

INTRODUCTION

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Is consumer culture the ultimate fulfillment of human destiny? Or are we entitled to hope for something more? Our current use of language, it must be said, does not bode well for those of us who live in hope, for consider what today is proudly called the 'developed world': In the face of extreme poverty we see gross overconsumption; in the face of environmental degradation we see a fetishistic obsession with economic growth; in the face of social decay and spiritual malaise we see a vast corporate wasteland eating away at the future of humanity. Our collective imagination lies dormant. *What is to be done? How now shall we live?*

Intended as an invitation to an alternative way of life, this anthology brings together some of the most important literature on the post-consumerist living strategy known as 'voluntary simplicity.' Our planet urgently needs us to explore alternative ways to live, and one promising way to lessen our impact on nature is to voluntarily embrace 'a simpler life' of reduced consumption. From various perspectives, the chapters explore what this way of life might involve and, just as importantly, what it does not involve. They also consider what potential or significance it has as a quietly emerging people's movement, and what its limitations might be. The central message of this book is that by *lowering* our 'standard of living' we can actually *increase* our 'quality of life.' Paradoxical though it may sound, voluntary simplicity is about living more with less.

Since there may be some who are unfamiliar with the term 'voluntary simplicity,' I thought I should begin this introduction by offering a preliminary definition of the basic idea. After doing so I will outline various ways that voluntary simplicity can be *justified* as a way of life, and I will also spend a short time discussing the *practice* of simplicity and the *attitudes* that make the practice of simplicity possible.

How one should respond to these issues is a creative and intimately personal matter – the following pages contain more questions than answers – but I wish to highlight the point that voluntary simplicity is an expression of human freedom and an affirmation of life, and I believe that this book requires evaluation in these terms.

All these matters and many more will be explored in detail throughout this comprehensive collection of celebrated writing. I will conclude this introduction by providing a brief overview of each chapter.

What Is Voluntary Simplicity?

Allow me to spend a moment laying some groundwork and trying to put this discussion in some context.

The economic problem of how to provide for ourselves and our families, of how to secure the necessities of life, has been solved for the vast majority of ordinary people in western society. We are fabulously wealthy when considered in the context of all known history or when compared to the three billion human beings who today subsist on one or two dollars per day. As one leading economist has noted, 'Most westerners today are prosperous beyond the dreams of their grandparents.' The houses of typical families are bigger than ever and they are each filled with untold numbers of consumer products, like multiple TVs, racks of unused clothes, washing machines, dish-washers, dryers, vacuum cleaners, kitchen gadgets, garages full of 'stuff'; etc. Houses are often centrally heated and have air-conditioning, with spare rooms, and two cars parked outside. It is nothing for an average parent to spend one hundred dollars on a present for a child or to buy them a personal mobile phone. Most of us have spare income to spend on take-out food, alcohol, going to the movies, books, taking holidays, etc. We generally have access to sophisticated health care and free primary and secondary education. On top of all this, we live in a democracy, our water is clean, and almost nobody goes hungry.

All this is indicative of a society that has attained unprecedented wealth, which I am not about to suggest is a bad thing, necessarily. But it is a prosperity which has proven extremely easy to take for granted, leaving many in the global middleclass still complaining about the hardness of their lot, and feeling deprived despite their plenty.

What I am suggesting is that western society is, at last, rich enough to be truly free, free from material want; although, as I have implied, not many people seem willing to accept that this is so. Is it because the prospect of freedom is terrifying? Perhaps it is terrifying because, once we recognize the sufficiency of our material situations and are able to quench the upward creep of material desire, we are forced to give an answer to that great question of what to *do* with the radical freedom that material sufficiency provides – a freedom which I believe is on offer to us today. But rather than facing this ultimate human question, many people today seem to have climbed or fallen upon a consumerist treadmill, and become enslaved, consciously or unconsciously, to a lifestyle in which too much consumption is never enough. There is no end to consumer cravings, for as soon as one is satisfied, two pop up. The goal in life does not seem to be material sufficiency, but material excess. In such cases, it seems to me, a life of freedom does not often arise. That so few recognize this is my greatest temptation to despair.

Despite the fact that western society is several times richer than it was in the 50s, at the beginning of the 21st century we are confronted by what Clive Hamilton (a contributor to this anthology) has called an ‘awful fact.’ Despite the unprecedented levels of material wealth, there is a growing body of social science which indicates that people today are no more satisfied with their lives than people were in the 50s and 60s.² In other words, it seems that increases in personal and social wealth have stopped increasing our wellbeing. *Getting richer is no longer making us any happier.* It is troubling, therefore, to see that our whole society is geared towards *maximizing wealth*. As Henry David Thoreau would say, ‘We labor under a mistake.’

Is it possible that we have reached a stage in our economic development where the process of getting richer is now causing the very problems that we seem to think getting richer will solve? As one of Thoreau’s disciples, I wish to suggest that we have. I wish to suggest that, however suitable the pursuit of more wealth and higher standards of living were in the past, today that pursuit has become not just wasteful but dangerously counter-productive – fetishistic, even. Consumer culture, which everyday is being globalized further, has failed and is still failing to fulfill its promise of a better life. It has even begun taking away many of things upon which our wellbeing depends, such as community life, a work/life balance, spiritual and aesthetic experience, and a healthy natural environment. We can no longer just fall in line, then, and continue the march ‘business as usual.’ We must explore alternative ways to live. We must experiment creatively, like the artist. *We must be the poets of our own lives and of a new generation.*

That is the invitation/incitation embodied in this book.

A Preliminary Definition

Voluntary simplicity is a post-consumerist living strategy that *rejects* the materialistic lifestyle of consumer culture and *affirms* what is often just called ‘the simple life,’ or ‘downshifting.’ The rejection of consumerism arises from the recognition that ordinary western consumption habits are destroying the planet; that lives of high consumption are unethical in a world of great human need; and that the meaning of life does not and cannot consist in the consumption or accumulation of material things. Extravagance and acquisitiveness are thus considered a despairing waste of life, not so much sad as foolish, and certainly not deserving of the social status and admiration they seem to attract today. The affirmation of simplicity arises from the recognition that very little is needed to live well – that abundance is a state of mind, not a quantity of consumer products, nor attainable through them.

