

DIALLING DOWN

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SEPTEMBER: NEW SCHOOL YEAR FOR THE KIDS, AND BACK TO WORK. AUTUMN BRINGS WITH IT A BUZZ OF ENERGY – IT'S A TIME FOR FRESH STARTS. OR DOES IT ALL FEEL LIKE MORE OF THE SAME? *SUBLIME* CONSIDERS WHAT A SIMPLER LIFE MIGHT LOOK LIKE

The sound of the morning alarm, and our contempt for it, is probably one of just a few things that unite us as human beings. Loud or quiet, sharp or soft, it indicates the start of yet another day, kicking off a personal routine that we have honed to perfection to ensure maximum efficiency and punctuality. Leaving the house with a fully charged phone might even take precedence over eating a sustaining breakfast.

Not only do we fail to realise that there are various things we do that might harm us, we sometimes overlook our relationships with those close to us as well. But why would we notice? After all, what we're looking forward to is the end of the month, and enough cash to see us through to the next.

Essentially, we have grown up in a system that emphasises the importance of money. Without it, we won't keep a roof over our heads, we won't eat, clothe ourselves or provide ourselves and others with a comfortable standard of living. Even the notion of being happy is structured around the health of our bank account.

BUT WHAT IF, LIKE SOME, YOU BEGIN TO TIRE OF THE RAT race and decide to downshift your life, freeing you to make the most not only of your material possessions, but also the people around you? How easy is it to have a life that looks like this?

Leading a more sustainable lifestyle, one that cuts out the materialistic element, will still require money. But at a time in which the country's finances aren't in the best state, opting for fewer hours of work is a crucial sacrifice rather than a luxury. The rise of technology has brought with it great convenience, and has undoubtedly become a significant part of our lives. But there was a time not so long ago when we had the upper hand over technology, a time when we were easily able to switch off and give more attention to one another. The addictive drive within us to use technology is a big issue downshiftingers face.

Sally Lever, a coach, writer and educator, says: 'One of the criticisms I hear of downshifting and living more sustainably is that a collective move in this direction will take us "back to living in the dark ages". Somehow a slower, less highly technological way of life is perceived as "backward-facing".'

Adopting this idea and believing in it indicates the power and authority technology holds in our lives. Ask anyone how they got by without the internet and Google, and a blank look sweeps over their faces as they recollect a time where dial-up was deemed 'advanced'.

Achieving a downshifted lifestyle can also be particularly difficult in social terms. Lever highlights that simplicity is the driving force behind living sustainability and, to a large extent, this also applies to downshifting too, as you look to maximise the life span of what you own. 'Somehow we've come to associate progress with more

sophistication and complexity in our technology, and yet simplicity is often the more elegant solution and the more sustainable,' she points out.

There is sometimes a concern that those who downshift may become acutely isolated from society. Clive Hamilton, the founder and former director of The Australia Institute mentioned in his 2003 discussion paper *Downshifting in Britain: A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness* some of the socio-political implications for those who downshift. He explains that downshifting is sometimes regarded as an alternative way of living that simply coexists with what is deemed a normal lifestyle.

DOWNSHIFTERS 'REJECT THE LARGELY UNQUESTIONED ASSUMPTION OF BRITISH politics that voters respond first and foremost to the "hip-pocket nerve". These voters, who comprise at least a quarter of the adult population, might be called "anti-aspirational voters", and perhaps a similar number may dream of making the same shift but do not have the courage or, in some cases, the wherewithal, to make the transition to downshifting.'

The downshifting movement also challenges the very same ideas about how to improve society and one's individual life. Economically biased notions clash with those that downshiftingers hold as they avoid the depths of consumerism, while mainstream politics and the media strive to push a consumer lifestyle as an essential.

Even though downshifting isn't the dominant lifestyle in today's society, it is growing in popularity, as Hamilton points out: '[There is] a large class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism, at least in its more obsessive form. While diverse in their reasons for downshifting, they agree that excessive pursuit of money and materialism comes at a substantial cost to their own lives and those of their families. Some of them also believe that consumerism and money-hunger have social and environmental costs.'

Withdrawing yourself from the hustle and bustle of everyday life can be tricky and tedious, and even though a simpler life still requires a steady income, it offers much more in terms of quality than the busy lifestyle we're used to. But most of us won't make a significant change unless we are pushed to, as Lever describes in a 2008 article.

'If we get made redundant and decide to start our own business, for example, that business opportunity was always there ready for us to pick up whether we got made redundant or not. It's just that we do not generally go looking for those opportunities, or have the courage to act on our findings unless we feel forced to.'

But making that change can do you the world of good. Lever describes how the rat race resulted in her health becoming poor – not just in the physical sense, but also emotionally and spiritually. The importance of multitasking, and taking work home with you, can lead to conditions such as Busy Lifestyle Syndrome. The condition manifests itself as an increase in absent-mindedness and forgetfulness because of the never-ending stream of information people absorb.

Always being on the move and living in a never-ending work bubble influences you to make poorer choices for yourself, which, as a result, can have a detrimental effect on the environment around you. Lever's first major change was to embrace vegetarianism, learning about the wider impact of her diet and how her choice benefited her surroundings and animal welfare.

'I WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL AS THOUGH I WAS MAKING A LARGER CONTRIBUTION to society than just fixing myself.' A lot of what Lever and Hamilton say boils down to how one defines happiness. Is it that material objects and wealth equal true happiness, or is it much simpler – enjoying strong relationships and good health, and the ability to have control over your life?

Tracey Smith, who put together the first National Downshifting Week, has pursued a simpler lifestyle, scaling back on the things she doesn't need. 'Many people want to pull back from the throwaway, takeaway society we have found ourselves in. I would love a glass of champagne as much as the next person, but I don't need it.'

The most important element Tracey has taken from the whole experience has been passing down these values to her children, who have a full understanding of what it would mean to accumulate material possessions.

'My children realise that if they want consumables, it means that Mum and Dad have to work harder, which in their eyes equates to less playtime with Mum and Dad.'

Smith's insight strongly suggests that downshifting appears to be not just a matter of saving money, but about doing some soul-searching to find out what really makes you happy. While people know that

non-material hopes will bring them happiness, the eroding effect of materialism on society presents a conflict of values.

IT'S A CONCERN THAT RUNS DEEP: HAMILTON REVEALS THAT AN OVERWHELMING number of people are concerned about the set of values they're leaving for their children. Younger generations are becoming more and more tech-savvy, which poses a problem with new products being consistently introduced to the market, boosting what is already a huge consumer sector. What needs to dawn on people is the same thing that Lever realised, prompting her to make changes.

'When I consume technology for technology's sake, then what I'm effectively doing is wasting valuable time and energy on a new gadget simply because I think it's clever or pretty, or that it says something wonderful about my identity,' she explains.

Swimming against the tide of a materialistic society is much easier said than done. But commitment to change, and acting on what our conscience may be prompting, can pave the way for others, teaching valuable life lessons that don't revolve around a large bank balance. Sustaining relationships and building a blissful life is the definition of happiness that downshifting reflects – as well as an exit strategy from society's rat race. ■

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