
THE SIMPLICITY EXERCISES

A SOURCEBOOK FOR SIMPLICITY EDUCATORS

Mark A Burch

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SIMPLICITY
INSTITUTE

PRAISE FOR THE SIMPLICITY EXERCISES:

Mark Burch is the real deal—it's evident from *The Simplicity Exercises* that he's spent a lifetime integrating simple living principles into his own life, and luckily for the rest of us, has developed and honed exercises to help others do the same. Seasoned voluntary simplicity facilitators will appreciate how thorough and well-presented these activities are. In fact, the material is so well-thought out that informal educators new to simple living could use Mark's book with confidence. If you're ready to change your game plan or help others do so, this book offers real transformative opportunities.

C. Jones, M. Div., Adult Educator and Simple Living Enthusiast

Refraining from adding to the critique of current social, economic and ecological challenges, Burch makes a notable shift towards positive social transformation, opting to share the rewards and potentials of simple living with others rather than additional criticism and analysis of contemporary problems. ... The sourcebook is therefore an important and valuable resource for all educators or individuals interested in exploring simplicity further,...

Natalie Swayze, Research Associate, Centre for Indigenous Science Education, The University of Winnipeg

In *The Simplicity Exercises*, Burch provides us with a path through that mental barrier [to transformative change] with comprehensive and well-thought-out group thought-experiments and exercises. Drawing from years of real-world experience, the book provides us a path beyond fear, critique and common despair-ridden questions about how to move forward to solve the challenges of our time.

JAMES MAGNUS-JOHNSTON, CANADIAN DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE STEADY STATE ECONOMY.

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Introduction

It probably sounds strange that anyone would need to learn how to live simply. The phrases “voluntary simplicity” or “simple living”, given our history of consumer culture indoctrination, imply that there’s nothing to it. Anyone can do this. What’s to learn?

I have practiced voluntary simplicity to one degree or another since the 1960s. In the 1970s, for five years I repeated Henry David Thoreau’s (Krutch 1989) experiment in simple living—only it was in the wilderness 50 kilometers north of Thunder Bay, Ontario (Canada), a good deal farther off the map than Walden Pond was from Concord, Massachusetts (U.S.A.).

By the 1990s, I was offering presentations and workshops about simple living to thousands of people across North America. Since 1998, I have taught an undergraduate university course on the subject. Over the years I’ve met many creative, resourceful, and deeply insightful people who have walked this path. I’ve also been challenged by many bright students who have posed excellent questions. All of this has taught me, first of all, that simple living isn’t simple. Second, while many aspects of simple living come naturally to us, we usually forget them almost entirely by the time we reach adulthood. Third, I have had a wonderful opportunity to develop a suite of learning tools and activities that help adults access the spirit and culture of simple living in very powerful ways. It may surprise some readers to learn that most of these have nothing to do with learning to can your own jam or operate a wood stove. At the end of the day, it turns out, the choice to live more simply implies inner change (Kasser and Brown 2009), not just emptying closets or adopting a 19th-century rural lifestyle. It’s the inner change as much as new life habits that we need to learn about.

This book is intended to bring some of these learning tools together in one place so that educators who want to share the rewards and potentials of simple living with others may have some grist for their own creative mills. I don’t offer a definitive curriculum for simple living. Rather, these are examples of activities, exercises, and resources that in my experience have proven track records of releasing tremendous energy, insight, and communion, both within groups and individuals. Happily, the values, principles, and sensibilities that make up a simple living perspective on life are enriched and strengthened through sharing. Given the alternatives we have for the future of humanity, I mean to make me some allies.

For a litany of reasons already thoroughly explored by others,¹ I have also come to the view that continuing the consumer culture delusion of the good life will soon extinguish our species and many others as well. For me, this premise is completely beyond rational dispute. As an educator, as a human being, as someone who has happily practiced simple living for five decades and survives to tell the tale, I think humanity’s main challenge is not teaching people to excel in the general scramble for more. Rather it entails learning to arrange our affairs so we enjoy ever-increasing well-being on a lower and lower consumption of materials, energy, and labor. I also believe that whether we choose this path voluntarily or not, the future we have

¹ Ever since Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962, there has been a continuous stream of warnings from many quarters respecting the environmental and social impacts of consumer culture. These sources are too numerous to canvass in this citation, but I would mention the series of *State of the World Reports* from the World Resources Institute; several global ecosphere assessments issued by the United Nations Environment Program; the Brundtland Commission’s (1987) *Our Common Future*, the *report of World Commission on the Environment and the Economy*; the series of reports issuing from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations on the progress of climate change worldwide; Ronald Wright’s (2004) *A Short History of Progress*; George Monbiot’s (2007) *Heat*; and Jared Diamond’s (2006) *Collapse*, to name but a few.

prepared for ourselves is one marked by economic contraction, environmental calamity, and social conflict. It is therefore skillful and wise to cultivate within ourselves the practical knowledge of how to keep our heads and to make a good life on slender means.

That having been said, I hasten to add that I don't think fear, guilt, or greed—the preferred bludgeons of those promoting social change—are any of them good reasons for teaching or learning about simple living. We certainly have things to fear, and to feel guilty about, and to lust after, if we wish; but none of these motivations springs from wholesome emotions or clear insight into the nature of things, and none provides a positive foundation for a good life. Remembering the stories of all those people who, both past and present, have adopted simple living, I'm impressed by the luminous, tenacious vision of a good life based on mindfulness, sufficiency, community, nonviolence, environmental stewardship, self-reliance, and most especially, the freedom, that shines at the heart of this way of life. Even if humanity wasn't facing the ominous crossroads it is, even if the Earth was pristine and young, even if all energy were green and everything we made was recyclable and biodegradable—even then, a way of living based on being is preferable in my experience to one based on having. Even green growth can choke a garden.

So I come to the task of assembling what follows from the perspective that living simply has been a wonderful experience for me, with the hope that it might also be wonderful for you, and with the conviction that it's something the world needs anyway. I hope that educators of all stripes—formal, non-formal, informal, and community-based practitioners—will all find something useful in these pages. I especially hope that they may find a catalyst for their own creative process in working with people toward life-giving cultural change.

Approach to Learning

I think most education practitioners who take their calling seriously try to make conscious their approach to teaching and learning. In my own case, the material that follows has been profoundly influenced by the work of others who have thought deeply about what education is, how people tick, and how we develop as individuals and communities. For some readers, making explicit my approach to teaching and learning about simple living will be essential to feeling secure with trying some of these activities with people they know. For other readers—the “concrete operations” folks—diving straight into the hands-on stuff is how they get a grip on the underlying theory. So, for those who share my academic preference for hearing about the model before the application, please read on. For those who learn about the model through applying it, try some exercises on for size and then read this section later.

The first meme² that informs my approach to teaching about simple living is the idea that people are curious about voluntary simplicity because at some level or other they desire a change in how they live. So educating about this subject 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 predisposition to change, providing a safe setting and relationships within which we can explore the origins, meaning, and implications of our desire to change, offering support and validation for personal change, and hopefully seeding the development of a community where change can continue to flourish. When I meet new students or workshop participants for the first time, 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 voluntary simplicity per se, because it sometimes turns out that they are not. Some people want to continue a consumer culture lifestyle but with the bad bits removed, like stress, or debt, or time pressure, etc. They don’t yet see that this is not possible. 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.

A second meme that informs the following material is a particular perspective on how people change. Today, the dominance of information technology in consumer culture leads us all to assume that information is what sparks change in our lives. This is a bias shared by many educators as well. Give people enough facts, or the right kind of facts, and they will automatically arrive at the right conclusions; they 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 what information matters and what doesn’t. I don’t ascribe to the view that personal change arises primarily from acquiring more information. For some types of change, information is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one.

In my experience, it is non-rational factors like dreams, visions, fantasies, and sometimes pre-conscious or wholly unconscious emotional processes that drive change at the personal and

² A “meme” is the cultural or intellectual equivalent of the biological “gene”. Memes are building blocks of thought, theory, and models. Like genes, memes can be mixed and matched for various purposes and even transmitted from one culture to another. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>

even cultural levels.³ 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 non-rational inspirations. 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 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 inspiration 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 material facts of our personal and collective histories. 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 inner 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.⁴ Journaling is a literary form of what the famous 20th-century depth 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 development, 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. 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 a pure thought 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. Many of the Simplicity Exercises incorporate journaling, either as 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. I also use journaling very broadly to refer 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. This process has been immensely valuable in my own journey, especially when inner experiences become emotionally intense.

Another meme that informs this work is the writing of the Brazilian philosopher, social activist and popular educator Paulo Freire (Freire 1995). For Freire, education is not about amassing a larger store of facts than other people have—something he called banking education. Rather, education is a process of social revolution 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 development and expansion of our conscious awareness. It's by interacting

³ For a compelling look at the non-rational factors at play in consumer behavior and how they are manipulated by corporate and political interests see: Curtis, Adam (2002) *Century of the self*. BBC Documentary. 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.” Progoff, Ira. 1985. *The dynamics of hope*. New York: Dialogue House, 25.

⁴ 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, is summarized in: Progoff, Ira. 1975. *At a Journal Workshop*. New York: Dialogue House Associates. I owe much to his inspiring writing which has informed my approach to several exercises included in this book.

with others that we develop consciousness of our current life situation and how to engage in it as active architects of our own history. For Freire, consciousness is socially constructed, and we grow our consciousness through relationships. Relationships are essential to this process because no single individual has a complete grasp of the historical situation we find ourselves 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.

Freire's work has had a profound influence on me personally and on how I invite people to explore voluntary simplicity. You won't find many lists of tips in these pages about how to declutter closets or off-load the cottage at the lake. Many exercises, however, invite participants 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 of simple living. Rather, we aim simply to create a social "space" where everyone has permission and encouragement to pause, reflect, make sense of what is happening to us, and imagine other possibilities whenever it is appropriate. 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. My touchstone is always to help people cultivate changes in consciousness before undertaking changes in their manner of living. Without doing this, we have no idea why we're doing what we're doing.

Yet another strand in this book's DNA is derived from the theory of complex living systems as described by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers 1996). I don't intend an excursion into full-blown systems theory here. What inspires me from the work of these thinkers is the vision of human beings, both as individuals and as societies, as creative, receptive, actively self-organizing entities. We are self-organizing systems congealing around an identity which, once established, creates a kind of psychological equilibrium that the system then functions to sustain and develop along the lines already defining that 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-recreation. Considered as complex living systems then, people are at one time constantly maintaining and constantly re-creating themselves. We are strongly motivated to maintain our identities even if that implies changing.

What has influenced me most directly from systems thinking has been the vision of human beings as complex, creative, self-maintaining, and self-guiding entities. We simultaneously conserve and create the identity that defines us, simultaneously maintain some psychological consistency with our history but also openness 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. As educators we can, however, frame questions and arrange experiences that seed change in learners precisely because they are also open to such new experiences. Using good strategic questions, we can disturb some of the givens which can so deeply dominate our worldview and behavior. In this process, good questions and invitations to engage in relationships are more potent catalysts than any lecture loaded with statistics or the dry syllogisms of formal 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 is. Thus, much also depends on trust and faith in ourselves and the goodness of others.