Sometimes called ‘the quiet revolution,’ this approach to life involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimizing expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively

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more time and energy towards pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. This generally means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in exchange for more time and freedom to pursue other life goals, such as community or social engagements, family time, artistic or intellectual projects, more fulfilling employment, political participation, sustainable living, spiritual exploration, reading, conversation, contemplation, relaxation, pleasure-seeking, love, and so on – none of which need to rely on money. The grounding assumption of voluntary simplicity is that human beings are inherently capable of living meaningful, free, happy, and infinitely diverse lives, while consuming no more than an equitable share of nature. Ancient but ever-new, the message is that those who know they have enough are rich.

According to this view, personal and social progress is measured not by the conspicuous display of wealth or status, but by increases in the qualitative richness of daily living, the cultivation of relationships, and the development of social, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual potentials. As Duane Elgin (a contributor to this anthology) has famously defined it, voluntary simplicity is ‘a manner of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich, ... a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more life will be returned to us in the process.’³

Voluntary simplicity does *not*, however, mean living in poverty, becoming an ascetic monk, or indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not involve regressing to a primitive state or becoming a self-righteous puritan. And it is not some escapist fad reserved for saints, hippies, or eccentric outsiders. Rather, by examining afresh our relationship with money, material possessions, the planet, ourselves and each other, ‘the simple life’ of voluntary simplicity is about discovering the freedom and contentment that comes with knowing how much consumption is truly ‘enough.’ And this might be a theme that has something to say to everyone, especially those of us who are everyday bombarded with thousands of cultural and institutional messages insisting that ‘more is always better.’ Voluntary simplicity is an art of living that is aglow with the insight that ‘just enough is plenty.’

The spirit of late capitalist society, however, cries out like a banshee for us to expend our lives pursuing middleclass luxuries and colored paper, for us to become faceless bodies dedicated to no higher purpose than the acquisition of nice things. We can embrace that comfortable unfreedom if we wish, that bourgeois compromise. But it is not the only way to live.

Voluntary simplicity presents an alternative.

What Voluntary Simplicity Is Not

So as not to be misunderstood, I now wish to clarify and elaborate on a few points that I have just made, by distinguishing voluntary simplicity from what it is *not*.

Voluntary simplicity is not a glorification of poverty. Nor does it deny that a small percentage of people in western society, and a large percentage around the rest of the world, still live lives oppressed by material deprivation. Far from glorifying or ignoring poverty, voluntary simplicity is about the importance of understanding and attaining material *sufficiency*, a concept that is all but unthinkable in a culture that generally assumes that ‘more is always better.’ My point is that living simply involves having an honest answer to the question of ‘How much consumption is enough?’, and then honestly attaining that much, and not bothering with superfluities. And the Voluntary Simplicity Movement is demonstrating, through the lives of millions of participants, that surprisingly little is needed to live well and to be free, if only life is approached with the right attitude.

Just as voluntary simplicity does not mean living in poverty, nor does it imply that people must leave the city to live to the country or join a hippie commune. Although some may decide that, for example, the life of an independent, self-sufficient rural farmer is a very good and natural way to live, it will not be for everybody; nor will joining a hippie commune. Indeed, learning how to live more sustainably in an urban setting strikes me as one of the greatest challenges of our age, especially since our political and economic institutions and our social infrastructure make urban simple living, especially, much more difficult than it needs to be, a point which I will touch on again later. For now, suffice it to say that voluntary simplicity is not synonymous with the ‘back to the land movement’ or the counter-cultures that arose in the 60s and 70s. I should note, however, that these movements do share some common ideals with voluntary simplicity, such as anti-consumerism, a reverence for nature, and non-violent resistance to unjust features of our society.

Voluntary simplicity, furthermore, does not mean indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not mean living in a cave, giving up electricity, or rejecting modern medicine. But it does question the assumption that science and technology are the only paths to health, happiness, and freedom. To live simply, as I am using the phrase, is to at least put one’s mind to the question of whether some new technology or scientific discovery actually improves our lives, or whether, on the contrary, it ultimately costs us more than it comes to, in terms of ‘life.’ Furthermore, the simple liver might come to see that there is a certain elegance and sophistication to the clothesline or the bicycle that the washing machine and the automobile decidedly lack. The simple liver will not build

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a ten billion dollar, hi-tech, desalination plant. The simple liver will install a water tank and think up ways to use less water. Rather than using central heating, the simple liver will be inclined to put on a sweater. And so on and so forth. Soon enough a new form of life emerges.

Why Simplify?

Now that I have offered a preliminary definition of voluntary simplicity, I wish to say a few words on why, exactly, we might want to adopt voluntary simplicity, why we might want to step out of the rush and begin shaping a simple life of our own.

I have divided my discussion of this question into four overlapping sections – personal, social, environmental, and spiritual.

Personal

Consumer culture can distract us from what is best in our lives, and it functions to keep many locked in a work-and-spend cycle that has no end and attains no lasting satisfaction. But if we rethink our relationship with money and possessions, we may be able to free up more time and energy for the pursuit of what truly inspires us and makes us happy, whatever that may be. In this way voluntary simplicity can be seen to enhance the meaning of our lives.

I begin with this point not because it is the most important, necessarily, but because I believe that if the Voluntary Simplicity Movement is to expand, it must be shown that simple living does not generate deprivations, but actually frees people from an insidiously addictive consumerism and an unhealthy relationship with money and 'stuff.'

