
COMMUNICATING SIMPLICITY

Mark A. Burch

Simplicity Institute Report 12o, 2012



SIMPLICITY
INSTITUTE

© Mark A. Burch, 2012. All rights reserved.

Communicating Simplicity

Mark A. Burch¹

1. Introduction

It's reasonable to assume that any essay about simplicity and communication will have to do with the classic themes of Right Speech. To write (or speak) rightly, our words should be true, carefully chosen, compassionate, and ideally, few. They should issue from a sincere and honest heart, expressing goodwill and intended for the improvement of others, even when the subject is contentious or our partners in conversation are malicious or uninformed. What we say should align with how we say it, how we hold our bodies, and the directness of our gaze. Above all what we say should be about something that matters. In all other cases, silence is preferable.

These themes continue to be highly relevant but they have been extensively explored by others in nearly every historical period and across many cultures. We have trouble managing our tongues (and pens) and there is no shortage of advice on this matter which I don't mean to repeat here. In the pages that follow I want to explore how we communicate simplicity, not how to communicate simply. For those who think that voluntary simplicity has something to offer the world in its present predicament, this must be a matter of considerable practical importance. Communicating simply is a matter of rhetoric and style. Communicating simplicity is an urgent task upon which the future of our species may depend. It is this second trail that I want to explore mostly because I think it is the one less traveled.

2. Have You Ever Metaphor?

An often used metaphor for humanity's sustainability predicament is the ill-fated Titanic, a luxury liner of massive bulk and inertia whose wealthy but clueless passengers are carried to their doom even as they sip champagne and listen to cheerful chamber music. Imagining this tragic event leaves us feeling as if we are being carried helplessly along in a huge vessel over which we have no control. We feel trapped aboard something which once set in motion cannot be easily turned or stopped, even if we wished to do so. The image arises from the Industrial Age paradigm of great mechanical forces blindly following impersonal natural laws, the age of Newtonian physics and Victorian values. It is an imperialist paradigm that aims to subject the world to human designs by sheer mechanical violence. Is it any wonder then that we too feel violated by these same relentless mechanical forces, along with the world we try to subjugate?

The image of the Titanic and all the associations it summons is an example of how the way we perceive and think can shape what we believe is possible for us. Discovering alternatives to being carried down with the ship implies creating new metaphors that help us see ourselves differently. Maybe we're not passengers on a cold iron ship fated to kill us because of its own design flaws. Instead, maybe we're more like a flock of birds, or a school of fish. We're a shining multitude capable of launching, stopping and turning on a dime. We are not a mute, mechanical mass of metal, or even a pile of silicon chips that must be plugged in and programmed to do what they do. We are a self-energized, self-aware, self-replicating, self-repairing, self-

¹ Mark A Burch is an author, educator, and group facilitator who offers presentations, workshops, and courses on voluntary simplicity. He has published four books on voluntary simplicity and is currently completing two further books, including a sourcebook for educators in simple living.

organizing, self-actualizing, solar powered, completely organic, totally recyclable, omni-local, interdependent and fully conscious *community*. What holds us together is not rivets and wires but *communication* among self-conscious beings. We are the makers not the victims of our technology.

With the possible exception of Facebook, we generally don't share anything and everything with anyone and everyone. *What* we communicate is constructed from a nearly infinite array of possibilities depending on how consciousness is oriented and on the story metaphors we tell ourselves about life, the universe and everything. Elsewhere I have proposed that a synergy of mindfulness practice and a lifestyle ordered to sufficiency rather than the pursuit of affluence might be foundations for a more sustainable culture. Assuming for the time being that it is messages about mindful sufficiency that we wish to communicate more broadly (so as to keep our flock from hitting the "wall" of our unsustainable way of life), this essay will focus on what sorts of communication might be most helpful in building and transmitting this new culture. Communication is the glue that keeps the flock flying together and communication tells us where the flock is going. Communication is also an essential process for education.

3. The Company We Keep

Encouraging a culture of mindfulness and sufficiency can face challenges arising from the misfit between what mindful sufficiency is about and the media we might use to communicate it. As early as the 1960s, philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan helped us appreciate that both the content of a message and the medium carrying it have profound effects on the societies within which they circulate (McLuhan 1967). In a consumer culture already saturated with the influence of mass media, we may think that promoting mindful sufficiency implies recruiting television and radio coverage, getting celebrity endorsements to attract public attention, and then crafting a one-size-fits-all "message" that we hope will be taken to heart by people in their millions. But this understandable first response already disconnects what mindful sufficiency is about from the media we might use to promote it.

Today, mass media are mostly commercially owned, serve commercial values, and are engaged in commercial activities. Their prime directive is to deliver people into the marketplace. They do this by broadcasting product advertising, but also by creating and continually reinforcing a generally consumeristic cultural milieu. Because the media themselves are so often used to sell things, to present unattainable fantasies as entertainment, to confound fact and fiction, and to manipulate public opinion, virtually anything else that appears in these media runs the risk of suffering because of the company it keeps. "Incredibility by association" is compounded by the fact that no one can realistically "sell" a non-consumptive way of life and stay in business. So pervasive is the association of electronic media (increasingly including the Internet) with commercial enterprise that even when they carry non-commercial content, they still implicitly endorse consumerism because the content itself is being "consumed" in the process of viewing or hearing it.

