Learning to Live Within Limits: Affluenza and Sabbath Discipline

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A recent PBS series introduced a new term into our popular lexicon: "Affluenza." This "virus" is indeed widespread in North American society, easily contracted in a consumer environment that celebrates excess and attributes magical powers to products. Unfortunately, our churches and synagogues are not immune to this destructive disease. This study looks at how the Judeo-Christian tradition both diagnoses this problem and offers a strategy for "preventative health."

Affluenza: A Terminal Disease

At the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, industrialized countries tended to point a finger at less developed nations for their role in over-population and its ensuing environmental devastation. Third and Fourth World nations were justified, however, in countering that First World over-consumption of natural resources and over-production of industrial pollution were equally if not more to blame for current global economic and ecological crises.

The inherent value of unrestricted consumption has long been assumed by the dominant culture in North America, both our economic philosophy of growth and our personal philosophies of material well-being. It is this assumption that determines the daily "business" news and popular perceptions of the health of our society. Yet we are discovering now that unlimited growth is unsustainable on a global basis. Affluenza, like any pathology, if undiagnosed and unchecked will have dire consequences for individuals, households, communities and the planet as a whole. Let us briefly summarize three problems with our current First World consumer lifestyle:

1) Affluenza is environmentally disastrous. The current level of consumption by industrialized countries carries devastating environmental consequences. Alan Durning writes:

> The furnishings of our consumer life-style---things like automobiles, throwaway goods and packaging, a high-fat diet, and air conditioning---can only be provided at great environmental cost. Our way of life depends on enormous and continuous inputs of the very commodities that are most damaging to the earth to produce: energy, chemicals, metals, and paper.

Industrialized nations make up only 20% of the world population, but with our appetite for meat, packaged food, soft drinks, private cars, and throw-away materials, we consume 85% of the world's paper, iron, and steel; 75% of its timber and energy; 60% of its meat, fertilizer, and cement; half the fish and grain; and 40% of the fresh water.

On the other hand, we generate most of the world's hazardous chemical waste, 96% of the radioactive waste, and nearly 90% of all ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons. Included in the list of environmental repercussions of such consumption: forests are vanishing at the rate of 41 million acres annually (a land area larger than the state of Georgia); habitat destruction is causing the daily extinction of plant and animal species, air quality is declining to increasingly unhealthy levels; global warming and ozone layer depletion continue to increase; and thousands of tons of nuclear waste are being produced with no foreseeable safe method of disposal. The average U.S. citizen consumes 50 times as much as the average citizen of India, and does roughly 100 times as much damage to the global environment as an average citizen in a poorer country. As environmentalist Norman Myers notes, "If everyone were to consume in the manner of the rich nations today, an extra three planets like the Earth would be required."

2) Affluenza sharpens disparities between rich and poor. Consumption patterns of the rich nations are also decreasing the resources available for the rest of the world. This means that the poor, who can least afford additional limits, are the ones most hurt as resources are drawn down. More than 3 billion people currently must spend half of their incomes on food, and the poorest of these (earning less than $700 a year) are forced to live on insufficient grain and unsafe drinking water. Between 1985 and 1995, as world population continued to outpace increases in grain production, rich nations continued to receive all the grain they desired, while the small increase in food prices pushed many of these already poor people over the edge into starvation. Meanwhile, 67% of the grain used by rich nations is fed to livestock, producing only 1/2 to 1/5th the amount of food that the grain alone would have offered.

Nor has economic growth solved the problem. The United Nations reported in 1992 that income disparities between the world's richest and poorest have doubled since 1960. Today the wealthiest 20% of the world's population receives almost 83% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% receive less than 2%! In our own country, too, wealth is polarizing. In 1965 the average U.S. worker made $7.52 per hour, while the person running the company made $330.38 per hour. Today, however, the average worker makes $7.39 per hour (a net loss when adjusted for inflation), and the average CEO $1,566.68 per hour – 212 times more! While for decades our political and economic managers have promised "trickle down" wealth, in fact we are witnessing the transfer of wealth from the increasingly *poor* to the increasingly *rich*, both at home and abroad. Recent neoliberal policies of "structural adjustment" are only hardening this polarization. Whether through plant closings, the demise of the local grocery store or the crisis of the family farm, we in the First World are now witnessing the epidemic of communal displacement that has already devastated local culture, institutions and environments in the Third and Fourth Worlds.

