

---

# **EDUCATING FOR SIMPLE LIVING**

Mark A. Burch

*Simplicity Institute Report 12j, 2012*

---



SIMPLICITY  
INSTITUTE



# Educating for Simple Living

Mark A. Burch\*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I aim to explore education within a culture of simple living and some methods that might serve the new educational project implied by such a culture. The historical and survival challenges we currently face as a species also requires that I approach this discussion from two distinct but intertwined perspectives:

First is the trans-historical role that education plays in our perennial efforts, both as individuals and as societies, to fashion a good life. The desire for a good life arises spontaneously within us as a fact of our inner experience. It is basic to our species. It draws us continually to transcend our historical situation through self-transformation and cultural evolution. This is education for a better life.

Second is the specific role education can play in helping us front the survival challenges posed by the imminent demise of consumer culture. We face the historical confluence of challenges such as peak oil, climate change, the end of economic growth and grid-locked institutions of governance, to name only a few. This more or less assures the end of material affluence as either a desirable or attainable goal for personal and social development. Our historical situation is driving a “transition” toward some new culture and worldview we cannot yet fully articulate (Hopkins, 2008). The only certainties are that the consumer culture of the past cannot be maintained for long and that it arises from a delusional worldview. Education has a key role to play in helping us evolve our worldview, and hence our culture, in directions that are more consistent with human well-being and ecological sustainability. This is education for human survival.

Finally, I take an essentially psychological perspective of our search for well-being and how we meet our survival challenges. Peak oil is a “problem” today because human beings are over-consuming oil in pursuit of inordinate desires for power, comfort and wealth. Climate change is threatening every ecosystem on Earth because human beings are releasing excessive greenhouse gases in pursuit of limitless affluence. While peak oil and climate change certainly threaten our survival, they are not something Earth is doing “to us.” They are instead the outer-world consequences of how we think and what we desire. While improved technology, better policies, and more humane social relations are undoubtedly necessary conditions for a better life, they are not sufficient. Such practices fail to address the essential motivational, attitudinal, and cognitive causes of the challenges we face. Since, as individuals, we are all prone to falling into unwholesome psychological states, it only seems sensible to engage every available cultural mechanism we have to compensate this tendency. Education can make a major contribution to this end.

## 2. EDUCATING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Education for simple living is based on a different perspective of human nature and what makes for well-being than that of consumer culture. It begins with telling ourselves a

---

\* 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.

different story about what sort of creatures we are, why we are here, and how we can flourish into the deep future. This story partly determines what we believe is possible for us.

A beginning on the question of what education for simple living might imply can be found in something written by Thomas Moore (1994) in one of his lesser-known books, *Meditations*:

We [now] study to get diplomas and degrees and certifications, but imagine a life devoted to study for no other purpose than to be educated. Being educated is not the same as being informed or trained. Education is an 'education,' a drawing out of one's own genius, nature, and heart. The manifestation of one's essence, the unfolding of one's capacities, the revelation of one's heretofore hidden possibilities—these are the goals of study from the point of view of the person. From another side, study amplifies the speech and song of the world so that it's more palpably present.

Education in soul leads to the enchantment of the world and the attunement of self.  
(Moore, 1994)

Education draws forth the human capacities we associate with "soul" but also does this so that "...the speech and song of the world is more palpably present." Put differently, education develops within us the capacity to be "attuned" to "enchantment." This is accomplished in a process which is both personal and relational, both "subjective" and "objective." We do this not in order to achieve something else like a high income or celebrity, but because attunement to the speech and song of the world contributes intrinsically to our well-being. Education aims to shape and inform how we are in the world. This is different from learning merely how to add to what we have. In Moore's words, the goal is to be educated—to have that which is potential within us drawn forth so that it can appear in the world and become a fact of human history.

Education of this sort begins within person-to-person relationships. This may seem obvious, but in consumer culture it is by no means obvious. Today both learners and educators spend more and more time interacting with machines in order to transfer information than they spend with each other drawing forth soul and experiencing enchantment together.

I remember spending considerable time as a child doing dishes with my mother. Working side by side was a time when we could talk about our days, how we were feeling, what we dreamed for the future. There was no formal instruction going on during these conversations but there was considerable "soul sharing" which helped me discover what my own soul was about. But this apprentice-style learning, the learning we absorb by working with others older and more experienced than we are, is something that has largely disappeared from modern life. It requires a different perspective of work than is common in consumer culture which sees youth not as a preparation for adulthood but as a protected, prolonged recess from any connection with the real world. This is an educational challenge as well as a social one. It represents an attitude toward education that would have no place in a culture of simple living which aims to strengthen and intensify our immersion in real world experience.

Our perennial search for a better life is a vibrant developmental dynamism intrinsic to our species. This energy is always present and active, but it can sometimes be directed in ways that are unskilful and unwholesome. A culture that encourages manifesting this energy exclusively as competitive material acquisitiveness is both a historical aberration and an ethical error. Maybe competitive acquisitiveness is imprinted right in our DNA as consumer culture claims. But perhaps it is a learned attitude that we absorb from an education system designed to serve consumerism and its familiars, capitalism and state fascism. The answer is often determined by what we emphasize.

I propose that our developmental energies can find more appropriate (ecologically and socially benign) expression if we think of education as the process of progressively drawing forth and realising the human potentials that contribute to well-being while at the same time

incurring an ever-decreasing impact on the ecosphere. Moreover, education provides the tools and relationships that help us harmoniously integrate the qualitative development of our personal well-being in synergy with the requirements of the ecosphere and of just and equitable human relationships.

One aim here is to liberate education from the chokehold of consumer culture and economics. Even momentary reflection on personal experience demonstrates that increasing our income secures an increase in well-being, but only up to a point. There is no simple or direct relationship between affluence and quality of life, or development of “soul” for that matter. Not all values are economic values. Indeed, economic values are decidedly limited in their power to determine well-being and personal development (See: Alexander, 2012, for an extensive review of research).

Achieving the goal of drawing forth (educing) the intrinsic human capacity for joy, development, and well-being in synergy with the ecosphere and with other people also calls for a re-orientation of technical and economic development.

A society that educated for lives of voluntary simplicity hopefully would not orient technical development to create products and services simply because this was potentially profitable. Instead, economic and technical innovation would be directed to developing soul in symbiosis with the ecosphere. This would certainly imply doing more with less, but not in order simply to maximize profit. We would strive to do more with less so that the development of human potential could be a more equitably distributed opportunity for human beings. We would employ technology so that the life processes of the ecosphere could be protected and enhanced. Our aim would be to achieve the maximum increment in human well-being at an ever-diminishing real cost to society and the ecosphere. The measure of our success would be a planet growing wilder and wilder inhabited by a race of healthy, happy, peaceable and soulful human beings. This is a fundamentally different vision for technical development than that it should simply be the hired brains of economic avarice.

Given this general perspective of education, what might be some more specific aspects of education for simple living and a better life?

### **3. EDUCATING FOR MINDFULNESS**

Simple living has been perennially identified with conscious living, with deliberate acts of mindfulness, and with deep rootedness in our human capacities and limitations. The mindfulness we seek to cultivate through simplicity of living is rooted in the powers of consciousness and the immediate experience of life-in-this-body. What Stephanie Mills (2002) has called “Epicurean simplicity” is deeply situated in our primordial physical powers to encounter life as warm animals, creatures capable of ease and pleasure, and through the capacities of our bodies, to become architects of friendships, communities, and intimacy. It also implies a heightened appreciation for the full range of our human experiences, without undue judgment or censorship.

Elsewhere I have discussed at some length the meaning and cultivation of mindfulness as well as the changes it’s regular practice brings to conscious awareness. Recent research has shown that the consistent practice of something like mindfulness meditation (Vipassana) is often accompanied by a growing preference for simple living (Elgin, 2010; Kasser & Brown, 2009). Mindfulness practice gradually produces a number of motivational, perceptual and cognitive changes that help practitioners experience greater richness in everyday living, perceive greater connectedness among themselves and other beings with whom they share the Earth, and an increasing preference for compassionate and nonviolent ways of interacting with others. I believe these changes are necessary conditions for assuring human well-being

over the long term and are absolutely essential pre-requisites to a lasting and fulfilling practice of simple living.

Mindfulness rarely develops spontaneously. It generally requires instruction and practice. It's also helpful if practice is supported and reinforced with the same insistent intensity that today we see devoted to promoting competition, entrepreneurism, greed and individualism. It takes daily, conscious effort to awaken, and more effort and social support to stay awake. Despite the fact that some Eastern cultures have been exploring mindful states of awareness for perhaps as long as five millennia, there is no reason to assume that everything there is to know about consciousness has already been discovered. This implies both an educational and a "research" project in as much as mindful states of awareness may well have life-giving applications of many different kinds (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

If the cultivation of consciousness becomes a central cultural project for a sustainable way of life, then we might imagine educating for mindfulness evolving along at least two continua. The first of these would be "inward" and "downward", that is, in terms of consciousness seeking to extend itself along its "depth dimension" toward its own subjective interiority. This is the world of what Carl Jung termed the personal and collective unconscious (Fuller, 1994: 74), and what Ira Progoff (1969: 153), a later figure in the field of depth psychology, called the "organic psyche," or that inner domain of experience where we notice "psyche" (what we think of as "mental" phenomena) emerging from the domain of bodily processes (or what we think of as physical, or somatic awareness). This is the world of interior imagery, of dreams, of intuition and deep inspiration, of the immanent sacred, and of the ancient personal continuities between ourselves and our psychological emergence, both as individuals, and as a species.

The other dimension along which mindfulness might develop is represented by an outer-directed, expansive movement. It includes all our efforts and activities aimed at expanding the perimeter of awareness through learning, exploration, communication, discovery, technical augmentation of our senses, and coming to know the Other. Of course that "Other" may be another person, nature, the cosmos, or the transcendent aspect of the sacred. To this realm belongs science and communication, but not primarily as a means of manipulating and controlling the Other-as-Object (nature, other people), but rather as means of coming to know, appreciate, and relate to the Other-as-Being. The purpose of this sort of learning is to expand the perimeter of what we recognize as "inter-being." Inter-being is the web of relationships that provides the enabling context that sustains our personal subjectivity—in descending scale, the cosmos, the ecosphere, and society (interpersonal relationships) (McMurtry, 2002; Macy, 1983). It is through cultivating these two species of mindfulness that we discover the balance that is a central value in simple living. Consciousness is the organ we use to gracefully balance and integrate the realities of our "inner" and "outer" experiences, the realities of our subjectivity as individuals who also flourish within a web of defining and indispensable relationships. The growth of consciousness is thus synonymous with the development of mature appreciation for these various realities and what they bring to our lives. It is also pre-requisite to making responsible choices.

Education for voluntary simplicity in some sense must imply recovering a sense of self as positioned within our powers of consciousness, and not as is the case in consumer culture, of a self increasingly alienated or projected into the material artifacts we use consciousness to create. Humanity's greatest achievement is neither our technology, nor economic affluence, nor luxury comfort, but rather the fact that we are self-aware. The chilling modern preoccupation with developing "silicon-based intelligence" that will supersede and surpass the organic intelligence that spawned it is a particularly alienated example of our powers of self-awareness held in projection on our artifacts.

