

On My Mind  
by Ruth L. Tighe

I've become the victim of consumerism, of planned obsolescence, of modern society's conviction that economics is the only solution to the world's ills. The hard drive on the lap-top computer I bought just three years ago is deteriorating so badly, so quickly, that I can only access my word processor by running "scandisk" every two to three days. But replacing the hard drive won't increase my computer's memory so that I can load Windows 98 instead of the 3.1 version I now have, and which I need to do to solve my Y2K problem. And replacing the hard drive won't speed up either my operating system or my modem.

As if that weren't bad enough, my printer, which I also bought just three years ago, has just died, completely. There's no "scandisk" equivalent to keep it limping along. The computer technician tells me it needs a new mother board, about as expensive as a new printer.

Thanks to the way computers and printers are being designed, I don't have much of an alternative if I want to continue being able to use a computer, print out what I've written, from home. I'm going to have to buy new ones.

But that's good for the economy, I'm told. It keeps people employed to design new short-life computers and printers, to dig out or otherwise create the materials that go into computer and printer manufacturing, to work the machines that produce the parts and assemble the products, to design and test the software, to pack and transport the finished goods, to demonstrate and sell them in the stores. According to that theory, that point of view, if computer and printers could last five or ten years - or even longer - it would put a lot of people all up and down the line out of work.

What that point of view does not consider is the negative side of the picture. That taking minerals, like copper, out of the earth uses up non-renewable resources, and, in all likelihood, also destroys the environment through poor mining practices. That the synthetic materials used in computers and printers are non-biodegradable, and use up space filling landfills. That the factories where parts are made and assembled use up more non-renewable resources such as coal, or oil, to power the equipment, and often emit air-polluting smoke. That designing and testing software uses up a lot of money and creativity that might be put to better use finding cures for cancer, or AIDS. That packing those finished products generates a demand for more non-biodegradable plastic, which uses up more space filling landfills. That transporting the products to the sales outlets consumes more non-renewable petroleum products. And that the space to demonstrate and sell those products consumes land, and power - derived from non-renewable resources - and water, thus depleting the water tables.

Nor is this true only of computers and printers. It is just as true of automobiles, vans and pick-ups. Of toasters and microwave ovens and gas or electric ranges. Of freezers and refrigerators, fans, air conditioners, washers and dryers. Of the weapons of war.

As is pointed out in a book called "Global Mind Change: the Promise of the 21st Century" by

Willis Harman, society used to preach frugality - making do with what one had, and making what one had last. Harman claims that around 1950, when World War II was no longer fueling the economy, this was replaced by consumerism - the idea of using it up and throwing it away - in a deliberate effort to keep the economy strong. People were seduced into supporting the idea of planned obsolescence as a virtue, a worthwhile way of life.

To consume, in fact, means to "use up." Only now, as the second millennium approaches, are people beginning to become aware of, understand, acknowledge, the fact that earth is not a permanently renewable resource. That copper mined out of the ground does not re-generate. That species killed in slash-burn treatment of rainforests do not re-create themselves. That polluted air does not automatically re-cleanse itself. That water siphoned off to garment factories does not refill the water table. That life in filled-in coastland mangrove swamps just dies, it doesn't move elsewhere.

To survive in the 21st Century, Harman believes, the world's inhabitants must go through a "mind change," shifting the focus away from consumerism. Instead, the focus should be on achieving harmony with nature, harmony with one another, respect for individual worth and diverse cultures, the globalization of global issues.

An impossible goal? According to Harman, this shift is already in evidence - though only on a small scale. The search for natural materials, for organic foodstuffs, for "back-to-nature" life-styles is one indication of this shift. The growing awareness that one country's treatment of its natural resources has world-wide implications is another. As are the efforts of citizen-groups to protect endangered species, pristine coastlines, to protest use of nuclear arms and energy, to promote conservation and use of renewable energy.

Unfortunately, such efforts do not seem to have affected the computer, and for the time being, I am forced to continue the consumerism pattern: use it up, throw it out. But one of these days....

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