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Voluntary Simplicity: The “Middle Way” to Sustainability

Fashioning a New Culture

In his book *Ishmael*,¹ Daniel Quinn suggests that every society is an enactment of a story the people of that society tell themselves about the nature and purpose of their existence and of the world they live in. Quinn believes that modern societies, with all their triumphs and abuses, enact a story that claims human beings are the crown jewel of evolution and all the world’s species and resources exist to satisfy human desires. By extension, the story of our “consumer society” tells us that the purpose of human existence is to find meaning, pleasure, and identity through consumption. In this story, the world exists for the sole purpose of satisfying human desires for things to consume. Technology is our instrument for making available new things to consume and economics measures our success in doing so. We have embraced the story of consumption but have forgotten that “to consume” means to eat, to use up, to waste and or to suffer destruction — and that “to be consumed by something” means to be obsessed by something.

No doubt many North Americans will protest that this assertion is too bold a generalization; that we cherish many non-material values; that our lives embrace more than just tripping back and forth to work and then shopping at the mall. As our churches, art galleries, public libraries, and parks fall into disrepair, as homeless people crowd our streets, as species disappear from our forests and the forests themselves dwindle, however, our protests sound more and more like lip-service to values which we may still cherish intellectually, but which we have lost sight of how to live out — how to *enact*.

While it is not widely advertised, there is much evidence to suggest that we are now writing the concluding chapters in the story of consumer society. Even as its technical advances exceed anything we have previously known, even as its business mergers surpass the scale and monetary value of the entire economies of many countries, even as its markets are jammed with more merchandise than ever before, and even as the promise of economic growth appears to be limitless,

the story of our society — the myth we tell ourselves about ourselves — is everywhere vitiated by contradiction, disillusionment, and emptiness.

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Many people are beginning to understand that we need to tell a new story if we are interested in sustaining civilized human societies — a story that affirms higher goals than the acquisition and consumption of material things and that better measures human progress than the yardstick of “economics” as we currently understand it.

The consumer culture of North America is spent, even though it continues to amass record profits. It never was socially sustainable. Now it is also proving to be environmentally unsustainable, even toxic. It has no way to account for its environmental deficits, and because of those deficits, it will perish in an ocean of its own poisonous wastes. It has few mechanisms for equitably distributing its material benefits, and that’s another reason it will perish — whether in an ocean of violence or with a sigh of indifference remains to be seen. The only real question is which of these two deaths will happen first.

Fashioning a new culture is an immensely creative challenge. Its first crystals have been seeded in the alembic of personal transformation. This new culture is emerging in human freedom as a voluntary choice and along a trajectory quite different from that of the more-is-better consumer ethic with its Horatio Alger myth of elitist competition for positions of hierarchical privilege. It is not being foisted on people through media blitzes, nor is it being proclaimed as the inevitable direction of a global market economy.

On the contrary, a new culture *is not* inevitable. The choice to live in equitable and sustainable relationships with other people and with the ecosphere is just that: a *choice*. It is coming into existence through myriad small, quiet decisions being made by individuals and small collectives, not in the grand councils of global international treaty-makers or in the boardrooms of transnational corporations.

Just as the roots of the consumer culture can be traced back to the values and decisions of people who thought of themselves as “consumers,” the roots of the new culture are found in the ethos of *voluntary simplicity*. Voluntary simplicity offers an alternative story to that told by the consumer culture. The values that underpin simple living express a different reason for living. The practices that comprise voluntary simplicity, whether the people living it call it that or not, are an alternative way of relating to other people and to the living world.



Voluntary simplicity is a social movement, a spiritual sensibility, an esthetic, a practice of livelihood — but is decidedly *not* a life-style. All sorts of people practice simplicity who might not call it by that name: environmentalists hungry to live more lightly on the land; artists, musicians, and scholars who live simply for the sake of their work; spiritual pilgrims who cannot truck clutter in the work of spiritual growth; people burned out and disillusioned by the frantic pace and empty promises of consumer hype; people in retreat from the dismal dangers of urban neighborhoods seeking friendlier communities and more caring relationships; people of wealth and social standing who hold themselves to a higher purpose than that of simply amassing more money or power over others; people fallen sick in mind or soul or body and thus forced to reconsider what really matters to them and then to find a way to live for it.

Voluntary simplicity isn't a fad cooked up by Madison Avenue to sell a new line of clothing or kitchen gadgets (although Madison Avenue is scrambling to co-opt the language of simplicity), nor has it sprung from academe as a philosophical system or research finding. In recent research conducted by Anthony Spina, voluntary simplicity is associated with the “successfully discontented,” the “mainstream disillusioned,” and the “cultural creatives.”² In short, it is appearing in the lives of people who have sampled many of the rewards promised by consumerism and found them tasteless. Having gorged on food that does not satisfy, they are creating something different — something *profoundly* different — but not, paradoxically, something new.

