

A Garden of Simplicity Is Growing In the World

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Voluntary Simplicity has become a “modern classic” because it gives voice to ways of living that are vital for building a workable and meaningful future. As we awaken to an endangered world, people are asking, “How can we live sustainably on the Earth when our actions are already producing dramatic climate change, species extinction, oil depletion, and more?” For a generation, a diverse subculture has grappled with these concerns and, in the United States and a dozen or so other “postmodern” nations, this subculture has grown from a miniscule movement in the 1960s to a respected part of the mainstream culture in the early 2000s. Glossy magazines now sell the simple life from the newsstands across the U.S. while it has become a popular theme on major television talk shows. More significantly, surveys show that at least 10 percent of the U.S. adult population or 20 million people are consciously exploring various expressions of simplicity of living.

These changes are not confined to the U.S. and Europe. Around the world, people are awakening to the sanity of simplicity as a path to sustainability. A survey done by the Gallup organization in 1993 found virtually world-wide citizen awareness that our planet is indeed in poor health and great public concern for its future well-being. The survey also found that it made little difference whether people lived in poorer and wealthier nations—they expressed nearly equal concern for the health of the planet. Majorities in most nations gave environmental protection a higher priority than economic growth and said that they were willing to pay higher prices for that protection.

Another revealing survey was conducted in 1998 for the International Environmental Monitor. Involving more than 35,000 respondents in 30 countries, the survey report concludes by stating their “findings will serve as a wake-up call to national governments and private corporations to get moving on environmental issues or get bitten by their citizens and consumers who will not stand for inaction on what they see as key survival issues.”

The push toward simpler ways of living was clearly described in 1992 when over 1,600 of

the world's senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed an unprecedented "Warning to Humanity." In this historic statement, they declared that: "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated." Roughly a decade later came a related warning from 100 Nobel Prize winners who said that "The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed."

As these two warnings by the world's elder scientists indicate, powerful adversity trends are converging, creating the possibility of an evolutionary crash within this generation. If we are to create instead an "evolutionary bounce" or leap forward, it will surely include a collective shift toward simpler, more sustainable and satisfying ways of living. *Simplicity is not an alternative lifestyle for a marginal few; it is a creative choice for the mainstream majority, particularly in developed nations.* If we are to pull together as a human community, it is crucial that people in affluent nations confront the choice of simplicity and sustainability head on. *Simplicity is simultaneously a personal choice, a civilizational choice, and a species choice.* Even with major technological innovations in energy and transportation, it will require dramatic changes in our overall patterns of living and consuming if we are to maintain the integrity of the Earth as a living system. The coming era of constraint can bring focus and energy to crafting lives of elegant and creative simplicity.

Although the ecological pushes toward simpler ways of living are strong, the pulls toward this way of life seem equally compelling. In reality, most people are not choosing to live more simply from a feeling of sacrifice; rather, they are seeking deeper sources of satisfaction than are being offered by a high stress, consumption-obsessed world. To illustrate, while real incomes doubled in the U.S. in the past generation, the percentage of the population reporting they are very happy has remained unchanged (roughly one-third). While happiness has not increased, during this same period divorce rates have doubled and teen suicide rates have tripled. A whole generation has tasted the fruits of an affluent society and has discovered that money does not buy happiness. In the search for satisfaction, millions of people are not only "downshifting"—or pulling back from the stress of the rat race—they are also "upshifting" or moving ahead into a life that is, though materially more modest, rich with family, friends, community, creative work in the world, and a soulful connection with the universe.

Although simplicity is intensely relevant to building a workable 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), the Taoists were asserting "He who knows he has enough is rich" (Lao Tzu), Plato and Aristotle were proclaiming the importance of the "golden mean"—a path through life with neither excess nor deficit—and the Buddhists were encouraging a "middle way" between poverty and mindless accumulation. Clearly, the wisdom of simplicity is not a recent revelation.

Although simplicity has a long history, we are now entering radically changing times—ecological, social, economic, and psycho-spiritual—and we should expect the worldly expressions of simplicity to evolve and grow in response. For more than thirty years I've explored the "simple life" and I've found that simplicity is not simple. I've encountered such a diversity of expressions of the simple life that I find the most accurate way of describing this approach to living is with the metaphor of a garden.

A Garden of Simplicity

To portray the richness of simplicity, here are ten different flowerings of expression 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. So there would be no favoritism in listing, they are placed in alphabetical order based on the brief name I associated with each.

1. Choiceful Simplicity: 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. A choiceful simplicity means staying focused, diving deep, and not being distracted by consumer culture. It means consciously organizing our lives so that we give our "true gifts" to the world—which is to give the essence of ourselves. As Emerson said, "The only true gift is a portion of yourself."

2. 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 reconciliation—with other species and future generations as well as, for example, between those with great differences of wealth and opportunity. A compassionate simplicity is a path of cooperation and fairness that seeks a future of mutually assured development for all.

3. 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. A natural 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.

4. Economic Simplicity: Simplicity means there are many forms of “right livelihood” in the rapidly growing market for healthy and sustainable products and services of all kinds—from home-building materials and energy systems to foods and transportation. When 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, then it is clear that an enormous wave of highly purposeful economic activity can unfold.

5. Elegant Simplicity: Simplicity means that the way we live our lives represents a work of unfolding artistry. As Gandhi said, “My life is my message.” In this spirit, an elegant simplicity is 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.

