*30 Days Spending Fast*

*Money, it's a gas
Grab that cash with both hands and make a stash
New car, caviar, four star daydream,
Think I'll buy me a football team

Money, get back
I'm all right, Jack, keep your hands off of my stack.
Money, it's a hit
Don't give me that do goody good bullshit
I'm in the high-fidelity first-class traveling set
And I think I need a Learjet

Money, it's a crime
Share it fairly but don't take a slice of my pie
Money, so they say
Is the root of all evil today
But if you ask for a rise it's no surprise that they're giving none away.*

Pink Floyd

**Introduction**

Money – cash – wedge – wonga – dough – dosh – dollar: call it what you will, it’s the measure of all things. In the west you ain’t worth a damn unless you got sack loads of the stuff. Money bequeaths the bearer with a demigod-like status and those fortunate few who have over-brimming piss-pots can have any whim, flight of fancy or perversity satisfied.

If you’re bereft of a conscience and you’ve screwed enough people over in business, if you’ve won the hereditary lottery and inherited yourself a fortune, or if you know how to gamble other peoples’ money on the stock market, well, when you finally hit the big time, regardless of how unscrupulously you do it, a whole host of obscenely decadent toys can be procured for a tuppence.

Materialism has hit an all-time ridiculous high. Here’s what I mean:

Let’s say you’re sick to death of flying with commercial airliners. This is more than understandable, after all the queues are getting bigger, the seats are getting ever closer and the service is plain awful. Well then why not follow in the lofty footsteps of one Saudi Prince who, for a mere £500 million, bought an Aribus 380 – which he had retro fitted with a golden throne, concert hall and on-board parking for his Rolls Royce (yes, you read that right: on-board parking for his *Rolls Royce*).

Perhaps you woke up wet one morning yearning for life on the open ocean. Fine, not a problem, just do what one Russian Oligarch did and treat yourself to a 556-foot super yacht with not one but two – yes *two*! (because one’s never enough) – helicopter pads, an indoor swimming pool, full sized basketball court, cinema, opera house, concert hall and manage. And for a few extra million you can even have a pretentious name stencilled on the side in 24 carat gold paint.

I know this all sounds a bit too ridiculous to be true – I mean, a golden throne in your private commercial-sized pleasure plane? Surely not! I’m sorry to report that, actually, yes, things have gotten this barmy. In fact I’ve barely even scratched the surface of the modern mosaic of materialistic madness. Things are so out of control that you can’t even satirise the current state of affairs. Truly, the world is too mad to mock.

But what’s any of this waffle got to do with this challenge? Read on assured, I am slowly wending my may to a point, honest.

When the plebs see all those expensive shiny things paraded in front of their eyes they naturally begin to develop an unhealthy craving – though they don’t have the financial means to feed such an appetite – and because most people are still stuck in the prepubescent anal-phallic stage of maturation they can’t help but want the thing the other child has; and if that thing is lavished with social prestige they want it all the more ardently.

Is it a shock, then, that the orientation of the western mind-set is pointed resolutely in the direction of consumerism? We are driven down the infinite road like a pack of docile mules, whipped forward by clever advertisement and our own insatiable hunger for social status. But when one looks at the organisation of our economy this should come as no surprise: its very existence is predicated on the work-earn-consume-repeat [from here you can cycle back through, or] over-consume-get-in-debt-repeat philosophy. ‘Twentieth-century capitalism,’ Fromm (1976) maintains, ‘is based on maximal consumption of the goods and services produced.’ According to Paul Mason (2016), author of the enlightening book *Postcaptialism*, people in western societies actually classify themselves as consumers.

This may well explain why personal debt in the UK has reached a record high exceeding £206 billion (Guardian 2018). Worryingly this £206 billion has been almost exclusively squandered on items of conspicuous consumerism (cars, clothes, technology). The country, therefore, is saddled with a crushing load of ‘un-supported’ debt.

