

## EXCERPTS FROM WRITINGS ON SIMPLICITY

\*Excerpts taken from writings including in *Discussion Course on Voluntary Simplicity*(2008) by the Northwest Earth Institute – [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).

### VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AND THE NEW GLOBAL CHALLENGE by Duane Elgin

At the heart of the simple life is an emphasis on harmonious and purposeful living. Richard Gregg was a student of Gandhi's teaching and, in 1936, he wrote the following about a life of "voluntary simplicity": *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. Of course, as different people have different purposes in life, what is relevant to the purpose of another... The degree of simplification is a matter for each individual to settle for himself.*

To live more voluntarily is to live more deliberately, intentionally, and purposefully – in short, it is to live more consciously. We cannot be deliberate when we are distracted from life. We cannot be intentional when we are not paying attention. We cannot be purposeful when we are not being present. Therefore, to act in a voluntary manner is to be aware of ourselves as we move through life. This requires that we not only pay attention to the actions we take in the outer world, but also that we pay attention to ourselves acting – our inner world. To the extent that we do not notice both inner and outer aspects of our passage through life, then our capacity for voluntary, deliberate, and purposeful action is commensurately diminished.

To live more simply is to live more purposefully and with a minimum of needless distraction. The particular expression of simplicity is a personal matter. We each know where our lives are unnecessarily complicated. We are all painfully aware of the clutter and pretense that weigh upon us and make our passage through the world more cumbersome and awkward. To live more simply is to unburden ourselves – to live more lightly, cleanly, aerodynamically. It is to establish a more direct, unpretentious, and unencumbered relationship with all aspects of our lives: the things that we consume, the work that we do, our relationships with others, our connections with nature and the cosmos, and more. Simplicity of living means meeting life face-to-face. It means confronting life clearly, without unnecessary distractions. It means being direct and honest in relationships of all kinds. It means taking life as it is – straight and unadulterated.

When we combine these two ideas for integrating the inner and outer aspects of our lives, we can describe voluntary simplicity as a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich, a way of being in which our most authentic and live self is brought into direct and conscious contact with living. This way of life is not a static condition to be achieved, but an ever-changing balance that must be continuously and consciously made real. Simplicity in this sense is not simple. The objective is not dogmatically to live with less, but is a more demanding intention of living with balance in order to find a life of greater purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

## LIVING DEEPLY by Janet Luhrs

Simple living is about living deliberately. That's all. You choose your existence rather than sailing through life on automatic pilot. Simple living is about having money in the bank and a zero balance on your credit card statement. If you want to travel, you are conscious enough about your choice that you are willing to give up something else. I've chosen to have kid's science projects, newspapers, and my sister's slippers cluttering the living room rather than living an austere existence. Someone else might like austerity because it brings a sense of peace and order. Either way, we've chosen these things consciously... they didn't just "happen." Simple living is about making deliberate, thoughtful choices. The difference is that you are fully aware of why you are living your particular life, and that life is one you have chosen thoughtfully.

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

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

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

## **WHEN IT'S ALL TOO MUCH** by Barry Schwartz

### *MORE CHOICES...MORE HAPPINESS?*

It seems a simple matter of logic that increased choice improves well-being. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Respected social scientists such as psychologist David G. Myers and political scientist Robert E. Lane tell us that increased choice and increased affluence have, in fact, been accompanied by decreased well-being.

The American “happiness quotient” has been going gently but consistently downhill for more than a generation. In the last 30 years – a time of great prosperity – the proportion of the population describing itself as “very happy” has declined. The decline was about 5%. This might not seem like much, but 5% translates into about 14 million Americans.

Not only that, but today, as a society, more Americans than ever are clinically depressed. By some estimates (for example, those of psychologist Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*), depression in the year 2000 was about 10 times as likely as it was in 1900.

Of course, no one believes that a single factor explains this. But accumulating evidence from psychological research indicates that the explosion of choice plays an important role. It seems that as we become freer to pursue and do whatever we want, we get less and less happy.

### *THE MORE WE HAVE, THE MORE WE WANT*

Increases in our expectations are partly to blame. The more we are allowed to be the masters of our fates, the more we expect to be. We believe we should be able to find work that is exciting, socially valuable and remunerative. We expect spouses who are sexually, emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Our children should be beautiful, smart, affectionate, obedient and independent. And everything we buy is supposed to be the best of its kind.

With all the choices available, we may believe we should never have to settle for things that are just “good enough.” Those who accept only the best, I call maximizers. In my research, I’ve found that maximizers are less happy, less optimistic and more depressed. At the very least maximizing behavior can lead to dissatisfaction – and, sometimes paralysis.

### *ONLY OURSELVES TO BLAME*

We are told we are now in the driver’s seat when it comes to what happens in our lives. If we fail, it’s our own fault. This might sound only fair, but the pressure we are put under can be enormous – especially in crucial areas of our lives such as medical care. For example, people in one study were asked whether, if they got cancer, they would want to be in charge of their treatment decisions; 65% said yes. Unless, however, they actually had cancer. Then only 12% said yes. People with cancer have experienced the awesome psychological consequences of being responsible for a life-and-death decision, and they don’t want that responsibility.

Unattainable expectations, plus a tendency to blame ourselves for our failures, make a lethal combination. This is the paradox: Here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. We get what we say we want, only to discover that it doesn’t satisfy us. The success of 21<sup>st</sup> century life turns out to be bittersweet. And I believe that a significant contributing factor is the overabundance of choice.