For many who practice voluntary simplicity, the physical side of life is not something from which to escape through fantasies of constructing alienated mechanical replicas of ourselves. Rather, it's an aspect of existence with which we hope to cultivate a deeper and more vibrant appreciation. It's precisely our ability to become conscious of these inherent potentials that brings us a sense of richness in living. These abilities pre-exist anything we might make or own. They are not enhanced by material affluence which may paradoxically numb us to the richness of life itself. We discover that it is through focusing consciousness mindfully that consciousness itself can grow, and a world of experiential richness opens up that is the inherent birthright of every human being, regardless of how much or how little we own. Learning mindfulness doesn't require owning anything tangible. Rather, it involves learning to attend closely to our sensory and emotional experiences, our immediate consciousness of self and other, and activities that foster in us a "beginner's mind"—freshly awake, non-judgmentally aware, compassionately open to the moment. In this way we discover for ourselves what is essential to our well-being and how easily that can be provisioned.

So education for mindful simplicity includes all those activities that help people reconnect with, develop and appreciate their inherent physical, psychological and interpersonal capacities. It is rooted in sensory and perceptual learning, cultivating appreciation, but also extends "inward" into dream work, intuitive awareness, and also "outward" to discovery learning of nature both human and infra-human, and the full range of knowledge and abilities needed to deepen our dialogue with the immanent and transcendent sacred.

#### **4. EDUCATING FOR COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING**

A perennial role for education is transmitting the deposit of human culture and knowledge from one generation to the next. This includes acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to a fruitful and cooperative co-existence with other people and with nature. This sort of education is a chance for future generations to learn from the mistakes and build on the achievements of their ancestors. Education in a culture of simple living would also perforce imply remembering our mistakes, celebrating our achievements, and outfitting ourselves to participate fully and constructively in the human adventure.

Making progress toward achieving this value will require considerable recovery and reconstruction activity in its own right. The industrial and commercial mentality that so pervades consumer culture has not failed to diffuse into education as well. Many education administrators and school trustees firmly believe that education is a business and that educational institutions should be run like businesses. This has produced a strong bias in favor of programs and curricula that are oriented toward the goals and activities of business in particular and consumer culture in general. It is common today to think of education as merely a training process for future employment or an "investment" which we expect to pay handsome financial dividends.

While education must certainly prepare everyone for productive roles in the economy, it cannot be only that or we lose a great deal that is very precious. To neglect history, music, the arts, physical education, pure science, the study of other societies, times and cultures, is to condemn learners of all ages to a generalized amnesia that narrows life, drains it of many rich sources of pleasure, handicaps people in their capacity to enjoy a rewarding leisure, and most pernicious, renders a population vulnerable to tyranny by propagating ignorance and apathy.

If the simple life is the examined life, richly lived, then its indispensable foundation is education that is both broad and deep, especially in values other than those of the market. If life is about more than getting and having, then learners need to discover what riches lay

beyond the frenzy of getting and having. Equally important is the need to weld strong connections with both our history and our visions for the future. Without being slaves to irrational traditions or inherited hatreds, we still need a sense of rootedness in history as well as a sense of responsibility toward future generations. Lacking this, we are limited to the narrow cell of our own personal concerns. We have little sense of where we come from, where we might belong, or where we might be going. Lacking historical and cultural perspective, we fall prey to lacking all perspective, unable to place events in context, or to value and protect what is worth valuing and protecting (See Alexander, 2000).

Thus, education for simple living implies education in cultural memory. Personally, I think it would be extremely valuable if we heard less about war heroes, captains of commerce, and megalomaniacal empire builders and more about those happy souls who discovered how to fashion lives of fruitful simplicity. In consumer culture we don't hesitate to give detailed attention to the lives of tyrants, torturers and frauds. Why not also study the lives of people who are happy?

## 5. EDUCATING FOR A LIFE ECONOMY

Any economy serving a culture of mindful sufficiency and voluntary simplicity would be an economy that aims to promote life, and more life, and not an economy that chronically conflates life with growth and profit as consumer culture does. What may be profitable is not always life-giving. When important costs of production are being externalized in myriad ways, an economy can be death-dealing instead. The very concept of "sustainability" calls for a life-serving economy. Such an economy regenerates resources, conserves genetic and species diversity, preserves habitat, actively removes toxins from the environment, recycles its materials, and aims continually to improve the quality of life for people independent of the quantity of their material property. Education in such a society would prepare people to participate in a life economy.

One vision of such an economy is offered by Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) in their book, *The Subsistence Perspective*. The key feature that distinguishes sustainable societies from consumer societies, according to these authors, is that the former represent "life economies" whereas the later exemplify "death economies." In life economies, productive activities aim to enhance and sustain the conditions necessary for life, and more life. It is the social consensus about protecting the conditions that provide for a diversity and fecundity of life that guides how human beings will relate to each other and how they will use nature.

From this perspective, organic permaculture and cooperative enterprises constitute "life-sustaining technologies" since the focus of organic food production regimes is the creation and maintenance of healthy, diverse, food-producing ecosystems, not just high agro-industry profits. Similarly, co-operatively organized enterprises constitute life-serving ways of collectively organizing production since the benefits of economic activity are equitably shared. Such arrangements promote and sustain more life, rather than being organized toward profit accumulation in the hands of a few.

By contrast, consumer societies require "death economies"—economies that extract resources beyond sustainable levels, employ toxic materials, systematically inflate their benefits by externalizing their costs and impacts, and that can exist only by parasitizing earlier, more foundational subsistence production activities. John McMurtry (2002) has argued that the globalization of consumer culture is occurring—just as was the case with the original "enclosures" that occurred in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe—at the expense of the "civil commons", i.e., all the non-profit productive and social assets we have collectively fashioned to sustain our communities, families, and bioregions—public libraries, concert halls, public



schools, pension plans, health benefit plans, daycare facilities, voluntary organizations, etc. Consumer culture can survive only by enclosing and exploiting the civil commons just as it does the ecological commons. Moreover, according to recent research published by Mathis Wackernagel (et al.) (2002), the aggregate effect of this death economy has been to expand the ecological footprint of humanity to 1.20 times the sustainable global carrying capacity for our species. This value does not represent what would be required if everyone on Earth lived like North Americans. It represents the current condition of ecological “overshoot” caused by the global “consumer class” (about 20% of the population) consuming and wasting well beyond what the planet can provide over the long term. As more and more people aspire to consumer culture lifestyles, this condition of overshoot can only worsen.

By contrast, education for voluntary simplicity implies developing an understanding of our place within Earth’s life system, and providing us with the knowledge and skills to live a life of qualitative abundance within the quantitative limits offered by that system. It implies the cultivation of a discriminating intelligence that can distinguish what activities serve life, and what activities propagate death, even if the later gains for us a measure of temporary prosperity or comfort. This sort of education also entails developing the capacity to take delight in the diversity and vibrancy of life and to discover pleasure there. It calls for integrating the feminine principle in a more dialectical relationship with the masculine. Education for life can never tolerate the subordination of women or the “reproductive economy” to the extractive economy that feeds consumer culture.

Equally important, the transition to simple living implies dethroning the myths that have proliferated around money, the assumed power of money to confer security, and the manipulation of money as a means of livelihood rather than simply a medium of exchange and measure of comparative value. Education for sustainable living must re-establish respect for all activities that contribute directly to the production and sustenance of livelihoods especially when these activities occur outside the market system. It calls for renewed respect for the people who perform such work—foresters, fishers, farm workers, homemakers, artisans and trades people, artists and creative thinkers. Educators need to help learners to discriminate activities that are truly productive and restorative from activities that are essentially derivative and parasitic. This learning needs to occur in an experiential way so that we internalize its lessons as personal experience, and not simply as a factoid on a test on the way to a “real job” that earns money.

Education for mindful sufficiency would then imply drawing forth and developing all those skills and attitudes that equip us to participate cooperatively in life-producing and life-sustaining activities. It also implies transmitting from one generation to the next the full inventory of practical knowledge about how to live wisely and sustainably in relation to each other, to this particular place on the Earth, and to all that is larger than personal (Hopkins, 2011: 152ff). Recognition of this fact is partly represented within the Transition Culture movement with its emphasis on “re-skilling”, i.e., education activities that help us recover our traditional knowledge (pre-fossil fuel age) of how to sustain life over the long term in our specific place on Earth. It presupposes gender equality and a knowledgeable respect for the work of reproducing life. It places the generative powers of the living world at center stage, and all those conditions that sustain and support the generative powers of life.

In addition to all this, education for a sustainable livelihood requires cultivating the sort of awareness and active involvement necessary to a defense of the civil and ecological commons. It is easy today to assign responsibility for the despoliation of the commons to a misguided and rapacious class of capitalist entrepreneurs (the “1%”) or to benighted consumption addicts. Of course it is essential that we come to recognize the vital importance of the defense of the commons to the sustenance of life and human civilization. We also need to actively take up that defense when the appearance of particular individuals, policies, or

enterprises threatens it. But at a deeper level, we can focus attention within ourselves on every movement of greed, fear, exaggerated self-interest or alienated individualism since these provide fuel for the aggressive pursuit of gain through the exploitation of the common good. Such impulses are the common heritage of humanity not only the failings of particular individuals. Our best defense against them is mindfulness of their presence and influence, insight into their dynamics, and a collective resolve not to let them undermine the general human welfare.

Finally, education in a culture of simple living includes mindfulness of scale. This is clearly implied in the very meaning of “sufficiency” which is a fundamental value of voluntary simplicity. As Herman Daly (1995: 180-194) has so cogently argued, any sustainable economy must establish limits on its overall scale such that the total scale of the economy can be carried within the ecosphere. Economics provides no means of establishing these limits because the discipline of economics suffers from severe theoretical and practical shortcomings that render it “blind” to energy and material flows in the ecosphere. Hence, the limits on the scale of the overall economy can only be set based on collective commitments to values and moral principles such as those we have been discussing. An economy can be “efficient” and still be ecologically unsustainable and socially unjust. Therefore, economics must be situated within a context of scientifically determined biophysical limits on resource and energy flows, and ethically determined limits on how much social and material inequality we will tolerate in society. This implies an ethic of mindfulness, sufficiency and social equity as the bedrock of any sustainable society.

## **6. EDUCATING FOR SELF-RELIANCE**

Some of the most colorful figures in the simple living literature advocate and practice strong forms of self-reliance. Sometimes, these practices border on aspirations to self-sufficiency, living “off grid,” going “back to the land,” or even ways of life that lean toward ascetical extremes (Segal, 1999).

More common, however, has been the recognition that cultivating self-reliance in the ordinary affairs of daily life, meeting at least some of our essential needs directly through our own productive activity, contributes considerably to well-being. Self-reliance is the alternative to dependency. Self-reliance is often the guarantor of a measure of personal freedom and latitude to make one’s own choices in life. Moreover, the practices that contribute to self-reliance also help build self-esteem since we come to know ourselves and develop our capabilities as constructive, productive, and capable individuals skilled in what is required to provide for ourselves and our families. These lessons are a powerful antidote to the toxic dependency psychology of consumer culture—a psychology that directly or indirectly emphasizes our helplessness, incompetence, and radical dependence on the market to provide for our needs. Today, this dependency take its most familiar form in staggering personal debt loads and relative ignorance concerning how to perform basic life sustaining tasks such as growing food, making clothes, maintaining shelter, etc.