3) Affluenza does not fulfill its promises of contentment. Not only are we consuming too much for the earth's good and hurting those in poorer countries in the process. There is a growing recognition that we are consuming too much for our own good. Our ballooning level of consumption has not provided us with the happiness, success, or better quality of life the countless advertisements that bombard us daily so fervently promise. In fact, it has left us stressed, overworked, unhappy, and unfulfilled. The President's Council on Sustainable Development, in its "Population and Consumption" task force report, found that in the twenty years from 1970 to 1990, while personal consumption of goods and services rose by 45 percent. The Index of Social Health—which subtracts from the positive features of American life such things as child abuse, teen suicide, and the gap between rich and poor---has dropped by more than half."

During that same time period, the average American saw the amount of time they had to spend on the job increase by 163 hours annually, leading to the current pervasive sense of stress and overwork in our nation. This may be why the number of people who described themselves as "very happy" in 1957 versus 1991 was identical: 33%. The task force found that nearly 70 percent of Americans would like to "slow down and live a more relaxed life," while a *U.S. News and World Report* poll in 1996 noted tha 51% of Americans "would rather have more free time, even if it means less money." These statistics suggest that as we continue to consume more, our social health is declining, our work load is increasing, and we are no happier than we were before.

Affluenza is, it seems, a terminal disease. Why then can't we find a cure? Because, writes Wendell Berry, "We all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue." We have become externally reliant upon a socioeconomic system that exhausts the earth's resources and allows wealth to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands. And we are so internally captive to our illusions, excesses and appetites that we can no longer *imagine* the world differently. But this, says Berry, is "the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do."

Facing the "Addict's Excuse"

It may be that we have to begin thinking about Affluenza as an *addiction*. Rational argument alone will not persuade us, because we are caught in a self-defeating cycle. "The steps we have taken to quell the anxiety," argues Paul Wachtel in *The Poverty of Affluence*, "have actually exacerbated our sense of insecurity and -- by ironic logic familiar to the student of neuroses -- have thereby called forth still more of the same kind of efforts and thus still more undermining of security and still further acceleration of a one-sided and self-defeating pattern."

Psychologist Gerald May defines addiction thus: "We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects, or people. *Attachment*, then, is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction." As with substance abuse, we must speak here both of the addictive nature of the thing desired and the creation and maintenance of the desire itself.

Many consumer products are manufactured to breed psychological and/or physiological dependence, from titillating soap operas to sugar- or caffeine-filled fast food. Style changes guarantee market regeneration, as true in the automobile industry as in fashion. And virtually everything mechanical and digital is planned and manufactured for obsolescence. In order to combat this addiction, we must forge a social consensus that will set and enforce limits, controls and even bans on consumer behavior, as we do with other addictive materials such as alcohol or drugs.

Such a consensus will, however, be impossible to achieve unless we can break the spell of seduction spun by product advertising. Advertising both creates and sustains the addiction by conjuring a vast, intense universe of artificial needs. The marketing industry generates a relentless aural and visual onslaught upon our consciousness with objectified images and alluring subtexts that seek to form us economically, socially, politically and spiritually. Our desires often become so attached to commodities that we are truly possessed by our possessions -- we simply *must* have the new car, the bigger home, or the more technologically advanced sound system. This process culminates, warned sociologist Herbert Marcuse more than three decades ago, when "people recognize themselves in their commodities… Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear--that is, they sustain alienation."

