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THE TRUE COST OF GADGETS

Technology and the culture of consumerism

IMAGINE IF YOU DECIDED to throw away your cell phone, close down your Facebook account, disconnect your high-speed internet modem, unplug your satellite television receiver, put away your BlackBerry, shut down your iPod, turn off your DVD player, and abandon your HDTV. Friends might think you've lost it. Family members might suggest counseling. "What's wrong?" they would want to know.

And you could tell them you're leading a completely modern life, circa 1995.

That's right: all of these things that are so ubiquitous today either had yet to be invented or were relatively rare just over a dozen years ago. Today, they're must-haves. And while it's true that you could play this same thought game for virtually any time period in the past few hundred years, never have there been so many high-tech products available on the market, never have they been so ingrained in our lives, and never

have they changed so quickly. Indeed, at this rate, by 2020 my dozen-year thought exercise could shrink to just five. After all, that DVD player I mentioned—a product that didn't even hit the market until 1997—is already obsolete and is being replaced by a new high-definition model.

Of course, the problem here is twofold. First, while some of these new technologies can reduce our environmental footprint by consuming less energy, for example, or by using less harmful chemicals in their manufacture, the sheer volume of their production soon overwhelms any environmental benefit. From the constant need to upgrade to the latest model to the marketing collateral and the outrageous amount of packaging that comes with even the smallest gizmo, the environmental costs of all this electronic stuff are enormous.

Second, and even more important, the constant focus on technological distractions can distance us from our families, our communities, and the world around us. That might sound like the battle cry of an old Luddite hippie, but as we examine in this next series of essays, plenty of evidence shows how too much time spent wrapped up in a virtual world and too little in the real world is bad for us and for our planet. Technology can be an enormously valuable asset, but when it ceases to be a tool for a specific purpose and becomes an end in itself, that's when you know we've lost perspective. And perspective in the digital age is more important than ever.

Without perspective, being constantly *online* and *plugged in* (a phrase meant to evoke the modern computer era, but already outdated) becomes the normal state of being. But being connected electronically is not the same as being connected physically. In fact, paradoxically, being electronically connected all the time has actually made us less social and less community-oriented. Increasingly, we focus on the visual stimuli that captivate us as consumers rather than the gamut of

emotions that make us human. We start to see technology as the mother of human inventiveness, not its progeny. We assume that technology will solve all our problems, including the environmental ones—as though there is an Earth version 2.0, just waiting in the wings to be unveiled with great fanfare by Steve Jobs; a slimmer version, perhaps, with more attractive inhabitants and brighter colors.

Yet none of this will solve our problems or make us happy. Ultimately we're not electronic beings; we're biological ones. We have millions of years of evolution programmed into our cells, programming that's infinitely more complex than anything we've created with our shiny new and exciting technologies. Patterns of nature are hardwired into who we are as a species and as individuals. To try to tear ourselves from this biological fabric is not only futile, it's self-destructive. Rather than fighting our biological nature, we need to embrace the fact that most of who and what we are goes back not just a dozen years, but to the beginning of human history and, in some ways, to the beginning of life itself.

BOWING BEFORE THE GOD OF TECHNOLOGY

"According to a new study, air pollution in our city is at its lowest level in thirty years, and we have technology to thank." I heard the words come out of the newscaster's mouth, but I still couldn't believe them. Not the part about air pollution—the part about thanking technology.

In many cities, air pollution certainly has been reduced from levels seen in the early 1970s. Our air is indeed cleaner than it was back then. Of course, with more and more cars on our roads and more and more energy being used, it's starting to get worse again. Still, our cleaner air is a wonderful health

and environmental success story—one we don't reflect on often enough or learn from as much as we could.

But we can thank technology? Says who?

Well, it turns out the "study" was a simple analysis done by an industry-funded think tank. The technology angle was theirs and the TV news folks just followed along. On the surface, it's actually true. New technologies and widespread application of existing technologies did help bring air pollution levels down. But no one appears to have asked the simple question, "What spurred the invention and application of these new technologies?" If they had, they would have found the real hero of the story—environmental regulations.