Duane Elgin calls voluntary simplicity a “way of life which is outwardly simple and inwardly rich.”³ It involves directing progressively more time and energy toward pursuing non-material aspirations while providing for material needs as simply, directly, and efficiently as possible. It measures personal and social progress by increases in the qualitative richness of daily living, the cultivation of relationships, and the development of personal and spiritual potentials. Simple living does not denigrate the material aspects of life but rather, by attending to quality, it values material things *more* highly than a society that merely consumes them.

The term “voluntary simplicity” was first coined by Richard Gregg, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Gregg described it as follows:

Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of

life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose.⁴

Gregg's description nicely captures several aspects of voluntary simplicity: that it involves many different "layers" of experience and that it includes stripping away whatever is extraneous to the central purposes of life. These are essentially *positive* things to do because we do so in service of things we value more than what is stripped away. Living simply is about the "deliberate organization of life for a purpose."

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practice it in some way, regardless of income, cultural background, or educational attainment. Practicing simplicity requires no special training, expert advice, or official sanction.

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The practice of simplicity begins with individuals and is well attuned to the humanistic outlook of modern society. It also reconnects a person with the traditional values of thrift, temperance, self-reliance, responsibility, and, where appropriate, spiritual asceticism. It immediately empowers people to make realistic, creative changes in understandable areas of their lives at no additional cost and at whatever pace is comfortable. Moreover, voluntary simplicity is highly "adjustable" since a person can simplify his or her life to any degree and in whatever way they find most congenial. It follows that how we practice simple living will change with each of life's seasons and situations.

One of the most encouraging aspects of voluntary simplicity is that there is no need to wait for one's neighbors to attain enlightenment, a federal election, an ascendance of principled politicians, a sea-change in social consciousness, new technology, global spiritual awakening, or a new political party before positive change can begin. Thus, simple living sidesteps the cynicism, delays, and dithering that come with large, complex institutions, policy discussions, government "procedures," or commercial ventures. For all these reasons, adopting simple living is a humble, personal endeavor and at the same time socially, economically, and politically radical.

While some colorful practitioners of voluntary simplicity have worked publicly to change social institutions, thousands of lovers of simplicity have practiced the art quietly and unobtrusively. They are creating patterns of livelihood that progressively free them from the obsessions and disquiet that so plague their neighbors. When asked, they happily share their discoveries. The very nature of their journey, however, shrinks their footprints on the world, making them progressively *less* visible to their neighbors. As this journey unfolds, one can actually fall in love with the esthetic of minimalism, with an image of the lightness of being and of the gracefulness that characterizes changing seasons, winds, and waves that leave no traces as well as beings who love without thought of recognition or reward. A feeling-sense emerges about one's proper role in the world that is the very opposite of needing to “leave one's mark” on it. In a sense, we might then say that the mature practice of voluntary simplicity is creative play leading toward practical invisibility.

Nine Characteristics of Voluntary Simplicity

One approach to understanding voluntary simplicity is to consider some of the *values* shared by those who practice it.

In 1997, I initiated a “delphi exercise”⁵ involving some participants in an Internet-based discussion group on simple living. The delphi process is a method for developing consensus on an issue or question among a group of people knowledgeable about the subject. Everyone participating in the process had been practicing voluntary simplicity in their personal lives for some time, though none would claim to be an “expert.” I asked participants what values they thought were *essential* to the meaning of voluntary simplicity. After four rounds of the delphi process, a consensus formed around the following values, or characteristics, of voluntary simplicity, though no priority should be inferred from the order in which I describe them here:

- **Sufficiency, minimalism; anti-consumerism; deliberate reduction of consumption, clutter, noise, social over-commitment, superfluous ornamentation, and scale.**

Practitioners of voluntary simplicity value living with few material possessions. Those they do have are deliberately and selectively chosen to reduce the “equipment” of life to its essentials without compromising esthetic values. This “esthetic and functional minimalism” is also carried into the realm of social relations, the organization of daily routines, and the attempt to cultivate a simplicity of outlook that is honest and unpretentious.

As implied in the definition provided by Richard Gregg, this preference for sufficiency has both an inner and outer aspect. Living simply obviously means reducing the number and variety of one's material possessions. It also implies an inner "house cleaning" with respect to attitudes, prejudices, pretensions, worries, and expectations.

Valuing minimalism has complicated roots in esthetic preferences for spaciousness, clarity, gracefulness, streamlining, and efficiency. It also contains echoes from more traditional values like frugality, thrift, common sense, and modesty. The rejection of consumerism is partly a reaction to the intrusiveness of consumer advertising and marketing, the pervasive transfer of public properties to private ownership, the commercialization of cultural events and public education, and especially the exploitation of children.