Rather than dedicating one's life to the pursuit of riches or status, simple livers are more likely to have a balanced working life or even work part-time, and are more likely to seek fulfilling employment and accept a modest income, rather than get too hung up about a high salary. With less time devoted to acquiring expensive things, simple livers will have more time to spend with friends and family, and more time to spend pursuing their private passions or enjoying their civic responsibilities. The point is that disciplined and enlightened moderation with respect to our material lives will not tend to give rise to any sense of deprivation, but will ultimately lead to a happiness, a satisfaction, and a freedom far greater than that which is ordinarily known in the hectic, dead-end lifestyles of consumer culture. In short, many are drawn to simplicity because they want to escape the rat race and live more with less.

Social

Although there are indeed many personal incentives for adopting voluntary simplicity, it would be an impoverished philosophy that sought to justify itself only in relation to personal self-interest. For that reason, it is important to recognize that there are also many *social* and *humanitarian* reasons for adopting voluntary simplicity. Living simply can be a powerful lifestyle response to social injustices, and many people are drawn to simplicity because it can be understood to be an act of sharing, an act of human solidarity. It can therefore foster a heightened sense of human community, both locally and globally.

One obvious way to share with others is simply to take less, to try to take only what one needs for a dignified life, and no more. This may not be easy, but it could be said that before the problem of global poverty can ever be solved, those in the consuming middleclass will need to show some enlightened, compassionate restraint in relation to their material lives, and accept that in a world of great human need the wasteful consumption of material things is an unambiguous act of violence.

The global population is expected to approach ten billion by the end of this century, and trends indicate that most of these extra souls will find themselves born into the Third World. This, among other factors, has led the United Nations to publish several urgent and strongly worded warnings to the effect that if First World attitudes to consumption persist, then future generations not so far away should expect humanitarian crises beyond what we have ever experienced.⁴

Fortunately, at least part of the solution is at hand. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'

Environmental

As well as personal and social reasons for simplifying, there are, of course, also *environmental* reasons. It is becoming increasingly obvious to more and more people that simpler living, in some form or another, is needed to save our planet from real ecological disaster, and that lifestyles of reduced consumption will be a necessary part of any sustainable future for human civilization. We know this very well, I suspect, both in our heads and in our hearts, so I need not review the details of the environmental predicament which is beginning to define our age. Let me just assert, then, that simple living is one very promising way – if not *the* most promising way – to personally confront global environmental problems such as climate change, pollution, and the overconsumption of non-renewable resources. And given what is at stake here – the health of the life-support system we call Earth – perhaps this should be justification enough for everyone.

Spiritual

Finally, for immediate purposes, there are what could be called *spiritual* reasons for living simply. I acknowledge that I am now touching on a very private matter – ‘private,’ not because spiritual exploration must be done alone, but because nobody can do it for us. By shifting attention from the material to the non-material side of life, voluntary simplicity can facilitate a deeper awareness of the spiritual dimension of being. I will not now argue this point, however, since it is one that I suspect can only be experienced, not explained; at least, not explained by me. I will only say this: That if we take time to isolate ourselves from consumer culture for long enough to unlearn it, for long enough to rouse ourselves from the daze of unexamined habit and reopen the doors of perception, we just might provoke a surprisingly fresh interpretation of the form of life behind, as well as provoke a new appreciation of the possibilities of an alternative mode of being. In other words, when we let ourselves be enchanted by ordinary experience, it quickly becomes clear that ‘a simple life’ is a profoundly beautiful life, one that is exciting and worth living. For simplicity is nothing if it is not an affirmative state of mind, an authentic celebration of life, and it is a state of mind that often seems to reflect a mystical interpretation of life and a deep reverence for nature, even if one does not subscribe to any traditional religion nor any crude pantheism.

Earlier generations confronted spiritual questions face to face, we through their eyes. But why, as Emerson would insist, should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?

The Practice Of Simplicity

Having now defined voluntary simplicity and offered a few words on why we might embrace it as a living strategy, it is important, I think, to say at least a few words about the *practice* of simplicity, about ‘how’ exactly one might go about simplifying one’s life, and ‘how’ one might try to *live the idea*, if one were convinced that this way of life was desirable.

I will, however, be very brief on this aspect of simplicity, not because it isn’t important. Obviously, it is very important. But the fact is that there is no Doctrine or Code of Simplicity to follow, as such. There is no Method or Equation of Simplicity into which we can plug the facts of our lives and be told how to live. That is precisely what the idea cannot do – but perhaps that suits your disposition as well as it does mine.

Voluntary simplicity, as I have said, is more about questions than answers, which implies that practicing simplicity calls for creative interpretation and personalized application. It is not for me, therefore, or for anyone, to prescribe universal rules on how to live simply. We each live unique lives,

and we each find ourselves in different situations, with different capabilities, and different responsibilities. Accordingly, the practice of simplicity by one person, in one situation, will very likely involve different things to a different person, in a different situation. But, as I have implied, I do not think that this practical indeterminacy is an objection to the idea.

With that proviso noted, allow me say a few general and very brief words on what a simple life might look like and how one might begin to live it.

Money

Although living simply is much more than just living cheaply and consuming less, spending wisely plays an important role. The following exercise may surprise you: Over a one month period, record *every* purchase you make, and then categorize your expenses. Multiply each category by twelve to get a rough estimate of the annual cost. Then consider how much of your time and energy you spent obtaining the money required to buy everything you consumed that month. Question not only the *amount* of money you spent on each category, but also the *categories* on which you spent your money. You might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over a whole year, suggesting that the money might be better spent elsewhere, not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. One does not have to be a tightwad, as such, only thoughtful. ‘The cost of a thing,’ after all, ‘is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it.’⁵ You may find that some small changes to your spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, will instead be life-affirming.⁶

And when it comes to spending our money we should always bear in mind Vicki Robin’s profound democratic insight: That how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world. If this is true, then the global middleclass has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, simply by changing its spending habits. Money is power, and with this power comes responsibility.

I repeat: How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.

