

Choosing Simplicity

From the book, Choosing Earth

The magnitude and speed of climate disruption now underway is astonishing and will require dramatic changes in how we live on Earth. For the past few hundred years, consumer-oriented societies have exploited the global resources for the benefit of a fraction of humanity. The goal of this approach has been to find happiness through consumption and to satisfy our material *wants* without conscious regard for the *needs* of a livable Earth. This self-serving approach brings ruin to the Earth and humanity's future. Instead of asking what we humans *want* (what we desire, crave, or hunger for), we are being called to respond to a far more important question: what does the overall ecology of life *need* (what is essential, basic, necessary) to build a regenerative future for the Earth? To live sustainably on the Earth, we need to choose ways of living that match our consumption with the regenerative capacities of the Earth and the needs of the rest of life with whom we share the biosphere. Instead of a wealthy minority pulling humanity down, a generous majority can live with moderation and kindness and bring tremendous uplift to living on Earth.

A study of what is required for "Life Beyond Growth" found that "a country like Japan would have to cut its consumption of resources and environmental impact by (very roughly speaking) more than 50 percent, while the United States would need to reduce by a factor of 75 percent." Therefore, when we ask, "What can we do to support the ecology of life?" the first powerful action we can take is to bring our personal lives into alignment with the regenerative needs of the Earth. In addition, the affluent minority needs to recognize that an impoverished majority lives at the

margins of material existence and, for them, simplicity of living is involuntary—they have few options and little choice in their daily struggles for survival.

Although simplicity is intensely relevant for building a work-able world, this approach to living is not a new idea. Simplicity has deep roots in history and finds expression in all of the world's wisdom traditions. More than two thousand years ago, in the same historical period that Christians were saying "Give me neither poverty nor wealth," (Proverbs 30:8), Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism declared, "I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures"; Plato and Aristotle proclaimed the importance of the "golden mean"—a path through life with neither excess nor deficit; and Buddhists encouraged a "middle way" between poverty and mindless accumulation. Clearly, the wisdom of simplicity is not a new revelation. What is new is the reality of humanity pressing against limits to material growth and recognizing the importance of building a new relationship with the material aspects of life.

Simplicity is not opposed to consumption of resources; instead, it places material consumption in a larger context. Simplicity does not encourage turning away from material progress; to the contrary, an advancing relationship with the material side of life lies at the heart of a maturing civilization. Arnold Toynbee—a renowned historian who invested a lifetime in studying the rise and fall of civilizations throughout the world—summarized the essence of a civilization's growth in what he called *The Law of Progressive Simplification*. He wrote that a civilization's progress was not to be measured in its conquest of land and people; instead, the true measure of growth is a civilization's ability to transfer increasing amounts of energy and attention from the material side of life to the non-material side—areas such as personal growth, family relationships, time with nature, psychological maturity, spiritual exploration, cultural and artistic expression, and strengthening democracy and citizenship.

Recall that modern physics recognizes that 96 percent of the known universe is invisible and non-material. The material aspect (including galaxies, stars, and planets and biological being) consists of only about four percent of the known universe. If we apply these proportions to our lives, then it is fitting to give greater attention to the invisible aspects that are often ignored and that represent the very aspects that Toynbee describes as expressing our progress as a civilization.

Toynbee also coined the word “etherialization” to describe the process whereby humans learn to accomplish the same, or even greater, results using less time, material resources, and energy. Buckminster Fuller called this process “ephemeralization,” although his emphasis was on realizing greater material performance for less time, weight, and energy invested. Drawing from the insights of Toynbee and Fuller, we can redefine progress as a two-fold process involving the simultaneous refinement of both the material and non-material sides of life. With progressive simplification, the material side of life grows lighter, less burdensome, more easeful, elegant and effortless and, at the same time, the non material side of life becomes more vital, expressive, and artistic.

Simplicity involves the co-evolution of both inner and outer aspects of life. Simplicity does not negate the material side of life, rather it calls forth a new partnership where the material and the non-material aspects of life co-evolve in concert with one another.

