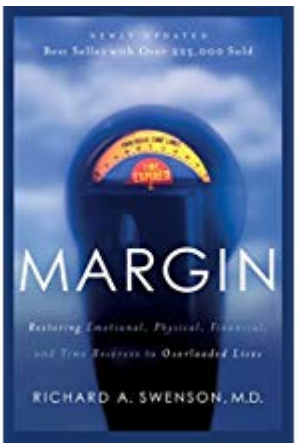
Margin: Space Between Ourselves and Our Limits

Margin is "The space that once existed between ourselves and our limits." When we reach the limits of our resources and abilities, we are out of margin. Former Probe staffer Lou Whitworth reviews a very important book by Dr. Richard Swenson, Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need.

The Problem with Progress



Until very recently most Americans had a blind faith in progress; we acknowledged that modern life brought problems but considered that such were inevitable and could be dealt with and eventually overcome. Over the past few years, however, discerning people have begun to ask, "What went wrong? With all the advancements we have made, life should be better. Instead, many aspects of our lives are worse than they were just a few years ago. What happened?"



In this article we are looking at a very important book by Richard A. Swenson, a medical doctor. The book is *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need*. Dr. Swenson's thesis is that though scientific progress benefits us in numerous ways, it also brings with it inevitable pains that must be ruthlessly resisted if one is to live a balanced life, and especially a life that reflects Christian values/virtues.

Margin is "the space that once existed between ourselves and

our limits.” When we reach the limits of our resources and abilities, we are out of margin. Progress, contrary to our expectations, is like Pacman; it incessantly eats up margin. Progress and margin are often opposing forces.

The author recognizes the pains of the past and acknowledges that life for previous generations was no picnic. Nevertheless, he amply illustrates the staggering number of challenges facing contemporary mankind, challenges that have no precedent in human history. The pace of modern life has been steamrolled by progress.

Many have resisted the notion that life in the waning years of the 20th century was unusually painful and stressful. After all, didn’t our history teach us of those intrepid men and women who crossed oceans and braved the harsh winters of the new world to have personal and religious freedom? Shouldn’t we be ashamed to complain about the stress in our lives when brave pioneer men, and their even braver wives, piled their children and all their belongings into covered wagons and headed west across unknown and unforgiving lands surrounded by potentially hostile Indians? Did not our fathers win World War II? After 50 years of strife and struggle and staring eyeball to eyeball with Russia, didn’t America finally face down the threat of world dominion by implacable, godless communism? Where then do we get off saying that life today is hard and stressful?

As Swenson clearly points out, without minimizing the horrors of the past, modern progress brings problems never before faced by mankind. Some of our problems are very different from those of the past perhaps, but they are real, formidable problems just the same. For example, a partial list of problems would include the speed of travel, the power of computers, levels of litigation, pervasiveness of the media, specialization, business layoffs, indebtedness, vulnerability to terrorism, spiraling medical costs, AIDS, numbers of teen mothers and illegitimate births, aging population, overcrowded

prisons, environmental pollution, overcrowding, traffic congestion, prevalence of divorce, disintegration of the family, drugs, prevalence of sexual diseases, complexity at all levels, and on and on the list could go. Never before have we had to face problems of this – and certainly we have never before had to face them all at the same time.

As Swenson writes, "Each item has played a significant role in making our era different from all those that preceded it. And when we factor in the interrelatedness of issues, the dimensions involved, and the speed of change, then unprecedented become too mild a word."

The Pain of Life Without Boundaries

In his book *Margin*, Dr. Swenson says that our problems have no precedent because of the rate of change. In the past we faced a slightly upward pattern of linear change; now we are looking at a skyrocketing pattern of exponential change in practically every area of life. Yet most of us still think and live with a linear mind-set. Suddenly we are encountering limits in our time, energy, health, finances, ability to concentrate, to care, to even feel. Minds, bodies, systems, plans that were adequate on a linear timescale may self-destruct at warp speed. We are perilously close to burnout. We hope beyond hope that things will level out and slow down, but even if that happens, much that makes life worthwhile and manageable will be destroyed in the meantime.

Examples abound of life without natural boundaries. Once it was a given that the night was for sleeping, and the day was for work. Now a hundred years after the electric light bulb, whole cities never sleep. Sunday was once a day of rest; nearly everyone had one day off from work. Now the boundaries between work and play and home and the office are so confused some people can never relax or let down. A few years back we might have known someone who had borne a child out of wedlock,

been divorced, had emotional problems, or gone bankrupt, but today we are in an epidemic of such problems.

