Opinion & Analysis

Time to kick the habit of always wanting more

JOHN GIBBONS

The contagious 'affluenza' virus impairs our ability to meet our fundamental needs as humans

SAILORS RARELY blush, and bankers never say sorry. Last weekend Anglo Irish Bank chairman Seán Fitzpatrick warned that the banking sector would fall unless the Government bailed it out. In June 2007 the same Fitzpatrick ridiculed Irish politicians for their "corporate McCarthyism". It was, he said, "time to shout stop. The tide of regulation has gone far enough . . . our wealth creators should be rewarded and admired, not subjected to levels of scrutiny which convicted criminals would rightly find intrusive."

Another "wealth creator", Richard Fuld, chief executive of collapsed US investment bank Lehman Brothers, did appear to squirm for a moment on RTÉ's evening news earlier this week as details of his income were put to him. In the last eight years he has pocketed $310 million – almost a million a week – as reward for his reckless gambling with other people's money. And all with little or none of the intrusive scrutiny Fitzpatrick finds objectionable.

Former Soviet dissident author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who died in August, had unique insights into the best and worst aspects of capitalism and communism. "Self-limitation is the fundamental and wisest step of a man who has obtained freedom," said Solzhenitsyn. It is, he added, "also the surest path towards its attainment". English philosopher Bertrand Russell captured the concept elegantly: "To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness."

And in a world of economic turmoil and overshadowed by a rapidly unfolding sustainability crisis that threatens our very ability to survive the 21st century, is it time to ask: have we had enough yet?

In his recently published book, *Enough – Breaking Free from the World of More*, John Naish opens with the observation that if alien spacecraft were orbiting the charred remains of planet Earth centuries from now, "its pilots might be appalled to learn how the human inhabitants had been wired to get such kicks from producing and consuming more and more of everything that they had ultimately burnt the whole planet out".

Naish posits that these extraterrestrials would have been baffled to discover how our pursuit of more and more had in fact made us more unhappy, unhealthy and exhausted. "Affluenza" is the term coined to describe the contagious, socially-transmitted condition sweeping the developed world. It is characterised by anxiety, overload, debt, distress and profligacy.

> "All along Dublin's M50 you'll see the latest manifestation of our inability to say stop – self-storage companies

A 2004 study by the World Health Organisation into emotional distress in 15 countries delivered some surprising findings. Nigeria is a far poorer country than the US, yet fewer than 5 per cent of its population were suffering from emotional distress, compared with over 26 per cent of Americans.

Commenting on the study, psychologist Oliver James observes: "Whilst poverty fosters survivalist materialism, it does not result in illness. Materialistic values cause emotional distress only when countries, or classes within them, become affluent."

Our most fundamental needs as humans are to feel secure; to be part of a community; to feel competent and to feel autonomous and authentic. The affluenza virus, James argues, impairs our ability to meet each of these needs. Paradoxically, the widespread social distress, depression and anxiety caused by affluenza is, he believes, crucial for the success of our current economic model of growth-based capitalism.

We strive to fill the void in our lives by consumption, as "it holds out the false promise that an internal lack can be fixed by an external means". We medicate our misery, James suggests, "through buying things".

A principal vector of this virus is television. A study from Fiji is revealing; prior to 1995, the country – where a full female figure is the cultural norm – had no television, and bulimia was unheard of. Within three years of the arrival of television, 11 per cent of young Fijian women were bulimic. The link between television viewing and the obesity epidemic is no less compelling.

All along Dublin's M50 you'll see the latest manifestation of our inability to say stop. The business parks that back on to the motorway are now dotted with self-storage companies. In the US, self-storage facilities now offer 2.2 billion sq ft of storage space. That's 78 sq miles of storage – an area three times the size of Manhattan Island, and all to pack away the mountains of goods that people keep buying but physically can't fit anywhere in their own homes.

A Bank of America analyst described self-storage as a "critical prop to global growth". In a nutshell, if you can't physically fit any more stuff in your house, you might have to stop buying things you don't need – and then the world economy collapses.

The world of consumption and consumerism is a world of disconnection. We are detached from the lessons of history, "because the world of more reviles yesterday, disdains today and preaches an obsession with some mythic perfect tomorrow", says Naish. This also extends to our collective indifference to the pauperised lives that four in five people in the world endure, and how our obsession with more means less and less for them, and for the environment as a whole.

The things that truly enhance our lives – family, friendships, good neighbours and health – have one thing in common. They can't be bought. As an antidote to angst, singer Bobby McFerrin has this timeless advice: don't worry, be happy.