

# Power of Money

Brenda Emmanus has a *tête à tête* with television's popular finance guru.

**W**e meet for the first time at a restaurant in a central London hotel. Alvin and I immediately strike up a rapport, talking as if we are great friends who have caught up for a coffee after a shopping spree. There is a wonderfully relaxed vibe as we converse, and I'm flattered when he tells me, "In almost all areas of my life I rely on intuition. When I met someone, I'll know instinctively if I'm going to like them." He goes on to say, "I'm like this even down to buying art, which is my greatest passion. If I try to buy pieces using solely my head and logic, then I get it wrong. The longer you live, the more you learn to trust your gut feeling on whether something is right or wrong. It's only fear or repulsion that ever prevent me being intuitive."

Born to a family of farmers in Tallahassee, Florida, Alvin initially pursued a literary career before fate worked its magic. Now he seduces the British public and Wall Street with his cutesy camp charm and wealth of financial knowledge. His digestible, practical approach to finance has seen his profile soar as the presenter of BBC's *Your Money or Your Life*. Audiences have observed and learnt as he adds sugar to the bitter pill of debt management. "My interest in money came from a wake-up call. I had a job worth \$16,000 a year, yet there were colleagues earning a lot more. So I wanted to know their secret. Over the years I became confident in my knowledge from reading and questioning. I had no shame in asking people anything about money, so I absorbed all the information and also learnt from their mistakes."

Alvin's financial savvy has afforded him an enviable career teaching the rest of us normal folk how to get wise to cash – training financiers on Wall Street, writing books, buying contemporary art and presenting on radio and television. But his pursuit of money and knowledge has not made him a "breadhead". Alvin puts it all in perspective: "I keep money in balance with everything else in my life. What money gives me is choice. If I want to I can take time off, since I have enough money now to make choices. I recently sold off a third of my possessions because I thought no single person needs this much stuff. I saved half the money and then treated myself with the rest. It was liberating. Sometimes I choose not to spend. I don't take taxis, and I don't have a car and never will."

As he talked it was evident that Alvin was a man of good taste. In London he dines regularly at the Wolseley or with friends in Notting Hill and Kensington. He frequents art galleries and theatres, and designer names slip off his tongue like friends. Yet, this is no snob. "I feel I will always remain a very shy farm boy. I was tiny as a child and had to force myself to



## Simple Savings Schemes

**1. Think of saving as a fixed monthly expense. Saving is something you must do, like paying your mortgage, even if it's only a small amount every month.**

**2. Use the money in your current account to pay your daily living expenses, and keep the money in your savings account sacrosanct.**

**3. To make saving easier, enrol in a savings plan that automatically deducts money (the amount is determined by you) from your current account each month.**

**4. Don't save your hard-earned money under the mattress, where a mouse or burglar can find it; instead, invest in a pension scheme such as a state-sponsored individual savings account (ISA).**

**5. Invest in a money-market fund. Nearly as safe as a bank's saving account, these funds pay a higher interest rate.**

**6. Set a savings target for the year – 10 per cent of your annual income, at least – to give yourself something to aim for.**

Taken from *Money for Life* by Alvin Hall (Coronet Books/Hodder & Stoughton)

be assertive by sheer will. The shy person still exists, but I've managed to keep it at the core of me as a place I can go and be completely satisfied. I feel very lucky that all the good things that happened to me occurred after I was 35. If it happened before, I am not sure I would have made good use of all the opportunities that I have had."

Like his television persona, Alvin chuckles throughout our conversation. The "farm boy" is suppressed as he talks passionately about his respect for the work of contemporary artists like Tracey Emin and Chris Ofili. He reveals how he once owned 20 Armani suits that he sold off to friends and acquired more than that number in credit cards. He is, indeed, older and wiser now, and that wisdom is admirable. I sit there, soaking in all his advice on saving money and his demystifying of stocks, shares and spending. "People think money is complicated, and those who work in the field like us to think it is – [that way] it makes them look smart. If you believe that money can give you happiness or solve your problems, then you can become a slave to it."

We talk and laugh about the whole bling phenomenon and why the nouveau riche become peacocks, showing off their wealth. Culture and background can also play a part in our attitude to dosh. Interestingly, though, the money guru believes that black people do, in fact, spend differently to their white counterparts. "For most black people money still exists as a mythical object. 'If I had lots of it, I'd do blah, blah, blah,' they say. The people we know that do have lots are usually sports stars or entertainers, where that excessive 'show' is realistic and part of their lifestyle. The average person does not live like that. The best thing that black people can realize is that with a series of small steps you *can* become a millionaire or a person who has substantial assets, but you don't have to

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go out and pursue a lifestyle beyond those assets. Much of this 'blinging' we see is in order to be seen as worthy of respect. We feel that if we achieve something, we want to prove it to ourselves by showing we can drive the Benz or shop at Prada. We showboat to confirm our status to ourselves – and to others. In most cases it is born from insecurity."

Alvin is at a stage of personal reinvention. Having already proved himself as TV's finance guru, it is time to pursue other passions. Awaiting the green light for a new series of television programmes, he is currently recording radio documentaries about collectors of contemporary art. He is also set to publish a book, *Money and You*, looking at our personal relationships and money. "What I really want to do is write more, and I've opened that up as a possibility. I'm working on a novel called *The House*, which I'm very excited about. This reinvention period has allowed me to indulge myself because I have already given myself most of what I've ever wanted. I'm seizing all my opportunities. Luck is always with us, but some of us are prepared to recognize it and grab it, while others are not even prepared to see it." 📖

**Alvin's book *Money and You* is published in January 2006**