

Temporal Belongings



Interview Series Number Eight

Tamara DiMattina
Founder, Buy Nothing New Month

Michelle Bastian
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Tamara DiMattina is a social entrepreneur who has founded a number of sustainability projects including *Buy Nothing New Month* and *The New Joneses*, as well as the PR firm *Trumpet*. She completed a fellowship at the Centre for Sustainability Leadership and is currently completing post-graduate work in Public Relations. She describes *Buy Nothing New Month* as “a global movement for collective, conscientious consumption. It is a one month challenge to buy nothing new (with the exception of essentials like food, hygiene and medicines).”¹

This interview was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded Sustaining Time project (www.sustainingtime.org). The project asks, if clock time helped build industrial capitalism & the idea of a speeded-up, networked time supports late capitalism, what kind of time would support alternative, sustainable economies? It took place in July 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

The Time of Stuff

MB: So just to start off, would you say that the *Buy Nothing New Month* is an attempt to make economies work differently?

TdM: It is, though I'd bring the conversation to how we can imagine a different way to how we're doing things now. I am not an economist. I have no background in 'alternative economies'. I'm just someone who thinks that the way we're doing things is nuts and not sustainable. So what I'm trying to do with *Buy Nothing New Month* is get us to imagine and build more resilient economies which are based on something other than finite resources, rather than on us churning through and consuming everything that we've got. I think it's important to ask what's going to happen if we continue with business as usual? Where will our economy be when we've gone through all our resources and we've dumped them all into landfill? What is our economy going to be like then?

So *Buy Nothing New Month* is about getting people to try to support alternative areas of our economy which are really important and are sustainable. As part of that we promote fun messages like, instead of buying another 'something' for a present, why not give a new experience or an offer of support, whether it's tickets to a show, a massage or an educational experience. All these sorts of services aren't necessarily churning through our resources in the way that 'stuff' is. Perhaps it's a very simple way of looking at it, but I think we need to focus valuing things in other ways besides just buying more stuff.

MB: So have you noticed time coming up as an issue within the project at all?

TdM: Well I think for me I have realised that the less stuff I buy or the less of a traditional consumer I am the more time I have, because then I don't need to work as long to earn the money to buy that stuff. In a way, for a long time I've lived a *Buy Nothing New Month* sort of life. Ever since I was living in London in 1997 or 1998 and I was working for an organisation where pretty much everyone there was fairly badly paid but you had to look smart. My salary wasn't enough that I could buy smart clothing on my salary, so I started shopping in charity stores in London.

At that time, buying second hand was more of a financial imperative than because I thought it was an ethically or sustainably smart thing to do. But I've been doing it for a really long time and while I've never really thought about it, I've been used to spending maybe \$30 on a good wool jumper in an op shop and my mates might be spending \$180 on that new in a store. So I would get people asking me questions, because I'd often go away for a month a year, and I'd have mates who worked really hard asking how I could afford it. At the time I didn't know, my mates were probably earning more than me so I couldn't understand what was happening, but it's become much clearer to me that because I have spent my money differently I do have more time on the other side.

MB: Are you thinking about that in terms of voluntary simplicity? Are you drawing on any of those kinds of ideas or is it just something you do anyway?

TdM: I've never heard of that, but I think that is something that I'm very aware of now, of making everything simple. For example, even things like I've recently noticed the time that I can save if, instead of wearing something different every day, I wear pretty much the same thing as I did the day before, sort of like having a uniform. I am looking to how can I simplify my life as much as possible because I want to have a lovely interesting full life. I want to do as much as I can but I don't want to spend my time doing boring things or things that I don't want to do. So how can I simplify these everyday routines.

The Time it Takes

MB: Well there has been some discussion lately around decision fatigue and trying to minimise the amount of decisions you make in a day so that you can focus on what is important to you. But so, to move on to another question, we have previously spoken about the inter-relationship of time, money and value and the idea that 'time is money'. I was wondering if your project shifts that relationship at all? Are people valuing their time in different ways? Just because one of the things

¹ See more at <http://www.buynothingnew.com.au>

I wondered about was the fact that buying everything second hand can be cheaper, but it can also take up a lot more time.

TdM: Yes, it can take a lot of time. But I think also that part of it for me is that for many people, though of course not for everyone, getting stuff these days can have no real challenge in it. So while our lives have become much more complex in some ways, they have become a lot easier in other ways. I think that perhaps that hunter-gather instinct to go on the search is still in us, because I have lots of friends who love the challenge of the search, the challenge of the hunt. So perhaps that's still in us as humans and we haven't evolved out of that. For example, I've just spent a year and a half looking for a workbench for my kitchen. I could spend that long partly because it wasn't essential. Of course it's different if you need something immediately. It's not like I can spend a year and a half looking for something to wear, if I am going to an event that week, but I quite like that there is that difficult challenge of having to find something rather than so being able to get whatever I need at the drop of a hat.