So I suggest that education for simple living also includes training for self-reliance, and this in very practical terms. Those who lose touch with the realities of growing and preparing food, building shelter, making clothing, creating entertainment, making art, etc., are also losing touch with some of their essential human creative powers. We can also lose the sense of direct personal immersion in the biophysical world that sustains us on a daily basis. Lacking such contact, we cease to know where we really live. We cannot love what we do not know. What we do not love, we often fail to appreciate and protect. Thus education for simplicity and self-reliance is also a form of education for the defense and conservation of the civic and ecological commons. As Wendell Berry has noted, it is awareness of ourselves as

participating members of a community of life that is in a specific place—i.e., really here, really now, and with these neighbors whom we personally know—that we have any sense of continuity with our past, any appreciation of the values of our present life, or any hope of protecting these values from the corrosive effects of a globalized market system that can only see them as “profit centers” (Berry, 1987).

Self-reliance can also be interpreted in a larger-than-personal sense. It may be even more important in the long run that we re-diversify our local economies through building stronger systems of regional self-reliance. Free market globalizers aim to de-skill the entire world into a mere aggregation of global regions specialized on the basis of their comparative advantages. This tends to destroy the traditional diversity of skills found in local communities. While such a strategy may be economically “efficient” as long as global trade can feed on cheap fossil fuels, this program cannot be sustained for more than another decade or so (See Rubin, 2009). In the process, the world’s societies are seeing their indigenous diversity of labor specializations atrophying or disappearing entirely as their leaders chase after the doubtful promises of the global marketplace.

A humane future requires re-constructing dense networks of local and regional self-reliance through production from local resources using local labor to meet local needs. Only local people are knowledgeable enough in the ways of regional ecosystems to understand how to use them sustainably. And only when production for local use is carried on locally, do we have a clear view of all the externalities of this productive activity and its effects on people and the environment. When we clearly know that our future well-being depends on caring for what is at hand, we are far less likely to fall prey to the psychological disconnection, disinformation, and apathy that plagues global consumer culture. Most know nothing about how the products and services they use affect ecosystems and societies that are safely out of sight (See Esteva & Prakash, 1996).

Thus education for simplicity and self-reliance has a collective aspect as well as a personal one. It implies learning, practicing and sharing all those skills and values, attitudes and cooperative abilities needed for a truly regional, organic, and sustainable way of life. Naturally, the values of mindfulness and sufficiency will provide the guiding vision for this project, but it must go beyond simply looking out for one’s own self-interest. Also essential is re-constructing the bonds of social and economic cooperation, a sense of mutual responsibility, and a sense of shared fate. In a world as inherently interconnected as ours, consumer culture’s adulation of radical individualism is both deluded and suicidal. We flourish together or we perish together, and not abstractly, but in concrete relation to this place, with these people who are our neighbors. So, while each of us blossoms by learning to take care of ourselves, we surpass ourselves when we learn to take care of each other. When we pass this threshold, we move into the world of collective self-reliance, itself a proper focus of education for simple living.

## **7. EDUCATING FOR TRANSITION**

In discussing education for a culture of simple living, there are some relevant situational factors to consider. First of all, living simply by choice as a pathway to the good life has always been a more or less marginal undertaking. The historical record suggests that most people most of the time have wanted, and continue to want, just a little more, and often a lot more. We are prone to believe that more is better until invited to a more penetrating awareness of the sources and consequences of this belief, or until for other reasons we are impelled to search for alternatives. Because those who have discovered alternative approaches to the good life are a minority, this necessarily positions education for simple living from the outset in a transformative context vis-à-vis the majority of the population.

Equally important is the fact that in many societies around the world, the penetration of consumerist values is deep and pervasive. It has been at least two generations since very many people in North America or Europe have had any direct personal experience of the values represented by the more self-reliant, community-centered, and non-monetized ways of life characteristic of rural and farm communities of the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus for North Americans who dwell in urban centers, perhaps 85% of us, living simply elicits no personal memories from which to reconstitute its values and practices, except for occasional brief holiday excursions on camping trips or the like. In these circumstances, then, to propose a life of voluntary simplicity woven up from threads of material moderation, cultivation of enhanced consciousness, personal and collective self-reliance, and deep cultural remembering—all of this represents new territory—a task of exploration and transformation rather than recollection and re-affirmation.

As I mentioned in my introduction, another pressing fact of our current situation is the urgency of humanity's sustainability predicament. Learning to live in greater harmony with the ecosphere and more peaceably with each other is no longer an undertaking we can comfortably assign to future generations we hope will be more enlightened and willing to change than ourselves. Everywhere, the wild facts of life are revealing this attitude for what it is: denial and delusion. The fossil fuels that have allowed us arrogantly to believe that "the sky is the limit" are themselves limited and within a decade or two will be astronomically expensive (Campbell & Laherrere, 1998). Under the pressure of consumer culture's relentless hunger for material resources and energy, every major ecosystem on Earth is in decline, being harvested at or beyond their sustainable yields (World Resources Institute, 2001). As we have already noted, the aggregate effect of this process has been to expand the ecological footprint of the human economy well beyond the carrying capacity of the planet (Wackernagel, 2002: 9266). To these observations we could add growing population, increasing inequality of incomes, growing risk of pandemic diseases, pervasive cynicism regarding institutions of governance, and many other factors. At the end of the day we can recognize the urgency of a transformative agenda for education, not merely an informative program that takes a hands-off position with regard to issues of value and destiny. We simply don't have another generation in which to learn how to live sustainably. I can scarcely imagine that such assertions could be received by current educational leaders without controversy or resistance. Yet it remains perhaps the greatest challenge of educating for mindful sufficiency to "...become a means of preserving the world against death" (Eastabrooks, 2002: 10).

To this end, while education of the young remains a priority as always, education for simple living must also focus on the current generation of adults and young adults—precisely those of us whose consciousness is most thoroughly colonized by consumer culture. In these circumstances, an approach to education that merely seeks to conform us more closely to our existing predicament is catastrophically misguided. Education for the current generation of adults must have a transformative focus to undo the trauma and psychological colonization propagated by consumer culture. Later, we may hope, education can become truly evocative and developmental—aimed not at transformation of consciousness to avert catastrophe, but to deepen, extend, and develop consciousness so that it then becomes the instrument for realizing all that we are capable of being. Presently, however, any educational program that serves life must at least partly devote itself to helping people make the transition from our self-destructive way of life to creating something more viable over the long term. This leads us directly to the second role of education—education to meet our survival challenges.

## 8. EDUCATING FOR SURVIVAL

### 8.1 *Delusion is Destruction: Correcting Unskillful Beliefs About The Nature of Things*

I have already mentioned that humanity currently faces a confluence of challenges which threaten our future. The now broadly international Transition Towns movement identifies peak oil, climate change, economic contraction (driven jointly by resource depletion and the contradictions of a debt-based monetary system) and grid-locked institutions of governance as four particularly pressing issues of global scale. (Hopkins, 2011: 28-39). If we don't meet these challenges with resourcefulness and creativity they have the potential of ending civilized human societies as we know them. But to these challenges we could also add a lengthy list of others such as depletion of top soils, water shortages, extinction of species, pervasive toxic chemical pollution, carrying capacity over-shoot, ocean acidification, shortages of strategic materials, and many more which, even if peak oil and climate change didn't exist, would still have the potential to end consumer culture and perhaps the human species as well. These realities have led Senior Fellow of the Post-Carbon Institute Richard Heinberg to characterize the world of the near future as gripped by "peak everything" (Heinberg, 2011).

Education has a role to play both in helping us fashion a good life and also in meeting our pressing survival challenges. But I don't think these are separate endeavours. In what follows I want to bring the perspective of education proposed above to bear on a complex of delusions that I think pervade consumer culture. In the process, I hope we can glimpse an educational agenda (a detailed curriculum is beyond the scope of this writing, but a start in this direction has already been made; see Burch, 2012) which compensates the delusional thinking that is driving the demise of consumer culture—and not to sustain consumer culture—but to replace it.

If I have a false idea about some detail of reality, we call it a "mistake." When a false idea plays a central role in my worldview or identity, however, such ideas are called delusions. If I believe that invisible "back-rays" originating from the constellation Pleiades cause me to be unlucky in love, my friends might gently suggest that I seek counseling. But if I believe that an "invisible hand" guides the economy ensuring efficiency and general well-being far surpassing any individual's ability to comprehend or control—I could be an economist. I might become a prime minister or privy to the counsel of presidents. When such ideas are shared by large numbers of people, they are collective delusions. They become non-negotiable dogmas of popular culture in proportion to the number of people who share them. People who create these ideas become famous and get Nobel Prizes—such as the celebrated gentlemen who brought us derivative trading regimes and credit default swaps. The prizes are especially generous if what they are telling us is something we want to hear anyway. We like it when "experts" tell us we really know what is going on in the world and that we can control events. We can know with particular certainty that we are dealing with a delusional belief when loyalty to the belief is utterly unaffected by its repeated failure to predict the future correctly or to adapt us successfully to life in the real world of ecological and social relationships. (A recent Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary directed by Josh Freed (2011) compared the accuracy of assessments made by "experts" in judging the authenticity of art, wine, political trends, and most tellingly, economic prediction, and found that their judgments are no better than chance, or the predictions that might be made by lay people. Nevertheless, the cult of expertise brings us considerable consolation.)

Oddly, we think that harboring delusional beliefs is a good thing. Why else would we comfort each other in moments of "disillusionment"? Why else do we think that deluded

children are “cute,” and chastise anyone who might undermine their beliefs in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy for “spoiling” their childhoods? Why do we spend so much time and energy helping each other reconstruct delusional thinking in the face of experiences that test or destroy these false notions such as divorce which shatters the delusion of everlasting love, and death which challenges the delusion of personal immortality? We do so because we fear being overwhelmed by anxiety. So, it seems we prefer being emotionally comfortable to being sane. This preference has many consequences.

I think that at the heart of consumer culture is a pervasive set of delusions which are so basic to how we see the world, life, and everything, that we accept them as cultural givens. This complex of delusions is the psychological source of many of the outer-world developments which now threaten the future of humanity and which now necessitate a major cultural transition. One role of education in service of survival is to help us become conscious of these delusions and replace them with more adaptive beliefs. By “more adaptive” I mean beliefs which better fit human activities within ecological systems and limits. More adaptive beliefs also help human beings live more peaceably with each other so that conflicts between people do not themselves cause further ecological harm.

In the following section I describe what I think are eight widely accepted but false ideas underpinning consumer culture together with eight corresponding “psychological transitions” that I think could correct each delusion and the educational project these imply.

## **8.2 *From Growth to Life***

The customary apology for economic over-development is that an economy must “grow or die.” The ideology of growth utterly pervades both consumer culture and political discourse as the highest goal of all human activity. Because the global economy rests entirely on a debt-based monetary system, growth is a fundamental economic requirement or the system will collapse. But the halo that surrounds the idea of growth is applied in a host of other cultural narratives as well. In short, in consumer culture, we must be growing in every way, every day, or else we are dying. In this way, the dogma of the desirability of growth comes to be augmented psychologically by the fear of death.