Technology does not arise out of a vacuum. It does not invent itself (at least not yet). It did not wake up one day and decide to clean up our air. Technology is a result of society's values. In the case of air pollution, citizens got angry because their air was dirty and demanded their political leaders do something about it. The result was new environmental regulations that forced industries to clean up their acts.

Of course, many industry leaders did not want to be regulated. Regulation would force them to be innovative, hire new engineers and scientists, fix existing systems, or build new ones. It would cost them money up front. And even if that investment paid off down the road as a result of better efficiency, the initial outlay would cut into their quarterly profits.

So many industries have fought environmental regulations tooth and nail. From car companies to electricity generators and appliance manufacturers, they fought change. They said such regulations would put them out of business. They said conforming to them would destroy the economy. Sometimes they said it couldn't be done—that it was impossible.

But after all the fuss, once the targets and timelines had been set and there was no choice, industries went to work.

They tried new things. They invented new products and processes, and they got the job done. That's where the technology came from. It didn't just appear one day in a burning bush. It was a result of the hard work of a variety of groups of people.

If we recognize that many problems are also opportunities, we can take advantage of them and regulation can help. Our cleaner air is just one example. It's saved countless lives and billions of dollars and improved the lives of millions of people. Phasing out ozone-depleting substances like CFCs is another success. So are seat belts and air bags. None of these advances would have occurred if it weren't for the government regulation that spurred innovation and the people who made it happen.

So, we can thank the engineers and scientists who did the technical work. We can thank the leaders who had the political courage to stand up to nay-saying industrial groups and enact strong regulations. We can thank the health and environmental organizations and the concerned citizens who demanded government take action.

But thanking technology? Sorry, wrong hero.

A SENSE OF WONDER

Humans, I believe, are naturally drawn to lives and worlds outside of our own. We revel in the existence of creatures and even whole societies beyond what we ourselves experience in our everyday lives. But have we gone so far in creating worlds of fantasy that we are missing the joy of other worlds that already exist all around us?

One doesn't have to look far to see examples of the attraction to other worlds in science. From the explorers who first mapped the Earth to researchers trying to understand the

inner workings of the human genome and those seeking to find out whether life of some kind exists on Mars, scientists certainly share this sense of wonder. But they hardly hold a patent on it.

Indeed, the trait seems universal. Look at the popularity of fantasy literature or movies like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. Or the escapism of certain video games where other worlds are created for us to explore. This innate sense of curiosity and wonder draws us to each other, to the world around us, and to the world of make-believe.

When I was a child, my escape to another world was a swamp near our house in London, Ontario. It was a wondrous world filled with amazing, bizarre, and beautiful plants, insects, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Every day in that marsh I could always count on finding something new, some exciting new creature or world to discover. Today, that swamp is entombed by a huge parking lot and shopping mall. The vast diversity of life has been replaced by an enormous array of consumer products. What does that mean for youths who spend their time there now?

Eminent Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has suggested that human beings possess a trait he calls "biophilia"—that is, an innate desire to bond with and understand other life forms. That was certainly true from my own experiences. But I didn't grow up in a world of computers, video games, and the internet. I bonded with my family, friends, and the creatures I found in my swamp. Today's youth, especially in big cities, often lead more isolated, insular lives and can be so far removed from the natural world that they can't even identify the common plants and animals that live around them.

Researchers at the University of Cambridge found that out when they surveyed British schoolchildren. They asked 109 children (boys and girls) to identify creatures depicted

on a series of twenty flashcards. Ten cards depicted common British plants and wildlife—things like rabbits, badgers, and oak trees. The other ten cards showed characters from the popular children's trading cards series, television show, and video game Pokémon.

The researchers discovered that at the age of four, children could identify about 30 percent of the wildlife and a handful of Pokémon. But by age eight, children were identifying nearly 80 percent of the Pokémon and barely half of the common wildlife species. They were not even asked to be terribly specific with the wildlife—in many cases answers like “beetle” would have sufficed. Compare that to my father-in-law, who was born in England in 1908 and, as a schoolboy, won a book for identifying some 150 different plant species.