MB: Have you noticed other people participating in the project saying anything about that issue of the value of time?

TdM: A lot of people have reported that they have more time because they are spending less time out shopping. For myself I know that I might walk past the windows of a shop for inspiration but I don't spend time just looking for things. The other thing is it's a completely different way of looking at acquiring stuff as well, because I do find that there are a couple of second hand stalls that I know are fantastic and so if I'm in the area I'll always go in. And so it can be a bit of a contradiction, because I'll buy stuff that I don't necessarily need now but then it's in my wardrobe for when I do need this or that so I never have to go looking for that.

Thinking further ahead

MB: So it sounds like partly what's important about the month is having people think about time in a different kind of way. So rather than focusing on instant gratification or solving their problems instantly, you would need to think further along about what might be needed in the future. Is there something then about cultivating a longer sense of time, thinking about what you might need and preparing for that, of even cultivating an enjoyment of not having things immediately?

TdM: Yes, definitely.

MB: Is that something you do deliberately in the project, or does it just kind of happen?

TdM: No, it's not really deliberate. To be honest, I think the project is not that complex. It just came from one person thinking that we are consuming too much. I don't have any of the answers, but one thing that I wanted to do was to get other people to start thinking about it. So *Buy Nothing New Month* started as a mainstream media project to get some of these questions out there and having other people find their own tribe of people because there are so many people out there doing this who are swapping and have been doing it forever. Everyone knows people that pass their second-hand baby things on to someone else who has just had a baby, for example. This stuff has been taking place unofficially forever. *Buy Nothing New Month* is just about normalising some of those things in other areas.

So for some reason we think it's fine to have our kids swap clothes but some people would never wear a second hand outfit. Meanwhile, there's a whole bunch of fashionistas who live for the way they look and they get all of their stuff second hand or through swapping because they see that as a great way to keep up with style and fashion and to have something 'new to you'. I actually think a lot of people in the fashion industry are disillusioned and disheartened by what the fashion industry has become. It's become more about a quick, fast turnaround than about style. As soon as you've bought something you're out of fashion. It's not even as though what you have might be last season or last year's. It's last week's fashion and you're not on trend anymore. So there is a movement with fashionable people to want to be stylish, rather than in the recent fashion.

Refashioning Time?

MB: That's interesting, because that itself is a critical approach to the time of fashion and so again part of shifting how fashion works is shifting the time of fashion, would you say?

TdM: Well I've never thought about these things in relation to time so this conversation is good because its stretching my thinking. But so there are a lot of people who are really rallying against cheap fast fashion — fashion that you get quickly, wear for a brief amount of time and then throw away. They are arguing that things shouldn't be like this and instead calling for beautifully crafted things where thought and love have gone into making them and they are built to last. It's a growing movement and you can see it with boot makers and craftsmen. It is still very niche, but you see new stores opening up or lovely more crafty objects coming back. People are looking for that sort of thing rather than something that's quickly mass-made and churned out.

A lot of people are crying out for something that has a bit more longevity to it and time does come into that. I do remember when I was younger and my mother

saying to me that it's better to have a few really good pieces that twenty shitty ones. She always said it was better to buy things that are going to last for years and years. I remember saying to her, "but I'm not going to want to wear this next year." I had that really immature way of looking at it, but I think that was also because it made sense because that's how the fashion industry and many of those lifestyle consumer goods industries work. They keep updating their products so we need to keep buying them because we don't want to have outdated things, which means that we keep buying more of their stuff.

But I think that older approach is better where you buy something that is beautifully made and it's not a fashion piece but a style piece that won't go out of fashion. Was it Coco Chanel that said something along those lines of 'good style never goes out of fashion'? So if it's beautifully made and it's good quality it has longevity and will be just as good many years later.

Story-telling Secondhand

MB: Developing that idea of longevity, I want to ask you about the relationship between past, present and future. So one of the things that has also been coming out in this project is around the time of the transaction. Buying is often something that can be done very quickly. You go into a shop, you buy something, you leave. There might not be very much shared between people, but just a very quick in-the-moment kind of experience. But it seems that with a lot of projects that I've been visiting there is a sense that people are interested in shifting the time of transactions between people so that it takes longer and there's more storying telling included.

TdM: It's more personal.

MB: Yes, and I noticed that you had a project with the Brotherhood of St Laurence where there was a sharing of stories around second hand things?

TdM: Yes, that was the *Secret Lives of Stuff* project.² The aim of that was to attach the story of an item to it so that people could find out more about an object and why it was donated, rather than thinking that there must be something wrong with it because it is second hand. That could actually be very far from the case, something might be the most beautiful piece in the world but it was too small for the person it was given to so it ended up in the op shop. It's about showing that these things have had a past life and they're going to go on and have a future life. So it's not like they're no good because they're second hand.

