

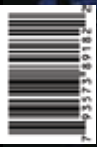
THE ISLAMIC MONTHLY

POLITICS / CULTURE / SOCIETY

2011 and Reflections on the Past Year



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interview

NOT A STRANGER TO DUMPS. Annie Leonard, author and director of the internet sensation *The Story of Stuff*. She has traveled to over 40 countries visiting factories and dumps in order to understand consumption in the world today.



WHEN CONSIDERING RESOURCES, POVERTY and the environment, numbers and statistics reveal a very bleak picture. The wealthiest 20 percent of the world accounts for more than 76 percent of consumption. Half the world population lives on less than \$2.50 a day, 1.6 billion people live without electricity, 1.6 million are killed each year from indoor air pollution, and 12 percent of the world's population uses 85 percent of global water resources, while one-fifth of the world's population faces daily water scarcity. It's often a challenge, living in a developed country and in a relatively stable income bracket, to translate these numbers into reality.

I reflect on my own scripture and the themes related to preserving the earth as caliphs from God and protecting the environment, resources and humanity. Knowing these principles in our faith and recalling principles that I grew up with as a Muslim to achieve equilibrium in my daily life and strive for moderation, I wondered where things went so wrong in history and in our society today. Why are we accumulating so much stuff? How has materialism and consumerism impacted our life? What decisions that we make on a day-to-day basis impact our world today and future generations?

These thoughts inspired me to ask Annie Leonard, host of the Internet film sensation "The Story of Stuff," to reflect on her many years of travel to factories and dumps around the globe. Leonard's work draws a clearer correlation to the decisions that I make and its impact on the rest of world — and its impact on my own path toward living a meaningful and richer life.

THE ISLAMIC MONTHLY: Thank you so much for this time. This is very special because discussing understanding of the environmental problem is very important to our global community. As a Muslim, I'm struck by the number of Quranic passages that talk about the environment and caring for the earth. And in some of my research, I see that these principles are shared in other religious and spiritual groups. In fact, I can't conceive of finding any religious tradition that does not stress this idea of preserving the earth, caring for nature and being guardians on earth. Then I wonder how these messages were lost as we came into the modern period. As you've traveled the globe, lived in Muslim countries for periods of time and engaged with all types of religious leaders who are, no doubt, now taking a stand to save the earth, how have you encountered religious principles that work in the same causes as you?

ANNIE LEONARD

THE STUFF OF OUR LIVES

A discussion with Annie Leonard, author and host of "The Story of Stuff" film and book, and director of The Story of Stuff Project.

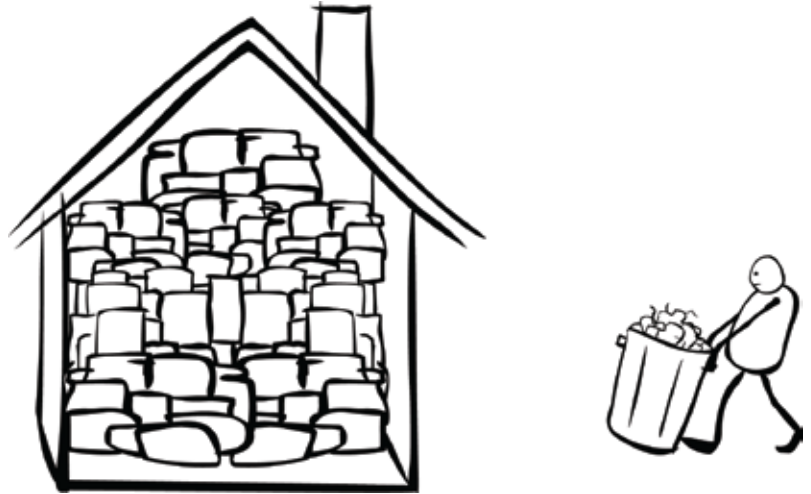
Interview by AMINA CHAUDARY

As you engage with these leaders, what are their reflections about finding the value of earth within our moral codes and scriptures?