I think this example shows how powerful the need to understand other people, worlds, and life forms really is. When we are deprived of meaningful interaction with the world around us, and sometimes even with our families and friends, we seek to understand and interact with things that exist only in our imaginations or on a computer screen.

Not that the world of make-believe is necessarily bad. The ability to immerse people in a different world through words, images, and sounds is what gives good stories, books, and films their power. And this power is a wonderful thing. The sharing of common stories and experiences can even help us bond with each other as human beings.

But when the world of fantasy, of television, video games, and computers becomes the only outlet for our sense of wonder, then I think we are really missing something. We are missing a connection with the living world with which we share common histories, life cycles, and even segments of our genetic code. Fascinating other worlds exist all around us. But

even more interesting is that if we look closely enough, we can see that these worlds are really part of our own.

FEEDING OUR SENSES IS IMPORTANT TO HEALTH

We live in a visually oriented world where the vast majority of our attentions are focused on what we can see. Whether we're watching television, working on a computer, or driving a car, sight has become the most dominant sense in modern life. But have we lost touch with our other senses?

Dr. Charles Spence of Oxford University thinks so. He's an experimental psychologist who wrote a report arguing that the use of all our senses is central to our psychological health. According to Dr. Spence, sensory deprivation is common in modern life, and it is harmful to our well-being.

Indeed, most of us have become so accustomed to the dominance of visual stimuli that we don't really think about it anymore. We take it for granted that most of the information we use to understand our world comes through our eyes. It's normal to us. But our other senses may be languishing.

Consider smell. Smell is one of our most powerful senses. It's directly connected to the part of our brain that processes memories and emotions. Yet most of us live and work in largely sterile, odor-neutral buildings. Most of the odors we do smell indoors are overly perfumed commercial items like soaps and air fresheners. Outdoors, walking on our city streets, we shut out the noise and stink of automobiles so we can focus on where we're going.

And what about our sense of touch? According to Dr. Spence, children may be growing up “touch-hungry” because people do not touch each other often enough and are not

getting enough tactile sensations. He argues that we should be putting more tactile objects into our schools and workplaces to help stimulate this sense.

Dr. Spence may be tapping into a problem that is deeper than our five senses. Modern life in the industrialized world is often far removed from natural rhythms that, for most of human history, have played a major role in our existence. For example, now that we spend 90 percent of our lives indoors, we are no longer as attuned to the change of seasons. We keep our climate-controlled homes at warm spring temperatures. “Summer” fruits and vegetables are available all year round, as is “farmed” salmon. Modern offices often offer little natural lighting to even indicate the time of day!

The relevance of day and night to modern society has changed. Grocery stores, fast-food outlets, and even gyms are open twenty-four hours. And have you ever been to one of those fancy video arcades with interactive games? I went to one with my grandson. I confess: I had a good time. They’re fantastically loud, hyperkinetic places that overwhelm the senses—especially our vision. And nowhere—nowhere—will you find a clock.

It’s intentional. It’s also no accident that there are no windows in these modern-day cathedrals of technology. Nor is it coincidental that the sounds and lights are so hypnotic and mesmerizing. The owners want you to lose track of time. They want you to spend hours plugging the machines with tokens. They want you to be completely disconnected from reality. This is true for casinos as well. No clocks, no windows. Just the ringing of slot machines and the clatter (through a digital sound effect) of cold, hard cash.

Ironically, some of the most popular video games are those that emulate real-life experiences. You can ride a mountain bike, skateboard, or snowboard, or drive a car, ski—even

fish! But again, 90 percent of these experiences are visual only. You don’t smell the salt air of the ocean or feel the swell of the waves under your boat or the slipperiness of a freshly caught fish.

It is disconcerting that even in our spare time we flock to malls and arcades for virtual experiences rather than the real thing. There’s nothing wrong with a little visual stimulation, but there’s more to life. We mustn’t forget to feed our other senses. Right now, they’re starving, and that may not be good for our mental or physical health.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF STUFF

Modern life is a communications paradox. We are in touch with each other as never before—cell phones, internet, text messaging, email. In fact, we now have to make an effort *not* to be in touch with other people.