But the opposition of growth to death is a false one. To recognize growth as one characteristic of life is altogether different from thinking that the absence of growth is death. Living things indeed grow, but they also come to maintain themselves in dynamic equilibriums—what in biology is called “homeostasis.” To live is to grow, surely, but unlimited growth is pathological. Thus sustaining life over the long term involves at least as much knowledge of how to stop as how to go. While localized dis-equilibriums and chaos can certainly be found in living systems, these conditions are usually transients on the way to some new state of equilibrium. Life displays both moments of growth, change and chaos as well as periods of stability, order and homeostasis. Also relevant are the intentions behind our actions: Obsession with growth is driven by self-centered greed whereas concern for life is motivated by other-centered love. What is delusional about consumer culture’s ideology of growth is ignoring this more holistic perspective of life founded on love. To think that the purpose of the economy and our institutions of governance is to promote growth rather than to serve life is deeply delusional thinking that leads to catastrophic results.

Correcting this delusion might begin by recognizing that life is a more comprehensive category than growth. Growth and life are not synonyms. Life includes and transcends both growth and death. Maturity, equilibrium, and death are as integral to the life system as are birth, youth and growth. Any culture that doesn’t recognize these facts and equip its people to

live them with grace, inner peace, and conscious awareness is deluding itself and multiplies suffering.

The critical psycho-spiritual mistake of consumer culture is that it fails to confront the emotional reality of death honestly and skillfully. We wish death was not a reality. So we try to escape it partly through focusing attention on growth. By extension, perhaps, we aim to “grow” our incomes, our possessions, our reputations, our “marks” in the world, as a way of transcending or escaping death. But because the means (pursuing growth at all costs) is not appropriate to the goal (resolving our anxiety about death) we remain fearful and insecure—a perfect potential market for whatever gadget or bauble is next in the queue promising false transcendence through consumption.

Consumer culture worships youth in denial of aging. It worships growth in denial of limits. It worships change in denial of homeostasis. All of these forms of denial underpin the delusions that youth can be made perpetual and aging is a curse, that people and economies must grow continually or else they are dying, and that everything must be changing continually or we are not “making progress.” To better fit our lives within the larger and more comprehensive ecosystem that supports all life, we need a more comprehensive and inclusive vision of life itself, and especially of a good life. If a good life is merely having more and more things that help reinforce and maintain denial of aging, mortality and death, then it can lead nowhere except to its own contradiction. Cancer is growth contradicting itself. Mummification and the Peter Pan Syndrome are youth contradicting itself. Psycho-social dislocation, addictions, social chaos, and anomie are change contradicting itself (Alexander, 2000).

Thus, in moving toward a more life-affirming culture, we need stories, music, drama, art, and activities and rituals that grounds our cultural in a narrative about life and not just growth. In this task, the cultivation of mindfulness, deep cultural remembering, framing human life within the larger life economy of the planet, and a recovery of community are highly skillful means to help us honestly face our ego-centered fear of loss, separation, change, and death. It is the ego’s fearful clinging to what it thinks will make for its own immortality that distracts us from the span of life which it is rightfully ours to experience and enjoy. Only by counteracting this fear by being reliably present to each other can we lessen the suffering it brings. No technology can do this for us. It is a form of human companionship which our culture can either well or poorly prepare us to offer each other.

### **8.3. From Technical “Progress” to Development of Consciousness**

In his book entitled *Graceful Simplicity*, Jerome Segal (1999) traces a debate that occurred among the 18<sup>th</sup> century intelligentsia about the nature of “progress.” Some parties to this debate argued that on the historical evidence, there was no basis to think that human character was any more virtuous in modern times than in the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome or Egypt. The most notable domain in which cumulative progress could be discerned, they observed, was in science and technology. At the time this discussion was going on, European inventors and entrepreneurs were soaring on the hubris of Newtonian mechanics and enjoying the first real fruits of scientific knowledge applied to enriching and comforting human beings. The sky seemed to be the only limit and we would eventually surpass that as well.

Since then, we generally equate “progress” with technical innovation rather than development of human well-being. Societies with more advanced technology are perceived as more advanced in every way—morally, intellectually, aesthetically and perhaps even spiritually. The teachers of character improvement and spiritual development have seldom had anything as flashy to show as the wonders summoned by the magicians of technology.

Despite the daily proof of what can happen when improved technology falls into the hands of people of unimproved character, popular culture is deeply pervaded by the delusion that technical advancement is the same as general cultural advancement. So enmeshed are we in this delusion that today we even look to technical gadgets as solutions for essentially non-technical problems. I've already mentioned "green consumerism" (based on the development of more environmentally friendly materials and technologies) as the perceived pseudo-solution for the impact that the insatiable human desire for luxury can have on the ecosphere.

Because technology is a blunt instrument which includes no intrinsic basis for moral judgment or answering questions of value, it is, taken by itself, a bad metric for progress. I propose instead that if we are to mark progress—that is, qualitative improvement in the human condition—the appropriate frame of reference is inner, not outer, and with reference to consciousness itself, not the artifacts it produces. I make this suggestion because our state of consciousness literally is our experience of well-being. It is the values that structure consciousness, the habits that guide it, the aperture of inclusiveness or exclusiveness that focuses it, and it is the capacity of consciousness to register truth as we discover it in the universe and in subjective experience which are most determinative of human well-being. It is for this reason that people living at very different levels of technical development can experience comparable levels of well-being. Therefore, I propose that consciousness itself—its development, deepening, extension, and right orientation—should become the principal focus of concern and the primary measure of human progress. The "technology" needed to support the development of human consciousness, and through this work, the qualitative improvement of character and increase in well-being, is very different from that needed to produce more material goods and dominate one's neighbors militarily. It seems intuitively obvious that there is little point in becoming richer or more powerful people unless we also become better people. In this task educating for mindfulness as well as deep remembering of the past are extremely skillful means. Continuously improving technology without also continuously improving human character merely guarantees improved tools for multiplying suffering. This is *prima facie* absurd. Asserting the priority of developing consciousness as the guiding principle for all development decisions might help assure that we pursue the right goals, even though progress is slow, rather than pursuing the wrong goals with increasing speed and efficiency.

#### ***8.4 From Affluence to Sufficiency***

Also central to consumer culture's worldview, and related to the delusions of both the growth imperative and mere technical innovation as progress, is the pursuit of limitless affluence. Note that the dictionary definition of "affluence" is "profusion, abundance of worldly possessions, wealth" (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). Implied in the idea of affluence is provision in excess of need, superfluity, and therefore waste. In its farther reaches, this is the realm of the "Cornucopians" —the bizarre doctrine that Earth has a limitless capacity to produce the limitless number of things people can be taught to want. But since affluence means "more than enough," what is more than enough can have no limit nor can it be anything other than waste (consumption without utility). A culture that defines the good life as ever increasing affluence delivered through endless growth and technical development is therefore orienting its entire economy and innovative capacity to the production of waste. While people clearly use material consumption for other reasons than meeting only essential physical needs, constructing a whole way of life around the production of waste is clearly delusional. This has happened because consumer culture includes no analysis of what material consumption is for, what contribution material consumption makes



to well-being, how over-consumption can diminish well-being, and therefore has no concept of sufficiency.

Compensating the delusion that material affluence is the preferred pathway to overall well-being requires an educational process that engages mindfulness practice, deep cultural memory, and knowledge of what makes for a life-oriented economy. Within mindfulness practice in particular, we need to learn just how, and to what limit, material things are needed and which needs they are appropriate to fulfill. Consumer culture tries to conflate material consumption with meeting nearly every human need, material or non-material. Mindfulness practice, on the other hand, is a skillful means of awakening to our actual material needs and the appropriate material means of fulfilling them. It also enables us to distinguish non-material needs and discern non-material ways of meeting them. Most important for the future of the Earth and of humanity, however, is the fact that mindfulness practice makes it possible to interrogate desire itself, to what degree pursuing desires in fact makes for well-being, and if not, what is a more skillful path to attaining well-being.

On this basis we can imagine a much more life-affirming worldview with cultural practices to match. It would include a clear awareness of “sufficient provision” as the guiding principle for a sustainable livelihood rather than maximization of waste in pursuit of profit. Since we all harbour innate tendencies to always desire more of everything (Miller, 1995), both a cultural ethos of sufficiency and daily mindfulness practice supported by encouraging communities are essential to compensate the delusion of affluence.

Lacking mindfulness, any suggestion that living more simply can lead to a qualitatively richer life just sounds incredible. From within the consumer culture delusion system, simplicity appears to be the opposite of richness, complexity, abundance, and choice—all values we prize for a variety of legitimate reasons. But once we take time to develop mindfulness of consumer culture itself, we become conscious of how consumerism is actually impoverishing people and the planet; how spurious complexity is now outrunning both our capacity to comprehend our situation and manage it effectively; how any prospect of future abundance is actually undermined by excessive current consumption; and how consumerism is actually reducing choice by destroying the social and ecological structures that make choice possible. Mindfulness reveals that consumerism is in fact leading us into a future of poverty, hideously complex problems, material scarcity because of resource depletion, and a future of involuntary simplicity in which all prospect of “choice” is only a distant memory.

### **8.5. *From Markets to Ecosystems***

The current hegemony of economic thinking, both in popular culture and in public policy, subordinates ecosystems to markets. Life serves profit. This inversion is carried to such an extreme that some think economic models can be used to “manage” ecosystems like businesses. This represents another instance of delusional thinking because it assumes that the laws of thermodynamics and of energy and material flows within ecosystems can somehow be reversed at the whim of human beings. It also places the proper object of “management”, i.e., our own behaviour, in projection on nature, i.e., that it’s ecosystems that need management when for eons they have managed themselves quite well, thank you. Economic thinking needs to be subordinated to, and nested within, eco-systemic thinking because that is the way nature works. The human economy subsists within the ecosphere or it doesn’t subsist at all. Economic activities must conform to natural systems and processes.

There is fairly universal agreement these days that markets allocate labor, capital and resources more efficiently than do centrally managed economies. But to recognize that markets allocate resources efficiently doesn’t address the question of whether such

allocations are just, or whether they are environmentally or socially benign. Instead, consumer culture uses markets to build an unsustainable and inequitable society hurtling toward collapse with optimum efficiency.

Remember that “free” market capitalism emerged triumphant from the Cold War due more to its opponents’ failings than to its own virtues. There are few today who will openly question capitalist market economies perhaps because capitalism, democracy, freedom, human rights, and technical progress are fused in a single overarching narrative of “modernity.” In fact they are merely historically contemporaneous, and only in some places. They do not necessarily require each other at all. We can find examples of socialist democracies (Sweden), capitalist regimes that violate human rights (Chile), totalitarian regimes with free markets (China), states where citizens enjoy considerable freedom and respect for their rights but which are technologically undeveloped (Bhutan, Kerala, etc.), and technologically and economically developed countries which routinely violate human and democratic rights in pursuit of their own interests (United States). Today, it is not hard to understand the popularity of market capitalism operating in a liberal secular democracy when the only alternative on offer seems to be neo-Medieval Islamic fundamentalism.

