



DISCUSSION COURSE ON

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

*The ability to simplify
means to eliminate the
unnecessary so that the
necessary may speak.*

- HANS HOFFMAN



D I S C U S S I O N C O U R S E O N

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY



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By



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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for participating in the Northwest Earth Institute's discussion course, *Voluntary Simplicity*. Simplicity can be viewed as a movement, a practice, and for many, a purposeful way of living in a complex, consumptive society. This course explores the *practice* of simplicity.

As a practice, to simplify is to reduce to essentials, to streamline, and to clarify. This curriculum explores simplicity in all of these ways. It examines the view that each person can, at the same time, improve his or her quality of life, reduce expenses, and live more lightly on the Earth. It also explores how to be at ease, free from compulsion and attachment, and without the need to possess or control. The discipline is to consciously simplify, by gradually releasing the things, attitudes, and commitments that distract us in our daily lives.

The course is comprised of five sessions, designed for weekly discussion. Each session includes readings, questions for the group, a "Putting It into Practice" list of suggested actions and "Further Readings and Resources." Each week as you meet with your discussion group, we invite you to bring your own experience and critical thinking to the process. The readings are intended to invoke meaningful discussion. Whether you agree or disagree, you will have an opportunity to clarify your views and values.

The course also includes several Action Plans to guide

you in putting simplicity into practice. Each session includes an Action Plan chart that focuses on the session's theme. Each week, group members will choose one action from their Action Plans to implement during the following week. During the next group meeting, participants share the actions they tried to implement and the successes, challenges, and inspiration they might have experienced. We suggest sharing your goals with your group during the optional "Call to Action" session. This last session is encouraged as a way for your group to celebrate the completion of the course, share goals and progress and consider ways the group might continue to work together.

For resources to get the discussion group started, go to www.nwei.org and visit the "Course Resources" page for flyers, organizing guides and press releases. Included on pages 6-7 of this guide, "How to Start a Discussion Course" provides further information about organizing a course. You may also contact our office at (503) 227-2807. To become a member of NWEI and support the sharing of this work with others, please visit www.nwei.org/join or complete the membership form on page 77 of this guide.

On behalf of the thousands of organizations, workplaces and volunteers who are involved in promoting Northwest Earth Institute programs, we trust that your experience with this course will be of deep value.

The Northwest Earth Institute currently offers nine other discussion courses:

- *Just Below the Surface: Perspectives on the Gulf Coast Oil Spill* is a one-session discussion guide that focuses on the connections between Deepwater Horizon, energy policies and our lifestyles.
- *A World of Health: Connecting People, Place and Planet* explores "good health," the connections between human health and the environment, and how we can sustain both.
- *Sustainable Systems at Work* is designed to advance organizational sustainability initiatives by addressing the greatest challenge any organization has when implementing corporate initiatives: engaging employees.

- *Menu for the Future* explores food systems and their impacts on culture, society and ecological systems.
- *Global Warming, Changing CO₂urse* addresses the urgent need to respond to climate change.
- *Choices for Sustainable Living* explores choices each of us makes that have an impact on the Earth.
- *Healthy Children — Healthy Planet* examines the influence of consumer culture on children and how families can deal with these influences.
- *Discovering a Sense of Place* considers the benefits of knowing and protecting our place.
- *Reconnecting with Earth* examines our relationship and responsibility to Earth.

How to Start a Discussion Course

Thank you for your interest in the programs offered by the Northwest Earth Institute. The following tips are for those of you who would like to organize NWEI discussion groups.

We are thrilled that you have taken the initiative to order this guide for small-group discussion. While this discussion guide has tremendous standalone value, please keep in mind that it was designed to be used with others in a group dialogue setting. As such, we ask that you consider inviting others to participate with you. You can find steps for doing so below. If you have any questions about the process please visit our website (www.nwei.org) or contact any member of NWEI's Outreach Team at (503) 227-2807, or by email at contact@nwei.org. If you have joined an already formed group, please consider organizing future courses. We hope you benefit from participating in this course.

STEP 1: FORM GROUP(S) — IDEAL SIZE IS 8-12 PEOPLE.

In certain regions, a local NWEI representative may be available to assist you in getting started. Visit www.nwei.org/n_american_network to see a list of regions where NWEI representatives may be available to mentor new groups and offer introductory presentations on NWEI's work and mission.

TIPS FOR STARTING YOUR NWEI COURSE:

- Invite others to join NWEI programs via newsletters, email networks, personal invitations or the media. Download NWEI program flyers at www.nwei.org. Include location information, times and dates for the entire program. Set clear registration deadlines for signups. Order any remaining materials from NWEI and get discussion guides to participants before the date of the first group meeting.
- Call a noontime meeting or host a brown bag lunch in a workplace to offer an informal presentation on NWEI programs and how they work.
- Host an introductory group meeting at home, your community or faith center, local library or municipal office.
- Visit www.nwei.org/course_resources to download NWEI's Introductory Presentation Manual for ideas.

STEP 2: FIRST CLASS SESSION — GETTING STARTED

TAKE THE FOLLOWING MATERIALS WITH YOU TO THE FIRST SESSION: 1) Discussion guide, 2) Course schedule on page 7 for participants to sign up for opener, facilitator, and notetaker roles for the remaining sessions.

HAVE A ROUND OF INTRODUCTIONS. Introductions serve several important functions, even if the group is

already well acquainted. Participants begin to know each other on a personal level and have an opportunity to “get each person’s voice into the room.” A person who has spoken and been listened to early in the session is more likely to participate in the rest of the session. Ask participants to say their names and something personal about themselves. As the organizer of your group, you should give your answer first to model the length and content.

DESCRIBE THE GROUP PROCESS. NWEI programs are designed to encourage discussions that clarify personal values and attitudes. Consensus is not the goal, and the group should not seek to reach agreement at the expense of diversity of opinion. Most groups meet for an hour to an hour and a half for each meeting. Each session will be led by a volunteer facilitator from the group. Point out the “Guidelines for the Session Facilitator” on page 8.

CALL ATTENTION TO THE EVALUATION FORM IN EACH DISCUSSION GUIDE. Encourage participants to fill out the evaluation form on page 9 and share any feedback with NWEI.

FILL OUT THE COURSE SCHEDULE (found on the next page). This gives different group members an opportunity to sign up to present an opening, to facilitate, and to conduct the action part of each session. Information on opening, facilitating and note-taking is included at the beginning of each discussion guide.

STEP 3: FIRST CLASS SESSION — DESCRIBE/PRESENT THE OPENING

Please reference Guidelines for the Facilitator, Opener and Notetaker located on page 8.

STEP 4: FIRST SESSION — FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

EXPLAIN THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER. Tell the group that you will help keep the discussion personal, focused, and balanced among the participants. Show them the “Guidelines” on page 8. Encourage each person to review these before taking their turn at facilitation, opening or note-taking.

CIRCLE QUESTION. Following the opening, the first step is for each person to answer the Circle Question found at the beginning of each session. The question provides a focus for the day's discussion.

STEP 5: FIRST SESSION — CLOSING

Watch the time, and stop discussion a few minutes before the session is scheduled to end. Note whether the Course Schedule is completed. If it is not, work with participants to complete it. Confirm the time and place

for the next meeting. Be sure to end the class on time. This shows respect for the participants, and demonstrates that their time commitment is predictable.

