

CHAPTER 1

The Winter *of* Our Discontent

OUR STORY BEGINS ON DECEMBER 27, 2007, IN THE WAKE of a post-Christmas funk. This season of hyperconsumption somehow managed to leave us flat, disconnected from the stuff we were buying, and no better connected to family and friends than we'd been a month before. Instead of a thoughtful exchange of gracious gifts, Christmas felt more like a warm-hearted system of pay-offs and buyouts.

Still staggering from our holiday hangover, my wife, Nancy, and I had a night on the town without our daughters, Noel, who was 7 at the time, and Lily, who was 5. Of all things, we went shopping. We were on our way out of a big-box bookstore when large, red clearance signs beckoned us like a porch light beckons moths. We needed a birthday present for a niece and decided on a sardine-can-sized manicure set housed in two square feet of cardboard and plastic. It was our last great deal of the season.

As we drove around in the cold, wet darkness of Seattle looking for a restaurant, there was an uneasy silence between us. Maybe it was the breakdown of our car earlier in the evening or the typical emotional overload of two pastors having just completed the

Christmas gauntlet of worship services, but I couldn't fight the creeping frustration that had been building in me for weeks. I glanced over at our latest acquisition and thought to myself, *That really is a piece of crap*. Normally I would be content to keep such thoughts to myself, but for some reason I felt led to proclaim it to the world. And I did.

"What do you mean? You were the one who said we should buy it," Nancy replied.

She had me there. I was the one who insisted we just get it and get out of there. Buying is like that for me sometimes. I just want to get it over with so I can put an end to the deafening dialogue in my head—the detailed cost-benefit analysis, the effort to focus on one thing in the midst of thousands, the urgency of detecting an apparent seam of weakness in the marketplace, the nagging recognition that whatever I purchase will soon join the scrap heap of useless consumer trash.

At this point I pulled the car off the road and into a parking lot, where I commenced to pour out my discontent. "Almost all of our recent purchases have been meaningless," I said. I lamented that they were far short of expressions of love. They were expensive. They were unnecessary accessories in the lives of relatively wealthy people. They preoccupied us for the better part of a month, bringing tension and anxiety to the busiest season of our work life.

Nancy listened to my little tirade and then responded, saying, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm the one who has carried the majority of the burden of entertaining and gift buying and family communications. The weight of all of it has stressed me out and pushed me to the limit. If anyone has a right to complain about things, it's me."

So there we sat, in an empty strip mall parking lot, in a stalemate of discontent, wondering how such a festive season had led us to such a desolate place.

We moved our conversation to a Thai restaurant. Between sips of Tom Yon Goong soup, we tried to get some perspective on where we had gone wrong. We talked about the last-minute presents I purchased for the girls out of a fear that they might not have enough, only to see both of them surrounded by a small mountain of gifts on Christmas morning. How could we have ever worried about them running low on stuffed animals and video games? We reflected on how intentional our expressions of faith had been during Advent with worship and study, but how there seemed to be no meaningful connection between the rhythms of faith and our life of consumption. Not only that, we didn't seem to have much of a grasp on what was driving our consumer lives. Our Christmas lament quickly turned into a more general inquiry into the state of our family economy. We recognized that the fear of not having enough and the compulsion to buy more stuff were year-long companions. We were shoppers all year, but during the holidays we were shoppers on steroids. We were insatiable seekers, hungry for more, bottomless pits of want.

At some point in the conversation Nancy asked, "What could we do differently?" It was such a simple question but a simple answer was beyond our immediate reach. It was like asking a fish to consider alternatives to a water habitat. We had been swimming in mindless consumerism for so long it was hard to imagine other options. Our decisions to buy or not to buy had been more destiny than decision.

A SPENT GENERATION

Our baby-boomer parents were raised in fairly humble circumstances—a combination of lumberjacking, teaching, nursing homes, and auto repair. Through education, resourcefulness, and the benefits of a burgeoning economy, they worked their way into respected professions that led to middle-class success. But Nancy and I are of the generation after. Prosperous, post-World War II

America is the only reality we have known. While our parents and grandparents were shaped by the Great Depression of the 1930s and '40s, we were formed by the deceptive abundance of an unprecedented bull market in the 1980s and '90s. I have faint memories of waiting for gas in our family's wood-paneled Ford Country Squire station wagon during the mid-1970s oil embargo, but I have fresh and formative memories of millionaire secretaries at Microsoft and Internet start-ups like Amazon and eBay.