Somewhat reiterative of the Freire and complex systems strands of my learning model is the importance of first hand, personal experience in learning about simple living. It is more deeply stimulating and inspiring to hear first-person accounts of simple living, or to tell our own stories, than it is to hear presentations, no matter how skillfully constructed, about simple living. It's the

difference between seeing a picture of a beer and actually cracking one open. So in many of the group activities I will present, emphasis is placed on getting this personal involvement even when it may result in incomplete or inaccurate information. People have a way of rounding out what they know about a subject after they get seriously engaged with it and my primary aim is always to spark further and future engagement with the exploration of simple living. It's for this same reason that I consistently stress the importance of face-to-face, real life activities rather than setting up websites, creating PowerPoint presentations, or even publishing books or articles. The chemistry, complexity and immediacy of real world relationships simply cannot be duplicated at the present time by any virtual proxies.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is taking a positive, creative approach to everything we do. It is very often the case that those working for positive change in the human situation get mired down in dissecting and 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 tiring. It feeds cynicism and despair and at the end of the day is both sterile and profoundly conservative. Finding fault with consumer culture is incredibly easy. Moreover, why would you waste your breath pursuing such a conversation unless you assumed deep down that consumer culture is worth saving if only it can be reformed in ways suggested by your critique? In the exercises that follow, we visit critiques of consumer culture only long enough to conscientize ourselves as to the effects it is having on us, and even then, not too often.

In my view, 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 this process of exploration, discovery, and change we are embarking on. As I said above, I believe consumer culture is already dead and beyond resuscitation. The dead should be left to bury the dead. Those interested in living should be taking up the task of creating a life-giving culture and should do so immediately. Why spend time parsing the failures of the dead except perhaps to learn the lessons of history not worth repeating?

So these are the key principles that guided the development of the exercises and activities included in this book:

- people interested in simple living already desire change at some level in their lives
- deep personal change is motivated by trans-rational (not necessarily irrational) psychological and spiritual factors
- journaling can be a powerful aid in working with trans-rational content
- we change our lives by first changing our consciousness and consciousness is socially constructed in symbiosis with others and can change through collaboration with others
- people are complex, self-regulating, conservative / creative systems who actively create and re-create themselves along the lines of their already established identities
- first-hand personal experience is the foundation for growing consciousness in face-to-face symbiosis with others
- all exercises should arise from, or lead back to a creative, life-affirming and positive place; mere critique is vain and ultimately sterile

The Simplicity Exercises

What follows is intended to be a practical tool for teachers and group leaders who have a specific interest in voluntary simplicity and adult learning. There are already a great many resources for group facilitators that offer a wide range of tools for conducting basic group introductions, problem solving, fostering creativity, and promoting personal development in a myriad of ways. I don't plan to repeat any of that material here, preferring instead to focus specifically on suggestions designed to nurture interest in simple living. I also assume that readers will have previous experience leading groups and therefore won't require an orientation to basic group dynamics, group psychology, principles of adult education, or the like.

This resource is divided into exercises, each one of which represents a separate group activity. They can also be used in combination to create workshops or retreats of longer duration than any single exercise. In general, these activities were intended for adults, although some can certainly be adapted for elementary school-aged children, families, or community groups. The exercises can also be supplemented with more formal information sharing, lectures or presentations, field trips, and so on, which I am leaving to the individual discretion and particular competencies of each educator. In the Notes section for each exercise, I have sometimes included some brief background material.

For every exercise, I provide:

- a description of the purpose of the exercise, and usually a framing statement that helps situate the activity within existing personal or cultural identity elements that may help the participants more readily associate the meaning of the exercise with values that are already familiar to them
- an estimate of the time required to conduct the exercise and recommended group size
- materials or equipment required
- a step-by-step description of the group process
- notes based on my own experience of leading the exercise, what insights can be drawn from them, potential pitfalls and opportunities, and any background information I think might be helpful to a facilitator in preparing the exercise or variations on it
- suggested resources consisting of references, readings, websites, and the like which can be used to inform the exercise or start a reading list for academic purposes if desired. I have not Googled every topic in order to pad out the Resource section since I hope this is something readers can and will do for themselves. Websites also change frequently and it would be impossible to provide a current list of active sites in a print-based resource such as this one.

Some exercises require supplies like food, writing materials, pens, flip chart paper, markers, or art supplies, etc. It is essential to procure these materials in the most environmentally sensitive way and to make sure that containers for recycling and composting are available and highly visible. As much as possible, everything should be zero waste, or else fully recyclable or compostable. Foods should be, as much as possible, organic and locally sourced. Attention to potential food allergies is essential these days and offering nut-free, gluten-free, dairy-free and / or vegan options is very desirable. Avoid bottled water and disposable dishes or cutlery. Supplies like markers should be water-based, odorless products, as some participants may have allergies or some history of exposure to solvents which should be managed with the utmost respect and discretion. People attracted to classes or workshops about simple living also

tend to be both conscious of, and scrupulous about, their consumption of environmentally damaging products and are sensitive to any lack of this awareness on the part of organizers of events they attend.

In a related vein, I think it is essential these days, and perhaps it has always been so, to manage group expectations respecting what can actually be accomplished in workshops or classes about simple living. People always seem hungry for panaceas or silver bullets that can solve all their problems in one fell swoop. Writing about simple living is often found in the “self-help” sections of bookstores, further reinforcing this hope. In addition, for several decades now, popular culture has conflated self-improvement with psychotherapy and there is no shortage of psychotherapists who are ready to encourage this mix by citing the therapeutic effects of education and the educational aspects of psychotherapy. I want to emphasize that none of the exercises that follow is intended as any form of psychotherapy whatsoever, and they should not be engaged as such. Neither do they represent any warranty, implied or expressed, that by participating in these exercises, people are guaranteed a better life or that all the problems they’ve accumulated from living in consumer culture will somehow instantly be resolved. Group leaders can be assured that there will almost certainly be some people showing up for workshops or classes expecting exactly this, especially those whom therapy group facilitators call “group wise”. These are people with long experience in therapy groups and therefore with a clear set of expectations about what will or should happen when things get underway. My intention in publishing these exercises is to make available an educational resource that can support and inform positive change both in the lives of individuals and in our culture. This mission certainly overlaps various systems of therapy as both aim to add quality to people’s lives. The emphasis here is learning about simple living in a way that is rooted in personal experience, not working through past traumas to resolve current conflicts or problematic feeling states. I would recommend therefore that facilitators or educators using these materials be mindful to correctly frame these activities both in promotional materials for specific events and during the orientation phase of the events themselves so that participant expectations can be realistic and accurate.

Finally, it is incumbent on everyone who leads groups to take all steps appropriate to secure informed consent from participants, assure that participants are well apprised of their responsibility for their own behavior and their obligations to other group members, and setting whatever ground rules seem necessary to assure respectful interaction and a safe learning environment. Especially important these days seems to be the issue of privacy. Clearly, there are generational differences in understanding the boundaries that demarcate our private lives from the public ones we live in the company of others. I’ve been unpleasantly surprised on more than one occasion, and at least once downright angered, by the liberties taken by some group participants to stream video or audio to the Internet or social media sites without my prior consent and when clearly the matters being discussed were personal and private for the speaker. I’ve come to the conclusion that nothing at all can be assumed in this regard and group facilitators need to make the boundaries of privacy and celebrity crystal clear from the outset. While in no way specifically requiring it, many of the exercises covered in the following pages can prompt disclosure of personal and sometimes emotionally delicate information. Assuring that everyone respects and protects these disclosures for what they are is essential to creating the atmosphere of trust, safety and collaboration that makes deep change possible.

Dialogue Introduction to Voluntary Simplicity

Purpose:

- to introduce group members to each other
- to establish an atmosphere of trust and safety
- to introduce basic principles and definitions of voluntary simplicity in an informal way

Framing:

Whenever people enter a classroom or workshop space for the first time, especially when the focus is something as unfamiliar as voluntary simplicity may be, it's reasonable to assume that certain questions will be high priorities:

- Who are all these other people?
- What is it going to be like to interact with them?
- What on earth is voluntary simplicity anyway?

The Dialogue Introduction to Voluntary Simplicity aims to address these questions without delay. Typical practice might be for facilitators to introduce themselves, and then conduct some sort of ice-breaker introduction exercise, and finally to offer an orientation talk on the topic, especially when the facilitators can be expected to know more about simple living than group members do.

This exercise takes a different approach. First, we assume that everyone present has some first hand personal experience with simple living. Second, many people are more engaged by listening to stories than by hearing lectures. Third, it is said that the fear of public speaking is second only to the fear of death—so immediately presenting oneself before a group to tell a story, if only in an informal way, has a tremendous tension-releasing effect. Finally, in this exercise, the facilitator responds to the self-introductory stories told by participants to interject bits of information (amusing anecdotes, bits of history, personal experiences, and leading questions) about what voluntary simplicity is (and isn't). This is done in a conversational way rather than as a didactic presentation. Participants are invited to amplify what they say with further gentle questions. As the process unfolds, participants begin right away to experience themselves as a collaborative learning community, drawing on their own experience, disclosing this experience through storytelling, and discovering connections between their personal experiences and the topic of simple living. This process is strengthened by facilitators who are warm, welcoming, funny, and willing to model self-disclosure by telling stories on themselves. It is also important that they model concision while telling the stories.

At its best, this exercise ends with all participants knowing a little more about each other, everyone feeling at ease and perhaps even energized, all while a great deal of information about what voluntary simplicity is and isn't, has been painlessly transferred between the lines of stories and jokes. Group members begin to trust each other and the facilitator. They begin to open to the possibility that this subject can be fun as well as meaningful and perhaps life-changing.

Group Size: 30 people (approximately)

Time: 30 minutes (less for groups smaller than 30, more for groups larger than thirty)

Dialogue Introduction to Voluntary Simplicity works very well with groups of any size up to about 30 or so. If every person is allowed only three minutes to speak, a group of 30 will require a minimum of 90 minutes to finish. This allows no time at all for the facilitator to offer a self-introduction or handle other matters of scheduling and housekeeping that might be required if this exercise is used to open a class or longer workshop. One hundred minutes would be a good estimate for a group of 30. For smaller groups, the total time could be reduced, or more time could be made available per group member for storytelling.

Materials / Equipment:

- A quiet room of sufficient size to seat everyone in a circle or semi-circle, but not so large as to make the group feel like a little island of humanity in a cavernous space.
- A laptop with presentation software (Keynote or PowerPoint), an LCD projector and screen can be helpful for displaying discussion questions and other information. If this technology is not available, a traditional black / white board or flip chart will also serve.

