

Progress.
Progress?

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In memory of Alison Wenck and all good people who have passed on without sparing time to smell the flowers, victims of the values that dominate our society today.

The survival of our children and this planet depends on our reassessment of these values and the role they play in our lives.

About the author

Angela Tam has no MBA, holds no teaching position at any prestigious tertiary institution and boasts of no impressive title from a multinational corporation. Unfortunately, by virtue of residency in an economically advanced but environmentally backward city, she has a ghastly ecological footprint.

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Introduction

One Saturday many years ago I bumped into a friend on the street. She was an Australian publisher I deeply respected because back when I was starting out as a young freelance writer she not only gave me a chance to build up a portfolio by giving me attractive assignments, she was also fair, always paying a good fee on time.

Instead of her usual warm and confident self, though, on this particular Saturday afternoon she looked distinctly embarrassed and uncomfortable. Being a forthright Aussie, it didn't take her long to confess the reason. She muttered something about being about to fly home for a holiday and shopping for something for her daughter. She felt embarrassed, she said, because she was casually dressed and shorn of make-up, looking quite unlike her usually power-dressed, wheeling-dealing self, and there she was, face-to-face with a business contact.

She was still the same wonderful person to me, but she didn't feel the same way. This was a woman who had, from humble beginnings as an advertising sales, worked her way up until she became the publisher of a highly regarded magazine who was on equal terms with some of the most powerful executives in town. Appearance was very important, of course, in the business world; so much so that, without the packaging that had helped her move up the corporate ladder, she felt as though she was naked, with some kind of power having been taken away from her. She didn't seem to see that it was her warm personality, sense of fair play and diligence that got her where she was.

She was in her 50s – still young for a senior executive – and was looking forward to expanding her business. Unfortunately, when I called her some months later, I discovered that she had died suddenly, her dream of a business empire unfulfilled.

How many of us work hard just like my friend, with dreams for more business and a better future? In order to do that, we make sure that everything we do is geared towards making the most of every minute we have. In today's crazy world, some of us may work, not nine-to-five, but more like nine-to-nine sometimes, so that we can earn enough to buy a nice house, enjoy holidays abroad – and earn more still. Doesn't matter if we have to eat takeaways and, when we get home from work, we only have enough energy to plonk down in front of the TV; because we will have made the money to, hopefully, guarantee a comfortable future. Well, that was the idea for those of us fortunate enough to belong to the well-off segment of the middle class, until the credit crisis wiped out much of this group's savings and investments. For those lower down the social ladder, the hours are just as long if not longer and the body even more tired at the end of the day; a decent meal is already a treat, and the idea of saving for the future doesn't exist at all.

Everyone wants health and happiness right? So how come millions of us are ruining ours? Life has not been the same since the Industrial Revolution. We first found a way to produce cheap cotton clothing for everyone. Then came everything else: the cars, the household appliances, the holidays. Yes, at one point London, the British capital where it all started, was called "the great stink" because the combination of industrial production and concentration of urban population produced such a potent sewage that the smell from the Thames caused Members of Parliament to faint. But a civil engineer by the name of Joseph Bazalgette devised a sewage network that solved the problem.¹ Or did he?

Let's set that question aside for the moment. Let's focus on the progress we've made. Remember, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, how long it took Elizabeth to receive the news of the reckless younger sister Lydia's elopement with Wickham, and how long it took her to rush home from one part of rural England to another to be with her elder sister Jane? Days. How

long does it take to travel from London to Paris on the Eurostar train today? Two hours fifteen minutes.

We human beings have come a long way, haven't we? Those of us in the developed world are living longer, healthier lives, with all the comforts and conveniences offered by modern living. While other animals continue on survival mode, we have devised technological marvel after technological marvel, consistently improving our quality of life. Some work may still require physical toil, but go home and there are all the wonderful appliances – dishwasher, washing machine, microwave ... - taking the toil away from us.

The choice of entertainment gets broader by the day. We now have cable TV, broadband TV, playstations, DVDs and iPods. And we can always stay in touch through our camera phones and social networking sites. It's a bit annoying, of course, when the boss can reach you anytime, any place, but at least you do get to physically get away from it all, what with all the cheap holiday packages available nowadays.