For our parents and grandparents, reminiscing about hard times in their formative years is based on real-life experience, but Nancy and I are more likely to put such reminiscing in the same category as Dana Carvey's grumpy old man character on *Saturday Night Live*. He says things like, "In my day, we didn't have *safety standards* for toys. We got rusty *nails* and big bags of *broken glass*! And that's the way it was, and we *liked* it! We *loved* it!" Neither of us had what I would describe as privileged childhoods, but we grew in the security of having our most basic needs met. We spent most our lives growing up in the middle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, preoccupied with questions of love and belonging because, for the most part, we didn't have to worry about our basic safety and physical needs.

Our parents were raised one step removed from the farm and the land, but we were three and four steps removed. When we look at a map and see Otis Orchards listed just east of our home in Spokane, it doesn't immediately occur to us that at one time there were actually millions of fruit trees and hundreds of orchards filling the Spokane valley. When we drive Interstate 90 to Seattle, we don't readily make a connection between the infinite rows of green potato plants lining the freeway and the french fries the kids are munching on in the back seat. We've been shaped by a finely tuned marketplace where history and narrative are flattened into efficient commodities and feel-good brands.

Nancy grew up a few miles from the iconic Sherman Oaks Galleria from *Valley Girl* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. She

was among the first generation of children in Southern California who never mowed their own lawns or trimmed their hedges, let alone weeded a vegetable garden or cleaned out a chicken coop. My formative shopping mall was in a smaller, more nondescript setting in New Bern, North Carolina, but it had the distinction of being one of the first in the country, or so I was told. Probably every child upon their inaugural visit to the town's sprawling new shopping mall was told some such story. We were all in the vanguard of retail shopping in those days.

Nancy and I have lived the entirety of our married lives in the suburbs, safely surrounded by the chemically enhanced green lawns of the middle-income, two-kids, tree-lined-street life. We have never been prodigal in our consumption. We have always given 10 percent of our income to the church as a tithe, and we've always saved 10 percent of our income for retirement. We don't buy new cars—we're happy to troll the local auto auction for ten-year-old minivans. We don't have debt other than our mortgage. We've set aside money to contribute to our daughters' college educations. As of Christmas 2007, we thought we were doing everything right. We were dutiful consumers in the marketplace doing our responsible best, and yet there we were on December 27, worn out, angry, defensive, and disappointed.

Looking back, we could have easily chalked it all up to a bad case of the holiday blues, a seasonally induced bummer that would wear off when life got back to normal. But somehow the *Spa Factory Color Sparkle Custom Mix Nail Studio with Bonus* became a looking glass through which we began to see the need for significant change, not just during the Christmas season but for the whole year.

That night over pad thai we noticed that while we were at a loss for immediate answers, we were invigorated by the question itself: What could we do differently? The more we talked, the more it became obvious that we wanted to change more than our budget

or our shopping habits. We wanted to break free of that hunger, that need for more. We were fed up with being stuck on autopilot and longed to be more intentional about what we bought and consumed. We wondered how we could make choices that had a positive impact on our friends and neighbors and community. We hoped for pathways that led to places of freedom and honest joy, as opposed to emotional standoffs in empty strip-mall parking lots.

As we finished our dinner and headed home, an idea started to take shape. We'd had a few recent experiences that seemed to share a common thread of satisfaction for us. The church where we serve as pastors, Millwood Presbyterian in Spokane, had started holding a farmers' market in the parking lot, and we enjoyed developing relationships with the farmers who fed us during the summer months. We'd planted a few vegetables in our garden as well and loved watching our girls discover how food comes from those tiny seeds. Even Christmas had given us a glimpse of how we might live differently—my sister had purchased all of our Christmas presents from local artisans in the suburbs of Sacramento where she lives. These random moments came together as a set of provocative proposals: What if we tried to limit our consumption to things that were local, used, homegrown, and homemade?

Then, in a fit of New Year's idealism, I proposed, "What if we did an experiment and tried to live by these rules for a whole year?"