- **Self-reliance, socially responsible autonomy, personal authenticity, and wholeness.**

Practitioners of voluntary simplicity value personal integrity, which they express through striving to match their actions with their values (walking their talk) and maintain through balanced choices and the cultivation of healthy self-reliance. Healthy self-reliance implies cultivating the capacities to meet some of one's own needs within a social context of equity and cooperation rather than in disregard for the needs of one's neighbors or the ecosphere.

"Simplicity" implies a certain directness in managing the affairs of one's life, and directness, in turn, implies personal knowledge and involvement. Life is not delegated but *lived*. Meeting one's real needs through one's own activities eliminates the "middle men" who tend to clutter our lives with agendas other than our own. For example, some practitioners of simple living learn to grow some or all of their own food; maintain their personal health; create their own entertainment; and repair and maintain their homes, appliances, vehicles, etc. Of course, the degree of self-reliance is a matter of individual preference and aptitude. But there are clear links between developing self-reliance and a sense of empowerment, competence, and high self-esteem. The products and services of consumerism tend to dumb life down, remove risk, promote passivity, and create dependency.

Ideally, developing self-reliance leads to "healthy autonomy." Healthy autonomy does not mean living in defiance of the community (as might be the case for a survivalist or misanthrope) but rather living in society as a contributing member capable of making a constructive difference to the quality of community life. It is partly through developing the skills and capacities essential

to self-reliance and healthy autonomy that we also lay the foundations for well-being and self-esteem.

- **Connection, interdependence; co-operation with the Earth, other beings, nature, and other people.**

Practitioners of voluntary simplicity value the capacity to experience connection with the ecosphere and with other people, who obviously comprise a part of the ecosphere. They strive to express this connection through co-operative interdependence in family and community relationships, as well as through activities that strengthen and deepen the quality of community life. The value of connection also finds expression in concern for equality, international justice, and compassion for oppressed people. Practitioners of voluntary simplicity value social and economic equity and strive to practice compassion toward all those suffering marginalization in any way.

For some, voluntary simplicity especially represents a way of living in greater harmony with other species and natural processes. The North American consumer lifestyle is destroying the Earth. Many people sense that consumerism cannot be sustained, but rich, rewarding alternatives seldom get “air time” in the consumer-dominated media.

Few doubt that the extraction of resources and the manufacture and consumption of material goods and services contribute to environmental damage. These activities may not be carried out with the *intention* of harming the ecosphere, but they often do cause harm. In fact, no imaginable technology designed to serve endless craving could do otherwise, except as a matter of *degree*, because no imaginable technology can sidestep the Laws of Thermodynamics or the Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy. We cannot *create* energy on planet Earth. The final limit on what we can consume is determined by the energy the planet receives from the sun as well as the energy stored in fossil fuels and fissionable elements. When fossil fuels are exhausted, even if this were possible without the Earth’s climate undergoing a radical change, all living things and all industrial activities would necessarily be limited to the energy available to us from the sun. Since the amount of this energy is more or less fixed, the limit that it imposes will sooner or later constrain the production and consumption activities of human beings.

At the end of the day, reducing environmental damage implies creating a richly satisfying way of life while also reducing the consumption of resources and the production of wastes. Advocates of cleaner production technology say resource consumption and waste production can be reduced by increasing

efficiency — which is true *to some degree*. But simpler living *halts* both resource consumption and waste production *at source, immediately*, for all those products and services that practitioners forgo. Increasing production efficiency alone cannot achieve sustainability if we continue to pursue a consumerist ideology of the good life while also failing to control human population growth. But if improving production efficiencies could be linked to effective population controls *and* a cultural ethos of simpler living, a sustainable livelihood might be in sight.

Voluntary simplicity suggests as the goal for technical development a *minimalist emphasis* rather than growth. In a demonstrably finite world, such a goal is inherently more sustainable. Moreover, voluntary simplicity emphasizes attention to *true development*, which is a qualitative improvement of life rather than a quantitative expansion of consumption as the measure of a good life. As people adopt simpler living, they may initially reduce the quantity of their material consumption, but eventually they increase the sophistication and efficiency of providing for their essential needs and of realizing their personal aspirations in life.

