

Your Lifestyle Has Already Been Designed

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Well I'm in the working world again. I've found myself a well-paying gig in the engineering industry, and life finally feels like it's returning to normal after my nine months of traveling.

Because I had been living quite a different lifestyle while I was away, this sudden transition to 9-to-5 existence has exposed something about it that I overlooked before.

Since the moment I was offered the job, I've been markedly more careless with my money. Not stupid, just a little quick to pull out my wallet. As a small example, I'm buying expensive coffees again, even though they aren't nearly as good as New Zealand's exceptional flat whites, and I don't get to savor the experience of drinking them on a sunny café patio. When I was away these purchases were less off-handed, and I enjoyed them more.

I'm not talking about big, extravagant purchases. I'm talking about small-scale, casual, promiscuous spending on stuff that doesn't really add a whole lot to my life. And I won't actually get paid for another two weeks.

In hindsight I think I've always done this when I've been well-employed — spending happily during the “flush times.” Having spent nine months living a no-income backpacking lifestyle, I can't help but be a little more aware of this phenomenon as it happens.

I suppose I do it because I feel I've regained a certain stature, now that I am again an amply-paid professional, which seems to entitle me to a certain level of wastefulness. There is a curious feeling of power you get when you drop a couple of twenties without a trace of critical thinking. It feels good to exercise that power of the dollar when you know it will “grow back” pretty quickly anyway.

What I'm doing isn't unusual at all. Everyone else seems to do this. In fact, I think I've only returned to the normal consumer mentality after having spent some time away from it.

One of the most surprising discoveries I made during my trip was that I spent much less per month traveling foreign counties (including countries more expensive than Canada) than I did as a regular working joe back home. I had much more free time, I was visiting some of the most beautiful places in the world, I was meeting new people left and right, I was calm and peaceful and otherwise having an unforgettable time, and somehow it cost me much less than my humble 9-5 lifestyle here in one of Canada's least expensive cities.

It seems I got much more for my dollar when I was traveling. Why?

A Culture of Unnecessaries

Here in the West, a lifestyle of unnecessary spending has been deliberately cultivated and nurtured in the public by big business. Companies in all kinds of industries have a huge stake in the public's penchant to be careless with their money. They will seek to encourage the public's habit of casual or non-essential spending whenever they can.

In the documentary *The Corporation*, a marketing psychologist discussed one of the methods she used to increase sales. Her staff carried out a study on what effect the nagging of children had on their parents' likelihood of buying a toy for them. They found out that 20% to 40% of the purchases of their toys *would not have occurred* if the child didn't nag its parents. One in four visits to theme parks would not have taken place. They used these studies to market their products directly to children, encouraging them to nag their parents to buy.

This marketing campaign alone represents many millions of dollars that were spent because of demand that was completely manufactured.

“You can manipulate consumers into wanting, and therefore buying, your products. It's a game.” ~ Lucy Hughes, co-creator of “The Nag Factor”

This is only one small example of something that has been going on for a very long time. Big companies didn't make their millions by earnestly promoting the virtues of their products, they made it by creating a culture of hundreds of millions of people that buy way more than they need and try to chase away dissatisfaction with money.

We buy stuff to cheer ourselves up, to keep up with the Joneses, to fulfill our childhood vision of what our adulthood would be like, to broadcast our status to the world, and for a lot of other psychological reasons that have very little to do with how useful the product really is. How much stuff is in your basement or garage that you haven't used in the past year?

The real reason for the forty-hour workweek

The ultimate tool for corporations to sustain a culture of this sort is to develop the 40-hour workweek as the normal lifestyle. Under these working conditions people have to build a life in the evenings and on weekends. This arrangement makes us naturally more inclined to spend heavily on entertainment and conveniences because our free time is so scarce.

I've only been back at work for a few days, but already I'm noticing that the more wholesome activities are quickly dropping out of my life: walking, exercising, reading, meditating, and extra writing.

The one conspicuous similarity between these activities is that they cost little or no money, but they take time.

Suddenly I have a lot more money and a lot less time, which means I have a lot more in common with the typical working North American than I did a few months ago. While I was abroad I wouldn't have thought twice about spending the day wandering through a national park or reading my book on the beach for a few hours. Now that kind of stuff feels like it's out of the question. Doing either one would take most of one of my precious weekend days!