ANNIE LEONARD: That’s a great question. I think that as our society becomes more technologically advanced, the Western cultural paradigm of incredible reductionism and compartmentalization — rather than looking at the whole — has become more dominant. There’s a lot of professional and academic validation for having a narrow expertise, rather than looking at whole systems, such as the global ecosystem. And it’s not just related to the environment. It shows up in other things where we’ve lost touch with the whole: our community, our compassion, our sense of equity and justice. We’re so compartmentalized: people can go to churches and mosques one day of the week and talk about equity and caring for all that God created and then go trash it for six days of the week and feel no contradiction. It’s very interesting. I originally made “The Story of Stuff” film, for my fellow activists to see the connections between our issues. And I’ve been totally shocked by the diversity and the scale of the response to this film.

One community that bombarded us with positive responses were faith-based communities. I was thrilled because, from a broader systems perspective, there is clearly a social equity piece as well as an environmental sustainability piece involved in caring for the planet and for each other, and this recognition is so completely in alignment with every religion on the planet. But I was also thrilled because faith-based communities already

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have existing infrastructure in society. They already have ways to connect and communicate, to share ideas and take action. One of the things we advocate for in “The Story of Stuff” is for people to get together with others and talk about how to make the world better. Faith-based communities are already getting together to discuss important issues, so why not also talk about how to make the world better?

We are now collaborating with GreenFaith in New Jersey to make a series of faith-based curriculums geared toward facilitating teenagers coming together to examine their relationship with Stuff, consumption, sustainability and the environment through the lens of their faith. We produced a Christian and Jewish one called “Let There Be... Stuff?: a Spirit-Filled Response to a Stuff-Crazed World.” We’re currently working on the Islamic version and collaborating with some folks we met in Lebanon when I gave

a talk in Beirut this summer at the first Arab World Zero Waste Summit.

If you look at the foundations of every religion, treating each other well and having reverence for the planet is core to every faith. We really need to get back to that. And I feel there is an opening in society for that right now, because people want a sense of meaning and identity, and for too long, many of us have been looking for that sense of meaning and identity through consumption — through the car we drive or through the logo on our shirts. We are increasingly seeing that the planet cannot sustain that level of consumption and it’s not really fulfilling in the long term. We need to look for other ways to establish a sense of identity and meaning, and to build our communities without such excessive and unequal consumption, and I think that faith-based communities can provide a much better place to look for that than the shopping mall.



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On this last point you make, when you define “Stuff” in your book, you point out that it is something with which we “confuse our personal self worth.” A lot of what you write about revolves around values and relationships between people and their respective communities and societies. From a sociological perspective, there is some idea of social consciousness that was lost: the idea of the neighbor was forgotten, and being conscious of the consequences of your actions on those around you and later generations. We’ve somehow become disconnected to the macro, the whole community, society, earth. Can you reflect on this idea of individual versus community? Even here in America, where there is this overarching interest in protecting the rights of the individual for fear of being trampled by the community.



Your questions go right back to the core challenges that those of us who are trying to figure out a way to live on this planet — sustainably and justly — face. This hyper individualism is so clearly part of the problem. Over the past decades, people have increasingly been trying to find happiness and meaning through Stuff, rather than community and family and civic engagement, and it’s just not working. We’ve had decades of being bombarded with commercial messages telling us that consumerism is the way you find more meaning, feel more loved, have success in your jobs and all of this is possible through more and better Stuff. And for a long time people bought into that.

Now our houses are full of Stuff — much of which we don’t need, our garages are full, we are stuff-saturated and it is exhausting. In order to maintain these high levels of consumerism, we’re working longer hours than previous generations. Workers in the United States work more hours each year than in any other industrialized country except maybe South Korea. We work on average 300 hours a year longer than workers in Europe. We are also watching more TV than previous generations did. We watch an average of five hours of TV a day — isn’t that incredible?

So, we’re stuck on this work-watch-spend treadmill, working, watching TV and shopping more than previous generations.

When I looked at the data about how many more hours we spend working and watching TV than our parents’ generation did, I wondered: where is that time coming from? It turns out that it’s often coming from spending time with friends and family, engaging in our communities and doing civic activity. The situation is depressing. A recent study showed that only about 20 percent of people in the U.S. know all their neighbors’ names and 25 percent of people don’t have one friend with whom they can talk to about personal issues. Imagine how isolating and lonely that would be to not have one friend! Increasingly, people are realizing the contradiction: we have all this cool Stuff but we’re not any happier and in many cases, are even less happy than our parents’ generation was. I think people are beginning to realize that this consumption-fueled treadmill is not working on multiple fronts.