Process:

1. Call the group to order and assure that everyone is comfortably seated, cell phones and other devices off.
2. The facilitator offers a brief welcome and self-introduction.
3. The exercise is introduced as a time for introductions and an initial overview of simple living, but starting from our own experience. Everyone has a story to tell and we want to begin from those personal stories because they are real, “close to home”, and a great way to get to know each other.
4. Invite every group member to respond to the following questions—write on flip chart, board, or display as slide:
 - Who are you?
 - What brought you to a (class / workshop / event) about voluntary simplicity?
 - What past experience have you had with simple living, and how was it for you?
5. As each group member speaks, follow up with some expression of welcome and appreciation for the contribution they are making. Also, as and if appropriate, use each story as an opportunity to overtly acknowledge whatever content in the story illustrates a principle of simple living, a discovery of some sort, or a link to some element of the history of those who have lived simply, or the modern concerns of those who live it now. These linkages and illustrations should be kept brief so that most of the time available is used for participants to tell their own stories. But as concisely as possible, also draw out from those stories whatever is useful in introducing the topic of simple living.
6. When all participants have spoken, if appropriate, summarize some of the key elements, practices, historical and contemporary linkages, etc., that have been mentioned. List some bullets on the board or flip chart if that feels appropriate. Try to avoid over-emphasizing the

contributions of some participants and neglecting others as this is not a competition to gain the approval of the facilitator. Create, instead, an atmosphere that recognizes everyone equally as real life experimenters, keen observers of their own experiences and of the human condition, and fellow travelers on a voyage of discovery. Thank everyone for their contributions.

Notes:

Despite the fact that I often use this exercise as an opener for classes and workshops, I'm continually reminded of how remarkably powerful it is in a number of respects.

In the Approach to Learning section of this book, I mentioned that it is usually the case that people attending a learning event about voluntary simplicity are already seeking change in their lives. For many, this change will be some version of escaping circumstances they now find intolerable: lack of time with family; excessive workplace stress; the fatigue of over work; crushing debt; concern for the environment; disillusionment with the rewards offered by consumer culture, etc. As these concerns are expressed, they represent good opportunities to mention how simpler living might be of help, and also how it might not. Voluntary simplicity is not a panacea, and can even involve stresses of its own. But we continue to hope for panaceas and for quick and easy solutions to inherently complex and demanding problems (both "quick" and "easy" being strongly associated in consumer culture advertising with "simple"). So as these stories come out, they each represent a "teachable moment" when simple living can be described increasingly as a way of life that requires thought, discipline, effort, and some application—even as its rewards are correspondingly great.

The stories that people tell can also be funny, touching, and sometimes deeply moving. They often include wistful or nostalgic references to childhood or family experiences that life in consumer culture has made more difficult or impossible over the years. Occasionally there will be group members who already live a strong form of simplicity and thus the opportunity is available to have them say a bit more about what this experience has been like—its rewards and challenges and stresses and benefits.

It is helpful if the facilitator has significant background knowledge, and preferably personal experience, with simple living. With such knowledge rolling around in the back of one's mind, it's far easier to decide which elements of the stories being told in group are most helpful to bring to the group's attention as illustrative of what voluntary simplicity is, and what it isn't.

In my experience, several of the most common misconceptions about simple living are sourced either in pop media portrayals, or the experiences of people who have suffered real poverty and imagine that voluntary simplicity somehow celebrates deprivation. Pop media strongly link simple living with rural living, when in fact over 80% of people practicing strong forms of voluntary simplicity live in cities or small towns. People who grew up in impoverished rural areas during the Great Depression, or in developing countries, can also mistake involuntary poverty imposed on them by circumstances beyond their control, with voluntary simplicity. On the contrary, it's a way of life involving the free choice to limit our material consumption even though we might be financially able to live in affluence if we wished.

Another misconception is a very strong tendency in the popular imagination to link simple living with moralistic points of view. While I see simple living as a profoundly moral choice, I don't particularly see morally normative judgements or guilt trips as being in any way essential to simple living. Many people have adopted simple living because they are morally troubled by what they see consumer culture doing to the environment and to people. But one might adopt simpler living on purely pragmatic grounds just by observing that any reasonable person can see that a high quality of life is impossible in a ruined environment or amidst deep social injustice and turmoil.

Finally, facilitators and teachers will be impressed by adult learners as amazing sources of information and experiences which could never have been anticipated before they started telling their stories. It is especially helpful to be flexible and creative with how story elements mentioned by participants might be incorporated or reflected in subsequent learning activities. Group participants deeply appreciate seeing their contributions skillfully woven into some greater work which is emerging from the group. Facilitating this process by staying mindful of what it can add to the overall learning experience helps everyone absorb what Paulo Freire meant by conscientization through group interaction. Together, we become something greater than any one of us could ever be as an individual, yet our individual contributions are essential to making this greater than personal reality emerge as a fact of history.

Mindfulness

The exercises in this section are intended to help participants establish a mindfulness practice and also to apply mindfulness practice in ways that enhance well-being and open additional dimensions of simplicity practice. The order of presentation represents no particular order of priority in the exercises, with the exception of the first one, Tea and Oranges, which is basic training in a mindfulness meditation technique. After this experience, I offer exercises which aim to bring mindfulness to one or another aspect of our inner, psychological, or spiritual experience.

The most recent, largest, and most comprehensive international survey of practitioners of voluntary simplicity (boasting over 1,700 respondents) found more than half (52%) included some form of formal mindfulness or meditative practice in their daily routine (Alexander and Ussher 2011). Other psychological research suggests that mindfulness practice is not just an activity adopted by those who live simply, but may itself be a primary source of the desire to simplify (Kasser and Brown 2009). Earlier surveys have concurred with these basic findings that some form of spiritual or personal meditative practice may be part of the lives of as many as 80% of people practicing strong forms of simple living (Elgin 1981; Pierce 2000). I know this is true for me, and as the years have gone by, I've become increasingly convinced of the contribution of mindfulness practice (or some similar practice that cultivates the contemplative side of life) to increasing well-being and planetary sustainability.

I should hasten to add, however, that people take up simple living for a variety of reasons that may have nothing to do with mindfulness practice. It may simply appeal to their reason as a good thing to do. It may present an alternative to crushing debt and stressful competition for the rewards offered by consumer culture that we discover are often exaggerated and sometimes dubious. A simpler life may be forced on us by outside circumstances (in which case it is not voluntary) but which we eventually discover offers rewards of its own, and even when the opportunity presents itself to return to the consumer culture mainstream, we decide to persist in our practice of simplicity (in which case it is becoming voluntary). We may adopt a simpler life because of the practical value it has in achieving some other life goal like raising a family, or devoting ourselves to a creative work, or social justice work, or an international development project. We may adopt simplicity as part of a vow of religious life, or a personal spiritual quest (Sinetar 1986).

So in presenting mindfulness practice the way I do, I'm simply expressing my particular bias. In my practice of simple living, it is central. In my work as an educator, I have seen repeatedly the value it can bring into the lives of others. While mindfulness certainly may not hold the same place in the lives of other simplicity practitioners that it does in mine, their journeys are not my journey. So everything I offer below is offered on a recommended basis, but in the end, each of us will walk the road we find most congenial.

Tea and Oranges

Purpose:

- to teach a mindfulness cultivation practice and link it directly to a sensuous experience that demonstrates how cultivating mindfulness can enhance our quality of life
- to help participants discover the relationship between shifting their attention from extrinsic to intrinsic sources of rewards, and how doing so will affect their personal well-being

Framing:

This exercise consists of training in mindfulness of breathing practice followed by the attentive eating of a piece of fruit (an orange). Its purpose is to introduce participants to the daily practice of mindfulness, its role in simple living, and the power of mindfulness practice to deepen our appreciation for simply being alive. Mindfulness practice is not religious per se, and can find its place within any belief system. But in its farther reaches, it can also become a spiritual practice as well as a way of focusing awareness on the moments that most make our lives worth living.

The most recent and comprehensive international research of people who practice strong forms of voluntary simplicity suggests that over half (52%) include some form of mindfulness practice in their daily routines (Alexander and Ussher 2011). Other research also suggests that the taste for simple living may arise at least partly as a result of mindfulness practice (Kasser and Brown 2009).

Group Size: 50 people

Time: 90 – 120 minutes (approximately)

This exercise is suitable for groups of any size, but groups larger than fifty or so inevitably incur some shuffling and rustling that can be distracting for beginners.

Larger groups may require more time if there are lots of questions, or if the facilitator wants to add some time at the end for sharing personal reflections on the exercise.

Materials / Equipment:

- one fresh orange for each participant
- one serviette (or napkin) for each participant
- compostable knife for each participant

If accompanied by a presentation, then suitable equipment might be required such as a laptop computer, projector, screen, etc.

Process:

1. Set up the meeting space so that each person has a chair that permits an erect, comfortable, yet attentive posture. Tables are also helpful for the writing and the orange eating part of the exercise.

2. Place an orange, serviette, and knife on the table in front of each group member. Advise them not to touch or eat the fruit until instructed to do so.
3. Introduce the concept of mindfulness practice in whatever level of detail seems appropriate. See Notes below.
4. Teach mindfulness of breathing practice and allow about ten minutes of sitting practice to help participants center and focus.
 - Come to sitting meditation with a definite intention to “take your seat” as in “taking a stand”. We come with a strong sense of honoring the place we are in and placement of the body in a posture of dignity, awareness, and deliberateness. The sitting posture should express dignity without stiffness or pompous formality.
 - Hands can be placed in different positions. Some believe these gestures signify different inner dispositions, i.e., palms up (receptivity), palms down (fullness; resting with digestion), etc.
 - The sitting posture can be in a chair or on a meditation cushion in any of the traditional lotus positions. In part, the suitability of lotus postures depends on the age of people in the group and / or their previous experience with such postures.
 - Simply close eyes and focus attention on the breathing, following the breath, patiently letting go of all thought forms, mental images, feelings, etc., without judgment, as they arise, trusting that this practice is possible and worthwhile. Invite participants to be generous enough to give themselves time for this. When thoughts arise (or memories, imaginings, sensations, images, or distractions of any kind, whether internal or external), simply return concentration to the breath.
 - Have the group sit for 10-15 minutes before moving on to the next part of the exercise.
5. This step of the process is delicate as it represents a turning of attention without loss of attention. It is imperative not to rush this step of the process. Group members have now been sitting in silence for several minutes, and for some a significant degree of stillness and inner-directed focus of attention may have been attained. For others, especially those with no previous meditation experience, this may not be the case. In any event, invite group members to very gradually open their eyes to look at the orange in front of them, without losing focus on their breath. Little by little, they should shift their attention from their breath to the orange, and then pick it up. Talk them through the process:
 - At first, we simply hold the orange attending closely to its weight, texture and temperature in your hand;
 - Then slowly, we turn the orange in our hand, closely inspecting its surface for features like the tiny dimples in the skin, the scar from the stem it was picked from, any variations in color and light that define its spherical shape, etc.;
 - Imaginatively look into the orange, as it were, visualizing first the blossom from which the fruit emerged, then the twig that held the blossom, then the tree that held the twig, then the trunk, and finally the roots of the tree;
 - Imagine the roots of the tree sucking moisture from the earth, and the moisture itself falling as rain from clouds, which themselves arose from the surface of oceans and lakes by the

power of the sun. Notice how clear all these connections and transfers are inherent in the orange we now hold—the sun, the clouds, the rain, the roots and trunks and branches and blossoms of trees, and that all of this comes to us mostly without our effort or much thought;

- Slowly break the rind of the orange, carefully noting its inner texture and aroma in every detail. How is the smell in the room changing? Is orange oil appearing along the line of the tear in the skin and what does it smell like? etc.;
 - Now, eat a single section of your oranges (walk them through each step of eating it) appreciating and paying attention to the fruit in each sensory modality. (Don't ignore the sound of a room full of people chomping on juicy oranges! Allow time for group members to eat and thoroughly enjoy their oranges in silence.)
6. After eating the oranges, invite participants to express whatever thoughts, feelings, or insights may have been sparked by this experience. Invite them to consider, and perhaps discuss, the implications of transferring a practice of mindfulness to all their daily activities.

