For the two or three hundredth time today, a worried, expensively casual man with incipient hair loss is trying to place a phone call. He is phoning Phoenix, but somehow manages to dial Fiji instead, where his call is answered by a partying native on a beach. This mix-up is odd—it seems to imply that if you misdial you are likely to reach a location phonetically similar to your intended destination—e.g., Peking, not Peoria. In fact, the area code for Phoenix is 602, while to reach Fiji you must call 011-679. But never mind—that's not the man's problem. His problem is that he has switched phone companies and his new carrier won't give him "immediate credit for wrong numbers." It's unclear why he can't wait a few days for his mistake to be righted—by all appearances he has more money than he knows what to do with—but he goes into a petulant sulk, whining to the operator that this never happened with AT&T. (Apparently he's spent much of his life misdialing.) The operator says, understandably, "You're not dealing with AT&T." "I am now," he says, slamming down the receiver as his disgusted look gives way to a smile of rueful triumph.

AT&T ads, as Michael Arlen documented in his book *Thirty Seconds*, are more carefully produced than most feature films. When you're selling something as intangible as the phone connection to someone's house, you need to rally primal emotion. For years they relied on sentiment—"Reach out and touch." But in the years since the courts ended AT&T's monopoly, they've had to raise even stronger feelings, like fear of humiliation. Their main campaign, to persuade customers not to heed the blandishments of MCI or Sprint and switch their service, has featured a parade of harassed yuppies, all of whom have made the mistake of going over to the other side. "What is with these people?" fumes one woman as she sits in her airy, enormous studio—she does some kind of work that involves looking at slides on a light table. "A month ago they called me—'Save big over AT&T.' So I switched. Bill came. Big savings didn't. It turned out they'd compared
their special discount plan to AT&T's regular prices." She has an indignant catch in her voice—a "Get a load of this" tone, as if she's caught diet guru Richard Simmons eating sticks of butter. "Now they tell me? C'mon, guys. If this is all I get I'm not hanging around." The booming male voice of AT&T fills the air: "People who thought they could do better than AT&T are coming back for the real value. Aren't you glad you never left?" We cut back to the woman, sitting on her couch, smiling and shaking her head, sadder but wiser. "Unreal," she says.

Then there's the overweight, balding black man. He double-parks his car on a city street, and jumps out in the rain to make a call from a pay phone, the picture of aggressive self-confidence. "Huh, huh," he chuckles. "This is going to be a piece of cake, right—pull over and make a fast call. But I'm using this other long-distance company." By now the rain is falling harder—it's one of those open-air booths, so most of him is sticking out into the downpour. "Now, first they have me dial all these numbers just to get them. Then I get to dial the number I'm calling. Then I have to dial all these other numbers." As the black man urgently pecks with his big fingers at the little keys, a cop arrives to ticket his car. The caller doesn't notice until it's too late—then he dashes futilely out into the street, arms akimbo, raincoat flapping pathetically, as the cop drives away. "So yeah—huh, huh, huh—I made the call. To the tune of thirty-five dollars. Huh, huh, huh." The joke's on him, just as it was on the man calling Fiji and the lady with no big savings, and all the other characters in this memorable series. They had been taken in, suckered by the sweet talk of a better life with MCI. They had suffered humiliation, not because they had gotten a parking ticket or Fiji on the phone, but because they had not been tough, gritty—they had listened to the siren song of change, and parted with long-established habit. (No consumer habit, except maybe Coke, is as old as AT&T.) Now the sirens they were hearing belonged to the police. They had been fools, but at least they had learned a lesson: Stay with what you know. Don't risk disappointment. Better to keep your old bill than find your new one is no lower. Better to stay on the right side of the cops. Not nice to fool Mother Bell. "Aren't you glad you never left?"

I've tried, in the preceding pages, to describe some of the information that the modern
world—the TV world—is missing. Information about the physical limits of a finite world. About sufficiency and need, about proper scale and real time, about the sensual pleasure of exertion and exposure to the elements, about the human need for community and for solid, real skills. About the good life as it appears on TV, and about other, perhaps better, lives. As I said at the outset, human desires count. I think the signals the natural world sends us—the seven warmest years on record all occurring in the last decade, for instance—are signals that our desires need to change.