The last thing I want to do when I get home from work is exercise. It's also the last thing I want to do after dinner or before bed or as soon as I wake, and that's really all the time I have on a weekday.

This seems like a problem with a simple answer: work less so I'd have more free time. I've already proven to myself that I can live a [fulfilling lifestyle](#) with less than I make right now. Unfortunately, this is close to impossible in my industry, and most others. You work 40-plus hours or you work zero. My clients and contractors are all firmly entrenched in the standard-workday culture, so it isn't practical to ask them not to ask anything of me after 1pm, even if I could convince my employer not to.

The eight-hour workday developed during the industrial revolution in Britain in the 19th century, as a respite for factory workers who were being exploited with 14- or 16-hour workdays.

As technologies and methods advanced, workers in all industries became able to produce much more value in a shorter amount of time. You'd think this would lead to shorter workdays.

But the 8-hour workday is too profitable for big business, not because of the amount of work people get done in eight hours (the average office worker gets less than three hours of actual work done in 8 hours) but because it makes for such a purchase-happy public. Keeping free time scarce means people pay a lot more for convenience, gratification, and any other relief they can buy. It keeps them watching television, and its commercials. It keeps them unambitious outside of work.

We've been led into a culture that has been engineered to leave us tired, hungry for indulgence, willing to pay a lot for convenience and entertainment, and most importantly, vaguely dissatisfied with our lives so that we continue wanting things we don't have. We buy so much because it always seems like something is still missing.

Western economies, particularly that of the United States, have been built in a very calculated manner on gratification, addiction, and unnecessary spending. We spend to cheer ourselves up, to reward ourselves, to celebrate, to fix problems, to elevate our status, and to alleviate boredom.

Can you imagine what would happen if all of America stopped buying so much unnecessary fluff that doesn't add a lot of lasting value to our lives?

The economy would collapse and never recover.

All of America's well-publicized problems, including obesity, depression, pollution and corruption are what it costs to create and sustain a trillion-dollar economy. For the economy to be “healthy”, America has to remain unhealthy. Healthy, happy people don't feel like they need much they don't already have, and that means they don't buy a lot of junk, don't need to be entertained as much, and they don't end up watching a lot of commercials.

The culture of the eight-hour workday is big business' most powerful tool for keeping people in this same dissatisfied state where the answer to every problem is to buy something.

You may have heard of Parkinson's Law. It is often used in reference to time usage: the more time you've been given to do something, the more time it will take you to do it. It's amazing how much you can get done in twenty minutes if twenty minutes is all you have. But if you have all afternoon, it would probably take way longer.

Most of us treat our money this way. The more we make, the more we spend. It's not that we suddenly *need* to buy more just because we make more, only that we *can*, so we do. In fact, it's quite difficult for us to avoid increasing our standard of living (or at least our rate of spending) every time we get a raise.

I don't think it's necessary to shun the whole ugly system and go live in the woods, pretending to be a deaf-mute, as Holden Caulfield often fantasized. But we could certainly do well to understand what big commerce really wants us to be. They've been working for decades to create millions of ideal consumers, and they have succeeded. Unless you're a real anomaly, your lifestyle has already been designed.

The perfect customer is dissatisfied but hopeful, uninterested in serious personal development, highly habituated to the television, working full-time, earning a fair amount, indulging during their free time, and somehow just getting by.

Is this you?

Two weeks ago I would have said hell no, that's not me, but if all my weeks were like this one has been, that might be wishful thinking.

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Ann
June 25, 2014 at 11:23 pm

Awesome post! Couldnt agree more



Richard
June 26, 2014 at 2:31 pm

I just wanted to say that I really agree with your closing.

I stopped being homeless about a year and a half ago. I was without a “real” job for roughly 2 years. [oddy, I had more on my plate while unemployed, but that's another story]

Coming back to “the normal world” has been a trip. There's all kinds of odd habits and expectations people hold, social codes and ques that were automatic and unnoticed before, but now I've had to (slowly) relearn them.