Brief distinction between the two common types of debt:

**Unsupported debt:** debt incurred through the acquisition of unnecessary consumer items; a short catalogue of which I have included in parenthesis in the above paragraph. This debt is riskier because if the individual defaults on payments – usually to a credit card company or dodgy eastern European loan shark – then the debt must be ‘written off’ as the company can’t rightly seize and re-sell Louis Viton bags, Armani Suits and Sony TVs.

**Supported debt:** debt supported by a physical asset, usually a house, the price of which is determined by the natural ebb and flow of market forces – not the capricious whims of the capitalists. If the individual defaults on payments then the bank, or ‘lender’, seizes the property and flogs it thus making their money back.

Now we all know what happens when debt spirals out of control and people for whatever reason can no longer finance repayments. The 2008 economic crash that happened across the pond is the oft cited example par excellence. However, this was caused by artificially depressed interest rates which encouraged people to overstretch on the size of their mortgage or acquire numerous properties for rental assets. There are undercurrents of speculation – mere murmurs at the moment – that we here in the UK are heading toward a similar crisis but with unsupported debt. Millions of people nationwide have incurred large credit card debt which they are struggling to ‘service’, i.e. keep up the basic minimum payments. How might this look?

A single household may have two people earning and contributing to bills and debt – whether that be supported (mortgage) or unsupported (credit cards, car finance) or, most likely, a combination of the two. Let’s say for ease of purpose that our hypothetical couple collectively earn £3000 per calendar month (that’s after they’ve been buggered by the tax man). A thousand of that might be allocated to the mortgage. They have two cars on finance at £300 each (crazy but very common nowadays). There goes £600 – and that’s without factoring in running cost. Their bills total £1000p/m (this includes rates, council tax, food, necessities, etc.). After those deductions they are left with four hundred for the month.

But they have £4500 on their credit cards which they must try to reduce each month. It’s pointless to speculate what the monthly repayment rates are; it could be a 0% interest loan which they can merrily chip away at for two years, or they could’ve missed a payment and now have to pay it back at rate of 29.9% APR. With very little savings in the bank this is a very vulnerable household. Yet, I would argue that this is a typical and quite accurate representation of the average household in the UK.

Serious problems arise when one loses their job, overtime is cut, or one of life’s unforeseen Chimeras rears its ugly mug. When people are so submerged in financial responsibilities and their head hovers just above the choppy waters, the slightest swell or rise in tide can lead to financial asphyxiation.

The multifaceted, hydra-headed factors that contribute to runway consumerism reside, I suspect, in the domain of human psychology and subtle social indoctrination programmes, the complexities of which exceed my powers of comprehension. For this reason I will not embarrass myself by attempting an analysis – bigger and better minds have tried. What is painfully obvious to me, though, is the social suffering all this consumerism and debt creates. I’ve worked with respected professionals (teachers and public servants) who happily prioritise a three grand item of jewellery or ten grand car over reducing household debt – thus affectively saddling themselves with a greater financial burden. One of my colleagues once went without proper meals and heating for a week because they’d spent all of their wages on designer clothes and a 26th pair of trainers. You may raise the argument that, well, they’re mature adults and it’s their money to do with whatever they so please. I’m inclined to agree. However, when it meant that their two young children also had to live on three squares of pot noodle whilst suffering climatic extremes, I found myself being a little less forgiving.

Many people lack the self-control and self-discipline necessary to delay the short term gratification derived from making a material acquisition – they may very well be addicted to what is known as the ‘buyer’s high’. Rather than squirreling a little away for that rainy day or choosing to reduce pre-existing debt, the majority of people instead opt to purchase that non-essential consumer item (such as a 26th pair of designer trainers), even if it means going without sufficient nourishment.

Unfortunately, because there is little in the way of data sets that provide an accurate picture of what percentage of the population carries consumer debt, one can only make a patchy speculative guess by drawing from what one hears, sees and, where possible, reads. Though from my own anthropological investigation, I would confidently assert that consumer debt is prevalent right across society. Of course the varying degree of debt differs from person to person, there are millions who are fettered to the burden of credit card/store card/consumer debt.