Commercial media make money from businesses that sponsor their programs. It is unlikely that they will carry content that is anti-consumerist in worldview as has already been discovered by "culture jamming" organizations like Adbusters (Adbusters 2012). To do so would undermine the very basis for their profitability. Even organizations like the Simplicity Forum (c. 2000), established specifically to promote simple living in the United States, has faced strong headwinds in trying to raise money from foundations to promote simpler living. Foundations are endowed with money generated through commercial endeavors. The interest on their original endowments depends on continuing and profitable economic activity, all of it

driven by a consumer culture narrative of the good life. Thus it's not likely that such institutions will fund activities that call into question the very basis of their existence.

There remains, however, the practical question of how mindful sufficiency and simpler living, as cultural innovations, can be diffused in society as a whole. This is important, partly because a cultural course change is essential if we are to avoid the wall of ecological and social catastrophe. But even more important is the fact that as we grow in mindfulness, our deepening appreciation for what is being lost to consumer culture, and also our growing sense of interdependence with all life makes such action imperative. So what forms of communication might better align with the values and culture of mindful sufficiency than those offered by the world of commerce? Will engaging them require multi-million dollar budgets, deep technical expertise, and World Cup of Soccer scale events? To address these questions, I want to distinguish two different species of communication, and then illustrate the role that each might play in diffusing a culture of mindful sufficiency.

4. Communication of the First Kind

"Communication" is as old as the human species; indeed, as old as life itself. If we situate communication for a moment within the living communities of the earth, we see a "multi-channel" world of great diversity. I want to use the term "Communication of the First Kind" to refer to our most biophysically rooted and earliest means of communication. Human beings are flooded, body and spirit, with a multitude of odors, hues, tones and tastes; with intuitions and images and dreams and visions; with songs and poems and hungers and hankerings. Long before we invented artificial communication technologies such as print, telephones, television, etc., we were (and continue to be) capable of a wide range of communication activities that include chemical, nonverbal / behavioral, visual and auditory, tactile and aesthetic communication, much of which we also share with animals and plants. We know the world and our place in it through experiences involving many senses. These experiences ground us in the pre-conscious depths of our cellular origins four billion years ago at the same time as they propel human consciousness toward whatever it is capable of becoming. We "communicate" but also "steep," breathe, and maneuver in an ocean of on-going exchanges and relationships of social and ecological interdependence. It is also our bridge into the world of organic reality and with all that is other than human. These are examples of Communication of the First Kind.

The ocean of messages from both "internal," subjective, unconscious sources and "external," social, and natural environments, provides our most immediate and real context for living. Mindfulness practice can heighten our awareness of these messages simply by providing a way of bringing attention back to them and valuing what they have to say to us. One example of what I would call "Communication of the First Kind" involves the image-making powers of the psyche. It consists of the spontaneously appearing images that have their source in the less conscious regions of the psyche and their communication to conscious awareness. Unlike words, images can represent situations as wholes. They empower people to transcend the constraints of communication of the second kind (to be explained below). They also give access to ways of knowing wherein whole new patterns can arise together with the sensory, motivational and emotional "auras" that will later nourish acts of culture creation.

A noteworthy example of this is community visioning exercises. I've facilitated groups on a number of occasions who tell their personal stories about what it feels like to be living in consumer culture at this time. Nearly all of these stories involve feelings of sadness, despair, stress, worry, regret and loss, especially when participants are asked to recall what has become of the natural places they enjoyed as children. As we process these memories in more detail, we discover a myriad of reasons why we respond emotionally to consumer culture in this way. But

we also soon discover that taking up each particular problematic situation and trying to deal with them one by one just lands us in a tangled thicket of complications, connections and unforeseen consequences. No one, it turns out, wants to be living in a society that leaves them feeling overwhelmed and despairing. The way out, however, is not found by fixing one problem at a time, but rather by imagining a healthier future society. These images appear as highly energized, quite detailed wholes. Moreover, they tend to be shared almost at an archetypal level, as if they are not the product of individual minds. Once a life-giving image is discovered, it's a much more energizing and hopeful prospect to work backwards, building from the image the better world we want, than it is to try to salvage consumer culture which is clearly undergoing its own extinction.

Communication of the First Kind represents our innate capacity for holistic connection with the world of our experience. It is common to all humanity, not the reserve of technical experts, monied elites, or even of literate cultures. It is inherently democratic and accessible to the youngest child. It is our most direct contact with living. It grows up from the earliest foundation of our biological and mental development. In my view, it is this sort of communication that most directly relates to mindfulness and which the practice of sustainable living is most concerned to conserve, deepen and develop. It pertains to what Anthony Spina (1998) refers to as our "Life World,"—the world of personal relationships, lived with immediacy and intensity, that infuses life with meaning. Communication of the First Kind is also the source of compelling messages about whether or not we are living sustainably. We know by walking down the street and listening and smelling and tasting the air and sensing the emotional and physical vibrations around us whether motor vehicles are a wholesome thing for us and for the planet. And we know this in a way that is never communicated by reviewing statistics and reports about automobile accident rates or air pollution levels.

Ecopyschologist Michael Cohen (1993) has suggested that in addition to the senses of vision and hearing which today we rely on most for our communication experience, we have 51 other senses that mediate our experiences of each other and our environment. Our culturally driven tendency to communicate mostly on just two of our 53 available sensory "channels" renders us both stupid and blind in ways that even our recent ancestors would find truly mind-boggling. It is precisely four million years of human evolution within this constellation of sensory and communication experience, Cohen contends, that produced human intelligence in the first place. We impoverish our sensory experience by focusing most of our attention on only one or two senses, he argues, and in the process we impoverish human intellect, our emotional well-being and even our contact with reality.