Swenson asks, “Is there a critical mass of problems beyond which a society—or, for that matter, an individual—will be destroyed no matter how wonderful the benefits it enjoys? If so, what is that critical mass? Are we approaching it? Have we reached it?” He answers, Yes, there is a point of critical mass; what that point is we don’t know, but clearly we are approaching it. He says it remains to be seem whether we have already reached it. As George Gallup wrote, “I’ve come to feel a deep sense of urgency about the Future Forces at work today. . . . If swift, forceful steps aren’t taken to defuse the political and social time bombs facing us, we may well find ourselves on a track that could lead to the destruction of civilization as we know it.”

It is critical to note here that progress has brought man much power— power that can be used for good or for evil. The sobering truth, then, is that the power to do evil advances exponentially, and modern secular man is not known for restraint nor does he recognize his fallenness and the danger it holds for himself and all humanity.

We have benefited from progress in two main areas. First, we have seen positive gains in medicine, technology, and in our standard of living and material well being. Second, our intellectual and educational opportunities have expanded enormously, and knowledge and information are increasing with unimagined speed.

The pain that progress has brought us is evident in three areas. First, we have lost ground in the social sphere as pressures have increased on all relationships: family, friendships, neighborhoods, community spirit, and church life. Second, we are often emotionally drained, stressed, angry, isolated, and frequently unfulfilled and don’t know what to do about these problems. Third, we are spiritually weakened by

the pace of life, the lack of community, lack of time and energy to cultivate our relationship with God and with our fellow man. This, Dr. Swenson says, is the price we have paid for progress.

The Problem of Stress

Because of the unprecedented level of problems today people live with very high levels of stress. Stress is “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it.” Note that stress is not the circumstance but the response to the circumstance.

We normally think of such a crisis as the “fight or flight” reaction which pumps adrenaline into our system, makes us stronger and more alert, etc. If these responses are occasional there is little harm done, but if triggered too often or if “stuck” in a constant state of anger, rage, anxiety, fear, or frustration, we begin to overdose on our own adrenaline. This can bring about irreversible damage to the body and set it up for heart attack, stroke, cancer, etc.

Our stress levels are unprecedented. One reason is that most of us today experience constant mental strain without the offsetting benefits of strenuous physical work. When, for example, the commercial property deal we’ve worked on for months falls through, or the accounts don’t balance, or the computer just won’t cooperate, there is no place to run and no one to hit. We just have to try again. The physical laborer, even if he has some mental strain, still has the labor to drain off his adrenaline, and he usually has the ability to think about other things occasionally as he works.

Closely related to stress is overload; in fact, overload is a primary cause of stress. Our culture adds detail on top of detail; one more choice, one more option, one more change, and the details never end. “We must now deal with more ‘things per person’ than at any other time in history. Yet one can

comfortably handle only so many details in his or her life. Exceeding this threshold will result in disorganization or frustration. . . . The problem is not in the 'details.' The problem is in the 'exceeding.' This is called overloading."

The facts are that there are physical limits and man has performance limits, emotional limits, and mental limits. The work load a twenty-five year old athletic, single man can carry may differ greatly from the load a fifty-five year old man can carry if the latter has two teenage children and two children in college, dependent parents, and a wife in menopause. When such overload occurs, the person may experience anxiety, have a physical or nervous breakdown, exhibit hostility, slip into depression, or become bitter and resentful.

We are overloaded with activities, change, choices, commitments, competition, debt, decisions, education, expectations, fatigue, hurry, information, media, ministry, noise, people, pollution, possessions, problems, technology, traffic, waste, and work.

So why do we overload? First, we are usually unaware of our overload until it's too late. Second, some people are too conscientious. Third, others get overloaded because their bosses are driven people who overload their employees. Generally people don't intend to go down the path to overload; they just think that "one more thing won't hurt." But if they are at or near overload, it will hurt.

As the author says, learning "to accept the finality and non-negotiability of the twenty-four hour day" will help us avoid overload and excessive stress.

Building Margin into our Lives

Of all the areas in which we need margin, having adequate emotional energy is the most important because with emotional

margin one can work to gain the other margins.

The amount of emotional energy we have is finite and must not be squandered. Though it is difficult to measure and quantify we must not be embarrassed to admit to ourselves or to others when our emotional reservoir is low. Then we need to replenish our emotional reserves for the good of others and ourselves.

Restoring emotional margin is aided by cultivating our social and family support network. Serving others or doing volunteer work is proven to enhance and lengthen life. Extending forgiveness and reconciling relationships can stop the negative drain on our emotional stores. Cultivating a spirit of gratitude, a hopeful outlook, and love for God and our fellow human beings is energizing, whereas their opposites are negative and debilitating. Finally, establishing appropriate limits and boundaries will help in maintaining emotional reserves.