THE RISE OF A MOVEMENT

Let me stop for a moment to comment on the whole "year-long experiment" phenomenon. In 2007, Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, in which she describes a year of eating local, was a bestseller. A couple in Vancouver, British Columbia, had recently completed a year following what they called "The 100-Mile Diet," eating only foods grown within a one-hundred-mile

radius of their home, and their blog and book were getting a lot of attention. Julie Powell was cooking her way through Julia Child's cookbook and writing a blog describing her experience. That blog, of course, would soon be made into the best-selling book and Oscar-nominated movie, *Julie & Julia*.

Food projects have perhaps been most prominent on the cultural landscape, but the experiments in alternative consumption have been more diverse than that. The year 2007 also saw the publication of Sara Bongiorni's book *A Year Without "Made in China": One Family's True Life Adventure in the Global Economy*, and the year before that Judith Levine wrote *Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping*. Colin Beavan, aka "No-Impact Man," was also wrapping up a year-long eco-experiment in 2007. As he put it, "For one year, my wife, my two-year-old daughter, my dog and I, while living in the middle of New York City, are attempting to live without making any net impact on the environment. In other words, no trash, no carbon emissions, no toxins in the water, no elevators, no subway, no products in packaging, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV, no toilets."¹ His efforts were chronicled on a blog that was turned into a book and documentary movie.

So here I am writing a book about a year-long experiment, based in part on my blog, feeling not all that original and suspicious that we may be a couple years late to the party.

But in defense of our authenticity bona fides, I'm not an author. I have all of two newspaper editorials to my name. We didn't go into this as writers in search of a muse or as pastors looking for a way to become celebrities. And I can honestly say that we were unaware of these other experiments. We didn't say, "Let's do what Barbara Kingsolver did," or "Let's do a Christian version of *No Impact Man*." We'd never heard of a *locavore*, "someone who seeks to eat only locally grown food," nor did we know that the *Oxford English Dictionary* had announced a month before we hatched our plan that *locavore* was their word of the year for 2008. We had no

clue as we transitioned to buying used, homegrown, and home-made that in a few months many would join us out of necessity as the economy suffered its worst collapse since the Great Depression.

In retrospect, this was a cultural moment that didn't need intentional awareness and connections or prescient predictions of economic peril. These experiments on the margins of our cultural marketplace, these aspirations toward a different consumption status quo, were bubbling up all over as if from a common hidden underground aquifer of unrest. In fact, the conversations and discoveries that awaited us had been brewing for decades.

Alice Waters opened her famous Chez Panisse restaurant in 1971 and has been working ever since to promote locally grown, seasonal foods. When Michelle Obama tore up a patch of White House lawn in 2009 to plant an organic garden, the media touted it as a culmination of Miss Waters's decades of food activism. Slow Food International was founded in the early '80s to promote good, clean, and fair food, and in 2008 this movement landed in our hometown of Spokane with a chapter dedicated to nurturing community around these food values.

Michael Pollan sums up these ongoing conversations and concerns in his best-selling book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. In 2008, the year of our experiment, Pollan's book was popping up as a required text on college freshman reading lists and holding steady on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Pollan starts out the book by describing food as a hub of contemporary issues. He writes, "Eating is an agricultural act,' as Wendell Berry famously said. It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it."²

More recently, the documentary *Food, Inc.* has taken this critique of industrial food and moved it into the mainstream, getting Oscar accolades and changing the way people eat along the way. Not

a week goes by at the farmers' market that I don't hear someone say, "I saw the movie *Food, Inc.*, and I'll never eat the same again."

These conversations and movements have been more broadly about patterns of overconsumption and the ways in which our economic lives are out of whack. The phrase "voluntary simplicity" has been around since the early 1930s,³ and in 1981 Duane Elgin popularized the concept with his book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. In the recently revised version of the book, Elgin describes the evolution of the idea of simple living since he first started speaking about the topic in the 1970s. He says, "Interest in sustainable ways of living has soared, and simplicity has moved from the margins of society to the mainstream. Simpler or greener approaches to living are becoming part of everyday life and culture."⁴ The concept has gone from strange counter-culture to popular brand with a flagship magazine, *Real Simple*, and a TV show on TLC, *Real Simple, Real Life*.