The massive levels of consumption we’re experiencing goes along with the massive inequity in our society, both nationally and globally. We’ve reached a situation where we are trashing the planet, we are trashing each other and we are not even having fun. Some people are so burdened with Stuff that they are slaves to their Stuff, and then others don’t even have enough for basic human needs. On both ends of the economic spectrum, it’s just not working. So one of the things I hope to inspire people to do is to think more critically about the role of Stuff in their lives, inspire people to ask questions like: “Does Stuff provide more happiness? Is this new thing worth the toll on the planet and the toll on my personal life? Could the money be better used by saving or sharing it?” I’m not saying that new Stuff never provides happiness. But if we look at the actual data, it is clear that as we get more and more Stuff, the per unit benefit — the marginal unit of happiness we get with each new thing — decreases. So a second pair of shoes makes us happier than our 22nd pair of shoes. And at some point, the benefit begins to go down and more Stuff actually makes us less happy because the marginal benefit of the new thing is outweighed by the loss



of all the time we have to spend to work and shop and maintain for all this Stuff.

We need to shift from looking for happiness and meaning from Stuff to reconnecting with our community, our families, participating in leisure and recreation and civic engagement. That's where we'll find happiness and meaning. Across cultures, ages and income groups, once your basic needs are met, once you have food and a roof, etc., the things that actually provide happiness are the quality of your social relations, a sense of meaning or purpose beyond yourself, leisure time with your friends and family and the act of coming together toward a shared goal.

Seeing the world beyond ourselves is a very important point, especially when I reflect on the principles I grew up with in a Muslim framework: A morally grounded structure that teaches you to look beyond yourself can greatly impact our livelihood today.

We can't care about something or someone if we don't have any connection to them, and that's why it's so important to get to know our neighbors and to listen to other people, close to home as well as on the other side of the planet. I know most people are good. I believe most people don't want their kids to be born with toxic chemicals in them, most people don't want their neighbors to not be able to go to the doctor because they can't afford the cost. Most people want clean air and water and a healthy economy. I believe most people have this decent core with many shared values. Unfortunately, the intensely commercialized society we've structured is not speaking to that core, but it's instead speaking to our insecurities, our anxieties and our anxiousness. The message is always, "Buy, buy, buy more." We have to search for those voices in society that are speaking to that good core in us, about sharing and



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love and justice. If we can connect to each other around those common values — rather than around fear and hate — I am confident we can find enough common ground upon which to build a better world.

I see there are two pieces to this by which numerous religious, moral and social communities can act by: There is the intellectual piece that is to recognize that this is part of our tradition, it is an imperative to us. The other is access: my religion tells me to do this but where or how do you do it? Like you, I spent some time traveling and living in parts of the Middle East and South Asia. One thing that made an impression on me was the lack of infrastructure. Why have certain countries lagged behind in these environmental efforts? Or have they?

It's good you are asking the questions on structures. One of the mistakes that people who are concerned about the environment fall into is thinking the responsibility to find solutions is exclusively an individual responsibility. Sometimes we call that the "individualization" of the problem. And it really benefits the polluters for us to think it's our problem alone. Then the big polluters can say, "It's your problem that there is climate change because you drove instead of rode a bicycle," or "It's your problem there is a landfill crisis because you used that disposable bottle." There has been a very intentional effort by many polluters to make us think the problem is caused by our poor choices and the responsibility to fix it is up to us, so we won't hold them responsible. I remember

when I was growing up in the 1970s, there were plastic bottles everywhere and people began to speak out against this waste. The environmentalists said, "We want a Bottle Bill" — a regulatory solution in which shoppers pay a 5-cent deposit for bottles which they get back when they return the bottle for reuse or recycling. Wherever they have been adopted, these "Bottle Bills" have been enormously effective at reducing waste and are among the most effective environmental laws you can have anywhere. But the bottling industry, like Coke and Pepsi and the guys who actually make the bottles, don't want a Bottle Bill — they want us to use the bottle once and throw it away so that we go back and buy another one instead of returning it to them for another use.

To divert attention from national legislative remedies, like Bottle Bills, they formed an organization called Keep America Beautiful. Most people think it was a well meaning group fighting litter, but really it was an industry front group working to make us think the garbage problem is because of individuals who litter, whereas in reality, the garbage problem is because of an entire industrial economy that rewards waste. They came up with this ad of a Native American standing on the side of this river watching all this pollution and litter in the landscape. The commercial zooms right into his face and he has this one tear rolling down his cheek. It was a powerful image and had a really a big impact on our thinking about pollution. At the end of the commercial, the narrator says: "People start pollution. People can stop it."

