A call for radical simplicity

Even amidst the deep uncertainty and global turbulence that’s our current reality, I find myself seeing new possibilities — new ways of working, being at home, organizing our time, connecting with others — that are ready and waiting to emerge. This unprecedented opportunity could chart a new way forward, one based on treating ourselves, each other and the planet better.

As the upheaval of the health pandemic eventually stabilizes, the enormous challenge of the global climate crisis will still be with us. The time for action is — and always has been — now. Our vulnerabilities are more exposed than ever. It’s as though our planet is demanding of us, with great urgency, to slow down ... pause ... stop.

I’m a clothing designer. I started my company in 1984 with a vision of simple shapes, natural fabrics and timeless designs. Within a few years, that vision evolved to include the impact our business has on the environment and on people. Our vice president of Social Consciousness, Amy Hall, has been with us for over 25 years. In the 1990s and even into the 2000s, most companies weren’t even considering sustainability efforts.

Today, I’m here to acknowledge that the apparel industry is one of the biggest global polluters on earth. The frantic pace of apparel production, especially over the last 15 years, isn’t sustainable, nor should it be.

Given the current moment, it would be inexcusable to just pick up again where we left off.

We must do better.

There is irrefutable evidence that the fashion industry produces more garments than Earth can handle — all while polluting our land and waters to an unimaginable magnitude. The average American discards 81 pounds of clothing and textiles a year. Plastic microfibers shed from synthetic clothing into the water account for 85 percent of the human-made material found along ocean shores, threatening marine wildlife and ending up in our food supply.
It’s clear we need to find a better way. A way that does not depend on a take-make-waste linear model, but that considers the full lifecycle of the garment, one that looks more like grow, make, reuse, upcycle, recycle, compost — and repeat. Instead of discarding apparel in a landfill, the circular lifecycle model finds new uses for unwanted clothing. Clothing itself becomes a raw material.

It’s also no longer enough for companies to merely limit the harm they do. We need to leave the people and places we touch better than we found them. We’re supporting regenerative agriculture, which restores biodiversity and draws carbon out of the atmosphere. It’s part of our vision to make clothes in a way that actually makes things better.

Our leadership teams have been gathering in recent weeks to deliberately reassess and reconsider our business model and strategies from a holistic perspective. It’s astounding to me how complex our systems have become in the process of making simple clothes. We are asking ourselves: What is essential? What is unnecessary? How might we edit, pare down and reduce? All as we continue to produce beautiful clothes that last for years and that truly serve the needs of our customers. In light of everything, I’m calling for radical simplicity, an updated version of our original core value.

We’ve all witnessed the phenomenon of our planet becoming cleaner over the past few weeks — let’s take that observation and consider the positive impact this pause is having. Let’s use it as motivation to align our priorities as an industry and become better stewards. If there’s something we can do to change, we must. In light of where we find ourselves, it would be shameful not to.

Now is the time.

It’s on those of us in the industry — on all of us — to drive change. This isn’t about an individual company or person. We have to act with urgency — and we need to act together.

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