Most recently Annie Leonard's book *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—And a Vision for Change* has summed up many of the movements and conversations that have sought to free us from the oppressive forces of "stuff" in our lives. She describes the hopeful trend of more and more people stepping off the treadmill of hyperconsumption, saying, "This approach—known variously as downshifting, enough-ism, or voluntary simplicity—involves embracing a shift toward working and spending less. . . . Downshiffters choose to prioritize leisure, community building, self-development, and health over accumulating more Stuff."⁵

Not surprisingly, the Christmas season has been a flash point for engaging these issues. In the early 1990s, social activists organized the first Buy-Nothing Day for the day after Thanksgiving to counteract the insanity of Black Friday and raise awareness of the issue of overconsumption. More recently a grass-roots movement called Advent Conspiracy has invited churches and communities

to transform the consumption rhythms of the Christmas season. Their motto is “Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.”

In 2008, Nancy and I were just getting our heads around the vocabulary of a changing culture: going green, carbon footprints, overconsumption, world poverty, microfinance, deforestation, reforestation, saving the planet, hybrid cars, composting food scraps, whole foods, free-range, fair trade, natural, organic, hormone free, cage free, backyard chickens, food not lawns, round-up ready, GMO, CAFO, rBST, walking school bus, bike-to-work week, buy local, buy less. Our personal journey was about to launch us into a cultural moment that had matured long before we came to the table.

Our entry into the fray reminds me of folks who come to me in my role as pastor with deep questions about God and the Bible. Upon discovering just a fraction of the thousands of volumes written and developed in response to their questions, they react with a wonderfully honest, “You mean someone has asked this question before?” I often feel like that around these issues of consumption—surprised and humbled that, for the most part, we had been oblivious to the determination and creativity of those who had already suggested profoundly meaningful answers to that question of how to live differently.

In light of the efforts of others’ answers, it’s fair to ask if the world really needs another book about one family’s year-long consumption experiment. But I believe there are aspects of our modern marketplace that haven’t already been unveiled and examined in other experiments.

A THEOLOGY OF PLENTY

I’ve found that one underexplored area of the conversation is the intersection of the Christian faith and these growing movements

that rebel against the consumption status quo and seek to craft a more holistic and sustainable way of living.

A recent experience at Earth Day festivities in downtown Spokane is indicative of the need for more engagement from Christians and the church. It was a vibrant gathering of people, and it seemed like everyone in town was there. Local businesses and publications, colleges and grassroots organizations, they all had booths with signs and flyers and people eager to share their concern for the environment. Every major player in the life of the city was engaged with these pressing issues of our day. Everyone, that is, except the Christian church. There were no booths declaring that Jesus loves the earth, or that caring for creation is central to the Christian calling.

I'm not pointing fingers. My church wasn't there either, so I'm as much to blame as anyone. But that experience is a reminder to me that there is need for more open, thoughtful, and passionate engagement with these issues from people speaking with a distinctively Christian voice. With this book, I am joining a rising chorus in the church calling for Christians to be engaged with creation care and issues of consumption, not because they are popular, but because the Spirit of God is at work in the midst of these causes and concerns.

My assumption is that there is something unique that followers of Jesus have to offer the conversation. My hope in telling this story is that it will be a meaningful contribution to the ongoing effort to sort out faith in the midst of the choices of everyday life. At various points in the book this dimension of faith will be subtle and at other times more overt, but I want to be upfront in saying that our family's belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior and the rhythms of worship, prayer, and hope are the orienting center from which this story is told.

We didn't really formulate our year as a Christian endeavor, it simply was by nature of who we are. It was natural for us to inquire of our faith to help sort out new ways of being consumers in the

world. Not unlike our experience of discovering long maturing conversations around local food and simple living, we were humbled and grateful to have our eyes opened to all kinds of uniquely Christian voices that were hidden in plain sight.

In 1977, Wendell Berry wrote *The Unsettling of America* in which he describes the American economic turn from nurturing the land to exploiting it. He has been a consistent and profound voice advocating for a local and sustainable way of life and has not been shy to explain that his perspectives arise out of his faith. For example, he once said:

I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God. I believe that health is wholeness. For many years I have returned again and again to the work of the English agriculturist Sir Albert Howard who said, in *The Soil and Health*, that “the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal and man [is] one great subject.”⁶

For Berry, questions of faith and sustainability are inseparable. To take up the cause of caring for the earth is to take up the cause of Christ.

One of the first things Nancy did when we got home from Seattle was to get out one of her beloved cookbooks called *More With Less Cookbook*. I’d seen it around the house but had no idea that it was commissioned in the 1970s by the Mennonite Central Committee to help people: “There is a way of wasting less, eating less, and spending less which gives not less, but more.”⁷ The earthy recipes for spinach loaf and Navajo fry bread are interspersed with

Bible quotes and practical advice on how to live more simply. It's not unusual for churches to have cookbooks, but it was new to me to see how faith and food were seen as partners in the quest for a holy life.

