A Garden of Simplicity

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To portray the richness of simplicity, here are eight different flowerings that I see growing in the "garden of simplicity." Although there is overlap among them, each expression of simplicity seems sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. These are presented in no particular order as all are important.

1. **Uncluttered Simplicity**—Simplicity means taking charge of lives that are too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. Simplicity means cutting back on clutter, complications, and trivial distractions, both material and non-material, and focusing on the essentials—whatever those may be for each of our unique lives. As Thoreau said, "Our life is frittered away by detail. . . . Simplify, simplify." Or, as Plato wrote, "In order to seek one's own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life."

2. **Ecological Simplicity**—Simplicity means to choose ways of living that touch the Earth more lightly and that reduce our ecological impact on the web of life. This life-path remembers our deep roots with the soil, air, and water. It encourages us to connect with nature, the seasons, and the cosmos. An ecological simplicity feels a deep reverence for the community of life on Earth and accepts that the non-human realms of plants and animals have their dignity and rights as well the human.

3. **Family Simplicity**—Simplicity means to place the well being of one's family ahead of materialism and the acquisition of things. This expression of green living puts an emphasis on giving children healthy role models of a balanced life that are not distorted by consumerism. Family simplicity affirms that what matters most in life is often invisible—the quality and integrity of our

relationships with one another. Family simplicity is also intergenerational—it looks ahead and seeks to live with restraint so as to leave a healthy Earth for future generations.

4. **Compassionate Simplicity**—Simplicity means to feel such a strong sense of kinship with others that, as Gandhi said, we "choose to live simply so that others may simply live." A compassionate simplicity means feeling a bond with the community of life and being drawn toward a path of cooperation and fairness that seeks a future of mutually assured development for all.

5. **Soulful Simplicity**—Simplicity means to approach life as a meditation and to cultivate our experience of direct connection with all that exists. By living simply, we can more easily awaken to the living universe that surrounds and sustains us, moment by moment. Soulful simplicity is more concerned with consciously tasting life in its unadorned richness than with a particular standard or manner of material living. In cultivating a soulful connection with life, we tend to look beyond surface appearances and bring our interior aliveness into relationships of all kinds.

6. **Business Simplicity**—Simplicity means a new kind of economy is growing in the world with healthy and sustainable products and services of all kinds (home-building materials, energy systems, food production, transportation). As the need for a sustainable infrastructure in developing nations is combined with the need to retrofit and redesign the homes, cities, workplaces, and transportation systems of developed nations, it is generating an enormous wave of green business innovation and employment.

7. **Civic Simplicity**—Simplicity means that living more lightly and sustainably on the Earth requires changes in every area of public life—from public transportation

and education to the design of our cities and workplaces. The politics of simplicity is also a media politics as the mass media are the primary vehicle for reinforcing—or transforming—the mass consciousness of consumerism. To realize the magnitude of changes required in such a brief time will require new approaches to governing ourselves at every scale.

8. **Frugal Simplicity**—Simplicity means that, by cutting back on spending that is not truly serving our lives, and by practicing skillful management of our personal finances, we can achieve greater financial independence. Frugality and careful financial management bring increased financial freedom and the opportunity to more consciously choose our path through life. Living with less also decreases the impact of our consumption upon the Earth and frees resources for others.

As these eight approaches illustrate, the growing culture of simplicity contains a flourishing garden of expressions whose great diversity—and intertwined unity—are creating a resilient and hardy ecology of learning about how to live more sustainable and meaningful lives. As with other ecosystems, it is the diversity of expressions that fosters flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Because there are so many pathways into the garden of simplicity, this self-organizing movement has enormous potential to grow.

Adapted from: Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, New York: Harper, second revised edition, 2010.