

One and the same subject who wants a new state of affairs,
a better reality... also brings it forth.

– MAX HORKHEIMER

Hope is the difference between *probability* and *possibility*.

– ISABELLE STENGERS

CONCLUSION

MEDITATIONS ON SIMPLICITY

Samuel Alexander

All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience. — GOETHE

This conclusion was written primarily for those readers who find themselves in a Goethean mood — that is to say, for those readers who, with a mixture of curiosity, hope, and perhaps a degree of apprehension, are now prepared to think over the preceding chapters slowly and honestly, and who are at least open to the possibility that the insights those chapters contain could take root in personal experience. Comprising of thought experiments and discussion questions, this conclusion aims 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*. It follows that this may be the most challenging chapter, since it leaves you, the thinker, doing all the hard work and taking all the risks. But however unsettling it can at times be to examine our own lives, we should remember that confronting ourselves honestly can also be profoundly liberating in the most unexpected ways. And so with honesty as our driving force and liberation as our goal, let us dare continue the exploration our subject.

What follows is divided into ten 'meditations' — a term only meant to imply a certain seriousness of thought — each of which is intended to provide enough material for an evening's alternative entertainment. While there may be distinct advantages to considering this material in quiet solitude, there may also be benefits to discussing it with friends or in a small group of interested individuals. To do both would be ideal. If the material is to be considered in solitude, have a pen and paper at hand, for there is no better way to clarify thought when contemplating an issue than to write down ideas and feelings as they arise. Follow your thoughts and feelings wherever they may take you and try not to stop writing until you run out of words or ink. If the following material is to be considered with others, put some time into thinking about who is going to organize the occasions, where and when they could be held, and how the discussions will be conducted. Needless to say, it is important that participants in any such discussion express themselves

respectfully and that everyone is given the opportunity to contribute. The aim should be to establish a conversational forum that is friendly, informal, and open.

Enjoying yourself is permitted. Trusting yourself is imperative.

First Meditation – Defining the Subject

Overview: If we are to engage ourselves in a discussion of a subject, or enquire into the merit or justification of an idea, it is important to have a clear understanding of what it is we are considering. Accordingly, it makes sense to begin with a close analysis of what voluntary simplicity might mean.

1. How would you define voluntary simplicity? What do you think it involves? (As an exercise in self-restraint – almost like resisting a consumer good – try answering these questions without being prompted by the definitions given immediately below.)
2. Here are six short definitions of voluntary simplicity given by contributors to this anthology. Spend some time going over them slowly:
 - ★ *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 of life will be returned to us in the process. (Elgin)*
 - ★ *Voluntary simplicity refers to the decision to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. (Etzioni)*
 - ★ *Voluntary simplicity involves directing progressively more time and energy toward pursuing non-material aspirations while providing for material needs as simply, directly, and efficiently as possible. It measures personal and social progress by increases in the qualitative richness of daily living, the cultivation of relationships, and the development of personal and spiritual potentials. Simple living does not denigrate the material aspects of life but rather, by attending to quality, it values material things more highly than a society that merely consumes them. ... Simplicity is about knowing how much consumption is enough. (Burch)*

- ★ *Voluntary simplicity involves the quest for calm, balanced, integrated lives; less clutter, less artificiality, and lessened impact on nature; and the elevation of quality over quantity, time over money, and community over competition. (Freyfogle)*
 - ★ *Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. (Gregg)*
 - ★ *Voluntary simplicity often involves making a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption to pursue other life goals. (Hamilton and Dennis)*
3. Read or re-read chapter one ('Voluntary Simplicity: The "Middle Way" to Sustainability') and chapter nine ('Voluntary Simplicity') of this anthology, both of which are extended definitional statements of voluntary simplicity. Are there any aspects of those statements which you disagree with or are uncomfortable with? Which aspects speak loudest to you? Can you refine or add to them in any way?
 4. How is voluntary simplicity different from poverty or deprivation?
 5. Is voluntary simplicity just about consuming less?
 6. Does voluntary simplicity involve renouncing all the advantages of science and technology?
 7. A wide variety of people and communities practice voluntary simplicity, in some form or another, but who do not necessarily call it by that name. Can you think of some examples?
 8. At the close of chapter nine, Elgin and Mitchell claim that through voluntary simplicity, 'the need of the individual uniquely matches the need of the society.' Do you agree? Are there any other emergent life patterns that could be described in this way?
 9. Craft a short personalized statement of what voluntary simplicity means.

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

10. Make a list of ways your life may already be consistent with voluntary simplicity.
11. Read or re-read the two appendixes to this anthology. (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.)
12. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 48–52 of 'The Manifesto.'
13. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret the first ten 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition.'
14. Closing thought: *Those who know they have enough are rich.*
– Lao Tzu

Second Meditation – Consumer Culture

Overview: Voluntary simplicity has been presented in this anthology as an 'alternative' to the materialistic form of life widely celebrated within consumer culture. Let us try to sharpen our understanding of voluntary simplicity by taking a closer look at the form of life it is reacting against.