And of course there are religious traditions in America that famously advocate for simple, sustainable living. The Hutterite settlements just a few miles to the west of Spokane have been pioneers of local sustainable living for decades. Seventh Day Adventists have always seen a life of healthy eating as part of a healthy faith. A 2010 Arizona State University study of Adventist vegetarians concludes that they are happier and healthier than omnivores.⁸ The monastic traditions, most notably Benedict's Rule, are historical models of integrating faith and practice that are being explored in new ways outside the walls of the abbey. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Shane Claiborne are examples of fresh voices from this tradition, a new-monasticism for the modern world.

When I headed off to Fuller Seminary in 1991, I inherited a retired pastor's library of books. They had a 1970s patina and a musty, used-bookstore smell to match. The collection was a history lesson of trends in publishing for pastors in the second half of the twentieth century. The majority were either pragmatic advice for running a church or deep theological reflection. The philosophical abstractions of Tillich and Tournier were side by side with books such as *Leading Your Church to Growth* and *Strengthening the Adult Sunday School Class*. But there were others that spoke to the intersections of faith and consumption—Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and Tom Sine's *Mustard Seed Conspiracy*.

These integrated voices, where faith and consumption are envisioned as being caught up in the one drama of God's redemption, had been echoing around me for decades but for the first time our family was about to give them a proper hearing.

While our year-long experiment is not altogether unique in the

cultural landscape, perhaps our reflection on faith in the midst of it offers a perspective worthy of being part of the conversation. That being said, I want to be careful not to give the wrong impression. Our intent is not to take a cultural narrative and shellac a Jesus fish on it. Hopefully this book is not like those T-shirts you buy at Christian bookstores that take a secular ad slogan and tweak it to sound all holy and righteous.

While faith is a central distinctive of this book, there is another aspect of our journey that we hope will add to the ever-expanding library of reports from the margins of the consumption status quo: we are ordinary. We set out to follow these rules while holding down two jobs, raising two children, and living absolutely ordinary lives in our ordinary neighborhood in our ordinary city.

We don't live in a large urban center like Manhattan or on an idyllic farm in the mountains of North Carolina. We live, like so many, in a middle-class suburb. When our kids show their chickens at the county fair, the other families ask us how many acres we have and we chuckle as we tell them about our house in a planned community with small lots, plastic fences, and deed restriction. I've been told that Spokane is often used by businesses to try out entrepreneurial initiatives because it is such an average, middle-of-the-road American city. It's in the "great-place-to-raise-a-family" category of cities and I love it for that.

So even though we were joining a movement in progress, in retrospect we can see that there was something different about an average Costco-shopping, YMCA-belonging, soccer-playing family entering into the strange confines of a year-long experiment that would come to involve plowing up the front yard and spending four hours looking for a birthday present.

THE RULE BOOK

After hatching our plan at the Thai restaurant we moved our little conspiracy-in-the-making to a Starbucks and wrote up our little manifesto on a green and white brochure titled, *We'd Love to Hear Your Thoughts*. We scribbled up a basic set of rules for shopping, which ironically included not going to Starbucks for an entire year. Here's what we came up with:

Local: We decided to buy goods from local producers, manufacturers, or growers, and we defined local as coming from eastern Washington and northern Idaho. We didn't have a precise mileage in mind. It was basically the outer limits from which our farmers from the church farmers' market traveled to sell goods in Spokane. We wanted to place value on things in a way that wasn't based solely on their price, forming a new economy of consumable goods anchored in caring relationships with people we know. In the end it seemed reasonable that we could nurture ongoing relationships in northern Idaho and eastern Washington. We agreed we would seek to do field trips to as many of these local producers as possible, meeting the people involved in bringing our goods to market, learning their way of life, their hopes and dreams and challenges.

The focus on local goods meant that there were many items, especially food, that would be limited by the Washington climate. Say good-bye to watermelon in January and hello to a long winter of lentils, peas, and potatoes.

Used: We would buy used products, preferably from one household to another. Craigslist and eBay would be our new shopping malls. Second-hand stores and garage sales would take on a whole new significance.