One really doesn’t have to travel too far to arrive at this conclusion. Coincidently, whilst working through this challenge, I overheard a shop assistant lament that she’d spent all of her wages before payday. A friend of mine told me about a relative who was in so much debt that he was on brink of financial ruin. And I found out that two of my relatives are perennial overdraft fiends.

It is my contention that there are a lot of people who could do with exercising some monetary discipline (this could also be said for our government: national debt has spiralled out of control and as of this writing the UK is somewhere in the region of 1.4 trillion in the red!). Here in lies the motivation for this challenge: to provide an opportunity for the spendthrift to see if he or she can tighten their belts, clamp-shut their wallets and purses and leave the piggy bank unmolested for a full 30 days.

“Here’s a lesson to test your mind’s mettle: take part of a week in which you have only the most meagre and cheap food, dress scantly in shabby clothes, and ask yourself if this is really the worst that you feared.”

*– Seneca*

**Some benefits that may emerge from this challenge**

If you are currently suffering with financial difficulties, a spending fast will enable you to direct more money into your deficit, enabling you to pay off those credit/store cards and/or overdraft quicker. Thirty days without spending a single cent will certainly help you cultivate and develop monetary discipline, endowing you with the ability to check the impulse that leads to an unnecessary purchase. But most importantly, I would say, this challenge could awaken you to the materialistic trap that so many in the western world are stuck in and are blinded by.

I personally believe that many people have little to no idea how to spend their time. So to fill the temporal void and temporarily smother the boredom they look to the material acquisition for a source of amusement. How often in conversation has the subject gravitated towards the topic of my new car? my new phone? my new this? my new that? or, what I would buy if I won the lottery! The void, of course, can never be filled, not with all the cars, iPhones and Gucci handbags in the world. And the boredom, once the novelty has faded from the thing, inevitably creeps back. So then what happens? That’s right. They look to the next material acquisition . . . and on the vicious cycle repeats.

This pernicious, self-perpetuating cycle is tragically prevalent. I see it all the time – in fact, I now seem to see it everywhere I look; this challenge, I could swear, has made me hypersensitive to detecting it. Though what I’ve come to understand is that it is not simply symptomatic of adolescence: the natural impetuosity of the young could very well explain irrational spending habits – this explains why there are so many products on the market specifically for young people and why the average child by the age of six has seen over ten thousand adverts: the capitalists have happened upon the fact that young people are almost incapable of delaying gratification. However, it appears to me that, actually, the materialistic mentality does not discriminate on the basis of a person’s age: it can be seen in the young child pointing to the colourful plastic toy on the shelf right the way up to my 76 year old father who has to have the latest flat screen TV – new models of which appear in the shops as frequently as do loafs of bread in my local baker’s window.

From the outside one can clearly see how dangerous this behaviour is and also how, the psychological instability that is its root cause, leads to the proliferation and exacerbation of spending for spending’s sake. An acquaintance of mine developed a taste – I should say more accurately an *addiction* – for exclusive mechanical timepieces. Ex*clusive* is another name for ex*pensive*. When he begins telling about his next purchase, which he does every six months with the regularity of clockwork, my immediate question is, *How many watches does one man need*? I thought it was one but apparently there is no established number. He has acquired over twenty watches – the average price of each one is around £2000. Do the math. 20 X 2000 . . . ! I know, crazy isn’t it?

Here’s the thing, this acquaintance of mine is completely oblivious to the law of diminishing returns – to be fair to him, though, most everyone is; if they weren’t the consumer bandwagon would’ve been abandoned to rot at the side of the road a long time ago. I’ll use his watch addiction to elucidate this vary alien concept.

