



April 2008 | Conversations

## **Conversations: Stuffed!**

*Storyteller Annie Leonard exposes the hidden costs of our over-consumption habit*

**Interview by Noelle Robbins**

Annie Leonard is obsessed with garbage. She's consumed by consumption. She's tormented by natural resource depletion and she's losing sleep over all the junk we buy and how and where we throw it away. In her 20 years of work as an environmental sustainability expert for nonprofits like Greenpeace and Health Care Without Harm, Leonard witnessed the

international fallout of our buying and disposing habit firsthand. Then came 9/11, and the president's entreaty to "shop more." That's when Leonard realized: the average American consumer just doesn't have a clue.

The Story of Stuff — an animated webumentary exposing the global repercussions of unchecked consumerism — is Leonard's wake-up call to the nation. Starring a cast of hand-drawn characters accompanied by the real-life Leonard herself, The Story of Stuff patiently and cheerily charts the lifecycle of a typical commercial product, beginning with raw materials mined or extracted, continuing with manufacturing and shipping, and concluding with purchase, use and landfill internment. Since its December 2007 launch, storyofstuff.com has received close to two million hits from around the world and, judging by the close to 300 emails Leonard receives each day, its message is hitting home.

Leonard contends a trip to the dump is an eye-popping experience that should be mandatory for all Americans. Until that happens, perhaps her story is the next best thing.

### **Tell us about The Story of Stuff.**

The Story of Stuff is a 20-minute fast-paced, fact-filled film that follows the lifecycle of all our stuff, from extraction and production to use and disposal. Along the way, it exposes a number of environmental, health and social impacts about the way we make, use and throw away stuff. The goal of the film is to encourage people to think about the impacts, at home and on the other side of the planet, of our production and consumption patterns and, hopefully, be inspired to make positive change.

### **Why is it especially important for Americans to get this message?**

The United States uses a disproportionately high amount of resources. If everyone on the planet consumed at U.S. rates, we would need three to five planets. At the same time that we consume so much, there are vast populations around the world that need to increase consumption even to meet basic needs. The solution is either to accept a kind of "resource apartheid" in which we get to consume more and others struggle to survive, or we in the U.S. agree to power down, to use and waste less in order to promote both sustainability and equity. And for many of us over-consumers, scaling back doesn't have to mean misery. There are many ways to reduce our use of energy and materials while actually increasing the quality of life. Look at Europe for example. Many countries in Europe consistently rank higher than the U.S. on a range of life quality indexes, but Europeans use far fewer resources, spend less time shopping, and use a fraction of the energy the average person uses in the U.S.

### **There has been a lot of conversation recently about "voting with our dollars" as an effective means of promoting social and environmental change. In light of the message of your video, what is your take on this idea?**

Making responsible choices while shopping is part of being a responsible adult, but it doesn't substitute for political action and it certainly isn't enough to make change at the scale needed.

Green consumerism is a limited solution because the choices available to us in the shopping mall or grocery store are limited and pre-determined by forces outside the store: by product designers, by corporate officials and by our government. This is becoming increasingly clear when we compare our product choices with those in Europe. For example, the European Union has recently adopted policies that prohibit a wide range of toxic compounds in cosmetics and in electronics. If you live in France, you can buy an MP3 player or a stick of lipstick without lead and other toxins. We aren't guaranteed this choice in the U.S. We aren't even informed that our products contain these toxins. So, while we should shop green when we must shop, we also need to be asking our corporations to redesign products to make them non-toxic, durable and recyclable, and holding our government responsible for keeping products that threaten public health and the environment out of our stores. If they can do it in Europe, why not here?