Communication of the First Kind occurs face-to-face. Historically, it has been by means of Communication of the First Kind (relationships, art, dance, experience in nature, introspective practices, ritual, gossip, storytelling, etc.) that cultural innovations have diffused within society. Since it often involves the more tactile, "intimate" senses, it is associated with the feminine. In light of its historical role, we might even conjecture that it provides the very ground that defines human sanity and our whole capacity for future development and evolution. There is hardly any reason to believe that nature is finished evolving the human species, even within the context of pre-industrial cultural forms.

Nevertheless, Communication of the First Kind presents some limitations. One is that all parties to the communication need to be in the same place at the same time. Communication of the First Kind is not pre-recordable or re-broadcastable. Consequently, it is inherently personal and limited both in time and space.

Second, every act of Communication of First Kind has about it a quality of uniqueness and unrepeatability because it is partly defined by the flow of experience in time and place, and by social context. A common example of this is a joke that isn't as funny on the second telling as on the first. We account for this difference by saying "you had to be there"; i.e., you had to be

present in the original physical and social situation to appreciate the humour. Since the flow of situations can never be duplicated, each act of Communication of the First Kind is unique in detail, if not in general outline. This lends to each occasion of Communication of the First Kind a special richness and unrepeatably preciousness. At the same time, however, it presents limitations when it's desirable or essential that a large number of people receive the same message, or that certain messages be preserved and transmitted over and over again.

Third, Communication of the First Kind is limited by the fact that, while it is "multi-modal" and therefore very rich, it moves at the speed of the human nervous system. Indeed, for both communication of the First and Second Kinds, the speed of human neural processing sets the outer limits of any communication experience, not the speed that machines can transfer information from one place to another.

Which brings us to Communication of the Second Kind.

5. Communication of the Second Kind

Today, whenever we think of "transmitting" something from one person to another, we naturally think of mass media communications. Our society is dominated, indeed obsessed, with the technology that mediates what I call "Communication of the Second Kind." The affluent North American adolescent is fully equipped with personal cell phone, entertainment center, laptop computer, iPod music player and high-speed internet access. Every credible business has a website, and every government is plagued by concerns about cyber-terrorism and information security. I call this "Communication of the Second Kind" because it is a historically recent, technically-mediated extension of human communication that rests upon the innate, and far older, layer of communication faculties that are the natural birth right of everyone—Communication of the First Kind.

The content of Second Kind communication technologies is symbols and images. It is abstract, quantitative, mostly visual, and linear. The technologies that carry these interactions mostly use only two sensory channels—vision and hearing—and at least as often, they aren't mediating communication between people at all, but rather between people and machines, or even between machines themselves.

Communication of the Second Kind offers some unique advantages as well as displaying some limitations of its own. In thinking of communication as a means of diffusing mindful sufficiency in North American culture, it will be important to keep these in mind since they will inform virtually every decision we make going forward.

Among its advantages, "second kind" communication does not require that everyone be physically present in the same place at the same time since messages can be recorded and rebroadcast at different times and across wide geographical areas. Since their content is symbolic rather than real, they are best suited to communicating news about something as an ersatz to experiencing the thing itself.

Another strength is the general belief in popular culture that whatever appears on mass media is important—whether or not this is true. For better or worse, media coverage confers status and currency to any event or cause appearing in them. Since access to mass media like television is rather expensive and technically difficult to arrange, the net effect is that messages appearing in them tend to represent the views and values of the mostly corporate and government enterprises who can afford to produce them. While this size and wealth advantage has to a considerable extent been off-set by the Internet and inexpensive video and audio production equipment, this freedom of access has been counterbalanced by audience fragmentation.

Finally, the mass media create celebrities. In North American popular culture (rapidly becoming a global popular culture) causes products, or events that are endorsed by celebrities to acquire an aura of status, urgency and importance. This is totally unrelated to the qualifications of the celebrity in question to confer such endorsements or even to know much about the product or cause they are endorsing. The relationship is purely commercial. While this defies logic, it remains a potent psychological truth that can't be ignored.

For all the glamor they confer and for all their pervasiveness, mass media also display many limitations. The fact that most mass media convey essentially the same message to everyone requires that messages be designed to appeal to a lowest common denominator of public interest and aptitude. This is not well-suited to dealing with inherently complex challenges like climate change, energy policy, or conservation of species diversity.

While mass media are necessary to heighten public awareness of a cultural innovation like mindful sufficiency, media "awareness" campaigns are not, on their own, sufficient to spark its adoption. Research on the effectiveness of advertising suggest that such approaches are both expensive and of limited value in actually changing behavior (McKenzie-Mohr 1999). Yet today, creating a media image, an on-line "brand", and some name recognition for an issue is seen as tantamount to actually doing something about it.

Third, for all the variety of technical gadgets available, communication of the Second Kind still represents only a thin slice of the communication bandwidth available to us through Communication of the First Kind. With the convergence of information technologies, the concentration of information and control of media infrastructure in fewer and fewer corporate hands, and the digitizing of everything, this range is getting narrower by the day. Conversely, however, there are legions of geeks who busy themselves with inventing new generations of technology capable of artificially replicating the full sensorium of experience that such communication systems cut us off from. This seems to me very much like inventing white bread and then reintroducing vitamin and mineral supplements that we could otherwise have ingested simply by eating whole grain bread to begin with.

Fourth, the very nature of technology-mediated communication is elitist, centralized, and increasingly controlled by a razor-thin cadre of technical specialists and corporate interests. Despite the best efforts of media rights activists, mass media continue to serve the interests of undemocratic corporate and government elites. In general, mass media represent an expensive "shotgun" approach to communication that is a real option only for the wealthy and the technically literate.