Homegrown: We had been novice gardeners, cultivating a small patch in our backyard for a few years. For the first time we would look to our yard as potential cropland, and our harvest as an essential component of our health and well being. The greenhouse I built the year before would now serve a vital purpose, allowing us to get an early start on our short growing season.

Homemade: Those things that weren't available by other means, we would seek to make at home. We agreed to allow some flexibility in buying the raw materials necessary to make the finished product, but we would try to get them from local sources. For example, when it came time to make our own ice cream, we bought cream from a local dairy but we settled on buying rock salt from a nonlocal source; when we ran out of vanilla we bartered with our neighbor to get what we needed.

Thailand: There was one major glitch in our newly emerging economy of local, used, homegrown, and homemade goods. The one food item we couldn't stomach giving up was coffee. While our Inland Northwest region is overrun with chicory, we had no interest in reliving the East German coffee crisis where they turned to a mixed brew of sugar beets, rye, and ground chicory roots. There are several quality roasters in the Spokane area, but we soon settled on the idea of choosing an international location from which we could buy select items during our year, including coffee. We crossed off Mexico and China from our list for obvious reasons and ultimately settled on Thailand where there is a marginal Arabica coffee industry but also the best Jasmine rice in the world. Nancy lived in Thailand for two years after graduating from college, which was invaluable as we sought to learn about the region and the people who live there, the economics of their lives, and

how our consumption would impact them in positive and negative ways.

I know that might seem like a bit of a cop out—we'll buy local as long as we like what we can get. But there was more to our coffee decision than a mild addiction to caffeine. We'd heard people say that the best thing we Americans can do for impoverished countries is buy their goods. Our conspicuous consumption is the best thing to ever to happen to the third world, the logic goes, but as we stepped back from this we wondered if there weren't more meaningful ways to participate in the world economy. We discussed not wanting our experiment to be an abandonment of the world, as if we weren't among the fifty million richest people on the planet (47,380,750 to be exact, a top 1 percenter). We bear a global responsibility in a world where \$2400 can buy a high-end flat screen TV at the Best Buy down the street from our house or schooling for an entire generation of school children in an Angolan village.⁹

Our goal was not to reject the economic realities of the world, but rather to enter them intentionally with eyes open to the impact of our purchases, even if it's just a can of tuna fish or pineapple, the majority of which we would learn originate in Thailand.

The rules at this point seemed to be writing themselves, one consistent wave of obvious and yet ridiculous notions that in a moment of grace seemed well within reach. In a final flourish we proposed that we would try to make a trip to Thailand as a family, just like we planned on making a field trip to the local flour mill and other local producers.

As we imagined putting all of our purchases through this new decision matrix we clarified some of the gray areas. We would allow ourselves to use everything in the house as of January 1. We would do our best to minimize the consumption of electricity, water, and fuel. I agreed to limit my use of the car by walking, taking the bus, carpooling, and biking. We would dine out only at locally owned

restaurants and coffee shops—no large national or regional chain establishments. We agreed that we would be flexible when eating with others at a party or public event—no need to be snobby about it. We also agreed that we wouldn't make a big deal of our efforts. For one we didn't know if we could do it, but we also didn't want to give the impression that we thought everyone should follow our lead. We framed it as a personal journey to save ourselves, not a crusade to save the world.

The point of all of this was relatively simple. We wanted to step back from the cultural passion for consumption that led us to want the new and next thing. We wanted to break free of the belief that our hope and joy could be found in consumable goods. In our small way, we hoped to minimize our contribution to a disposable society in which anything that has lost the shine of newness has outlived its usefulness. On a more personal level, we wanted to raise our daughters as children of the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of goods. We wanted to live more fully integrated lives by making financial decisions based on what we value and believe. We wanted to find more joy in the everydayness by slowing down, being intentional with our time and resources, and building meaningful relationships in our community. We didn't know if our experiment would accomplish any of those things when we set out, but we knew something had to change.

Who would have guessed an overpackaged teeny-bopper manicure set could throw our entire way of life into question? As ridiculous as our prospective year of consumption seemed, that night we wondered if it wasn't our middle-class American way of life that had become ridiculous. All it took is one question, "How could we do it differently?" Nancy and I went to bed that night with a sense of anticipation and no real way of knowing if our wild speculations would come to fruition. If so, we had some preparations to make. January 1 was three days away.