MB: So is it important that the item gets to have

² The project was conducted with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a charity working to alleviate poverty. See <http://www.bsl.org.au/about-the-brotherhood/>

a past and future in a way that it doesn't in a normal shop? That the item have a longer 'life' and perhaps even their own 'time'?

TdM: Well, we want to extend the life of existing stuff so we want those things to go on longer. So there is that time element.

MB: And part of that is giving it a story? So that when you encounter it, it has a history rather than just being a random object?

TdM: Yes, the stories allow it to have a value instead of people seeing things as being disposed of. So again, we're encouraging people to see the value of those things that are well-made and that have longevity. To see that a second hand item might be beautifully made and is going to last.

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MB: And telling the story was an important aspect of that, of letting it have a future?

TdM: Well the campaign was really just about having some fun with seeing items as having value. We were looking at what the stories of these items were and we wanted to help people see them as things that were valued and might even have been very valuable to its last owner. For example, there was a belt that a woman had bought for her honeymoon and she loved it but that had been fifteen years ago and she thought that probably she was never going to be able to wear it again. It was so gorgeous, but —. And if you just saw that belt in the store you'd just go, "Oh whatever, it's just a second hand belt," but to look at it differently and see it was so valuable to someone and also that they want it to go on and have another life instead of it sitting in their wardrobe. So the project was about how to extend the life of objects, extending the time.

Past Inspirations

MB: Great, thank you. So another thing I've been wondering about in relation to the past and future is that it seemed that in thinking about more sustainable futures, some projects actually seemed to be reaching into the past to things that maybe didn't get taken up at the time or have been forgotten. So I wondered if that idea fit with what you are doing?

TdM: Definitely. A hundred per cent. Pretty much everything in *Buy Nothing New Month* goes back to what your grandmother was saying. These are not new concepts. I think we've moved away from a lot of those really sensible ways of being and we have become 'consumers'. But who likes being a consumer?

Being called a consumer rather than being a person or a human? I don't like the idea that I'm just seen as like something on a conveyor belt that just goes out handing out money. That's not who I am. We're all so much more than that, but for many companies we are consumers who are just targeted to buy. The whole system is about getting us to buy this and buy that.

Buy Nothing New Month is about trying to connect us back to real worth so you might share something rather than buy it. If you need a dress for a function, for example, you could borrow your sister's, like they used to do in the old days, and it might be a gorgeous thing. A lot of people have been doing these things the whole time, but this is just about normalising that behaviour and encouraging or inviting more people to take part in a different way of consuming stuff, one which may be going back in time to how we used to do things. You would share things - your lawnmower, your drill - and then we got to this stage where we were excited about owning everything ourselves. I think also that has taken a lot of enjoyment out of things for people.

Of course there's a huge amount of people who can't have everything and that's part of what *Buy Nothing New Month* is about as well. If you move to buying more from charity stores then you're supporting them to do some great work in the community. So when I talk about people having too much stuff or that we've got an abundance of stuff, I'm very aware that there are a huge amount of people for whom the idea of having too much stuff is such a luxury. And of course there are people who scoff at the project and say, "Well that's already my lifestyle, but not from choice," as if actively trying to buy less is a lucky yuppie choice and it kind of is. So while it is a very luxurious position to be in, to be someone who has too much stuff, or who buys too much stuff, the project is about getting many of us who are in that position to look differently at our relationship with stuff and how it can have a different relationship with people. Does that make sense?

The time of creativity

MB: Yes, it does, thank you. So there's the relationship between time, money and value, and I wanted to ask you about another triangle which ties together success, growth and creativity.

TdM: Are we talking about economic growth, or are we talking about personal growth?

MB: Well in this case economic growth. I'm picking up on the way that often progress is thought to be about growth, which can include having more things. When there are discussions of post-growth or steady state economies, for example, there can be questions such as "how are you going to encourage creativity? How are you going to get change? How are you going

to have new ideas?" In many ways the idea of being successful is tied up with growing and expanding, for example if your company isn't growing or expanding then you're not seen as 'successful.' So success, growth and creativity seem to co-constitute each other within dominant approaches to the economy, and I was just interested to see whether that idea was something that resonated with you? *Buy Nothing New Month* is focused on reduction rather than growth, but do you think this has any effect on people's feeling of creativity?

TdM: No, I think you still need to be very creative, and we do want to grow, but we want to grow the ideas. This is where I feel like I get out of my depth because, as I said before, I'm not an economist but I've looked at people like Paul Gilding³ and others, and I guess the key question is how can we have infinite growth on a finite planet? Do the maths. How does that keep going? And I've spoken with other economists who say that in universities it's still being taught that growth is the only way, but there are people starting to criticise this. Everyone knows that the growth model was always going to come to an end, that it was no longer sustainable.

