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Leaving The "Distinctive" Lifestyle -- Regaining Farm-Family Values In A High-Tech World

By Christine Durst And Michael Haaren

In a world of lengthening commutes, longer workweeks, and high-stress, gridlocked suburban

sprawl, we may often wonder about the undeclared "values" that are motivating us to live the way we do (and how to get back on the right track).

When we find ourselves envying the gleaming new SUV in the next lane over, or the larger home a friend has just bought, or the private university tuition the neighbors can afford, it may help us to stand back and ask ourselves about the "distinctive" lifestyles that so many of us seem to yearn for, and the sacrifices in family togetherness, joy, and satisfaction that the "distinctive" lifestyle demands.

Indeed, after some thought on the trade-offs -- pollution, rampant materialism, rootless waves of people ebbing and flowing around us and our children -- you may well conclude that the "distinctive suburban way of life" everyone is chasing is actually what we have come to call the DISTINCTIVE suburban way of life: Dual Income Striving to Impress Neighbors and Co-workers yet Tormented by Increasing Vexation and Emptiness.

With this in mind, maybe instead of trying to live the distinctive lifestyle, we should be trying to leave the distinctive lifestyle.

TELEWORK & FARM-FAMILY VALUES It's one of the great ironies of the high-tech world: We leave our small towns and farms -- sacrificing family life, roots, and healthy values -- to settle in sprawling suburbs close to technology-enabled jobs, and now technology is allowing us to return to small towns and farms, and rediscover the joy and strength of family and neighborhood bonds.

How is this happening? Virtual work. With the spread of the Internet and broadband communications, coinciding with the strong growth of outsourcing, it's becoming easier and easier to stay at home and earn a decent living doing interesting, legitimate work. No longer must both parents in a family commute to an office. (It may help put things in perspective by considering that work is no longer a "place," but an activity.) Indeed, as far-fetched as it sounds, it's now possible for both parents -- depending on their qualifications, of course -- to get off the "gerbil wheel" of suburban living altogether, and work at home pretty much wherever they choose.

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VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS, VIRTUAL PROFESSIONALS, and JETBLUE AIRWAYS The virtual work movement has come a long way since the birth of the Virtual Assistant industry in the mid-1990s. (Virtual Assistants, if you're unfamiliar with the term, are independent contractors who provide business-support services to other small businesses and independent professionals via email, phone, fax and courier.) In those days, it was highly unusual to find someone working from home exclusively, and using email and other electronic tools to handle workflow from faraway clients. It was also unusual to find anyone handling other than administrative-oriented projects.

Today, however, virtual workers under many guises -- Virtual Assistants, Virtual Professionals, Virtual Service Providers, Virtual Freelancers, etc. -- offer well over 80 areas of expertise, ranging from word processing and bookkeeping to high-end corporate consulting, psychotherapy and even surgical assistance. And while most of these workers are independent contractors, companies such as JetBlue, AIG and Travelers now actually require that many of their employees (primarily "call center" personnel)

work from home almost all the time.

WHO HIRES "VIRTUAL HELP"? Because smaller businesses are usually more ready to innovate and embrace change than are their larger, Fortune 500 brethren (whose processes and outlook become rigid through custom and age), the majority of Virtual Assistants work with young companies and solo professionals, such as Realtors, smaller law firms, import-export firms, and professional speakers. VAs may also provide one-to-one support to senior management in larger companies (i.e., as a virtual "executive administrative assistant" to a Vice President).

Similarly, virtual workers with advanced degrees (aka Virtual Professionals) often offer consulting services to smaller outfits and soloists (think of a marketing consultant, for example, advising a company on its marketing or advertising strategies), and virtual workers in a professional niche such as medicine (e.g., an RN or MD) may also consult to insurance firms, malpractice law firms, and hospitals.

A WIDENING TREND As we enter our ninth year of research in this field, most exciting to us is the broadening we see in virtual, legitimate work opportunities overall, which coincides with the spread of broadband Internet and the outsourcing phenomenon. Now, we're encountering a wider variety of "virtual employee" positions (full-time, home-based work from a fixed employer), freelance work (e.g., proofreading, editing, graphic artwork, and help desk specialists, along with the conventional Website design projects), and virtual teaching positions (community colleges and distance learning institutions, for example), as well as the online tutoring of individuals (elementary school and up).

Equally impressive is the emergence of the Ebay "mompreneurs," as detailed in an article in the June 7, 2004, issue of Business Week ("The Rise of the Mompreneurs"). The article, which is available at the Business Week site (

www.businessweek.com

), contains the following eye-opening statistics:

"Today, upwards of 430,000 people in the U.S. alone -- more than are employed worldwide by General

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Electric Co. (GE) and Procter & Gamble combined -- earn a full- or part-time living on eBay selling everything from fashion to farm equipment, with the highest-sellers grossing up to \$1 million a month."