We've got a problem with shopping in this country. The amount of time we spend shopping is

growing, while time spent building community, relaxing with friends and family and engaging in civic activities is decreasing. Our children are indoctrinated into consumer culture at an ever-younger age. One cost of this shopping mania is the erosion of our civic life. Our democracy is in serious need of resuscitation. For many, the only interaction we have with our democracy is voting. I worry that programs that seek to make social change through shopping may inadvertently perpetuate our over-identification as consumers rather than citizens. Yes, we should shop responsibly when we do shop, but the best place to seek solutions to the ecological crisis is in the political arena, not the shopping mall. The real solutions we need aren't items for sale in even the greenest shop; we need sustainability policies and programs that we can obtain only by coming together for collective political action. And, along the way, we'll build community, make friends, and have fun and may even find out that there are lots more fulfilling ways to spend a weekend than trolling the mall.

### **Is the “green thing” just a passing fad?**

For many people, concern about the environment has become a driving force in their lives. School kids now are raised with an environmental consciousness as a norm. The response to *The Story of Stuff* has shown me that this discontent with our current toxins-based, consumer-frenzied lifestyle isn't working and that vast numbers are struggling to promote sustainability and justice in their own ways.

### **What keeps you up at night?**

I'm worried about the inequity in resource access and how this is going to play out as resources become increasingly scarce. I worry a lot about water. In many parts of the world, people have to walk miles for a dwindling daily ration of water. As climate change, industrial agriculture, growing populations and industrial developments deplete water further, what is going to happen to communities in water-scarce regions? The possibility for conflict seems enormous. After all, if someone is deprived of water, what motivation is there for them not to fight?

### **What are some of the most exciting ideas/businesses/people on your radar right now?**

There are lots of exciting developments happening right now. The whole field of green chemistry is super exciting. Green chemists are figuring out how to make materials that are inherently safe for people and the planet, rather than churning out all this toxic stuff and then focusing on containing that risk. The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies ([balle](http://balle.org)) promotes new business models that support economic wellbeing, social equity and local economies. Zero waste advocates are taking a systems approach to the waste problem, designing waste out of the system rather than just trying to recycle it at the back end. Through processes like the World Social Forum, activists around the world are connecting human rights, equity and environmental issues, breaking through conventional issue silos to find common ground and build stronger movements for change. There is more good news out there than I could possibly describe. For an overview of the thousands of groups doing good work, visit [wiserearth.org](http://wiserearth.org).

### **How do you connect with nature? Where do you go to experience what you're working to protect?**

That is a really key question. Too often, those of us striving to protect the planet end up spending far too much time sitting behind desks, far from the very source of our passion. For me, it is really important to reconnect with nature on a regular basis, otherwise I get burned out and irritable. Having a child helps me on this one, since she motivates me to turn off the work and go for a hike. We ride bikes, we tend a garden and we go camping. Even if we're just walking around the block, we stop and squat down and look at bugs and flowers and think about all the connections between those individual things and the larger ecosystem.

### **What reading is on your bedside table?**

Oh, I am reading so many good books. If I could read all day, it wouldn't be enough. A favorite that I read over and over is Vance Packard's classic *The Waste Makers*. Published in 1960, *The Waste Makers* exposes a range of business tactics just coming into practice, including planned obsolescence, to encourage us to consume and waste at ever increasing rates. I find this book fascinating, since the disposability of everyday products which we're now accustomed to was just emerging. As one small example, Packard expresses outrage that one company has even started to sell a disposable razor. The book reminds me how intentional, recent and unnecessary this rapid planned obsolescence is.

**What question do you wish our readers would ask themselves?**

I think we'll all do well to pause frequently and ask ourselves what in our own lives brings us the deepest satisfaction. Then, look at how we construct our lives, spend our money, spend our leisure hours. Does it match our priorities?

For most people I've asked, their deepest satisfaction comes from time with friends and family, in community, working together toward a shared goal. Yet, the average U.S. resident now spends far more hours staring at a tv or computer screen or buying or tending to all his/her stuff than in building community.

We need to keep our eyes on the real source of joy in life: loved ones, friends, a healthy environment and a fair community. Those — not the latest gadgets or wardrobe — are what really make life sweet.

Watch or download The Story of Stuff for free at [storyofstuff.com](http://storyofstuff.com).



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