Even if everyone agreed, this would be an outlandishly difficult task. Switching from our present headlong trajectory toward personal lives and societies and economies that instead stress frugality and sustainability would demand enormous ingenuity. Even among those who are convinced such a life would be richer, change is hard—I still live in a fashion as close to my suburban upbringing as to my ideal of engagement. In part this is due to the difficulty of trying to live against the majority—you can vow to give up your car and ride the bus, but if your area has failed to provide decent and regular public transportation your vow will soon fade. In part, it's probably due to ingrained flaws in our nature—greed, or desire for status, or for power—which should never be ignored or wished away, and which have troubled people in all times and all ages. But in part, too, it's due to a very particular feature of the modern world, especially the television world. The AT&T ads exemplify the conservatism of an advanced consumer society. One of the functions of advertising, and more broadly of television as a whole, is to reinforce the way we're used to doing things, and one of its most potent tools is ridicule. These saps have changed their long-distance company and been humiliated—what if they had decided to change, say, their expensive taste in cars and clothes? What if they decided to change their jobs, alter their life-styles? The consumer society can adapt to change—indeed, in the name of growth it must sometimes encourage it—but the form of adaptation is usually akin to what a marketer would call "brand management." That is, confronted with the rise of people interested in good nutrition, no advertiser worth his reduced sodium content would encourage people simply to eat less packaged food or dine lower on the food chain. Instead, they "extend" their brand by creating slightly different products that perhaps can be marketed at higher margins—breakfast cereals, say, studded with slivers of almond because people believe that "nutty goodness" will
help lower their cholesterol. Or they reposition their brand slightly. If you had recently
begun watching McDonald's ads, for instance, you would likely think it was an enormous
recycling company that happened to sell hamburgers on the side. During the buildup to
the Iran-Iraq war, Cadillac, whose cars barely averaged sixteen miles to the gallon in city
driving, added the tag line "as responsible to own as they are responsive to drive" to
some of their commercials, in order to "reassure prospective buyers that they would not
be out of step with the times by purchasing a Cadillac."

Or consider Cheerios, which built a successful franchise based on the essential
tastelessness of their cereal. Combined with its mildly humorous shape, this made it a
perfect food for young children. Its advertising agency, however, had clearly decided to
cash in on the popular adult belief that oats were a magic bullet against heart disease.
Two men, obviously busy executives, sit in a dining room sharing a power breakfast. One
of them—the younger, flightier one—complains about how difficult it is to "know what to
believe" about nutrition, what with all the conflicting claims and so on. He fears,
obviously, the humiliation of making the wrong choice—of choosing the MCI of
breakfast cereals or, worse yet, some nonbrand, some bowl of berries or brown rice. The
older fellow, his mentor, takes a second to set him straight. Cheerios, he says, is nutrition
made simple, because "you don't need any more problems." Change has been successfully
contained, if not to Cheerios proper then to its new companion, Honey Nut Cheerios.
This ad is instructive—all sorts of people are confusing you with their ideas about how
you should act in the world. But there's no need to be confused—stick with the old, the
tried-and-true. On *TV*, of course, the old, the tried-and-true, means the artifacts of the
consumer society, not whatever came before. They can change slightly, but not radically.

Allied with this fear of humiliation is television's carefully cultivated sense of hip, its ironic
stance. Mark Crispin brilliant essay in the 1980s that he titled "The Hipness Unto Death,"
pointing out that a great deal of the time when we are watching TV we know that it is
stupid. That in fact we watch it because we know it is stupid and enjoy the feeling of
superiority—of hipness—it provides. That is, TV more or less takes us into its confi-
dence—it says, "You know it's silly to be watching Donna Reed reruns after thirty-five
years, and we know it's silly. That's why we're packaging them in this funny way, with
lots of jokes about how silly she is living in her 'dream house' and so on." What it doesn't say is, once you're swelled with this agreeable sense of your hip superiority, you can be sold products as easily as a tribesman just emerging from the bush. Miller goes on to successfully deconstruct any number of shows and commercials (his *Family Feud* autopsy is a gem), but even he, I think, would have a hard time believing just how obvious TV has become in the last two or three years as it plays to our sense of hipness. Take MTV as an example. The people who run the network face a potentially serious problem—their target audience is at the age when they might be attracted to "subversive" and uncontained ideas. And rock 'n' roll, de-fanged as it now is, still, by sheer volume if nothing else, raises the possibility of mild rebellion against the model consumer life-style. MTV's response has included a series of ads like this one:

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People who make TV
COMMERCIALS
use words just like these to
COMMUNICATE A MESSAGE
This practice is supposed to be
SIMPLE AND EFFECTIVE
These words . . . wilt hang out for 15 seconds
until it's time
for another
COMMERCIAL
These are words that could be saying something
but they're not
They're just sitting here
LIKE YOU
MTV
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This ad is not designed, obviously, to make you stand up and turn off the TV and do something else. (MTV above all others requires lethargic torpor from its viewers.) It is designed to make you say, "Yeah, I'm hip. I'm just sitting here, but I'm under no illusion
that I'm not—I'm not pretending to be doing something deep. I'm a couch potato."

Others were following this lead—the brand-new HA! comedy network, appealing to an MTVish demographic, was constantly airing promos for itself with slogans like "I've got better things to do" a wink that makes it okay to sit and watch, say, twenty-four solid hours of Marlo Thomas reruns ("Gobs and Gobs of That Girl"). In the end, though, MTV retained the title for most cynical commercial, a sixty-second spot that I saw during Yo, MTV Raps. Jonathan Demme, the certifiably hip filmmaker, was shown in close-up, just talking: "With MTV, obviously, the prime purpose of MTV is to entertain, and that's fine, but I think it would be terrific to see MTV try to become more a force for—in a small way, without intruding on their need to entertain—become some kind of force for social change and have kind of—to use MTV as some kind of consciousness-raising medium as well as an entertainment medium." Now, MTV doesn't want to raise our consciousness—if it did, it wouldn't show so much Lycra. If it did, it would just go out and try, not show Jonathan Demme talking about how it would be nice if it did. But MTV knows that at this particular moment there are lots of kids thinking about social change, or thinking that they should be thinking about social change—about the environment, say. So it allows—encourages—them to pretend that they are so hip that it's happening almost by osmosis, simply by looking at Jonathan Demme.

TV retains its power in part because it's trained us not to take it seriously. This emperor is so confident that he announces constantly that he has no clothes—he makes jokes about it. "See—no pants, hahahaha. Back after this short commercial break." Watch David Letterman for a night to see what I mean. You can hardly deconstruct it—it's deconstructing itself. There's nothing on TV to push against; even if you're inclined to push, after a while you stop and are carried along for the ride. On a medium that mocks itself, seriousness does not play. If someone came on MTV, or any other spot on the dial, and began to say, "Hey, we should learn to walk instead of drive cars everywhere," GM would have nothing to fear. Trained to laugh, trained as ironists, trained to avoid anything that might make us foolish, we're all but inoculated against such messages. "Sounds like the Waltons." "Good night Johnboy." "Good night Grandma." TV has prepared us to defuse most bombs. When the twelve-year-olds on the new Mickey Mouse Club perform a long sketch spoofing the Home Shopping network ("If you were to buy the planet Saturn in any store, you might expect to pay twenty-five squajillion dollars"), they are
not attacking the Home Shopping network. They are unconsciously ensuring that kids will watch it immune to its crudeness. Because they already know—they're in on the joke. If you think Home Shopping network's a tacky rip-off, you’re a dweeb, because everyone already knows it's a tacky rip-off.

