I was visiting a friend earlier this year, and somewhere during the visit, we ended up getting into a computer adventure game. I am not a "gamer," but the game still struck me as interesting but not particularly difficult. I was quite surprised when my friend suddenly paused the game, so she could go on Google to look for some "cheats."

In unrelated news, just a couple of days ago, the very public story broke about Major League Baseball's little "problem" with performance enhancing drugs. And no more than a week ago, I came across a snippet of an Oprah show, about bariatric surgery to have one's stomach size reduced, as a measure to lose weight. Meanwhile, I have been reading an assortment of articles around the web, and noticed a very large number of "money making opportunities," offering people to make $1000s while promising they "only have to work one hour a day."

As I contemplated these mostly unrelated items, it struck me that we seem to be increasingly surrounded by a cultural mentality centered around where we can find the next shortcut or "cheat" to get ahead... as opposed to simply "doing the work" to get what we need.

What is that about? Have we always done this? Is the "Protestant Work Ethic" upon which the American nation was founded just a myth? Are we inherently lazy? Are we cheaters by nature, and not just because we've been taught by culture?

Our Shortcut Culture

These incidents got me to exploring the whole current (and rather pervasive, it seems) obsession with "taking the easy way" and using whatever shortcuts can be bought, stolen or manipulated to cheat our way to results, rather than actually work for them. Maybe I'm very old-fashioned, but I do find this trend rather disturbing, in part because the "cheat solution" typically offers no lasting value, just an immediate short-term boost that quickly vanishes.

So my idle mind poked around in this a bit further. We cheat on spouses and partners (usually when they seem "difficult" to live with, and it's "too much work" to get into therapy); we look for "magic pills" to lose weight (or get our stomachs reduced to the size of a walnut) instead of learning to exercise and eat right; we cheat on our taxes (if we think we can get away with it); we steal (at least) office supplies from our employers; we lie about our accomplishments, weight and job success on social sites; kids break into the principal's office to steal tests, rather than study-- and we increasingly defend their actions rather than condemn them; and we look for home income opportunities where someone else (good luck!!) "does all the work" while we allegedly get to reap the rewards.

But that's not the whole of it: We increasingly consider these things "harmless." "Normal," even.

What's interesting and puzzling to me is the stark juxtaposition of such actions vs. the predominant "Protestant Work Ethic" upon which US society was founded. And it's not limited to the US-- many nations supposedly put a value on hard work. Bill Gates didn't become "Bill Gates" by chasing money-for-nothing, yet an increasing number of people seem to be looking for his results without effort. And-- ironically-- they will often put lots of energy into finding "the shortcut." Some people will spend years of effort trying to "create a method" that will help them win the lottery, or score big in Las Vegas. If they put even half that energy into regular work, they'd have plenty of money. What gives?

Money for Nothing is a Major Industry!

What do we really WANT?

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm all for "making the most" of whatever situation comes our way. If we're putting effort into something, let's by all means maximize the results. But it strikes me that the end result of cheating and shortcuts are a bit like a "false-positive." It "looks good" on the surface, but rarely amounts to what we actually hoped for.

For example, a number of studies have been done on the "magic pill effect." Take a person who gets a drug that "magically" gets rid of their depression. In many cases, it turns out to not be such a great thing. Why? Because instead of waking up to discover they suddenly have a "perfect life," they instead discover that life still sucks because the underlying issues that caused them to be depressed in the first place were never dealt with, they were merely masked by the happy pill. Or take someone who hops from relationship to relationship, in search of happiness and ostensibly "the perfect partner"... when the proven fact is that true lasting happiness actually requires work on the self. Or-- as studies have shown-- many of the people who have stomach reduction surgery merely end up with a new addiction because now they have just become "thin people who still hate their lives."

Yes, of course there are exceptions...

Time to Change our Approach?

I spent a number of years studying and being involved in network marketing (or "MLM" or "pyramid schemes," if you prefer), and subsequently ended up writing about them for various business publications. Most of the industry (I said "most," not "all," before you folks in so-called "programs" start screaming at me!) is based on deception, illusion and fantasy, and is largely driven by a huge number of people's beliefs that you really can make a huge sum of money with almost no work. And even though fewer than 1-in-200 participants just break even (after considering their actual EXPENSES)-- let alone make money-- network marketing (which now has morphed into all manners of Internet-based "plans") attracts millions of people. This is not some "fringe" industry-- an estimated 25 million people are involved, in the US alone. And the numbers are growing.

For most people, there's an unaddressed "price" that comes with getting involved in such programs: an unexpected assault on their self-esteem. Not only is the most likely outcome "failure," but most people also end up feeling bad because they find themselves "having to lie" about "how well" they are really doing, in order to get others involved. Once that has failed, they feel bad about themselves because they put several thousand dollars they could have used for food into something that never had a chance of succeeding, and their friends are angry for getting them involved in a losing proposition.

The more I look at these trends, the more I wonder whether they are they are the result of us having so "much" in every aspect of our lives, and feeling compelled to pursue even more? Or could it be because our expectations of what we "should" have in our lives have been inflated to a point where no reasonable human being can keep up, we increasingly resort to cheating and shortcuts?

IS there a solution? And if there is, are people even willing to consider it?

Oddly enough, most of the "quietly content" people I have met in life have something in common: They are happy with "less"-- or "enough"-- rather than being stuck in a cycle of eternally pursuing "more," by whatever means they can find. Oddly enough, the need to be part of "cheat culture" falls away for those who embrace "voluntary simplicity" and a smaller life.