Dr. Swenson's recommendations for gaining a margin in physical energy are fairly routine to the knowledgeable reader, but he puts particular stress on the need for the need for rest and sleep. The need for correction is clear since America has now become a 24-hour society: many of our cities never sleep and many businesses never close. People of all types, college students, policemen, nurses, taxi drivers, shift workers, and mothers of young children, may go long periods without a good night's sleep. Such people push (or are pushed) to their limits during the day and push on into or through the night. Sleep disorders plague more than 50 million of us; in fact, sleep deprivation "has become one of the most pervasive problems facing the U.S." Unfortunately the ability to go without sleep is sometimes a matter of pride for some, but sleep and rest are God's ideas, and we should not be ashamed of our need for both. The author gives several helpful suggestions on making sleep more natural and effective.

Dr. Swenson strongly stresses the need for all types of

physical exercise, but says that aerobic exercise for the heart “will do more to establish margin in physical energy” than anything else. He endorses exercise not only for its physical benefits but also for its emotional and mental benefits.

When the subject turns to time the author writes, “The spontaneous flow of progress is to consume more of our time, not less . . . to consume more of our margin, not less.” He adds that for “every hour progress saves by organizing and technologizing our time, it consumes two more hours through the consequences, direct or indirect, of this activity.”

Clearly time becomes a problem for a society like ours. Some the author’s suggestions for countering the time crunch are countercultural and tough to implement, but then continuing on in the same direction most of us are going is difficult as well. He suggests practicing saying “No,” turning off the television, practicing simplicity, and getting less done but doing the right things. Many of us need to make some thoughtful and hard choices.

The author’s suggestions for gaining a margin in time are preceded with a reminder that of the ten top stressors of family life, four have to do with insufficient time: insufficient couple time, “me” time, family play time, and overscheduled family calendars.

Why do we need to prune our time wasters? Because time is for people and relationships, subjects very dear to God.

A Plan of Action

There are many ways we can spend our time. We could follow the “Excellence” gurus and pour all our energy into one part of our lives. We would probably have no extra margin since other parts of our lives had been sacrificed and in a condition of “negative excellence.”

At some point, all things being equal, we would become quite accomplished in a given area. The end result, however, might be similar to having one magnificently developed right arm attached to puny, stooped shoulders, a scrawny left arm, and skinny, weak legs. This is like the person who is a powerhouse in his professional life and a dwarf in his relationships.

Dr. Richard Swenson suggests a different way in his book *Margin*. He suggests an approach to life that neglects no important area. He suggests being willing to sacrifice excellence in one or two areas in order that no area be in a condition of negative excellence. This would be similar to the athlete who is toned and conditioned all over, but not overly developed in any one area.

A similar balance in our lives will increase our emotional margin because we and and our families will be happier.

Simplicity has much to offer harried twentieth-century man. But it isn’t easy. It takes effort to discard the superfluous and concentrate on the core elements of life. There has always been an attraction to simplicity; the difficulty has been in achieving it. The simple life the author calls us to is not so much to escape modern life as to transcend it.

Envy is the enemy of contentment and form of self-inflicted torture. Yet because envy is the chief ingredient of advertising and the mainspring of political and social movements, it is difficult for many to see its destructiveness. We need to follow Paul who learned contentment in whatever circumstance he found himself (Phil. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 6:6-10). The practice of contentment brings margin into our lives.

The pain that progress has brought us is mostly in the area of our emotions, our relationships, and our spiritual natures. What are some additional steps start dealing with the pain and achieving some margin?

First, thank God for the pain. The pain pointed out that something is wrong. Second, repent in a way that leads to permanent, tangible change. Third, prune activities and habits that waste time, sap energy, and stifle relationships. Fourth, cooperate with God. Bathe plans in prayer and leave wiggle room for yourself, your family, and people God may send your way.

- How did we relate to God?
- How did we relate to ourselves?
- How did we relate to others?

The road to health and blessing in the path of relationship. Love and relationships are hard work, and sometimes costly because superfluous, unimportant things may need to be put aside, but the payoff is happiness, contentment, peace, and margin. I hope some of the things we have shared in this article turn you from the path of overload and start you down the path of margin.

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“I’m Looking for a Way to Deprogram Homosexuality”

I’m a licensed counselor looking for ways to de-program homosexuality.

I’m afraid we don’t know any formulaic means for de-programming homosexuality. And neither Probe nor Living Hope Ministries (a ministry that helps people with unwanted homosexuality) does “conversion therapy.” In my 20+ years with

LHM, the only method I have seen that makes a difference is the time-honored process of Christian discipleship, where we point people to Jesus and walk with them in submitting to Him and His word, cooperating with the Holy Spirit in facing the wounds and hurts of the past and grieving them, forgiving those who hurt us, and obeying God's commands because they are given to protect and bless us. The fruit of this process is transformation from the inside out (Romans 12:2), because Jesus doesn't make things better, He makes things new.

