

# FOREWORD

## BY VICKI ROBIN

Open to page 136 of *Material World* (the book of photos by Peter Menzel showing people and their possessions from around the world). Don't have a copy? No problem — I'll tell you what the picture is. It's the Skeen Family from Pearland, Texas, selected because they are “deep in the heart” of the American experience. Their income approximates the average US level. They have two children — Michael, age 7 and Julie, age 10. Like all of the 30 families representing 30 countries that were selected for this coffee table book, they stand in front of their home with all their furniture and appliances arranged in the cul de sac behind them. It's a nice but modest array, nothing compared to the stage set of many sitcoms. Every family from around the world was asked what their most valued possession was — for the Skeens, as for many Americans, it's the family Bible.

Now turn to page 14. Mali, in Africa. The Natoma family of eleven (two wives, eight children, one father) sits on the roof of their mud and straw adobe home, surrounded by cooking pots, baskets and various kitchen and farming implements. Perhaps half of these everyday items were made by the family themselves. In the background is a bicycle,

which is Papa's most prized possession. The clothes on their bodies and on a makeshift drying rack (a pole balanced between the house and the mud wall) are colorful. Their faces sport big smiles. They have a radio but no TV, no telephone, no VCRs and no automobiles.

These two families are separated by many thousands of miles, many years of development and many layers of creature comforts. If you are like me, you can appreciate the simplicity of the Mali household and even wonder at their apparent delight in circumstances that would send most any American into helplessness and despair. Almost everything arrayed behind the Skeens would have to be plucked out of the picture to put them on a par with the Natomas. Best to close the book.

But we can't close the book. You, I, the Natomas and the Skeens, along with perhaps 6.5 billion other humans and hundreds of billions of other creatures, live together on one planet. The "have-nots" can be out of sight and even out of mind, but they breathe the same air, drink from the same scant supply of fresh water, and birth children who will grow up to work with our children to finish the job we've barely started; they will have to find a way for *all* of us to live well within the Earth's means.

Jim Merkel, a former weapons engineer, accepted this challenge 14 years ago. He whittled away at his stock of possessions and reduced the sheer volume, complexity and toxicity of the stuff that flowed through his life. He did it with gusto and good spirit, guided by passion and curiosity. His engineering background gave him the mentality and the tools to assess which of the changes he was making actually lowered his impact on the Earth. He lobbied his city council for bike paths so everyone who wanted to could choose to do without a car. He organized Earth Day celebrations that attracted hundreds of volunteers and thousands of people. His high spirits, humble integrity and winning ways were dished up along with his facts and figures about the devastating impact on the Earth of the American lifestyle.

He learned everything he could and experimented with every method he could find. In the process he met Mathis Wackernagel and Bill Rees who taught Jim about the Ecological Footprint, a relatively accurate way to actually measure how much of the planet's resources

it takes to support us in the style to which we have become accustomed. He also sought out Joe Dominguez and me after reading *Your Money or Your Life*. Our method for lowering consumption while increasing quality of life was another key piece in the puzzle he was pondering: how do we get people to live within the means of nature and not feel deprived? Jim also jumped at the chance to go on a study trip to Kerala, India, to learn from the people in that state who have a quality of life almost as high as ours in North America — but do it on just over \$300 a year per person.

From these building blocks he dreamed a big dream — starting a research and education center to teach people the skills of living lightly and the ways to know how much of everything it takes to support their lives. But from here on, how about I let Jim tell you his own story? What I really want you to know is that Jim makes living on less seem like so much fun that you'll want to try it yourself. He shares compelling facts through telling vivid stories about his own successive awakenings to both the peril and the promise of living on this Earth.

People, animals, plants, soil and the all the rest of the critters together make up this precious mantle of life on our exquisite planet. We *all* live here together — now, and now, and now. So now what? Jim has some answers. Listen to him and you'll see how plausible sustainability is — and how necessary. You'll want to do your part, because by then, Jim will be your friend and his plans will seem like the greatest adventure on Earth.

Vicki Robin is coauthor, with Joe Dominguez, of  
*Your Money or Your Life*.