He’d purchase a really exclusive watch (the most recent one costing in excess of £6500) and, to disable the dissuasive force of cognitive dissonance, ‘chop-in’ an old one in a futile attempt to reduce that obscene price tag. Here’s how it would work: He’d buy a watch for £2000 and keep it for six months or so. By this time the lustre had worn off and so he’d go in search for another one. Of course, the capitalists have more than provided for his predilection. At the end of few weeks’ worth of perusing the plethora of online watch catalogues, he successfully finds a new and better watch, which essentially performs the same basic function as the old one: it keeps time less-accurately than a twenty quid Casio. Though this one costs £6500. As the old watch no longer makes him happy he decides to ‘chop it in’. But because it is second hand its re-sale value has substantially diminished and the store offer a trade-in price of £1000.

At each of the four stages a significant loss is made. First when he purchased the £2000 watch – because it’s only really worth about half that, and that’s being generous. The second loss occurs when he re-sells it losing 50% of its original value. Third, the new watch is overpriced by about £3500, maybe more. And, fourthly, he’ll lose when he next sells the new watch for a new-new watch. A conservative calculation would estimate losses of between three to four thousand pounds.

Laid out as simply and objectively as I have done above, surly only an idiot or someone afflicted with dyscalculia (or the companies who are making a ton of wedge) would consider this an acceptable set of transactions. Matters get worse if we factor in the theory of labour. The time spent at work earning all those pounds was underpaid and the items those pounds purchased were over-priced! I’m reminded of the poem *Smart*, by Shel Silverstein. It goes like this:

My dad gave me one dollar bill

'Cause I'm his smartest son,

And I swapped it for two shiny quarters

'Cause two is more than one!

And then I took the quarters

And traded them to Lou

For three dimes -- I guess he didn't know

That three is more than two!

Just then, along came old blind Bates

And just 'cause he can't see

He gave me four nickels for my three dimes,

And four is more than three!

And then I took the nickels to Hiram Coombs

Down at the seed-feed store,

And the fool gave me five pennies for them,

And five is more than four!

And then I went and showed my dad,

And he got red in the cheeks

And closed his eyes and shook his head --

Too proud of me to speak!

I won’t patronise the reader by explaining the child’s numerous acts of fiscal folly. Though if your understanding of American currency is a bit sketchy then it might not be so obvious. But I’ll leave you to work it out. When you do the metaphorical penny will drop!

Of course, for most people their materialistic vice is not a tick tock attached to a four figure price tag. However, the desire to keep up with the latest fashion, the Joneses or the next new technological upgrade, over the course of a year, probably amounts to an exclusive timepiece. A spending fast can help combat (or at least curb) this behaviour – and maybe, if you are disciplined enough to see it through for the full thirty days, the realisation that happiness does not exist in materialistic acquisitions will dawn. Ultimately this will only be a good thing as your life will be brightened by a light which illuminates the age old axiom: the best things in life are free.

**Rules**

* For 30 Days you are not to spend a single solitary cent!
* Of course, you must still pay the mortgage and other bills – if you’re unfortunate enough to have any that is.
* You cannot accrue debt by amassing a collection I.O.Us. For example, you can’t say to a friend, ‘Can you foot the bill for this meal/coffee/pair of designer shoes/handbag and I’ll recompense you in 30 Days’ time?’ No. You must abstain from the luxuries of restaurant meals, coffees out and any other products or items of conspicuous consumerism. Failure to adhere to this rule will – if your integrity is intact – require that you re-start the challenge from day one.
* You cannot spend any spare cash you so happen to have lying about the house; nor can you withdraw a sum prior to starting the challenge and live off of that for the 30 Days.
* In sum: pay the bills but nothing, absolutely nothing else.

**Participation Log**

I knew this was going to be a tough challenge – and it certainly lived up to my expectation. Here’s why. I don’t want for much in life; my car was last valued at about twenty five quid above the scrap value, I haven’t changed my wardrobe since my last (and final) growth spurt and I’m about as materialistic as a Mormon. But . . . but! I absolutely love a coffee and slice of carrot cake at my local café on a Saturday and Sunday morning, I love a film night with the missus and I’m an inveterate book addict. I found it very difficult to cut these things out for 30 Days, especially the last one – I should have, for the duration of the challenge, avoided all bookstores; but I didn’t and consequently found myself in one holding a book that I really wanted. I’m ashamed to say that I toyed with the idea of slipping it inside my jacket and making a run for it. Thanks to Kant’s categorical imperative, which doggedly nagged at my conscience until it caved in, I instead hid the book at the back of a stack of dusty old George Elliot novels where I knew no one would find it. After the challenge I returned and purchased it.