What I have personally witnessed over and over is that God helps the person reframe their understanding of their lives, especially the hurts of the past (and there is always pain in the past) and their sinful responses to those hurts. This is true of any believer, not just those dealing with homosexuality. As the person invites Jesus to be Lord over more and more internal real estate, He brings change and understanding. For example, I keep seeing that men reframe their craving to connect with other men sexually as their heart's cry for healthy attention, affirmation and affection from other men, either (or both) a father figure, or a best-friend kind of relationship. In women, I see that women reframe their craving to intensely connect with another woman, as their heart's cry for those same 3 As from a mother or a best friend. When those legitimate needs are met in healthy relationships with other believers, the craving subsides. One of my closest friends, who spent 25 years as a lesbian activist before becoming a Christ follower, says that what used to be screaming in front of her face (her same sex attraction), is now white noise in the background of her life. It's not totally gone, and she can feed it when she's stressed which means additional temptations, but its control over her life has been replaced by intimacy with Jesus and with healthy relationships with women.

I don't know how this happens outside of the grace and power of God in a believer's life and in the context of community,

because we need each other.

I’m glad you asked. And by the way, I see from your email address that you utilize EMDR in your therapy. God bless you for that! I am the beneficiary of its effectiveness as I have seen my husband healed of childhood traumas through EMDR. A number of the people at Living Hope—and friends fro church as well—have found EMDR helpful in their counseling, which makes sense because trauma is part of so many people’s stories who now deal with same-sex attraction.

Blessing you today,

Sue

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Remodeling a Home—and a Soul



We are in the midst of a major remodeling project in our home as it is made wheelchair-friendly. Doors are being widened, our closet is being reconfigured so I can reach my hanging clothes, and our bathroom's tub and step-in shower are being replaced by a roll-in shower.

I have been struck by the similarities between remodeling a home and remodeling a soul—otherwise known as the sanctification process. Sanctification means "being made holy," and holy means set apart. I am being set apart for God's kingdom, for His purposes, and with a plan to make me into the image of His own dear Son (Romans 8:29).

The first thing that happened was that things got moved. Our bed was moved to an enclosed porch, which is a great blessing given the amount of construction dust in our bedroom. Our hanging clothes got moved to rented racks in our dining room, along with all the suitcases and other kinds of things on shelves. (It pretty much looks like a bomb went off in our home!)

When God is remodeling our soul, He also moves things, particularly moving us out of our comfort zone. We get moved into a *dis*comfort zone—a change zone, a growth zone. In this part of the process, we can find out how easy it is to make idols of comfort and the status quo. And like all other challenges and trials, the answer to the test is to trust God

and rely on Him.

Before making any changes, the project director went up in the attic to check the load-bearing walls. I was so glad to learn this; it meant that nothing would be torn down and taken out that would weaken our home and make it unstable.

When God is doing the remodeling, He takes into account how we were designed and built (by Himself!). He knows how much stress we can take, and won't violate His own design for us. Just as He promises us not to allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1 Cor 10:13), He always remembers that we are but dust (Psalm 103:14), and He knows our limits.

The trim around doors was pulled out, and sections of sheet rock were cut out and removed. The garden tub was cut up and hauled away, and the huge mirror over it is now gone. The glass shower was taken out.

I've noticed that part of the sanctification process means God removes the old things in our hearts that have outlived their usefulness—things like coping strategies and childish ways of thinking and living. In order to grow us up to maturity, the old has to go.

They parked a trailer outside our back door, and it was soon filled with sheet rock, wood, marble and glass that needed to be taken to the city dump because it was trash. I mentioned this to the man in charge, who cheerfully agreed that "You gotta get rid of the ugly!" Since I also shared with him my thoughts about the parallel to sanctification, he laughed with me that that's what God does: He gets rid of our ugly. He targets anything that's not glorifying to Himself or helpful to us, and pulls it out. Or calls us to let it go into His hands.

I noticed there is a definite order to things. The open spaces for closets and bathrooms were widened before installing new doors. The walls were textured before being painted. The

bathtub was pulled out, and its faucet and spigot were removed, before the tiler comes to give us a beautiful new wall.

This made me realize that God knows the best order for addressing issues in our lives that need to be changed. Like knowing which are the load-bearing walls, He knows what needs to wait until He deals with other problems first. For example, we often want Him to get rid of nasty habits or addictions, but He's more interested in working on our hearts so that the change in our behaviors is a more (super)natural, organic result of growth.

Remodeling a house means a lot of inconvenience. I have to go to a gym that has a roll-in shower because our other shower is in a bathtub, and I can't climb in and out of bathtubs anymore. We are having trouble finding some things that were moved temporarily. There is dust everywhere. I can't have people over very easily. These are all temporary, but they are still inconvenient.

God's remodeling process also feels inconvenient because there are so many adjustments to new ways of thinking and reacting and living. We have to practice new ways of thinking when God makes changes in our belief system and our trust system. Adjustment means change, and change is rarely convenient!