Because consumer culture strongly enforces a taboo against questioning “free” markets, any discussion of alternatives sounds like advocating one or another form of oppression—not a popular position to advocate. But we need to disentangle the demonstrated efficiency of markets from consideration of other values which are not necessarily efficient, but which still matter to us, such as economic equity, local self-reliance, and ecosystem integrity.

Alternatives to the hegemony of economic thinking can be found on a number of fronts. Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) propose that it should be the Earth’s capacity to provide conditions congenial to life which is the real “economic bottom line,” and that any culture which encourages its people to expend life in exchange for monetary profit is deeply deluded and violent. A subsistence oriented economy existed in the past and could exist again in the future—changed in form and using improved technology, to be sure—but an economy which is more concerned with the health and productivity of ecosystems and more inclined to power itself on current sunlight than any imaginable consumer culture.

The permaculture movement is another example—an ecological design discipline that aims to create designed ecosystems based on an intimate knowledge of, and respect for, the possibilities of a specific place and culture (Mollison, 1991). Permaculture substitutes the short term pursuit of profit from agricultural production of monocultures with the long-term process of developing intact, viable and productive ecosystems capable of feeding human beings as a side benefit. By seeking to optimize the system for ecological resilience, permaculture mimics nature more faithfully than extractive approaches to food production aimed at maximizing profits.

Yet another cultural innovation, albeit leaning toward the technological side of the conversation, is restorative architecture (Riu, 2012). Key here is viewing the buildings required for a good life not as gadgets that stand between people and the environment, or against the environment in the interests of people, but rather working with the environment to meet human needs. Restorative architecture aims to design buildings that generate their own energy, produce and recycle their own water, process their own waste, perhaps even “grow” and repair themselves rather as a body heals itself following injury. Such buildings would rely heavily on local materials, current sunlight, and the dynamics of local climate and terrain to subtly transform these elements into spaces congenial to human activities. They resemble organisms more than human artifacts, yet they provide for legitimate human needs.

The work of transition required here is breaking the hegemony of economic thinking on the worldviews and decision-making practices now current. This is not to say that

considerations of “cost and benefit” be thrown to the wind, but rather that conscious efforts be made to re-think economics from the bottom up as is being done by the advocates of “steady-state” economics, appropriate development, and others (Daly, 1995; Schumacher, 1973). Any economic theory which takes “the market” as its point of departure effectively establishes a bias that promotes economic exchange ahead of every other consideration. Economic exchange needs to be situated within ecological and social relationships, not superordinate to them, before human societies can fit well within the ecosystems upon which they depend.

## **8.6. *From Individualism to Community***

Apparently as part of its natural evolution, the human psyche developed what Sigmund Freud called an “ego” to provide a focal centre for consciousness and help mediate interactions with the environment of objects and other people. The very nature of the ego is that it is “bounded.” It perceives and feels itself as set apart from its environment. This “distance” is a useful fiction for getting certain needs met and laying the foundation for later psychological development. Even today, many psychologists consider “ego strength” to be a sign of a healthy personality rather than what it is, a delusion.

The Renaissance Period in Western culture valorized the ego through its cult of individualism which in turn has been monstrously amplified by consumer culture. Strong, indeed impregnable, belief in one’s individuality, one’s individual rights, and the supremacy of one’s individual desires and needs is immensely useful to consumer culture. It motivates individual efforts to earn income as well as maximizes consumption in the disposal of that income. A society of radical individualists anxious to advertise their uniqueness and aggrandize their egos is vastly more profitable for business than would be a society of humbler people more intent on living simply, finding common ground, and sharing their material possessions.

As mentioned before, “ego consciousness” has its uses in helping us adapt to our surroundings and interact with each other. When much social interaction is focused on strengthening this “useful fiction,” however, we become delusional because we forget a more essential fact of life—our connectedness to everything and everyone—and in fact, the radical dependency of the ego on these relationships for its very existence.

It is through a relationship that each of us is conceived. It is through a succession of molecular and cellular relationships that we grow and develop physically. It is through a multitude of social, informational, emotional and intellectual transactions that we develop as persons. It is interdependence and cooperation that sustain us in existence at every moment. “No [person] is an island..” John Donne once observed, and it is more than a mere poetic metaphor.

When advertising presents us with amplified and distorted images of the sovereign ego while obscuring, minimizing or derogating our relationships with others, it can have disastrous consequences for sustainability. It promotes strong tendencies to aggressive self-assertion and narcissism which in turn encourages choices that can be destructively individualistic. We lose the ability to perceive or care when our individual choices and behaviors are having adverse effects on others. Such behaviour blinds us to our interdependence with human and non-human others. Ecosystems are all about relationships, and not so much about individuals. Losing sight of the reciprocal relation between individuality and collective connection is suicidal.

The taboo in consumer culture against portraying individuals as constituted by their relationships is propagated mainly in two ways. The collective or larger-than-personal

perspective of our existence is defamed by labeling it “communist” and therefore linking it with past statist abuses of basic human rights. Alternatively it is considered “mystical” or “idealistic” and therefore beyond the compass of the “hard-headed” realism we so admire in the “self-made man.” This willful unwillingness to recognize our connectedness, whether by rendering it scary by branding it “communist,” or otherworldly by calling it “utopian”—in either case condemns us to a form of delusion which is having grave consequences for our own and future generations.

Just as the forces which in the past suppressed and violated the dignity of individual rights have been shown to be contrary to human well-being, so too it can be shown that pathological narcissism joined at the hip to self-indulgent consumerism can be equally corrosive of well-being. Every person is, to borrow a metaphor from Arthur Koestler (1967), “Janus-faced”—after the Greek god Janus who was depicted as having two faces. There is an aspect (face) of our existence which is individualistic and which is served fairly well by notions of a separate ego and individual rights. But the very same being can also be represented in terms of connections, relationships, and interdependencies which are just as compelling and determinative of well-being as are references to individuality. The fallacy underpinning many conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the idea that these two aspects of our humanity are necessarily at odds with each other in the public sphere.

If we are to escape the cul-de-sac of environmental catastrophe on the one hand, and perpetual interpersonal and inter-social conflict on the other, we must construct an understanding of ourselves and others which conceives of our individuality in terms of our relationships, and which also nuances our social obligations with respect for our individuality. Unless both these perspectives are present in how we think of ourselves, the result is violence of one sort or another. Either society oppresses the individual, or individuals become so self-absorbed that their inner lives are pervaded by isolation, depression and paranoia. Then our collective life suffers for lack of individual energy and engagement.

Surprisingly, perhaps, some useful metaphors for this relationship have been made available to us from quantum physics and its concept of “entanglement” (Arntz & Chase, 2004). The concept of entanglement applies strictly only at the quantum (subatomic) level of matter and energy relationships. It denotes an observed tendency of the physical state of one subatomic particle (or wave) to be directly affected by the state of another particle or wave, even though these two phenomena are widely separated in space. Thus two particles are conceived as “entangled” or “connected” in a sense, when the physical state of one is determinative of the other, even though they are not in observable physical proximity. Since according to the “Big Bang” theory of cosmic evolution, at the moment of the Big Bang, all matter was co-terminus and co-existed before space-time unfolded, all matter is entangled with all other matter. The conclusion implied by this theory is that at the quantum level at least, everything really is “connected” to everything else.

Extending what is a quantum physical theory as a metaphor to discussion of other issues can be hazardous. But this has not stopped many speculative thinkers from doing so. Mindful of how such transfers can lead to more confusion than clarity, the notion of entanglement is however, still quite descriptive, as a metaphor, of other species of relationship relevant to our discussion.

For example, there is abundant evidence of what might be called ecological entanglement observable in how meteorological, hydrological, and nutrient cycles, energy exchanges, genetic diffusion and food webs link physically distant organisms and populations in relationships of mutual interdependence. Not only are nutrients and energy cycled through these relationships, but also pollution, toxins and mutations. Everything each of us does from

breathing, eating, excreting and reproducing has consequences for other species and physical and biological systems elsewhere on Earth. These effects are often proportional to the physical quantities of matter and energy appropriated by human beings, as well as their toxicity. A consumer culture that maximizes consumption of matter and energy in the deluded belief that this will also maximize well-being, is a culture that creates maximum impacts on the ecosphere through these relationships of interdependence.

We can also identify examples of psycho-social entanglement. From the very beginning, we are fundamentally social beings. We are conceived in relationships. We are socialized and educated through interactions with other people and life forms. Power is essentially relational and exercised through social connections. The whole construction of the ego and our cognitive universe of learned knowledge and skills is built up and maintained through interactions with others. This reality of connection also makes us vulnerable as individuals to cultural determination of our values, attitudes and behavior, and vulnerable to mass social hysterias, delusions and mob thinking. Some thinkers have even proposed that the human species as a whole is psychologically entangled at the “archetypal” level—the level of inherited psychic structures that define characteristically “human” ways of behaving (Jung, 1981; Progoff, 1969).

Finally, many spiritual traditions assert that we are spiritually entangled. This claim arises from the intuition that we live in a moral universe with larger than personal connections and responsibilities. It's expressed in such metaphors as everyone being “children” of the same God (Judeo-Christian), or of a people who receives its identity from a common source or heritage (Judaic, Islamic), or of diverse peoples who nevertheless comprise a single ontological whole by virtue of their connection within the sacred dimension of the universe (medicine wheel). Evidence of spiritual entanglement is difficult to verify publicly but it is often authoritative for individuals who experience it subjectively. For many spiritual teachers, the essence of spiritual experience is liberation from the sense of a separate self (ego consciousness) and experiencing oneself instead as “at home” or “belonging” to the cosmos, i.e., connected to the universe rather than a stranger “in” it (James, 1958; Progoff, 1973; Walters, 2001). Thus our deepest spiritual experiences may not be theistic at all, but simply awakening to, or perhaps remembering, our fundamental identity with everything.

An appreciation for our own fallibility is a corollary of the various scales at which entanglement can be discerned and the very complex linkages and interactions which are possible in a connected universe. In this context, the meaning of individuality is very relative. Since it is the ego and its rational functions that constitute individuality, the compass of what the ego can grasp is limited compared to the vastness of a connected universe. We are only apparently individuals and our egos exist, relatively speaking, for only a very short time. Because our individuality is both limited and transient, we can never, as individuals, grasp the whole. Therefore our perceptions, thoughts, decisions and actions relative to the whole will always be more or less fallible. Therefore, the way to happiness and harmony if that's what we want is: (a) undoing the ego delusion by cultivating consciousness and remembrance of our connectedness to everything else; (b) cultivation of humility in recognition of our limitations and fallibility and, (c) living simply so that the negative consequences to others of our relative ignorance and fallibility are minimized. This too is an inherently educational and transformational project that exceeds the abilities of most individuals acting alone. We need support from each other in community, assistance from the lessons of the past, and specific training that helps us escape the delusion of ego-centered existence and live instead as who we truly are.

## **8.7 From Mine to Ours: The Transition to a Commonwealth of Goods**

Today many people believe that possessing wealth automatically confers entitlement to use it any way they like, short of breaking the law. This claim on the freedom to dispose of our material property as we please is another attitude deeply rooted in individualism and powerfully amplified by consumerism. Much advertising today is not about products or services at all. It's about freedom. It aims to intensify the individual sense of entitlement to break all constraints, defy all boundaries, ignore all limits, because we can afford to do so. Hence, the financially successful person can drive an SUV that appropriates three times the fuel and produces three times the pollution of a more ordinary car, proportionally depriving future generations of these resources and exposing everyone to increased air pollution here and now. Very few people would question the SUV owner's entitlement to do so, if he can "afford it." He might even be envied. This very same logic applies to anyone who drives any sort of car at all when compared to people who so far have not been able to afford one.

