

The Elephant and the Ostrich

An old story talks about a bunch of mice that encounter an elephant. One sees the end of the trunk, and says "It's a great big hose!" Another is near a leg, and says "No, it's a great big tree!" Still another is back near the tail, and says "It's a great big broom!"

What the story teaches is that seeing one part of a thing doesn't mean you see it all. The same is true of plastics and the environment. Some well-meaning people who believe they are the friends of the earth (and all who dwell thereon) are worried about plastics, which they see as a menace. When asked why, they may answer that it doesn't degrade, or that it consumes valuable resources, or that it reinforces the "throwaway" ethic. They say whatever they have to, to justify their feelings. These arguments, however, don't hold up to logical examination. Degradability isn't necessarily good, as we may not want the products of degradability in our soil and air, and resources are there to consume (or reserve for later consumption) or they wouldn't be resources. Plastics save resources, too – the fuel saved by lightweighting cars and planes is an outstanding example. The real questions are how much we consume and how much is necessary. Thus, some of the criticism of plastics in general, and packaging in particular, is a diversion from the consumption issue. The public, like a small child, wants to use what they want whenever they want, and wants Mommy and Daddy (Government and Industry, or the other way round) to clean up after them. Maturity, as the child discovers, means some restraint of this undifferentiated desire and the channeling of one's own resources (time, money, effort) in a way that achieves some degree of psychological stability. That is a nice goal that we don't always reach, hence the use of various media to help us along – some more damaging (addiction to legal and illegal drugs, alcohol, tobacco), some less so (sports and other entertainments) and some downright productive (gardening, building and fixing things, hugging).

One of these media is the Oedipal bashing of our Corporate Society that we live in, that gives us so many restrictions that we can't do anything about (look at all the lawyer and managed-care jokes), yet also gives us the broadest medical care and education opportunities in our history, ever-increasing life expectancy, among the cheapest food and fuel in the world (even now), and the incredible availability of knowledge on the Internet. Why else would so many people want to come here, and not vice versa? And plastics (and computers) are symbolic of this New Age, the age of Information, the Communications Revolution -- so the anxiety that these changes bring about are understandably diverted to blame plastics for such change.

Here is where the ostrich fits in. The ostrich hides his head in the sand to escape predators when he can't outrun them (or so we are told; I checked it out on the net and found they don't do this. Doubters can check my source, at <http://www.ostrichonline.com/general/quickfacts.html>). We don't want to face the need to restrain our addiction to "stuff" and "newness," so we hide our minds in the sand and blame the media and the corporations (and plastics, which make everything possible) for seducing us to buy, buy, buy. Until we see that buy, buy, buy is fulfilling these insatiable addictions, it's bye, bye resources, and we have no-one to blame but ourselves.

If you are troubled that much by the Corporate Society, sell all your investments, don't go to institutions which are supported by the income from such investments, seek alternative medical treatments when you are sick, buy your food direct from farmers (organic, of course) or grow it yourself. If that sounds too austere, try to fix the leaks – that is, demand responsibility from corporations and their executives, stop expecting that their companies grow at all costs

(economic cancer), and use our democratic system to control excesses (our own as well as corporate). Recycle when you can; even though it may not always be environmentally defensible, it makes us value the things and resources we have. But don't get taken in by its political correctness, don't get caught in such junk-science scams as Greenpeace's anti-vinyl campaign, watch out for the "natural" argument (snake venom and the AIDS virus are "natural, too), or the "complicated chemical" argument (carbon monoxide is just C-O, very simple and very deadly), and if your family members or teachers have an anti-plastics mind-set, just look around the room and imagine life without plastic wire insulation, pipe that doesn't corrode in the ground, refrigerators with door liner storage, unbreakable bottles in the bathroom, grocery bags that have so many other uses, contact lenses, and on and on. Finally, don't forget the need for responsible consumption: ULS -FOS-TANA: Use Less Stuff, Fix Old Stuff and Throw Almost Nothing Away.

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