Yet, at the same time, it can be harder than ever to reach large groups of people. Television audiences are fractured. Newspaper readership is down. Magazines drift in and out with the change of seasons. Town hall meetings go unattended.

So what binds us together? What’s the cultural glue that we all share—those common touchpoints we all understand? Unfortunately, it seems the answer today is—stuff. The power of globalization means that most of us are buying the same products, wearing the same clothes, eating the same food, and shopping at the same stores as our neighbors. Brand logos are now among the first things children recognize.

Because I am a well-known Canadian, I frequently get approached to promote this same stuff, endorse products, put my name on things, and generally sell out in every conceivable

fashion. Do kids still use that term—"sell out"? I don't know if they do. It's hard to imagine they would now that every movie star, pop icon, and über athlete seems to shill at least one product. Sometimes dozens.

Generally, I ignore such requests. But is that always wise? The fact of the matter is that today, stuff-selling mega-corporations have a huge influence on our daily lives. And because of the competitive nature of our global economy, these corporations are generally only concerned with one thing—the bottom line. That is, maximizing profit, regardless of the social or environmental costs.

Which brings us back to our paradox. If we want to move towards a low-polluting, sustainable society, we need to get consumers to think about their purchases. But how the heck can you reach them when methods of communicating are so fractured? Well, what if we could harness the power of stuff and turn it against itself? A few years ago, I was asked by a coffee company to put a quote on their disposable cups to "spur coffeehouse-type discussion." It could say whatever I wanted—perhaps even question the product itself. The list of other well-known individuals whose quotes would grace the sides of cups was long and distinguished. I would have been in good company.

Now, make no mistake about it. The only reason the company was doing this, really, was for brand promotion. Having the words of well-known people on the cups would make the company look good. Customers would, consciously or unconsciously, associate the person with the brand. If the person were generally held in high esteem, the brand would benefit.

But here was also an opportunity to get to people right at their cultural touch point—stuff. Here was a chance to ask them to think about the choices they make every day and how those choices affect our future. And it was an opportunity to

do it right when they were making the decision. Right when their choice really mattered. Here was a chance to use the power of a giant corporate machine to get people thinking.

And I balked. I couldn't do it. Time and time again, people I asked about the proposition said, "Are you nuts? That will look like an endorsement, no matter what you say." Sadly, I think they are right. Most people simply wouldn't be able to get beyond the medium to the message. They would assume I was tacitly endorsing the product—or worse, getting paid for it.

Maybe people aren't quite ready to accept the idea of questioning a product on the product itself. Perhaps it's a bit too postmodern even in this day and age. But with today's fractured communications world, unless we look at new ways to reach people and get them to question their choices, most will choose what is cheapest or most convenient—choices that have essentially already been made for them by corporations with their eye on the bottom line.

For the sake of our future, this is one paradox we had better solve.

BRANDING KIDS STARTS EARLIER THAN EVER

Would you let your kids play in a swamp? Odds are that most parents would balk at such a notion today. After all, a swamp seems so dirty and teeming with who-knows-what. But if not a swamp, what about a forest or a creek—or even a backyard? What worlds are children exploring today, and what are they learning from them?

As I have mentioned, my childhood playground was a swamp near my home in southern Ontario. I spent countless hours there, catching tadpoles and wading through cattails, delighting at each new discovery. As a result, I could easily

name dozens of species of birds, fish, and insects. This was my world, and it shaped who I am today.

But while my world was full of nature's delights, today's children face a world dominated by consumer delights. Instead of a real swamp, their world is often "virtual," consisting more of television, video games, and the internet. Each of these technologies wields tremendous power, and children can learn a great deal with them. What they learn, however, is not necessarily what we intend.

Advertising certainly existed when I was growing up, but it was nothing close to the saturation levels faced by children today. In my swamp, there were no billboards. Frogs did not croak "Coke." Birds did not pull banner ads. The swamp was not sponsored by an oil company. And I was blissfully free of the consumer messages that bombard children in the twenty-first century.