Finally, voluntary simplicity contributes directly to environmental sustainability because it engages a powerful “reverse multiplier” effect. Every pound of “product” we see at the retail level represents tens, or even hundreds, of pounds of resources and energy expended in the extraction, manufacturing, distribution, and retailing stages “upstream” in the lifecycle of the product. Individuals often feel as though their choices matter little in meeting the global challenge of environmental preservation. Yet, as individuals forgo excessive consumption, each such decision avoids all the “upstream” environmental costs incurred in bringing the product to market. Gradually we come to perceive each thing we might own as the visible “tip” of a less visible environmental “iceberg” lying just beneath the surface of the economy. For example, it is estimated that every American consumes about 32 pounds of resources (forest products, minerals, energy resources) per week, while over 2,000 pounds of waste are discarded to support that consumption.⁶ Thus, each consumption decision matters a great deal and can have more or less dramatic effects, depending on the items purchased. For many people, this by itself is enough reason to simplify the material side of their lives.

- **Mindfulness, spirituality.**

Practitioners of voluntary simplicity value a mindful, unhurried, intentional (rather than impulsive), and appreciative approach to living. Some practitioners

value *mindfulness* as a personal spiritual practice in its own right. They also see applying the insights they gain through cultivating a mindful approach to living as part of living with personal integrity. For many, this is synonymous with spiritual practice.

We will explore the cultivation of mindfulness in a chapter all its own. It is enough at this point to say that in order to live “voluntarily,” to bring more consciousness about making choices into our lives, we must be awake and paying attention to our experiences here and now. Those who value simplicity also value taking responsibility for making life choices. This is the exact opposite of allowing yourself to be just another automaton at the conveyor belt of consumer culture, of being narcotized by advertising, hypnotized by marketing imagery, or manipulated by flimflam artists. Mindfulness is the means of maintaining connection with our experience — another one of the values essential to simple living. By cultivating mindfulness, we also happily discover that it can become a pathway to our deepest spiritual intuitions.

You needn't be a devotee of simple living to share the values of mindfulness and spirituality. But to the degree that these values *are* shared and lived out, it seems that people who hold them gradually develop simpler ways of life as a consequence. Each of us has limited time and energy. We each decide how much we will give to nurturing relationships versus acquiring, maintaining, and protecting possessions. While the two focuses are not entirely exclusive of each other, they clearly represent different ways of being in the world. Similarly, many people find that cultivating the depth dimension of their experience calls for silence, solitude, time for reflection and appreciation, and energy for exploration and new learning. Pursuing these kinds of purposes usually takes you out of the consumer mainstream into quieter pools where the currents are slower and deeper and different forms of reflection become possible.

It would be misleading, however, to think of people who are attracted to voluntary simplicity as only fashioning a life based on practical applications of abstract values. Closer to the mark perhaps is to imagine myriad life experiments guided by a certain sensibility, an inner image of gracefulness and spaciousness that expresses itself first through a *practice* of livelihood that only later reveals its values. Values and practice become closely linked and strengthen each other. In the words of the Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr, “We don't think our way into a new life; we live our way into a new kind of thinking.”⁷

The idea of “practice” is especially helpful because it links simple living with other practices, such as meditation, artistic development, scholarship, crafts and trades, farming, dancing, martial arts — in short, any human endeavor that allows one to be a *perpetual student*. Those who “practice” are always on the road, always learning, always developing and deepening their practice and understanding. This is the case no matter how skillful or adept they may become. Great pianists and dancers still practice. Practice requires openness and humility. It is the attitude of one who communicates and co-operates rather than of one who dominates and controls.

- **Deliberate reduction in the number of material possessions and the amount of consumption, reduction of clutter and unnecessary complexity, and a conscious re-direction of consumption decisions in favor of more environmentally sustainable forms of transportation, food production, housing, and entertainment.**

This characteristic of voluntary simplicity is more a cluster of practices that aim to apply the values of sufficiency and minimalism. The practices of reducing material possessions, consumables, and clutter, and of redirecting choices to more environmentally sustainable forms of transportation, diet, housing, and entertainment echo the “Golden Mean” or “Middle Way” espoused by philosophers and spiritual teachers. This cluster also entails reducing unnecessary complexity in the financial aspects of everyday living and developing financial responsibility, frugality, freedom from debt, and financial literacy. All these help provide for a more fully humane existence that is marked neither by conspicuous excess nor by deprivation.

Clearly, what might be “excess” to one person at one time in life may prove entirely necessary and appropriate in another situation with different personal or family responsibilities. But regardless of climate, geography, or social station, those who love simplicity are attracted to a leaner, more streamlined form of existence.

This process of “stripping down” is not something painful. Pejorative presentations of simplicity suggesting that it is driven by a grim commitment to moral principle make it hard to appreciate how joyous the material side of simple living can be. Picture a toddler stripping off clothes as he runs for the beach! What is happening is loss of a sort, but what is being gained in the process is a more intense connection with daily experience. Reducing excess baggage reveals more and more clearly the central purposes of our lives. Since these purposes are often beautiful and frequently go un-lived in a consumer-

oriented society, the simplification of material possessions becomes a form of personal liberation — as invigorating as a good skinny dip!

