

## Book Review

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*Happier People Healthier Planet: How Putting Wellbeing First Would Help Sustain Life on Earth.* By Teresa Belton. (2014). Bristol, UK: SilverWood Books. 372 pp.

In her ground-breaking book *Happier People Healthier Planet*, Teresa Belton echoes the claim of many great writers and thinkers over the past century that materialism is a psychological, emotional and spiritual dead-end. Material possessions generally and consumer goods in particular have proven to be inadequate containers for all the values attributed to them or invested in them. The tragic irony of our modern civilisation's frenetic preoccupation with getting and hoarding is that our overvalued possessions have become increasingly devoid of any real meaning, a flood of "stuff" – interchangeable, disposable items that induce attitudes of carelessness and habits of waste in the average consumer. Materialism also fuels war and strife as a growing human population competes with increasing desperation for scarce non-renewable material resources, including basics such as clean air, clean water and fertile soil. A materialistic, consumer-oriented society is therefore highly unlikely to deliver on its promises of peace and plenty.

But Belton takes these important insights a step further with her contention that the cultivation of personal wellbeing and the shrinking of unrealistic and unsustainable material expectations are inextricably linked. Her radical and very optimistic proposal is that the proper understanding and pursuit of the wellsprings of personal and social wellbeing will actually serve to contribute to the creation of a sustainable life for human beings on Earth. The key to supporting such a claim will be found in evidence that personal wellbeing is best served by living according to values that play out as lifestyles of modest consumption. In other words, prioritising the sources of deep and enduring wellbeing over the pursuit of money and acquisition, which will need to be practised principally by the members of the developed world – those who already possess more than they need – is not only essential to the global sustainability and wellbeing of the planet, but can promote happiness at the individual level.

Is this true? Are individuals who focus on making a positive contribution to the world, being in contact with the natural world, being creative, appreciating even the small benefits that life brings them, and so on, rather than on money and the spending opportunities it provides, actually happier than immodest consumers? Belton's study of "Modest Consumers" suggests that this is so, although the results of the study are not without some ambiguity. But if willing material modesty does indeed enhance happiness and personal wellbeing, can a critical mass of immodest consumers become convinced of this truth for themselves? Can they alter their lifestyles accordingly? Belton's book seeks to make a contribution to this much-needed sea change.

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Psychotherapists take note. Much of the malaise that afflicts our middleclass and above clients today could be diagnosed as a disorder of rising expectations and a stressful striving for upward mobility (or reactions to that striving) that produce anxiety and disappointment instead of satisfaction and contentment. Treatment of this condition, which has come to be known as “Affluenza”, requires a degree of mindfulness about our own parallel process and countertransference responses to this syndrome. Most of us pay some lip service to the general idea that the personal is political. Here is an opportunity to experiment with incorporating our political awareness of the larger systems within which we live our lives, such as materialism, capitalism, and globalism, into the practical work of therapy as we assist our clients to process the unthought knowns in their lives.

Perhaps the weakest link in Belton’s book is the relative infrequency with which she offers a critical perspective that addresses the sociology and sociometry of power. Belton’s primary interest is in empowering individuals, which would, in turn, become collective values and political priorities. Her decision is to stay faithful to the many small steps that ordinary people can achieve if and when they decide to alter their own consumerist tendencies and re-evaluate what really matters to them. Of course, Belton is well aware that our efforts to raise our collective consciousness about our human condition are profoundly impacted and impeded by global economic and political forces that consistently work for profit and growth and equally consistently work against eco-justice and sustainability. More attention to the “hidden curriculum” of capitalism and globalism might be helpful to people seeking to free themselves from a consumerist mind-set. This caveat notwithstanding, Belton has made a significant contribution to the literature on sustainability, living an intentional, values-informed life, and learning to recognize and resist the siren song of a dominant culture of materialism and consumerism that promises so much and delivers so little, while destroying our planetary life-support systems.