1. What is meant by 'consumer culture'? (The fact that we are deeply embedded in consumer culture – whether we like it or not – can make this an extremely challenging question. Try to dig beneath the surface of what is 'obviously' consumer culture, and see if you cannot uncover certain features of it that might be easily taken for granted, features that we might ordinarily assume are 'facts of life' or 'just the way the world is,' but which on closer analysis turn out to be contingent upon *choices* we have made – choices we could perhaps remake?)
2. Read or re-read chapter four ('What is Affluenza?') and chapter five ('The Conundrum of Consumption') of this anthology. What are the characteristics of consumer culture presented in those chapters?
3. Do you agree with Hamilton and Denniss that western society is in the grip of a collective psychological disorder ('affluenza')?
4. Interpret the following proverb: *Do not be like the fish that doesn't know it's in water.*

5. If it is true, 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?
6. Compare life within consumer culture to the life of a self-sufficient peasant farmer in Brazil or a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas. Imagine you (along with some friends and family) exchanged roles with either for five years: How would your life be different? What would you miss the most? How might you benefit from the change? Could there be a 'middle way' that secures the advantages of both without the disadvantages of either?
7. Below are four ways of thinking about the difficult term 'ideology.' Consider them with reference to the meanings of 'wealth,' 'progress,' 'enough' and 'the good life' in consumer culture.
 - ★ *To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination, including self-domination. (John Thompson)*
 - ★ *To study ideology is to study the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness. (Terry Eagleton)*
 - ★ *To study ideology is study the ways people fail to see some instance of oppression at all, or fail to see it as improper or unjust because they believe it has been consented to or legitimated in some way. (Michael Robertson)*
 - ★ *To study ideology is to study the ways we might need to free ourselves from ourselves. (Terry Eagleton)*
8. Consider the meaning of 'status.' (a) What is it to have status in consumer culture? (b) What do you think should confer status in a society? (c) How important is status in your life, and, if you value/seek status, of what sort do you value/seek? (d) What could meant by the phrase 'status anxiety'? (e) What is it to be free from status anxiety?
9. Learn Diderot's lesson! In the 18th century, the French philosopher Denis Diderot wrote an essay entitled *Regrets on Parting with My Old Dress-*

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

ing Gown. Juliet Schor (a contributor in this anthology) has summarized the point and relevance of that essay as follows:

Diderot's regrets were prompted by a gift of a beautiful scarlet dressing gown. Delighted with his new acquisition, Diderot quickly discarded his old gown. But in a short time, his pleasure turned sour as he began to sense that the surroundings within which the gown was worn did not properly reflect the garment's elegance. He grew dissatisfied with his study, with its threadbare tapestry, the desk, his chairs and even room's bookshelves. One by one, the familiar but well-worn furnishings of the study were replaced. In the end, Diderot found himself seated uncomfortably in the stylish formality of his new surroundings, regretting the work of this 'impervious scarlet robe [that] forced everything else to conform with its own elegant tone.'

Today consumer researchers call such striving for conformity the 'Diderot effect.' And, while Diderot effects can be constraining (some people foresee the problem and refuse the initial upgrading), in a world of growing income the pressure to enter and follow the cycle are overwhelming. The purchase of a new home is the impetus for replacing old furniture; a new jacket makes little sense without the right skirt to match; an upgrade in china can't really be enjoyed without a corresponding upgrade in glassware. This need for unity and conformity in our lifestyle choices is part of what keeps the consumer escalator moving ever upward. And 'escalator' is the operative metaphor: when the acquisition of each item on a wish list adds another item, and more, to our 'must-have' list, the pressure to upgrade our stock of stuff is relentlessly unidirectional, always ascending.¹

10. Many of the world's most sophisticated psychologists are today hired as 'marketers.' They spend all day thinking up ways to make us feel dissatisfied with what we have, despite our plenty, in order to get us buy things we didn't even know we wanted. In relation to the idea of voluntary simplicity, think critically about the function of advertising / television / mass media in modern life.
11. The process of getting richer is now causing the very problems that we seem to think getting richer will solve. Discuss.
12. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 53–57 of 'The Manifesto.'
13. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 11–20.

14. Closing thought: *How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.* – Vicki Robin.

Third Meditation – Henry David Thoreau

Overview: 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*, perhaps the greatest statement ever made on the subject of voluntary simplicity – one more relevant today than ever before and deserving of our closest attention.

1. Read or re-read chapter ten (‘Thoreau’s Alternative Economics’), chapter nineteen (‘Transcendental Simplicity’), and chapter twenty (‘Economy’). Reduce each chapter to ten central insights. Also, try to get your hands on a complete copy of *Walden* and set out to read it as deliberately as it was written. (As a last resort, *Walden* can be read online for free at www.gutenberg.org/catalog/. Another relevant essay of Thoreau’s, also available online, is ‘Life Without Principle.’)
2. ‘The necessities of life of life,’ wrote Thoreau in *Walden*, ‘may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success.’ In all seriousness, what do you consider to be the necessities of life? (Try to be as detailed as you can.)
3. Housing is typically life’s greatest expense, so we should think especially carefully about where we live and why. ‘Consider how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary,’ asks Thoreau. ‘Most people appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.’ Carefully reconsider your housing from this perspective and, then, in exactly the same vein, reconsider your consumption habits relating to food, clothing, and fuel.
4. Imagine you won a prize that provided you with the necessities of life for the rest of your life, plus \$5,000 to buy a few extra things. The only

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

condition to accepting the prize was that you were prohibited from ever earning more money. Would you accept it? Could you live a happy and fulfilling life? How would you spend the \$5,000 dollars? And, of particular interest, what would you do with a life of 'free time'?