- **Practices that develop one’s spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, interpersonal, and esthetic potentials.**

These can take a diversity of forms, including meditation, music, fine and folk arts, martial arts, various forms of physical culture such as yoga, Qi-Gong, or sports that contribute to a sense of “flow,” for instance long-distance running, cross-country skiing, and cycling. What is shared is an active commitment to wholistic personal growth.

This cluster of practices is the enactment of the value of self-reliance and the cultivation of healthy autonomy. For some people, the inner aspect of voluntary simplicity serves as their starting point. The practice of inner simplicity, as we shall see later, begins with cultivating the capacity to be conscious and mindful

of ourselves, our relationships, and our moment-to-moment experience. It’s that “simple.” From the cultivation of mindfulness there unfolds a whole array of other attitudes, emotions, insights, and habits that serve to express and embody a progressively clearer awareness of *who* we are, *what* we want our lives to be about, and just *how* we can express that most artfully.

From the cultivation of mindfulness, a new center for personal identity is forged that spins itself into forms and actions in the world — a new pattern of activities and commitments that define a new way of living. We cease to pursue a *lifestyle* and instead start fashioning a *life*. In this process, the organization of one’s outer life comes to reflect and help sustain what is growing in one’s inner life. The reduction of material clutter finds its psychological and spiritual counterpart in increasing mindfulness, integrity, heightened attention, deliberateness, focus, and clarity. We cultivate a way of life that is free of pretense, affectation, façade; in short, a life decidedly uninterested in *image* but passionately interested in *substance*. It matters less and less what one *has*, but more and more what sort of person one *is*.

The consumer economy actively strives to divert individuals from realizing their inherent potential, unless it can be easily linked with selling goods and services. Advertising, marketing, manufacturing, a great part of the legal code, many financial enterprises, and the very physical shape of communities

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distract people from the knowledge and expression of their inherent potential, or else they strive to re-interpret and re-align personal aspirations to economic goals. Vanishingly few commercial ventures are launched with the goal of helping people come home to *themselves*. Rather, consumerism seeks to bring people to the *marketplace*.

Just living in a technically complex and increasingly populous society can divert our attention and energy from the inner life and direct them instead toward the activities necessary for physical subsistence and safety in urban centers that have become so fast, noisy, mechanical, and dangerous that a moment's lapse of attention can be lethal.

Voluntary simplicity is all about realizing our inherent potential. It involves "growth by subtraction," or paring away whatever distracts us or is extraneous or alien to what we believe are our central purposes in life. When we begin to practice self-reliance and healthy autonomy and learn not to succumb to the distractions on which the consumer economy depends, we learn to recognize our life purposes, the quality of their depth and mystery, and ways to best express and honor them in how we live.

- **Practices that build strong, intimate, non-violent, and compassionate relationships with people and with nature that contribute to the personal and common good.**

Nurturing interpersonal connections is important to practitioners of voluntary simplicity, especially through co-operative activities that serve one's family or community, including the wider international and natural communities. Many North Americans say they feel oppressed by stress, hurry, bureaucracy, debt, fear of violence, or fear of abandonment — in short, they feel disconnected and unsupported. As a result, their anxiety increases. The pace and direction of life in a consumer society can carry us away from connections and relationships that would nourish us and sustain our self-worth or heal our disappointments, while at the same time promising us that all its gadgets and services will give us more time to cultivate and enjoy relationships. Increasingly, we spend more time with technological devices (machines, computers, paperwork) and less time with people.

Fashioning a simpler way of life is part of fashioning a life that offers more opportunity to establish relationships and to then live within them. Those who practice simple living make building and sustaining relationships a conscious part of daily activity. (We will explore these themes in greater detail when we take up the discussion of simplicity and community.)

- **Development of a conscious, intentional approach to living rather than acting on unconscious impulses.**

Many practitioners of simple living actively develop awareness, knowledge of issues, and intellectual and emotional skills that support making responsible life choices. These may include participating in civic affairs and making sound purchasing decisions rather than being driven by momentary impulse, appetite, or urgent necessity.

This cluster of practices grows out of the values placed on mindfulness in daily living and our capacity to exercise our freedom of choice in making life decisions. We have already seen how these are linked. The practice of cultivating and maintaining consciousness in making life choices, including purchasing decisions and being involved in issues of community concern, even in our approach to individual and work relationships, is simply seen as a mode of life appropriate to living simply. Developing a conscious, intentional approach to living affirms some of what is best about life, rather than focusing, as consumerism often does, on whatever will promote sales.