Only a few centuries ago, some people thought that the possession of wealth conferred obligations in addition to entitlements. The doctrine was noblesse oblige. Wealth was a divine trust or at least partly the result of unmerited good fortune. People then recognized that success or position can be as much a matter of good luck as of hard work. A case in point is the accidental matter of the family, society, racial group or historical period into which one is born. Possession of wealth entailed responsibilities to the community and to God, the creator of all wealth. The wealthy person was a steward on behalf of God and the less privileged members of society. How wealth was deployed was a weighty decision surrounded by clear moral imperatives. It was not merely a matter of deciding which of one's own competing appetites should be indulged at the moment. Compare this to the prevalent attitude today that if I am born into a wealthy family and experience good fortune in my business, it is not a gift of Providence, but proof that I must deserve it.

Whether or not one believes that wealth entails spiritual and moral obligations, there is no doubt that wealth in our society is a claim on material consumption. Matter and energy are degraded or transformed whenever money is spent. These facts of life have consequences for current and future generations. Conscious beings survive who recognize their connectedness with others and respect the obligations those connections imply. Those that don't perish. It's nothing personal. It's just the way the universe works. The entitlement we think accompanies the mere possession of wealth needs rethinking in our society. We are not free to do what we like with what is "ours" without regard for others because such an attitude is arbitrary, groundless, false and ultimately self-destructive.

The idea of "private property" strongly reinforces that of individual identity and underpins claims of entitlement to exclusive use of resources and space. We can even find analogues of these ideas in the behavior of infra-human species to establish "territories" from which they try to exclude others. But is it appropriate to take as the moral compass for human choices the behaviors of infra-human species? Or is nature just nature, doing what nature does, and can human beings aspire to something more? Or might human beings even be Nature aspiring to something more? While we trace our origins to natural evolution, is evolution, in the human case, repeating itself, or is it surpassing itself?

Regardless of how we answer these questions, it seems promoting the "privacy" of private property can lead to as many abuses as contrary efforts to disentitle people from the property they can rightfully claim to provide for themselves.

I would suggest that a more holistic and truer understanding of property must include many qualifiers: That the mere physical possession of something does not automatically confer an entitlement to it against the claims of all comers. Many things we possess come to

us by luck or happenstance and might likewise have come to others just as well. Therefore the ferocity of our defense of our claims to what we have might be softened by imagining how we ourselves would hope to be treated by more fortunate others should our circumstances be reversed. We ourselves, as well as the things we think we “own,” in fact belonged, still belong, and will in the end continue to belong to the Earth. They are more truly “on loan” to us for the duration of our stay, but not eternally. The idea of private property should never be extended to the point where it deprives others of resources essential to their lives, whether or not we personally enjoy an abundance of the resource in question. What we might well do in service of sustainability and social harmony is nuance the hegemony of private property, personal ownership and individual advantage in favour of a commonwealth of goods rooted in a multi-generational and multi-species perspective of “rights.”

In terms of simple living, these reflections imply that we hold our “possessions” lightly and that we order our lives so that there are fewer of them. From the perspective of sustainability, overcoming the delusion of private property opens up the possibility of owning in common and sharing with others things that before we thought we must own individually and protect from others. Fostering such a reorientation of attitudes is inherently an educational and a long term project.

### ***8.8 From Competitive Balance to Cooperative Synergy***

By far the dominant conception of how to sustain consumer culture, or more generally, civilized human existence, is to seek balance. It is finding a balance among economic, environmental and social values—often represented as three intersecting circles with their common intercept being the holy grail of “sustainability”—that provides to nearly everyone the common sense paradigm for “sustainable development.” Talk about balance always sounds so respectful, inclusive and open to compromise. There are very few advocates for imbalance who don’t also run the risk of being taken as threats to civil order. The concept of balance also appeals to our desire for equality because achieving balance between competing interests implies a sort of teeter-totter arrangement where both “sides” can get at least part of what they want. Finally, balance resonates with our pre-existing delusion of ego isolation, i.e., I stand here opposed to you over there. This implies tension, separation, and opposition that can only be resolved through “balance.” So people who seek balance between opposing interests are considered “realistic,” and those who consistently help us find balance—however temporary—we think are “wise.”

The problem is that the universe doesn’t work this way. Nature is not organized as a “flat” aggregation of equally legitimate “interests” that are in tension, or that can be “traded off” in negotiations moving toward balanced compromises. Neither is nature organized simplistically in opposing pairs which would make balances between such opposites easy to achieve. Instead, nature is organized as complex, nested systems of holarchies (Koestler, 1967). Some elements of these systems are subordinate to others and some are super-ordinate. Relations between elements in the system are not democratic. Subordinate elements are foundational to the existence of their super-ordinate counterparts. They cannot be “traded away” in the spirit of compromise. More concretely for this discussion, the economy, human social life and ecosystems are not spheres of interest that occupy the same “level” of practical significance the claims of which can be “balanced” or traded off against each other.

Instead, the ecosphere and its well-being are foundational to the imbedded complex systems—human societies and economies—which are built up within it. The “claims” that the ecosphere might make—if it had a voice—the claim to maintain its own physical and reproductive integrity, to carry out its life functions free of toxic agents introduced by

humans, to evolve along the vectors of its inherent dynamics without artificial manipulation of its store of genetic memory, etc.—these claims are absolutely fundamental to sustaining the living system upon which all human activities depend. There can be no question of “balance” here if what is meant by this is some calculus of value that trades a bit of death to the ecosphere in exchange for a bit more human “prosperity.” Until people recognize the holarchical structure of nature, comprehend and limit the danger inherent in ego-assertiveness that expresses itself as a will to dominate nature, we will never be able to find a sustainable way of life, much less the serenity we long for in pursuing balance. Whatever economic benefit we want to achieve must be secured within what is required for a healthy ecosphere and an equitable society. Social conflict will always undo economic progress. Ecological collapse will undo both. The direction of these relationships is non-negotiable.

Any future culture of simple living must evolve beyond the delusion of “balance” as the main goal of real politik. As discussed above, the search for balance presupposes separate “interests” which are in competition for the same scarce resource. What I’m proposing instead is the principle that every conflict originates in perception which is too superficial or individualistic. When a society encourages development that inflames individualism, encourages the “privateness” of private property, and intensifies every competitive instinct of individuals, it multiplies and intensifies conflict because it is multiplying and intensifying delusion. When a society encourages mindfulness of interdependence, relationship, shared fate, and collective self-interest, it multiplies and intensifies the potential for cooperation and synergy. Moving beyond seeking “balance” among interests competing for power and scarce resources might help us move toward cooperative collaborations seeking symbiotic relationships of mutual benefit.

Cultivating mindfulness of these relationships needs to become a matter of daily psychic hygiene. We need to slow down our pace of life. We need to teach these practices to our children with as much dedication and self-sacrifice as we give today to hockey practice, soccer, or ‘extreme fighting.’ Then we will begin to tip the balance toward a different sort of future. When we notice any sort of conflict arising, and when this becomes a universally recognized signal that we are mis-perceiving our situation—that we are overlooking some aspect of our interdependence—we will rediscover the ancient basis for cooperation and social harmony.

### ***8.9 Reproduction is a Right***

In its fevered efforts to appear environmentally enlightened, CBC television recently aired a story about a single mother in Toronto who was diligently teaching her seven children to replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents. Upon a moment’s reflection, however, it’s clear that the sustainability challenge in this particular household is not the light bulbs. To say as much is “politically incorrect.” It brings into view decisions, or the lack of them, concerning one of the most intimate and personal of human acts—reproduction. Yet our future is threatened at least as much by sheer human numbers as it is by our consumption habits. Earth might be able to support a billion or so humans living in relative affluence. It almost certainly cannot support nine billion of us doing so. Some sort of conversation is required about whether reproduction can remain an entirely private, individual, and inviolate “human right” when the consequences of over-population are not borne solely by the individuals making the decision to procreate. Just as there is a fundamental point of natural justice which turns upon entitlements to property, there is an equally compelling point which turns upon the act of reproduction. At the moment, this “right” is effectively quarantined in the realm of “individual” rights.



Thinking of reproduction as an entirely private matter is delusional because procreation has both social and ecological consequences, depending on the consumption expectations accompanying each addition to the family. Past efforts by states to limit procreation as in the case of China, are odious to us because they seem to be an excessive exercise of state authority. A more palatable alternative to such draconian measures might be an educational program that places the act of procreation in a broader perspective by including along side its individual and private aspects consideration of its social and ecological consequences. Should this be part of the broader educational program presented above, individuals would probably find grounds enough upon which to base their personal decisions.

## 9. EDUCATION AS THERAPY

To summarize so far, I've proposed that education for simple living, just like education for life in a consumer culture, calls for a particular program of learning and enculturation. I've proposed educating for:

- mindfulness;
- collective remembering;
- participation in a life economy;
- personal and community self-reliance;
- preparation for psycho-social transition.

While certainly not exhaustive, I see these as central guiding principles for any "curriculum for simple living." I hope it goes without saying that a curriculum for simple living would also include all the nitty-gritty practical skills proper to each of these principles, not simply an intellectual assent to their importance.

I've also suggested that the perspective that informs these principles can also be brought to bear on the critical survival challenges facing humanity at this time in our history. The causes of our survival challenges originate from a cluster of widely shared and mutually supportive delusions that pervade consumer culture's narrative of the good life. A critical task of education is to support psycho-social transitions from delusional ways of thinking and acting to a alternate worldview that better aligns our thinking and behavior with what is required for ecological "fit" and social well-being—education as "therapy" if you will. These include transitions:

- from growth obsession to concern for the well-being of life;
- from developing superfluous technology to developing consciousness;
- from policies that serve markets to those modeled on ecosystems;
- from valuing affluence to prizing sufficiency;
- from pathological individualism to persons-in-community;
- from private property to a commonwealth of goods;
- from seeking a balance among competing interests to seeking cooperative synergies within nested holarchies of social and ecological relationships;
- from viewing reproduction as an individual right to a social and ecological act.

Keeping these considerations in mind, I would now like to take up a brief discussion of education methods that might fit well with the perspective of education just outlined.

## **10. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING**

Traditional education can be described as “informational learning.” Much modern pedagogy assumes that it is transfer of “content” (information) from one person who has it to someone else who doesn’t have it that forms the core of educational activities. Despite calls over many generations to broaden the meaning of education, mainstream practice still consists mainly of thoughts transferred from one brain to another. Emotional, physical, intuitive, aesthetic, or spiritual learning occurs mostly by happenstance or in special niche programmes, if at all.