Fifth, because Communication of the Second Kind is inherently symbolic, it is always a message about something-at-a-distance, rather than immersion in the thing / event / experience itself. Most of us understand the difference between a television program about the Amazon rain forest and the actual experience of being in the Amazon rainforest, even though some people today probably think that they are doing important work for environmental conservation simply by making and watching television programs about it. While it's obviously better to be aware of rain forest conservation issues than to be unaware, it's a bit delusional to think that by watching a television program about rain forests, we actually know something about them in the same sense as would apply had we actually been there.

Sixth, and paradoxically, despite the remarkable trend toward corporate concentration of "second kind" media outlets, at the same time there is a fragmentation of media audiences driven by the development of its own technologies. The number of television sets and radios per household in North America is now at saturation. There are only twenty-four hours a day in which to consume these media. Penetration of household computer technology and Internet use is rapidly reaching saturation as well. The total potential audience for any one program has always been finite but now it's declining. Satellite systems, cable distribution systems, and now, the introduction of digital technology, vastly increases the number of different programs

available. Moreover, there has been a great expansion in programming for niche audiences. The ultimate fragmentation of audiences will result from Internet streaming of video and audio programming which in the long run will make possible individual tailoring of program content and delivery times. The result of all of these developments is essentially to eliminate one of the mass media's greatest advantages—the promise of reaching a mass audience.

Audience fragmentation is further intensified by a corresponding profusion of communicators. Viewed by some as a resurgent democratization of media, inexpensive video and audio production equipment, cell phones, readily available editing software, and cheap band width have all made it possible for virtually anyone to produce media content and distribute it themselves. But this may be as much a limitation as a liberation. Because of their scale, budgets, and technical capacities, the traditional corporate mass media could claim a certain credibility with the general public. But in the rapidly emerging world of “everyone as audience—everyone as producer” literally anything goes and it's caveat emptor in the marketplace of ideas.

The diminishing capacity of “mass” media to actually reach the mass audiences they used to deliver must be weighed against the high “fixed costs” of producing programs for these media. If the same or larger costs are being incurred to reach ever-diminishing audiences, the financial, to say nothing of the strategic, realism of turning to mass media to promote cultural innovation is questionable.

In addition to all these considerations, there is a range of other issues concerning whether Communication of the Second Kind media contradict the meaning of mindful sufficiency at another level altogether. Some eminent, well-intentioned advocates of simpler, more sustainable living, view mass media, and especially the Internet, as indispensable means of promoting global sustainability. I want to address each of the grounds on which these proposals are made, with deepest respect and affection for the thinkers making them, but from which I must differ because I don't think the proposals make sense. I fear that time and resources which could better be applied elsewhere may be wasted by pursuing these avenues.

First, a perennial concern is raised that television, and now video media streamed on the Internet, fail to realize their potential because commercial and entertainment content dominate these media. They could and should be used instead to inform and engage the mass of society in solving sustainability problems (Elgin 2009: 130ff). Mass media should be used to educate and inform, not just sell stuff and entertain. Through such broad programs of information and engagement, citizens would be better equipped to think critically about pressing sustainability issues and participate more effectively in democratic decision-making.

As desirable as this sounds, it doesn't fit very well with the effects that television actually has on human brain activity and motivation. The medium of television itself evokes brain potentials associated with daydreaming and unfocused attention (Burke 1996). This happens at a pre-conscious level, before we are even aware that our brain activity is being changed. It tends to induce passivity and suggestibility (Hanson 1996). Television viewing promotes a sedentary lifestyle of community disengagement (Edsall 1995). It is also the breeder reactor for consumer culture, exposing viewers to a relentless stream of commercial messages. The medium itself is one that tends to render its viewers passive, uncritical and compliant (McGrane 1998). Based on the research evidence, it would appear that television, and to a considerable degree the Internet as well, is perfectly suited to the tasks it is already performing: serving as a conveyor belt for government and corporate propaganda fed to an increasingly narcotized and uncritical public. It seems an unlikely mechanism for fostering anything like a literate, engaged, and active citizenry.

A second reason offered in favor of using mass media to promote sustainability is the idea that television today provides the images and ideas that comprise our shared frames of

reference for viewing the world (Elgin 2009: 156). Having a shared frame of reference is pre-requisite to cooperative, broad-based action. This insight was originally offered by MacLuhan as well in his “global village” concept and later his “global theatre”, but has been echoed many times since in the work of others (MacLuhan 1962). It’s important to note, however, that simply because something is widely shared does not necessarily mean the results will be positive. Mass media can, and are, being used today to spread ignorance, misinformation and prejudice with equal effectiveness to enlightenment, facts and goodwill. For example, two separate studies have shown that viewing Fox News coverage of current events such as the Iraq War and the U.S. Public Health Care debate actually leads to increased misinformation and confusion about the issues (World Public Opinion.org 2010; NBC/Wall Street Journal, 2009). Given the diversity of values already present in society, there seems to be little basis for believing that in the case of the sustainability crisis we would have any more luck recruiting people to a common point of view than on any other issue.

Next, there is considerable evidence that mass media can be addictive. A CBC documentary aired in 2010, “Are We Digital Dummies”, reported that perhaps as many as 10% of Internet users suffer corrosive effects on social interaction skills and the capacity to function effectively in ordinary reality. Enlightening is a quote from a reviewer of massive multi-player on-line games who digressed from his review of the soon to be released “Cataclysm” by Blizzard Games, to wax philosophical about the meaning of on-line gaming in the lives of gamers themselves:

“We play games because their miniature worlds are places where everything makes sense, where effort brings rewards, where neither we nor the place ever grows old.” (Chatfield 2010)

That is to say, gamers seek immersion in a world of unreality. Peter Pan couldn’t have said it better.