STEP 6: DURATION OF NWEI PROGRAM

Your group will meet one to seven times, depending on the chosen discussion course and the meeting dates set by participants. Each session will be led by a rotating member of the group. Note the “Putting It into Practice” and “Further Reading” lists at the beginning of each session for ideas on further educational opportunities as well as tips for applying the learning into your life.

CLOSING

FINAL SESSION — A CALL TO ACTION. The final session in each discussion guide is an optional celebration, and is an opportunity to:

- Celebrate the completion of the program and evaluate your experience.
- Discuss options for continuing as a group, reflect on actions taken during the course and consider goals and action items to implement.
- Consider organizing other NWEI programs in your community, workplace or organization.

Don't hesitate to contact NWEI for assistance with questions.

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

This course schedule may be useful to keep track of meeting dates and of when you will be facilitating or providing the opening.

Course Coordinator : _____ Phone : _____

Mentor (if applicable) : _____ Phone : _____

Location For Future Meetings : _____

CLASS SESSION	DATE	OPENING	FACILITATOR	NOTETAKER
The Meaning of Simplicity	_____	_____	_____	_____
Living More with Less	_____	_____	_____	_____
Making a Living	_____	_____	_____	_____
Do You Have the Time?	_____	_____	_____	_____
Living Simply on Earth	_____	_____	_____	_____

PLANNERS

Call to Action* _____

*After the last regular session, your group may choose to have a final meeting and Call to Action. This meeting celebrates the completion of the course, and may include a potluck lunch or dinner. It is an opportunity for evaluation and consideration of next steps.

GUIDELINES

FOR THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER

For each session of this course, one participant brings an “opening,” a second participant facilitates the discussion, and a third participant takes notes on members’ commitments to action. The roles rotate each week with a different group member doing the opening, facilitating and taking notes. This process is at the core of the Earth Institute culture — it assumes we gain our greatest insights through self-discovery, by promoting discussion among equals with no teacher.



FOR THE SESSION FACILITATOR

As facilitator for one session, your role is to stimulate and moderate the discussion. You do not need to be an expert or the most knowledgeable person about the topic.

Your role is to:

- Remind the designated person ahead of time to bring an opening.
- Begin and end on time.
- Ask the questions included in each chapter, or your own.
- Make sure your group has time to respond to the action-oriented discussion questions — it is a positive way to end each gathering.
- Keep discussion focused on the session’s topic. A delicate balance is best — don’t force the group into the questions, but don’t allow the discussion to drift too far.
- Manage the group process, using the guidelines below:

A primary goal is for everyone to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don’t let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.

Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

The focus should be on personal reactions to the readings — on personal values, feelings, and experiences.

The course is not for judging others’ responses or problem solving. **Consensus is not a goal.**

The facilitator should ensure that the action item discussion:

- allows each person’s action item to be discussed for 1-2 minutes;
- remains non-judgmental and non-prescriptive;
- focuses on encouraging fellow group members in their commitments and actions.

FOR THE SESSION OPENER

- Bring a short opening, not more than five minutes. It should be something meaningful to you, or that expresses your personal appreciation for the natural world. Examples: a short personal story, an object or photograph that has special meaning, a poem, a visualization, etc. You can be creative.
- The purpose of the opening is twofold. First, it provides a transition from other activities of the day into the group discussion. Second, since the opening is personal, it allows the group to get better acquainted with you. This aspect of the course can be very rewarding.

FOR THE NOTETAKER

At the end of each session, each participant will commit to one action item they will complete before the next meeting. They will share their action with the group, and it is your responsibility as notetaker to record each person’s commitment to action.

Each week the notetaker role will rotate. During the portion of discussion focused on action items, the notetaker from the previous meeting will read aloud each person’s action item, and group members will have the opportunity to share their successes and struggles in implementing their actions. The new notetaker for that week will then record each person’s commitment for the next meeting.

For more information on the NWEI course model and organizing a course, see “How to Start a Discussion Course” on page 6.

EVALUATION

PART 1. PLEASE FILL OUT WEEKLY, while your thoughts and opinions are fresh in your mind. We suggest removing this page to use as a bookmark as you read through the course. Rate the five sessions. You may also complete an online evaluation at www.nwei.org on the “Voluntary Simplicity” page.

	POOR CHOICE	EXCELLENT	COMMENTS:
1. The Meaning of Simplicity	1	2 3 4 5	
2. Living More With Less	1	2 3 4 5	
3. Making a Living	1	2 3 4 5	
4. Do You Have the Time?	1	2 3 4 5	
5. Living Simply on Earth	1	2 3 4 5	

Were the following resources helpful? Circle “Y” if we should use the resource next time or “N” if we should look for better material. Leave blank if you didn’t use it or have no opinion.

	COMMENTS:
1 “Living Deeply”	Y N
“The Simple Living Wheel”	Y N
“The Gospel of Consumption”.....	Y N
“Take Your Time”	Y N
“Do High-Consumption Levels Improve Human Well-Being?”.....	Y N
2 “When It’s All Too Much”	Y N
“Stepping Lightly”.....	Y N
“Homemade Prosperity”	Y N
“Do It Yourself! The DIY Movement”.....	Y N
“Attached to Technology and Paying a Price”.....	Y N
“When Enough is Enough”	Y N
“Teachings of World Religions on Consumption”	Y N
3 “Work: The Benefits of Working Less Hard”.....	Y N
“Crafting a New World: An Interview with Richard Sennett”.....	Y N
“Economy and Pleasure”	Y N
“How to Make Work-Life Balance Work”	Y N
“What Is the Purpose of Work?”	Y N
“Slow Down and Explore Simplicity”.....	Y N
4 “Simplicity, Time, and Money”.....	Y N
“Caught in the Current”	Y N
“A Slow Media Movement”	Y N
“My Antidote to Overwhelm”	Y N
“I Need a Virtual Break... No, Really”.....	Y N
“Washing the Dishes” by Thich Nhat Hanh.....	Y N

- 5 "Small Wonder"..... Y N
- "One Garbage Wonder" Y N
- "Conservation is Good Work" Y N
- "Living Simply and Strengthening Community" Y N
- "Cool Lifestyle for a Hot Planet" Y N

If you had an Earth Institute volunteer mentor your first session, they will collect evaluations at the final session. If not, please send your completed evaluation to NWEI, 107 SE Washington Street, Suite 235, Portland, OR 97214. Thank you for your participation!

PART 2. PLEASE COMPLETE AT THE END OF COURSE.

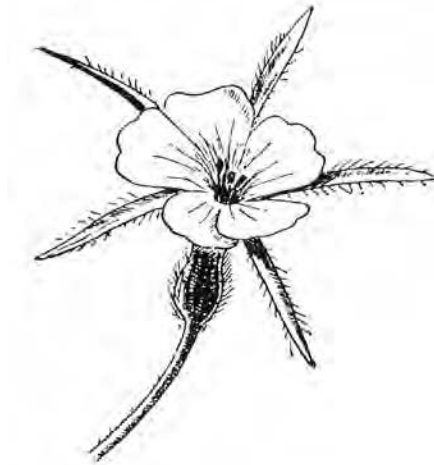
Has the course made a difference in your life? Yes No Please describe what actions you are taking or you plan to take in response to this course. _____

Please list other articles, books or other resources that should be included in the course. Identify chapter(s)/page(s) and the session where they should be included. _____

Is the Action Plan a helpful tool for you? Why/why not? What would improve it? _____

Is the information "How to Start a Discussion Guide" on page 6 helpful? Why/why not? What would improve it? _____

What has been the most valuable aspect of this course? _____



THE MEANING OF SIMPLICITY

In character, in manner, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity.

— HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

SESSION GOALS

- To become aware of what truly makes us happy.
- To explore how our lives might be enriched by simplicity.
- To use the Action Plan to set goals around simplicity and get started with putting them into practice.

SESSION BACKGROUND

The concept of simplicity, as a religious practice or a philosophical outlook, has a long history. In the United States it is often associated with Henry David Thoreau who lived in solitude at Walden Pond. In the 1960s and 1970s, voluntary simplicity came to be seen as a path away from environmental destruction and toward personal responsibility. For many today, it continues to offer a meaningful alternative to dominant consumer culture.

The authors included in this session provide perspectives

on the meaning and purpose of intentional living. In “Living Deeply” Janet Luhrs examines Thoreau’s ideas of living with the greatest deliberateness. She urges us to seek the “quiet voice of our essence,” to bring it to the surface and to examine our everyday lives with this in mind.

Jeffrey Kaplan provides us with an overview of the history of our consumer culture and how it has affected and continues to affect us in “The Gospel of Consumption.”

Deliberate consciousness or “mindfulness” is explored further in an excerpt from “Take Your Time” by Heather Menzies. The author shares her understanding of voluntary simplicity by offering examples from her own practice.

After completing the readings, please turn to the chart on page 13 to begin developing an Action Plan for yourself. The chart focuses on the session’s theme of intentional living and provides guidelines for thinking about how to incorporate changes into your daily life. Before your group meets, give yourself 15 minutes to complete the chart.

Circle Question

(Each Member Answers)

What are you grateful for in your life, right now?

Reminder to the facilitator: The circle question should move quickly. Elicit a brief answer from each participant without questions or comments from others. The facilitator's guidelines are on page 8. Feel free to pick and choose which discussion questions you want to discuss, but be sure to finish with the Committing to Action section at the end of the list.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the readings most resonated with you? Why?
2. Luhrs discusses the concept of living deliberately. Are there areas of your life in which you now live very deliberately?
3. What do you do to remind yourself of the basics of your life, the things that are most important to you?
4. How do you find balance in your life?
5. After examining the Simple Living Wheel (page 17), which spoke do you relate most with? After sharing this with the group, can you see why the authors state that the 16 spokes are interconnected?
6. If appliances are supposed to make our lives "simpler" and production of goods has become "easier," then why are Americans becoming increasingly stressed, with less free time?
7. Think about five things you purchased last week. Why did you purchase them? Did you really need all of them?
8. After reading these articles, what is one personal change you are considering for simplifying your life?

COMMITTING TO ACTION: Each person should choose one Action Item from their Action Plan to focus on implementing for the next week. Commit to an action item that is doable (e.g., to clean out a drawer or room, not the entire garage, for example).

If you can't get it done for whatever reason, do not feel you should miss a meeting because you didn't have time to complete your action item. The aim of this course is to provide support and encouragement around changes you'd like to make, and your group is there to offer support and ideas, serving as a forum for exploration.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Steps others are taking:

- Going for walks.
- Spending some time each day observing nature (e.g., taking time for sun rises and moon rises).
- Making family dinners a priority.
- Setting aside a time for daily meditation.
- Upon awakening, affirming priorities for the day.
- Spending more time with friends.
- Writing in a personal journal every day.
- Eating a healthy meal without distractions (i.e., newspaper, book, TV, etc.).

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (2010) by Duane Elgin. First published in 1981, this is a classic text on voluntary simplicity. In it, Elgin exhorts us to live "with balance in order to find a life of greater purpose."
- *Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For* (2003) by Bruce Elkin helps you discover what you love and how to create a life that shows it.
- *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (2004) by Eckhart Tolle is a book that has helped countless people awaken to the spiritual dimension in their lives, and find inner peace, increased joy and more harmonious relationships.
- Awakening the Dreamer Symposium explores the current state of our planet from a new perspective and connects participants with a powerful global movement: www.awakeningthedreamer.org.

As you complete the weekly readings, please remember to fill out the course evaluation on page 9. Your comments will help NWEI improve the course. Thank you.

SESSION 1 ACTION PLAN: INTENTIONAL LIVING

After completing the readings, take some time to consider actions you can take to live more deliberately, intentionally and purposefully. The “Putting It into Practice” section can get you started.

To see how others have implemented some of these ideas into their daily lives, go to <http://blog.nwei.org>.

For each category, take the following steps:

1. **Identify** use and degree of impact of current habits and behaviors.
2. **Consider** alternatives to existing habits — what would be realistic, yet also challenging and rewarding?
3. **Commit** to making a change or recommit to a previous effort that has lost its momentum. Be specific and select the **one change** you will make before your group meets to discuss Session 1, and highlight it on the chart. This will be your **Action Item** for this session.

Category	Identify Habits	Consider Alternatives	Commit to Change	Timeline	Done?
<p>NOISE Look closely at the distractions you’re subjected to. What “background noises” are you dealing with, which hold you back from greater mindfulness?</p>	<p>For example, ordered by what distracts me the most: Social networking sites, text messages, television, radio in the car.</p>	<p>For example: Limit the number of times I check email / Facebook.</p>	<p>For example: Check email only after I have breakfast... in silence, outside.</p>	<p>This week</p>	
<p>CULTIVATING A DAILY PRACTICE Do you stop for at least a few moments every day to get in touch with yourself? With your family/loved ones?</p>	<p>For example, ordered by habits that I find most harmful: My checking email first thing in the morning, kids turning on TV as soon as anyone gets into living room, our eating in front of TV.</p>				
<p>SELF CARE Are you taking care of yourself or are you exclusively focused on taking care of others? Are you spending quality time with people who support you?</p>	<p>For example, ordered by what I would like to do for myself but gets hijacked: Go to the gym, take walks, read more. Main hijackers: Work, volunteer duties I accept.</p>				



LIVING DEEPLY

By Janet Luhrs

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow of life...

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU

When I first got involved with voluntary simplicity, I heard this quote from Thoreau over and over. It was supposed to symbolize the movement, somehow. I listened and thought it sounded right, but I didn't really and truly get it. First I thought it meant that anyone who wanted to honestly simplify had to go live in the woods. After all, how could anyone live simply in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a city? I was so enamored of simplicity and so excited to get right to it that I signed up for a class on how to build log houses. My little dream was that my family would go off and live in a log cabin in the woods, simply ever after. Everything would take care of itself from there on.

Six years later I'm still living in the same house in the same city. I still look pretty much the same. But inside I've

changed. And lots of little details have changed. I've edited and published a journal titled *Simple Living* since 1992. I have interviewed countless people who have simplified their lives in every way imaginable. ... I read everything I could get my hands on about the subject. And I spent a lot of time thinking about what it all meant. Now, finally, I really, deeply understand the quote. The key word is not *woods*, it is *deliberately*. What the heck does that really mean? This one word, in my opinion, is the hallmark of a simple life.