Shelter

Housing or accommodation is typically life’s greatest expense, so we should think especially carefully about where we live and why, and how much of our lives we are prepared to spend seeking a nicer home. Exactly what kind of shelter does one need to live well and to be free? Obviously, we must answer this question for ourselves, but again the words of Henry David Thoreau might give us a moment’s pause: ‘Most people appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives

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because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.⁷ The individual or family who today is admired for a large and luxurious house might find that our culture comes to admire those who have learned how to combine functional simplicity and beauty in a smaller, much more modest, home.⁸

Clothing

The historic purpose of clothing, of course, was to keep us warm and, in time, for reasons of modesty. Today its primary purpose seems to be fashion and the conspicuous display of wealth and status. People can, of course, spend thousands and thousands of dollars on clothing if they want, in search of themselves. But we should never forget that functional, second-hand clothing can be obtained extremely cheaply. And those who 'dress down' often express themselves more uniquely than those who are limited to the styles found in shopping malls or who try to imitate celebrities. Many hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each and every year on the fashion industry. Just imagine if even half of that money was redirected towards green energy or humanitarian initiatives? We would lose so little and gain so much.

Once again, how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.

Food

Eating locally, eating green, eating out in moderation, eating less meat, eating simply and creatively – I know by experience this can be done very cheaply. Given some thought and a little discipline, a good diet can be obtained at a surprisingly low cost, especially if you are able to cultivate your own garden, which is a very natural and strangely satisfying thing to do.

Work

I have just outlined, with a very broad brush, a voluntarily simplistic perspective on acquiring the most basic necessities of life – shelter, clothing, and food. Once upon a time these necessities could be obtained by hunting and gathering in the commons, but in our day and age, of course, they must be obtained through economic transactions in the marketplace, usually through the medium of money, which we must work to acquire. It is important to consider, therefore, however briefly, the question of employment.

When it comes to work, we would do well, I believe, to more carefully put our minds to the question of what our time is worth. For once we have obtained the necessities of life, and have acquired a few comforts appropriate for a dignified life, there is another alternative than to spend our

lives working to obtain material superfluities. And that is to pass up those superfluities and instead ‘adventure on life now,’ as Thoreau would say, ‘our vacation from humbler toil having commenced.’ From the perspective of voluntary simplicity, this exchange of money for time will often prove to be a very good trade.

If we keep raising our standard of living every time we come into more money, through a raise, for example; or if we keep raising our standard of living every time we become more productive, through some new technological development, for example; then we will never shorten our working week. Most westerners, especially North Americans, are working longer hours today than they were in the 50s,⁹ despite being many times richer and many times more productive. Why should we always be working for more consumer products and not sometimes be content with less? Why should we not accept a lower standard of living and work half as much? Who can say what wonders such a cultural style might not bring! The immediate point is simply that if we can embrace the simple life and stop the upward creep of material desire, then we can take some of our pay increases or increases in productivity, not in terms of dollars and things, but in ‘freedom’ instead. Again, this seems like it would be a very good trade — a no-brainer, even. But history suggests that most westerners will choose otherwise. The ruts of conformity run deep.

A Thumbnail Sketch

A comprehensive guide to simple living would obviously require much more space than is available here, so let me just round off this part of my discussion by summarizing what simple living *tends* to involve. It tends to involve thoughtful thrift and environmentally and socially conscientious spending habits. It can involve recognizing that there is no good reason for desperately trying to ‘keep up with the Joneses,’ since modest accommodation and few possessions are perfectly sufficient to live a free and happy life. Simple living can involve buying secondhand clothing and furniture, creating one’s own style, and rejecting high fashion. It might involve cultivating a garden, eating simply, locally, and creatively, and discovering that doing so can be both cheap and satisfying. And it might involve riding a bike instead of driving a car, choosing a washing line over a dryer, or even something as simple as choosing a book over television. Rather than stay at a luxurious resort, the simple liver might spend \$12 a night bush camping in midst of nature. Rather than work long hours to afford a life dedicated to consumption, the simple liver might step out of the rush and reduce working hours, freeing up more time to be creative, play a musical instrument, meditate, spend with friends / family, laugh etc. Rather than choose competition, the simple liver

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is likely to choose community. Not money, but meaning. And so on and so forth, until the elements of life have been transformed.

Despite these tentative remarks on how to practice simplicity, I wish to reiterate that there is not *one way* to live the simple life, and that anyone who wishes to embrace simplicity must be prepared to think over the idea for oneself, until it takes root in personal experience. I am convinced, however, both by faith and by experience, that if someone is genuinely committed to the idea of simplicity then that person, with a little courage and some imaginative effort, will find a way to shape a simple life of their own. Start with a few small steps, enjoy the adventure, and soon enough your life has changed.

The Call Of Simplicity

From what I have said so far, it should be clear that voluntary simplicity embodies a way of life that is very different from the high consumption, materialistic lifestyle that is widely celebrated in advanced capitalist society today. And it should be of concern to all those who are sympathetic to voluntary simplicity that this way of life is given very little serious attention by politicians and the mass media, two of the most powerful forces in our society. Our politicians and the mass media seem not just indifferent but fundamentally opposed to the idea of voluntary simplicity, despite the occasional lip-service that is paid to the social and environmental problems caused by overconsumption. It is little surprise, then, that to date the Voluntary Simplicity Movement has not entered the mainstream, although perhaps some light is beginning to break through the crust of convention, albeit with much difficulty.

The mass media, in particular, has very little interest in promoting voluntary simplicity, since it is, by in large, made up of privately owned corporations, each of which is driven almost exclusively by the incentive of private profits. Corporate shareholders, by definition, it seems, want us only to consume more and more — never less. Indeed, many of the world's most sophisticated psychologists are today hired by corporations as 'marketers,' and I do not think it misrepresents the situation to say that these marketers spend all day thinking up ways to make us — potential consumers — feel dissatisfied with what we have, despite our plenty, in order to get us buy things we didn't even know we wanted and certainly didn't need. The message they convey in their slick, ever-present advertisements is that more money, more material things, more consumption, is what is needed to improve our lives. And we are easily persuaded.