Immersion in the world of the Internet is so addictive that one young man in California actually had his legs amputated because they became gangrenous when he failed to move away from his computer console. Well heeled Internet addicts are now being carted off to addiction treatment centers with programming specific to their needs. It is not clear therefore how such a medium could reliably heighten human consciousness, voluntary action, critical thought, improved information, or public involvement in the issues of the day. The very definition of addiction suggests that freedom is compromised; we become less able to make the free, voluntary choice for a simpler way of life, which is one of the key values of mindful sufficiency.

A final rationale for engaging mass media to address the sustainability challenge is that a consensus of global values must develop before effective action can be taken on issues of global scope such as climate change or over-appropriation of planetary productive capacity (Elgin 2009: 155). This might be construed as calling for the same sort of centralized media campaign in service of sustainability as it currently serves in the cause of commerce. This may or may not be a welcome development, depending on your point of view. While centralized control might have been possible when mass media consisted only of radio and television, in the age of the Internet this is technically impossible because of how the operational architecture of the Internet is designed. It’s probably also socially impossible because of the libertarian / anarchistic views shared by many Internet activists. But the recommendation can also be questioned at the level of appropriateness to what the sustainability crisis may require.

It may be that the reason why so many centralized, “big picture”, one-size-fits-all planetary rescue plans have failed to catch on (e.g., the World Conservation Strategy in 1980; Agenda21 in 1992; the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, etc.) is because the sustainability crisis, while global in scope, cannot be solved by a single globalized program of reforms. This is the case because the global problem of sustainability has arisen from a diversity of local contributions of which local people are fully aware. These might be more effectively addressed by bringing mindfulness to their

local contexts, awareness of place, memory of local wisdom, capacity to generate local networks of knowledge, practice and solidarity in meeting the local manifestations of misdirected desire, addictive consumer behavior, and erosion of community.

Given all these considerations concerning both Communication of the First and Second Kinds, what sort of approach might be more effective in sharing the message of voluntary simplicity more widely?

6. What is Needed Now

The notion that expensive mass media promotional campaigns might be sufficient means of propagating the values of mindful sufficiency in our culture may be mistaken. Such an approach at best runs the risk of casting the promotion of simple living back into the cultural mold from which we're trying to extricate it. At worst, it threatens to invalidate these efforts entirely by placing them in the company of fantasies, idealizations, and commercial interests devoid of reinforcing messages from Communication of the First Kind. The last thing we really need is more information about our problems. What we need instead is transformation of our culture, beginning with how we live our own lives. Transformational communication does not happen simply by repeating the same cliches used by our favorite pop culture celebrities. Transformational communication happens between people, really present to each other, using all the "channels" we have.

If we want to advance the practice of mindful sufficiency, we need to find means that are consistent with its central values and vision. This immediately commends forms of communication that are direct, democratic, holistic, deeply entrenched in authentic human experience, decentralized, low-tech, and by employing which we actively deepen mindfulness, communities of interdependence, and meaning. Clues to these forms of communication can be found by exploring how those without access to electronic technology propagate change. We need to understand how new learning diffuses through animal populations where access to money or technology plays no part at all. In short, we need to share the treasures of mindfulness practice through Communication of the First Kind as well as through Communication of the Second Kind if we aim to promote transformation as well as awareness.

If we believe that the world is truly a system of relationships, then it is responses-as-messages on which we need to focus, and it is message relevance that matters at least as much as the size of audience we're reaching. What is required is insight and involvement, not necessarily large amounts of money. We need sufficient insight into the sustainability dilemma so that the messages we fashion are powerfully compelling for other people. They need to carry within them a "communication dynamic," a quality of social contagion that is self-propagating. They need to be "viral." I stress here transformational responses to the sustainability challenge, not only messages about it. We need creativity in how to frame and communicate these responses. And we need involvement sufficient to live these insights with integrity and accept some sacrifices in seeing them replicated. A negative example of this has been the success of radical Islam which uses minimum technical and financial resources to achieve remarkably impressive effects relying instead on the intensity of the relevance of its message to its adherents and their seemingly limitless commitment to achieving their ends. There is nothing about money, or about centralized high-tech media that assures insight, creativity or commitment. Which brings us to communicating in a "First Kind" manner.

7. The Message Is What We Do

The fact that human beings are intensely preoccupied with social comparisons assures that any sensible (visible, audible, tactile) efforts we make to adopt the values and practices of mindful sufficiency will become “messages” sent by “example” and, unless we live as recluses, they will be immediately detected. Commercial media already exploit the power of social comparison by presenting advertising imagery that attempts to substitute for the face-to-face social comparison activities of daily life. Since the goal of advertising is to deliver us into the marketplace, it is not concerned to mediate forms of experience that deliver us into community or into mindfulness either. Nevertheless, the contrived and vicarious “role models” offered by mass media are not nearly as compelling as the real life examples of happier people we might meet in person. It is through these personal meetings that we communicate in a “First Kind” way.

Probably the most compelling way to communicate the value of mindful living is to live it deeply and authentically ourselves and just share our life with others. This doesn’t require becoming evangelistic or aggressive. On the contrary, what is more consistent with the spirit of simplicity and mindfulness, is a genuine, unpretentious cultivation of its values, a neighbourly readiness to share this as and when appropriate, i.e., to cultivate community rather than privacy, and to be joyfully present and available to others through the good things we discover in simple living. In this way, we are not telling others about mindful sufficiency, but rather being it. The deeper and more authentically we cultivate this way of being, and the more generously we invite others into experiencing its benefits, the more compelling it is as an act of communication and the more dynamic we become as engines of cultural transformation. We cannot convincingly share what we don’t also authentically live.