I thought I lead an austere life as is, but by god did this challenge force it to the next level – I’m talking Zen Buddhist level. It’s strange, I can easily abstain from meat, dairy, fast food, confectionaries, lazy days on the couch, meaningless conversations with friends, lye-ins, fashion and everything else that constitutes the western diet. But cutting out those three little aforementioned pleasures was agonisingly difficult. I started suffering with coffee and carrot cake withdrawal symptoms; which came in the form of headaches, mood swings, hot sweats and intense bouts of cravings. My subconscious seemed to steer me in the direction of every café I happened to pass whilst out gathering the groceries. A disgruntled voice would sound: ‘What bloody harm will it do? I live like a Shaolin Monk anyway; this is just taking things to the unhealthy extremes!’ And so the persuasive line of argument would go. Every day up until the second week, about the time when the realisation dawned, I was forced to wage war against this internal battle.

Buying stuff, meaningless pointless unnecessary superfluous stuff, is a western pastime – which we collectively call consumerism. I’ve talked about this enough in the introduction and I think we can all agree that it is a well established fact: we in the west are consumer addicts. What I came to realise toward the end of the second week was that, actually, we need very little to live, happy contented lives. This challenge acts like a glimpse into life on the other side: the side where we’ve dispensed of the materialistic crutch and instead find fulfilment in activities that don’t involve buying things. Because I no longer went for my obligatory Saturday and Sunday morning coffee and cake, the commute and activity taking in total about two hours, I discovered that I had more time to devote to higher pursuits: my plank got spanked more, much to my delight, and I got round to writing those book reviews which I had been putting off.

By the time this challenge drew to a close the compulsion to be the first in the queue at the coffee shop had all but left me. And at the end of the 30 Days I was practically cured of my addiction (I say *practically* because there still remains a residual chance of relapse). Also, my book buying obsession withered a bit and during a brief spell of sobriety I was struck down by an epiphany: because I can acquire books much quicker than I can read them, I have about fifty or so that are as yet un-read. Consequently I’ve promulgated a book buying embargo; this sanction is only to be lifted once all un-read titles have been read.

A moderately amusing thing happened at the end of this challenge which I absolutely must mention. About a week before I started the spending fast I changed banks. This meant that I had to have a new debit card and pin. I memorised the pin, burnt the little plastic tab and stuffed the card in my wallet for safekeeping saying, ‘I’ll see you in thirty days.’ When the challenge concluded I chose to celebrate by treating my other half to a meal out. The bill came to about a pound above the contactless limit and so I had to punch my pin into the card machine. But lo! I’d forgotten the number. My other half at first thought I was joking until my red face and perspiring forehead gave away my embarrassment. She was none too pleased when she had to foot the bill. I later tried my card in a cash machine but my card was cancelled after I entered the incorrect combination three consecutive times. I had to wait another five days for a new pin.

**Outcomes**

* I had just over £750 extra in my account – which was nice. What did I do with it I hear you ask? Well, I didn’t have a night at the casino if that’s what you’re thinking. I banked £500, took the other half for a meal (though later reimbursed her because of the pin fiasco) and gave her £100 so she could treat herself, and with the final hundred I went out in search for a desperately needed new pair of shoes. But as size 12s are rarer than rocking horse shit and I’m annoyingly particular about what I’ll adorn my feet with, I chose to save the last hundred for when the book ban is lifted.
* I have become more aware of superfluous spending habits.
* In light of the many positive impacts this challenge has had, I’ve decided to undertake a 30 Day spending fast three times a year. The months I have selected are: January, May and September. I invite you to join me in this.

**This Concludes the Challenge: Spending Fast**

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Pink Floyd – “Money” track six from *Dark Side of the Moon* (aka: greatest album ever!).