Related to this is the belief, implied by the practice of mindfulness, that our choices *matter*. They matter in how they contribute to our own quality of life, to the future we give our children, to the quality of life enjoyed by people elsewhere in the world, to the security of life enjoyed by other species, to the promotion of justice and wellness in our own communities, and to our spiritual growth. Since our choices and the quality of our daily experience matter, blundering through life purely on impulse, following appetite, chasing the ephemeral, accepting what amounts to lies are all betrayals of ourselves. In effect, they silently demonstrate that we don't value our own lives. Practicing a conscious, deliberate, attentive approach to living directly opposes the siren song of consumerism. What consumerism prefers in its customers is that they only be awake enough to “swipe the plastic.”

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- **Practices contributing to a wholistic approach to personal health.**

There are many examples of how people live out this general practice. For instance, adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet incurs lower environmental impact during food production, can (though not always) simplify food prepa-

ration, and, some people feel, represents a more compassionate way of meeting our nutritional needs than diets rich in animal products. A preference for organically produced foods further expresses the conviction that personal health cannot be cultivated in isolation from planetary health or be secured through the use of pesticides, fertilizers, and herbicides in food production. Healthy habits of rest and exercise, commitment to health maintenance practices, and activities that relieve stress and promote wellness are seen as primary foundations for personal health that prevent us from relying on disease-care services in the first place. Some practitioners of simple living also express a preference for alternative treatment approaches (e.g., homeopathy, nutrition, energy, massage) in time of illness, perhaps because many of these call for a greater level of involvement and control to be exercised by the “patient” during illness treatment than is the case with allopathic approaches to treating disease. Taking more responsibility for our health and also our treatment in times of illness is simply another expression of the values of mindfulness and self-reliance in living.

Attention to maintaining one's health is a logical outgrowth of self-reliance and the directness implied in simpler living. Increasingly, practitioners of simple living perceive a professionalized, impersonal, medical-pharmaceutical industry that promotes “consumerism” of its own products and services and is not necessarily interested in human health per se, despite its protestations to the contrary. Documented examples abound of the “over-medication” of North Americans, especially of vulnerable seniors and children; of the specialized and often arcane medical vocabularies that serve more to alienate than to connect people with their own bodies and wellness processes; of a readiness to prescribe rather than collaborate and advise; of disproportionate over-funding of disease-cure technology and services and concomitant under-funding of health and wellness promotion and education programs; of a general tendency to respond to illness by treating its effects rather than attending to its causes in environmental pollution, sanitation issues, and an inadequate general education.

These considerations and many others incline those practicing voluntary simplicity to the view that healthy food, knowledge of one's body and environment, wholesome exercise, and safe communities make a more direct and immediate contribution to personal health than sophisticated technology, exotic and expensive pharmaceuticals, and large medical service bureaucracies. Certainly people get sick and sometimes need invasive interventions. But what is of concern is the way priorities are established. It makes little

sense to spend billions on cancer research while turning a blind eye to lifestyle and environmental factors that clearly cause cancer. Promoting wellness is far less expensive and far more pleasant than curing disease.

Perspectives from History and for Today

As David Shi illustrated in his book *The Simple Life*,⁸ simple living has a long history in American culture, reaching back to the Puritan and Quaker religious movements in Europe and their subsequent settlements in North America. Perhaps because simple living has periodically gained a high profile in North American history, it has also accumulated a number of stereotypes and given rise to nostalgic fantasies. For this reason, another useful perspective on voluntary simplicity is to consider what it is *not*.

First, voluntary simplicity is *not* new. Those who portray it as some radically new social innovation overlook its deep roots in traditional values and virtues. Thrift, temperance, co-operative self-reliance, community interdependence, harmony with nature, and the pre-eminence of spiritual and interpersonal values over material and consumer values have a far older heritage in our culture than the more recent messages to spend, consume, compete, and radically isolate oneself through the “in-your-face” behavior celebrated by consumerism. Voluntary simplicity reaffirms values that have a much more established track record in contributing to survival and human well-being than anything emerging from the muddy dreams of advertising agencies.

Simplicity has an ancient pedigree. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu left a career in the Mandarin civil service to live simply as a mountain-dwelling hermit, during which time he wrote one of the classic texts of Taoism, the *Tao-Te-Ching*. The Greek philosopher Diogenes was said to live in a tub in the agora of Athens, where he walked the streets and questioned passersby in search of one honest person. Siddhartha Gautama, himself the heir to a throne in ancient India, forsook the pleasures and power of a kingdom to search for enlightenment. Eventually attaining it as the Buddha, he taught that attachment to material things was simply one of many impediments to liberation from suffering. Jesus of Nazareth embraced simplicity in solidarity with society’s outcasts and in order to set his heart first of all on his Heavenly Father’s kingdom. St. Francis of Assisi, innumerable desert recluses and hermits, and thousands of people entering religious orders that include vows of religious poverty, embraced simplicity in imitation of Christ. The same is true for millions of the followers of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Hasidic Judaism, Sufism, and Hinduism. Thus, simplicity has drawn its enthusiasts from both the high- and low-born and has included intellectuals and spiritual leaders as well as legions of ordinary folk.