And it's not just the holidays; everything's getting cheaper too. We can dress well even if all we ever do is pick up the bargains on discount days. Food too, is good value. In fact, we eat so well obesity has become a top concern, but hey, there are as many exercise routines as diets to help us shed the extra pounds. Besides, medical advances mean that more and more diseases, obesity-related or not, can now be cured or at least brought under control. We can pop a pill for high blood pressure, and we can pop a pill for diabetes. We may have to adjust our lifestyle a bit if we have these problems, but all in all we can continue our lives pretty normally.

In my grandmother's days, in the 1950s, the telephone was such a precious commodity that it cost thousands of dollars to rent a line, and then each call was put through manually by an operator, so unless there's something pretty important to say, people didn't call each other. In those days the radio was a huge and amazing box that delivered news like there was

an invisible stranger in the house, and everything that came out of it commanded the whole family's attention. Today, you can get a prepaid sim card for your mobile for the price of a set lunch. There are no more operators, only telesales who call incessantly to push the latest calling plans, and – radio? Try podcast instead.

So why aren't we happy? Never mind climate change; we've been unhappy long before this global warming business threatens to derail our lifestyle. Why?

We've heard that wealth doesn't bring happiness, hence the 1990s TV series and subsequent book *Affluenza*² drawing people's attention to this problem. The thing is, how do we come by our wealth? Working our socks off, that's how. Having to neglect friends and family and risk our health to make what we make. That's why there are people urging others to work less; there are even people who boast of taking naps everyday – in the process turning a healthy habit into something of a status symbol.

Now that's another thing, status symbol. We work for them! The fancy car and the condo in the smart district, the branded shoes, suits and watches, you name it. It's such hard work keeping up with the Joneses, no wonder we're unhappy. We're so stressed out by modern life that the UK's Drinking Water Inspectorate found traces of Prozac in the country's water³, we're using so much of the anti-depressant. That's a problem even Joseph Bazalgette couldn't have solved. All kinds of deformities and cancers are afflicting people in both developed and developing countries because there is so much pollution and chemicals. And ever wonder why we suffer so many allergies?

The credit crisis may have forced some of us to review our living arrangements, but desperate attempts to return, even to a more modest degree, to the way of life that became familiar to us before the crisis means that we are still far from achieving equilibrium. And the struggle will continue for as long as we

accept without question the values that are implied by the things and concepts that we use or encounter everyday. We have come to be driven by them, without realising it, even though they make us – and the planet as a whole – very unhappy indeed.

And if you think, like so many media commentators do, that the crisis will finally put paid to the excesses that have brought us so much grief, think again: far from reviewing our values and priorities, we are looking to our governments to step on the pedal, eager to avoid the necessary pain of a major transition and opting instead to have things restored to the way they've been for the past thirty or so years. This despite the fact that the planet is on the verge of collapse and we are ourselves suffering the consequences – to our wealth, health, relationships and sense of wholeness.

This book is an attempt to unravel the assumptions associated with concepts we have come to take for granted and, in the process, make us see clearly what they are doing to us. The concepts discussed here have come to be accepted as unquestionably good, even though they actually contain serious negative implications.

It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the concepts that we've come to embrace without question, with definitions obtained from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and the Random House Unabridged Dictionary. The second part contains a vision of what life would be like if our view of these concepts and the lifestyle associated with them were to undergo a radical change. There is nothing radical about the vision itself: the technologies already exist and in pockets around the world there are communities that already live this way. However, unless it is embraced by the rest of us, we will not see the positive change that will drive us towards true progress.

I hope you find food for thought in these pages.

Part I

Chapter I

Convenience

*Convenience: something (as an appliance, device, or service) conducive to comfort or ease; freedom from discomfort*⁴

Our modern lifestyle would not be possible without this concept. Can you imagine life without the washing machine? Or the microwave?

Think of all the things that enable us to fit so much into a day. Let's start with breakfast – at least, for those of us who do eat our breakfast. Some of us may be lucky enough to have a cooked breakfast; for the majority of people though, breakfast is a piece of toast or cereals straight out of a box. For those who can't be bothered with breakfast, the morning ritual may be a cup of instant coffee or a stop by the café on the way to the office. For lunch, we may go out to a nice restaurant once in a while, but mostly it's a lunchbox eaten in the office or a trip to the fast food restaurant for a quick meal that will give us time to go to the bank or run some other errands.