Television, writes Miller, "has us automatically deplore or ridicule all anger, fear, political commitment, deep belief, keen pleasure, exalted self-esteem, tremendous love; and yet while making all these passions seem unnatural, the medium persistently dwells on their darkest consequences, teasing the housebound spectator with hints of that intensity it has helped to kill." TV is sometimes accused of encouraging fantasies. Its real problem, though, is that it encourages—enforces, almost—a brute realism. It is anti-utopian in the extreme. We're discouraged from thinking that, except for a few new products, there might be a better way of doing things. I've discussed, for instance, the possibility that smaller, tighter, more self-sufficient communities might help us through our human and environmental problems. On TV, such communities, when portrayed at all, are invariably pictured as fanatic. Today's *Twilight Zone* repeat follows a motorist whose car breaks down—he spends the night in an inbred country town. "We've lived here for generations, independent of the outside world," they tell him. But instead of decent Amish, they are nutball maniacs who believe that the lighthouse on the coast is instructing them to kill the stranger. TV employs a consistent and mocking reductio ad absurdum with anything the slightest bit off center. Ever occur to you to give up TV for a while? A sitcom called *Mr. Belvedere* explores this subject—the main character is a butler, and in today's episode his family has sworn off the tube. As a result they become absurd. They play Simon Says. They dress up in hillbilly outfits and start a jug band. Without TV you'd be playing a kazoo. Think maybe you might give your family more time and attention instead of buying them stuff? Then watch the single cruelest ad on television. One after another, nice-looking old ladies appear on the screen to say what they want for Mother's Day. "You just give me your love and respect," says one. But underneath her chin, Joe Isuzu-fashion, appear the words "I'd like that nice desk organizer." Thanks, Hallmark, we really needed that.

That reduction to absurdity—that mocking, knowing snicker—is so sad, because it shuts people's ears to the promise of this particular moment. Which is,
simply, this having immense amounts of technology available to us, this society could pick and choose those things that would create a life both sustainable and rich. When you mention that in some ways people lived better a hundred years ago, the nearly automatic response is that they died at fifty. True enough—and I've never heard anyone seriously suggest giving up antibiotics and anesthesia and clean water. But perhaps we could, if we listened more carefully to the information of the natural world, come to terms with dying and spare ourselves the last anguished months hooked to machines. Almost no one suggests abolishing electricity—but a nation where nightfall meant a bulb or two and the elegance of candles, that's not so obviously ludicrous. We light candles for romance, for special occasions. Perhaps lighting them two or three times a week instead of turning on lamps and televisions would greatly increase the percentage of our lives that are romantic and special. Certainly it would let us see the sunset and the dark more easily; certainly it would cut down the light bill. Those of us who live in the north know that every few years a big snowstorm immobilizes us and turns off the power—and turns the world spectacularly peaceful. We forget that we have the power, and the right, to simulate the effects of a snowstorm as often as we want to.

We've now, as a species, lived through extremes. We know that people will flee from backbreaking labor at the first chance. But we might be starting to sense that the total abandonment of skilled and careful labor, the utter emancipation offered by light bulbs and machines, can be just as alienating, quite aside from their environmental dangers. And perhaps we're starting to sense something deeply human in a life is less engaged with the world of consumption and growth and comfort offered by television, and more engaged with the world of balance and pleasure and elegant simplicity suggested by the natural world. You don't need to live in the country to understand these kinds of changes. City dwellers and suburbanites can continue to drive everywhere, hoping that the ever-progressing society will deliver hydrogen cars or solar cars or whatever other kinds of cars soon enough to save the atmosphere. Or they can begin to use existing technology—the bicycle, for instance. It's every bit as technological as an electric car, and as a significant minority of people have discovered, it's endlessly more elegant. On a bicycle you see the world around you—you notice
hills that a car obliterates; you see neighborhoods at a pace that makes them real, not a blur. You save gas, of course, but you also hear your body again. TV can't appreciate this kind of elegance—on TV, you'd buy an Infiniti and drive it quickly to Jack LaLanne, where you can pay someone to let you sit on a stationary bicycle and pump away.

All the information offered by the natural world suggests that somewhere between the meaninglessness of lives lived in destitute struggle and the emptiness of life lived in swaddled affluence there is daily, ordinary life filled with meaning. Kohak, who lives in a small cabin in rural New Hampshire, writes: "A life wholly absorbed in need and its satisfaction, be it on the level of conspicuous consumption or of marginal survival, falls short of realizing the inner-most human possibility of cherishing beauty, knowing the truth, doing the good, worshipping the holy." Life needn't be nasty, brutish, and short—we have the scientists and the engineers to thank for that. But it needn't, the clamor of TV notwithstanding, be infinite or utterly easy either. We don't need to go back to the Dark Ages—but how much further forward do we need to go? An efficient solar cell, yes, but what is there that can't do now that we will be able to do when we've developed artificial intelligence and virtual reality and smart houses and all the other shiny promises of the technological future? What convenience or comfort does the average American life lack? If you could pick three conditions on earth to change in the next fifty years, would you want "advances"—Picturephones, virtual reality, computer shopping—or would you want more quiet, more community, cleaner air?