In more recent times, the Russian literary giant Leo Tolstoy sang the praises of simple living, while North America has seen a long line of people who lived simply as part of their religious practice (Puritans, Shakers, Amish, Quakers, and Mennonites, among others) or because of their philosophical convictions (Henry David Thoreau and the New England Transcendentalists, for example).

The birth of modern India in 1948 was sparked by the forceful simplicity of one of its most charismatic leaders, Mahatma Gandhi. Partly inspired by his example, a whole generation of youth in North America and Europe, at least for a time, took their ideological leave from the materialism of the 1950s in a variety of counterculture “back-to-the-land” experiments during the 1960s and 70s.

While the love of simple living, and even occasional extremes of material asceticism, can, as described above, claim some lofty figures among its proponents there have been periods during which very large numbers of ordinary people have adopted simplicity to some degree and for a variety of reasons. Usually people embrace simplicity because it is either a pathway to or an expression of values that they believe are more meaningful and rewarding than the material benefits they forgo. Sometimes, as Shi points out, people embrace simplicity to assist with a war effort or some other national crisis, only to revert again to whatever is the historical equivalent of consumerism. But in any case, the concept of simple living is certainly not an invention of the 1990s.

Given its venerable history, some people are surprised to discover that voluntary simplicity is *not* about going back to anything. There is deep nostalgia within our society for what we suppose were the “simpler” values of North America’s aboriginal or rural agrarian past. Many people (including myself) who participated in the “back-to-the-land” spin-off of the 1960s counterculture discovered that rural living using 19th century technology is anything but simple! For some, this experiment has been deeply satisfying. For others, it was a stepping stone that helped disentangle sentimental illusions about nature, rural living, and earlier periods of history from the realities of living a physically more demanding, direct, and rooted way of life. We have come away from these experiences with the awareness that simple living is indeed rewarding and that one can live simply in *any* century and in *both* rural and urban settings. The essence of simplicity is not about living in a certain historical period or at a certain level of technical development. It definitely is not about returning to the “Little House on the Prairie” or reconstructing tube-powered radios as if integrated circuits didn’t represent an immense advance in the quality of life with a simultaneous reduction in the intensity of its energy and resource use. While the ranks of those living simply probably include some “technophobes,” voluntary simplicity is a *forward-looking* cultural development aimed at higher states of focus, attention, mindfulness, awareness,

and conscious purpose. Technology, however advanced it may be, must serve these values. Technology is not the enemy. It can very much be a part of living simply versus being, as it is currently presented, a rationale for “consumerism.”

Simplicity, on the other hand, is all about knowing how much consumption is *enough* and then setting aside efforts to further expand consumption in favor of pursuing other goals. Simplicity is what a healthy culture develops toward if it escapes getting caught in the *growth* trap. Our society is fixated on expanding the scale and volume of everything it does. Consumer economies, and the political interests that serve them, depend on economic growth to generate increasing profits and shareholder dividends. The practice of voluntary simplicity shifts focus onto the quality and meaning of life and away from its scale and quantity.

In his original essay on voluntary simplicity, Richard Gregg refers to the work of historian Arnold Toynbee, who argued that the essence of civilization consists in a progressive “etherealization of culture.” That is, mature civilizations, after having sufficiently provided the necessities of life, turn their energies to other goals: spiritual development, learning, art, the promotion of justice and peace, cultural development. Any society that simply goes on to produce more and more of what it already has is stuck in a kind of perpetual cultural immaturity, never ripening to full maturity. Thus, on both the personal and the societal level, the movement toward voluntary simplicity is a sign of personal and cultural maturation, not merely a nostalgic indulgence, a throw-back that may have sentimental appeal but no relevance to modern life.

Simplicity is what a healthy culture develops toward if it escapes getting caught in the growth trap.

Voluntary simplicity is not necessarily anti-technological or anti-modern. Instead, it calls for the re-orientation of technology as a means of achieving economic growth for its own sake to being a means of developing sufficiency and equity in society. The goal is to recognize that human well-being can never be achieved solely by maximizing production and profit. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth: we should be striving to maximize human and ecological well-being on the *minimum of production*. This is a post-modern goal, not an exercise in nostalgia.