Notes:

This exercise consists of teaching a very simple mindfulness of breathing practice, and then applying that mindful state of awareness to an ordinary daily activity like eating a piece of fruit. While it does shift attention from intrinsic sources of well-being like heightened states of self-awareness to an extrinsic source of well-being like an orange, for people with no previous experience of meditation, the exercise can be very profound and demonstrates immediate the value of such practices to enhance our quality of life. Over the years I have found it a consistently powerful and reliable way of sparking interest in group members to explore such practices further, and in particular, their relationship to simple living.

Several things need to be noted.

First, this exercise is most effective if the group leader or teacher is him or herself a practitioner of mindfulness. We cannot convincingly teach what we ourselves have not first authentically lived. Cultivating one's own mindfulness practice also develops a deeper intuitive appreciation for what others are feeling when they attempt it for the first time. Plus, it helps us keep instructions succinct and relevant.

Second, many North Americans still have no practical experience of meditation and frequently conflate it with self-hypnosis, daydreaming, trance states, and various forms of prayer, of which it is none. It is therefore helpful to include in the introduction to the exercise clear distinctions between these practices and states of inner awareness, together with reassurances that the practice of mindfulness in no way contradicts the beliefs of any mainstream religious tradition.

It is quite often the case that group members will perceive meditation as a religious exercise, and depending on their personal history with institutionalized religions, this may evoke very loaded feelings. These need to be dispelled immediately, simply by saying that mindfulness practice is a way of training attention, cultivating stillness and a centered, non-judgmental openness to present-moment experience. In and of itself, this implies no particular creed at all.

Much of my teaching work has occurred in regions of Canada where many people come from strongly conservative and religiously fundamentalist backgrounds. Some are deeply suspicious of anything they think is new age or cultish, fearing that they are being cleverly tempted to disloyalty to their faith. I usually handle these concerns in one of three ways:

- by addressing them immediately and openly
- by offering everyone an opt-out option if anything about any aspect of the exercise creates discomfort or moral doubt for them

- in some cases, if appropriate, humor. (“If you listen to the sound of my voice, then of course you will immediately fall under my power, and I will make you take all your clothes off and give me all your money right now!”)

Another misconception that can pop up around mindfulness practice is that it is a relaxation technique—a sort of gimmick that uses guided imagery (not meditation) to bring people in their imagination to their happy place on a beach or in a bathtub where they float in perfect tranquillity. Over the long-term, mindfulness practice can certainly increase our tranquillity. But mindful awareness is not always pleasant, and certainly doesn’t seek relaxation per se. Growth in mindful awareness can, and even should, bring us face-to-face with disturbing as well as pleasing aspects of reality. Perhaps the disturbing aspects call us to action on some pressing community or family concern. But mindfulness practice is what strengthens our ability to be present to our experience, whatever it is. If we bias this work toward seeking relaxation, we may or may not find it, but in either case, we’re no longer engaged in mindfulness practice.

Because mindfulness practice is still new to many people, it will be necessary to introduce and also follow the exercise with some information about what mindfulness practice is, where it comes from, what effects it can have if practiced with diligence, what it is not, and in particular, what role it can play in simple living. In my experience, it’s best to keep the introduction as short as feasible. You do not want to create a great long lead up to a practice which, at its core, is very simple and easy to learn—though it is decidedly not easy to sustain and requires lengthy practice to master. After the group has experienced the mindfulness exercise, then more information can be offered and they too are in a better position to ask questions arising from their own personal experience. I would urge readers to consult the appropriate sources on mindfulness, some of which are listed below. Unfortunately there are relatively few sources that specifically answer the question respecting the relationship between mindfulness practice and simple living itself. I would therefore offer the following thoughts:

- First of all, mindfulness is the practice of simplicity itself. There is nothing simpler than just being still and consciously present in the moment. For a few minutes or an hour a day, we are at least not making more mischief.
- Second, being awake and aware in the present moment is an essential requirement for free, responsible, and deliberate choice, since voluntary simplicity has been defined as, “the deliberate organization of life for a purpose” (Gregg 1936).
- Third, mindfulness is a prerequisite to living deeply with attention and gratitude. The alternative to maximizing quantity of consumption is to deepen our quality of attention and appreciation. This deepened awareness of, and appreciation for, the significance of ordinary acts then permeates all of our activities.
- Fourth, mindfulness is practiced for its own sake. The cultivation of mindfulness is exactly opposite to the consciousness cultivated by consumer culture. Mindfulness is not about achieving anything, acquiring anything, or improving anything. It is a totally non-instrumental activity.

Meditation is the only intentional, systematic human activity which, at bottom, is about not trying to improve yourself or get anywhere else, but simply to realize where you already are (Kabat-Zinn 1994:14).

Contemplation, like leisure, or being itself leisure, brings felicity. The man in contemplation is a free man. He needs nothing. Therefore nothing determines or distorts his thought. He does whatever he loves to do, and what he does is done for its own sake (Aristotle 384-322 BC).

- Fifth, the practice of mindfulness itself seems to evoke a gradually growing preference for simple living. It is therefore both a source and a destination of this way of life. As we learn to appreciate more and more the value of living a life rooted in mindfulness, we have less and less interest in a distracted, impulsive, inattentive way of living. We are becoming the change we want to see in the world.

Finally, Tea and Oranges can be followed by the Gratitude Log exercise because mindfully eating an orange can be cause for gratitude. Linking the two exercises together this way gives group members a concrete example of what belongs in a gratitude log entry and how mindfulness puts us in a frame of mind which is more receptive to experiences for which we might feel grateful.

Resources:

Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 1994. *Wherever you are, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

LeShan, Lawrence. 1974. *How to meditate: A guide to self-discovery*. New York: Bantam.

Miller, Timothy. 1995. *How to want what you have*. New York: Avon Books.

Tart, Charles. 1994. *Living the mindful life: A handbook for living in the present moment*. London: Shambala.

Wildmind Buddhist Meditation (2006). *Mindfulness of Breathing: Meditation*. <http://www.wildmind.org/meditation/mindfulness/intro.html>

Best Things in Life

Purpose:

- to enable participants to discover that much reward and meaning in life is found in very simple, low-cost, or no-cost experiences, and to base this discovery in personal memories, not external prescriptions of the good life
- to help participants recognize that, based on their past experiences of well-being, they already have an innate capacity to know what is well for them and the wisdom to discern what contributes to their well-being and what doesn't

Framing:

There is probably a natural tendency to approach the idea of simple living with a bias toward material simplification, and also perhaps with a bias toward normative (should, ought, must) prescriptions. Yet all of us have some personal experience of simple living, if only some experiences as children at summer camp, or family vacations at the lake or seaside when our usual routines are set aside and we can take on a less hurried, more instinctive pace to our living.

This exercise aims to offer participants some time simply to remember moments from our own lives when we have experienced great well-being. The goal is not to indoctrinate ourselves with a particular theory of what constitutes well-being, but to rediscover the meaning it has for us based on our own past experiences of it. Given the sometimes bizarre portrayals of simple living that often crop up in mass media, group members may already have established prejudices to overcome before we are even open to giving simple living a fair hearing. A good place to begin is to recall that simple living is not something exotic or eccentric, but in fact part of our own past experience. Seeds of simplicity are already present in our personal history, perhaps even the seeds that have brought us to this workshop or class. Remembering this helps reveal simple living as something natural to us, even something with which we already have some experience, and therefore worthy of further exploration.

Group Size: 20 - 30 people

Time: 90 minutes (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all participants
- odorless markers or chalk
- recyclable newsprint flip chart paper or chalk / white board

Process:

1. Invite all participants to relax and think back over the course of their lives. Individually and without speaking with others, write one sentence descriptions of three experiences of maximum well-being. Such experiences can be characterized by:

- strong energy
- great vitality
- a sense of connection with what is meaningful in life
- with personal calling
- with the real “juice” of what living is about

Note that paradoxically, not all such experiences are necessarily pleasant or happy occasions. Allow 4-5 minutes for recording these examples.

2. Invite them to select the most intense or “energized” experience from the three just noted, and write an entire paragraph that describes this experience more fully. Allow ten minutes or so for writing, or until people seem to slow down or stop. Then to further assist with memory, ask the following prompts:

- What were you doing during this experience?
- Where did this experience take place?
- Who were you with (including animals, natural elements, etc.) and what were you doing together that made this occasion memorable?
- What was the emotional “tone” of this experience?
- What elements of “material culture” (i.e., things, stuff, gadgets) were essential to making this experience possible, if any?
- What changes, if any, in your current way of living would be needed to help dispose you to experience more moments like these in the future?

3. After the silent time of individual writing, invite, but do not require, everyone to share their stories. They can be literal readings of what was written, a story based on one of the high point experiences but one not chosen to use, or an entirely different story. It’s very important that participants feel free to choose what they will share, or not tell a story at all if they wish. Even three or four people willing to share from their history will be enough to make the point of this exercise. The more stories shared, however, the more emphatically “the point” is made. This exercise can sometimes tap very powerful memories some of which are strongly emotional, deeply personal, spiritual, or even ineffable. So it is important to honor this sacredness by assuring participants that we all can keep our stories private if they hit too close to home or are too personal to share with people we don’t yet know well. Nevertheless, some of us will choose to tell our stories and others will become emboldened by the example and tell theirs as well. (person number changes.)

4. As the stories come out, the facilitator should listen to them without judgment, record a line or key phrase on the flip chart that provides a “memory cue” to the group for each story, and

respectfully thank each participant for every story told. The facilitator can also ask open questions to clarify points of the story or draw out layers of memory or emotional significance that seem to be present, but this needs to be gentle and respectful so that people don't feel interrogated or judged, or led into territory that becomes too difficult or emotionally challenging. If the trust level is high in the group and a skilled facilitator is at the helm, you can take this process quite far. But it is always well to keep in mind that these exercises are not psychotherapy and pushing participants' psychological or emotional defenses does utterly nothing to move the exercise forward. On the contrary, it can be counterproductive.