So while I learned the names of other living creatures, kids today are far more likely to learn the names of various products and popular brands. And according to new research, this constant assault of brand imagery is reaching our children at earlier and earlier ages.

A study published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* has found that children as young as two are now able to recognize common brand names. Researchers tested some two hundred Dutch children, presenting them with common logos, such as McDonald's, Nike, Mercedes, and Cheetos. Most two- to three-year-olds recognized eight out of twelve logos, and the majority of eight-year-olds recognized 100 percent of them—including Camel cigarettes and Heineken beer.

Researchers found that one of the strongest correlations with higher brand recognition scores was a child's exposure to television. Generally, the more television a child watched, the more readily he or she was able to recognize brands. This

makes sense, given television's power as a visual medium.

But the researchers also point out that their results should be a warning about the potential for advertising to influence the most impressionable minds. Advertising to infants and toddlers is a rapidly growing trend. Just ten years ago, most marketers targeted children only over age six. Today, with the success of toddler-based television shows like *Teletubbies*, researchers say infants and toddlers have been identified as a "vital and undeniable target group."

In fact, the authors argue that marketers have already done their own research about the cognitive and behavioral effects of advertising on young children. In most cases, however, the results have not been made available to academics or policy-makers. In other words, marketers aren't just incidentally targeting some of the most vulnerable members of society—they are actively targeting them and then keeping quiet about it.

Children of the twenty-first century are growing up in a world very different from the one I faced. In some ways they have more opportunities than my generation ever did. But they also face new problems and threats that we never would have imagined. Given the insidious nature of some of those threats, maybe a swamp isn't such a bad place to play after all.

REALITY TV THE CLOSEST

SOME CHILDREN GET TO REALITY

In the heat of the summer, do you know where your kids are? According to a 2006 study, they're probably in a darkened room somewhere, staring at a television or computer monitor.

The study, published in the *Journal of Environmental Management*, found that per-capita visits to U.S. national parks have been declining for nearly twenty years—largely as a

result of people's increased time spent watching television and movies, playing video games, and surfing the web.

Although the study was conducted in the U.S., and Canadians tend to have stronger ties to the outdoors, I would be surprised if the trends were that different in Canada. Canadians watch less television than do Americans, but they also have some of the highest internet usage rates in the world. They stare at computer screens more than practically anybody else.

And while lower attendance levels in national parks do not necessarily mean people are spending less time outdoors in general, the connection to time glued to electronic media is hard to ignore. In fact, the evidence was strong enough for the researchers to conclude, "We may be seeing evidence of a fundamental shift away from people's appreciation of nature (biophilia, Wilson 1984) to 'videophilia,' which we here define as 'the new human tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media.' Such a shift would not bode well for the future of biodiversity conservation."

Indeed. The internet is a fantastic tool, as is television. Even video games can have educational value as well as be entertaining. But as with anything, there needs to be a balance. When I was a boy, escaping to the air-conditioned comfort of a movie theater during the heat of the summer was a real treat. But it was an exception, not the norm. Far from spending the majority of my time indoors, I spent most of my waking hours outside—swimming, fishing, hiking, or just exploring.

Times certainly change, but when our behaviors change in a way that alienates us from the natural world upon which we depend for our food, our energy, our natural resources—our very lives—that, to me, is cause for concern.

We tend to forget that the world we live in today—the electronic age—barely registers in the timeline of human history.

For the vast majority of that history, we were a rural people. We lived in family groups and small villages and followed the natural cycles of days and nights and the seasons. We didn't buy processed food from the mini-mart, text-message people halfway around the world, or watch infomercials at 3:00 AM bathed in the glow of artificial light. Most of the modern electronics we take for granted today have been around for only fifty years or less.

These electronics may make our lives easier, but I often question whether they are making our lives better. People tap away on BlackBerries and personal computers during meetings. They take cell phone calls during the birth of their children and play video games for days at a time, virtually without a break. They walk down the street listening to MP3 players, lost in their own worlds. We seem to be plugged in twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That strikes me as decidedly unbalanced.