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT THE FAMILY? As you might guess, these trends have significant potential consequences for the family, and not only in the realm of homeschooling and other preferences. First, if at least one parent has a skill that is "virtually marketable," then

- * that parent may now stay home with the children;
- * the family may now be free to move to a more family-friendly location;
- * the stresses of the two-commuter life -- and their toll on the couple and the family -- will be significantly reduced; and

- * the children will be able to learn valuable work-related lessons firsthand, from the best teacher of all -- a parent.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD? Although no one can predict the future -- and working from home, be it as a freelancer or an employee, is certainly not for everyone -- these trends do indicate that the old-style concept of "telecommuting" (an employee working at home a few days per month) is steadily being overtaken by a radically different model: full-time, home-based virtual careers, founded on a steadily-growing supply of legitimate virtual-work opportunities. Moreover, additional progress in communication technologies will soon enable real-time, high-definition interviews between virtual

workers and their hirers (even cell phones can already transmit and receive videos), which will further accelerate these trends.

Since virtual workers can be based anywhere, these trends carry obvious potential consequences for rural areas and small-town life, and again by extension, the family. The transient, anonymous suburban "communities" that now house over 80% of Americans (essentially, ghost towns by day, motels by night) no longer need be the only alternative for working parents and their families. A virtual worker can operate from a town in rural Kansas, an island off Maine, a farm in Nebraska, or even a houseboat on a Minnesota lake.

Moreover, in addition to the mobility, the virtual worker enjoys several significant advantages, not the least of which is savings on auto-related expenses. Perhaps most important is that he or she is not locked in to local wages or other economic conditions. The small town in Kansas (whose three-bedroom homes, with emigration, have fallen to rock-bottom prices), can be a lovely place for a family whose employer or clients live in Manhattan, or London, or Los Angeles, or even Kansas City, where hourly fees for business services are much higher than they would be locally.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE The best place to learn more about virtual opportunities is (of course) online. A few Google searches using such terms as "telework," "virtual assistant" and "freelance" will point you in the right direction. A visit to such organizations as Staffcentrix (

www.staffcentrix.com

), the

International Virtual Assistants Association (the industry association for VAs, at

www.ivaa.org

) and the

International Telework Association & Council (

www.workingfromanywhere.org

) will also help fill in the

gaps.

Although it may feel like a "brave new world" at first, the world of virtual work is already populated with a host of potential friends, supporters, and erstwhile pioneers, who long ago settled the frontier.

Although not without its risks, you may very well discover that it holds the keys to a lifestyle you and your family always thought might only be a dream. But regardless of your path, we wish success to you and to those who take so many cues from how you live and what you choose to do -- your children.

Chris and Mike are the co-founders of Staffcentrix, the leading provider of Virtual Assistant training to the US armed forces and the US Dept. of State. They also publish the Rat Race Rebellion, a weekly bulletin of prescreened telework and freelance opportunities at

<http://www.2secondcommute.com>

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Your Life – Your Values

By Myrtis Smith

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Everyone has things in their life they value. Some people value family and community, others value wealth and having fun. There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to values, they just are. Regardless of what you value, all values adhere to one fundamental truth: the more you align your life's activities to your values, the happier you will be.

Consider Sue, a successful real estate agent and mother of 2 pre-teen boys. One of Sue's stated goals was to become the top real estate agent in her region. While she was

making good progress towards achieving that goal she still was unhappy; something was missing. Sue began working with a coach to focus on her personal development. What she discovered was one of her top values was family, not career as she had been assuming. Her conflict quickly became obvious: her children were home in the evenings and on the weekend – peak hours for real estate agents are evenings and weekends. Sue realized she had some choices to make.

So how do your values and goals line up? What are things that you SAY are important to you? Do your actions support those things? Do you feel like there is a disconnect in your life? Take a few moments to list all of the things that you consider important. Some ideas include family, career, spirituality, life-long learning, having fun, helping others, and the list goes on. Prioritize your top 3. Now pull out your day planner; are your daily activities supporting those 3 values? What can you do to reorient your life around your values?

Myrtis Smith is a career coach and the founder of Premeditated Life. At Premeditated Life, we have one focus: Your Career. We offer services to support your career goals, whether you are in transition, need help with your job search or want to improve your professional skills. For a FREE Career Assessment email: coaching@premeditatedlife.com



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