Disappointingly, we can perceive the very same message in the rhetoric of our so-called 'political representatives.' In the newspapers everyday, on

the television news every night, and throughout every political campaign I have ever experienced, political parties seem to assume that it is their overriding objective to maximize economic growth. Almost every political party, whether on the Left or the Right, claims that they will run the economy 'best,' by which it is implied that they will increase our standard of living, make us all richer, and make us better able to buy more things – as if that were the solution to all our problems.

This is a point that has been picked up on and criticized heavily by Clive Hamilton, who I mentioned earlier. To oversimplify slightly, he sums up contemporary public policy as follows: Unemployment is high: only economic growth can create the jobs; schools and hospitals are under-funded: economic growth will improve the budget; protection of the environment is too expensive: the solution is economic growth; poverty is entrenched: economic growth will rescue the poor; income distribution is unequal: economic growth will make everyone better off.¹⁰ Just as with the mass media, the point is that our politicians are telling us that more money and more consumer products are the key to a better life.

Voluntary simplicity rejects this approach. To repeat a phrase mentioned earlier, in stark contrast to the idea that 'more is always better,' voluntary simplicity is an art of living that is aglow with the insight that 'just enough is plenty.' But, whether we like it or not, most of us today have been educated into a materialistic culture that assumes the legitimacy of ever-higher levels of consumption. Even though we are now aware that ordinary western consumption habits are destroying the planet, we think that it is normal and acceptable for the mass media and our politicians to dedicate themselves to encouraging and facilitating ever higher levels of consumption. So embedded are we in consumer culture that these perversities seem natural and inevitable; facts of life; just the way the world is. An alternative is almost unthinkable and largely unspeakable.

When a whole society is geared towards producing and then consuming ever-more consumer products, it can be very difficult for people to live and think differently, even for those of us who want to. As I see it, there is no easy, silver-bullet, solution to this problem. But one step that can be taken is to dedicate more of our attention to exploring alternatives, and that was one motivation I had for publishing this book. Obviously, just *reading* and *talking* about voluntary simplicity is not enough to change our lives and our society, but I am convinced that it is an important and perhaps necessary first step. In a world such as ours, focused so intently on making money, it is important that we occasionally take time to step back and ask ourselves, 'What is money *for*?' and "What is our economy *for*?" For when we ask ourselves these questions, it quickly becomes apparent that the meaning of life does not and cannot consist in the consumption and accumulation of material things. There is more to life than desiring big houses, new carpet,

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fine clothing, expensive cars, and luxurious holidays, etc. There is freedom from such desires.

What I am suggesting, and what is discussed in this book, is that 'the simple life' is a viable alternative to consumer culture, one that will improve not only our own lives, but the lives of others, and, at the same time, help save the planet from the environmental catastrophe towards which we are so enthusiastically marching. By reading and talking about voluntary simplicity, I believe we can revolutionize – a term I do not use lightly – the form of life we have inherited from the past. By giving more attention to alternatives to consumer culture, we will discover that there are other, better, more fulfilling ways to live. By acting upon this realization, we can reshape our own lives, improve our culture, and upset the ruts of conformity. We can better face the social and environmental challenges which confront us today, and which will undoubtedly confront us for all of the foreseeable future. What we can be sure of is that the 21st century will be defined, to a large extent, by how we today deal with the problems caused by overconsumption – not only how we deal with them politically and economically, but perhaps most importantly how we deal with them through the everyday decisions we make in our private lives.

And it is for this reason that the idea of voluntary simplicity gives me such hope, because it shows (although perhaps this is obvious) that the power to change the world ultimately lies in the hands of ordinary people. It is a reminder that, in the end, the nature of a society is the product of nothing more or less than the countless number of small decisions made by private individuals.

The corollary of this is that those small decisions, those small acts of simplification – insignificant though they may seem in isolation – can be of revolutionary significance when added up and taken as a whole. And that, I wish to emphasize, is one of the central messages I would like to convey: *That if we are concerned about the direction our society is heading, and if we seek a different way of life, then we must first look to our own lives, and begin making changes there, and not be disheartened by the fact that our social, economic, and political institutions embody outdated materialistic values that we ourselves reject.*

As Gandhi once said, in a phrase that captures the revolutionary spirit of voluntary simplicity: 'Be the change you wish to see in the world.' This inspiring call to personal action complements the call of another great simple liver, Henry David Thoreau, who never tired of reminding us that, 'The individual who goes it alone can start today.' The point, as I understand it, is that there is no reason, nor is there any time, to wait for politicians to deal with the problems that we face. For what the world needs more than anything else is for brave visionaries to quietly step out of the rat race and show, by example,

both to themselves and to others, that a different way of life is both possible and desirable.

Let us, then, be pioneers once more.

Chapter Overviews

The contributors to this anthology – all leading figures in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement – are highly distinguished scholars, activists, educators, and artists. Brought together so comprehensively for the first time, the result is a collection of the very best writing on one of today's most important but neglected ideas. The great advantage of an 'anthology' is that by bringing together diverse minds and mixing perspectives and styles, the reader is exposed to a richness, depth, and variety of analysis that makes for a perfect introduction for the student of simplicity, and, at the same time, results in a valuable resource for those who have already studied the literature. That, at least, was my goal in publishing this deliberately long book.

In order to give the reader some insight into how this anthology unfolds and the central themes it addresses, below I have provided short summaries of each chapter. The book will then be left to speak for itself.

1. Voluntary Simplicity: The 'Middle Way' to Sustainability

Mark A. Burch

Since this anthology is intended to be accessible to the reader who is unfamiliar with voluntary simplicity, it made sense to open with a close analysis of what the term means. Accordingly, in Chapter One, Mark A. Burch provides an extended definitional statement of voluntary simplicity and discusses the core ideals and values underpinning it. Addressing issues such as material sufficiency, anti-consumerism, minimalism, self-reliance, and environmental sustainability, Burch shows how 'simple living' is both a humble, personal endeavor, and at the same time a socially, economically, and politically radical form of life. I know of no better introduction to the subject.