So try this: for a month next summer, or maybe just a week, or even a day—unplug. Put away all your electronic gizmos and go outside. Lie under a tree. Watch the clouds. Smell the air. Enjoy real life, rather than a virtual version of it.

Most important, take the kids.

THERE OUGHT TO BE A LAW

Sometimes I feel like I'm the only person in Canada who doesn't own a cell phone, and I don't think I ever will. Watching people barking into their phones at the gym, on ski hills, and in restaurants, I wonder why they bother to go there in the first place. But that's their personal choice. What really bugs me is the planned obsolescence of so many of these technologies.

Sustainability is a word generously slathered through corporate and government reports. It flows freely from the lips of those who say they're committed to being green, but to turn words into action we've got to reflect on what those words mean in everyday life. Sustainability is about ensuring that what we do today does not compromise the opportunity and future for our children and grandchildren. We are a long way from achieving that right now. Everything we use—food, clothing, energy, consumer goods—everything comes from the biosphere, the zone of air, water, and land where life exists. And all of our garbage, effluent, and waste goes back into that same zone of life. Indeed, if the globe were reduced to the size of a basketball, the biosphere would be thinner than a layer of plastic sandwich wrap. That's it, our home where we live. It is finite and fixed; it can't grow.

Today most people, myself included, are all agog at the wondrous outpouring of new technology—cell phones, iPods, iPhones, laptops, BlackBerries, and on and on. Even though I am techno-incompetent and like to think I shun these new devices, I actually have a drawer filled with the detritus of yesterday's hottest products, now reduced to the status of fossils. I have video cameras that use tapes no longer available, laptops with programs incompatible with anything on today's market, Beta cassette recorders, portable tape and CD players I no longer use, and more. But what really upsets me is opening a drawer and finding it filled with cords, chargers, and transformers for which there is no longer anything to plug into. Yet if I misplace a cord to charge the battery of my current camera or laptop, none of the cords in the drawer works!

Forgive my rant, but not long ago, I embarked on an epic search for a cord to plug into my wife's cell phone to recharge it. We were in Toronto and the poor phone kept bleating that

it was running low and the battery needed recharging. Calls were coming in to Tara but there wasn't enough juice to return them. We asked others in our group to lend us a charger but found every single one was incompatible with her phone.

So we began a search—from big-box technology superstores to smaller suppliers and the cell phone companies themselves—all to no avail. Finally, a salesperson told my wife, "That's an old model, so we don't stock the charger any longer."

"But I only bought it last year," sputtered Tara.

"Yeah, like I said, that's an old model," he replied without a hint of irony or sympathy. So in the world of insanely rapid obsolescence, not only does each company's products have its own unique plugs and cords, each successive model is incompatible with the previous one it replaces.

If there must be new models with new gimmicks every few months, why can't there be a single charger or transformer that can be used interchangeably by all companies' products and from year to year? Why can't there be some sort of standard? How technologically advanced is a cord that it must be replaced with a new model every six months? The proliferation and sheer waste of this type of practice is mind-boggling.

Someone has to pay for all those disposable cords, chargers, and adapters, to say nothing of the products themselves. That someone is all of us. And not just for the product, but also for the pollution created when it's made and disposed of—right back into the biosphere. It's time for producers to take responsibility for their products' entire life cycles and not just pretend they can wash their hands of the problem when it goes out the door.

GET OUTSIDE—IT'S GOOD FOR YOU

When your mom told you to go outside and play, it seems that she really did know what was best for you. Just being outdoors or having access to the natural world has been proven to have physical and mental health benefits. And research has now found that the more diverse and vibrant an ecosystem is, the healthier it is for us.

One of my personal favorite places in the world is Haida Gwaii—the Queen Charlotte Islands—off the coast of British Columbia, Canada. The diversity of life there in the cold, nutrient-rich waters, on the shorelines, and in the old-growth forests is simply astonishing. I'm hardly alone. Lodges and retreats are popping up all along B.C.'s pristine middle and north coast as people search for places to get away from the stress of their everyday lives.

People gravitate to these kinds of places, they usually say, because they are beautiful, peaceful, or relaxing. Sometimes they will venture as far as describing experiences with these ecosystems as uplifting, moving—even spiritual. For others, it's a feeling that's difficult to describe in words, but being in nature just somehow makes them feel better.

