



# *Poisoned by* PROSPERITY?

A new book wonders if the suburbs are bad for your soul.

**BOB SMJETANA**

Dave Goetz began to worry that he was losing his perspective on life on the day that he volunteered to read with students in his daughter Kira's kindergarten class. When Kira mastered the book she was given, Goetz beamed with pride at his daughter's accomplishment.

Then along came Josh.

One of Kira's classmates, Josh could already read at a fourth-grade level. By the time Josh was done with his book, Goetz was in a panic. Kira was being left behind, and he had to do something about it. He went home and announced to his family that from then on, television was banned from their house in the evenings. Instead,

the family would embark on a "Great Book Reading Program," says Goetz in his new book, *Death by Suburb* (Harper-SanFrancisco).

After all, Goetz says, "Education isn't about learning—it's about winning."

That is one of the erroneous lessons Goetz says he has learned from more than a decade of suburban living, where life often revolves around collecting "immortality symbols"—the perfect job, the perfect house, the perfect car, the perfect family. Those symbols promise happiness, says Goetz, a member of Glen Ellyn (Illinois) Evangelical Covenant Church and former editor at *Leadership* magazine, but fail to deliver. Even worse, Goetz believes they

rob much of the joy from life.

“We think if we had all these pieces in place, we would have no anxiety,” Goetz said in an interview with the *Companion*. “But in fact, having all these pieces in place creates anxiety in your life.”

Goetz writes about what he calls the eight “toxins” of contemporary suburban life, which he believes can kill the soul.

Those toxins are:

“I am in control of my life.”

“I am what I do and what I own.”

“I want my neighbor’s life.”

“My life should be easier than it is.”

“I need to make a difference with my life.”

“My church is the problem.”

“What will this relationship do for me?”

“I need to get more done in less time.”

Rather than being grateful for the blessings of life, these toxins keep many people in “hot pursuit” of the ideal life, says Goetz. And that turns every aspect of life, from a child’s education to the kind of car we drive to church into a form of competition. As a result, he says, “you don’t get to enjoy the things that God gives you.”

Goetz is quick to point out that as the owner of a small marketing company, he is not anti-possessions or anti-success. He lives in the suburbs himself, and is not anti-suburb. In his book, he uses the suburbs as a metaphor for the “good life.” Too much of the good life, Goetz argues, “ends up being toxic”—a never-ending game of one-upmanship. He uses an example from his son’s experience on a local swim team to make his point. His son’s biggest challenge was the temptation to poke his head up and see how the other swimmers were doing instead of concentrating on swimming in his own lane. Suburban life can be like that, Goetz says.

“Your eyes are naturally drawn to the people who are on a level higher than you, or maybe two levels up,” he says. “Why can’t I have that life? I need to have that life, how do I get that life? I think it’s very spiritually corrosive.”

The one-upmanship can even invade the church, and not just in material possessions, though Goetz recounts a conversation with a friend who “covets more on Sunday morning than on any other day of the week,” tempted by SUVs and late-model sedans in the church parking lot.

Even spiritual practices like Bible study, mission trips, or serving the poor can become immortality symbols or religious merit badges. When he was a seminary student, Goetz volunteered at a prison in Canon City, Colorado, about 100 miles from Golden, where he lived at the time. He was assigned as a mentor to a prisoner named Perry, and visited him weekly for about eight months. Goetz says he made Perry a pet project—he found Perry a job upon his release from prison, encouraged Perry to get married, and naively thought he could solve all of Perry’s problems.

Then Perry was arrested for driving without a license, and while Goetz

approach to service can’t be sustained over the long haul.

The difference between the two approaches can be seen in the lives of missionaries. Goetz says he has noticed that when young people go out as missionaries, they are filled with fervor and are convinced they will change the world. The ones who survive as missionaries, he says, realize that God will save the world, and their job is to be faithful to their calling.