RIGHT: City of Cairo, in Egypt Scavenging through the rubbish of a public dump of Cairo.



“Too often we treat materials as disposable but we also treat people as disposable.”

These messages reinforced the notion that pollution is caused by individuals. But I say, pollution does not stop with me making different choices. I am not the one deciding to produce and distribute millions of single-use disposable bottles. I am not the one over-packaging products in plastic known to contain hormone disrupting chemicals. I am not the one making electronics and appliances so they can't be repaired or upgraded or recycled. Pollution stops with big industries making better choices, wasting less, replacing toxics and preventing pollution. Instead of realizing this, many people think that the way we save the environment is to focus on all these little things, like carry our own bag, recycle, change our light bulbs — all of which are good responsible things to do, but those day-to-day actions are not going to make real systemic change. I am sure

polluting industries love these constant lists of 10 simple things we can each do to save the planet, because then we focus on nagging each other to bring your own bottle instead of telling the industry to stop spewing out these toxic chemicals.

The real point of leverage is not perfecting our own ability to make the right choices, which is a trap that environmentalists fall into which turns us into whiny nags. The real place to make change is to change the structures in which our industries, our banks, our schools, our society operate. Right now, the way our economy is set up rewards wasting, rewards companies that externalize the cost of bad decisions on to the community, allows companies to put toxic chemicals into everyday products and the onus is on us to navigate that and strive to make the right choices. I

definitely think setting up the structures to facilitate environmentally sustainable behavior is much better than nagging and focusing on the individual behavior changes.

In places like South Asia and lots of other places, there are systems for recycling, but you don't see it because it's often invisible. And this is where the human dimension comes in. In most places in the world, the poorest people in society take on an informal role of recyclers (also called scavengers or waste pickers in some areas). In countries ranging from Bangladesh to Egypt to Brazil, there are vibrant communities of informal recyclers, but they don't have recycling bins or recycling trucks, and they are the kind of people who are often invisible in society anyway so it's easy to ignore them. I can't tell you how many countries I've gone to and the fancy environmentalists tell me that there is no recycling going on, so I ask them to take me to the dump. And at the dump, they see thousands of families, often children, picking through the discards to find material to sell. That's recycling. When we're looking at improving recycling infrastructure in these places, we need to ensure that we don't treat these people as invisible and dispose of them. Too often we treat materials as disposable but we also treat people as disposable. These people have been providing a vital public health, sanitation and materials recovery service behind the scenes, without public support, being exposed to all kinds of hazards in our garbage. So our job is to respect and honor them and build recycling systems on the foundation of their tremendous knowledge. There are fabulous programs all over India now and it's starting in Bangladesh too where these informal recyclers are getting licensed by the government so that they get increased recognition, credibility and protection from harassment. They are getting protective clothing so they are not being exposed to hazards, and they are working with the householders to separate the materials at the source so that these people don't have to sort through all the yucky stuff to pull out the valuable materials. I'm very supportive of the growing informal recyclers movement that is being built upon the invisible recycling happening everywhere. So, if we look

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closely enough in other countries, we may be surprised that there is more recycling infrastructure than we first realized.

As the promise of higher pay in urban areas draws more people into cities, that lifestyle is replaced by modern living that has much less regard for the environment. You then say these indigenous communities “are often discriminated against and shut out of decision making about projects that affect their resources and their communities.” What are your thoughts on this?

Wow, there are a lot of pieces to that question. One piece is this sort of indoctrination into consumer culture. And that's a really important piece of the problem. I spent 20 years looking at issues of waste, pollution and consumption in the U.S. and countries around the world. Over this time, I saw that we export our unwanted hazardous wastes and trash to other countries, we export our hazardous technologies like garbage incinerators that we don't want, we export certain products like pesticides that we make in the U.S. even though you are not allowed to use them here because they are too toxic. But we export them overseas. So, it's too toxic for American children but it's not too toxic for Bangladeshi children? It's outrageous. We export hazardous products, hazardous wastes, hazardous technologies, but I think perhaps the most dangerous thing we export is this consumer crazed way of organizing society, and this idea that you are more valuable based on what you own. And we are bombarding other countries with this message.