Although many people may not realize it, there's actual biological value in having experiences with nature, value that is measurable and quantifiable. It's long been established that general health, mental fatigue, and physical injury all recover faster when patients have access to natural areas. Studies have shown, for example, that surgery patients recover more quickly when they have views of natural landscapes outside their windows rather than views of bricks and concrete.

Some people attribute this connection with nature to the perceived benefits of having access to fresh air and fewer distractions. But it actually goes much deeper. Famed Harvard ecologist E.O. Wilson calls this connection to the natural

world biophilia. It's a term he coined and it simply means that he believes humans have a kinship with other living things that is genetically programmed into us.

So I'm sure Dr. Wilson wasn't the least bit surprised by a 2007 study published in the science journal *Biology Letters*. The study found that the psychological benefits of urban green spaces increase with the diversity of life found in them. Researchers interviewed more than three hundred park-goers in the medium-sized city of Sheffield, England, and compared their answers to an analysis of the species richness, or biodiversity, of their parks.

They found that while the overall size of a park influenced the visitor's perception of how it made them feel, even more important was the diversity of life. Bigger parks made people feel better, yes. But species-rich parks were even more beneficial. In fact, the researchers report that visitors to the green spaces were actually able to consciously perceive differences in species diversity—especially with plants.

As it turns out, when it comes to our health and well-being, not all parks are created equal. A grass field, for example, is likely to be far less beneficial than a natural area with a greater diversity of plant and animal life. We now know that humans, consciously or otherwise, are able to judge the overall diversity and vibrancy of green spaces. What's more, the more diverse and vibrant those ecosystems are, the greater their value to humanity in terms of our own personal health and well-being.

With three-quarters of North Americans now living in urban areas, citizens must ensure that city planners and municipal politicians are paying attention to this kind of research. It underscores the need both to protect our most diverse ecosystems and to design cities to have more and larger green spaces. Ultimately, our health depends on it.

RESPECT FOR NATURE HAS TO START AT HOME

One of the refrains I often hear from people is about how we have to educate our kids to be more environmentally responsible. It's too late for us, they say. Adults are too set in their ways to change. We've got to teach the children!

What a cop-out. So not only are we leaving our children with a legacy of global warming and other environmental challenges, but we'll leave it up to them to fix the problems we created? Sorry, but that's fundamentally unfair. It also sets us all up for failure. Children do what we do, not what we say. If we don't change our ways first, what incentive do children have to behave more responsibly?

This isn't to say that we couldn't be doing a better job with teaching children in school to be more environmentally aware. But doing that isn't just about pointing to things in a book. It's about doing things differently together. It's about changing behaviors.

Even before kids get to the classroom, look at how they get there. Every year it seems a group releases new, alarming statistics about childhood obesity. More and more, we hear about how kids are becoming increasingly housebound and sedentary. Yet we fail to connect these problems with the lineups of SUVs and minivans several blocks long outside schools every morning and every afternoon.

Chauffeur-ing our children to and fro not only denies them an opportunity to exercise, pollutes our air, and adds to global warming, it further removes them from the natural world. We don't respect things that we don't understand. And it's very hard to understand something without experiencing it.

At the risk of sounding very old-fashioned and very old, when I was young I walked to school. When I got older, I rode a bicycle. So did everyone else. It's a great way to get exercise and experience the outdoors. There's nothing like walking to

help you get to know your community. And not just the people, but the plants and the trees, the animals, the weather, and the seasons.

Reconnecting our children with nature in their everyday lives is the first step in an environmental education. That means getting children outside into the world to experience it firsthand rather than through TVs, computers, or YouTube.

I'm not saying that there isn't a place for technology in helping us understand the world. After all, I've spent forty years trying to educate people through television. In fact, one of my favorite tools is an addition to Google Earth called Google Sky. For years, I've been a fan of Google Earth as a tool helping people understand just how small our world really is and how connected we all are. Google Sky adds a new dimension, as now you can turn the lens around and look at what's out there. It's really an interactive chart of the heavens, the stars, and the planets that lets us explore the universe and ultimately better understand our place in it.

