

Wall Street Journal cites Westacott as Frugality Expert

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Alfred University Professor of
Philosophy Emrys Westacott

ALFRED, NY – Alfred University Professor of Philosophy Emrys Westacott recently was cited in a Wall Street Journal column by Bouree Lam, personal finance editor for the Journal. Bouree's column, "How Frugality Got Its Groove Back," argues the previous decade was marked by a zeitgeist in the U.S. favoring frugality over lavish spending. She cites Westacott's 2016 book, **The Wisdom of Frugality: Why Less is More – More or Less**, and offers Westacott's observation that frugality is part of the American DNA, dating back to Benjamin Franklin and Henry David Thoreau.

The article is available [here Wall Street Article](#).

Westacott's book received numerous positive reviews when it was published. In the aftermath of Lam's column, he agreed to be interviewed for an update on the frugal spirit.

Congratulations on your recognition in a Wall Street Journal op ed. Would you summarize the thesis of the Frugality book, which the op ed piece finds so illuminating?

Thinkers from Socrates to Thoreau have claimed that living frugally and simply will make you a better person and is the key to happiness. I'm quite sympathetic to this view, and I try to lay out their main arguments. But obviously, they haven't persuaded everyone that they are right. So I also take seriously some of the important counter-arguments (e.g. extravagance is responsible for great cultural artifacts, such as Renaissance art and architecture). In the end, I claim that what matters, both to individuals and to society, isn't so much living cheaply as being clear and wise about which things in our lives and in our world we should really value.

The thesis seems to push back against the common American attitude toward spending, which is: Do more of it, even if you have to take on debt. Are you really pushing back?

I'd say I push back gently. The book is a philosophical study rather than a self-help book. And I'm happy to recognize that sometimes spending money on "luxuries" can make sense: e.g. on exciting new experiences, or on high quality artifacts (say, a musical instrument that one is able to fully appreciate). But I'm certainly critical of the sort of

foolish extravagance that is likely to lead to problems rather than to happiness (e.g. racking up thousands of dollars on credit cards to pay for a fancy wedding, so that instead of paying off a mortgage one spends years paying interest at extortionate rates to Mastercard and Visa.

I also question the idea that constantly increasing consumer spending in order to constantly fuel further economic growth is a Good Thing. Many people now have more than enough stuff; and modern economies, like the US, have plenty of wealth. Given the various environmental threats the planet faces, we shouldn't blindly assume that all growth is good. And the problem of poverty could be most immediately addressed by reversing the trend of the last four decades toward an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth.

WSJ has a nearly 3 million daily circulation – much larger than the New York Times, for instance. It’s also the leading conservative newspaper in the U.S., with a motto “Free markets, for free people.” The majority of its readers earn more than \$250,000 annually. As a liberal thinker, how do you feel about being cited approvingly on its editorial pages?

I'd perhaps worry if I was being cited approvingly by Sean Hannity on Fox News. But the WSJ, while conservative, does not spew out deliberate lies and shamelessly one-sided garbage. Moreover, their articles and reviews on non-political topics are often high quality and worth reading. So like most authors, I'll happily accept their approval! Besides, it would be a bit odd for me to disown it since I published an article in the WSJ a few years ago.

Is there a conservative ideology underlying some of the thesis in Frugality?

That's a good question, and one that's given me some trouble. Advocating simple living can certainly be viewed as conservative in the sense that it perhaps encourages people to be content with little while letting the upper classes wallow in their unjustly acquired wealth. This is Jesus' message. Be like the lilies of the field. Be happy with just enough. Don't worry about tomorrow. Don't envy the rich. And render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.

On the other hand, the philosophy of frugality challenges the values that prevail in our consumerist culture. It pushes less materialistic values, seeing human happiness to lie primarily in such things as friendship, simple pleasures, and the appreciation of nature. And it is an outlook that goes well with contemporary environmentalism. In these respects it can be seen as quite radical.