

# The Garden of Simplicity

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Simplicity of living is not a new idea. It has deep roots in history and finds expression in all of the world's wisdom traditions. More than two thousand years ago, in the same historical period that Christians were saying "Give me neither poverty nor wealth," (Proverbs 30:8), the Taoists were asserting "He who knows he has enough is rich" (Lao Tzu), Plato and Aristotle were proclaiming the importance of the "golden mean" of a path through life with neither excess nor deficit, and the Buddhists were encouraging a "middle way" between poverty and mindless accumulation. Clearly, the simple life is not a new social invention. What is new are the radically changing ecological, social, and psycho-spiritual circumstances of the modern world.

The push toward simpler ways of living was clearly described in 1992 when over 1,600 of the world's senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed an unprecedented "Warning to Humanity." In this historic statement, they declared that, "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course . . . that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know." They concluded that: "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."

Roughly a decade later came a related warning from 100 Nobel Prize winners who said that "The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed." As these two warnings by the world's elder scientists indicate, powerful adversity trends (such as global climate change, the depletion of key resources such as water and cheap oil, a burgeoning population, and a growing gap between the rich and poor) are converging into a whole-systems crisis, creating the possibility of an evolutionary crash within this generation. If we are to create instead an evolutionary bounce or leap forward, it will surely include a shift toward simpler, more sustainable and satisfying ways of living.

Although the pushes toward simpler ways of living are strong, the pulls toward this way of life seem equally compelling. Most people are not choosing to live more simply from a feeling of sacrifice; rather, they are seeking deeper sources of satisfaction than are being offered by a high stress, consumption-obsessed society. To illustrate, while real incomes doubled in the U.S. in the past generation, the percentage of the population reporting they are very happy has remained unchanged (roughly one-third) and, at the same time, divorce rates have doubled and teen suicide rates have tripled. A whole generation has tasted the fruits of an affluent society and has discovered that money does not buy happiness. In the search for satisfaction, millions of people are not only "downshifting" or pulling back from the rat race, they are also "upshifting" or moving ahead into a life that is, though materially more modest, rich with family, friends, community, creative work in the world, and a soulful connection with the universe.

In response to the unique pushes and pulls of modern conditions, in the United States and a dozen or so other "postmodern" nations, a trend toward simpler living has evolved from a fringe movement in the 1960s to a respected part of the mainstream culture in the early 2000s. Now glossy magazines tout the simple life from the newsstands across the U.S. while it has become a popular theme on major television talk shows. Surveys show a distinct subpopulation—conservatively estimated at 10 percent of the U.S. adult population or 20 million people—is pioneering a way of life that is outwardly more sustainable and inwardly more spiritual.

Importantly, the simple life is not simple. Many, diverse expressions of simplicity of living are flowering in response to the challenges and opportunities of our times. To present a more realistic picture of the scope and expression of this way of life for today's complex world, here are ten different approaches that I see thriving in a "garden of simplicity." Although there is overlap among them, each expression of simplicity seems sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. So there would be no favoritism in listing, they are placed in alphabetical order based on the brief name I associated with each.

**1. Choiceful Simplicity:** Simplicity means choosing our path through life consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. As a path that emphasizes freedom, a choiceful simplicity also means staying focused, diving deep, and not being distracted by consumer culture. It means consciously organizing our lives so that we give our "true gifts" to the world—which is to give the essence of ourselves. As Emerson said, "The only true gift is a portion of yourself."

**2. Compassionate Simplicity:** Simplicity means to feel such a sense of kinship with others that we “choose to live simply so that others may simply live.” A compassionate simplicity means feeling a bond with the community of life and drawn toward a path of reconciliation—with other species and future generations as well as, for example, between those with great differences of wealth and opportunity. A compassionate simplicity is a path of cooperation and fairness that seeks a future of mutually assured development for all.

