

THE SCIENCE OF THRIFT

Pennies Saved and Pennies Earned

The traditional virtues—honesty, diligence, compassion—still receive attention in our culture despite our failure to practice them as we should. But discussion of one virtue—thrift—has all but disappeared, as affluence and extravagance have taken center stage. A new initiative, Exploring the Science and Practice of Thrift, aims to increase the visibility of this overlooked virtue, through research and public education.

Thrift has become a somewhat neglected value,” says David Blankenhorn, director of the Institute for American Values and head of the new Foundation initiative Exploring the Science and Practice of Thrift. “We seem to be practicing it less and thinking about it less. What does this mean for the future of our society?” Take the influential generation known as the Baby Boomers. Their public image is one of affluence and upward mobility. Yet U.S. News & World Report says that a quarter of all professional and managerial Boomers have a negative net worth and are teetering on the edge of personal bankruptcy. Despite their emphasis on family values, political correctness and even traditional virtues, the Baby Boomers are not thrifty. In fact, thrift has become America’s “lost virtue,” rarely mentioned and never celebrated, despite its historical significance. “It’s an important American value,” says Blankenhorn, “one that has shaped, and in some ways continues to shape, our national character.”

Blankenhorn has been described by The New York Times as a “consensus builder for a moral base in society.” An experienced scholar of values, he has contributed to our understanding of marriage, fatherhood, family and so on. Critics have hailed his numerous books as seminal contributions to important cultural conversations. Blankenhorn believes that virtues define a culture in important ways. “Understanding the history and possible future of thrift can deepen our understanding of who we are as a people—where we came from, what has shaped us and where we want to go.”

Exploring the Science and Practice of Thrift aims to return thrift to its rightful place at the center of our religious and cultural thinking about the stewardship of time, talent and resources. Blankenhorn emphasizes that thrift is a broadly based concept that affects many areas of life. “It’s related to a number of important social goods across cultures, including entrepreneurship, altruism and generosity, stewardship, and economic growth and development,” he says.

The program will pursue its agenda on three fronts:

- 1) Promoting greater awareness among opinion that thrift is an important but neglected virtue.
- 2) Encouraging research on the origins and practice of thrift.
- 3) Leveraging financial and policy support for behaviors that emphasize thrift.

In particular there is an urgent need for research on thrift from a variety of perspectives, all of which bring their own questions. What are the evolutionary and biological origins of thrift? Do religious organizations teach about thrift today? Will practicing thrift be good for the economy? How can we teach children to practice thrift behavior? What are the behavioral underpinnings of thrift behavior?

Blankenhorn has high expectations for the program, which will be administered by the Institute for American Values, a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to contributing intellectually to the renewal of marriage and family life and the sources of competence, character, and citizenship in the United States. Joining with others, Blankenhorn hopes to ignite a much-needed “conversation about the role and future of thrift as an American and global value.”