2. A New Social Movement?

Amatai Etzioni

In Chapter Two, Amatai Etzioni examines the Voluntary Simplicity Movement with regard to its sociological significance as a possible counterbalance to mainstream capitalist society. Etzioni acknowledges that whether the movement expands will depend a great deal upon whether it is perceived as generating deprivations, or whether it is found to liberate people from

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an obsessive and possibly addictive consumerism. After critically reviewing a large body of social science, Etzioni is led to the conclusion that, not far beyond the poverty line, there is only a very weak correlation between having more money and increased wellbeing. In other words, it seems that once human beings have their basic needs securely met, and have acquired a modicum of comforts appropriate for a dignified life, further increases in wealth have a fast diminishing and at times even negative impact on human wellbeing. The far-reaching implications of these mutually reinforcing studies cannot be brushed aside: if increases in income beyond a modest level tend to stop increasing wellbeing, then the pursuit of ever-more wealth quickly begins to look not just wasteful but counter-productive – fetishistic, even. A profound intellectual challenge to the ideology of consumer capitalism, this astute sociological analysis establishes the Voluntary Simplicity Movement as a promising counter-cultural force.

3. Two Ways of Thinking About Money

Jerome Segal

With the preliminary definitions and sociological groundwork complete, in this chapter Jerome Segal takes a closer look at the philosophy and history of voluntary simplicity. ‘In Western thought,’ observes Segal, ‘from the very beginning to the present day, people had doubts about the real value of riches and the things money can buy. There has always been a conflict between the view that “more is better” and the view that “just enough is plenty.”’ Segal shows that this divide is reflected in two ways of thinking about money, and in two very different visions of the good life. By offering a contemporary interpretation of Aristotle, Segal presents a compelling case for why the vision resting upon the attainment of a simple life is the sounder vision. ‘Simple living,’ he concludes, ‘is not the residue that emerges when one consumes less; it is an achievement. It is what can emerge when as a result of subjecting the material dimension to a larger vision, one succeeds in creating a life that is rich and exciting in its aesthetic, intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions.’

4. What is Affluenza?

Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss

Throughout this anthology voluntary simplicity is presented as an ‘alternative’ to the materialistic form of life widely celebrated within consumer culture. In Chapter Four, Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss sharpen our understanding of voluntary simplicity by taking a closer look at the form of life it is reacting against. Backed up by extensive sociological research, their provocative thesis is that western society is in the grip of a collective

psychological disorder, which they call ‘*affluenza*,’ a disorder that deludes people into thinking that they are deprived despite their plenty.

5. The Conundrum of Consumption

Alan Durning

In Chapter Five, Alan Durning discusses what he calls the ‘conundrum of consumption.’ He points out that the American middleclass is the group that, more than any other, defines and embodies the contemporary international vision of ‘the good life.’ Yet, that consuming middleclass is among the world’s premier environmental problems, and may be the most difficult to solve. Scientific advances, better laws, restructured industries, new treaties, environmental campaigns – all these can help us move closer to a sustainable society. But Durning’s forthright conclusion is that, ultimately, what is required is that we change our values. Both sobering and inspiring, this chapter is a reminder that before we can change the world, we must change ourselves.

6. The Value of Voluntary Simplicity

Richard Gregg

Chapter Six is an abridged version of the pioneering 1936 essay by Richard Gregg, who coined the term ‘voluntary simplicity.’ A disciple of Gandhi’s, this properly suggests that there is an intimate link between voluntary simplicity and non-violent resistance. Gregg’s essay is especially valuable in that he anticipates many of the *objections* that can be raised against voluntary simplicity, before methodically responding to them in a balanced manner. Always insightful, Gregg approaches voluntary simplicity from various perspectives, including economics, politics, religion, psychology, and aesthetics.

7. Less is More

Philip Cafaro

Voluntary simplicity is built upon the paradox that ‘less is more.’ In Chapter Seven, Philip Cafaro unravels this paradox and in doing so he undermines the consumerist view that ‘more is always better.’ Shifting between (and often merging) economic and environmentalist perspectives, Cafaro argues that we should judge consumption by whether it improves or detracts from our lives, and act on that basis, rather than just assume that more consumption is what is needed to improve our lives. With our enlightened self-interest in mind, Cafaro shows that less is often more, particularly for middle and upper class members of wealthy industrialized societies. If all this chapter does is open up the question of whether less is more – if all it does is remind

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the reader that this is a question, and that our answers to it have important repercussions – then it will have served its purpose.

8. Building the Case for Global Living

Jim Merkel

Jim Merkel begins Chapter Eight with a striking thought experiment. He asks us to imagine we are first in line at a potluck buffet that includes not just food and water, but also the materials needed for shelter, clothing, health-care and education. Six billion people, shoulder to shoulder, form a line with plates in hand, and behind them, the untold millions of other species that inhabit the Earth. Further behind still, are the soon-to-be-born children, cubs, larvae, etc. How do we know how much to take? How much would be fair? One answer is that we could just take what seems *normal* to have, but then how much will be left for those who must come after us, those at the end of the line? These are the difficult issues of ‘global living’ that Merkel tackles in this chapter – not to induce guilt or place blame, but only to share with us his hope for a world in which all life forms, of all generations, have ‘enough’ to live a simple, dignified life of material sufficiency. Merkel shows that such a world is achievable, but that it will require some restraint by those in the consuming middleclass.

9. Voluntary Simplicity

Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell

Chapter Nine is an abridged version of the much celebrated essay, ‘Voluntary Simplicity,’ by Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell. In this essay the authors discuss five prominent features of voluntary simplicity: (1) Material simplicity; (2) Human scale; (3) Self-determination; (4) Ecological awareness; and (5) Personal growth. According to Elgin and Mitchell, our era of relative abundance contrasts sharply with the material poverty of the past, meaning that for the first time in history large numbers of ordinary people can live lives of material sufficiency. On that basis, they think that voluntary simplicity may prove an increasingly powerful economic, social, and political force over coming decades and beyond if large numbers of people of diverse backgrounds come to see it as a workable and purposeful response to many of the critical problems that we face. In living a life that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich, they argue that *the needs of the individual uniquely match the needs of society*. Of what other emergent life patterns can this be said?