The taunt of a popular recent beer commercial --"Why ask why?"—seems to represent the perfect mantra for an addicted/addictive consumer culture that passively ingests the delusions of Madison Avenue, and that cannot set limits on consumption. But the religious community cannot resign itself to the "addict's excuse." Moral theologian Patrick McCormick points out that addiction has significant "theological likenesses." It arises from a "denial of creatureliness," our inability and unwillingness to live within limits, seeking instead the omnipotence promised by the delusional attachment. It represents also a denial of the Creator by its idolatrous fixation on the addictive object. Addiction seduces with the promise of liberation from pain, only to deliver progressive enslavement, which it masks through Denial.

People of concern and conscience can and *must* address the great public addiction of Affluenza. To do so, however, we need ancient wisdom. Older cultures knew the danger of unrestrained behavior. We see this in classical cautionary tales such as the tragic demise of old King Midas, or of young Icarus. The Bible, too, instructs believers to live within limits, and is especially concerned with constraining the concentration of wealth and power so that there is "enough for everyone." This vision for human life is articulated in a variety of ways in both testaments: through Exodus storytelling, Levitical legislation, Deuteronomic exhortation, prophetic pronouncement, and for Christians in gospel parable and apostolic pleading. Let us examine the Hebrew Bible roots of this tradition.

Sabbath-Keeping: A Discipline of Limits

The biblical standard of social and economic justice is grounded in God's call to "keep the Sabbath." The word "Sabbath" comes from the Hebrew verb *shabat,* which means "to rest or stop working." It first appears in the Bible as the culmination of the story of Creation: "God rested on the seventh day from all the work God did" (Genesis 2:2). Here a primal pattern is set: "good" work (1:31) is followed by Shabat, which is then "blessed" (2:3), just like the creation itself (1:22,28). This, Richard Lowery contends, captures the double theme of the biblical creation story: abundance and restraint.

The next place we encounter the term Sabbath (now as a noun) is in the archetypal story of hunger and bread in the wilderness (Exodus 16), which is sandwiched between two stories of thirst and water (Exodus 15:22-27 and 17:1-7). The people of ancient Israel had been liberated from their oppression, but now had to face the harsh realities of life outside the Egyptian system. They – like modern North Americans – couldn't imagine an economic system apart from the military-industrial-technological complExodusthat enslaved them. "Would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this desert to die of famine!" they complain to their leader, Moses (Exodus 16:3).

The manna story is a parable that illustrates God's alternative to the Egyptian economy (Exodus 16:6). God "raining bread from heaven" symbolizes the perception that the earth's fruits are a Divine gift: rain and sun, soil and seed bring us bread (see Isaiah 55:10). This story narrates a "test" to see if Israel will follow instructions on how to "gather" – a symbol in traditional societies for harvesting (Exodus 16:4). The people's first lesson outside of Egypt concerns economic production!

Moses' instructions give us the three defining characteristics of this alternative economic practice. First, every family is told to gather just enough bread for their needs (Exodus 16:16-18). In contrast to Israel's Egyptian condition of deprivation, here everyone has *enough*: "Those who gathered more had no surplus, and those who gathered less had no shortage." In God's economy there *is* such a thing as "too much" and "too little." Exodus 16's "theology of enough" is underlined by the (probably later) version of the manna story in Numbers 11, in which the people's persistent "cravings" are punished with a plague of "too much" (Numbers 11:33-34; see Psalm 78:20-31; 106:13-15). These wise old stories contrast radically with our modern consumer culture's infinite tolerance for both wealth and poverty.

Second, this bread should not be "stored up" (Exodus 16:19-20). Wealth and power in Egypt was defined by surplus accumulation. It is no accident that Israel's forced labor consisted of building "store-cities" (Exodus1:11), into which the empire's plunder and the tribute of subject peoples was gathered. The Bible understands that dominant civilizations exert centripetal force, drawing labor, resources and wealth into greater and greater concentrations of idolatrous power (the archetypal biblical description of this is found in the story of the Tower of Babel, Genesis 11:1-9). So Israel is enjoined to keep wealth *circulating* through strategies of redistribution, not *concentrating* through strategies of accumulation.