I still feel out of sync, in many ways. I'm partially reintegrated, but even just those two minor years leave me feeling out of place in a number of ways. It's really difficult to understand why people care about the things they care about, and it's strange to see how we differ.

[I also succumbed, immediately, to the “spend a bunch of money” the moment I had money again. I'm getting back on the other side of that — but I miss having time to think, all the same.]

Just thought I'd share that I feel like I know where you're coming from.



Lucy
June 26, 2014 at 5:29 pm

This is a superb read! Also it's worth adding that your employers keep you tied up for 40 hours to wear you down leaving you little time to learn to fish for yourself i.e. become self-employed and starting your own business, they don't want to lose their dependent wage-slave, they want you in a trap!



HP
June 26, 2014 at 7:33 pm

Read this article... and immediately came across a great antidote from Australia... (I work from home now...)

<http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/instead-sad-ads-animal-rescue-happy-dogs-walking-humans-see-100-adoption/>



Morin
June 26, 2014 at 10:36 pm

Great post! Couldn't describe the situation better! We managed to “escape” this 40 hour workweek cycle a year ago. It's not easy but I believe its manageable and definitely healthier – less working, more traveling and having a free time to actually live.



Harmaan
June 27, 2014 at 5:04 am

Very well written. Very articulate, and to the point.

However, one key takeaway has to be that a lot of this realisation, or this epiphany if you could call it that, happened while you were travelling. This is important, because space or distance often helps us to achieve clarity.

The "mouse on the wheel" syndrome is a self-fulfilling cycle which affects not just North Americans, but most working class people the world over.

Also, what you pointed out about working either full-time or not at all also holds true for most professionals, and so it ends up being a fait accompli for most.

In light of these, the best we can hope for is to take an annual holiday, and limit our unnecessary expenditures otherwise.



Chris Haslage

June 27, 2014 at 7:46 am

First, I love the article.

Second, can you change "deaf-mute" to just "deaf". Deaf-mute is an old term that is very disparaging. It may not mean anything to you, but for me and many others like me it means a lot. Read this for why: <http://eamo.org/SNA/deaf%20PC%20terminology.pdf>

Thanks!



brydangerr

June 27, 2014 at 1:41 pm

I feel your pain.

We left our jobs to travel 2 years ago. Now the very premise of a 40 hour work week seems completely ridiculous.

We are trying to fight against "the cycle" in every way possible...got rid of the stuff, the car payments, the mortgage. Now trying to make ends meet without hopping back on the hamster wheel.

It's incredible the shift in logic. The values and passions that we have now. Life is far too short to live in a cubicle, to live with stress, or to live trying to keep up with "the joneses"...



Jeremy

June 28, 2014 at 7:39 pm

My wife hates when I read articles like this (I think for fear we will end up in a van down by the river). But I think there's a lot of truth to this, and sadly too many of us have bought into it. I just don't see a lot of solutions being presented, and I don't think we can say that everything technology or things like the Maker Movement have brought us are not helpful.



Julie

June 29, 2014 at 10:03 pm

My husband (also an engineer) and I have returned from 10 months of travelling about 8 months ago, and your article rings true with our experience in every way.

We're already back in the rut we desperately wanted to break away from in the first place. We both have full time jobs again, and as you've said, we're spending more frivolously because we can, and because we no longer have all the time in the world to enjoy things at a slower pace.

Our friends and family would prefer that we conform to the rules that society has dictated so that we're around, but it all feels so unfulfilling and meaningless... I already want to take off again.



Rudy

July 3, 2014 at 12:09 pm

This reminds of the field of public health, where we know from research that larger systems (economic, racial, political) have big impacts on population health. And those working in it want to assume that the individual has almost no ability to fight against these massive and, in the minds of many, oppressive forces. Everything of course is easier if you have money—health, exercise, access to good schools, jobs, etc—and so if you lack such luxuries you are trapped and worse off. I do not entirely buy that and actually think that individuals have a lot of personal responsibility to shoulder. But the proportion of "individual responsibility" to control one's destiny is definitely going to be determined by the cards we're dealt. Sure, I'm brainwashed every day and told to shop and eat crap food that leaves me prone to chronic diseases. But I also walk and cook my own healthy food, and shop very little too. Nothing is really black and white. Nothing.

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