The owner of a construction company that does these remodeling jobs for mobility-challenged people like me has a picture in his mind of what all these changes will look like in the end. I have a vague idea of what changing the entrance to our bedroom will look like, and how the reconfigured closet will work, and what it will be like to roll into the shower, but he has a very specific plan in mind based on experience and knowledge and wisdom.

My heavenly Father has a very specific plan for my remodeling too. He knows what making me over into the image of His Son

means, so I will look like Sue and Jesus both.

And just as I need to trust the architect of our home remodel, even more I need to trust my Father, who knows what He's doing in remodeling my soul and does it all well . . . and in love.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/remodeling_a_home–and_a_soul
on May 2, 2017.

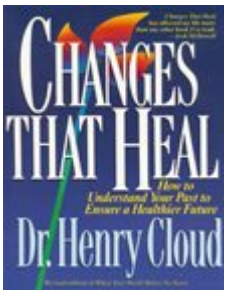
How Change Happens

On my recent trip to Australia (2010), one of the topics I was asked to address at a conference featuring a redemptive view of homosexuality was "Is Change Possible?" This is a controversial question because there are some loud, insistent voices in the culture who say, "Unless you never again have a homosexual thought or feeling, you haven't changed. And since no one admits to that, any claim of change is an illusion."

No one would apply that strict a standard to any other issue! Former alcoholics living sober and free from the chaos of their drinking for decades still would like a cold beer on a hot day, but that doesn't mean they haven't changed!

Is change possible? Change is part of life! But transformation is also part of what it means to be a Christ-follower. Understanding how change happens, on the other hand, is another matter. So I have been thinking about the process for a long time as I prepared for my message.

One of my favorite explanations comes from Dr. Henry Cloud in his book *Changes That Heal*. He gives a delightful application to one of Jesus' parables in Luke 13.



> "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'
>
> "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' (vv. 6-9)
>
> Grace and truth in this parable are symbolized by the actions of "digging around" and "fertilizing." Using the trowel of God's truth, we must dig out the weeds and encumbrances of falsehood, sin and hurt that keep the soil of our souls cluttered. In addition, we must add the fertilizer of love and relationship to "enrich the soil."

As a Bible teacher, a lay counselor, and one involved in helping those deal with unwanted homosexuality, I have seen the truth of Dr. Cloud's suggestion over and over again. As we study God's word with an open heart and pursue knowledge of God and intimacy with Him in a personal relationship ("the trowel of God's truth"), change comes when we identify the lies we have believed about life, about ourselves, about other people, and about God, and replace them with the truth. Change comes when we repent of how our coping mechanisms have become sin because they keep us from trusting God. Change comes when we forgive those who hurt us so we are no longer in bondage to those who left wounds on our souls. Change comes when we live in community, engaging with the Body of Christ who can be "Jesus with skin on" to us. Change comes when people love us

and accept us as we are so we can be courageous to deal with our "stuff" and cooperate with God in the changing, healing process.

Dr. Cloud continues,

> But the Bible tells us that in order for grace and truth to produce fruit, we need a third key element: time.
>
> Look again at verses 8 and 9. "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, Fine! If not, then cut it down.'" The gardener, who certainly symbolizes our Lord, the "author and perfecter" of our faith, realized that his work and the fertilizer need time to take effect. In short, *it takes time to grow*. And time alone will not do it. *Time must be joined by grace and truth.* When we respond responsibly to these three elements, we will not only heal, but also bear fruit.

We live in a microwave culture that has trained us to have unrealistic expectations about time. We want instant everything, and we hate waiting. I received an email from a young man in his early 20s who hated his same-sex attractions and wondered how long it would take to get rid of them. I explained to him that it's not like a bad case of acne, it's far more complex than that, and that it's our experience that for people his age, three to five years of actively "digging around" in the soil of their hearts and minds produces lasting change. He thought that was too long. I wondered, "What will your life look like in three to five years if you keep going down the path you're on? Bless your heart!"

Change is normative. Change is expected. Change is hard work, but we have the assistance of our divine Gardener to make it happen.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/how-change-happens/

on Sept. 14, 2010

“How Do I Help My Friend Get Unstuck From a Failed Relationship?”

I have a friend who has been saved for about 8 years. She is a 30 year old single parent with an 8 year old daughter. She broke up with the baby’s father about 6 years ago. The problem bothering her is that she is still in love with him. She realizes this is not a man she can marry due to his lifestyle and the fact that he is living with another woman. This is the only man she has been sexually involved with. Moving on with her life has been a constant struggle. Her confession to me is, “I feel stuck.” What do you recommend?