People and reporters often ask me what I think simple living is all about. They want to know how low an income they can live on. They want to know if they should keep their condo in the city. Does simple living mean giving up their car? Does it mean never traveling? Does it mean living in poverty? Do you have to go meditate on top of a mountain in Tibet to be *really* simple? Do you have to live in an austere house? Must you live an austere existence? Can you never go to restaurants or movies?

Simple living is about living deliberately. That's all. You *choose* your existence rather than sailing through life on automatic pilot. Your existence can be in the woods, in the city, as a carpet cleaner, a doctor, an office manager, a retired person, a single person, a parent of six, a person in his 20s, a person in her 80s. You could have any level of income, but you hang on to a good chunk of your income, whatever it is. Simple living is about having money in the bank and a zero balance on your credit card statement. If you want to travel, you are conscious enough about your choice that you are willing to give up something else. I've chosen to have kids' science projects, newspapers, and my sister's slippers cluttering the living room rather than living an austere existence. Someone else might like austerity because it brings a sense of peace and order. Either way, we've chosen these things *consciously* ... they didn't just "happen." Simple living is about making deliberate, thoughtful choices. The difference is that you are fully aware of why you are living your particular life, and that life is one you have chosen thoughtfully.

As I got deeper into writing this book, the deliberate theme became so loud and clear that I even thought about changing the title from *The Simple Living Guide* to *Yes You Can!* This was because literally every single person I interviewed had consciously and with clear purpose designed their lives to coincide with their ideals. They live *deliberately*. They know full well what they want out of life, and they take creativity and determination to impressive heights in order to accomplish their dreams. Not one of them waited around for someone else to make things better, and not one of them blamed other people or other systems for keeping them from what they deemed important. Nor did any of them absentmindedly wake up one day wondering how their life came to be. They live consciously ... deliberately ... and thoughtfully. This is what Thoreau meant when he said "I wanted to live deep and suck

out all the marrow of life ..."

Living deeply means living consciously ... being fully present, fully aware. If you buy a big house, you are fully aware of the yin and yang trade-offs involved. (Yin and yang is a Chinese phrase that means opposites. Often this means that any choice we make has opposite effects — one positive, one negative.) The yin of a big house is that it is pleasant and comfortable, maybe even impressive. The yang is that you need to work many, many more hours at your job in order to pay for it, and that means giving up other parts of your life. When you live deliberately, you are totally aware of this balance before ever signing a paper. When you live on automatic pilot, you skim the surface of life and see only the immediate gratification of this house. Then you wonder, months or years later, why you are on the treadmill of work and spend, work and spend.

Living deeply means living intimately ... closely tied to the people, places, and things in your life. When you simplify, you'll have space and time to know and love people in a deeper way. You'll present your authentic self to the world and will create a life that is authentic for you. You'll surround yourself with people who like and love you for who you are deep inside, rather than the professional or other kind of persona you project to the world. Simplicity and living deeply means shedding all of those outward layers of image and busyness that keep us from being close to ourselves and other people. It is a more authentic life. Simplicity is living from your essence ... your core. You can discover this essence only when you slow down and begin to live deliberately, consciously. ...

When you live deeply, consciously, sucking the marrow out of life, you will live a full, robust, honest, and intimate life. When you skim over the surface, never stopping to really, deeply feel or think about what you are doing, or when you simply react to one event after another, you will discover, as Thoreau laments, that you have not lived. This is the essence of simplicity ... to live with full awareness and with passion. ...

Thoreau says: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn. ... The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive."

When I first learned about simplicity, I didn't know what *awake* meant. Surely I was awake or I wouldn't be able to drive my car, talk on the phone, take out the garbage. Now I know that being asleep means at least two things: you can really be asleep, like at night when you are in bed. But you can also be asleep during the day by not paying attention. I can drive my car but be thinking of a discussion I had yesterday with my neighbor. I will notice almost nothing on the way to the store because I am on automatic pilot and

am thinking of the discussion. I miss all of life that I have just whizzed past. I don't even feel my hands on the steering wheel. I can talk on the phone while I am stirring my dinner on the stove, thinking about what to put into the pot next and only half aware of what my friend is saying. I miss the intimacy of her voice, of what she is really saying, really needing. I can stay on the surface of that relationship. I can wonder why I don't feel deeply intimate with the people around me. I can get tired of living a perfunctory life. I can take out the garbage on automatic pilot and not even be aware that I just walked out to the sidewalk holding a heavy can. I can be asleep this way.

I can never get in deep and really, truly experience each and every event in my life. I can touch the garbage can, I can touch the onion I am cutting, I can look at the person I am talking to, but I can do this without feeling much of anything, without noticing much of anything. I can accept a job and not really feel or think about what it means in the big scheme of my life. It pays the bills right now, it uses my skills, the people seem nice. The end. Or I can accept a job and know just how it fits in and just how it feels, down to my core. If I am living deliberately, I have been conscious with my money so I have some in the bank; then I can even turn down the job until a real match is made.

I can feel the smooth, round, brittle paper skin of the onion as I cut it. I can notice that my friend's eyes seem a little sad as he is talking to me. He doesn't say anything a little sad, but I can see it. Maybe I can reach out to him. Maybe then he and I won't wonder why we don't feel very fulfilled around each other anymore. This is simplicity. This is living deliberately. This is being awake. This is taking in every bit of life: the good, the happy, the dark, the sad. All of it. Sucking the marrow out of life. Not just leaving it on the banquet table for the next person to sample carefully and

FROM SINGING IN THE LIVING TRADITION

By William Henry Channing

To live content with small means;

*To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement
rather than fashion;*

To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;

*To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages,
with open heart;*

*To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions,
hurry, never.*

*To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious,
grow up through the common.*

This is to be my symphony.



then put down, marching swiftly on to the next item.

We don't need to go shopping for this full life. It is right in front of us, waiting. All we need to do is notice. We're too caught up in our daily lives to find the time or space to notice. How did we get this way? When did we decide that more and bigger stuff would give us a better life? When was the last time a busy calendar gave anyone more serenity? Do we really get more joy from worrying about, rearranging, and dusting our things than we do from visiting with a friend in an intimate way? Do our soulful, intimate friends really care whether our houses are decorated in the latest style and whether we spent an extra five minutes worrying about a certain vase? Do we like ourselves more if we move up from a medium-size to a big-screen television set? Will that make zoning out every night a little more pleasant? Is zoning out what we always dreamed was the meaning of life?

When simplicity friend and colleague Joe Dominguez, author of *Your Money or Your Life*, died this year [1997], our mutual friend Duane Elgin, author of *Voluntary Simplicity*, delivered the most profound yet simple remembrance at Joe's service. The few lines he read summed up the essence of a deliberate, intimate life: "Joe did not care if you made a bunch of money. He wanted to know if you had enough

money to share your life freely with others. Joe did not care 'who you knew'. He cared if you knew yourself and if you could be true to your soul's integrity. Joe did not care how many college degrees you had. He cared whether you were willing to show up, each day, in the school of life and learn your soul's lessons. Joe did not care how old you were. He cared if you were old enough to be wise about life and to meet its challenge with humor, inventiveness, and truth. Joe did not care about your guru or astrological sign. He wanted to know if you were in touch with your soul's fire and whether you were willing to take a stand for what you love and believe."

