

How Times Have Changed!

Duane Elgin's Introduction to revised edition of *Voluntary Simplicity*

There has been a seismic shift in public interest in simpler, more sustainable ways of living since the first edition of this book. This accelerating change is summarized beautifully in two introductions I was given to business audiences, separated by a span of nearly thirty years. In 1977, I gave a talk to an audience of business executives on an emerging way of life called “voluntary simplicity” and, on this occasion, I was introduced as a “Wharton MBA who had gone bad.” Although intended with good-natured humor, it was clear that I was viewed as a renegade MBA, outside the business mainstream. Then in 2005, I was introduced to another audience of business executives, but this time as a “Wharton MBA who had gone green.” On this occasion, I was viewed as a pioneering MBA on the cutting edge of a revolution in sustainability. Going from “bad” to “green” in those two introductions summarizes the transformation that I have been watching for nearly four decades. More specifically, here are a half-dozen fundamental changes in how simplicity of living is viewed by business, government, and the public.

First, the public conversation about simplicity is shifting from complacency to urgency. In the 1970s, there was little public concern about climate change, massive famines, energy and water shortages, and more. Although these loomed on the horizon, the majority of people were focused on the “good life” in the short run. More than thirty years later, these are no longer problems for the distant future; they represent a critical challenge to the human community *now*. The more closely we look, the more compelling is the evidence that the human family has exceeded the ability of the Earth to support humanity's current levels of consumption, let alone that projected for the future. There must be dramatic, global changes in our overall approach to living and consuming if we are to avoid a future of immense calamity. Simplicity of living, by whatever name, is moving from an easily dismissed lifestyle fad to an approach to living that is recognized as a vital ingredient for building a sustainable and meaningful future.

Second, as people's sense of urgency has grown, interest in sustainable ways of living has soared, and simplicity has moved from the margins of society to the mainstream. Simpler

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or greener approaches to living are becoming part of everyday life and culture. Television programs on themes such as organic gardening, healthy cooking, and solar living are growing in popularity. Magazines with green themes for living are sprouting everywhere. College courses in green building and environmental management are blossoming. There has been an explosion in Internet websites and blogs concerned with restoring the Earth to health and building a more just and sustainable economy for the world. Overall, the “center of social gravity” is shifting rapidly and simpler, greener ways of living are of growing interest and concern to the mainstream of many societies.

Third, public understanding of simplicity has evolved from fantasy stereotypes to realistic examples and archetypes. In the 1980s, it was common for the mass media to characterize simplicity as a “back to the land” movement that turned away from technological progress (an inaccurate stereotype as the sustainability movement has generated a wave of technological innovation that is now recognized as vital to a green future). Several decades later, in response to growing economic and ecological crises, people are looking for resilient and practical approaches to living that are uniquely adapted to different settings. Pushed by necessity, a discerning social intelligence is emerging that looks beyond shallow stereotypes to a diverse garden of expressions that offer realistic models of change for diverse people and circumstances.

Fourth, simplicity has moved from being regarded as a path of regress to being seen as a path to a new kind of progress and social vitality. When I first began speaking about simplicity, it was often dismissed as a nostalgic desire to return to the past as an antidote to the impersonality of the fast pace of the city life. Simplicity was seen as turning back the clock—a life-way of regress not progress. Decades later, instead of a return to the past, simplicity is seen increasingly as vital for building a workable and meaningful future. To illustrate, where the traditional economic wisdom assumed that consuming less meant fewer jobs, a new economic wisdom says that consuming moderately, differently, and intelligently will produce both sustainable jobs and a healthy world for the long run.

Fifth, there has been a dramatic expansion in the scope of simplicity as it has moved from a personal issue to a consideration vital to our collective future. Despite the media interest in alternative lifestyles in the 1960s and 1970s, the vast majority of early pioneers of

sustainable ways of living were individuals and families. Many of these people felt alone and out of step with the consumer culture. However, with energy shortages, climate change, economic breakdowns, and more, the scale of public concern and attention has grown from the personal to the national and planetary. Now we are seeing the rapid growth of interest in eco-villages, co-housing communities, transition towns, state-level initiatives, federal programs, and global agreements. Simplicity of living is no longer a personal issue; it is a theme and concern woven into our lives at every scale.

Sixth, over the decades, simplicity is increasingly being defined by what it is *for* (connecting with and caring for life) instead of what it is *against* (destructive consumerism). In the 1980s, simplicity was seen primarily as “downshifting” or pulling back from the rat race of consumer society. Several decades later, there is a growing recognition of simplicity as “upshifting”—or moving beyond the rat race to the human race. Increasingly, the mainstream media and society are recognizing how people’s search for happiness is taking them beyond consumerism to a more balanced and integrated approach to living.

Overall, the world has changed dramatically since I wrote the first edition of *Voluntary Simplicity* in the late 1970s. To respond, I’ve completely revised this book and more than half of it is new material. It is my hope this new edition will extend the promising wisdom and healing force of simplicity to our imperiled world for, on the other side of the fast emerging planetary systems crisis is a future bright with promise.

--Duane Elgin, May 2009

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