I suggest you encourage her to reframe her thinking about her daughters daddy. In our culture, we tend to elevate our feelings to the position of idols, and we feel like it would somehow be dishonest not to follow them. But feelings are just feelings, and they are not equally valid or wise. If shes still “in love with” a man she hasnt had a relationship with for six years, who had made it abundantly clear he doesnt care for her, then its because she is still feeding the fantasy and the feelings with her thoughts. No wonder she feels stuck! She is stuck because she keeps feeding the feelings.

The problem is that we cant change our feelings by attacking them directly. Feelings are like the caboose on a train; they follow the engines. The engines are our beliefs/thoughts and our behavior. Redirect the engine, and the caboose will follow in a different direction.

I would suggest you help her write out on a sheet of paper two columns: the lies and stuck thoughts she believes, and the truths that would counter the lies. Such as:

Lies and Stuck Thoughts	Truths
I want my daughters daddy to come back	Hes not coming back. That chapter is over.
I have feelings for him	So what, theyre just feelings. I have to deal with reality.
I am stuck	God will help me get unstuck as I follow Him
I need him	Hes not available; I must get my needs met from God, through my support network of friends and family
I love him because I had sex with him	I must confess my sin of sexual immorality and renounce the emotional ties I have to him because of our one-flesh union

I would also suggest that you instruct her to imagine taking a giant roll of Saran wrap to her bundle of feelings and wrapping them up like leftovers that go in the fridge. Then put them on a mental shelf, and purposely engage in some activity that will help her replace her thoughts and feelings with something else. The biblical pattern for lasting change is to replace and displace the old with the new, but first we have to plan on what the new will be—such as a new hobby, new relationships, new habits that dont remind us of the old thing

were trying to renounce. She may need some help with coming up with ideas for new things to add into her life.

Its also possible that shell say no, no, no to all that you suggest, giving excuses why none of those will work. Sometimes people dont really want to change, they just want to complain about their terrible emotional state and suck sympathy and compassion from those they complain to. If you discern that thats the route shes taking, then I would suggest that you tell her, You dont really want to be unstuck. So Im not going to talk about this situation with you. Then always change the subject if it comes up.

Bless you for being a friend! I hope you find this helpful.

Cordially,

Sue Bohlin

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Globalization and the Wal-Mart Effect – How Wal-Mart Changes the Way Products are Sourced and Sold

Kerby Anderson helps us understand the foundational principles and some the current factors which make Wal-Mart the dominant force in consumer sales in the world. Wal-Mart has fundamentally changed the way products are sourced and sold as shown in the examples presented in this article. Kerby does not take a position for or against those changes but

encourages us to consume in ways that consider the impact of our consumption.

Introduction

In this article, we revisit the issue of global trade and the process of globalization. In an earlier article I asked, Is the world flat?{1} I talked about the various things that have made our world flat and used Wal-Mart as one of the examples.

I would like to further develop our discussion by using Wal-Mart as an example of what is happening in our world. Thomas Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat*, says that if Wal-Mart were an individual economy, it would rank as China's eighth-biggest trading partner, ahead of Russia, Australia, and Canada.{2}

Often I will be referring to many of the facts and figures from Charles Fishman's book *The Wal-Mart Effect*.{3} For example, he points out that more than half of all Americans live within five miles of a Wal-Mart store. For most people, that's about a ten- to fifteen-minute drive. Ninety percent of Americans live within fifteen miles of a Wal-Mart. In fact, when you drive down the interstate, it is rare for you to go more than a few minutes without seeing a Wal-Mart truck.

Wal-Mart has over 3800 stores in the United States. That is more than one Wal-Mart store for every single county in the country.{4} And they don't exactly fade into the landscape. They sit on vast aprons of asphalt parking and stand out because of their sheer size.

Wal-Mart has also become the national commons. Every seven days more than one hundred million Americans shop at Wal-Mart (that's one third of the country). Each year, ninety-three percent of American households shop at least once at Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart's sales in the United States are a bit more than $2000 per household. And Wal-Mart's profit on that amount was

just $75.00.{5}

The size of this company is hard to grasp. Wal-Mart isn't just the largest retailer in the nation and the world. For most of this decade, it has been both the largest company in the world as well as the largest company in the history of the world.

In 2006, Wal-Mart will be bumped from the number-one spot on the Fortune 500 list of the largest companies by ExxonMobil, whose sales will surge past Wal-Mart's because the world price of oil rose so much in the last year.

But if you consider payrolls, there is no comparison. ExxonMobil employs about 90,000 people worldwide. Wal-Mart employs 1.6 million.{6} And there's another difference. ExxonMobil is growing by raising prices. Wal-Mart is growing despite lowering prices.

