

# Introduction

by Cecile Andrews

*I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite — only a sense of existence. My breath is sweet to me. O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can drain it, for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment.*

*If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet smelling herbs — is more elastic, starry, and immortal— that is your success.*

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU

## What Is Simplicity?

I've never tired of this question! Defining “simplicity” is a fascinating and lifelong project. Each one of our authors approaches it differently, showing the incredible depth and complexity of the idea of Simplicity.

Essentially, Simplicity is about creating a life you love, a life that brings you joy and peace of mind or, as Thoreau would say, a life that “emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet smelling herbs: is more elastic, starry, and immortal.”

Simplicity allows us to say with Thoreau, “I am grateful for what I am and have, my thanksgiving is perpetual.”

People are intuitively drawn to Simplicity, sensing its promise of the re-enchantment of life. But at the same time, they fear it, worrying that they will never enjoy themselves again. But they’re mistaken — if you’re not laughing and smiling more as you simplify, you’re not doing it right.

Most people see Simplicity as being only about frugality, and while that’s a key element, it’s something much wider. Simplicity is a lens through which to view all of life.

To explain what I mean, let’s step back a minute and look at some basic dictionary definitions of “simplicity”:

Absence of luxury, pretentiousness, ornament, etc.; plainness: a life of simplicity.

Freedom from deceit or guile; sincerity; artlessness; naturalness: a simplicity of manner.

Freedom from artificial ornament, pretentious style, or luxury; plainness; as, simplicity of dress, of style, or of language; simplicity of diet; simplicity of life.

Freedom from subtlety or abstruseness; clearness; as, the simplicity of a doctrine; the simplicity of an explanation or a demonstration.

Plainness, clarity, clearness — what these definitions have in common is a sense of clearing away the extraneous, stripping away the inessential. It’s about what’s real, what’s important or, again, as Thoreau put it, “life near the bone where it is sweetest.”

So Simplicity is about much more than ten tips to save money. Ultimately, Simplicity is asking yourself: “How do I really want to live? What truly makes me happy? What are my actions doing to the planet? How does my lifestyle con-

tribute to the greater good? Ultimately Simplicity is about knowing who you are, being clear about your values, understanding what brings true well-being. It's cutting through the commercial static of manipulation and deceit that says that the consumer society is the good life. Ultimately, it's about taking time to think and finding clarity; it's about discernment and deliberation.

In particular, it's about seeing clearly — seeing the consumer society for what it is. One person who sees clearly is the Dalai Lama. In his book *Ethics for the New Millennium*, he comments on his experience as an outsider coming to our culture: “Those living in the materially developed countries, for all their industry, are in some ways less satisfied, are less happy, and to some extent suffer more than those living in the least developed countries.”

He sees that our values have been distorted:

[The rich] are so caught up with the idea of acquiring still more that they make no room for anything else in their lives. In their absorption, they actually lose the dream of happiness, which riches were to have provided. As a result, they are constantly tormented, torn between doubt about what might happen and the hope of gaining more, and plagued with mental and emotional suffering...so many feel uneasy and dissatisfied with their lives. They experience feelings of isolation; then follows depression.

His diagnosis of our problem? A theme all of our writers echo — our lack of connection with each other. He finds that “in place of our dependence on one another for support, today, wherever possible, we tend to rely on machines and services. We find modern living organized so that it demands the least possible direct dependence on others.... we find a high degree of loneliness and alienation.”

What we'll find our authors saying is that we're happier and more fulfilled when we limit our outer riches and focus on inner riches. It's not about impoverishment — where people do not have enough — particularly enough food, or shelter or safety. It's about everyone having enough. Simplicity is about having enough, but not too much. Affluence, as the Dalai Lama notes, brings inner, spiritual impoverishment.

But of course we also have physical impoverishment in our society. Is Simplicity relevant to the poor? Yes, but in a different way. The Simplicity movement is a middle-class movement because it concerns making a choice about how to live, and the poor have few choices. Instead of cutting back their spending, the poor need more money to spend. The poor need new policies rather than Simplicity tips. They need policies that support higher minimum wages, good jobs, affordable housing and health care — policies that make it possible for the poor to live simply.

Simplicity is relevant to the poor in another way — it challenges our beliefs about money: As long as we allow unbridled profit to be our primary goal, people, and particularly corporations, will lie, cheat and treat workers unfairly. Ultimately, profit is the reason we go to war, and it's the poor who fight these wars. As Americans use up more than their share of resources, others have less. As Americans force other nations to cater to their needs, poor countries neglect their own citizens. As Americans insist on pursuing “more,” they destroy the planet for the rest of humankind. Americans must learn to “live simply so that others may simply live,” as Elizabeth Seton (1774–1821), the first American-born saint, said.

Simplicity, then, is about taking control over your life and resisting the forces of the dominant society that tell us to claw our way to the top, to be a winner, regardless of con-

sequences. Being a winner does not necessarily make you happy! And in fact, it most likely won't. Again, as Thoreau says, success is when you feel contented "with only a sense of existence."

Enjoy the many paths to Simplicity our writers explore.