5. When everyone who wants to has had a chance to tell their stories, the facilitator then invites the group to look at all the story cues that have been charted to see if any intuitions arise from what is present. This is impossible to predict and one must work with what emerges. However, in my experience, certain common patterns appear every time:
 - Experiences of great well-being tend to be very simple and therefore require little or no support from material culture, spending money, high technology, etc. The implied lesson is that most of the richest experiences of our lives come to us along very simple, innate channels of our humanity. Expensive holidays or massive spending splurges are not necessary to experience this, and it is especially powerful that people recognize that this is based on their own memories, not an ideology of "simple living" being imposed from outside their experience.
 - Nearly all experiences of great well-being fall into two broad groups: (1) experiences of interpersonal intimacy, friendship, family, or community, and (2) experiences in Nature, wilderness, bonding with Nature, or some other experience where a natural setting provides the indispensable context for whatever else happens. The implied lessons from these observations are that people matter to us, and Nature matters to us. Moreover, it is precisely human relationships, community, and wilderness that we are busy destroying or degrading for the sake of expanding material affluence. Yet our experience tells us that it's not from material affluence that we experience most meaning and reward in life.
 - Finally, what often links these stories together is a certain state of awareness (mindfulness), of unhurried, nonjudgmental openness to experience which we most often find in leisure, i.e., time which is structured only by the requirements of awareness and playfulness in the moment. Thus we often discover that leisure, not money, is the most important condition contributing to well-being.

We hope that, out of this session, most of the participants discover that simple living is not something exotic or foreign to their experience. Now that they have tasted it, they know that it tastes good; they know that it comes naturally to human beings, especially when we take time for it. Hopefully, we all will be motivated to want to learn more about it.

Notes:

Best Things in Life is a simple exercise to facilitate and produces highly reliable outcomes. The more sensitive, capable, and mature the facilitator, the more potential there is for the exercise to move very deeply indeed. One other consideration is that it's important not to cut anyone off who wants to tell their story—even if pressed for time. As some stories are told, the more reserved group members feel emboldened to tell their own stories. As the process moves forward, the awareness grows that there is something very special happening here, very precious. When people feel moved to contribute their bit to this precious deepening moment, it's very important to honor that and provide opportunity, permission, and protection for it. It's also vital to tell participants from the beginning that we aren't judging, analyzing, recommending,

prescribing, or in any way even commenting on these experiences. These are simply the data of our lives—what matters to us. These experiences may inform a conversation, but probably shouldn't be the focus of the conversation. We don't want to pick apart what may be sacred to someone else. We do, however, want to be informed by it.

While we do want to offer everyone time to tell his or her story, and especially to refrain from cutting anyone off, every group will have limited time to conduct its activities. It's therefore helpful at the very beginning, before anyone starts storytelling, to inform all group members that time is limited; while there is no need to hurry, it's also essential that everyone respect everyone else's opportunity to speak, and should therefore keep their own comments as brief and to the point as possible.

It is also sometimes appropriate to nuance the final discovery I mentioned in connection with this exercise, namely, that well-being and leisure are strongly connected. In consumer culture, however, we are all indoctrinated to the idea that leisure is generally relegated to the margins of our lives during holidays or other special occasions. Moreover, we think of leisure as something we must earn through a vastly larger commitment of time and effort to work. This then may represent a timely moment to introduce the idea that simple living should not be strictly equated with a leisure time expansion movement—something that actively promotes idleness as the acme of human achievement. Rather, we're seeking a way of life, and perhaps even a way of working, which includes more of the qualities we now associate with leisure. The self-styled realists in the crowd will be quick to point out that taking a leisurely perspective on life is all well and good for a slacker minority, but somebody has to be out there slaving in the real world to pay the bills. A good response to this is simply to return to the data available in the stories. In very many cases we can observe that moments of maximum well-being are rarely moments of total idleness. On the contrary, people may be extremely active and productive while experiencing high levels of well-being. Contrary to how consumer culture portrays leisure, it is not the same as idleness. If we discuss enough examples, it becomes clear that a way of life is possible which melds leisure with action and productivity, but uses the choice for simplicity to remove from life some of the driven, compulsive, addictive, and fear-ridden ambience characteristic of life in consumer culture.

Resources:

Ban Breathnach, Sarah. 1995. *Simple abundance: A daybook of comfort and joy*. New York: Wartner Books, Inc. An exploration of simple living through a series of daily meditations and celebrations of life's richness as enjoyed through the senses, homemaking, self-care, and awareness of the seasons.

Drake, John D. 2001. *Downshifting: How to work less and enjoy life more*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. Psychologist and former CEO of large human resources consulting firm offers practical advice on how to cut back on work hours. Discusses options such as flextime schedules, gradual retirement plans, and requesting a lower level job within the same organization.

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. 1991. *Gift from the sea*. New York: Pantheon Books. Classic memoir of voluntary simplicity. Ruminates on author's life and the values of simplicity written during author's stay at the seashore. Originally written in 1955, it's still relevant today.

McBride, Tracey. 1997. *Frugal luxuries: Simple pleasures to enhance your life and comfort your soul*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. A beautiful book with a woman's touch and sensitivity to the sensuous delights of simple living with mindfulness and gratitude. Includes many suggestions on how to fill our lives with a sense of luxury on very slender means.

- Lippe, Toinette. 2002. *Nothing left over: A plain and simple life*. New York: J. P. Tarcher. Memoir by spirituality editor and former publisher about living mindfully without attachment to material possessions, focusing instead on the richness of experiences. Includes references to both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.
- Mills, Stephanie. 2002. *Epicurean simplicity*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. One woman's reflections on her experiences living in the wilderness, her encounters with her non-human neighbors, and the value of a simple daily round in contributing to a high state of well-being.
- Moore, Thomas. 1992. *Care of the soul*. New York: HarperCollins. While this book is primarily a deep and sensitive exploration of the matters of the soul, it focuses very well on the matters which for many people form the heart and matter of simple living; valuing self and others; taking time to listen to one's own soul and honor its movements and needs, etc.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1989. *Walden and other writings*. New York: Bantam Books. This is a classic account of Thoreau's two years living by the banks of Walden Pond in 19th-century New England. It is loaded with insightful critique of the vain strivings of ordinary mortals after peace through possessions and an unparalleled anthem to simple, self-reliant living.

The Gratitude Log

Purpose:

- to introduce gratitude as a deliberate practice which can enrich and deepen a life of simple living
- to consciously honor moments when we experience the plenitude of life
- to deliberately focus mindful attention on what we have rather than what we lack as a practice which helps us cultivate contentment with simple things

Framing:

Voluntary simplicity is defined as much by practices as it is by holding particular opinions about life. A fruitful practice for many people has been keeping a gratitude log. Like a ship's log book, the gratitude log records events in our lives for which we feel, or believe we should rightfully feel, grateful. Many of us are better at remembering our hurts than the gifts that come to us.

Consumer culture also thrives by using advertising and a variety of other marketing techniques to keep our attention focused on what we lack, or how precarious our hold is on what we already have. No one goes to the marketplace looking for what they already have. Over the long-term, the psychological effect of advertising is to create an inner emotional sense that what we need for a good life is scarce and insecure and other members of the community will be out for themselves in competition with us for scarce goods. This general tone breeds insecurity, competition and anxiousness in society generally and can be a major source of anxiety and a driver for incurring debt for individuals.

In this exercise, we aim consciously to "change the channel" on consumer culture by focusing attention on what we have and experience in our relationships with others for which we are grateful. This exercise can nicely follow Best Things in Life and / or Tea and Oranges, since both of these exercises can place us in touch with past or present life experiences for which we might feel gratitude.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 15 - 20 minutes

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper or newsprint scribbles for all participants

Process:

1. Introduce group members to the concept of simple living as a suite of practices in addition to a set of values and beliefs. Simple is as simple does. The practices of simple living aim at enhancing well-being and meaning, not necessarily acquiring material riches. Mindfulness is the practice that cultivates a mindful state of consciousness. The Best Things in Life exercise introduces us to the practice of periodically stopping and taking stock of the good

things, the positive energy, the loving relationships that are already present in our lives. In this exercise, we add the practice of keeping a gratitude log.

2. Note the example of a ship's log—a daily account of key events taking place during a voyage. In a similar manner, the Gratitude Log is a log book of things that have happened to us over the last 24 hours (or couple of days) for which we feel grateful. If we don't spontaneously feel gratitude for any events of the last day, then we survey the day's happenings and we log events we judge intellectually to be worthy of gratitude. Even if we begin our practice of gratitude with intellectual judgments, and maintain the practice, eventually we will come also to feel the gratitude we judge to be appropriate in the circumstances.
3. Have the group members take a few minutes and review the day just ended. Provide them with paper and invite them to write one or two sentences describing three events from the day for which they are grateful. These might be derived from the Best Things in Life exercise or the Tea and Oranges exercise from which they practiced mindfulness, or they can be examples simply drawn from free recall. Remind them that, making this a daily practice can gradually change our perspective on life—what is important and what isn't—and how much abundance can be found in simple daily events.
4. After the group has had a few minutes to make some entries, open the floor for readings, if people wish. The facilitator can also add comments based on the Notes section below or their own use of the Gratitude Log. Stress that the effect of this practice is not fully evident simply by doing it once. It needs to become a regular, if not daily, practice and can be linked into a more general practice of journaling for personal growth.

Notes:

I believe keeping a gratitude log was first introduced to the simplicity literature in Sarah Ban Breathnach's book *Simple Abundance* (1995), but the practice certainly didn't originate with her. For centuries it has been a time-honored practice in contemplative monastic orders to keep a spiritual diary for recording all of one's spiritual challenges, insights, questions and also consolations—moments of awareness of the goodness of life and our gratitude for it. Similar practices were also recommended by both the Greek and Roman Stoics prior to the Christian era as a method of cultivating tranquility in a life which could be full of challenges and pain.

While it can result in lengthening this exercise to 30 minutes or so, I've found that it represents a teachable moment for group members to discover the power and significance of what they give their attention to. I illustrate this by drawing a Necker Cube on the board or flip chart. A Necker Cube is one of many illustrations dreamed up by researchers in human perception to demonstrate what is called figure-ground reversal. Many people are also familiar with the vase-profile figure that changes appearance depending on whether we attend to the figure as figure or attend to it as a background for an alternate figure that pops out of the page when we shift our attention. The Necker Cube works in the same way, but the illustration is simpler, consisting merely of two intersecting squares with their corners connected by lines to create the appearance of an empty cube defined only by its edges. When rendered on paper as a two-dimensional drawing, it can appear as a three-dimensional illustration that can be viewed in two different ways: From one perspective one surface of the cube appears to be the front, but from a different perspective, it appears to be the back. When our perspective shifts, there is a perceptible little jolt which can be quite funny when it happens. Group members of all ages seem to enjoy this experience. They especially like learning that, by an act of will, they can push the cube back and forth from one perspective to the other.