What's happened to the rest of us? Where is our fire?

A certain level of material comfort is necessary. We all need our own nests, food, and clothing in order to survive. We need some kind of work to do, paid or unpaid. And as human beings, we need more than the bare minimum; we need a certain level of aesthetics. The trouble is, most of us don't know when to stop. We get to a certain level of comfort and then think, "This feels nice, I'd better strive for some more." The next thing we know we're buried in debt, stress, and complication. Then we've lost our fire, our passion for life.

I had a wonderful interview with a couple one time. The husband's philosophy on life was this: "The bottom line for us is, if you can become self-sufficient in the basics of life, which are shelter, nutritious food, and clothing . . . if you have these things covered, then all you have to do with the rest of your time is make yourself a peaceful person, rather than spending that same time buying things you don't need."

I had another interview with a friend who has lived in Nepal and the United States. She said: "We seem to be awfully busy here in the U.S. But at the end of our lives have we really achieved more than the simple farmer, and will we remember that we bought 12 pairs of pants instead of 2?"

Will we?

Janet Luhrs is the author of the best-selling books, *The Simple Living Guide* (1997), and *Simple Loving*, (2000). Her personal simplifying journey has been featured in *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*. Visit her website at www.simplicityjourney.com

TALK DEEPLY, BE HAPPY?

By Roni Caryn Rabin, *The New York Times*, March 17, 2010.

A recent study published by University of Arizona psychologist Matthias Mehl proposed that substantive conversation seems to hold the key to happiness for two reasons: both because human beings are driven to find and create meaning in their lives, and because we are social animals who want and need to connect with other people. "By engaging in meaningful conversations, we manage to impose meaning on an otherwise pretty

chaotic world," Dr. Mehl said. "And interpersonally, as you find this meaning, you bond with your interactive partner, and we know that interpersonal connection and integration is a core fundamental foundation of happiness."

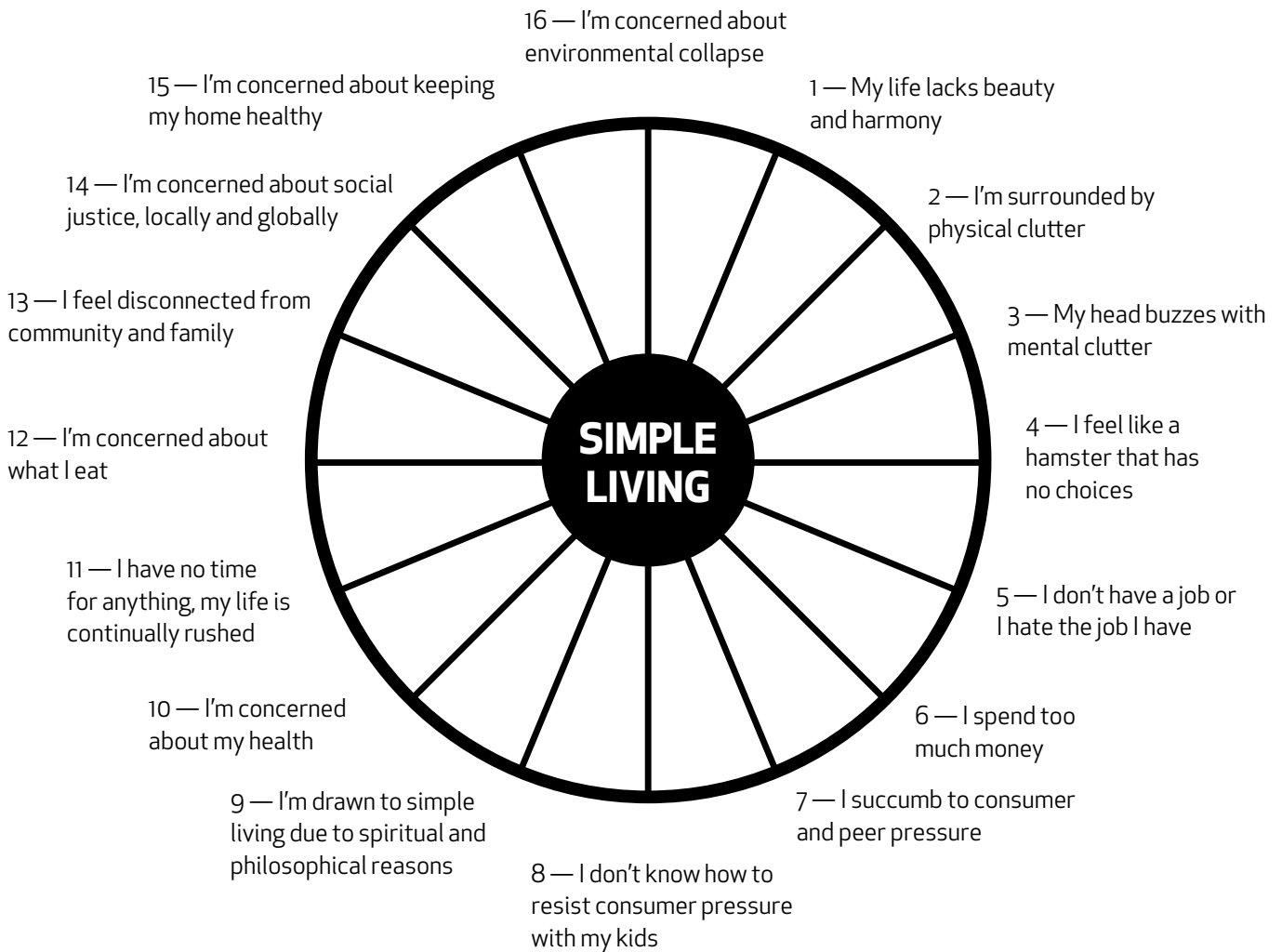
The happiest person in Mehl's study had twice as many substantive conversations, and only one-third the amount of small talk as the unhappiest.

THE SIMPLE LIVING WHEEL WHICH SPOKES SPEAK TO YOU?

Each of the spokes on the Simple Living Wheel represents a pathway people take to simple living. Please read the descriptions next to the 16 spokes around the wheel, and place a check next to the one(s) you can relate to. Share with the other people in your group.

Discuss:

- Would you agree that all these paths lead to simple living?
- Give specific examples of how these spokes may be interconnected.



Simplicity Matters Earth Institute

www.simplicity-matters.org

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EXCERPT FROM "THE GOSPEL OF CONSUMPTION"

By Jeffrey Kaplan

Private cars were relatively scarce in 1919 and horse-drawn conveyances were still common. In residential districts, electric streetlights had not yet replaced many of the old gaslights. And within the home, electricity remained largely a luxury item for the wealthy.

Just ten years later things looked very different. Cars dominated the streets and most urban homes had electric lights, electric flat irons, and vacuum cleaners. In upper-middle-class houses, washing machines, refrigerators, toasters, curling irons, percolators, heating pads, and popcorn poppers were becoming commonplace. And although the first commercial radio station didn't begin broadcasting until 1920, the American public, with an adult population of about 122 million people, bought 4,438,000 radios in the year 1929 alone.