Transformational learning subordinates acquiring facts (although it certainly includes that) to changing the orientation of consciousness. By “orientation of consciousness” I mean new thoughts about the world and our place in it, but also a new felt sense of this relationship; access to, and a deeper appreciation for, a wider range of our personal experience including emotion and intuition; awakening to our physical and psychological interdependence with other people and species; recognizing that consciousness is socially constructed, not a property of individual brains, and that consciousness develops and changes through interactions in relationships (community). The tools appropriate to this sort of learning involve a greater role for activities like storytelling and visioning in education for simple living than mere transmission of facts.

My understanding of transformational learning has grown from a synthesis of ideas and approaches developed by several other scholars and educators as well as my personal experience as a practicing educator.

For me, transformational learning in service of simple living starts from the assumption that people are curious about voluntary simplicity because at some level they desire a change in how they live. So “educating” about voluntary simplicity is not in the first instance a matter of transferring information from one person to another, but rather drawing forth (educing) what is already present in learners. It’s about making conscious our already existing predisposition to change. We aim to provide a safe setting and relationships within which we can explore the origins, meaning, and implications of our desire to change. We hope to offer support and validation for personal change. And hopefully we seed the development of a community where change can continue to flourish. When I meet people for the first time who are interested in voluntary simplicity, I believe they are looking for a different sort of life than the one they have or else they wouldn’t be showing up. I don’t assume that everyone is looking for the same thing because it sometimes turns out that we are not. While no activity can be all things to all people who participate in it, I’ve found it helpful nevertheless to hold this work as lightly as possible so that it can be whatever it needs to be for the people who show up for it.

A second principle that informs my understanding of transformational learning is a particular perspective on how people change. Today, the dominance of information technology in consumer culture begs the argument that information is what sparks change in our lives. This is a bias shared by many educators as well. Give people enough information, or the “right” information, and they will automatically arrive at the “right” conclusions and will be motivated by sweet reason to act in “appropriate” ways. Especially in a consumer culture which preaches that “more is better in every way,” more and more information delivered faster and faster is supposed to somehow substitute for both the knowledge of how to structure the information in useful ways and the wisdom necessary to discern which information matters and which doesn’t. I don’t ascribe to the view that personal change arises from acquiring more information. For many sorts of change, information is essential in

the later stages of the process when a decision to change has already been made, but it is not necessarily sufficient to spark change on its own.

In many cases, it is transrational factors like dreams, visions, fantasies, and sometimes pre-conscious or wholly unconscious emotional processes that drive change at the personal and even societal levels (Curtis, 2002; Progoff, 1985). We humans are certainly capable of reason. We often use reason to rationalize not changing our lives. But we can also use reason for creating the changes we have already decided we want based on transrational inspirations and experiences. It appears to me, however, that it is very seldom the case that we make deep change in our way of life solely to conform them to the dictates of reason. Rather, making deep change seems to require subjective encounters with powerfully numinous imagery and emotions that exert a strong attractive influence. Related to this is the experience of meeting numinous people whose lived example is literally an “guiding beacon” for us—an experience that “in-spirits” us with energy and hope. Once these inner energies are mobilized, we use reason to figure out how to make our inspirations manifest as facts of history. Learning about simple living in a way that actually leads to life change thus requires making conscious the deeply inspiring and powerfully attractive visions we already harbor for such a life. The curiosity and desire for change is itself evidence that these motivations are already present to one degree or another and are seeking to manifest themselves in consciousness and in action.

Immanently useful in this connection is the important tool of journaling (Progoff, 1975). Journaling is a literary form of what the 20th century analytical psychologist C.G. Jung called “active imagination.” Jung thought that by giving some concrete form to the images and inspirations arising within us, we could “befriend the unconscious,” advance the project of our own growth, and access a deep wisdom in our relationships with others. He encouraged people to write, paint, sculpt or sing whatever was arising from their dream life and waking fantasies, with appropriate limits in place, of course, to acting these out in real life. New media are making us a more visual/aural culture but in the process we are trading away one of the great strengths of literary culture: The act of writing or drawing can take something which is transient and ephemeral and “solidify” it long enough for us to meditate on it, suck out all it has to say, and in the process, develop a relationship with it. Journaling can be a starting place for recollecting our own awareness, or integrating our awareness after some new experience, or as a way of honoring and remembering some new insight. Journaling can also refer very broadly to any process that helps externalize an internal process so that we can relate to it differently. This need not be limited to writing per se.

Another principle that informs transformational learning is the work of the Brazilian philosopher, social activist and popular educator Paulo Freire (Freire, 1995). For Freire, education is a process of social evolution rooted in the development of consciousness. Social change is the aim of real education. Social change is sourced in personal change, which in turn is sourced in the transformation of our conscious awareness. It’s by interacting with others that we develop consciousness of our current life situation, name that life situation, and then imagine how to engage it as active architects of our own history rather than spectators (victims) of a history shaped by oppressive social forces or institutions. For Freire, consciousness is socially constructed. We “grow” consciousness through relationships. Relationships are essential to this process because no single individual has a complete grasp of the historical situation we live in. Each of us has a partial grasp of what is going on, even in our own lives. When we tell our stories to each other, naming as best we can the realities impacting our lives, and when we listen respectfully to each other’s stories, we come to a more complete awareness of our situation and the opportunities it presents for change if change is required.

Freire's work has had a profound influence on me personally and on how I invite people to explore change in their lives. Eschewing traditional didactic approaches to learning we can invite each other into conversations, simulation games, and reflective activities in which the main content is the story of our lives—what it is like to live in consumer culture right now; what this culture has done to the people and places of our memories; what we hope for ourselves and our children in the future; how we feel about what we experience every day. The aim is not to implant an ideology. Rather, we aim simply to create a social “space” where everyone has permission and encouragement to pause, reflect, name what is happening to us, and imagine other possibilities whenever that is called for. There is also opportunity on many occasions to take this sometimes newly emerging awareness toward practical steps that implement both minor and major life changes. But my touchstone is always to help people cultivate changes in consciousness before undertaking changes in their way of life. Without doing this, we have no idea why we're doing what we're doing.

I think this approach is an important alternative to the “pep talks” we might offer about the virtues and benefits of simple living. In my experience, most people are already well aware of the difficulty consumerism has landed us in, and they know quite a bit about why—at least as this impacts their own lives. Sometimes this knowledge contains factual errors, but the “facts” of our situation are less relevant in the short run than whether or not we have a general awareness of the challenges we face and a felt sense of the urgency of change. People need time to tell their stories and hear the stories of others so that first of all we create a broad community of concern. Once this emotional bond is in place and a sense of community is emerging, there is time enough to deliver up-to-date information about all the challenges and threats posed by consumer culture to the future of humanity.

Another strand in transformational learning is derived from the theory of complex living systems as described by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996). What inspires me from the work of these thinkers is their vision of human beings, both as individuals and as societies, as creative, receptive, actively self-organizing entities. We are self-organizing systems congealing around identities which, once established, create a kind of psychological equilibrium that the system then functions to sustain and develop along the lines already defining each identity. We thus “selectively perceive” new information from the world so that we maintain some minimum level of historical consistency with how we already see ourselves. At the same time, however, we are continually admitting new information which feeds an on-going process of self-re-creation. Considered as complex living systems then, we are at the same time continually maintaining and re-creating ourselves. We are strongly motivated to maintain our identities, even if that requires changing. Similarly, we must be able to see our already established values reflected in some form in the new way of life we are being invited to enter or we won't enter upon it.

What has influenced me most directly from systems thinking has been the vision of human beings as complex, creative, self-maintaining and self-guiding beings. We simultaneously conserve and create the identity that constitutes who we are. We simultaneously maintain some psychological consistency with our history, but we also open to new experiences. The lesson for me as an educator is the need to take a humble and respectful approach to working with others. As educators, we cannot transform the lives of others. Only others can transform their own lives. This is probably a good thing. But as educators we can frame questions and arrange experiences that provoke change in learners precisely because they are also open to such new experiences. Using good provocative questions (pro = “promoting”, vocative = “conversation”), we can “disturb” some of the “certainties” which dominate our worldviews and behavior. In this process, good questions and invitations to relationship are stronger catalysts than any lecture loaded with statistics or any appeals to cold logic. What happens to the questions and invitations we offer once they

enter the labyrinth of a learner's consciousness is something over which we have very little control. Therefore, we can always expect surprises during any process as creative as this one. So much depends on trust and faith in ourselves and the goodness of others. At bottom this implies a deep trust in life itself and the healing intentions of our "good angels."

Somewhat reiterative of the Freire and complex systems strands of the transformational learning model is the importance of first hand, personal experience in learning about simple living. It is far more stimulating and inspiring to hear first-person accounts, or to tell our own stories, than it is to hear presentations, no matter how skillfully constructed, "about" simple living. I emphasize getting this personal involvement even when it begins with "incomplete" or "inaccurate" information. People have a way of rounding out what they need to know about a subject after they start caring about it. My primary aim is always to spark further and future engagement with simple living. It's for this reason that I stress the importance of face-to-face, real life activities for which setting up websites, creating PowerPoint® presentations, or even publishing books or articles is no substitute. The chemistry, complexity and immediacy of real world relationships simply cannot be duplicated at the present time by any "virtual" proxies no matter how useful they may be in disseminating information.

Finally, and perhaps most important, is taking a positive, creative approach to everything we do. Those working for positive change in society can get mired down in criticizing the deficiencies of consumer culture. This is an especially honored pastime in academia where it is believed that criticizing something is tantamount to actually doing something about it. But the exercise can be incredibly exhausting. It feeds cynicism and despair and at the end of the day is both sterile and profoundly conservative. It's very easy to find fault with consumer culture. But why would you waste your breath pursuing such a conversation unless you believed that consumer culture is worth saving if only it can be reformed in the ways urged by your critique?

A more radical and positive approach involves ceasing critique, or at most, confining it to its role in "conscientization" (Freire's term for growing consciousness), and fixing most attention on the good life we want to create through the process of exploration, discovery, visioning and change we are embarking on. I believe consumer culture is already dead and beyond resuscitation. The dead can be left to bury the dead. Those interested in living will take up the task of creating a life-giving culture and will do so immediately.

So these are the key principles that guide what I'm calling a transformational approach to education: (a) people interested in voluntary simplicity already desire change at some level in their lives; (b) deep personal change is motivated by transrational (not necessarily irrational) emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, intuitive and spiritual energies which must be respectfully evoked before change can happen; (c) "journaling" can be a powerful aid in working with transrational content; (d) we change our lives by first changing our consciousness, and consciousness is socially constructed in symbiosis with others and evolves through communicating with others; (e) people are complex, self-regulating, conservative/creative "systems" who actively create and re-create themselves along lines of their already established identities and values; (f) first-hand personal experience is the foundation for growing consciousness in face-to-face symbiosis with others; (g) all learning activities should arise from, or lead back to a creative, life-affirming and positive place; mere critique is vain and ultimately sterile.

## **11. RE-VISIONING: AN EXERCISE IN TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING**

One example of transformational learning is workshops I have facilitated on "Re-Visioning"—essentially inviting participants to use imagination to address our sustainability challenges.

I begin the workshop with a memory and journaling exercise where participants are invited to recall one or more past experiences in nature—especially experiences from childhood—and they write detailed accounts of them in a workshop journal. I offer stimulus questions to help participants develop rich journal entries with lots of memory detail. Everyone then tells one or more of their stories to the group. As the stories unfold, many accounts are very emotional as people recall the wonder, sensory richness, and spirit of discovery and adventure that marked many of their experiences. Often participants want to tell more than one story. All are emboldened by the sharing of others to tell even more of their own history. I allow ample time for these stories because a great deal of community-building, shared trust, and respectful communication occurs as an unconscious parallel process to the storytelling.