Put another way, Wal-Mart is as big as Home Depot, Kroger, Target, Costco, Sears, and Kmart combined. Target might be considered Wal-Mart's biggest rival and closest competitor, but it is small in comparison. Wal-Mart sells more by St. Patrick's Day (March 17) than Target sells all year.{7}

The Wal-Mart Effect

Ask people to give you their opinion about Wal-Mart and you are likely to get lots of different responses. They may talk with enthusiasm about the "always low prices." Or they might talk about the impact Wal-Mart had on small businesses in their community when the first store arrived. They may even talk about the loss of American jobs overseas. Believe me, most will have an opinion about Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart had its creation in the mind of Sam Walton who promoted a single idea: sell merchandise at the lowest price possible. It began with Wal-Mart working hard to keep the costs of their company as low as possible. This idea moved

from their company to their suppliers as they asked them to be as frugal as possible. As the company grew in size, they began looking for every way to wring out the last penny of savings from materials, packaging, labor, transportation, and display. The result was “the Wal-Mart effect.”

Consumers have embraced “the Wal-Mart effect.” As a store moves into a community bringing lower prices, it drives down prices in other stores. And either they compete or close their doors. And it also reshapes the shopping habits of those in the community.

But with “the Wal-Mart effect” comes fears of “the Wal-Mart economy.” This is the nagging feeling that there are social and economic costs to be paid for “always low prices.” Critics talk about low wages, minimal benefits, and little chance for career advancement.

The company has found itself under attack from many quarters. There is a lawsuit on behalf of 1.6 million women who have worked at Wal-Mart that alleges systematic sex discrimination. Add to this the allegations that managers have required employees to work off the clock and even have locked employees in stores overnight.

There is also the constant complaint that Wal-Mart does not provide adequate health care benefits. Last year, for example, the Maryland legislature passed a bill that forces companies with more than 10,000 employees to spend at least eight percent of their payroll on health care or pay the state the difference. Since Wal-Mart is the only employer with over 10,000 employees in the state, it is easy to see that the legislation was only targeting Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart recently settled a federal investigation of its use of illegal aliens to clean its stores. The company made a record-setting payment to the federal government.

Sam Walton’s goal from the beginning was an unrelenting focus

on controlling costs in order to provide “always low prices.” He instilled in his employees core values like hard work, frugality, discipline, and loyalty.{8}

In his book *The Wal-Mart Effect*, Charles Fishman says these values have become inverted. He points out how the company has changed. When Sam Walton died in 1992, Wal-Mart was a $44 billion-a-year company with 370,000 employees. The number of employees has now grown by 1.2 million, and sales have grown by $240 billion. “Wal-Mart is not only not the company Sam Walton founded, it is no longer the company he left behind.”{9}

Out of the Box

You probably never thought about the packaging around deodorant, but Wal-Mart did. Until the early 1990s, nearly every brand of deodorant came in a paperboard box. Most consumers opened the box, pulled out the deodorant container, and tossed the box into the garbage. Some of us recycled them, but we were a very small minority.

In the early 1990s, Wal-Mart (along with a few other retailers) decided the paperboard box was a waste. The product came in a can or plastic container. These were at least as tough as the box. The box took up wasted space, and it wasted cardboard. Shipping the weight of the cardboard added weight to trucks and wasted fuel. And the box itself cost money to design and produce. It even cost money to put the deodorant into the box.

Wal-Mart began to apply pressure on the suppliers to eliminate the box. Deodorant manufacturers calculated that the box cost about a nickel for every consumer. Wal-Mart split the savings. Deodorant makers keep a few pennies, and Wal-Mart passed a couple of pennies savings on to the consumers.

Walk into Wal-Mart today and look at the deodorant aisle. You

will probably find eight shelves of deodorant, sixty containers across. In this sea of nearly five hundred containers of deodorant, not one box.

Consider the impact of this one decision. First, there is the environmental impact. Whole forests were not cut down to provide a box that consumers did not use. A few recycled them, but the vast majority threw them away seconds after they removed their deodorant. Was Wal-Mart's pressure to unbox deodorant a good thing? It certainly was, if you are concerned about environmental issues. And Christians should be concerned about our stewardship of the environment.

The economic impact was also considerable. A savings of one nickel might seem trivial until you multiply it by the two hundred million adults in the United States. If you just account for the container of deodorant in every American bathroom, you have a savings of $10 million, of which consumers got to keep half. But don't forget that the savings is recurrent. Americans are saving $5 million in nickels about five to six times a year.

But there is also a third impact. The impact this decision had on jobs. So far the decision looks like a win-win. But you might not feel so excited about the decision if you work in the forestry industry or are in the paperboard box business.

This story illustrates only so well the problem with providing a clear, unambiguous analysis of consumer behavior in American markets and, even more so, the ethics of corporations in a global market. And this story is probably easier to analyze if your first priority is the environment. But the ethics of other situations that arise from globalization aren't quite so easy to evaluate.