**3. Ecological Simplicity:** Simplicity means to choose ways of living that touch the Earth more lightly and that reduce our ecological footprint. This life path remembers our deep roots in the natural world. It means to experience our connection with the ecology of life in which we are immersed and to balance our experience of the human-created environments with time in nature. It also means to celebrate the experience of living through the miracle of the Earth’s seasons. A natural simplicity feels a deep reverence for the community of life on Earth and accepts that the non-human realms of plants and animals have their dignity and rights as well the human. This is an ecological simplicity that appreciates our deep interconnection with the web of life and is mobilized by threats to its well-being (such as climate change, species-extinction, and resource depletion).

**4. Economic Simplicity:** Simplicity means there are many forms of “right livelihood” in the rapidly growing market for healthy and sustainable products and services of all kinds—from home-building materials and energy systems to foods. When the need for a sustainable infrastructure in developing nations is combined with the need to retrofit and redesign the homes, cities, workplaces, and transportation systems of “developed” nations, then it is clear that an enormous expansion of highly purposeful economic activity can unfold.

**5. Elegant Simplicity:** Simplicity means that the way we live our lives represents a work of unfolding artistry. As Gandhi said, “My life is my message.” In this spirit, an elegant simplicity is an understated, organic aesthetic that contrasts with the excess of consumerist lifestyles. Drawing from influences ranging from Zen to the Quakers, it celebrates natural materials and clean, functional expressions, such as are found in many of the hand-made arts and crafts from this community. Simplicity is a path of beauty.

**6. Family Simplicity:** A growing number of people are opting out of the fast track of life out of concern for the well-being of their children and the integrity of the family. In seeing our consumer society trying to take possession of our children’s minds from an early age, people are seeking to reduce some of the clutter and complexity they are otherwise bombarded with each day.

**7. Frugal Simplicity:** Simplicity means that, by cutting back on spending that is not truly serving our lives, and by practicing skillful management of our personal finances, we can achieve greater financial independence. Frugality and careful financial management bring increased financial freedom and the opportunity to more consciously choose our path through life. Living with less also decreases the impact of our consumption upon the Earth and frees resources for others.

**8. Political Simplicity:** Simplicity means organizing our collective lives in ways that enable us to live more lightly and sustainably on the Earth which, in turn, involves changes in nearly every area of public life—from transportation and education to the design of our homes, cities, and workplaces. The politics of simplicity is also a media politics as the mass media are the primary vehicle for reinforcing—or transforming—the mass consciousness of consumerism. Political simplicity is a politics of conversation and community that builds from local, face-to-face connections to networks of relationships emerging around the world through the enabling power of television and the Internet.

**9. Soulful Simplicity:** Simplicity means to approach life as a meditation and to cultivate our experience of intimate connection with all that exists. A spiritual presence infuses the world and, by living simply, we can more directly awaken to the living universe that surrounds and sustains us, moment by moment. Soulful simplicity is more concerned with consciously tasting life in its unadorned richness than with a particular standard or manner of material living. In cultivating a soulful connection with life, we tend to look beyond surface appearances and bring our interior aliveness into relationships of all kinds.

**10. Uncluttered Simplicity—**Simplicity means taking charge of a life that is too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. An uncluttered simplicity means cutting back on trivial distractions, both material and non-material, and focusing on the essentials—whatever those may be for each of our unique lives. As Thoreau said, “Our life is frittered

away by detail. . . Simplify, simplify.” Or, as Plato wrote, “In order to seek one’s own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life.”

As these ten approaches illustrate, the growing culture of simplicity contains a flourishing garden of expressions whose great diversity—and intertwined unity—are creating a resilient and hardy ecology of learning about how to live more sustainable and meaningful lives. As with other ecosystems, it is the diversity of expressions that fosters flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Because there are so many pathways of great relevance into the garden of simplicity, this cultural movement appears to have enormous potential to grow—particularly if it is nurtured and cultivated in the mass media as a legitimate, creative, and promising life-path for the future.

Our evolutionary intelligence is now being tested. The choices made within this generation will reverberate into the deep future. Although human societies have confronted major hurdles throughout history, the challenges of our era are genuinely unique. Never before have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. Never before has the entire human family been entrusted with the task of working together to imagine and then consciously build a sustainable, just, and compassionate future. Seeds growing for the past generation in the garden of simplicity are now blossoming into the springtime of their relevance for the Earth. May the garden flourish!

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