10. Thoreau's Alternative Economics

Philip Cafaro

'When we have obtained those things necessary to life,' wrote Henry David Thoreau, 'there is another alternative than to obtain superfluities; and that is to adventure on life now, our vacation from humbler toil having commenced.' In Chapter Ten, Philip Cafaro considers this alternative living strategy of Thoreau's and contrasts it with the living strategy normally employed within advanced capitalist society. What is the best way to earn a living? How much time should we spend at it? How much food and what kind of shelter is necessary to live, or to live well? Through a close reading of Thoreau's *Walden* (see chapter twenty), Cafaro shows that the real importance of our economic lives lies not in how much wealth they create, but what sorts of people they make us, and how they relate us to others.

11. Why Simplify?

Mark A. Burch

Why would anyone want to adopt voluntary simplicity? In Chapter Eleven, Mark A. Burch offers a four-fold answer to this question, aspects of which were summarized earlier. I will not repeat that earlier discussion, which Burch expands upon insightfully and at some length, but only reiterate that there are various personal, social, environmental, and spiritual reasons for embracing the simple life, many of which are mutually reinforcing.

12. Sharing the Earth

Jim Merkel

Environmental sustainability can be broadly defined as follows: *each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations to meet their needs.* There is now an overwhelming consensus among scientists that 'ordinary' western consumption habits are *not* sustainable, and certainly not universalizable. Accordingly, it is time to seriously reconsider the 'ethics of consumption' and reevaluate inherited cultural understandings of 'the good life.' Environmental issues and questions of distributive justice have been discussed already at various places in this anthology, but in this chapter they take center stage, with Jim Merkel tackling urgent ethical questions about how humanity ought to share the Earth. With characteristic eloquence and humility, Merkel considers the consumption and distribution of natural resources from the three perspectives of interspecies equity, interhuman equity, and intergenerational equity.

13. The Downshifters

Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss

In Chapter Thirteen, Hamilton and Denniss review their research into the class of people they call ‘Downshifters’ – people exploring the simple life who have made a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in order to pursue other life goals. Who are these people? What are their stories? How many of them are there? And why do they live as they do? These are some of the questions surveyed in this fascinating enquiry into an emerging post-consumerist subculture.

14. A Culture of Permanence

Alan Durning

From this chapter onward, the anthology takes a deliberate turn towards the political, which is meant to acknowledge the limitations of personal action alone. Our choices, notes Alan Durning, are constrained by the social pressures, physical infrastructure, and institutional channels that envelop us. Thus, a strategy for reducing consumption must focus as much on changing the framework in which we make choices as it does on the choices we make. To rejuvenate the ethic of sufficiency, a critical mass of individuals committed to living by it must emerge. But Durning argues that if we are to succeed, we must balance our efforts to change ourselves with a bold agenda to challenge the laws, institutions, and interests that promote unsustainable consumption.

15. Simplicity, Community, and Private Land

Eric T. Freyfogle

Simple living involves the quest for calm, balanced lives, with less clutter, less artificiality, and lessened impact on nature. It involves the elevation of quality over quantity, time over money, and community over competition. What does all this mean, though, at the community or landscape level, particularly with respect to the ways we dwell upon the land? How might simple living affect our patterns of living on land, individually and collectively? And what would this mean in terms of private property rights, the functions of government, and the ways we think about democracy and self-rule? In Chapter Fifteen, Eric Freyfogle delves into these important questions, making particularly astute observations about the nature of private property: that it is a human creation which can take any number of forms, that we must define it collectively, that it can and should evolve as society changes. His point is that ‘free market’ capitalism as we know it is *not* the only alternative to communism. Freyfogle argues that for a society of simple livers to emerge, people

as individuals need to take stock of who they are and how they live, and imagine better ways. Many steps, he notes, can be taken in daily life to shift toward greater simplicity, and they should be taken. But Freyfogle concludes that ultimately some form of collective action will also be needed to change the governing structures within which we act out our daily lives.

16. The New Politics of Consumption

Juliet Schor

However much we might want to live simply, it is a fact that western society (and increasingly global society) is structurally opposed to voluntary simplicity. That is, our political and economic institutions make living simply much more difficult than it needs to be, as was outlined in the previous two chapters. This has led simplicity theorist, Juliet Schor, to call for a ‘politics of consumption.’ In Chapter Sixteen, Schor sketches an outline of a ‘politics of consumption’ by considering what institutional reforms could facilitate the emergence of a society of simple lives. Importantly, she also exposes ways that the conceptual framework usually used to think about consumption is defective – how it blinds us to possibilities and poses the wrong questions. By fixing those defects, Schor opens up a whole new set of problems, but she also points to a new and hopeful set of solutions.

17. Political Prescriptions

John de Graaf

John de Graaf does not believe that the world’s social and environmental problems associated with overconsumption can be cured by personal action alone. Like Durning, Freyfogle, Schor, and many others, he is convinced that political action will be a necessary part of any adequate solution. In Chapter Seventeen, de Graaf discusses what political action he believes is required to move our society in a better direction, including reducing working hours, restructuring tax and earning systems, investing in sustainable infrastructure, redirecting state subsidies, protecting children from advertising, and developing new ideas about economic growth. Anticipating that many will look upon his proposals with skepticism, he everywhere cites examples of where European nations have *already* implemented them – and implemented them successfully. So it seems the choice is ours, if only we choose it, a point which suggests that the relationship between ‘the personal’ and ‘the political’ is so close as to be one of identity.

