

Now here's a news flash from America: Last week, 42-year-old Kate Rhoad of Conroe, Texas — momentarily strapped for gift ideas — asked her 9-year-old son Travis whether there was anything he wanted or needed for Christmas.

First, the kid went off and thought about it. When Travis came back a few hours later, Rhoad heard something that perhaps no other parent in the nation has heard — could even conceive of hearing — at this time of year.

No, said Travis. He couldn't think of anything he needed.

So this year, Travis got homemade coupons, each one redeemable for one of the things he prizes most — a round with Mom on the board game of his choice. In other words, gift certificates for his mother's time.

Another flash: On the drizzly day after Thanksgiving, as crowds thronged West Lake Mall in Seattle, 25-year-old Alan Seid and a group of friends set up the most improbable of solicitations. They urged mall-goers to join them in observing "Buy Nothing Day." They invited them to come to their booth and cut up their credit cards.

And six people did it! With gusto, according to Seid. Countless others made thumbs-up gestures at the group manning the scissors.

Gerald Celente, author of "Trends 2000," calls simplicity — a rejection of mindless consumerism and a return to quieter, simpler lives — one of the really big trends for the new millennium. "Never before have I seen a social trend gain such momentum as this one," Celente gushes. "Something new is being born. This is not a flash in the pan."

And yet: This year, Americans spent \$500 billion — an amount equal to roughly three-quarters the gross domestic product of Canada — on Christmas presents.

Americans are in debt up to their eyeballs: The Federal Reserve reports consumer debt has reached \$1.178 trillion. The average U.S. household has run up a credit card bill of \$3,400, compared with \$1,600 a decade ago, according to Standard & Poors.

By the end of the year, a record 1.1 million Americans — roughly 1 in every 100 U.S. households — will have declared personal bankruptcy, according to government statisticians. Once a mark of shame and failure, declaring bankruptcy this year became almost as common as purchasing a new foreign car.

In the national debate over values, money appears to represent the final frontier. The bridge too

To talk to Americans, it would seem both the source and the destroyer of many of our shared values. At its best, money can serve as a faithful handmaiden to many of our most cherished institutions: family, community, responsibility. At its worst, it is the dark force that separates many of us from the values we hold dear.

"Money is a great servant, but it's a terrible master," says Rick Peterson, a 42-year-old financial planner in Alameda, Calif., who has embarked on a conscious effort to wean himself from overspending and to simplify his life. "I'm trying to make it a better servant, but I'm not there yet."

Today, according to Celente, roughly 1 in 20 baby-boomers — about 4 million people — have acted on that conviction, embracing a life that stresses frugality and rejects consumption for its own sake. Those numbers include Rhoad and Seid, both of whom followed a nine-step program laid out in the movement's bible "Your Money or Your Life." The 4-year-old guide to "transforming your relationship with money" has remained on the Business Week best-seller list all year long.

Many believe a growing number of Americans, whether by conscious decision or financial necessity, will follow Rhoad and Seid in reordering the role of money and the things it buys in their lives.

Until then, the vast preponderance of Americans will continue to bemoan the nation's materialism. All the way to the mall.

Celente predicts that the number of Americans embracing what some have called the "voluntary simplicity movement" will quadruple — reaching 12 million — by the year 2000.

But along with most social scientists who have tracked American consumer behavior, he has no romantic illusions about what is causing this sudden surge of personal fiscal virtue. It is the cold, hard financial reality of lower wages, greater job insecurity, imminent retirement, or a growing recognition on the part of many Americans of the chest-tightening, mouth-drying extent of their personal debt.

He calls it "involuntary voluntary simplicity."

Oh, and in case you were wondering, none of Kate and Rusty Rhoad's three kids has even heard of a Tickle-Me-Elmo.

Is the Rhoad family the wedge of a burgeoning movement, or is it just weird?

Yes, and yes, Rhoad says.

"We have so many options that all people around us don't have, it's fun and exciting," she says. "I do feel different."

Buying craze unfulfilling, survey finds

Even as Americans indulged in an orgy of buying, there is growing evidence they are feeling guilty and unfulfilled about their spending.

According to a 1995 poll conducted by the Merck Family Fund, 91 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that "the buy-now, pay-later attitude causes many of us to consume more than we need." And while 89 percent agreed that "buying and consuming is the American way," 82 percent acknowledged that "most of us buy and consume far more than we need. It's wasteful."

Believing is one thing. Taking personal responsibility for broad social problems — and changing one's behavior accordingly — is quite another.

The Merck poll asked respondents if, in the past five years, they had voluntarily taken steps to make less money. To their astonishment, 28 percent said yes — a figure that prompts many pollsters to caution that respondents sometimes lie and many economists to laugh.

"I guarantee you, they don't just go in to their bosses and say: 'I'll take a pay cut,'" says Susan Sterne, president of Economic Analysis Associates in Greenwich, Conn. "It never is voluntary. You just don't get that. If people were more values-oriented or virtuous, why would they be bankrupt or up to their ears in debt?"

— Los Angeles Times

Mounting debt spurs yen for return to simpler life