

There's more to the American dream than the good life



SHOP TALK
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Early in the week, I backed into and damaged my parent's car. A deep juvenile guilt sat with me all day.

But when I went to bed that night, I felt less guilty than I would have before Sept. 11, the day terrorists attacked the United States.

Like Americans across the country, the tragedy has brought life's important things into focus and drawn the rest of it into the shadows for my parents and me.

While dad initially expressed frustration about the accident, he quickly embraced my apology — with compassion.

In the afternoon, mom made a point of calling me at the office to say not to worry, the scratch wasn't that bad, and "it's just a car."

That phrase, "it's just," I think, captures Americans' current feelings about many aspects of our culture, with material possessions and the lifestyle afforded by our society ranking high on the list.

The terrorist attacks have awakened Americans from a deep sleep, commentators, writers and academics are saying.

On the surface, that image says Americans have been living in a dream world that suppressed the threat of terrorism and perpetuated the delusion of America's invulnerability.

But look a little closer, take the concept one step farther. Have our baubles and preoccupation with "the good life" been aiding our deep sleep?

There's no doubt Americans are extraordinarily materialistic compared to the rest of the world. Rampant consumerism is a phrase used to characterize our culture, not just our economy.

It's also fair to say consumer goods and services demand our time and attention, whether we like it or not.

And we, like all other human beings, are products of environment. On a more basic level, we are human beings driven to secure the best existence we can for ourselves and family members.

I am not suggesting Americans stop buying things. Yes, at the moment, shopping is an act of patriotism. Our slowing economy, further damaged by the terrorist attacks, desperately needs consumers to pump in dollars.

Likewise, I'm not proposing Americans stop the lifestyle a capitalist democracy affords.

The problem isn't that we make, market, sell, buy and own lots of stuff in America. The problem is we lose perspective. We get caught up in all the stuff. And before we know it, our lives are overflowing with dreams of trendy wardrobes, shiny sports cars, the latest-new-computer-money-can-buy, a professionally equipped kitchen, a bigger house. The list goes on and on.

The irony is that our consumerism was to undermine the capitalist democracy that makes our marvelous way of life possible.

It keeps us so busy, distracted and hungry for more we have neither the time nor energy nor inclination to work at being informed, active citizens of the United States.

Our sense of goods and services insulates us, too. It not only removes us from the reality of day-to-day living in other parts of the world but also perpetuates our sense of untouchability and boundless freedom.

Last year, 47 percent of all terrorist incidents worldwide were committed against U. S. citizens and property, according to the U. S. Department of State. Our own freedom was at stake. We were too busy worrying about how the decline of "dotcom" stocks would affect our discretionary income to see it.

Doesn't the country's recent obsession with emotional well-being and items like candles, aromatherapy, self-help books and herbal supplements seem a bit absurd in light of our innocence about terrorism?

The same could be said of the "style" movement. How much time do Americans spend flipping through the pages of magazines like *In Style* and *Martha Stewart Living*? Do they devote even an equal amount of time to reading publications like *U.S. News & World Report*?

Then, there's the technology craze. Do those of us who own a Palm Pilot, cell phone or laptop computer, use the time saved by these devices to read up on global happenings and foreign policy?

Wake up Americans, we can live the American Dream but we also have to protect it.

Signs of hope

Local retail community offers its support, mobilizes for times ahead



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM AGRESTO

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