This becomes a perceptual illustration of what we hope will happen during the practice of keeping a gratitude log. Keeping such a log encourages us to shift our perspective from what

we lack to what we have. We might be reviewing the exact same objective life experiences, but by deliberately shifting our attention in search of that for which we can be grateful in the circumstances, the whole meaning of the experience can change.

For example, if I encounter someone in a store or at the office who is gratuitously insulting or grouchy, I can attend to my hurt feelings, how rude people are becoming these days, etc., or I can be—along with Socrates—grateful that life has sent me a wonderful example of the sort of person I don't want to be! I can also see the moment as a signal opportunity to cultivate patience and compassion, remembering that everyone suffers as I too suffer. Everyone loses it from time-to-time and may not intend to. And on this occasion I have an opportunity to strengthen my compassion, deepen my patience, and ground out a little bit of negative energy from the universe by not responding in a way that amplifies it.

Encourage group members to notice as they diligently practice gratitude how consumer culture is not really a system for delivering the best of all possible lives, but rather a system for manufacturing fear, discontent, perceptions of scarcity, insecurity, and personal inferiority. As we strengthen our practice of gratitude, the toxicity of advertising becomes more and more apparent and we become naturally inclined to try to minimize its influence over us and its presence in our environment. These are significant steps toward lower consumption with environmental benefits, as well as greatly increasing personal contentment without having to purchase something.

Resources:

Ban Breathnach, Sarah. 1995. *Simple abundance: A daybook of comfort and joy*. New York: Wartner Books, Inc. An exploration of simple living through a series of daily meditations and celebrations of life's richness as enjoyed through the senses, homemaking, self-care, and awareness of the seasons.

Irvine, William B. 2009. *A guide to the good life: The ancient art of stoic joy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 978-0-19-537461-2. A wonderful re-introduction of Stoic philosophy for modern readers with particular attention to applied stoicism—the techniques of mental hygiene developed by the Stoics to help sustain tranquillity in challenging circumstances.

Inner Clearing (Fire Cleansing / Composting Ritual)

Purpose:

- to bring mindfulness to our inner, subjective clutter and the influence it has on diminishing our well-being
- to introduce a ritual for inner clearing that provides an outward symbolic expression for an intention we carry inwardly to release whatever is contrary to our well-being

Framing:

Clutter can refer to more than just the unused possessions jamming our closets and garages. We also pick up inner clutter like poisonous memories, old grudges, dismal forebodings, negative attitudes, prejudices, hurts and affronts that we cherish more than our healings and compliments, distractions and ingratitude.

This exercise aims to bring some mindfulness to our inner household and some encouragement to the task of cleaning the kitchen. But the intention we bring to this process during this exercise is one of releasing rather than clinging and dwelling. In traditional Buddhist practice, we bring mindfulness to three domains of our lives: Our experiences of outer objective reality (traditionally called dharmas), our bodies and bodily states (as when we attend to breathing, physical posture, etc.) and to our own mental / emotional phenomena (feelings, thoughts, desires, memories, etc.). In the Tea and Oranges exercise, we focused to some degree on all three of these, but in the present exercise, our attention is given primarily to the last category of experiences.

Life in consumer culture inclines us to hoard everything, especially our memories of hurt and personal injustice. Many people define themselves in terms of the ways they have been victimized in the past. This can be corrosive to well-being at every imaginable level. Without trivializing or denying our personal histories, this exercise encourages group members to clean house.

Group Size: 100 people (approximately)

Time: 90 minutes (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all group members
- matches
- pail of water or fire extinguisher
- fire pit, BBQ, or Wok (with a lid)

Optional: Access to an outdoor area where a small fire can be safely kindled if the Fire Cleansing Ritual is used.

Also, managers of the meeting venue should be advised of the activity and permission for it secured in advance.

Process:

1. Introduce exercise by noting that just as it is possible for our houses to get cluttered up with material possessions that impede graceful living, so it is possible for us to become inwardly cluttered. Our goal in adopting an outward simplicity is to foster a life of inner richness and freedom. In the same way, our goal in developing inner simplicity is to cultivate a greater clarity and intensity of connection with our sources of inner richness.
2. Mention to group members that a great deal depends on the intentions that we bring to our inner work. Memories, hurts, self-destructive habits, prejudices, and personal feuds don't evaporate instantly, no matter how much we would like to clear away such clutter. But their power to erode our well-being can be steadily diminished first by forming the clear intention to simplify our lives from these influences, and then by adopting a regular program of substituting more wholesome thoughts and habits for the clutter that's been discarded.
3. Invite group members to first work as individuals and make a list of personal examples of inner clutter—the emotional, intellectual, or spiritual stuff that distracts us from our sources of inner plenitude and vitality.
4. Next, have everyone list some of their favorite methods for inner clearing, i.e., coming to a renewed feeling of inner centeredness, calm, clarity, spaciousness, freedom.
5. Next, following this exercise (workshop / class), ask what will you promise yourself to do to clear some of the inner clutter you've identified? What wholesome practices or thought can you substitute for less wholesome practices and thoughts? How will you renew your intention to cultivate inner spaciousness and clarity?

The exercise can be halted at this point, where all of the material that group members have been working with will remain private. Alternatively, additional layers of the exercise can be engaged:

6. Assign everyone to groups of four or five people and share, as each feels comfortable, personal examples of inner clutter, your three favorite ways of clearing inner clutter, and what it is you intend to do following the exercise to take action on your own inner clearing process? Allow 20 to 30 minutes for these discussions.
7. Reassemble the large group and without asking for specific small group reports, invite participants to share their impressions and reactions to the exercise.
 - What was it like to think about inner clutter?
 - Did you discover any new ways of dealing with inner clutter?
 - How has participating in this exercise affected your inner resolve to liberate yourself from inner clutter?

Fire Cleansing / Composting Ritual

8. Some groups, or the particular circumstances in which this exercise might be used, might make ritualizing intentions to simplify inner baggage a step that adds value to the exercise. Two different approaches might be used to this ritual, depending on how you like to think of inner clutter and what the most life-giving relationship to it might be.

(a) First, we can remind participants that from ancient times, fire has symbolized purity, spirit, cleansing, and renewal. Thus we can symbolize our intentions to clear our inner clutter by writing down our personal examples of inner clutter on separate slips of paper. These should not be generalizations about categories of inner clutter, but rather specific memories, grievances, traumas, issues, etc. Then, as a group, we leave the meeting room and go outside where we kindle a fire and, one by one, toss the slips of paper into the flames. As they are consumed, we might silently or vocally express in words our intention to seek liberation from what the fire is now symbolically consuming.

(b) Another perspective on clutter is that it might actually represent compost that we don't seek to rid ourselves of, but rather to retain, transform, and reincorporate into our lives in a different form. This image is more organic and conservative than the fire cleansing option, but for many people it rings more true of the fact that we can never, and perhaps should never, rid ourselves of any part of our history. We can instead re-process it into some new, life-giving form, even though at the moment it appears to be "shit". This exercise could then be reconfigured with a different narrative leading up to this ritual, using compostable paper to write down whatever it is we want to clear, then shredding these slips of paper up and adding them to some nearby flower bed, garden, or other outdoor spot where they will be reincorporated into the soil—and symbolically reincorporated into our lives.

Notes:

Depending on the group, this exercise can be very powerful and deeply personal. I have used it closer to the end of workshops when group members have developed a high level of trust and are comfortable disclosing the material that this exercise can evoke. Particularly delicate here can be maintaining the boundary between education and what some participants might start to experience as therapy. The aim of the exercise is simply to conscientize participants to the reality of inner clutter, as well as the outer stuff, that voluntary simplicity has a psycho-emotional dimension as well as a material one, and our intentions matter a great deal in our journey toward a simpler life. The purpose of the exercise is decidedly neither to dredge up old wounds and dwell on them, nor refresh our awareness of victimization and helplessness that can accompany that kind of thinking.

The Fire Cleansing Ritual is something I once incorporated in a retreat I was giving during the Christian liturgical season of Lent—traditionally a time when believers bring special attention to the amendment of their lives toward attitudes and behaviors that are more in alignment with Christian values and morality. In Judeo-Christian heritage, fire is associated with the sacred fire of the Pascal Candle which is ignited during the Liturgy of Light as part of the Easter Vigil celebrated in Catholicism. But the imagery of fire also recalls the idea of "sacrifices of oblation" and the burnt offerings of pre-Christian Judaic times where what is sacrificed is simultaneously cleansed and offered up as a prayerful expression of praise or gratitude. In this context, fire is not something that merely rids us of things we no longer want. It represents instead a process which spiritualizes and sanctifies something which, prior to the ritual, had a different value and meaning in our lives.

Modifying the Fire Cleansing Ritual to make it a sort of “composting” ceremony is an approach which offers an alternative not only to the traditional Christian perspective on what we may do with what life hands us, but also a metaphor that evokes the idea of non-destructive transformation. To me, composting has more metamorphic connotations than does fire. Composting conserves and recycles what is still of value in things that appear to have no value, or even seem noxious. There is a deep lesson in this for our inner life as it doesn’t try to dispose of the darker side of our experience, but rather to “digest” it and reincorporate it into a vigorously living body of life experience. Since we can seldom “dispose” of the clutter in our lives as neatly as the imagery of fire may suggest anyway, the composting metaphor might be both more realistic and more organic for certain audiences. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

After using this exercise a number of times, I continue to be impressed by the wide range of things group members identify as examples of inner clutter, and also the methods they have for dealing with it. Some may obvert to practices such as sacramental confession and absolution, while others will suggest talking with a friend, going to the spa, going fishing, having a massage, journaling—whatever may help them self-liberate from whatever they find inwardly oppressive.

Another source of helpful counsel in this respect comes to us from the Stoics of ancient Greece and Rome when they suggested that we meet every circumstance in life with a certain attitude of “triage”. We can classify every situation in life as either:

- a) something over which I have complete control
- b) something over which I have some influence but not complete control
- c) something over which I have no control at all

The Stoics advise us that for situations of type (c), we simply disregard them because we have no control over them anyway and continuing to worry about them is a waste of time and self-destructive to boot. For situations of type (a), we should act immediately according to the dictates of virtue and so as to promote tranquillity in our own lives and harmony among people. The Stoics believed that the only areas of life where we have complete control are in the choice of our values and how we will react emotionally to our life experiences. For situations that fall into type (b), we should exercise influence where we can to the betterment of all, but try to distance ourselves from outward indications of success or failure. In type (b) situations, we do well to do our best by our own lights, regardless of results or whether we get the credit we think is our due from others.

I think this view of life can be very helpful as we sort through our inner clutter because much of it might be memories of situations over which we have little or no control anyway. Most of us, most of the time, try to do our best. Too often, we judge our own efforts based on the recognition, or lack of it, that we get from others. This can be destructive at worst, and at best, a useless waste of time. So one method for releasing some of our inner clutter is to bring to each instance, this Stoic triage approach, let go of what is past or what we cannot control, act promptly in areas of life we have complete control, and simply try to do our best in everything else.