5. Can you think of examples where some of your material *wants* have come to feel like *needs*? If so, what is the significance this transformation? What might cause it?
6. By consciously reducing his material wants and choosing to live simply, Thoreau was able to live a healthy and fulfilling life on six weeks work per year. Perhaps he was exceptional? Perhaps he had it easy? Whatever the case, six weeks gives us at least a rough guide as to how much time is required for human beings to provide for their most basic material needs. In your social circumstances today, how much time would you need to secure the necessities of life (and perhaps a few simple comforts)? In what ways might reducing your material wants / working hours enhance your freedom and/or contentment?
7. Mull over what is perhaps the central passage in *Walden*: 'When we have obtained those things necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain superfluities; and that is to adventure on life now, our vacation from humbler toil having commenced.' How does this 'alternative' living strategy of Thoreau's sit in relation to the living strategy normally employed within advanced capitalist society today?
8. Thoreau does not think that we should only ever obtain the mere necessities of life and no more. Rather, he is trying to get us to think about the *true cost* of 'superfluities.' According to Thoreau, 'The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it.' What do you think he meant by this? Try to apply this type of economic analysis to purchases you have made (or might make) in your life.
9. In the passage below, Thoreau offers some justification for his approach to life. Consider its merits:

Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee that if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for

me there would be nothing left worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage. *I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living.*²

10. Thoreau believed that the high-consumption life which is praised and regarded as successful is but one kind. Why, then, he asks of us, should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others? Put otherwise, Thoreau is asking us to consider, 'What kinds of "success" can be achieved outside of or beyond the consuming middle-class?'
11. Consider 'declaring independence' by isolating yourself from consumer culture for long enough to gain a new perspective on it – for long enough to unlearn it, so that it may be relearned. Retreating to a quiet, natural setting for an extended period of time is a self-conscious attempt to rouse oneself from the daze of unexamined habit, which, if successful, might bring about a surprisingly fresh interpretation of the form of life left behind, as well as provoke a new appreciation of the possibilities of an alternative existence. One need not go to the extremes of Thoreau, but his justification for temporarily escaping society might provide an incentive for us all: 'My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles.'³ Think of places that could be your own 'Walden Pond.' Plan an excursion there. Stay until your 'private business' is complete.
12. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 58–62 of 'The Manifesto.'
13. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 21–30.
14. Closing thought: *The individual who goes it alone can start today.*
– Henry David Thoreau

Fourth Meditation – How Much Consumption is 'Enough'?

Overview: The idea of voluntary simplicity urges us to ask ourselves: 'How much consumption is "enough."?' But when we ask ourselves this question we discover that there is a prior and even more important question to consider first: 'Enough for *what*?' Let us consider both of these difficult

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

questions in some detail, for if we do not know where we are going, or why we are heading in one direction rather than another, we will not be able to tell if we are lost.

1. What is your chief purpose in life?
 - ★ *Terrifying though it can be to admit, no one, no thing, no book, no logic, no universe, can answer this question for us. Consequently, we should trust ourselves, live in good faith, and make no excuses.*
 - ★ *Make a list of 4–5 of your most important life aspirations. ('It is better to travel than to arrive.' – Aristotle)*
 - ★ *Hypothetically reflect on your life from the vantage point of a very old age: What kind of life would you like to remember? What attitudes would you hope defined it?*
2. We all want the material resources needed to pursue our chief purpose in life – whatever that purpose might be – but might there be times when our pursuit of material resources does not support but actually interferes with our chief purpose? (Again, if we do not know what our chief purpose *is*, we will not be able to tell if it is getting interfered with.)
3. Can you specify how much consumption is 'enough' for you? How much would be 'too much'?
4. Read or re-read chapter three ('Two Ways of Thinking About Money') and chapter six ('The Value of Voluntary Simplicity') of this anthology.
5. Consider the following thought experiment: Imagine that you are climbing a huge mountain and your chief purpose in life awaits you at the top. You have concentrated all your thoughts and energies on the planning of this expedition for several years, acquiring all the equipment you thought you might need, but in the actual attempt you find that some of the equipment is just hindering your ascent. Do you discard the equipment which is not needed to attain your chief purpose in life? Or will your possessive tendencies put the entire exhibition in jeopardy? (Apply to life.)
6. The great difficulty with the above thought experiment (when applied to life) lies in knowing which possessions are indeed 'irrelevant' to our

chief purpose in life, since thousands of cultural messages bombard us daily insisting that we need *more* than we have, not less – and we are easily persuaded. So not only are we at risk of spending too much of our precious time thoughtlessly acquiring more and ‘better’ possessions – nicer cars, bigger houses, finer clothes, etc. – but, through mere ignorance and mistake, we are forever unwilling to let those possessions go. Thoreau, however, was not to be fooled: ‘I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust.’ Dig beneath the surface of this obscure insight, dwell on its subtleties, and, with respect to your own life, reflect upon the insidious nature of ‘stuff.’

7. Important: What is the difference between ‘standard of living’ and ‘quality of life’?
8. Does an increased ‘standard of living’ necessarily mean a better ‘quality of life’? Could increasing your ‘standard of living’ ever impact *negatively* on your ‘quality of life’? Could decreasing your ‘standard of living’ ever impact *positively* on your ‘quality of life’?
9. Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss have conducted extensive research into Australian attitudes to consumption. Consider the significance of their following conclusion (from chapter four of this volume):

When asked whether they can afford to buy everything they really need, nearly two-thirds of Australians say ‘no’. If we remember that Australia is one of the world’s richest countries and that Australians today have real incomes three times higher than in 1950, it is remarkable that such a high proportion feel so deprived. Average earnings exceed \$50,000 a year, yet a substantial majority of Australians who experience no real hardship – and indeed live lives of abundance – believe that they have difficulty making ends meet and that they qualify as ‘battlers.’