But as fascinating as it is, nothing can replace the real experiences we have outdoors, peering through a telescope into the night sky. Or digging in a garden. Or exploring a swamp, a forest, or a tide pool. If we want our children to be more environmentally responsible, we have to show them why they should be. We have to emulate the right behaviors and teach them why environmental sustainability is so important.

So yes, this means we need more schoolyard gardens, better outdoor education curricula, more field trips, and more sustainable schools. But it also means we need more exercise. More cycling and more plain old walking. We have to get our kids outside more to play and explore the wonders of nature so that they will come to understand it better.

This isn't just up to kids or teachers. It's up to parents. It's up to school boards. It's up to all of us to ensure that we're not

telling our children one thing and doing another. Anything else and we're not just lying to them. We're lying to ourselves.

CHRISTMAS COMPLAINTS MISS THE POINT

It can start in October—even before Halloween. The television commercials, the flyers in the mail, the decorations in the mall. Christmas is now a two-month event—one long blowout sale.

But there's also no shortage of people decrying the commercialization of the holidays. The criticism itself is nothing new. People have been complaining about it for decades. Every year, the Christmas season gets a little longer, and every year people complain about it a little more.

It's certainly a valid criticism, one that I can't help but make myself. As the holiday hype escalates, so too does our accumulated waste. The roads become packed with anxious shoppers driving from mall to mall in search of the right gifts. The malls become stuffed with Christmas goods and trinkets, all vying to catch the shopper's eye. And the shoppers themselves become stuffed with holiday sweets and extra-large gingerbread lattes. The whole enterprise is a monument to excess.

For some, this excess typifies everything that is wrong with the developed world. We consume far more than our share of the world's resources. We create huge amounts of waste. We obsess with fads and fancy while species die out, pollutants seep into the food chain, and the climate changes. Christmas is the pinnacle of our hyperconsumptive lifestyles, so it's easy to point a finger and condemn the whole stressful, chaotic, overindulgent experience.

But the real question is why? Why do people put themselves through all the stress and pressure? Why do we go into debt so we can give gifts that the receiver probably doesn't

even need? Two months after Christmas, how many of those gifts can we even remember? And why do we complain about the excesses of Christmas and then fall for it again every year?

I believe we are trying to fill a void. With fewer and fewer people taking part in the religious aspects of the holidays, many are looking for other rituals to take their place. Humans have an innate need to connect with their families, their communities, and the rhythms and cycles of nature. Throughout human history, we've done that with celebrations and rituals to mark the changing seasons, the lunar cycles, and important stages in our lives.

But today's world is very different, and in many ways, it runs against millennia of the human experience. This new world runs 24/7. This world is built on consistency and uniformity rather than reflecting natural rhythms and local cultural or geographic differences. This world has few rituals to reflect the stages of our lives, the changing of the seasons, and the passage of time. It doesn't matter if it's dark outside. We just turn on a light. It doesn't matter if it's cold outside. We just turn up the heat. The seasons may change, but our work schedules stay the same. Fresh vegetables and fruits are available year-round regardless of whether or not they are in season or grown anywhere nearby. A Big Mac is a Big Mac, here or in Turkey.

This world we've created is hard on the planet, and it's hard on us. We've tried to isolate the human experience from the rest of nature, but it's an impossible task. Humans are a part of nature. Whether we like it or not, our bodies respond to changes in the natural world. The more we try to deny who we are, the less connected we will feel and the more damage we will do to the planet.

In the absence of God or spirituality, in the absence of a capacity to respond to seasonal patterns and natural rhythms,

and in the absence of meaningful social rituals, people are grasping on to whatever they can to help ground them in their communities. If that means spending days at a time in a crowded mall, then that's what we do. That becomes the ritual. That becomes Christmas.

I think people are hungry for change but feel trapped. We are yearning for meaning but accepting baubles and trinkets instead. Until we stop denying our biological roots and embrace our humanity, we will never find the meaning we seek. It's just not something you can pick up at the mall.