Despite its venerable history and association with many spiritual traditions, voluntary simplicity is *not* a religion. Its close relationship with spiritual practice is both instrumental and essential. There is no “creed of simplicity” that binds all its practitioners. Simple living is trans-denominational and has its proponents in all major spiritual traditions. It has also been practiced by secular humanists, atheistic philosophers, and some followers of schools of spiritual thinking, such as Henry David Thoreau, a New England Transcendentalist.⁹

There are also people who embrace simplicity for financial reasons, to find relief from stress, because the Zen-like esthetics of simplicity appeal to the, or because it's a practical response to the demands of a particularly compelling life work, such as the completion of an art work or saving money to put a child through university.

Simple living, therefore, is purely a *means*. It is not a creed but a *practice*, not a destination but a *vehicle*. Its value rests in what it helps us achieve: more time, peace, solitude, gracefulness, mindfulness, justice, ecological sustainability, equity, sufficiency, silence, gratitude, generosity, interdependence, spiritual intuition, humility. That the lovers of simplicity share certain values or configure their lives in similar ways in no sense requires that they hold the same opinions on religious matters, or that they subscribe to any religion at all.

Simplicity and Clearing away Distractions

Simplicity by itself does not automatically improve human character. It merely "clears the decks" so that something new can grow according to the aspirations of the person concerned. If a person happens to be narcissistic or selfish, he or she can live simply and still be narcissistic and selfish.

It is important to recognize that voluntary simplicity is *not* poverty, puritanical self-denial, or negative asceticism. Those advocating simplicity are *not* saying that poverty is noble, a good thing, or a way of life that should be adopted. Rather, simple living is practiced for the values it conserves, many of which are antithetical to any philosophy that espouses the denial of pleasure for the sake of denial.

Poverty often arises from uncontrollable circumstances (such as chronic or catastrophic illness, unemployment, natural disaster) or results from systemic injustice (such as discrimination, existing inequitable patterns of privilege and want that exist in many places today). Poverty is usually not voluntary. Extreme poverty can result in destitution, a condition of material, psychological, and sometimes even spiritual impoverishment in which choice and mindfulness are not options. Negative asceticism and some other self-denial philosophies view consumption and the enjoyment of material things as morally suspect. None of this has anything to do with simple living.

Today, in North America, poverty and destitution are spreading like cancers. A whole generation of young people is being cut off from education and employment opportunities while their elders are being forced into "early retirement." All alike are exposed to the same daily drone of messages from advertisers that promote an idea of a good life that fewer and fewer people can afford.

Both the affluent *and* the poor are enmeshed in the same destructive system. Consumerism exploits the poor and the affluent at the same time as it lies to both. While the poor suffer the pain of deprivation, the affluent suffer the pain of disillusionment when all they have to show for their affluence is a lot of “stuff,” but spiritual emptiness. Consumerism as a way of life destroys people and communities as a whole, even those people who suppose they are in control of it.

Simple living speaks directly to the moral, social, spiritual, and ecological costs of affluence. It enables the freedom of choice open to the affluent to conserve their communities, the planet’s ecosystems, and their own opportunity to find meaning in life. The message of simple living can heighten awareness among the affluent of the ever-increasing stresses and costs that attend the ever-diminishing rewards of an acquisitive lifestyle. Finally, voluntary simplicity can underline the truth that, beyond what is needed for sufficiency, looking for meaning in life through consumption is futile.

Advocates of simplicity have never idealised destitution. Death by starvation is agony. Homelessness, illness, inadequate clothing, loneliness — all these are not only personally calamitous, they are socially degrading. The fact that our social systems don’t remedy or prevent them offends our principles of decency. The only appropriate response to conditions such as these is to do what many of the great philosophers and spiritual teachers of history have always taught: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, care for the sick, educate the ignorant, visit the lonely, welcome the stranger, look after the orphan, comfort the afflicted — in a word, *love* each other.

Yet when we have *enough*, and there are very many of us who do, what then? Could it be that some of the discontent associated with a modest income is caused by the ceaseless din of advertising messages that one can be happier by earning or owning more? And could it be that if we were less open to these messages, our minds and hearts would be more open to those aspects of living that cannot be bought and sold? Could it be that some of the pain of unemployment (apart from the very real and legitimate fear of starvation and homelessness) comes from the loss of a sense of personal identity that consumer societies find only in working and earning and owning? In truth, is this an appropriate basis for personal identity in any case? If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” then simplicity has something to say to nearly everyone.

Closely related to the misconception that simple living celebrates poverty is the idea that it celebrates *cheapness*. Practicing simplicity doesn’t mean surrounding oneself with junk, regardless of its price. Neither does it require always purchasing used items, such as clothing or cars, or always riding a bicycle for transportation.