Outer aspects include the basics such as housing, transportation, food production, and energy generation. Inner aspects include learning the skills of touching the world ever more lightly and lovingly—ourselves, our relationships, our work, and our passage through life. By refining both outer and inner aspects of life (outward simplicity combined with inner richness) we can foster genuine progress and build

a sustainable *and* meaningful world for billions of people without devastating the ecology of the Earth. An ethic of moderation and “enough” will grow in importance as global communications reveal vast inequities in material well-being. Economic justice does not require replicating the industrial-era mode of life globally; instead it means every person has a right to a fair share of the world’s wealth, adequate to ensure a “decent” standard of living—enough food, shelter, education, and healthcare sufficient for a reasonable standard of human decency. Given intelligent designs for living lightly and simply, a decent standard and manner of living could vary significantly depending on local customs, ecology, resources, and climate.

To accomplish a great transition within a few decades requires that we invent new approaches to living that transform every facet of life—the work we do, the communities and homes in which we live, the food we eat, the transportation we use, the clothes we wear, the symbols of status that shape our consumption patterns, and so on. We can call this way of living “voluntary simplicity” or “conscious simplicity” or “ecological living.” However described, we need more than a change in our style of life.

A change in *style* implies a superficial or exterior change—a new fad, craze, or fashion. We require a far deeper change in our *way* of life, one that recognizes the Earth is our home and must be maintained for the long-range future. Ecological living begins with the understanding that we all live in mutual contingency and that we also create safety, comfort, and compassion in our lives together.

An ecologically conscious economy will shift its emphasis from sheer physical expansion to more qualitative growth of greater richness, depth, and connection. Products will be designed with increasing efficiency (doing ever more with ever less), while simultaneously increasing their beauty, strength, and ecological integrity.

Voluntary simplicity does not encourage a life of poverty, deficiency, and deprivation, when living can be transformed through intelligent design into elegant simplicity. The level of satisfaction and beauty in living can be increased while lowering the quantity of resources consumed and the amount of pollution produced.

How can we awaken a new regard for living simply in a world so focused on material consumption? To make a turn toward simplicity and sustainability, it is helpful to recall the paradigm of aliveness and how, for tens of thousands of years, our ancestors were aware of living within a subtle ecology of aliveness. That awareness has been temporarily replaced by the view that our universe consists of primarily of dead matter and empty space, without purpose or meaning. Recall the logic of the two paradigms considered earlier:

If the universe is viewed as *dead* at its foundations, then it is natural to *exploit* the Earth and use it up;

- If the universe is viewed as *alive* at its foundations, then it is natural to cherish the Earth and *care* for it.

How can we shift to a mindset of regenerative living when so much of the world currently lives within a mindset of exploitive living? A perceptive quotation from Antoine de Saint-Exupery suggests a way: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” This wisdom suggests that if we want to build a regenerative world, then don’t drum up people to collect materials and assign tasks for them to do; instead, *teach people to long for the endless immensity of our living universe and their unique ways of participation within it*. Awakening a longing for living in the unbounded enormity and richness of our living universe will naturally draw out people’s energy and creativity for building a regenerative and beautiful world.

If we regard aliveness as our greatest wealth, then it is only natural to choose ways of living that afford greater time and opportunity to develop the areas of our lives where we feel most alive—in nurturing relationships, caring communities, time in nature, in creative expression, and service to others. In seeing the universe as alive, we naturally shift our priorities from an ego-economy oriented toward consuming dead things to an economy oriented toward growing experiences of aliveness.

An aliveness economy seeks to touch life more lightly while generating an abundance of meaning and satisfaction. Theologian Matthew Fox has written, “Luxury living is not what living is about. *Living* is what living is about! But living takes discipline and letting go and doing with less in a culture that is overdeveloped. It takes a commitment to challenge and adventure, to sacrifice and passion.” In more affluent societies, consumerism is increasingly regarded as a less rewarding life pursuit and, instead, new sources of well-being are increasingly valued. A major study in the U.S. by Pew Research illustrates the growing importance of direct experience over material consumption. When asked what brings the most meaning to their lives, people replied: “spending time with family” (69%), “being outdoors” (47%), “spending time with friends” (47%), “caring for pets” (45%), and “religious faith” (36%). These are not expensive—quality time with family, friends, pets, and nature is a source of richness available to nearly all. Further evidence that wealthier nations are ready to trade reduced levels of material consumption for higher levels of experiential riches is found in a study reported in the *Wall Street Journal*:

“People think that experiences are only going to provide temporary happiness, but they actually provide both more happiness and more lasting value [than material consumption]. Experiences tend to meet more of our underlying psychological needs. They’re often shared with other people, giving us a greater sense of connection, and they form a bigger part of our sense of identity.”

