

When we covet more, we care less

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

First published: Saturday, January 27, 2007

HDTV, cellphones, digital cameras, PDAs, MP3 players, GPS, VoIP, DVD recorders. The list goes on. We just figured out how to work our VCRs and microwaves.

Even 30-somethings have to rely on their teenage cousins to master their toys.

Years ago, Volkswagen urged American consumers to "live beneath your means." Those whimsical ads seemed to echo the words of Henry David Thoreau: "Live simply, that others may simply live."

One might label VW's proclamation heretical. The American economy depends on coveting our neighbors' goods -- keeping up with the Joneses.

"Why can't we have a summer cottage?" "I have nothing to wear." "But Joey got a car for his 16th birthday." The complaints go on. We buy new cars every time the ashtray gets dirty. Cadillac Escalades are driven by accountant and drug dealer alike. Many households own more vehicles than there are drivers.

Attachment to physical objects is discouraged in both the Bible and Asian scriptures. Matthew's Gospel implores, "Don't lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal."

Lao Tsu's Tao Te Ching mirrors this sentiment: "The sage has no attachment to anything. ... If the sage does not buy treasures then the people won't want to steal them." Buddhism insists that clear consciousness depends on being unattached to worldly things.

It is easy to succumb to the newness of technology -- every year the quality of computers, cellphones and MP3 players increases, as purchase prices drop.

Buddhist and Benedictine monks have laptops. Monasteries have Web sites.

If you "own" a house, then you know that you can never really own it. You are just its curator. You can whittle away the mortgage, but by the time you pay it off you will need a new roof. Buy a new computer and you will devote hours of your free time on calls to technical support. Buy a new car with XM Satellite radio and you will wrap it around a vintage telephone pole when someone talking on a cellphone cuts you off while you try to change the station.

Deuteronomy and Exodus warn of the dangers of coveting, not because there is an inherent evil in the material universe but rather an inherent weakness in minds that value objects over community and relationship.

We are witness to a generation of poor inner-city youth and rich arbitrageurs who share the same philosophy: You want it, you take it. This covetous mind-set is responsible for the arrogance and greed of Enron, just as it is responsible for drive-by shootings.

This same philosophy is embraced by every nation. The U.S. embraces thugs and swindlers to keep crude oil coming in. China fouls its air with more coal-burning power plants so that its citizens might enjoy a standard of living that mimics our own wasteful practices. In the meantime, Darfur refugees struggle for survival while Sunni Arabs murder their Shia brethren in a fierce power struggle fueled by unfathomable theological differences.

I won't even mention the mud-slinging electioneering that accompanies every battle for political power, from the lowest to the highest office in the land. Coveting power is even more of a full-time job than coveting goods.

Tim O'Toole of Albany likes to offer his unique insights on contemporary living.