8. Immersion Learning

Immersion learning could also provide a means of diffusing mindful sufficiency (Bender 1989). We learn by imitation and direct instruction, of course, but in immersion learning we enter a whole new environment where everything in our surroundings immerses us in what we aim to learn. Travel to unfamiliar cultures has this effect, as does immersion learning of languages. These are very much Second Kind communication experiences and highlight the difference between these communication styles—the difference for example, between learning French from a computer screen as contrasted with living in France for a year. Creating opportunities for curious people to live various expressions of mindful sufficiency over short periods of time would allow them to experience what it is like rather than learn about it as a detached curiosity. It might be possible to create special learning centers for this purpose, at least at the outset. They would later be followed by intentional communities created with mindfulness and sufficiency as key articles of a “community charter.” Simply being in such places and joining in a daily round configured to other values than those of consumerism could provide a powerful “first-kind medium” for sharing the values and practices of more sustainable living.

A limitation of all immersion learning is its questionable transferability to the outside culture once people return from the demonstration setting and resume their former lives. Eventually, we must see the appearance of whole communities that practice more sustainable living and then the decision will simply be whether or not to join in. Examples of such places already exist in the growing number of ecovillages being established around the world (Global Ecovillage Network). But before then, any immersion learning process must be mindful of participants’ need to re-enter mainstream consumer culture and take steps to help visitors transfer their learning as much as possible back into the old context. This may be very difficult

to do, however, as Thomas Kuhn (1962) pointed out: Whenever different paradigms are represented in the same cultural space, they appear to be incommensurable. They speak with different languages to different aspects of our experience. Transiting from one to the other can be very challenging, and maintaining two at once in consciousness is by definition, impossible.

An existing movement within voluntary simplicity to form voluntary simplicity study circles (Andrews 1997) offers some of the characteristics of both social comparison and immersion learning approaches. Study circle participants explore many new ideas and examples of simple living while also participating in a short immersion experience of being in a group attracted to the same values and practices. Extending and developing the study circle process may be an excellent entrée to important forms of Communication of the First Kind that transformation toward a more sustainable culture.

9. Going Artsy

“Culture” is an all-embracing idea that includes language, cuisine, beliefs, values, institutions, governance, technology, and the arts. The role of the arts in developing a more sustainable culture is, in my view, grossly underrepresented and perhaps even undervalued in most discussions of how we can meet our sustainability challenges. But if we think for even a moment about how we each came to absorb the ideas, images, stories, and feelings that define our way of life, both the fine arts and folk art play major roles. The songs we sing and listen to, the stories we tell ourselves, the selection of subjects that appear in our art, the screenplays and scripts that underpin our movies, television and drama productions, the stories we tell our children, the dances we perform and the occasions we perform them—all these and many others are examples of how the arts communicate culture. The most intimate expressions of these artistic creations are those that are expressed as communications of the First Kind.

Of course artists have to eat and fame is part of the allure of art for some people. Therefore an artist must be a commercial as well as an aesthetic success if she or he is to keep on eating and making art. Second Kind communication media represent the logical channels for exposing one’s art to a large audience, becoming better known, and thus making more money. But even among the financially successful in the artistic community, there is continual preoccupation with retrieving intimacy, connection with their audience, authenticity of portrayal, personal scale, depth of insight, and ideally, a level of communication with others which is transformative of both artist and art appreciator. We “engage” with art when it touches us sufficiently to change our lives, or at least our outlook on our lives.

I think any transition to a more sustainable society and a culture of mindful sufficiency will involve deep engagement of the artistic community. We very much need visions of what a more sustainable society will look like in the future. We need songs that celebrate the revelations of mindfulness and the rewards of discovering our deep relationships of interdependence. We need stories to tell our children (and ourselves) that remind us of the things we so easily forget if we slip out of paying mindful attention to what is real. We need artistic works that once again engage the full human sensorium and don’t settle for mere visual or aural bedazzlement. While I have no artistic talent of my own, I can see art all around me and I sense its absolutely fundamental significance in transmitting and shaping culture. I have also felt its power to transform me at emotional and intuitive levels that are hard to articulate in words.

A great tragedy in consumer culture is that so many of our artists are either transfixed by the catastrophe unfolding around us, or else they have sold out to the commercialism and narcissism of mainstream culture. Their art expresses only their individual struggles with their various neuroses and fails to reveal anything to the rest of us about the realities of our own lives---something I think is an integral part of the vocation of an artist. What our time in history

needs are visionary artists who can see past both themselves and the present darkness that surrounds humanity. This act of visioning is not to promote some ideology like a workers' paradise, nor to offer unattainably idealized images of the future. We need artists who can portray that within us which offers real testimony to our powers of transformation and evolution. We need an art of hope, rooted in mindfulness, but breathing us into a future wherein human life still means something and the human adventure is continuing.

To do this of course implies that artists themselves make this journey. We cannot spin convincing yarns about a world yet to be born unless we have ourselves already visited those terrible regions where these transforming energies are at work. I am not at all naive about what this process involves. But this is and always has been the meaning of real art and real artists navigate these waters. Who will come forward then and help us? Who will make this journey and come back with a vision to save the people?

10. Spreading Viruses

The most compelling argument for relying principally on mass media to broadly promote a more sustainable way of life is the notion that there is no other practical way of reaching large numbers of people in time to avert the ecological collapse in store for consumer culture. While it is true that electronic communication systems offer instantaneous broadcast of the sort of communication they can carry, for many reasons already mentioned, this may not be the way of reaching people that best aligns with what mindful sufficiency is about. Worse than not being effective, they threaten to undermine the very values sustainable livelihood requires. Admitting this requires that we come to terms with all our fears of being ineffective, or of not diffusing the sustainability message in time to avert ecological collapse, and to forego the popular delusion that whatever creates a "buzz" must be important and is having a deep effect. Moreover, sustainability advocates are just as vulnerable as anyone to the vanity that one is having a positive effect on things simply by being well known.