But despite the apparent tidal wave of new consumer

goods and what appeared to be a healthy appetite for their consumption among the well-to-do, industrialists were worried. They feared that the frugal habits maintained by most American families would be difficult to break. Perhaps even more threatening was the fact that the industrial capacity for turning out goods seemed to be increasing at a pace greater than people's sense that they needed them.

It was this latter concern that led Charles Kettering, director of General Motors Research, to write a 1929 magazine article called "Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied." He wasn't suggesting that manufacturers produce shoddy products. Along with many of his corporate cohorts, he was defining a strategic shift for American industry — from fulfilling basic human needs to creating new ones.

In a 1927 interview with the magazine *Nation's Business*, Secretary of Labor James J. Davis provided some numbers to illustrate a problem that the *New York Times* called "need saturation." Davis noted that "the textile mills of this country can produce all the cloth needed in six months' operation each year" and that 14 percent of the American shoe factories could produce a year's supply of footwear. The

magazine went on to suggest, “It may be that the world’s needs ultimately will be produced by three days’ work a week.”

By the late 1920s, America’s business and political elite had found a way to defuse the dual threat of stagnating economic growth and a radicalized working class in what one industrial consultant called “the gospel of consumption” — the notion that people could be convinced that however much they have, it isn’t enough. President Herbert Hoover’s 1929 Committee on Recent Economic Changes observed in glowing terms the results: “By advertising and other promotional devices... a measurable pull on production has been created which releases capital otherwise tied up.” They celebrated the conceptual breakthrough: “Economically we have a boundless field before us; that there are new wants which will make way endlessly for newer wants, as fast as they are satisfied.”

From the earliest days of the Age of Consumerism there were critics. One of the most influential was Arthur Dahlberg, whose 1932 book *Jobs, Machines, and Capitalism* was well known to policymakers and elected officials in Washington. Dahlberg declared that “failure to shorten the length of the working day... is the primary cause of our rationing of opportunity, our excess industrial plant, our enormous wastes of competition, our high pressure advertising, [and] our economic imperialism.”

There was, for a time, a visionary alternative. In 1930 Kellogg Company, the world’s leading producer of ready-to-eat cereal, announced that all of its nearly fifteen hundred workers would move from an eight-hour to a six-hour workday. Company president Lewis Brown and owner W. K. Kellogg noted that if the company ran “four six-hour shifts... instead of three eight-hour shifts, this will give work and paychecks to the heads of three hundred more families in Battle Creek.”

This was welcome news to workers at a time when the country was rapidly descending into the Great Depression. But as Benjamin Hunnicutt explains in his book *Kellogg’s Six-Hour Day*, Brown and Kellogg wanted to do more than save jobs. They hoped to show that the “free exchange of goods, services, and labor in the free market would not have to mean mindless consumerism or eternal exploitation of people and natural resources.” Instead “workers would be liberated by increasingly higher wages and shorter hours for the final freedom promised by the Declaration of Independence — the pursuit of happiness.”

To be sure, Kellogg did not intend to stop making a profit. But the company leaders argued that men and women would work more efficiently on shorter shifts, and with more people employed, the overall purchasing power of the community would increase, thus allowing for more purchases of goods, including cereals.

A shorter workday did entail a cut in overall pay for

workers. But Kellogg raised the hourly rate to partially offset the loss and provided for production bonuses to encourage people to work hard. The company eliminated time off for lunch, assuming that workers would rather work their shorter shift and leave as soon as possible. In a “personal letter” to employees, Brown pointed to the “mental income” of “the enjoyment of the surroundings of your home, the place you work, your neighbors, the other pleasures you have [that are] harder to translate into dollars and cents.” Greater leisure, he hoped, would lead to “higher standards in school and civic... life” that would benefit the company by allowing it to “draw its workers from a community where good homes predominate.”

It was an attractive vision, and it worked. Not only did Kellogg prosper, but journalists from magazines such as *Forbes* and *BusinessWeek* reported that the great majority of company employees embraced the shorter workday. One reporter described “a lot of gardening and community beautification, athletics and hobbies... libraries well patronized and the mental background of these fortunate workers... becoming richer.”

A U.S. Department of Labor survey taken at the time, as well as interviews Hunnicutt conducted with former workers, confirm this picture. The government interviewers noted that “little dissatisfaction with lower earnings resulting from the decrease in hours was expressed, although in the majority of cases very real decreases had resulted.” One man spoke of “more time at home with the family.” Another remembered: “I could go home and have time to work in my garden.” A woman noted that the six-hour shift allowed her husband to “be with 4 boys at ages it was important.”

This was the stuff of a human ecology in which thousands of small, almost invisible, interactions between family members, friends, and neighbors create an intricate structure that supports social life in much the same way as





topsoil supports our biological existence. When we allow either one to become impoverished, whether out of greed or intemperance, we put our long-term survival at risk.

Yet we could work and spend a lot less and still live quite comfortably. By 1991 the amount of goods and services produced for each hour of labor was double what it had been in 1948. By 2006 that figure had risen another 30 percent. In other words, if as a society we made a collective decision to get by on the amount we produced and consumed seventeen years ago, we could cut back from the standard forty-hour week to 5.3 hours per day — or 2.7 hours if we were willing to return to the 1948 level. We were already the richest country on the planet in 1948 and most of the world has not yet caught up to where we were then.

Rather than realizing the enriched social life that Kellogg's vision offered us, we have impoverished our human communities with a form of materialism that leaves us in relative isolation from family, friends, and neighbors. We simply don't have time for them. Unlike our great-grandparents who passed the time, we spend it. An outside observer might conclude that we are in the grip of some strange curse, like a modern-day King Midas whose touch turns everything into a product built around a microchip.

Of course not everybody has been able to take part in the buying spree on equal terms. Millions of Americans work long hours at poverty wages while many others can find no work at all. However, as advertisers well know, poverty does not render one immune to the gospel of consumption.

Meanwhile, the influence of the gospel has spread far beyond the land of its origin. Most of the clothes, video players, furniture, toys, and other goods Americans buy today are made in distant countries, often by underpaid people working in sweatshop conditions. The raw material

for many of those products comes from clearcutting or strip mining or other disastrous means of extraction. Here at home, business activity is centered on designing those products, financing their manufacture, marketing them — and counting the profits.

Kellogg's vision, despite its popularity with his employees, had little support among his fellow business leaders. But Dahlberg's book had a major influence on Senator (and future Supreme Court justice) Hugo Black who, in 1933, introduced legislation requiring a thirty-hour workweek. Although Roosevelt at first appeared to support Black's bill, he soon sided with the majority of businessmen who opposed it. Instead, Roosevelt went on to launch a series of policy initiatives that led to the forty-hour standard that we more or less observe today.