I then invite participants to consider what has happened to these natural places since their childhood? We journal these accounts as well, followed by another round of storytelling. Not surprisingly, many of the landscapes and natural places of our youth have been degraded or destroyed by “development” of various kinds. As people share one story after another, the magnitude of this destruction becomes evident as something that touches everyone’s life. I ask participants to focus especially on how they feel about these losses and how the landscapes now look and smell and sound compared to the days of their youth. Needless to say, these questions can sometimes evoke “dark emotions.” But we have already fashioned a learning community and together we can face and accept emotional content that as individuals we would be strongly tempted to deny or avoid. Fear, sadness, revulsion, anger, and a sense of loss are all framed as feelings that inform us about what we need in life to be well. In most cases, these experiences inform participants that “development” as we have always known it is no longer well for us—and we now know this at a visceral, personal level. Even when the landscapes of our youth remain untouched by capitalist exploitation, the very sense of relief and delight we feel in knowing that they have been preserved also informs us of what is well for us.

At this point, the group arrives at what Joanna Macy calls “the turning” in the workshop process (Macy, 1998: 17). It’s here that I introduce the idea that we humans are creative, imaginative creatures. The good news in the bad news of traditional development activities is that we chose to do these things, and we can choose something different if we wish. The question is, what do we wish? I then introduce a visioning process to visualize a future state of affairs where the shape of our lives, of our communities, and of our daily round of activities more closely matches what we intuitively know is well for us. Participants journal these visions in detail and then again share them as stories of hope, aspiration, and common purpose. In longer workshops, I have combined this visioning process with delphi process, using successive rounds of visioning to bring the group into stronger and stronger consensus around the collective vision that emerges amidst all the individual vision-sharing.

After a vision has emerged that engages everyone in some way at a transrational level of their awareness, the time is right to share information about how we can set priorities and make our visions for simpler living realities. This is a sort of “back-casting” process that begins from a vision of possibilities that are “future distant” and then identifies the steps needed to reach the vision working backwards from the vision to our present situation and time in history.

Needless to say, this Re-visioning process can evoke strong feelings as well as other insights and responses. But it is precisely avoiding these feelings that blinds us to what is well for us, and keeps in place social and economic arrangements that are perverse to well-being. When a fuller range of our human experience is admitted to the conversation, we foster in each other an expansion of consciousness which reveals that we are not alone, that much that we tried to push out of consciousness is actually working on our behalf, and that we are

creative, active, free beings who can shape our own history. In short, when these transrational forms of awareness take their proper and respected places in the conversation, we become capable of what Miriam Greenspan has called “the alchemy of the dark emotions” (Greenspan, 2003). In my view, this process shares much in common with what Paulo Freire called “conscientization” and the choices we make in the “limit situations” which conscientization reveals to us, as well as what Joanna Macy means by “despair and empowerment work” (Macy, 1998).

Finally, it is because we have not done this work of psycho-spiritual alchemy in our society, that we see epidemic levels of addictions and other unwholesome responses to our crisis. Consumer culture devalues this work. The military industrial system of capitalism generates a continual state of crisis which is both dangerous and distracting from the real concerns that should occupy our attention and the fundamental work of education we need to pursue to meet our common challenges. Our time in history is calling on us to work together to cultivate personal well-being through simple living, community resilience, and meeting the challenges of our age together.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, B., 2000. 'The Roots of Addiction in Free Market Society.' Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Vancouver, BC, Canada. This very process is partly what is meant by "psycho-social dislocation" as described by Alexander, Bruce (2000) As we lose rootedness and a sense of place in our own culture, we fall prey to increased risk of all sorts of addictions and their associated threats to personal and community health. This comes about mainly because of the intense psychological pain that accompanies psycho-social dislocation and the efforts sufferers make to escape it in any way they can, usually through a substance addiction or else a "behavioral addiction" such as shopping, over-work, sex, etc.
- Alexander, S., 2012. 'Living Better on Less? Toward an Economics of Sufficiency.' Simplicity Institute Report 12c, 2012, Melbourne, Australia.
- Arntz, W. & Chase, B., (producers). Down The Rabbit Hole (What the Bleep Do We Know?) DVD, Lord of the Wind Films, 2004, [www.whatthebleep.com](http://www.whatthebleep.com).
- Berry, W., 1987. 'Does Community Have Value?' in: Wendell Berry, Home Economics. North Point Press, San Francisco, CA, 179-192.
- Burch, M. A., (2012). The Simplicity Exercises: A Sourcebook for Simplicity Educators. The Simplicity Institute, Melbourne, Australia.
- Campbell, Colin J. and Laherrere, Jean H. (1998). "The end of cheap oil." Scientific American, March, 1998.
- Curtis, A., 2002. "Century of the Self." BBC Documentary. A compelling look at the non-rational factors at play in consumer behavior and how they are manipulated by corporate and political interests.
- Daly, H., 1995. 'The Steady-State Economy: Alternative to Growthmania,' in: Steady State Economics, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), Island Press, Washington, DC, Chap. 9, 180-194.
- Eastabrooks, J., 2002. 'Christianity and Voluntary Simplicity.' Unpublished paper; Menno Simons College, Winnipeg, MB, Canada, 10.
- Elgin, D., 2010. Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich. HarperCollins, New York, NY.
- Esteva, G. & Prakash, M.S., 1996. 'From Global Thinking to Local Thinking.' in Majid Rahnema and Vitoria Bawtree (Eds.) The Post-Development Reader, ZED Books, London, UK, 277-289. for a fascinating discussion of the shifting meaning of "global" and "parochial" perspectives in a developmental context. During the heyday of international development thinking, taking a "global perspective" of the economy was considered more modern and progressive than the local, more "parochial" perspectives common in less developed societies. But over time, globalized thinking has become the new orthodoxy and "parochial" in its own way in as much as it is incapable of grasping the full ecological and social complexity of the earth and all the cultures it supports. Indeed, the most ecologically sustainable ideas of development might in fact be rooted precisely in intimate local knowledge that globalized regimes of development are too large scale and too abstract to recognize. Thus because of its inflexibility and dogmatic reliance on neo-conservative economic doctrines, globalization turns out to be the more "parochial", backward, inflexible, even superstitious worldview. Sustainability may in fact be found in global networks of local knowledge and development practice that can inform and inspire each other, but which don't seek a one-size-fits-all formula for improving human well-being.



- Freed, J. (Director) *The Trouble With Experts*. CBC Doc Zone, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto, Ontario, aired 29 September 2011.
- Freire, P., 1995. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Revised Edition). Continuum, New York, NY: 68-105.
- Fuller, A., 1994. *Psychology and Religion: Eight Points of View*. (Third Edition) Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., London, UK, 74.
- Greenspan, M., 2003. *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair*. Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, MA.
- Heinberg, R., 2011. *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada.
- Hopkins, R., 2008. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. Chelsea Green Publishing Co., White River Junction, VT.
- Hopkins, R., 2011. *The Transition Companion*. Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT.
- James, W., 1958. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. New American Library, New York, NY.
- Jung, C.G., 1981. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9, Part 1). R.F.C. Hull (Translator), Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., 1994. *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion, New York, NY. An obvious example of this might be work already being done by Jon Kabat-Zinn, where mindfulness practice is being applied to the treatment of anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Less obvious appear to be applications where mindfulness-like meditation and centering practices have been used in the context of gardening and food production for a number of decades at the Findhorn Foundation in norther Scotland, <http://www.findhorn.org/> ]
- Kasser, T. & Brown, K. W., 2009. 'A Scientific Approach to Voluntary Simplicity.' in Andrews, C. & Urbanska, W., 2009. *Less is More: Embracing Simplicity for a Healthy Planet, a Caring Economy and Lasting Happiness*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada.
- Koestler, A., 1967. *The Ghost In The Machine*. Arkana, London, UK.
- Macy, J., 1983. *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 24ff.
- Macy, J. & Brown, M.Y., 1998. *Coming Back To Life: Practices to reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada.
- McMurtry, J., 2002. 'The Life-ground, the Civil Commons and the Corporate Male Gang.' *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. XXII, Special Issue, 2002, 840.
- Mies, M. & Bennholdt-Thomsen, V., 1999. *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy*. ZED Books, London, UK.
- Miller, T., 1995. *How to Want What You Have: Discovering the Magic and Grandeur of Ordinary Existence*. Avon Books, New York, NY.
- Mills, S., 2002. *Epicurean Simplicity*. Island Press, Washington, DC.
- Mollison, B., 1991. *Introduction to Permaculture*. Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, Australia.
- Moore, T., 1994. *Meditations: On the Monk Who Dwells In Daily Life*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 59.
- Progoff, I., 1969. *Depth Psychology and Modern Man*. Dialogue House Library, New York, NY, 153.
- Progoff, I. 1973. *The Symbolic and The Real*. Dialogue House Library, New York, NY.

- Progoff, I., 1975. At a Journal Workshop. Dialogue House Associates, New York, NY. One of the most creative and compelling sources on journaling are various works by Ira Progoff who developed the National Intensive Journaling Program. The journaling process he devised, based heavily on the depth psychology of C. G. Jung.
- Progoff, I., 1985. *The Dynamics of Hope*. Dialogue House, New York, NY, 25. While non-rational psychological factors can be manipulated for corporate gain, they are also a natural part of how human beings tick, and the very basis for personal and social change. For as the 20th century depth psychologist Ira Progoff observed: "...societies...move forward in terms of dreams or visions of reality that carry the image of potentiality by which the meaning of a given society can be fulfilled. It may even be that human society as a whole has such an image implicit in the seed of its being, implicit in the social nature of [humanity]. It may be that this image has been dreamed imperfectly in the past, has been dreamed many times in the past, and that it needs to be dreamed again and again until it can become a reality of history."
- Riu, S. J., 2012. *Environmentally Regenerative/Restorative Architecture: The Future of Sustainable Design*. <http://sooryu.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/regenerative-restorative-architecture.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2012.
- Rubin, J., 2009. *Why Your World is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller: Oil and the End of Globalization*. Random House Canada, Toronto, Ontario. Rubin argues that peak oil essentially ensures that transportation costs will increase dramatically between now and mid-century which will essentially be the death-nell of globalization. In its place we will have to re-construct more self-reliant regional economies.
- Schumacher, E. F., 1973. *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. Vintage Books, London, UK.
- Segal, J., 1999. *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living*. Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 180-200.
- Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Sixth Edition), 2007. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Wackernagel, M. (et al.), 2002. "Tracking the Ecological Overshoot of the Human Economy. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 99, (No. 14), July 9, 2002, 9266-9271.
- Walters, K., 2001. *Rufus Jones: Essential Writings*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.
- Wheatley, M. J. and Kellner-Rogers, M., 1996. *A Simple Way*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- World Resources Institute, 2001. *A Guide to World Resources 2000-2001: People and Ecosystems: The Fraying Web of Life*. World Resources Institute, Washington, DC.

**Mark Burch holds copyright in this essay.**