To supplement our deeply ingrained propensity to use mass media to promote ideas, I would offer the hopeful principle of "six degrees of separation" linking everyone on earth. This notion proposes that every person on earth is separated from every other by only six steps of contact. If a message is passed from one person to all the people they know and thence onward, the message would only have to be repeated six times to reach everyone on earth—six billion people. Critical here is the fact that the message must be meaningful enough to be valued as relevant, and contagious (viral) enough in its urgency, attractiveness or humor, to assure that it will be passed along.

To scale this down a bit, if each person practicing a strong form of voluntary simplicity chose to share this way of life enthusiastically and personally with just ten other people, and these ten felt benefitted enough to share it with ten others in turn, this circle of sharing would only have to pass through nine iterations to directly reach a billion people—the "consumer class" of planet Earth. Since the traditional North American nuclear family itself still consists of about four people, a substantial part of this work can be done in one's own household, and by a tiny extension, to one's immediate neighbors. Most of us could easily engage many more than ten other people.

The nine degrees of separation principle requires no technology at all, no money, and no mass organizing campaigns. It can achieve its purpose entirely by word-of-mouth, face-to-face relationships. It is amenable to infinite variation and spontaneous, creative innovation, unlike the standard canned messages of the mass media. It encourages the dialogue in relationships which even the most advanced forms of interactive media fail entirely to duplicate in subtlety, precision, and flexibility. Most important, since relationships mediate the diffusion of this

cultural innovation not technology, our introduction to mindful sufficiency can be leisurely, prolonged, deep, and most important of all, personal. It is therefore infinitely adaptable to local circumstances, history, and culture. There is no need to learn a new language to engage machines, no matter how “intuitive” the interfaces.

Though the diffusion of a sustainable culture by this means would be agonizingly slow at first, like any geometric progression, its expansion at the end of the sequence is explosive and complete. What drops out of the picture is any access to celebrity or claim on expert status for those sharing the lifestyle of mindful sufficiency. Sustainable living would not be purely a “message” or a “program” that some people have that they then use mass media to transmit to others who don’t have it—the old consumer model of communication. Rather, the practice of mindful sufficiency would be a communion among people spreading out from a common center in a shared set of values and practices. Or even better, it might be something originating from a diversity of “centers” to find expression in a diversity of ways. It would be egalitarian and accessible to everyone. Best of all, it would require no expensive bureaucratic organizations to manage. It would be a self-stoking process unfolding entirely outside and ‘round-about the money exchange economy and all of its coercive institutions.

What might be most necessary in sparking this sort of process is strengthening the idea among existing practitioners of mindful sufficiency that its practice is something that the crisis of sustainability calls us to “pay forward” through relationships. While many expressions of simple living are strongly communitarian, others are quite solitary. Yet the times call for generosity and trust. If we can see what we gain from simple living as a summons to pass it on, we will have tossed the pebble in the pond. Moreover, we will be stepping into a more egalitarian, creative, and grounded future than anything currently promised by high technology, globalized markets, and elitist power structures.

A common question that arises in connection with introducing mindful sufficiency into mainstream culture is how many people are already living this way? Or, how many people do we have to convince before this reaches a tipping point to become a cultural reality? Implicit in these questions is the assumption that the more people who adopt an idea or a way of life, the more likely it is to be “true” or “rewarding.” All those people can’t be wrong! Well, history shows that “all those people can be wrong” and the mere popularity of an opinion or practice doesn’t make it true or valuable on that account. It only makes it popular—something the current Internet generation who believes so naively in the “truth” being whatever opinion is widely shared, has yet to learn.

Some fear that large-scale sustainability problems involving the day-to-day activities of a large number of people require an equally large scale and populous response to resolve them. But those fears may be groundless. This is the old “Titanic metaphor” come back to haunt us again—while the problems created by consumer culture are indeed very large scale, and vast numbers of people participate in the culture (probably because they see no choice or have no time or energy to create anything different), only a relatively small number create and direct consumer culture. It may be that the task of cultural transformation, the task of shifting consciousness, does not require a mass “conversion” to mindfulness and sufficiency. Rather it might involve merely engaging those who create and direct consumer culture, or those who will someday be culture creators themselves. In this connection it is the “opinion leaders” and artists and educators and daycare workers---particularly daycare workers—the key role models or “idols” who might be most instrumental in diffusing a new consciousness in society. We have no difficulty these days appreciating the power of “asymmetric warfare” where lightly armed but determined fighters have repeatedly stopped the massive armies of super powers. Why should we doubt the potential efficacy of a nonviolent asymmetric social change process?

It is important to keep in mind that those who currently style themselves as society’s leaders, people with formal power in government and business, are the custodians of the old

paradigm. It is their worldview that is dying because it has failed so totally to bring human activities into harmony with the planet, and human beings into harmony with each other. It already is this traditional group of leaders who cannot decipher the lyrics of the new songs wafting on the breezes from the future, because we speak different languages grounded in different worldviews. Whoever will shape the future culture of sustainability may not be many in number. But whoever they are, they are, or soon will be, standing at those critical balance points where the tiniest push at the right time may birth a new world. We have only to hope that their mindfulness is deep when the time comes. As Thich Nhat Hahn is said to have remarked: "We need more buddhas...more buddhas!"