Some of us may be too tired to cook at the end of a long day, or we're not that good at cooking anyway, so we'd order some takeaway or a ready-meal to eat in front of the TV. We'd stick our clothes into the washing machine or, for those who have the money but not the time, perhaps take the lot to a cleaner's who'd wash and iron the clothes for us.

As we have less and less time to do anything other than work, more and more products are developed to make things more convenient for us, so we can cope with this lifestyle. Think of all the things we can use then simply throw away,

without the need to clean them or take care of them in any way. Like the takeaway. Or the disposable razors. Or, for that matter, most of the food and drinks in the supermarket, all treated and packaged to be delivered to us in such a way that they can be consumed and their packaging thrown out. Some brains even invented ring pulls so that, for example, instead of labouring with a can opener and worrying about sharp edges, we can just lift the ring and open a can of beans, which we can then simply re-heat, without having to go through the trouble of soaking them overnight first.

The result of taking the concept of convenience for granted, as we are becoming aware, is the amount of waste that has accumulated in the world. In theory, with a bit of effort put into waste separation and recycling, much of this rubbish can be turned into products again, but at what price?

Have you heard about this village in the southern Chinese province of Guangzhou, where migrant workers paid a pittance to sift through literally mountains of waste shipped in from the UK, much of it still sporting the labels of the supermarkets that used it?⁵ The waste clogs and pollutes the waterways so that the water is no longer drinkable or usable for irrigation; rather it smells and damages the health of residents.

The process of turning this waste into products again also takes water and energy, at a time when water has become an increasingly scarce resource and fossil fuels are contributing to global warming.

What could be an alternative to a lifestyle based on convenience? In my grandmother's days, someone who ran out of salt or sugar for the kitchen would have to bring a container with them to the grocer's round the street corner so the grocer could top it up. It may seem inconvenient to us, but not to my grandmother's generation; it's just a matter of habit. In many parts of the world plastic bags are being banned, forcing people to bring their own reusable bags with them when they

go shopping; the approach can be extended to a lot of things. Essentials like salt and sugar for one, because there is little point in product differentiation, which is what packaging is used for, as a marketing tool as much as a material for holding things for sale.

But what about things that do need product differentiation? Maybe one brand of biscuits really is better than another? Well, where does the flavour come from? Do we really want to eat all the artificial additives and preservatives that keep these biscuits crispy and fresh? The danger has been sufficiently significant to prompt the UK's Food Standards Agency to introduce a voluntary ban on the use of six colouring agents.⁶ The scientific community has not fully established that all the artificial substances added to food are harmful, because the chemicals of which these substances are made have only been created in the past few decades. Still, some have been confirmed as causes of hyperactivity and disruptive behaviour in children.⁷

Think of all the additives and preservatives that we've put in our bodies because we've opted to have a ready-meal rather than prepare something fresh. Wouldn't it be better to buy freshly baked cookies from the local baker instead? They may not be so convenient – you can't leave them in a cupboard and expect them to last a month – but chances are, being freshly made by human beings rather than a factory production line, they are tastier. And you can put the cookies in a container you've brought along too, just to keep the amount of waste associated with the purchase to a minimum.

But in some places it can be terribly 'inconvenient' to live like that. I remember visiting a friend in San Francisco years ago. She was worried about what I could do while she went back to work the day after I arrived, so I told her there'd be plenty to keep me occupied just exploring the neighbourhood. Just tell me where the shops are, I said, so if I needed anything I'd know where to get them. Oh, the shops, she thought, they're just five minutes away. So she gave me some simple

instructions: out the door, turn left till I reached the junction, take a right and then a left at the next junction and carry on till I hit the main road. There are some shops there, she said.

What didn't occur to her to tell me, though, was that her "five minutes" were calculated in driving terms. I set off the next day, beginning with an 'exploration' of the neighbourhood that yielded nothing but a heavy dose of middle-class suburban monotony. Giving up, I decided to head for the shops, and walked, and walked. Well, I certainly had no problem killing the time that day. After a good hour, I finally hit the main road – and spotted nothing more than a pharmacy and a couple of small restaurants.