The third instruction introduces Sabbath discipline (Exodus 16:22-30). "Six days you shall gather; but on the seventh, which is a Sabbath, there will be none" (Exodus16:26). Human beings are instructed to imitate God's Self-restraint in Genesis 2:2. The manna story institutes Sabbath-keeping even *before* the Covenant at Sinai (Exodus 20:8-11). It is reiterated again at the conclusion of the Covenant Code in dire terms: if the people do not practice Sabbath, they will die (Exodus 31:12-17). Not only then is *shabat* the crowning blessing of creation; it is also the "beginning and end of the Law."

Torah's Sabbath regulations represent God's strategy for teaching Israel about its dependence upon the land as a gift to share equitably, not as a possession to exploit (see for example the rituals enjoined in harvest festivals, Leviticus 23:9-25).. The prescribed periodic rest for the land and for human labor means to disrupt human attempts to "control" nature and "maximize" the forces of production. Because the earth belongs to God and its fruits are a gift, the people should justly distribute those fruits, instead of seeking to own and hoard them. "Sabbath observance," writes Lowery, "promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. It operates on the assumption that human life and prosperity exceed human productivity."

This first lesson was fundamental: the people were instructed to keep a jarful of the manna *in front* of the Covenant, so as never to forget Sabbath economics. The manna story, in sum, illustrates human dependence upon the divine "economy of grace." Sabbath observation means to remember *every week* this economy's two principles: the goal of "enough" for everyone, and the prohibition on hoarding. This vision is, of course, utterly contrary to economics as we know it. Interestingly, our incredulity is rather humorously anticipated in the story itself: "manna" means "What *is this*?" (Exodus16:15).

The social justice code of Exodus 23 extends the Sabbath cycle to a seventh year: "You shall let the land rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat" (Exodus 23:10-11). The Sabbath year restores equilibrium by restraining the activity of "productive" members of the economy and freeing constraints upon those the economy has marginalized, both the disenfranchised (the poor) and the undomesticated (wild animals)! The ecological and social wisdom of the Sabbath year goes beyond the agricultural good sense of letting land lie fallow. The rest commanded for the land and the laborer restores the primacy of the Great Economy, and forces humans to re-adapt to *its* limits.

Wendell Berry explains this notion by calling the all-encompassing and integrated system of nature "the Great Economy" upon which human systems ("little economies") by necessity depend. The problem, Berry writes, is that our modern industrial economy, with its managerial penchant for control and its lack of limits, "does not see itself as a little economy; it sees itself as the *only* economy. It makes itself thus exclusive by the simple expedient of valuing only what it can use -- that is, only what it can regard as 'raw material' to be transformed mechanically into something else... The industrial economy is based on invasion and pillage of the Great Economy."

Deuteronomy further interprets the Sabbath year to include debt-release (Deuteronomy 15:1-81). This was intended as a hedge against the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom. In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family fell into debt, deepened when it had to sell off its land in order to service the debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor, becoming bond-slaves. Since there were no banks in antiquity, it was larger land owners who acted as creditors – and who foreclosed, adding to their holdings. The prophet Isaiah railed against precisely this process of economic stratification by which wealthy creditors "add house to house and field to field, until there is room for no one but you" (Isaiah 5:8). He saw it as a betrayal of Israel's vocation to be "God's pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed" (Isaiah 5:7).

Sabbath year debt release intends to safeguard both social justice ("there will be no one in need among you") and sound fiscal policy ("creditor nations will not rule over you," Deuteronomy 15:4-6). But anticipating the human tendency toward selfishness, the practical Deuteronomist specifically forbids people from tightening credit in the years immediately prior to the Sabbath remission (15:7-11). The remission applies to debt-slaves as well, demanding that they be sent away with sufficient resources to make it on their own (15:12-17). One can only think in our own history of the promises of "forty acres and a mule" made to African Americans after the Emancipation Proclamation, but never kept.