By the time the Black bill came before Congress, the prophets of the gospel of consumption had been developing their tactics and techniques for at least a decade. However, as the Great Depression deepened, the public mood was uncertain, at best, about the proper role of the large corporation. Labor unions were gaining in both public support and legal legitimacy, and the Roosevelt administration, under its New Deal program, was implementing government regulation of industry on an unprecedented scale. Many corporate leaders saw the New Deal as a serious threat. James A. Emery, general counsel for the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), issued a "call to arms" against the "shackles of irrational regulation" and the "back-breaking burdens of taxation," characterizing the New Deal doctrines as "alien invaders of our national thought."

In response, the industrial elite represented by NAM, including General Motors, the big steel companies, General Foods, DuPont, and others, decided to create their own propaganda. An internal NAM memo called for "re-selling all of the individual Joe Doakes on the advantages and benefits he enjoys under a competitive economy." NAM launched a massive public relations campaign it called the "American Way." As the minutes of a NAM meeting described it, the purpose of the campaign was to link "free enterprise in the public consciousness with free speech, free press and free religion as integral parts of democracy." [A] J. Walter Thompson advertising agency told readers that under "private capitalism, the *Consumer*, the *Citizen* is boss," and "he doesn't have to wait for election day to vote. [...] The consumer 'votes' each time he buys one article and rejects another."

NAM formed a national network of groups to ensure that the booklet from J. Walter Thompson and similar material appeared in libraries and school curricula across the country. The campaign also placed favorable articles in newspapers (often citing "independent" scholars who were paid secretly) and created popular magazines and

film shorts directed to children and adults with such titles as “Building Better Americans,” “The Business of America’s People Is Selling,” and “America Marching On.”

People in the depression-wracked 1930s, with what seems to us today to be a very low level of material goods, readily chose fewer work hours for the same reasons as some of their children and grandchildren did in the 1980s: to have more time for themselves and their families. We could, as a society, make a similar choice today.

But we cannot do it as individuals. The mavericks at Kellogg held out against company and social pressure for years, but in the end the marketplace didn’t offer them a choice to work less and consume less. The reason is simple: that choice is at odds with the foundations of the marketplace itself — at least as it is currently constructed. The men and women who masterminded the creation of the consumerist society understood that theirs was a political undertaking, and it will take a powerful political movement to change course today.

As far back as 1835, Boston workingmen striking for shorter hours declared that they needed time away from work to be good citizens: “We have rights, and we have duties to perform as American citizens and members of society.” As those workers well understood, any meaningful democracy requires citizens who are empowered to create and re-create their government, rather than a mass of marginalized voters who merely choose from what is offered by an “invisible” government. Citizenship requires a commitment of time and attention, a commitment people cannot make if they are lost to themselves in an ever-accelerating cycle of work and consumption.

We can break that cycle by turning off our machines when they have created enough of what we need. Doing so will give us an opportunity to re-create the kind of healthy communities that were beginning to emerge with Kellogg’s six-hour day, communities in which human welfare is the overriding concern rather than subservience to machines and those who own them. We can create a society where people have time to play together as well as work together, time to act politically in their common interests, and time even to argue over what those common interests might be. That fertile mix of human relationships is necessary for healthy human societies, which in turn are necessary for sustaining a healthy planet.

If we want to save the Earth, we must also save ourselves from ourselves. We can start by sharing the work *and* the wealth. We may just find that there is plenty of both to go around.

Jeffrey Kaplan is a writer and activist in the Bay Area. This article is taken from “The Gospel of Consumption” by Jeffrey Kaplan, *Orion Magazine*, May/June 2008.



TAKE YOUR TIME

By Heather Menzies

As I reach to get the bowl from its resting place on the cupboard shelf, at some point in the bowl’s descent voluntary simplicity suddenly makes sense. The bowl sits comfortably in the spread of my hand as I carry it to the counter, as I’ve carried it for well over twenty years, carefully packing and unpacking it through at least three moves and all the ups and downs of married life, including the final move when my marriage was over. It’s a medium-sized pottery bowl, so perfectly rounded that if I had two and stuck them together they’d happily roll across the floor. Turning it over to check the artist’s name, I see spiral marks from the wheel that spun this shape into being under the wet and steady hands of a woman in Dundas, Ontario. She left a lot of the natural clay color to glow through the glaze and decorated the side with simple motifs that look like a series of butterflies and a stuttering border of luminous lapis lazuli. When I get out the bowl, I often think of my dear cousins Jennifer and Jessica Bayne, who gave it to me as a wedding present. I also remember how I used it

once to make Jell-O when my son Donald had his tonsils out, and how many times I've served beans or broccoli in it when friends had been over for dinner. As I hold and heft its familiar shape and weight, I realize how much it holds me, too. With its memories spilling over the blue-limned top, I realize how much it plays me back to myself. As it does, it also slows me down as the associations catch my attention.

I'd always thought the voluntary simplicity movement was just about rich people jettisoning excess stuff in life and feeling smug. Still, I could see the merit in paring down the things you have to buy and throw out, buy, upgrade, maintain and replace, plus worry about having stolen in a break-in. I've become a convert now that I realize voluntary simplicity is also about recovering a sense of self in local and personal things, and feeling anchored in place and time through them. We end up wanting less because we get that much more out of what we have. What philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin called the "aura," the "authentic" presence of an object imbued with the character of a place because the people who made it and used it wove their particular talents and traditions into it, applies also to people. It's through time, then, that objects and people



take on the distinctive character of place. Of course, this is precisely what gets lost when objects become mere commodities in the standardized space-time compressions of the global economy. And it's our individual selves that get worn away when we're going too fast, on-line and off, buying into new identities and investments, getting more things, getting more things done faster, processing our lives in a blur of fast-forwarding efficiency and servicing all the technology.

As I peer inside the bowl, I see a slight abrasion in the glaze at the bottom. I've left my mark, I realize, the mark of my serving spoon and my mother's Depression-era thriftiness in scraping the bowl clean every time. In a way it's like looking in a mirror.

ZEN AND THE ART OF SLOWING DOWN

Not long ago I read an article about the Japanese tea ceremony, or *sadou*, and how it can help overcome stress. It's a lovely essay, describing and explaining the philosophical precepts behind every step in the traditional ceremony: the gathering of the few familiar things for making the tea, the importance of soft lighting and delicate incense in a place set aside specifically for this purpose, ideally with a low doorway so that everyone bows his or her head and enters humbly, as equals. Inside the room, the meditative anticipation while waiting for the water to come to the boil and for the tea to steep is just as important. The idea in repeating the same simple motions each time is not to perfect the technique and the task but to go beyond the details, to go with the flow of tea time and re-embed one's self in the primal rhythms of life. The ritual serves as a medium for slowing down, a meditative process for transforming clock time into lived time.

By participating in a tea ceremony we reweave space and time according to our own felt rhythms, such as breathing. We reconstitute ourselves through the rhythms of the ritual involved and emerge with our minds "cleared," our awareness "sharpened" and possibly, too, with renewed energy to face the responsibilities of our lives. Each time we do it we are also reminded that we can live consciously, conscious of ourselves and the values we live by, fully present and attuned to life around us. We are agents. We do have a choice.