10. Imagine that the economy of your society doubled over night. Do you think people would have ‘enough’ then? What if it tripled? Or even quadrupled? Can you imagine a time when a society might collectively say, ‘Surely we have acquired enough stuff! Let’s do something else, for we’ve begun laying waste our powers.’ Or is human nature such that too much consumption is never enough?

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

11. Marcus Aurelius, the great stoic philosopher, once said: 'Always bear in mind that very little indeed is necessary for living a happy life.' What is the *minimum* you would need to be happy?
12. Theory of Practice: Creatively interpret clauses 63–67 of 'The Manifesto.'
13. Practice of Theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 31–40.
14. Closing thought: *Lately in the wreck of a California ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was afterward found at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking – had he the gold? Or had the gold him? – John Ruskin*

Fifth Meditation – To Have or To Be?

Overview: The social psychologist / political theorist, Erich Fromm, has drawn an important distinction between two 'modes of existence'— namely, *having* and *being*. In the *having* mode, the meaning of one's identity is defined by and dependent upon material factors external to oneself. In the *being* mode, the meaning of one's identity is defined by and dependent upon existential factors internal to oneself. These modes are not 'either/or' alternatives, but rather they sit upon a spectrum, with pure *having* at one extreme (insanity), pure *being* at the other (saintliness), and with shades of degree in between. Fromm argues that advanced capitalist society is heavily characterized by the *having* mode. The question he provokes, and which we will now consider, is what individual and/or collective life would be like if the *being* mode was privileged over the *having* mode.

1. On the spectrum between *pure being* (1) and *pure having* (10), where would you place our society? Where would you place your life? Give reasons.
2. What types of actions or attitudes in your life could bring about an 'immaterial shift' toward the *being* mode? List twenty 'simple luxuries.'
3. Imagine that tomorrow your employer advises you that due to [insert reason] your position must be reduced to part-time (one day less per week) and your total wages reduced by twenty percent. How would you cope? Could there be benefits to such a change?

4. Now imagine, instead, that tomorrow your employer offered you *either* a twenty percent pay rise *or* an extra day off per week at the same income *or* two extra days off per week with a twenty percent reduction in pay. Which would you prefer and why? Compare options.
5. Read or re-read chapter two ('A New Social Movement?') and chapter thirteen ('The Downshifters') of this anthology. In what ways do those chapters support (explicitly or implicitly) the privileging of *being* over *having*?
6. How does Amatai Etzioni think that the 'cyber age' might help advance the Voluntary Simplicity Movement?
7. Over the last half a century, most westerners have been offered a remarkable choice, as John de Graaf explains in the following passage. Consider what the world would be like if we had made a different choice:

★ *As our productivity has more than doubled [since World War II], we could have chosen to work half as much – or even less – and still produce the same material lifestyle we found 'affluent' in the 1950s. We could have split the difference, letting our material aspirations rise somewhat but also taking an important portion our productivity gains in the form of more free time. Instead, we put all our apples into making and consuming more.*⁴
8. With reference to the above quotation, consider the following statement by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault: 'We are freer than we think we are.'
9. In terms of acquiring material things, how far are you influenced by what your neighbors have or think? To what extent do you define 'success' by what lies outside of yourself, outside of your control?
10. In the following passage, Duane Elgin speculates insightfully about what a society that privileges *being* over *having* might be like. Consider his ideas and then develop them further:

A conscious simplicity, then, is not self-denying but life affirming. Voluntary simplicity is not an 'ascetic simplicity' (of strict austerity); rather it is an 'aesthetic simplicity' where each person considers whether his or her level and pattern of consumption fits with grace and integrity into the practical art of daily living on this planet. The possessions that seemed so important and appealing during the industrial era would gradually lose much of their allure. The

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

individual or family who, in the past, was admired for a large and luxurious home would find that the mainstream culture increasingly admired those who had learned how to combine functional simplicity and beauty in a smaller house. The person who was previously envied for his or her expensive car would find that a growing number of people were uninterested in displays of conspicuous consumption. The person who was previously recognized for always wearing the latest in clothing styles would find that more and more people viewed high fashion as tasteless ostentation that was no longer fitting in a world of great human need. This does not mean that people would turn away from the material side of life; rather, they would place a premium on living ever more lightly and aesthetically.⁵

11. Voluntary simplicity is misunderstood if it is thought to be about just consuming less *and no more*. Consider what might be called the ‘immaterial dimension’ or ‘spiritual dimension’ of voluntary simplicity.
12. What do you love doing but don’t do enough of? Could voluntary simplicity help free up some more time and energy?
13. When we come to draw our last breath, what attitude might we have towards our possessions? Would we ever wish that we had spent more time in the office?
14. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 68–72 of ‘The Manifesto.’
15. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret ‘Peaceful Acts of Opposition,’ numbers 41–50.
16. Closing thought: *Most people, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.* – Henry David Thoreau

Sixth Meditation – Poverty and Distributive Justice

Overview: What follows is not about guilt or blame. Rather, it is about our shared hope for a world in which everybody has ‘enough’ to live a simple, dignified life of material sufficiency. On that basis, let us begin by stating the facts bluntly: (1) More than three billion of our fellow human beings live lives of material destitution;⁶ (2) More than 10,000 people die everyday for want of life’s most basic necessities, such as access to clean drinking water.⁷

There is a sense in which these grim figures are utterly incomprehensible to our intellectual and emotional faculties – we could not possibly grasp their true significance, and perhaps we would not want to. But the fact we cannot fully understand them doesn't lessen the objective tragedy of this very real human situation, this very real human challenge. What is to be done?