The fullest expression of Sabbath logic is the Levitical "Jubilee" (Leviticus 25). This comprehensive remission was to take place every "Sabbath's Sabbath", or $49^{th}/50^{th}$ year (a pattern perhaps already prefigured in the "Feast of Weeks" or first fruits in Leviticus 23:15-25). The Jubilee (named after the *jovel*, a ram's horn that sounded to herald the remission) aimed to dismantle structures of social-economic inequality by:

- releasing each community member from debt (Leviticus 25:35-42)
- returning encumbered land to its original owners (25:13,25-28);
- freeing slaves (25:47-55);

The rationale for this unilateral restructuring of the community's assets was to remind Israel that the land belongs to God (25:23) and that they are an Exodus people who must never return to a system of slavery (25:42).

Keeping the Sabbath Vision Alive

Many of the texts cited above probably did not take their final form until after the Babylonian Exile (6th century, BCE). This means that the ancient vision of Sabbath economics that originated among tribal Israel was *re-visioned* almost a half a millennium later, under very different circumstances. Sabbath disciplines of seventh year debt release and Jubilee restructuring were, of course, inevitably abandoned by the powerful in the community who wished to consolidate social advantages they had gained. Israel's betrayal of its Sabbath vocation to forge social and economic justice thus became a central complaint of Israel's prophets. They repeatedly and relentlessly criticized the nation's leadership for betraying the poor and the vulnerable members of the community.

When Isaiah charged the nation's leadership with robbery -- "The spoil of the poor is in your houses; what do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" (Isaiah 3:14f) – he was echoing the manna tradition's censure of stored wealth in the face of community need (see also Isaiah 5:7-8; Malachi 3:5-12). Amos accused the commercial classes of regarding *shabat* as an obstacle to market profiteering instead of "keeping the Sabbath holy" (Amos 8:5). The rich and landed treat the poor as an exploitable class instead of guaranteeing their gleaning rights: "You buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell sweepings of the wheat" (8:6; see Exodus 23:10f; Leviticus 19:9; Micah 7:1).

Hosea laments that fidelity to international markets had replaced Israel's allegiance to God's economy of grace: "I will go after my lovers; *they* give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" (Hosea 2:5). Most telling of all, however, is the tradition that attributed the downfall of Jerusalem to the people's failure to keep Sabbath: "God took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped the sword… to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land *had made up for its Sabbaths*. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (2 Chronicles 36:20f; see Leviticus 26:34f).

Jeremiah blasts King Zedekiah when he reneges on his declaration of Jubilee manumission:

> Thus says the Lord: "I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt… saying, 'Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews…' But your ancestors did not listen to me… You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another… but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your slaves" (Jeremiah 34:13-16).

The reformer Nehemiah resurrects the Levitical prohibition of interest (Nehemiah 5:6-13) as well as the Sabbath strictures on commercial production, transaction and finance: "…if the peoples of the land bring in merchandise or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy it… and we will forego the crops on the seventh year and the exaction of every debt" (10:31). Sabbath redistribution is also invoked in Ezekiel's visions of renewal: "My princes shall no longer oppress my people; but shall let the house of Israel have the land according to their tribes" (Ezekiel 45:8; see 46:17f; 47:13ff).

The most well-known prophetic appropriation of the Jubilee vision is found in Isaiah 61:1-2. This commission begins with a call to "bring good news to the oppressed poor" and ends with a proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favor." It is *this* text that the latter-day Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth chose to define and inaugurate his mission, according to Luke's gospel (Luke 4:18-19). Even the apostle Paul embraced the old wisdom of the manna story in his appeal to early Christian churches to share wealth (2 Corinthians 8).

Economic self-restraint and sharing were central to the practice of the early Christian churches, and continued to be exhorted even after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. In the fourth century St. Ambrose of Milan penned these remarkably contemporary-sounding words:

> Why do the injuries to nature delight you? For all has the world been created, which you few rich are trying to keep for yourselves. For not merely the possession of the earth, but the very sky, the air and the sea are claimed for the use of the rich few… Whosoever does not use his patrimony as a possession, who does know how to give and distribute to the poor, he is the servant of his wealth, not its master.