Finally, it seems to me that popular culture these days is tinged with a literalism that sends shudders through more poetic souls. Participants in an exercise like this one may need help distinguishing between metaphor and reality, help appreciating the value of symbols in their lives, and help grasping the inner meaning of outwardly enacted rituals. I believe that voluntary simplicity implies a life where the inner, more subjective aspects of our experience are given more room to play and accorded more respect than is the case in consumer culture right now. Thus how we organize our lives outwardly can be a symbolic expression of what we want for ourselves inwardly. In the simple life, these two aspects of our experience are continually

playing back and forth and thus, are weaving a much richer garment than if we focus only on outer appearances and the surface features of our daily round.

On retreat, one sits, walks, eats, sleeps, dresses, and takes care of personal hygiene. These are the basic physical needs. Keep it as simple as possible—clean, light, uncomplicated, spacious, empty—and use this pristine external form as a vehicle for and reflection of what we want for our inner being(Copper 1992:106).

Resources:

Irvine, William B. 2009. *A guide to the good life: The ancient art of stoic joy*. New York: Oxford University Press. A wonderful re-introduction of Stoic philosophy for modern readers with particular attention to applied stoicism—the techniques of mental hygiene developed by the Stoics to help sustain tranquillity in challenging circumstances.

Silence and Solitude

Purpose:

- to offer participants an opportunity to experience how rare and precious are silence and solitude, and correspondingly to grow in mindfulness of how noisy and crowded is the average urban environment
- to become more aware of our physical, psychological, and spiritual responses to silence and solitude

Framing:

This exercise invites participants to become more mindful of how rarely we experience silence or solitude in modern urban life, to seek out an experience of these, and then share their stories of encounters back in the group. Silence and solitude have traditionally been rich sources of insight both into our own character and into the conditions in which we live. It is difficult to truly hear others if we don't appreciate the value of silence, and it is difficult to appreciate the value of the lives of other beings with whom we share the planet, when we are always in human company.

Accounts of simple living by people like Thomas Treherne, Henry David Thoreau, and Scott and Helen Nearing all attest to the importance of cultivating silence within ourselves in order to really hear and experience what is going on around us. Sometimes it is only in solitude that we can find the time to give unhurried attention to the daily round of our lives without, if only temporarily, responding to the demands or mere presence of others. Consumer culture advertising consistently associates "good times" with moments of intense social interaction. But a balanced life is one shaped by a sense of how much of anything is sufficient, including sufficient company. We cannot fully and freely enjoy the company of others if we haven't first discovered contentment in solitude.

Group Size: Any size.

Time: 1 hour to 1 day

This is a take home activity. A small group discussion will follow.

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all participants, or journals / notebooks if participants are keeping them

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise by reminding group members that simple living is about sufficiency and balance. We strive to balance the inner and outer aspects of our life, consumption with moderation, and in this exercise, sound with silence, and society with solitude.

2. Find a quiet place and spend at least one hour there. By quiet we do not mean a place totally without sound, but a place which allows only natural sounds, e.g., birdsong, running water, wind, surf, etc. Your quiet place should be out of earshot of any human-made sounds. If you are comfortable after one hour in silence, see if you can stay for another hour, or perhaps even a whole day. Finding silence will also, perforce, involve finding solitude. Then write some answers to the following questions:
 - How easy was it to find silence and solitude? How far did you have to go to find quiet?
 - How did you feel as you entered your silence? How did your feelings change as you spent more time in silence?
 - How did you feel about being alone? What did you do?
 - If anyone else knew about your search for silence and solitude, how did they react to you?
 - After spending some time in silence and solitude, what new awareness or feelings arise for you from this experience?
3. On a subsequent day, or later on the same day (if this activity is being incorporated in some single day event), assemble participants into groups of four or five people and invite them to discuss their experiences.
 - What insights arise for us as we hear each other's stories?
 - How are we affected by the incessant noise associated with consumer culture, and how do we feel about this?
 - What alternatives, if any, do we want for ourselves?
4. After some small group discussion, reassemble the larger group, ask for small group recaps, and then discuss any more issues or insights that might arise.

Notes:

Every major spiritual tradition has stressed the value of spending time in silence and solitude as key elements of spiritual practice as distinct from creed or belief. Yet life in a consumer-oriented culture often intrudes upon both silence and solitude with promotions, advertising, and aggressive, in-your-face marketing techniques.

To seek silence is to voluntarily simplify our lives of extraneous sound, noise, and aural intrusiveness. It is to choose to live, at least for a little while, in gentler sonic surroundings.

To seek solitude is to voluntarily simplify our interaction with other people—and sometimes with things that are people-like, for example, computers and other machines that demand our attention in some way. Choosing solitude is the choice to live, at least for a little while, in less cluttered social surroundings.

This exercise often generates a heightened awareness of how very noisy most cities and small towns are in consumer culture. Even if we resort to parks or wilderness preserves, it is not unusual to hear the whine of long-haul truck tires in the distance, or jet airplanes high over head. In cities there is an almost ceaseless whine or hum of motors and traffic noise that creates an inescapable background wall of sound that follows us nearly everywhere. Scientists studying how people react to noise discovered decades ago that high levels of noise are stressful, impair learning activities in children, and can contribute to chronic hearing loss if

endured over a lifetime. Moreover, these effects occur whether we “hear” noise or not. For example, some children were monitored for a number of months in a Chicago neighborhood that lay directly in the flight path of O’Hare International Airport. Despite noise levels that could sometimes shake the china in the cupboard, after a few days of exposure, residents of the neighborhood ceased to hear, i.e., to consciously notice and acknowledge, the passing planes. Even though residents eventually habituated to the noise, there were still statistically significant impacts on learning, memory, and symptoms of stress when compared to similar neighborhoods in Chicago that were quieter.

Another interesting story relates to a Christian monastic community that had established a retreat and spiritual practice centre deep in a forest in Nova Scotia that came to be threatened by the logging activities of Irving Lumber Ltd. Despite the fact that the monastery owned nearly a square mile of its own land, and despite lengthy negotiations with Irving Lumber, the monastery was eventually forced to relocate to a mountain side in Colorado in order to find the peace and solitude essential for serious spiritual work. In consumer culture, commercial growth and profit nearly always trumps personal and spiritual growth.

Resources:

Cooper, David. 1992. *Silence, simplicity and solitude: A guide for spiritual retreat*. New York: Bell Tower. A book about spiritual retreat, but eloquent in its praise of silence and simplicity as pre-requisites of personal well-being.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1989. *Walden and other writings*. New York: Bantam Books. This is a classic account of Thoreau’s two years living by the banks of Walden Pond in 19th-century New England. It is loaded with insightful critique of the vain strivings of ordinary mortals after peace through possessions and an unparalleled anthem to simple, self-reliant living. Thoreau devotes a whole chapter to “Sounds” (and by implication the importance of silence) and another to “Solitude”.

Simplicity Examens (Advices and Queries)

Purpose:

- to bring a higher level of awareness to our daily practice of simple living
- to provide a basis for celebrating positive changes
- identify areas where we feel challenged in our practice of simple living.

Framing:

There is a long tradition among Quakers (The Religious Society of Friends) to reflect on Advices and Queries—short, pithy questions or passages that invite us to consider one or another aspect of how we are living in order to gain insights as to how to align our decisions and habits more truly with our values and inner wisdom. This exercise adapts the form of the Quaker Advice / Query to a self-examination process focused on our personal practice of voluntary simplicity. The aim is to simply increase mindfulness of how we are doing in our practice of simple living and what our next steps might be.

Any sort of self-inquiry like this one runs the risk of getting caught up in guilt spirals of one sort or another if group members mistakenly think they are being invited into a process of self-criticism or fault-finding. This is hardly the goal. The aim is self-awareness and compassionate self-observation, plain and simple. If we want to become better at archery, we must have our eyes open when shooting at the target. We have to notice where the arrows are going and make the appropriate changes to our aim or our technique if we hope to improve. This same feedback principle applies to anything that takes practice—driving, bowling, tennis, yoga, dancing, art. Since no one is watching our practice of simplicity (at least from the inside) except us, to whom else can we turn for feedback?

The practice of the Simplicity Examens can be linked up with keeping a Gratitude Log and other journaling activities that support our development and mark progress toward the change we want to see in the world.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1 hour (approximately)

Fifteen minutes maybe needed to describe the activity, then any desired length of time to complete it.

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper or a journal for all participants

Process:

1. Invite group members to come to stillness in the manner of practicing mindfulness, then scan the following queries one by one, meditating on each for a few minutes. Write whatever

responses seem appropriate to recognize specific progress toward the focus of the query, raise further questions, identify areas where more attention may be warranted, etc.

- What steps have I taken over the last twenty-four hours to cultivate and maintain a mindful state of awareness, slow the daily round of my activities, and be present to all my experiences with gratitude, non-judgment, and compassion?
 - How have I sought to cultivate the practice of gratitude, noting all the events of the past day for which I feel grateful, and assuring that I hold them in memory and present moment awareness, to the end of cultivating contentment?
 - Mindful that all beings form one body, have my intentions and actions toward all been compassionate, nonviolent, and filled with good will?
 - Mindful that in this moment, all things are perishing, do I manifest compassion, patience and courage? And mindful that in this moment, all things come into being, do I manifest joy, welcome, and gratitude?
 - Mindful that I am one citizen in a vastly larger community of all beings sharing the same planetary home, have I arranged my affairs and my consumption choices in symbiosis with this living community? Are my actions environmentally wholesome, life-giving for the whole, and benign toward future generations of all beings?
 - How am I practicing conservation of scarce resources and energy and making choices in my consumption of goods that also minimize the suffering of other beings and future generations to sustain my life?
 - The Spirit, working through evolution, has entrusted human beings with consciousness—an emergent property of life itself, and is present in human beings to a special degree. How am I orienting my consciousness? With what do I nourish it, develop and train it? Do I apply its special abilities to the service of life? Have I understood “life” broadly to include the welfare of all beings, or only the profit of human beings?
 - Given that simplicity in living is a supremely skillful means to personal and planetary well-being, have I made reasonable efforts to distinguish real needs from learned desires? Do I strive to cultivate maximum well-being in my life, making judicious and elegant use of the minimum means? Do I strive for self-reliance and nonviolence in relationship with other beings? Will the “mark” I leave in the world be that of love alone?
 - Do I value both action and stillness in proper measure? Do I understand that non-action is the deliberate decision to desist from action, based on mindfulness, insight, and wisdom, and do I distinguish it carefully from mere inaction, apathy or cowardice? In what is life, love or justice now calling me to act, and in what is wisdom now calling me to remain still?
 - Is my home modest and free of superfluities? Does it evoke spaciousness and tranquility? Have I equipped my home for a wholesome self-reliance, mindful also of the claims of justice, nonviolence and generosity? While “keeping to the valley” is there yet room in my home and my heart for hospitality? And am I always mindful that I am merely a tenant in my home—a sojourner who possesses nothing?
2. This exercise can be framed as a take-home assignment, a daily practice of its own, or as a group exercise where one or two of the queries can be singled out for individual reflection followed by group discussion. Meditating on all the queries every day would be onerous, but

making a daily practice of meditating on one of them can be a fruitful way of staying on track with our simplicity practices.