1. Consider Jim Merkel's thought experiment about distributive justice and try to specify an answer to his difficult questions:

Imagine you are at a potluck buffet and see that you are the first in line. How do you know how much to take? Imagine that this potluck spread includes not just food and water, but also the materials needed for shelter, clothing, health care and education. It all looks and smells so good and you are hungry. What will you heap on your plate? How much is enough to leave for your neighbors behind you in the line? Now extend this cornucopia to today's global economy, where the necessities for life come from around the world. Six billion people, shoulder to shoulder, form a line that circles around the globe to Cairo, onto Hawaii over ocean bridges, then back, and around the globe again, 180 times more. With plates in hand, they too wait in line, hearty appetites in place. And along with them are giraffes and klipspringers, manatees and spiders, untold millions of species, millions of billions of unique beings, all with the same lusty appetites. And behind them, the soon-to-be-born children, cubs, and larvae.

A harmonious feast just might be possible. But it requires a bit of restraint, or shall we say, a tamed appetite, as our plate becomes a shopping cart, becomes a pickup truck – filling our home, attic, basement, garage, and maybe even a rented storage unit with nature transformed into things. As we sit down for a good hearty meal with new friends and creatures from around the world, what is the level of equity that we would feel great about? *At what level of inequity would we say, 'Wait a minute, that's not fair?'*

2. Do you believe that moral obligations stop at the border? Discuss.
3. John Rawls, in his *Theory of Justice* (1972), has argued that our starting position in life is 'arbitrary from a moral perspective.' He means by this that nobody *deserves* to be born into a position of relative advantage any more than someone *deserves* to be born into a position of relative disadvantage. Our starting point in life is the result of what Rawls calls 'the natural lottery.' The outcome of the 'natural lottery' is neither just nor unjust, according to Rawls. That is just a fact of life. What is just or unjust is how we *deal* with this fact. How do you think we should deal with the fact that billions of people, through no fault of their own, are born into positions of poverty? If you were born into the Third World,

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

for example, what assistance would you reasonably expect from the First World?

4. Read or re-read chapter eight ('Building the Case for Global Living') and chapter eleven ('Why Simplify?') of this anthology. How do those chapters seek to justify voluntary simplicity?
5. A large and growing body of social science supports the thesis that, not far beyond the poverty line, there is only a very weak correlation between having more money and increased wellbeing.⁸ 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, somehow defined, further increases in wealth have a fast diminishing and at times even negative marginal utility. In the United States, for example, where consistent surveys have been conducted since 1946, real incomes have increased by 400 percent, yet, remarkably, even disconcertingly, there has been no increase in reported levels of 'wellbeing' (meaning levels of happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction with 'life as a whole'.)⁹ Moreover, there is virtually no reported difference in wellbeing between Americans with incomes of \$20,000 and \$80,000.¹⁰ And similar conclusions are reflected throughout a substantial and expanding body of social research into many of the developed nations,¹¹ including Australia,¹² suggesting strongly that above a certain level of individual and national income, more wealth does not tend to increase wellbeing. One expansive study even indicates that there is a threshold level around US\$10–15,000 above which a higher average income makes almost no difference to a population's life satisfaction.¹³ What do these findings suggest about the distribution of wealth in our world? What do they suggest about the pursuit of ever-more wealth?
6. In chapter four of this anthology, 'What is Affluenza?', Hamilton and Denniss argue that we will not be able to solve the problem of poverty until we solve the problem of affluence. What do you think those authors meant by this?
7. Recall Vicki Robin's insight that, 'How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.' From that perspective, consider the following:
 - ★ *In 2007, the United States alone spent about \$700 billion on its military. Imagine what the world would be like if the United States, and other wealthy industrialized countries, redirected half of the resources spent on military to the alleviation of poverty? Or*

imagine if half the global expenditure on advertising and fashion was redirected similarly? Does poverty exist because we don't have enough money?

8. What is the difference between an act and an omission?
9. Money is power, and with power comes responsibility. On that basis, to what extent is poverty a middle-class responsibility?
10. Could the middle-class become a non-violent revolutionary class simply by using its wealth differently?
11. Earlier you were asked to imagine winning a prize that provided you with the necessities of life for the rest of your life, plus \$5,000 to buy a few extra things. Now imagine that the whole world won this prize? What would the world be like?
12. What link is there between voluntary simplicity and the possibility of distributive justice?
13. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 78–82 of 'The Manifesto.'
14. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 61–70.
15. Closing thought: *Live simply so that others may simply live.*
– Mahatma Gandhi

Seventh Meditation – Environmental Sustainability

Overview: Environmental sustainability can be broadly defined as follows: *each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations to meet their own needs.* There is now an overwhelming consensus among scientists that 'ordinary' western consumption habits are *not* sustainable, and certainly not universalizable. On that basis, it is time to reconsider the 'ethics of consumption' and reevaluate cultural understandings of 'the good life.'

