

Getting and spending

STOCK PORTFOLIOS AND VALUES

By Missy Wheeler

Have you checked your investment portfolio lately? You might just find some companies that remove mountaintops, or companies that swallow up greenspace and destroy main street America, or companies that burden monocultured land with chemicals and decimate small family farms, or companies that produce and distribute harmful, addictive substances. A semi-annual report from a retirement fund finally got my attention and encouraged me to further investigate.

Categorizing many of these companies under the heading "Consumer Staples", the S&P 500 constituents' list serves as the benchmark for many retirement funds, including the federal governments' TSP (Thrift Savings Plan) C Fund. The government website describes this fund as the "large-company domestic stock fund ... invested in the Barclays Equity Index Fund, a commingled stock index fund that tracks the Standard & Poor's 500 stock index." They go on to describe a commingled fund as one in which the assets of many plans are combined and invested together. The website claims that "the Barclays Equity Index Fund holds stocks of all the companies represented in the S&P 500 index." The TSP C Fund seems to show the highest rate of return on investments of all the TSP options.

Many retirement and investment funds track other indexes such as the Russell 3000 and the Wilshire 4500, which

include even more US companies. And then there are the international market funds on which many of us are banking our futures and our world's future. Wow.

The money industry lingo alone would send most of us running for our nearest financial planner or at least to the signature page of our employers' 401(k) plan. I know as a young and overwhelmed new employee, the last thing I wanted to scrutinize was the retirement-options booklet that accompanied the pounds of paperwork put in front of me.

It all seems so sophisticated, too, doesn't it? To be able to mention "the market" in casual conversation, or share our disappointments in the latest crash, is to speak smartly, isn't it?

Where did the wisdom go with all this sophistication, though? How in the world could we as individuals keep on top of the goings on in the 500, or 3000, or 4500 or more companies we invest in? How can we be sure that we are not supporting companies that go against our most personal values? As I age and have more time to consider the complicated systems that have become part of our lives, I really fear that mindfulness has become endangered in our everyday affairs – from the sources of our "consumer staples", to the companies that we support through our investments.

Socially responsible and environmentally responsible investing options do

exist, although they might not be present in some employer plans. While we must still be mindful of the filters through which companies pass to find themselves in these accounts, I believe it's a good start. What could indeed happen if we all switched over to funds that excluded the types of companies we disdain? I am also rereading David Korten's When Corporations Rule the World, now in its 2nd edition, to remind myself of even more hopeful ideas.

It is very disappointing to constantly read and hear about the "bottom lines" and the this-and-that average and the so-and-so product when these figures rarely are accompanied by any real commentary on the quality of our lives. Numerical gains do not necessarily reflect health and happiness. I wonder what kind of discussion might ensue if we choose to include this in casual conversation?

Ms. Wheeler is a West Virginia Highlands Conservancy member who was born and raised in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. She now lives in Athens, Georgia.

**Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours.**

William Wordsworth

Back Allegheny Mountain WV High Elevation Bog In April.
This high elevation bog is in the upper Shavers Fork drainage. The elevation here is four thousand feet. Beaver activity flooded the bases of these spruce trees, depriving their roots of air, which killed them. This meadow is much more fertile as a result of the pond and many life forms enjoy the benefits. The remnants of the pond are barely visible in the distance. Photo taken early April 2002. Photo © Jonathan Jessup.



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