18. Extending the Movement

Mary Grigsby

When considered from the mutually reinforcing perspectives of personal happiness, the environment, distributive justice, spiritual awakening, opposing global capitalism, fostering human solidarity, etc., the Voluntary Simplicity Movement, though still in its infancy, is arguably the most promising social movement on the planet today. Many of the problems facing humankind seem *connected*, and voluntary simplicity offers a compelling and graceful solution to many of them. The movement, as I have noted, is sometimes described as ‘the quiet revolution,’ and this may indeed indicate its potential. But the problem is that currently, with the environmental clock ticking and the Third World expanding, it may be *too* quiet. In other words, if the Voluntary Simplicity Movement remains a small, unorganized, ‘subculture,’ it will probably fail to have enough impact on the course of history to do much good. In Chapter Eighteen Mary Grigsby considers this problem and discusses whether or in what ways the Voluntary Simplicity Movement could extend into the mainstream and become a more significant oppositional force.

19. Transcendental Simplicity

David Shi

In Chapter Nineteen, which lays the foundation for the final chapter, celebrated historian David Shi returns to 19th century America to examine the fascinating version of ‘the simple life’ articulated by the New England Transcendentalists, that colorful group of inspired poets, mystics, and philosophers centered in Concord. According to this group, plain living was designed to lead to high thinking of one sort or another – intellectual, moral, spiritual. William Henry Channing succinctly expressed their credo: ‘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 study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly.’ This was the symphony of Transcendentalism – the ability to live within one’s means in order to afford the luxury of contemplation and creativity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson was to assert, ‘It is better to go without than to have possessions at too great a cost. Let us learn the meaning of Economy.’

20. ‘Economy’ (from *Walden*)

Henry David Thoreau

In 1845, at age 28, Henry David Thoreau left his town of Concord and went to live alone in the woods, on the shores of Walden Pond, a mile from any neighbor. He there built himself a modest cabin, and for two years and two

months earned a simple living by the labor of his own hands. 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,' wrote Thoreau, 'to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what they had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.' While at the pond he wrote *Walden*, a book that is widely regarded as the greatest statement ever made on the subject of voluntary simplicity. The final chapter of this anthology is the famous 'Economy' chapter from that extraordinary book. While it may be the most challenging chapter – which is one reason it is placed at the end of this anthology – if it is read as deliberately as it was written, it will also be the most rewarding. The language and ideas are masterfully dense, so even the best reader will profit from a second or third reading. Be warned, however, that Thoreau intends to do nothing less than change your life.

Conclusion: Meditations on Simplicity

Samuel Alexander

Dissatisfaction with our material situations may often be the result of failing to look properly at our lives, rather than the result of any 'lack.' For that reason, this anthology concludes with a 'study guide,' of sorts, comprising of thought experiments and discussion questions. These are intended to facilitate further introspection and provoke conversation about the central themes of this anthology, in the hope that this leads to a more direct and practical understanding of voluntary simplicity *in relation to one's own life*. There are also three appendices attached to the anthology, which were constructed in the same spirit. The first appendix, 'The Manifesto,' is a collection of quotations expressing, in various ways, the philosophy of voluntary simplicity. The second appendix, 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' is an attempt to reduce the philosophy of voluntary simplicity to a list of broad proposals for personal action. The third appendix, 'Declaration on Degrowth,' is a short statement on the politics of simplicity. I hope that these documents may be of some use, although I should point out that they are in need of creative interpretation.

Closing Remarks

As the globalization of western consumption habits pushes our planet towards the brink of environmental collapse, as evidence mounts that consumer culture has failed to fulfill its promise of a better life, and at a time when three billion of our fellow human beings still live in the darkness of poverty amidst plenty, one may be forgiven for thinking that there is a certain inescapable logic to pursuing a way of life that is 'outwardly simple, inwardly rich.' Yet, from earliest childhood onward, first upon somebody's

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knee, then through lessons ratified by polite society, we are educated into a materialistic form of life that squarely contradicts that of voluntary simplicity. What is more, it seems we are forbidden to admit this.

If it is true, however, as some existentialists have argued, that we can always make something new out of what we have been made into, then it might be interesting to inquire: Did you choose your mode of living because you preferred it to any other? Or did you honestly think that it was the only way? Reading and talking about voluntary simplicity with these questions in mind can be unsettling, rather like being shaken awake from the most dogmatic slumber. But it can also be exhilarating and uplifting, in the most unexpected ways. I hope that some readers will find, or have already found, that this is so.



Despite what seems to be a strong case for voluntary simplicity, one may nearly despair of the possibility that the entrenched economics of consumerism will ever lose its authority over western minds. But as Theodore Roszak has said:

There is one way forward: the creation of flesh-and-blood examples of low-consumption, high-quality alternatives to the mainstream pattern of life. This we can see happening already on the counter cultural fringes. And nothing – no amount of argument or research – will take the place of such living proof. What people must see is that ecologically sane, socially responsible living is *good* living; that simplicity, thrift, and reciprocity make for an existence that is free.¹¹

This anthology will have served its purpose if the reader goes away with an increased curiosity about this life-affirming freedom, and an appreciation that with a little courage and some imaginative effort, the door to voluntary simplicity will swing gracefully open.



Our world can change. Thoughtful, dedicated people like you and me can change it. And if not us, then who? If not now, then when? My closing words must be that if it is not us, then it will be nobody. And if not now, then never.

'Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.'¹²

(ENDNOTES)

- 1 Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (2003) xi. This paragraph draws on Hamilton's discussion.
- 2 Many of the chapters which follow draw on this social science when discussing the correlation between wealth and wellbeing. See Chapter Two, especially.
- 3 Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (Revised edition, 1993).
- 4 See, for example, the United Nations Human Development Report 2007/8.
- 5 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 286.
- 6 For more elaborate financial exercises, see Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming your relationship with money and achieving financial independence* (1992) and Jim Merkel, *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Planet* (2003).
- 7 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 290.
- 8 Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (Revised edition, 1993) 150–51.
- 9 This argument has been made most famously by Juliet Schor, in *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (1992) and *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (1998), and by John de Graaf et al, in *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America* (2003).
- 10 Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (2003) 2.
- 11 Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (1972) 422 (emphasis in original).
- 12 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 264. Also, see www.simplicitycollective.com.