1. Reports by the United Nations have predicted that the world's population will be peak in about 100 years somewhere around 9 or 10 billion

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

people.¹⁴ What do you think the world will be like then? Does everyone have the right to live in the consuming middle-class?

2. If there is an infinite variety of meaningful and satisfying ways of life compatible with living on an equitable share of nature, then it could be argued that consuming an inequitable share is evidence of (among other things) a lack of imagination. Discuss.
3. The Climate Change Program of the New Economics Foundation has published a technical note entitled '100 Months,' which concludes that '100 months from August 2008 atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will begin to exceed a point whereby it is no longer *likely* that we will be able to avert potentially irreversible climate change...'. Let us suppose for a moment that the almost unanimous scientific community is more or less correct about its gloomy prospects for the future of our natural environment. What precisely is at stake here?
4. The Union of Concerned Scientists, in their publication, *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices*, recommend that consumers start by reforming the features of their lifestyles that have the *largest* negative impacts on the environment, rather than fretting the small stuff. Some of the largest problems are listed below for consideration:
 - ★ *Since automobiles have arguably more impact on the environment than anything else, there is no better place to start than by seriously doubting the need to own your own car. Why not walk, ride a bike, or use public transport? Perhaps you could hire or borrow a car when traveling longer distances? If you seriously think that your own car is a necessity, could you make driving the exception rather than the norm?*
 - ★ *Second on the list, in terms of negative environmental impact, might be the consumption of meat and not eating locally. Have you ever considered becoming a vegetarian or reducing meat consumption? Could you eat food that doesn't travel long distances to arrive on your plate? Are you able to cultivate a vegetable garden / grow fruit trees?*
 - ★ *Third on the list might be excessive energy use. Could you be more energy efficient? Could you progress towards 'green' / 'renewable' energy?*

- ★ *Fourth may be air travel. Air travel is the world's fastest growing source of carbon-dioxide emissions.¹⁵ Why not travel closer to home and avoid air travel? Take the train, perhaps, or consider 'video conferencing' for business, etc.? Or travel inward?*
 - ★ *Fifth may be general consumption habits/spending habits. Could you find ways to reform your consumption habits to consume less? Could you find ways to spend more wisely? Use your imagination. (N.B. Beware of times when 'green' marketing might be a sham, for calling something 'green' doesn't necessarily make it so).*
5. Do some research on five other significant causes of environmental damage. How could decisions at the personal level help reduce such damage?
 6. Read or re-read chapter seven ('Less is More') and chapter twelve ('Sharing the Earth') of this anthology. What environmental issues are discussed in those chapters?
 7. Let us return again to the idea that, 'How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.' From that perspective, consider the following:
 - ★ *How much renewable energy could be bought for the 700 billion (plus) dollars that has recently been spent bailing out banks? Martin Lloyd has offered a quick calculation: 'Global wind market in 2007 – 37 billion dollars – 19,865 MW added. 700 billion is about 19 times 37 billion, giving us 377 GW of new electricity. So that's 5–6% of global electricity demand switched to clean renewable fuel.'*
 8. Consider the difficult phrase 'crimes against our grandchildren' in the context of overconsumption and the prospect of environmental collapse. Should we today be haunted by the gaze of future generations? Could we say we didn't know?
 9. Increased consumption is often presumed to be a *good* thing, without question. Political parties, for example, spend most of their time claiming that they would run the economy 'best,' meaning that under their leadership ordinary people would be richer and therefore able to consume more goods and services. On the face of it, this sounds like a reasonable goal – but is it? Might we need to fundamentally reassess

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

what we mean by ‘economic progress’? How much economic growth is ‘enough’? Or, again, is too much never enough?

10. Consider the problem of overpopulation: How could it be addressed? How is overpopulation and overconsumption connected?
11. Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History* (1972), summarized a lifetime of research into the evolution of civilizations with his ‘Law of Progressive Simplification,’ which can be expressed as follows: ‘This law asserts that as evolution proceeds, a civilization will transfer increasing increments of energy and attention from the material to the nonmaterial side of life and that this will be expressed through developing culture (music, art, drama, literature) and a growing capacity for compassion, caring community, and self-governance.’¹⁶ According to Toynbee, the globalization of consumer culture would obviously reflect a regression, not a progression, of civilization. How do you think we should use the word ‘progress’? We are certainly getting richer, but is our society progressing?
12. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 73–77 of ‘The Manifesto.’
13. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret ‘Peaceful Acts of Opposition,’ numbers 51–60.
14. Closing thought: *If not us, then who? If not now, then when?*

Eighth Meditation – Extending the Movement

Overview: Whether voluntary simplicity is considered from the perspective 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 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. If, however, voluntary simplicity one day came to more widely inform ‘common sense,’ in the same way that the anti-slavery and women’s rights

movements have come to do so, the Voluntary Simplicity Movement could change the course of history as profoundly as those movements have. An important question, then, is whether or in what ways the Voluntary Simplicity Movement could extend into the mainstream and become a more significant oppositional force.