And in the early fifth Century St. Nilus of Ancyra was still counseling limits:

> We should remain within the limits imposed by our basic needs and strive with all our power not to exceed them. For once we are carried beyond these limits in our desire for the pleasures of life, there is no criterion by which to check our onward movement, since no bounds can be set to that which exceeds the necessary.

The "subversive memory" of Jubilee kept erupting in religious history, among early monks, medieval communitarians and radical Reformers.

Even with the ascendancy of modern capitalism –with its fierce antipathy toward Sabbath economics – this vision has not been extinguished. We see it in tracts by the 18th century "Leveler" Thomas Spence in his struggle against the move to enclose (i.e. privatize) the Commons in early industrial England: "Since then this Jubilee/Sets all at Liberty/Let us be glad/Behold each man return to his possession." And we hear it in the 19th century spirituals of African slaves sung in American fields: "Don't you hear the Gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?" The ancient Sabbath vision of justice continues to fire the imaginations of Jewish and Christian reformers, for example in the current "Jubilee 2000" interfaith campaign advocating for Third World debt relief. And it can guide our contemporary struggles against Affluenza.

Rediscovering Limits Through Contemporary Sabbath Disciplines

The Hebrew Bible's vision of Sabbath economics contends that a theology of abundant grace and a communal ethic of restraint and redistribution is the only way out of our slavery to systems of accumulation and slavery. Our contemporary religious communities, however, have had difficulty embodying this tradition because our theological and practical imaginations have long been captive to the market-driven orthodoxies of economic growth, as we have noted. Our fears have persuaded us that the biblical Jubilee is at best utopian, and at worst Communistic.

It is true that the biblical Sabbath vision is diametrically opposed to our modern practices of unrestrained consumption. The two main assumptions of classical capitalist economics are: 1) scarcity; and 2) unlimited need. These, Lowery writes, “breed resignation to systems of distribution so unequal as to guarantee homelessness and starvation. On the other hand, they create an imperative toward unlimited economic growth.” Sabbath economics, however, based on “the principles of abundance and self restraint, turn this classical economic approach on its head. If you assume that resources are abundant, sufficient for the survival and prosperity of human life, and that human needs and wants are limited, then no one need starve or suffer the elements through lack of housing or clothing.” The conclusion we must draw, says Lowery, is that “long-term, systemic hunger, homelessness and poverty can be viewed only as a failure of human will.”

What might a Sabbath discipline mean today in light of our captivity to Affluenza? The most basic insight of Sabbath-keeping is that we can only resist the compulsive culture of production and consumption by *stopping*. It is this, of course, that our addicted behavior resists fiercely. This struggle is very familiar to those in recovery from substance abuse. The Twelve-Step movement has emerged over the last half-century as a genuinely popular insurrection against the epidemic of alcoholism and drug addiction in the First World. I believe this tradition reflects three important insights for a practice of Sabbath-keeping.

First, the Twelve-Step, in keeping with its religious origins, is a "conversionist" strategy. *Step One*, as essential as it is uncomfortable, is the acknowledgment that the addictive system which controls me is destructive to me and all those around me. To be liberated from the nihilistic logic of that system I must:

- appeal to and yield to a "Higher Power" (*Two and Three*);
- accept my culpability in that system and "confess" it to others (*Four and Five*);
- seek to "repent" of those practices (*Six and Seven*);
- make reparation to those I've wronged (*Eight and Nine*).

Recovering addicts learn to recognize the systemic nature of the problem, and to invite others into a dis-continuous way of living in the midst of it.

The second key insight of Twelve-Step is that it begins with our *own* experience of culpability and responsibility. Michael Lerner has described the widespread perception by North Americans that they can do nothing to change the world as "surplus powerlessness," which he sees as the inevitable result of a culture of spectating and hyper-individualism. Instead, we must acknowledge and understand how we are part of the addictive system (complicity) and how it is part of us (internalization). This allows us to recognize the power of the system over us (our addiction) in a way that does not concede impotence (the addict's excuse). In this sense disciplines of Sabbath-keeping are both personal and political.