“You see older, more mature missionaries, and there is just a difference—a maturity and a wisdom that comes from suffering,” he says. “Now they know that they are not going to save the world, but now they are in this moment where they need to be obedient to where God has placed them. That is a different spirituality. One is ego driven—one has taken that journey through the self and is on the other side of it.”

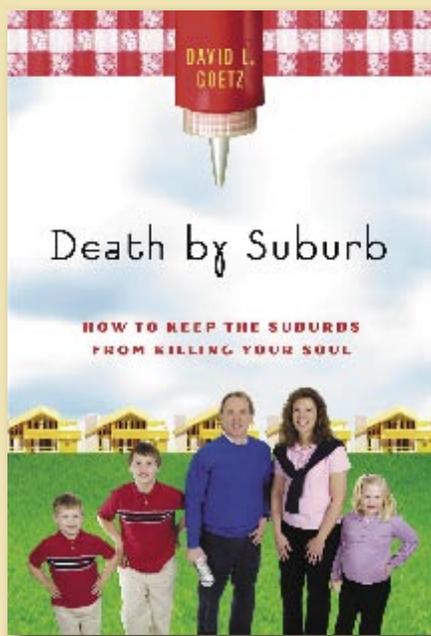
Goetz offers eight antidotes, spiritual practices that he believes can counteract the effects of suburban toxins. They are: the prayer of silence, the journey through the self, friendship with the poor, accepting my cross with grace and patience, pursuing action not results, staying put in your church, building deep friendships, falling in love with a day.

Most of the toxins are based on the illusion that we are in control of our lives. “In the end,” Goetz says, “life ends badly for all of us.” No immortality symbol—whether it’s the newest SUV or a mammoth McMansion—can stave off the inevitable. We’re all going to die. The spiritual antidotes help Christians accept that truth and pursue God’s kingdom instead of our own—and to find joy in the process.

SUVs draw most of Goetz’s ire in *Death by Suburb* (though he admits that he owns one himself). He says that SUVs offer “passive security” and the illusion of control. “In my mind, the SUV is the ultimate symbol of our attempt to control life, our attempt to

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found him a lawyer and kept Perry out of prison, the two parted ways. Perry’s life was too messy, and Goetz’s spiritual high over “making a difference” was ruined. Instead, he learned that God wanted him to serve without worrying about results. That kind of service requires giving up power, Goetz says, and allowing God to take care of the results. While “making a difference” feels better, Goetz says, that kind of

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hedge life and to protect ourselves,” he says. The only trouble, he adds, is that SUVs can’t keep us safe.

He contrasts the passive security of SUVs with the take-life-as-it-comes attitude he learned while growing up in Harvey, North Dakota, 100 miles north of Bismarck. One day in the middle of January, Goetz’s father was driving his old station wagon down a back road, with two feet of snow on the ground. A snow drift covered part of the road, but there were tracks over the drift, so Goetz’s father thought he could drive over it. He got stuck. Even worse, he didn’t have a shovel in the car. Since there were no cell phones in those days, and no farms nearby, Goetz’s father did what came naturally. He got busy.

“He kept the engine running, and dug out with his hands,” Goetz says. “And about two or three hours later, he got out. That was the environment I grew up in.”

What he learned from growing up in North Dakota was that the rain falls—or doesn’t fall—on the just and the unjust, and human beings can’t control everything. He also learned that there’s no way to insulate ourselves from suffering. The key is finding God’s presence in the midst of difficulties.

“You know where we need missionaries today?” he says. “We need third-world missionaries to come into our Christian suburbs and teach us how to celebrate in the midst of great suffering, and what does it mean to have true joy in suffering. We need them to tell us how they do it. Because on the face of it, they ought to have no joy. They ought to be the ones that live in deep fear all of the time. Instead, you don’t see that in a lot of Christian communities across the globe. They are experiencing deep suffering and yet there is this joy in their lives. We need missionaries to help us come and have joy. The joy comes from realizing that there is nothing in this life that you can hold on to. There just isn’t. If you’ve lost everything, you can understand joy. But if you are anesthetized from suffering you can’t feel any joy.” □