We are living with a consumption level that the earth cannot sustain. In the U.S., we are 5 percent of the world's population and

consume 30 percent of the world's resources. Globally, the whole planet is using one and a half planet of resources each year, which is a big problem because we only have one planet. We are consuming more each year than the planet produces. And the only way we can do that is if we are eating into the stockpile of what the planet produced over the centuries. So that's bad enough that we in the U.S. are consuming more than our share, more than the planet can provide. But now we are exporting this model of overconsumption to the whole world and that is heading us to ecological collapse. We should be reining in our consumption, figuring out how we can live good healthy lives with less Stuff, how to use fewer toxins, how to share better, and then sharing that model instead of sharing the dirty development model that got us into this ecological mess.

I think that is a big issue when you talk of people moving into cities and then being bombarded with this excessive commercialization. We have to stop spreading the commercialization gospel because it is heading us to ruin. The whole planet cannot consume at U.S. levels, nor can it sustain even us consuming at these levels. The challenge before us is to find a way to live well, with less Stuff and more of what really matters. Fortunately, there are many, many ways to do that.

Terrorism remains a critical issue in our day, and obviously the Muslim world is front and center when it comes to concerns about terrorism. While there is no justification for these acts, there are causes. So for example, we rarely hear about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict discussed in terms of access to water or water rights. How do you think access to resources in the Muslim world impact this reality? Is there a possibility that part of the

turmoil we see in the Middle East is more related to access to basic necessities such as water and food as opposed to the larger political conflicts that usually frame the discussion?

Absolutely. Increasingly, conflicts all over the world are resource conflicts. And it's at a couple of levels. One is that we want their resources. The U.S. and other over-consumptive societies want the resources that are located in other countries. Oil is obviously the biggest example of this, but we also want metals from Africa for our cheap and disposable electronics, crops from Asia and Latin America. We want Stuff from all over the world to maintain our lifestyle here, and this often leads to conflicts.

The other issue is that, in many instances, communities are being displaced and denied access to their own resources, and when you depend on resources to live, then displacement threatens your entire life. Deforestation doesn't just threaten forests but also the millions of people who depend on them for survival. Big fishing trawlers and polluting factories don't just threaten fish populations, but also the millions of small fisherfolk who fish to survive. Threatening peoples' livelihood and sustenance inevitably leads to conflict.

A lot of people say that water is going to be the new oil. Today, water is seriously threatened all over the world. Water is being diverted for industrial and agricultural uses, or is disappearing as a result of climate change or is being degraded with pesticides or from poor sanitation. There are lots of reasons that water is disappearing or being degraded and it's leading to an increase in water scarcity or water stress. If you look at the global maps of areas of water stress, it's terrifying. Huge areas of the world are experiencing increasing water stress and people can only go about three days without water. If you have no water, your choices are dying or fighting for it. If your child needs water and there is no water, why not take up arms? Talk about an incentive to engage in violent or other conflicts. Please, let us, as a global society, work together to find a solution before we push more communities to that, because people are not

going to politely sit there and die of no water. They will put up a fight. Our industrial and economic policies right now are planting the seeds of future conflict over future resources. It's just so clear, the trajectory is so clear. If we want to avoid future conflicts, we have to make sure that people have healthy, sustainable livelihoods. Most people who have healthy, sustainable livelihoods are happy to stay right there in their community and do meaningful and safe work and don't see any reason to join a violent cause. But if you have no other option, then it becomes a lot more attractive.

What is one thing that most people would be surprised to know about you?

One thing that may surprise people is that I just want to stay home and work in my garden. I am grateful for the travel I have done and the many things I have learned from communities around the world. I realize that traveling like I have done is a huge privilege. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but for me, the greatest adventure of all at this point would be to stay home more, spend time with my family and work on my garden. So that is my goal for the coming years: more time at home being part of the solution — building community, growing healthy food, engaging in the democratic process to change the rules of our economy so that we can have happier, healthier, more sustainable jobs, communities and lives. §

Annie Leonard is the author and host of "The Story of Stuff" film now translated in X languages and viewed by over X million viewers. She is also the author of The Story of Stuff book published by the Free Press of Simon and Schuster in March 2010. As the Director of The Story of Stuff Project based in Berkeley, California Annie has written and hosted additional films including: The Story of Cap and Trade, The Story of Electronics, The Story of Cosmetics and The Story of Bottled Water.

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