I have to confess that I haven't quite succeeded in creating a proper tea ceremony, as I sometimes lapse into multi-tasking while waiting for the water to boil and the tea to steep for a whole four minutes! Still, if there's a zen, a meditative aspect of tea, we can bring this mind set to other parts of our lives: to walking and swimming, to taking a bath, to hanging laundry outside, particularly on a balmy spring day or even a glittering-cold January day when the sheets may instantly stiffen like cardboard, then gradually soften as the ice crystals miraculously evaporate, leaving a residue of fresh air. Meditation can take many forms. Some people

sit in absolute quiet and focus inward, “becoming intimate with your mind,” in the words of one practitioner, becoming “less wired” and more “in touch with myself,” in the words of another. Others use music as a medium, either making it themselves or listening to it (sometimes even to melodies specifically selected or synthesized as “sonic therapy”), attuning (even entraining) the vibrational rhythms of their bodies to those of the music.

We can slow down through simple, everyday things such as chopping vegetables by hand or making bread the old-fashioned way, with one’s hands kneading the dough back and forth, back and forth on a flour-dusted kitchen counter. We can reconnect with ourselves by spending time with our children when they are young. I remember swimming at a public pool one winter’s day and watching man and his son sitting on the side of the wading pool. Again and again the man bent over to fill a green-and-yellow plastic watering can, then he poured the water onto his thigh just in front of his child. I watched enthralled as each of the infant’s hands came up and played with the falling water as if it were the strings of a harp. Once the water was gone, he looked at the drops still lying on the skin of his father’s bare thigh. He patted the water with the flat of his hand, sending beads flying in all directions. The water all gone, he looked up, and the father bent to fill the can once more. As I watched the simple drama, I imagined the action taking the father back to that basic space-time, and I realized that my own rhythm was being slowed down too as I swam my lengths.

Now that my own child has grown up, I find that going for long, solitary walks works well (bicycling or roller blading are okay, but walking still is the simplest). If possible, I choose a route beside a river, a lake or even an ocean if I can be so lucky, where the wash of water pulls me into the rhythms of tidal time and of my own beating heart. I find that I need at least an hour every day because for the first half hour I’m still processing all the stuff I couldn’t quite leave behind when I turned off the computer and left the house. I will briefly notice, say, a bit of acid-yellow lichen on the side of an elm tree, but so often I’m seeing only like a camera: merely processing information, not really taking it all in, but if I keep on walking, if I consciously focus on my breathing, almost using its rhythm as a mantra, I can feel myself drop back into my body, feel myself coming awake inside. My eyes begin to “feel” what they see. It’s almost as though my whole being reaches out through my eyes when I’m into the slowed-down phase of my walk. I don’t just see, I understand, and I feel for each thing that I’m looking at. I am present, fully present to myself and to the universe just beyond my skin.

This reading was excerpted from the novel *No Time* (2005) by Heather Menzies. Menzies is an award-winning Canadian writer and scholar, a long-time activist in the women’s movement, and is committed to social justice and cultural politics.



DO HIGH-CONSUMPTION LEVELS IMPROVE HUMAN WELL-BEING?

Ultimately, whether high consumption levels make people better off is irrelevant if they lead to the degradation of Earth’s systems, as ecological decline will undermine human well-being for the majority of society in the long term. But even assuming this threat were not looming, there is strong evidence that higher levels of consumption do not significantly increase the quality of life beyond a certain point, and they may even reduce it. First, psychological evidence suggests that it is close relationships, a meaningful life, economic security, and health that contribute most to well-being. While there are marked improvements in happiness when people at low levels of income earn more (as their economic security improves and their range of opportunities grows), as incomes increase this extra earning power converts less effectively into increased happiness. In part, this may stem from people’s tendency to habituate to the consumption level they are exposed to. Goods that were once perceived as luxuries can over time be seen as entitlements or even necessities.

By the 1960s, for instance, the Japanese already viewed a fan, a washing machine, and electric rice cookers as essential goods for a satisfactory living standard. In due course, a car, an air conditioner, and a color television were



added to the list of “essentials.” And in the United States, 83 percent of people saw clothes dryers as a necessity in 2006. Even products around only a short time quickly become viewed as necessities. Half of Americans now think they must have a mobile phone, and one third of them see a high-

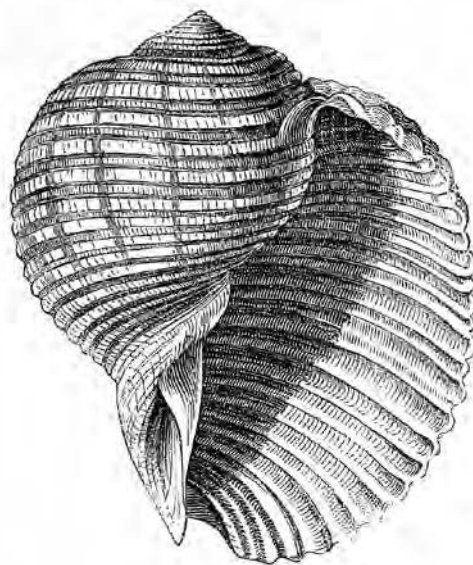
speed Internet connection as essential.

A high-consumption lifestyle can also have many side effects that do not improve well-being, from increased work stress and debt to more illness and a greater risk of death. Each year roughly half of all deaths worldwide are caused by cancers, cardiovascular and lung diseases, diabetes, and auto accidents. Many of these deaths are caused or at least largely influenced by individual consumption choices such as smoking, being sedentary, eating too few fruits and vegetables, and being overweight. Today 1.6 billion people around the world are overweight or obese, lowering their quality of life and shortening their lives, for the obese, by 3 to 10 years on average.

Compiled by the Worldwatch Institute, an organization that “delivers the insights and ideas that empower decision makers to create an environmentally sustainable society that meets human needs.” This article was featured in *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures*. www.worldwatch.org

The voyage of discovery
lies not in finding new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.

— MARCEL PROUST



LIVING MORE WITH LESS

To live a pure unselfish life, one must count nothing as one's own in the midst of abundance.

— BUDDHA

SESSION GOALS

- To understand when possessions and technologies add satisfaction to our lives and when they distract us from what is most important.
- To explore in more depth the desire to acquire more things and the role advertising plays in fueling that desire.
- To use the Action Plan to set goals around simplicity and get started with putting them into practice.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Our consumer- and technology-driven culture promotes the constant acquisition of things: goods, luxuries, information, gadgets. The authors in this session examine consumerism and how it impacts our personal lives, the culture and the natural world.

In the first reading, “When It’s All Too Much,” Barry Schwartz describes how an overabundance of choice can lead to feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

In an excerpt from *Stepping Lightly* Mark Burch examines the ubiquity of advertising in daily life and offers suggestions for developing a “self-defense” against its influence.

Shannon Hayes, in her article on “Homemade Prosperity” outlines how she and her family have created their own wealth by choosing to do work that is meaningful and focusing on production instead on consumption.

In “Attached to Technology and Paying a Price,” Matt Richtel tells the story of Campbell family and how their constant connection to technology affects their lives. In the final reading, “When Enough is Enough,” Marina Schaufler suggests that a counterbalance to consumerism lies in the “more than-human world.”

After completing the readings, turn to the chart on page 27 to continue developing a personal Action Plan. The chart focuses on the session’s theme of consumerism and provides guidelines for thinking about how to incorporate changes into your daily life. Please give yourself at least 15 minutes to complete the chart and questions before your group meets.