6. Family Simplicity: Simplicity means that the balanced lives of children and families are of highest priority and that it is important not to get sidetracked by our consumer society. In turn, a growing number of parents are opting out of consumerist lifestyles and seeking

to bring enhancing values and experiences into the lives of their children and family.

7. 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.

8. Political Simplicity: Simplicity means organizing our collective lives in ways that enable us to live more lightly and sustainably on the Earth which, in turn, involves changes in nearly every area of public life—from transportation and education to the design of our homes, 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. Political simplicity is a politics of conversation and community that builds from local, face-to-face connections to networks of relationships emerging around the world through the enabling power of television and the Internet.

9. Soulful Simplicity: Simplicity means to approach life as a meditation and to cultivate our experience of 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.

10. Uncluttered Simplicity: Simplicity means taking charge of lives that are too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. An uncluttered simplicity means cutting back on 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.”

As these ten 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 of great relevance into the garden of simplicity, this cultural movement appears to have enormous potential to grow—particularly if it is nurtured and cultivated in the mass media as a legitimate, creative, and promising life-path for the future. As the culture of simplicity develops, it will draw people toward it by demonstrating a more meaningful and fulfilling way of life beyond modern materialism. In turn, a vital foundation for nurturing the garden of simplicity will be the flowering of new forms of human-scale community.

Simplicity and Community in a Stewardship Society

If given the choice, millions of people would choose new forms of community that support simpler, more sustainable ways of living. However, our current patterns and scales of living do not suit these needs. The scale of the household is often too small and that of the city too large to realize many of the opportunities for sustainable living. However, at the scale of a small village, the strength of one person or family meets the strength of others and, working together, something can be created that was not possible before.

Modern neighborhoods with isolated, single-family dwellings have been compared to tiny, underdeveloped nations where the potential for community and synergy has yet to be realized. A new architecture of life is needed; one that integrates the physical as well as social and cultural/spiritual dimensions of our lives. Taking a lesson from humanity’s past, it is important to look at the in-between scale of living—that of a small village consisting of a few hundred people or less. Great opportunity exists for organizing into clusters of small ecovillages that are nested within a larger urban area.

To illustrate from my own life, my wife Coleen and I lived in an ecovillage/co-housing community in Northern California of roughly seventy people for a year and a half. One of the three organizing principles for the community is “simplicity” (and the other two are ecology and

family). We experienced how easily and quickly activities could be organized. From organizing fundraisers (such as a brunch for tsunami disaster relief), to arranging classes (such as yoga and Cajun dancing), planting the community landscape and garden, and creating community celebrations and events, we participated in several dozen gatherings that emerged with ease from the combined strengths and diverse talents of the community.

I imagine that, in a sustainable future, a family will live in an “eco-home” that is nested within an “ecovillage,” that, in turn, is nested within an “eco-city,” and so on up the scale to the bio-region, nation, and world. Each ecovillage of several hundred persons would have a distinct character, architecture, and local economy. Most would likely contain a child-care facility and play area, a common house for meetings, celebrations, and regular meals together, an organic community garden, a recycling and composting area, some revered open space, and a crafts and shop area. As well, each could offer a variety of types of work to the local economy—such as the arts, health care, child care, a non-profit learning center for gardening, green building, conflict resolution, and other skills—that provide fulfilling employment for many. These micro-communities or modern villages could have the culture and cohesiveness of a small town and the sophistication of a big city, as virtually everyone will be immersed within a world that is rich with communications. Ecovillages create the possibility for meaningful work, raising healthy children, celebrating life in community with others, and living in a way that seeks to honor the Earth and future generations.

Ecovillages represent a healthy response to economic globalization as they create a strong, decentralized foundation for society and a way of living that has the potential for being sustainable for everyone on the planet. Because they may range in size from roughly one or two hundred people, they approximate the scale of a more traditional tribe. Consequently, ecovillages are compatible with both the village-based cultures of indigenous societies and with those of post-modern cultures.

With a social and physical architecture sensitive to the psychology of modern tribes, a flowering of diverse communities could replace the alienation of today’s massive cities. Ecovillages provide the practical scale and foundation for a sustainable future. I believe they will become important islands of community, security, learning, and innovation in a world of sweeping change. These smaller-scale, human-sized living and working environments will foster diverse experiments in community and cooperative living. Sustainability will be achieved through different

designs that touch people and the Earth lightly and that are uniquely adapted to the culture, economy, interests and environment of each locale.

Simplicity and a Sustainable Species-Civilization

In a shift similar to that nature makes—for example, in the jump from simple atoms to complex molecules, or from complex molecules to living cells—humanity is being challenged to make a jump to a new kind of community and life-organization. A robust garden of expressions will emerge from the combination of a culture of conscious simplicity with new forms of community adapted to the unique culture and ecology of different geographic regions. The great diversity of approaches to sustainable and compassionate living that emerge in the context of new forms of community will foster flexibility, adaptability, and resilience at the local scale—qualities that will be profoundly tested in the decades ahead.

Although human societies have confronted major hurdles throughout history, the challenges of our era are unique. Never before has the human family been on the verge of devastating the Earth's biosphere and crippling its ecological foundations for countless generations to come. Never before have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. Never before has the entire human family been entrusted with the task of working together to imagine and consciously build a sustainable and compassionate future. As we awaken to this new world, integrating life-ways of simplicity and new forms of community will be at the foundation of building a stewardship society and promising future. Seeds of simplicity, growing quietly for the past generation, are now blossoming into a garden of expressions. May the garden flourish!