**We’re all rich, even if we don’t know it**

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**Mumbai, late at night. Behind five-star hotels full of the fortunate I find hundreds of sleeping figures crowding a footpath. Men, women, kids.**

While rats scurry around and over them, I step carefully. Many have laid out flattened cardboard cartons over the filth. I look down at upturned faces while trying to avoid their akimbo legs, outflung arms, bare feet and vulnerable fingers.

One sleeper lingers in my memory. He has two possessions, just two, apart from his cardboard mattress. A toothbrush down to its last bristles and a bent aluminium spoon.

Phnom Penh, blazing noon. Buddhist monks, heads shaven, saffron-robed, glide by, their begging bowls in one hand, smartphones in the other. And here, on the footpath, I come across perhaps the world’s smallest small business. Rather than beg outright, a wizened man begs to weigh passers-by. As he squats beside his rusted set of bathroom scales a customer climbs aboard. The old bloke murmurs the figure and receives a coin.

Just as it’s mostly Mercedes that purr past the sleepers at midnight in Mumbai, it’s luxurious Lexuses that are bumper-to-bumper here in the capital of Cambodia. The obscenely rich oblivious to the obscenity of poverty. Poor is a poor word for people beyond and beneath destitution. Poor suggests less, not nothing. A brushless toothbrush, a bent spoon, a set of rusty scales. Things. It’s like that parody of hard times in Monty Python, with the old codgers out-bidding each other in an auction of misery, on who had the toughest childhood.

In contrast to my fraternity of the footpath we have many more things in a pocket, a purse or a glove box, while just one kitchen drawer is a cornucopia. Even the dustbins of the middle classes are full of riches – ask the scavengers who survive by picking over municipal tips from Cambodia to the Philippines.

As bad as the most deranged hoarder we see confronting a local council, I collect everything. A bit like Andy Warhol, who threw everything into a box every day, leaving it for others to sort, I’ve kept every letter from every reader I’ve ever received, even the anonymous and abusive ones. And just about every book I’ve ever read or even half-read, too. The National Library has the letters – hundreds of boxes filled in Warholian style over half a century. The books, in their tens of thousands, from *Just William* and *Biggles* to the latest effort by the learned scholar I interviewed last night, fill room after room in four buildings.

No one seems to want books any more. Redundant technology. Can’t bear to toss them out. Can’t give them away. They’ll finish up as landfill. Meanwhile, fellow humans pile up collections of anything and everything, from Bronze Age artefacts to Barbie dolls. Think of all the eccentric objects and collections thereof that are celebrated – and highly valued – on *The Antiques Roadshow*. (Memo to the ABC: bring back *Collectors*).

While some of our domestic detritus makes it to the tip, more and more is detoured to Vinnies, the toffier junk-shops and antique dealers. Antique? It used to take 100 years for something to be considered antique, at least 1000 to be an antiquity. Now, no matter how god-awful or kitsch, if it lasts a decade it becomes a curio, a collectable. It won’t be too long before Tupperware is taken as seriously as Greek vases.

Things used to be handmade, took a bit of time and trouble. Whereas we dwell within the era of mass and messy production. Now we drown in things – the good, the bad and the ugly. Think of how many things you own, versus how many things you need. I dare you to count and catalogue your possessions.

1. What is the gist of this article?

2. Which places did this writer, personally, visit?

3. What "small business" did the writer see?

4. Explain the writer's comments about the word "poor".

5. What is the writer's attitude toward (his own) possessions? Also give examples of what he's done with his different possessions.

6. What eventually happens to our possessions in the modern world?

7. Explain his comment about Tupperware.

8. What is his message, in the last paragraph, about possessions?

9. Explain the meaning of the following words...

a) bumper-to-bumper

b) destitution

c) hoarder

d) detritus

1. your answer should definitely mention at least these two points:

-the writer saw extreme poverty overseas

-he contrasts it to our modern society, in which people have far too many possessions

2. Mumbai and Phnom Penh

3. a man with scales who would weigh people for a small fee

4. "poor" is not a strong enough word for some of these people who really have nothing, because the word "poor" suggests "a little"/"not much", rather than "nothing"

5. he collects a lot and doesn't throw them away

all the letters he's received are at the National Library and all his books are in four buildings!

6. two points:

-many go to landfill/the tip (become garbage)

-many go to charity shops etc and eventually become 'antiques' etc

7. we are quick, these days, to label something an 'antique' (even if it is not very old or special) - so he sarcastically says that soon we will value Tupperware (a non-valuable item) as much as Greek vases (very old/rare antiques)

8. now we have mass production, we have far too many things - we should consider how many things we actually have (and whether we really need them)

9. a) cars driving very close together (eg, in a traffic jam)

b) extreme poverty

c) person who keeps too many things (doesn't throw things away)

d) waste, bits of rubbish