgets for cushy living—trash compactors, garbage disposers, dishwashers, and top-loading washing machines. We would want to go back to toilets that use 3 gallons of water per flush, perhaps using distilled water instead of the drinking water we now use for flushing and of course replace any low-flow faucets with maximum flow devices. That would allow us the 30-minute shower that blasts hot water on us—the kind of showers we deserve. Bubble baths to the rim of the tub would always be appropriate.

Using up resources would of course extend to the building industry. Every jobsite would have two Dumpsters, so that if a board had the slightest blemish, we could simply get rid of it immediately. Another bonus is that we would spend less money on insulation, and we could use the cheaper windows, rather than the more expensive energy-efficient types. We would insist on a SEER rating 6 to 10 for our air conditioners and furnaces, because, after all, we could be as piggy at the thermostat as we chose—78 in the winter and 62 in the summer. In fact, we wouldn't need to spend money on ceiling fans, because we would routinely keep the thermostat at below- or above-normal levels.

We wouldn't have to worry about formaldehyde or other organic compounds invading our lives, because we would be embracing them, comfortable in the belief that eventually their abatement would come and our lives would be healthier. We could revel in the quality of life that such chemicals currently provide. We might even develop a tolerance for the chemicals we live with daily.

We would never stand for something "used." We would always get new. We would never have to fix anything. If something didn't work, we would simply throw it away—knowing in our hearts that life would eventually be better after a short transition period of sacrifice.

The concept could be Augustan living at its finest for about five years or so, and then a brief period whereby nothing was available. After that, life would settle back down to the standard of living we are accustomed to, since the corporations (maybe with the help of the federal government) would see to it that the highly profitable business of providing energy and materials resources would continue. They'd figure it out somehow. We would simply have to trust the model.

We might even create a federal commission on Resource Excess, and appoint an energy czar to head it up, and pay him obscene salaries and bonuses. Because over the years we would have overpaid for the energy we used, they would have plenty of capital to research new resources that were planet friendly. The commission would initially search out all remaining deposits of fossil fuel—especially in wilderness areas—insuring that these were tapped and depleted.

Years ago, Jonathan Swift said, "I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich." Such insight can serve us very well right now. Today.

For those who might be unfamiliar with Mr. Swift's original article, you can read it at www.online-literature.com/swift/947.

