

# Cross Current



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## Sell-ebrity



Call it naked ambition.

In January 1998, a struggling comedian with the stage name Nasubi (Eggplant) landed a very bizarre television gig. The 23-year-old agreed to be locked in a tiny apartment until he won magazine contest prizes worth a million yen, about \$10,000 back then. Cameras were set up in the apartment and Nasubi was told footage would be edited later into a segment that would make him a national celebrity.

But the contestant had to live off the prizes he won. He even had to win his food and clothing. All the naked man had was a collection of magazines, stacks of postcards for entering the magazine contests, a telephone, table, sitting cushion and some pens.

By filling out 3,000 to 8,000 postcards a month, Nasubi did win prizes. It took him two weeks to win a jar of jelly and two weeks more to get a bag of rice. Though producers wouldn't admit it, it's likely they secretly helped him with at least some food in the early days.

But what Nasubi didn't know was that he was on TV from the start! Each Sunday night, edited highlights of the week were shown in a one-hour show. With a cartoon eggplant superimposed on the screen to hide his nakedness, Nasubi captivated the whole country as he won more rice, duck meat, car tires, a bike he couldn't go outside to ride, concert tickets he couldn't use, a tent, and ladies underwear — the only clothing he won during his captivity. He also won a TV but was crushed to find the apartment had no cable — because producers didn't want him to see himself on the tube.

When Nasubi greeted each new prize with a song and dance, many viewers danced with him. They sobbed and cringed with him when he had only dog food to eat, and — when he prayed for a new bag of rice



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— many viewers prayed, too.

In July, the producers set up a website so people could watch Nasubi 24-hours-a-day. When he finally won the prize that put him over the million yen mark, they flew him to Korea and made him win more prizes to earn airfare home. Fifteen months after the start of the contest, when Nasubi was taken back to another empty room in Tokyo, he stripped, out of habit. Suddenly, the walls fell away and the contestant found himself in a TV studio, covering himself with a cushion, in front of an audience of 17 million.

Nasubi did become a celebrity, briefly, and he got lots of money but the isolation almost did him in. He looked happy on the show, but footage was edited to hide his despair. He said he nearly went nuts.

We shake our heads at such blatant exploitation. But the truth is, many of us have fallen for the con in consumerism. We desperately want “the good life” and, like Nasubi, we're willing to sacrifice anything to get it, including our families, peace of mind and dignity.

The promise of approval and perceived prosperity is a powerful combination and the marketers know it. But when they persuade us to part with our paycheque and priorities, they offer little of value for our values and the ultimate cost is far higher than the price. Still, we buy the lie, amassing prizes that have no worth because we're too busy, tired, alone or dissatisfied to enjoy them.

And sadly, we in the church have lost our sense of outrage and concern. Unlike Paul who arrived in Athens and “was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw in the city” (Acts 17:16) we're often too taken with those same idols to raise an alarm or an objection.

Even when we don't get mired in materialism ourselves, we passively ignore the toll it takes on its victims. Instead, we celebrate the success of their excess, or sympathize with each material setback. We even pray for those who are hurting. But we should care enough to challenge consumer culture, distinguish between need and greed, and model the elusive value of true contentment. “*After all, we didn't bring anything with us when we came into the world and we can't carry anything with us when we die. So if we have enough food and clothing, let's be content... [Pursue] a godly life with faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.*” (1 Tim. 6:7,11) An audience is watching.

*Rick Gamble*