Wal-Mart illustrates the world in which corporate entities significantly influence our decisions and even transform an economy. While we might like the outcome of saving paperboard

boxes, we certainly don't like other aspects of "the Wal-Mart effect." The company has grown so large and evolved in unexpected ways that it is difficult to predict what the future holds. And when we begin to ask moral questions, it isn't so easy to always determine whether the outcomes are good for us or the country.

Salmon

Americans love to eat salmon. In fact, we eat more than 1.75 million pounds of salmon a day.{10} We eat it at home and when we go out to a restaurant.

And Americans buy lots of cheap salmon from Wal-Mart. But they are probably unaware of the impact their purchase has on the environment. Most of the salmon served in the United States is Atlantic salmon (which is a species that is not only found wild but is also the species of choice for salmon farmers).

The salmon that you buy in Wal-Mart is "a factory product." In other words, they are hatched from eggs, raised in freshwater hatcheries, and then grown to maturity in open-topped ocean cages in cold coastal waters.{11}

Wal-Mart sells more salmon than any other store in the country. Wal-Mart also buys all its salmon from Chile. In fact, they purchase about one-third of the annual harvest of salmon that Chile sells. Wal-Mart sells the salmon for $4.84 a pound. It seems incredible that they can sell it for so little, but there are hidden costs.

Atlantic salmon are not native to Chile (its coastline runs along the Pacific). It's an exotic species that is literally farmed and processed by thousands of Chileans. The labor conditions are certainly a concern (long hours, low pay, processing of salmon with razor-sharp filleting instruments).

Another concern is the environment. Salmon farming is already

transforming the ecology of southern Chile "with tens of millions of salmon living in vast ocean corrals, their excess food and feces settling to the ocean floor beneath the pens, and dozens of salmon processing plants dumping untreated salmon entrails directly into the ocean."{12}

When we buy salmon from Chile are we contributing to this environmental damage? Charles Fishman asks, "Does it matter that salmon for $4.84 a pound leaves a layer of toxic sludge on the ocean bottoms of the Pacific fjords of southern Chile?"{13} After all, these salmon are raised in pens (with as many as one million per farm). They are fed antibiotics to prevent disease. As a result, you have quite a mess. One million salmon produce about the same amount of waste as 65,000 people. And add to that additional waste from unconsumed food and antibiotic residue. In essence, the current method of salmon farming creates a toxic seabed.

So how do we change this? The answer is simple: by changing consumer behavior. If shoppers won't buy salmon until Wal-Mart insists on higher standards, Wal-Mart will insist on them. The same company that created this huge market for salmon can also change it. But this will only happen if consumers voice their concerns and back it up with their behavior.

Consumer Behavior

As I said earlier, mention the name Wal-Mart and you are likely to get lots of varied reactions. While shoppers love the "always low prices," critics point to the impact that the company has had on the economy and the environment.

In fact, it is a bit misleading to think of Wal-Mart as merely a company. In reality it's a global market force. Without a doubt it is one of the most efficient entities at improving its supply chain not only in this country but around the world. Most of us just shop at the store and don't think of

the implications of what we buy and where we buy it.

The size of Wal-Mart gives it the power to do many positive things. It recently announced fuel-savings plans for its stores and trucks. This could provide a model for the nation.

Wal-Mart also provided a model of how to deal with a disaster like Hurricane Katrina. Even though they had 171 facilities in the path of the storm, they were able to recover and reopen eighty-three percent of their facilities in the Gulf area within six days.{14}

One key to Wal-Mart's success was associates who were dedicated to their communities. The local connection helped it deliver goods when the government failed. Wal-Mart sprang into action even before the hurricane hit. Whenever there is a possibility of a hurricane, its supply chain automatically adjusts and sends in plenty of non-perishable food and generators.

What is Wal-Mart's effect on the local economy? One famous study found that the arrival of a Wal-Mart store had a dramatic impact. "Grocery stores lost 5 percent of their business, specialty stores lost 14 percent of their business, and clothing stores lost 18 percent of their business—all while total sales were rising 6 percent, mostly due to Wal-Mart."{15}

Critics of Wal-Mart say that it forces small businesses into bankruptcy. But if you think about it, it is the consumers who put people out of business. We vote with our wallets. Shoppers are the ones who have made it possible for Wal-Mart's phenomenal growth. And we are the ones who need to pay attention to what we buy and where we buy it.

In this article, we have identified a few economic and environmental issues that result from "the Wal-Mart effect." Previously, we have produced articles discussing the Christian's responsibility towards economics{16} and the

environment.{17}

Our consumer behavior can have a positive impact on our world. As individuals, we have a minimal impact, but collectively we have an impact on our lives and our economy every day when we spend money. For too long, Christians have been willing to separate ethics from economics. Yet in earlier centuries theologians asked important questions about the relationship of morality to money.

It is time to return to that moral reflection, especially in this age of globalization. Christians should be alert consumers in this global economy.

Notes

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