A few days later we did go shopping for food and other things, which involved driving way out of town to an enormous shopping complex with a sprawling car park where everybody was pushing around trolleys full of huge packets of processed foods. Coming from a compact city where people can walk to the shops to buy freshly made food, that was quite an eye-opener.

Homo sapiens have a knack for creating problems that they then proceed to overcome with complicated solutions. The demand for convenience accounts for not a few. Because we enjoy the convenience, for example, of being able to do all our shopping in one place, big conglomerates buy up greenfield sites the first chance they get, to build sprawling complexes where we can get our groceries, furniture, petrol, etc, all at once before driving straight home. How much green cover have we lost because of this? And how 'inconvenient' it's become to have to drive to these complexes rather than take a short walk to a few little shops nearer home? Oil prices may have gone down, but oil-producing countries have become accustomed to the affluence that high oil prices bring them and are also well aware that they have to control supply carefully so as not to run out too soon and blow their economies as a consequence – which means high oil prices will become the norm.

So we lack exercise, thanks to all this driving around, and worse still, our already unhealthy diet is made worse by the portions we get. Visitors to the US are always shocked at the food portions they get at restaurants, but that's not all: you also get supersized packs of everything at the supermarket. It's convenient, you see: bigger packs means you don't have to go back for more as quickly. Alas, researchers have already discovered that the actual amount we eat is influenced by the portion we're given, and the bigger the portion, the more we have; and the same goes with the gigantic packs of crisps, cokes and what-nots.⁸ They don't last longer at all; we just devour more of them, in record time.

And as you can see, how our cities are designed can make a huge difference to the degree of convenience we need.

The modern concept of convenience is as old as the Industrial Revolution itself. The discovery of electricity in the 19th century was followed by the invention of the electric motor, which was applied to the design of production lines, thus making it possible to mass-produce goods. We wouldn't think of our clothes as a convenience today, but before the Industrial Revolution sewing was very much a chore rather than a hobby.

In the 1900s inventors began to take advantage of electricity to come up with household appliances, starting with James Murray Spangler's portable vacuum cleaner in 1907,⁹ which William Hoover, the husband of Spangler's cousin, improved on and successfully marketed until almost every American household had one. The first practical domestic washing machine appeared on the scene in 1922, when the Maytag Company developed an agitator system that forced water through the clothes, which was a departure from early attempts that imitated the manual process of dragging clothes over a hard surface.¹⁰

These appliances certainly freed women from many tyrannies of home, but they also sowed an acceptance of the concept of convenience that has remained unquestioned even

as it extended its reach beyond the earth's ability to cope with its implications. And appliances are not the only problem; think of all the packaging that is being thrown out. Yes, you can recycle a lot of the plastic, but the recycling process itself uses a lot of water and electricity, and we're running out of the former and struggling to get enough of the latter from renewable sources. And even though, in theory, most waste packaging can be recycled nowadays, not every place provides the service, because, for example, the infrastructure may be there to recycle waste paper but not waste beverage cartons – or glass bottles, or aluminium foils. Which means some if not most of it still ends up in landfills.

Governments are now talking product responsibility schemes that require manufacturers to take back appliances that have reached the end of their service life, but this is still very much just talk in a small number of countries. In most parts of the world, old appliances are still carelessly discarded or taken apart, polluting whole towns and producing toxic waste mountains that kill the poor by the scores, over time or in one fell swoop, when they collapse without warning.

The little conveniences are the worst when it comes to adding waste to landfills, because we don't notice them at all: the latte that sometimes comes in two paper cups so our hands won't get burned; the mobile phones that we throw away after a year in favour of the latest, hippest models; the canned and bottled drinks that we buy from the supermarket. It would never occur to us to brew our own coffee in the office or bring a mug with us to the café; or to use the same mobile phone for years and years; or have a simple glass of water, which doesn't contain all the teeth-rotting sugar commercial drinks have.

Meanwhile, have you ever wondered why, despite all the appliances making it easier for us to finish household chores that used to take hours, we somehow haven't got more time? In some parts of the developed world it is common to have the ultimate convenience – domestic help – and yet we still don't seem to have any spare time. So what is the point of all this convenience?

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in there, so we hope you'd
consider it.