To me it makes sense to question the focus on growth. For example, I remember working at a communications agency — ironically a consumer goods agency where I was working to get people to buy more stuff — but I remember that we used to work really hard but we didn't get our bonuses because we were being punished for not meeting new targets. I remember thinking at the time, 'why do they have projections that they've just set because they think that we have to be bringing in more and more every year?' Everyone was already working hard and everything was fine so why does it have to step up? I just didn't understand why there was a sense that we had failed because we hadn't hit a target, but that didn't mean that we weren't still doing well and earning everyone money. It just seemed a bit crazy and evil to me.

MB: Well I guess that's partly the result of being in an economy based on debt, where you also have to keep earning more and more to service your debt. But so the issue of creativity, I imagine that *Buy Nothing New Month* could seem quite restrictive in a way, not being able to buy new things, but how have people actually found it?

TdM: Well to me it opens you up to so many other things. I'm having so many more conversations with people and connecting with people in a way that I never would if I wasn't involved with this sort of thing and I think it makes me think much more creatively about things. I might need a chair and I could go down the street in a second and buy it, done, and then move on, but if you acquire things that way you're

³ An Australian environmentalist and author of *The Great Disruption*

always just going to go about things the same way. With *Buy Nothing New Month*, I like the fact that it makes me more creative about how I go about getting things. For example, can I find something and redo it? I've been looking for a workbench, which I don't need immediately, but now I've bought an old second hand workbench and I'm going to go and refashion that with my dad. It's lovely and it's opened up other opportunities. I wouldn't be spending the next few weekends with my dad reworking this workbench if I had just gone and bought whatever. And I could have, I could just go down the street and buy it today if I wanted to, but I wanted to have something that had a bit more meaning.

So yeah, I actually get confused about *Buy Nothing New Month* being restrictive, because there is all this stuff out there, you're just getting it in a different way. So we're having a bunch of fashion bloggers over for a swap off at my office. Imagine what their wardrobes would be — these girls live for fashion. That, to me, is not restrictive. Something like this fashion swap will give me access to things I wouldn't normally have access to, so it opens up more options to me. It was the same thing when I was in London last year and I just went crazy in the op shops there. There were beautiful labels, designer labels that I'd never be able to buy new but I can buy them second hand. So I don't see the project as being restrictive in that way. Maybe for some things, like for technology perhaps.

More Time?

MB: So, I guess our last question is about time in terms of rhythms and speeds. I was wondering whether during the *Buy Nothing New Month*, you noticed any changes in the feeling of time? You might not have because you've said that you try to live that way in your life more normally...

TdM: To me, it's hell because I've got so much media going on. That's a different side of it.

MB: Yes, I guess it would be. Has anybody mentioned anything to you about how they might have felt?

TdM: People have said they have more time.

MB: So did things feel slower in a way? Or something else?

TdM: Well, a perfect example is from last night, when I was speaking with a bunch of girls who, as a result of *Buy Nothing New Month*, have set this thing in train where when people have baby showers they are writing on the invitation 'please don't bring any gifts'. So if you want to bring an old book from your kid's library to add to your friend's library or something like then that's ok,

but nothing new. People going along to the showers are saying, "Thank you so much, I didn't have to go out and shop and spend fifty bucks on just whatever. I didn't have to go to the shops and do that." So I think it gives people more time. I find for me I do feel like I have more time. I'll often hear friends saying, "I've got to go and get so and so a present," but I stopped buying presents years ago.

I feel like I give to my friends and people in my life in other ways but I've just never felt like giving something just for the sake of it. This imperative to rush out at Christmas time, for example, could be really strong in my family where I'm the youngest of five and I've got nine nieces and nephews. Imagine if I had to go out and buy presents for all those people. I'd be buying stuff that they're not going to use. They wouldn't really even care because they're getting fifty presents from everyone. So instead I just started buying Oxfam goats for everyone years ago. I get online, I spend more for Oxfam because I'm happy that the money is going there rather than buying cheap stuff and I've got all this time because I don't have to spend it in that way. I do think we only have a certain amount of time and a lot of it can be taken up with things that we feel like we should do. Kids' birthdays are a perfect example. I have lots of mums saying, "I hate kids birthdays because I have to go and buy these presents, spend money, go round finding something that the kid is going to pull open, look at it for a second and throw away, onto a massive pile of other stuff, but I'm still expected to do that." So I think the whole concept of *Buy Nothing New Month* can give you more time if we just start thinking about stuff differently.

MB: Lovely, it's a nice place to end. Was there anything that you wanted to say?

TdM: There's so much!

MB: Yes there is. Well thank you for speaking with me today.

TdM: Thank you

Temporal Belongings

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