A shift toward “postmaterialist” values is also found in the highly regarded *World Values Survey*, which concluded that, over a period of roughly three decades (1981–2007), a “postmodern shift” in values has been occurring in a cluster of a dozen or so nations—primarily in the United States, Canada, and Northern Europe. In these societies, emphasis is shifting from economic achievement to post-materialist values that emphasize individual self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life.

Although simplicity has a long history, we are now entering radically changing times—ecological, social, economic, and psychospiritual—and we should expect the worldly expressions of simplicity to evolve and grow in response. Simplicity is not simple. A wide diversity of expressions portrays the simple life and the most useful way of describing this approach to living is with the metaphor of a garden. Suggesting the richness of simplicity, here are ten different flowerings of expression that I see growing in the “garden of simplicity.” Although they overlap to some extent, each expression of simplicity seems sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. (To avoid favoritism, I have ordered them alphabetically, based on the brief name associated with each.)

- **Artistic Simplicity:** Simplicity means the way we live our lives represents a work of unfolding artistry. Leonardo da Vinci said, “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” Gandhi said, “My life is my message.” Frederic Chopin said, “Simplicity is the final achievement . . . the crowning reward of art.” In this spirit, artistic simplicity refers to an understated, organic aesthetic that contrasts with the excess of consumerist lifestyles. Drawing from influences ranging from Zen to the Quakers, simplicity is a path of beauty that celebrates natural materials and clean, functional expressions.

- **Choiceful Simplicity:** Simplicity means taking charge of lives that are too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. Simplicity means choosing our unique path through life consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. It means to live whole—to not live divided against ourselves. This path emphasizes the challenges of freedom over the comfort of consumerism. Conscious simplicity means staying focused, diving deep, and not being distracted by consumer culture. It means consciously organizing our lives so we give our “true gifts” to the world—to give the essence of ourselves. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The only true gift is a portion of yourself.”
- **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.” Compassionate simplicity means feeling a bond with the community of life and being drawn toward a path of reconciliation—especially with other species and future generations. Compassionate simplicity follows a path of cooperation and fairness, seeking a future of mutually assured development for all.
- **Ecological Simplicity:** Simplicity means to choose ways of living that touch the Earth more lightly and that reduce our ecological impact. This life-path remembers our deep roots in the natural world. It encourages us to connect with nature, the seasons, and the cosmos. Natural simplicity responds to a deep reverence for the community of life and accepts that the non-human realms of plants and other animals have their dignity and rights as well.

Albert Schweitzer wrote, “From naïve simplicity we arrive at more profound simplicity.”

- **Economic Simplicity:** Simplicity means a choice for conscious consumerism and a sharing economy. Economic simplicity recognizes that we manage our relationship with our home—the Earth—by developing fitting forms of “right liveli- hood.” It also recognizes the deep transformation in economic activity needed to live sustainably by redesigning products and services of all kinds—from housing and energy systems to food and transportation systems.
- **Family Simplicity:** Simplicity means giving priority to the lives of our children and family and not to get sidetracked by consumer society. A growing number of parents are opting out of consumerist lifestyles and seeking ways to bring life-enhancing values and experiences into the lives of their children and family.
- **Frugal Simplicity:** Simplicity means cutting back on spending that does not truly serve us and practicing skillful management of our personal finances—all of which can help us 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 on the Earth and frees resources for others.

- **Political Simplicity:** Simplicity means organizing our collective lives in ways that enable us to live more lightly and sustainably on the Earth, and this, in turn, involves changes in nearly every area of public life—zoning, education, transportation, and energy systems. All of these involve political choices. The politics of simplicity involves, also, media politics—because the mass media are the primary vehicles promoting mass consumerism.
- **Soulful Simplicity:** Simplicity means to approach life as a meditation and to cultivate an intimate connection with all that exists. A spiritual presence infuses the world and, by living simply, we can more directly 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.
- **Uncluttered Simplicity:** This means cutting back on trivial distractions, both material and non-material, and focusing on 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.”

As these approaches illustrate, the growing culture of simplicity contains a flourishing garden of expressions whose great diversity—and intertwined unity—create a resilient and hardy ecology of learning about how to live more sustainable and purposeful lives. As with other ecosystems, diversity of expressions fosters

flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Because so many different paths can lead us into the garden of simplicity, this way of life has enormous potential to grow—particularly if it is nurtured and cultivated in the mass media as a legitimate, creative, and promising path for a future beyond materialism and consumerism