1. Consider the meaning of voluntary simplicity, not as a personal living strategy, but as a *social movement*? What might it promise?
2. Think about some of the great social movements which have changed / are still changing the world (e.g. anti-slavery, women's rights, environmentalism, etc.). How have they expanded our awareness? Why were they so effective? Could the Voluntary Simplicity Movement learn anything from them?
3. To what extent are children in consumer culture educated about voluntary simplicity? What benefits might there be to giving voluntary simplicity more emphasis? (Were you ever informed about the idea of voluntary simplicity at school? Or by your parents or peers?)
4. How often have you seen or heard voluntary simplicity promoted in the mass media of corporate capitalism? Might there be a conflict of interest at work here?
5. How or in what ways do you think the Voluntary Simplicity Movement could be extended?
6. In what ways could *you* help extend it?
7. Read or re-read chapter fifteen ('Simplicity, Community, and Private Land') and chapter seventeen ('Extending the Movement'). What are the limitations to voluntary simplicity that are described in those chapters?
8. How does Mary Grigsby think the Voluntary Simplicity Movement could be extended?
9. How does Eric Freyfogle conceptualize private property? Does he think private property could be reformed to better reflect social and environmental values? Consider the validity of his arguments.
10. What do you think a voluntarily simplistic society would look like? Exhaust your imagination and be as detailed as possible.

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

11. Jessie Sampter has argued that voluntary simplicity is the 'peak of civilization.' What do you think he means by this? Do you agree or disagree with his view?
12. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 83–87 of 'The Manifesto.'
13. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 71–80.
14. Closing thought: *If we do not change direction, we are likely to end up where we are going.* – Chinese Proverb

Ninth Meditation – The Politics of Consumption

Overview: 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. This has led some simplicity theorists to call for a 'politics of consumption.' Let us think about what a 'politics of consumption' might look like by considering what institutional reforms could facilitate the emergence of a society of simple livers.

1. To what extent can *personal action* solve the problems of our age? To what extent is *structural reform through collective political engagement* necessary? What are the strengths and weakness of both modes of opposition?
2. Voluntary simplicity is usually described as a 'social movement.' How would 'politicizing' the movement further its causes)? What does 'politicizing' the movement even mean?
3. Study Appendix III 'Declaration on Degrowth'.
4. Read or re-read chapter sixteen ('The Politics of Consumption') and chapter seventeen ('Political Prescriptions) of this anthology. Take note of the political reforms proposed in those chapters.
5. Consider, in relation to voluntary simplicity, the merits of the following broad political / economic / educational reforms:

- ★ *Introduce legislation limiting working hours per year (e.g. 1,500) to combat unemployment, time poverty, and 'affluenza.' Protect employees who wish to work part-time.*
- ★ *Provide tax incentives for corporations that establish themselves as locally owned worker co-ops to encourage the emergence of a more communitarian and ecologically sensitive capitalism.*
- ★ *Provide an adequate minimum wage.*
- ★ *Establish new 'green taxes' (i.e. taxes which tax environmentally damaging goods and services) in an attempt to encourage sustainable capitalism and price things at their true cost. (For example, imagine high taxes on non-local food or non-electronic cars. Can you think of other examples?)*
- ★ *Create a progressive income tax system culminating in a socially acceptable 'income cap' (i.e. tax the rich progressively more than the poor, and in such a way that all income above a certain level is taxed very heavily or even completely).*
- ★ *Establish new 'luxury taxes' (i.e. taxes which tax luxury goods) in an attempt to foster more socially beneficial spending. The money collected could subsidize the provision of 'basic needs' for all, perhaps, or fund research into green/renewable energy.*
- ★ *Establish new 'wealth taxes' (i.e. taxes which annually tax the very rich) in order to distribute the social product more fairly and provide all with the resources needed to live a simple life.*
- ★ *Increase 'inheritance taxes' to promote a more egalitarian society with equal opportunities.*
- ★ *Reconceive the meaning of private property to prohibit socially and environmentally destructive action (i.e. sensibly limit the 'right to use' in various ways).*
- ★ *Halt the privatization of common resources.*
- ★ *Provide free health care and education for all.*
- ★ *Provide adequate social security.*

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

- ★ *Create new advertising standards and prohibit corporate advertising to children.*
 - ★ *Replace state promotion/subsidization of consumerism with promotion/subsidization of the simple life by redirecting state expenditure. Think up some examples.*
 - ★ *Increase aid to the Third World. What would fulfill our humanitarian duties? Be precise.*
 - ★ *Establish stricter and more humanitarian standards for fair trade.*
 - ★ *Discuss the possibility of voluntary simplicity being promoted in schools.*
 - ★ *Limit corporate funding of political campaigns so that political parties are not unduly influenced by corporate interests.*
6. Imagine a society where all of the above reforms were democratically enacted over a fifteen year period. What would it be like? Is such a world possible/desirable?
 7. Can you think of other ways voluntary simplicity could be facilitated by political / economic / educational reform?
 8. Think of all the good things the above reforms could achieve. Think of all the new problems they could cause. Weigh up the pros and cons. What is a reasonable path forward?
 9. The central neoliberal objection to reforms such as those noted above is that such reforms would be 'inefficient,' in the sense that they would not 'maximize wealth.' This may indeed be true, but from the eco-social-democratic perspective of voluntary simplicity, the response would be that the good gained from the reforms (or the evils avoided) would outweigh the costs of their alleged 'inefficiency.' What do you think of this response? Should the aim of political society be to 'maximize wealth' or to 'increase human wellbeing'?
 10. Let us return, once again, to the idea that, 'How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.' Collective spending is a political matter. How could redirecting our collective expenditure change the world?

11. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 88–92 of ‘The Manifesto.’
12. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret ‘Peaceful Acts of Opposition,’ numbers 81–90.
13. Closing thought: *Our social ills will not be cured by personal action alone.* – John de Graaf

Tenth Meditation – Living the Idea

Overview: Perhaps there are some readers who have already been convinced of the merits of voluntary simplicity and who wish to explore it further, but who haven’t yet taken any practical steps? For some people this could be a state that persists over a number of years, a lifetime even. For others, in different circumstances, there could be more urgency. Whatever the case, the first step is unlikely to be easy, since the passion for simplicity leads us in an opposite direction to where most of the world is drifting. But if your heart is so inclined, and if being swept along is no longer enough, why don’t you become a pioneer of postmaterialism? Why don’t you consider proactively downshifting? A more radical simplicity could follow, perhaps, circumstances permitting? (Only your imagination is needed.)

1. Begin by imagining for yourself, in some detail, a simple life of your own. What would it look like? How would you live? What would you do differently? How might you think differently?
2. What obstacles lie in the way to achieving this life and how could they be overcome? What would you find most difficult about simplifying?
 - ★ *If you are concerned about what other people would think, consider that there might be more important things at stake.*
 - ★ *If you are concerned about what luxuries you might have to give up, focus on all that you will get back in return.*
 - ★ *If you do not think you could do it, make the pioneer’s leap of faith.*
3. Earlier you were asked to consider what ways your life might already be consistent with voluntary simplicity. Now make a list of small but

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

meaningful ways you might like to change your life over coming weeks and months to further increase consistency. (The cumulative result of small actions can be of transformative significance.)

4. What could you do *today*?
5. Would you like to take more radical steps towards simplicity some time in the future? ('What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.' – Thoreau.)
6. When living simply it is especially important not to waste money, so make sure you know where it is all going. The following exercise can be enlightening: 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 life–energy you spent obtaining the money to buy everything you consumed that month. Question not only the amounts but also the categories. 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. (Again, 'The cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it.') You may find that some small changes to your spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, will instead be life–affirming.¹⁷
7. Knowing your finances is not just about making sure you don't waste any life. Recall, yet again, Vicki Robin's insight: 'How we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.' Reflect on the kinds of products and corporations you are 'voting' for.
8. Read or re-read chapter fourteen ('A Culture of Permanence').
9. In this anthology it has been argued that any proposed solutions to the problems of poverty, environmental degradation, social decay, and spiritual malaise, are destined to fail unless we first address the role that commodity fetishism plays in creating those problems. Do you agree? How could we protect ourselves from or overcome commodity fetishism? How could we live the solution?
10. Begin compiling your own list of inspiring quotations. (A highly recommended source is the book of quotations on simplicity edited by Gold-

ian Vanenbroeck, entitled *Less is More: An Anthology of Ancient and Modern Voices Raised in Praise of Simplicity*.¹⁸⁾

11. Rework or refine the 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition' to suit your own situation and condition. What amendments would you make? Add your own commentary. (Please email any suggestions or comments to the author at samuelalexander42@gmail.com).
12. If, as Gandhi believed, 'our life is our message,' what do you want your message to be? Write a letter to yourself addressing this question.
13. Theory of practice: Creatively interpret clauses 93–95 of 'The Manifesto.'
14. Practice of theory: Creatively interpret 'Peaceful Acts of Opposition,' numbers 91–95.
15. Closing thought: *Be the change you wish to see in the world.*
– Mahatma Gandhi

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

ENDNOTES

- 1 Juliet Schor, 'Learning Diderot's Lesson: Stopping the Upward Creep of Desire,' in Tim Jackson (ed.), *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption* (2005) p178.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, 'Life Without Principle,' in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) p636. (emphasis added.)
- 3 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) p275.
- 4 John de Graaf et al, *Affluenza: The All-consuming Epidemic* (2005, 2nd edition) p224.
- 5 Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (1993, revised edition) p150–51.
- 6 United Nations 'Human Development Report' (2007/8)
- 7 As noted in a speech by Kofi Annan (then Secretary-General of the United Nations) in July 2004.
- 8 See, for example, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman, 'Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being' (2004) 5(1) *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*: 1 (reviewing over 150 studies assessing the correlation between financial wealth and wellbeing). See also, Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (2003), especially chapters one and two.
- 9 See D G Myers and E Diener, 'The Pursuit of Happiness' (1996) 274 *Scientific American* 54–6; and D G Myers, 'Does Economic Growth Improve Human Morale?' (1997) Center for a New American Dream, available at www.newdream.org (last retrieved on 12 June 2008).
- 10 See Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics* (2002), 74–6.
- 11 Data for Japan show that between 1958 and 1991 real GDP per person increased sixfold, yet reported levels of satisfaction with life did not change at all. *Ibid*, 9–10.
- 12 Clive Hamilton, 'Overconsumption in Australia: The Rise of the Middle-class Battler' (2002, Australia Institute Discussion Paper No. 49); and 'Tracking Well-being in Australia: The Genuine Progress Indicator' (2000, Australia Institute Discussion Paper No. 35); and (with Richard Dennis), *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (2005).
- 13 See note 10, above, 74–6.
- 14 United Nations, 'Human Development Report' (2007/8).
- 15 Tony Jupiter, *How Many Lightbulbs Does it Take to Change a Planet?* (2007) p141.
- 16 Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (1993, revised edition) p195.
- 17 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).
- 18 I gratefully acknowledge that clauses 50, 53, 63, 64, 79, 80, of the Manifesto were first read in *Less is More: An Anthology of Ancient and Modern Voices Raised in Praise of Simplicity* (1991).