Sometimes TV offers what might be fables if they weren't facts. On C-SPAN this day, Congressman Gerry Sikorski, a Minnesota congressman, took to the rostrum of the House to raise the issue of children who are squished by automatic garage-door openers. "With fifty-five dead kids, we can't just shrug our shoulders," he said. Accidents are "turning that friendly open garage door of home into a fearsome death trap." That's obviously insufficient carnage to get us thinking about reducing our use of cars, and garages we can't do without—where would we put our stuff? But it never even occurs to Sikorski that we might at least eliminate automatic garage-door openers. They've somehow become vital to America—"that friendly open garage
door of home." Instead, he demands passage of the Automatic Garage Door Opener Safety Act to make sure that new automatic garage-door openers have reverse mechanisms.

Increasingly we live in a world filled with the equivalents of deadly garage-door openers, unnecessary items that offer us mild and insipid comfort at the price of a dangerous and uncomfortable planet, and at the price of any real relationship to the physical world. If you live in a suburban home and commute to a parking garage somewhere, that ten seconds opening the garage door might be nearly the only rain you ever feel. Having been given the gift of light, can we use it to light our way on a dark night when we need to go somewhere—or must we keep using it as a floodlight, to wash out the darkness always and everywhere? Unlike all the other animals, who have these decisions made for them, we have to choose.

And we live at the curious moment when this choice matters—when aesthetic notions about the good life and community and sufficiency and so on, long the province of moral philosophers and preachers, coincide with interests of atmospheric chemists. You can look at our environmental problems like this—almost everyone on the planet is causing friction, some because they have too much and consume it wastefully, some because they have too little and must abuse the earth. Some drive Oldsmobiles and some chop down rain forests, but the life of each harms the planet, perhaps irreparably. Somewhere there is a mean.

On the mountaintop you see it constantly in action—see life in balance, rolling on imperturbably, not growing, not shrinking. Over geological time it may change violently—these mountains were once volcanoes. But we don't live in geological time. This is the information nature whispers to us in "biological time, in our time—it's the information drowned out by the familiar mocking laughter of TV. We can't go live in the woods by a lake—but we can go there long enough to listen, to hear. And come back not chastened but uplifted. So that we bike to work not because we have to but because it's the richest alternative. So that we live with less not because an economy in recession forces us to compromise but out of a distaste for the insulation from the real that "too much" ensures. That we grow some of our food not because we couldn't buy it but for the meeting with nature it affords and the sweetness of corn fresh picked. The question is not "Did the Indians have it
right?" The question is not "Did the Amish have it right?" The question is "Can we, blessed with technology but also with nature, get it right?"

This sounds quaint to me, too, and improbable. How could it not? I grew up rapt with attention at the words and images on the screen. Darren and Gilligan and Mrs. Brady and Peter Jennings and all the rest—this was the real world. I assumed unconsciously that the information that poured from the TV into my quite similar suburban world was all the information there was, except for stuff about sex, which back then they couldn't show. But there's another real world. A realer world, maybe—certainly an older one. This world is full of information, information that grows inevitably in you the more time you spend there, the stiller you are. It is accessible to anyone anytime—to people in New York City who'll take the subway to the deserted beach; to people in Westchester who will ride a bike instead of drive a car, who will seek out the woods and hang the bird feeders and row the marshes along the Hudson. It's available, at least for a little while longer, to every one of us—especially to the comfortable in our society who most need to see it, hear it, feel it, get it. That's the one great hopeful possibility; this other world broadcasts round the clock, and in stereo and sensurround and smellavision. Its signal grows steadily fainter, and the noise of the modern world makes it ever harder to hear. But it's still there.