11. The Way Ahead

In considering a research / action agenda for mindful sufficiency, it is not my intention to set up a polarity between media-driven and personal approaches to promoting sustainable livelihood. What I do suggest, however, is that neither can be substituted for the other and we need both. People must become aware of more sustainable ways of living as options that are being lived and practiced by people like themselves, not just eccentrics, atavistic back-to-the-landers, or celebrities. For this purpose, Communication of the Second Kind is both useful and appropriate.

Complementing this awareness-building, however, we should consider activities that aim more precisely at understanding how to share and support others in the practices of sustainable living. Study circles may already offer an excellent test bed for this sort of activity and we might well apply ourselves to the task of understanding how to nurture "super study circles" that carry people through conversation into solidarity, innovation, and action/non-action (Burch 2009). To do this, it will be useful to deepen our understanding of how a good joke makes the rounds, what has made twelve-step groups so ubiquitous and successful, and how animals transmit knowledge from one generation to the next. When we better understand these sorts of happenings, we may at last have grown beyond our technology to a wider understanding of our humanity.

References

- Adbusters: A Journal of the Mental Environment. <http://www.adbusters.org/>
- Andrews, Cecile, 1997. *The Circle of Simplicity*. HarperPerennial, New York, NY.
- Bender, Sue, 1989. *Plain and Simple: A Woman's Journey To The Amish*. HarperCollins, New York, NY. An excellent memoir of this sort of "immersion learning" experience.
- Burch, Mark A., 2009. *The Simplicity Study Circle II: Tools for Participation*. Simplicity Practice and Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
- Burke, Monte, 1995. 'The Four Basic Arguments for a National TV-Turnoff Week.' Washington, DC: TV-Free America.
- Burke, Monte, 1996. 'Television and Health.' Washington, DC: TV Free America.
- CBC-TV Doc Zone, *Are We Digital Dummies?* Broadcast 18 November 2010.
- Chatfield, Tom, 2010. 'Cataclysm coming...' Accessed at www.boingboing.net/2010/11/05/cataclysm.html
- Cohen, Michael J., 1993. 'Beyond meditation: An introduction to the pure science of speaking with Earth and its spirit.' World Peace University.
- Edsall, Thomas B., 1995. 'TV Tattered Nation's Social Fabric, Political Scientist Contends.' *The Washington Post*, Sunday, September 3, 1995.
- Elgin, Duane, 2009. *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a way of Life That is outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. Harper, New York, NY, 130ff.
- Hanson, Jay, 1996. 'Neurological effects of television.' <jhanson@ilhawaii.net>, 13 Aug 1996, sustainable-development@civic.net.
- Kuhn, Thomas S., 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- MacLuhan, Marshall, 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*; 1st Ed.: University of Toronto Press; reissued by Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- MacLuhan, Marshall, 1967. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. 1st Ed.: Random House, New York, NY; reissued by Gingko Press, 2001.
- McGrane, Bernard, 1998. 'The Zen TV Experiment.' Accessed at <http://adbusters.org/Articles/zentv.html> (January 1998) A zen-inspired look at how television shapes perception and carries people away from reality rather than connecting them to it. Includes exercises for cultivating greater awareness of the effects media have on us.
- McKenzie-Mohr, Doug, 1999. *Fostering More Sustainable Behavior*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada. After reviewing a considerable amount of empirical research on the factors that contribute to people adopting more sustainable behavior such as increasing their use of recycling facilities or participating in car pooling programs, McKenzie-mohr concluded that taken in isolation, information and advertising campaigns were generally ineffective to spark sustainability-positive behavior change. Instead, what seems to be required is a multi-faceted approach that includes analyzing and removing barriers to the desired behavior, identifying effective motivators and rewards for the desired behavior, having role models (celebrities) model and endorse the behavior, incessant communication and reinforcement of the desired behavior, highly targeted advertising campaigns, information campaigns stressing the benefits and progress being made in establishing the desired behavior, creation of peer-pressure networks to reinforce and strengthen the behavior, publicized rewards for performing the behavior—and all this to establish extremely modest changes to our daily habits.
- NBC/Wall Street Journal, 2009. *NBC News Health Care Survey*, August 2009.
- Spina, Anthony. 1998. 'Research shows new aspects of voluntary simplicity.' *The Simple Living Network*. Spina conducted research on people who had made a decision to take up the practice of voluntary

simplicity and their reasons for doing so. His research respondents consistently reported that succeeding in consumer culture carried them away from the values in life that mattered most to them. These values Spina called the “Life World” which included the day-to-day, face-to-face relationships and experiences that give our lives meaning. The Life World provides the “signals” we need to stay in touch with what matters to us and feeds our souls. Consumer culture, by contrast, was perceived as a source of “noise” that blurred or dimmed out signals from the Life World. This noise consisted of physical noise itself, but much more of a torrent of information, advertising, propaganda, and “urgent” messages of all sorts arising from governments and commercial interests. The result was that people eventually felt as though they were wandering in a “data smog” of information that lost relevance in direct proportion to its abundance. Escaping this milieu eventually became an urgent matter if staying connected with one’s Life World was to be possible. Voluntary simplicity provided both the tools and the rationale for a transition out of consumer culture and its smog of information to recover the values and experiences of the Life World.

The Global Ecovillage Network, <http://gen.ecovillage.org/>

The Simplicity Forum, <http://www.thesimplicityforum.org/>

World Public Opinion.org, 2010. ‘Voters Say Election Full of Misleading and False Information: Poll Also Finds Voters Were Misinformed on Key Issues,’ December 9, 2010. Accessed at <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brunitedstatescanadara/671.php?nid=&id=&pnt=671&lb=>