The third, and perhaps most important, aspect of the Twelve-Step recovery process is its recognition of the necessity of an ongoing community of accountability and support in sustaining resistance to the addictive system. However great our internal opposition to recovery may be, the *external* opposition will be much more formidable, because the status quo always attempts to constrain fundamental changes in the system. This may come from our own the family system, our community, or even public policy itself (that, for example, rewards accumulation and penalizes sharing). As the recovering addict tries to resist old patterns, the alternative community of recovery becomes crucial as a place of understanding, identity and support, as "base ecclesial communities" in the Third World have discovered.

It is probably fair to say that most churches and synagogues in the U.S. today have at least one Twelve-Step group meeting in their halls during the week. What might it take for our religious communities to themselves become communities of recovery from our more public forms of addiction? First we need to name our condition clearly. Consumerism is mildly scolded in our congregations on occasion, but hardly considered to be a deadly *addiction*! To propose it as such would obviously provoke congregational opposition. This would not in most cases be attributable to any deep commitment to consumerist values and practices, however. Rather the objection would be that issues of economic culture are simply too large for regular church folk to deal with. Where, after all, would we *begin*?

We must recognize this as a socialized response. We have been formed to believe that we cannot make any real "difference" in the economic system unless we are powerful politicians, bankers or corporate chiefs. Insofar as the structural imperatives of capitalism regarding profit, production and power are concerned, this is unfortunately all too true. King, Maynard and Woodyard point out that "We can recycle paper and other waste materials, but industrial America fouls the environment in ways we seem helpless to restrain." We are thus presented with two, somewhat paradoxical challenges. On one hand there is no such thing as strictly "personal liberation" from addictive consumerism. Private strategies of change only strengthen a system whose purpose is to privatize consciousness. Our practices of recovery must address the *public* character of the addiction and must therefore include disciplines of collective analysis and action.

On the other hand, we are not absolved of individual responsibility. Just because we cannot *personally* change a system does not mean we have ceased to exist as moral and political agents. This is precisely the powerlessness the system promotes: to convince us that socio-economic processes are so complex and remote that we, as isolated producers/consumers, are absolved of all obligation to think critically or act conscientiously. This attitude of exoneration merely reflects the late stages of addiction: total capitulation to the structural imperatives of the system. Instead, we must embrace both culpability and responsibility. Our synagogues and churches, as communities of recovery, must empower our members to take steps to resist the imperatives and expectations of the addictive body politic in the *actual* social, political and economic spaces of their lives.

Practically this means developing contemporary Sabbath disciplines. The ancient metaphor for such discipline, Gerald May reminds us, is *asceticism* (from the Greek *askēo*, 'to exercise'): "Every habit may be exposed to the searing, purifying sun; every false prop is vulnerable to relinquishment; and one can be left truly dependent upon the grace of God for sustenance." Economic practices, like sexuality, are not inherently evil; quite the contrary, they are intrinsic to our humanity. But our appetites -- economic and sexual -- are exploited mercilessly by the highly sophisticated techniques of seduction in consumer culture. Recovery thus also involves a kind of "consumer celibacy" that reasserts responsibility for our economic lives. Alan Durning reminds us that North Americans "spend $5 billion a year on special diets to lower their calorie consumption, while the world's poorest 400 million people are so undernourished they are likely to suffer stunted growth, mental retardation, or death." The affluent clearly need disciplines different than compulsive diets and obsessive gym workouts, which only mask our addiction to Affluenza!

