

How limits make life simpler

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The American soul longs for liberation. We represent to the world maximum personal freedom - the right to do, say, have and plan what you please as long as it's not against the law and doesn't hurt anyone. While this aspiration is sublime for the soul and invigorating for creative enterprise, it's turning out to have a lot of costs for the body, society, the environment and our global reputation as reckless and rapacious.

Freedom, though, can't be wrong! It's too necessary for responding to changing times, for science and technology to flourish, for the sheer joy of existence. Life without freedom is no life at all. If freedom is suppressed, revolutions will come. Freedom will out, like grass that comes up through cracks in the sidewalk and eventually can crack and crumble any binding structure, returning all to nature.

It turns out that the problem isn't freedom, but our definition of freedom as no limits. "No limits" is actually impossible anywhere but the human mind and spirit. On earth, life is full of limits, and we depend on them for order, predictability, safety, protection, property, sport, art, architecture, cities, marriage, organizations and all the civilizing aspects of human society and personal existence. Natural law, too, depends on limits: gravity and magnetism, for example. Even the limit of death is essential for renewal of life. As intoxicated as we might become when the lid comes off, when we are released from frustrating or debilitating constraints, we actually don't want a life of no constraints. We want to have a say over which constraints we choose to protect, connect, respect, reject and select in shaping of our personal and community lives.

People who have chosen to live more simply are all about choosing limits. They are free from excess. They know who they are and this truth sets them free. They are free in their relationship because they respect others' limits. They have a sense of purpose, knowing what freedom is for. On a daily basis they wield limits with discernment. They limit the hours they are willing to work for money so they have more hours for human fun and frolic. They limit the cost of living by not buying things they don't need. They limit the intrusion of the commercial world into their homes by turning off the TV and reading, playing games and talking with their family. They limit what they buy from to products with limited toxins and pollutants and exploitation of others in their production. They limit ugliness by living in homes elegantly appointed with that Goldilocks esthetic of not too much, not too little, just right. They limit the cost of gas by buying fuel efficient cars, riding bikes, taking busses, carpooling, telecommuting and walking when possible. They are masters of limits, not slaves of the "more is better and it's never enough" mentality sold to us by corporations eager to harvest our hard earned dollars for their often unnecessary products.

What do they get for all these limits? Freedom to be blissfully real, authentic, balanced, relaxed and healthy.

In fact, if more people chose to limit excess in their lives, we'd limit war on the planet. When we live beyond our natural means, how else will we keep our way of life going than to take from others' minerals, oil, timber, labor, etc.? If we want to limit war - and who but the arms dealers wants war for heaven's sake! - we need to limit our appetites for material excess. We'd also limit the public health problems that arise from toxics in our food, our carpets, our cleaning products, our air, our water and even mother's milk which, were it tested by the FDA, would be deemed unfit for consumption.

Now of course setting limits isn't simple at all. It takes sophisticated deliberation and decision making to maximize freedom while minimizing harm to humans and other living things. It takes great honesty in studying and reporting accurately the effects of our actions and making agreements to limit harm - as we have with the Kyoto and Montreal Protocols and eventually the Oil Depletion Protocol which protect life on earth from harm from climate change, ozone thinning and diminishing cheap energy reserves. Limits in fact are the tools grown ups use for morality and ethics and compassion and wisdom. Promising freedom without limits is like crying fire for fun in a crowded theater - a prank reckless teenagers find fun but society wisely prohibits. Prisons are one way society protects itself from the dark expressions of freedom: domination, license, predation, taking what isn't yours.

Simple living is simply ahead of the curve. People who live simply design with limits, cooperate with limits, participate in limit setting in their household, communities and politics. They are masters of limits the way a martial artist or a doctor or an artist is a master is far. Such simplicity is more enjoyable than getting whacked by limits when you transgress the natural and human laws meant to make life exquisitely worth living. Such simplicity is the ultimate expression of freedom.