Three disciplines of "economic sobriety" come to mind, ways of daily deciding to "turn over" our economic lives to the alternative Reality of God's Economy of Grace. First, we should set concrete limits on our work and our consumption. This, of course, is the traditional meaning of both the Jewish and Christian Sabbath. Although it has suffered from a history of legalistic interpretations, the Sabbath remains a concrete weekly discipline that carves out a time and space liberated from compulsive consumption. Key here is community accountability. We middle class people are hostage to deeply ingrained assumptions about private ownership, freedom and control. This extends not only to material things but also to use of time, space, vocational options and above all, decision-making. Nothing challenges this socialization more than accountability for how we earn and how we spend. Yet in doing this we are actually *taking* back control from the illusions and expectations of the market. Personal and family disciplines of Sabbath time are a barometer of how deeply we are possessed by our possessions, and help to establish an alternative rhythm to our lives. If our churches and synagogues cannot re-train us in the creative discipline of Sabbath is rest and limits, who will?

A second strategy is a commitment to "simple living" and so-called "downward mobility." Such lifestyle changes are nothing more or less than spiritual disciplines for those who are privileged enough to make those choices. A survey given in 1993 noted as much as 28% of the U.S. population has embraced the voluntary simplicity movement in some fashion. Alternative economic experiments range from communal common purses to community credit unions. Collective living arrangements aid the recovery of traditional practices of extended family and hospitality that have atrophied in modern urban culture. Similarly, cooperative work strikes at the heart of alienated and alienating wage-labor. Other examples that have been outline by Barbara Brandt in her helpful *Whole Life Economics* include land trusts as an alternative to private ownership, community money systems, and the burgeoning Community Supported Agriculture movement. The

Ministry of Money has developed programs specifically for affluent people, including "trips of perspective" to poor countries and suggestions for personal economic partnerships. Other groups are trying to help religious institutions and communities to invest responsibly, particularly given the need for capital in poor neighborhoods. These all represent experiments with the truth of the biblical call to Sabbath economics and Jubilee.

A third discipline is making ourselves, not just our resources, available to the poor. We can socially relocate to live and work in proximity to disenfranchised people, not primarily in order to "help," as in the old missionary model, but in order to view the world *from that space*. This is a way that middle class people can avoid liberal abstractions about poverty and begin to build real relationships with the very folk from whom they were insulated by suburban upbringing. The longer we are rooted in such neighborhoods the more the issues so familiar to the poor become *genuinely* ours. Our work then moves from "aid" to "alliance," from sympathy to solidarity. Such disciplines create the conditions for engagement with bigger structural issues, because our awareness of public addiction is heightened in direct proportion to our *actual* discontinuity with it. Lifestyle changes are not a political *solution* to anything, but can represent a political *question* to everything. We can become involved in promoting economic literacy at the grassroots, and in organizing consumer education and actions, from boycotts to shareholder protests. A Catholic priest was acquitted by a Chicago jury in 1990 after a campaign of defacing neighborhood billboards advertising alcohol and tobacco products that ravage the lives of so many in his urban, working class, Black and Latino parish. In South Central Los Angeles churches and community groups organized to prohibit the rebuilding of liquor stores after the 1992 Uprising, and ended up fighting a white political establishment "under the influence" of the powerful alcohol lobby. Other strategies include participation in labor organizing, zoning battles, class-action lawsuits, and of course political lobbying. Many consumer, public interest and corporate watchdog organizations already exist that would welcome the support of our religious communities.

The Sabbath/Jubilee vision has particular relevance today in its encouragement of sufficiency rather than excess, and of economic redistribution instead of wealth concentration and accumulation. It is an invitation to practice a life of moderation and simplicity—a life ultimately far more fulfilling than addictive consumerism. These disciplines are hard work, and we are forever *reverting* rather than *converting*! Recovery from Affluenza is like peeling an onion: each layer of internalized consumerism we remove brings more tears. That is why neither politics nor piety can substitute for the authentic inward journey. As Center for a New American Dream director Betsy Taylor put it: "In the final analysis, accepting and living by sufficiency rather than excess offers a return to what is, culturally speaking, the human home: to the ancient order of family, community, good work, and good life; to a reverence for skill creativity, and creation; to a daily cadence slow enough to let us watch the sunset and stroll by the water's edge; to communities worth spending a lifetime in; and to local places pregnant with the memories of generations."

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