Notes:

The Greek philosopher Socrates said: “The unexamined life isn’t worth living.” But given the Puritanical heritage of North American culture, we often avoid this sort of activity because we’re so certain we’ll be disappointed by what we find in the process. We associate self-examination with negative judgment and fault-finding. Thus we toss out the baby of making progress toward what we value along with the bathwater of avoiding neurotic guilt.

Benjamin Franklin, the 18th-century Quaker, statesman, scientist, philosopher, and one of the Founding Father of the United States, drew up for himself a list of a dozen virtues he wanted to cultivate during his lifetime. He did this when he was in his early twenties, and stuck to his program for his entire life. Each month he would focus on cultivating one or another of his virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity and humility. While some of these may not resonate with a modern sensibility, the point is that Franklin had a program. He knew what sort of character he wanted to cultivate, and month by month, he consciously aimed to develop these traits of character in himself. His aim was not self-judgment, but self-improvement, and he valued developing his character more than his material fortune. Writing in his diaries in his early eighties, Franklin commented that respecting some of his virtues, he had “made a little progress.”

Whether it’s traits of character we want to cultivate, or an ever more authentic practice of simple living, it’s the general approach and not the specific details that is most relevant to our subject.

John Woolman, another 18th-century Quaker, tailor, and preacher, also adopted the practice of self-examination as a way of trying to bring his life progressively more into alignment with his beliefs about simple living:

... Do I use food and drink in no other sort and in no other degree than was designed by him who gave these creatures for our sustenance? Do I never abuse my body by inordinate labour, striving to accomplish some end which I have unwisely proposed? Do I use action enough in some useful employ? Or do I sit too much idle, while some person who labors to support me have too great a share of it? If in any of these things I am deficient, to be incited to consider it is a favor to me (Moulton 1989:103).

Resources:

Moulton, Phillips P. 1989. The journal and major essays of John Woolman Richmond. In Friends United Press.

Consumer Culture

The exercises in this section focus group attention specifically on consumer culture and its influence on us. I continually debate with myself about how much attention to accord to consumer culture per se. From one perspective, it is hardly possible to change that of which we have no awareness. If consumer culture is unsustainable, then moving toward a more sustainable culture implies some awareness of where we are beginning from and where we desire to go.

From another perspective, however, focusing too much attention on consumer culture runs the risk of wasting time and attention on critiques of a way of life we already know is doomed. We might be tempted to think that by offering a critique, we're actually doing something constructive, which is only sometimes the case. Tomes have been written about the shortcomings and contradictions of consumer culture, and it's not my aim to repeat those critiques here.

By including some discussion of consumer culture, however, I hope to introduce the concept of culture as a helpful way of framing the sustainability dilemma. A culture is the sum total of language, art, technology, institutions, customs, craft, and belief that distinguish one cultural group from another. It's a very abstract, but also a very inclusive and impersonal category. I've been impressed with how readily groups take to the idea. Its virtue is that culture can refer to the net we are all caught in, and helps us escape the many narratives that cast one social or economic group as victims and another group as victimizers.

Victimization and exploitation certainly go on in consumer culture. But I have always doubted the value of blaming the sustainability crisis on corporations, capitalist classes, special interest groups, or conspiracies of elites. I choose instead to think of those who currently wield power and privilege as enmeshed in the same cultural matrix as the rest of us with the signal difference that the powerful and the privileged think they are in control of the system.

One danger that comes with narratives of victimization and oppression is the tendency for us to project our own responsibility for whatever is problematic in our lives onto others, thereby disempowering ourselves. We petition the privileged and the powerful to change a system upon which their very power and privilege depend, throwing them into an untenable conflict of interest.

Another danger is that by blaming specific institutions, corporations, or social classes for our dilemma we confuse the drones who serve the cultural narrative with the culture itself. In so doing, we run the risk of attacking people rather than deconstructing the belief system that is directing their actions. Leaving the culture unquestioned while pursuing elites contributes to the future likelihood that one elite will be replaced by another with no net change in our long-term well-being. There is no time left to repeat this mistake.

Therefore, in the following section, I offer a few exercises that introduce the concept of consumerism as a cultural problem, and explore some of its effects on our well-being. After this introduction, however, we don't linger here long. When one has once discovered the sewage lagoon of consumer culture, there should be no need to wallow in it.

Moreover, our conscientization to consumer culture is not limited to the exercises in this section. Exercises designed to address other aspects of livelihood may also include elements that sensitize group members to various aspects of consumer culture and its effects on our lives, but with respect to specific contexts like our use of money, or time, or how our lifestyles impact the environment.

Mother Culture's Story -- An Adult Fairy Tale

Purpose:

- to conscientize participants to the story that the dominant culture tells us about the nature, goals, and meaning of our lives
- to help participants distinguish between a cultural narrative and those who enact the narrative, i.e., to focus our creative energies for change on the cultural narrative rather than specific individuals or elites

Framing:

This exercise is based on Daniel Quinn's thesis explored in his novel, *Ishmael*, which suggests that every society is the enactment of a story the people of that society learn from their culture. Through brainstorming, critical reflection, and personal storytelling, group members develop consciousness of the story consumer culture tells them about what is the origin of life, what sort of creatures human beings are, what the earth is for, and what constitutes a good life. Increasing mindfulness of Mother Culture's story is essential to transcending it and discovering new choices for ourselves if we want them.

Human beings love stories. Indeed, it seems we can hardly think without them. We can understand abstract ideas, but we engage more fully if they come packaged in or illustrated by a story. The major news media are all in the business of storytelling—sometimes to the prejudice of reporting anything that is factually substantive. All major entertainments, many art forms, and virtually all popular religious texts are collections of stories. We even think of our individual lives as a story beginning with our birth, passing through many adventures, and ending with our death. While post-modern critiques of language and culture try to deconstruct the deeply engrained human tendency to cast random events into coherent narratives, this critique is mostly limited to a few intellectual elites. In our day-to-day lives, we are a storytelling species. Therefore, it's not much of a stretch to invite group members to think of a cultural narrative as a sort of over-arching framework or meta-story that embraces all of the shorter, more fragmentary and limited stories we hear and see enacted every day. How we, as denizens of consumer culture, make sense of our daily experience depends at least partly on the place our experiences can find in the over-arching cultural narrative.

As we become more conscious of all the ways we hear stories, tell stories to each other, and even to ourselves, the more conscious we become of the possibility of telling ourselves different stories. As soon as we discover this possibility, we cross the threshold from being the victims of our culture to being what Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson (2000) called "cultural creatives", people capable of shaping different destinies for ourselves and our children.

Group Size: 30 – 40 people

Time: 1 hour (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled and recyclable writing paper for notes

Process:

1. Assign participants to small groups of four or five and appoint as recorders whoever's birthday is closest to New Year's Day.
2. Offer a brief introduction based on Daniel Quinn's book *Ishmael*. A culture is a story that a people tells itself about the origins, nature, and destination of its existence. It becomes the water in which all members of that culture swim. A society and its behavior is the physical enactment of the cultural story believed by the people of that society.
3. Beginning as individuals, write (or develop an oral narrative) of the story consumer culture tells us as we grow up and live in it. What story have we heard, absorbed or learned that answers these questions:
 - Where have we humans come from?
 - Where has the Earth come from?
 - What is the purpose of the Earth?
 - What is the "good life" for human beings?
 - Where are we (as individuals and collectively) going? What is our destiny?
4. After individuals make some notes for ten minutes or so, discuss as a small group for another fifteen minutes. Then listen to round-robin presentations from small group recorders. Have people tell these stories as adult fairy tales or "once upon a time" stories.
5. Chart and discuss.

Notes:

This is a challenging exercise because it takes a fair bit of self-examination, fumbling about, and close listening to each other to start to come to terms with our own cultural narrative. It's partly by means of this narrative that we understand anything at all. It's as close to us, and as taken for granted, as the air we breathe. We absorbed the narrative as children before we were in any way conscious of what was going on or capable of taking a critical perspective on what we were being taught. Much of what we learned wasn't even consciously taught by our elders. They just did what they did, pursued what they pursued, and avoided what they avoided, etc., and we absorbed these choices and decisions and values and attitudes as the natural order of things. So, people doing this exercise may need some encouragement to stay on task as well as examples of cultural narratives.

For instance, as children many of us heard the story of *The Little Engine That Could*. It's about a little train engine who rescues a village on the other side of a mountain when larger train engines fail in the task. In more recent, politically correct, versions of the story, the Little Engine is female whereas in earlier versions, it is male. But in both cases, the central cultural theme remains the same: It's by dint of personal effort, self-confidence, and belief in one's own individuality that success is achieved in life. The story might have been written in many different ways, with different outcomes. But it wasn't. It was written in a particular way to teach certain values. This is an example of a fragment of cultural narrative in a children's story.

Cultural narratives are also carried in humor. The bumper sticker "Whoever Dies with the Most Toys Wins" is funny, but also expresses a non-trivial belief in consumer culture: At the end

of the day, material things matter more than anything else, and accumulating more of them than your neighbors is a sign of a life well lived.

Another point to keep in mind as this exercise unfolds is that, depending on the venue where the activity is being held, some participants may offer normative rather than thoughtful responses to the questions. On one occasion I used this exercise during a retreat being held at a religious retreat and conference center. On the question of where the Earth comes from, one or two people responded with the biblical account of creation. Now it may be that they really believed this account of the origins of things, or it may be that they offered it as what they thought might be expected, given the location we were in. Maybe they were being facetious or maybe just lazy. Regardless of what is the case, such responses can wind up pulling the group discussion into a debate about creationist versus evolutionary perspectives on the origins of the Earth and of life. But the focus of the exercise is not a debate about which normative account we should adopt. Rather, the focus should be on what we hear from consumer culture about these questions. This will include messages about the normative responses we're expected to utter when asked such questions, but it is much more the case that consumer culture offers a diversity of different responses depending on the circumstances. The circumstances that determine which response we hear at any given moment tends to be mostly driven by commercial motives, with not much concern for the truth. So a creationist perspective will be adopted in all sincerity if it will sell books, DVDs, and speaker engagements that attract audiences with creationist beliefs, but for different audiences in different circumstances, an evolutionist perspective would be similarly engaged in service of commercial objectives. Sensitizing group members to this sort of process is a major step toward getting at the cultural narrative that shapes our world view, not specific opinions about relatively narrow questions.

A final observation is that I think it's helpful for the educator to set a tone for this exercise from the very beginning that we are not seeking agreement on what exactly the consumer culture narrative is. Everyone experiences different fragments of this narrative and we start to get a sense of its hugeness and all encompassing dominance only by offering our bits and pieces of it toward a large mosaic of awareness. We don't assemble to argue about what belongs in the mosaic and what doesn't, or what is truly there and what isn't. It's sufficient that we each tell our stories of what we perceive and that we hear the stories of others. When we connect with this diversity and indeterminacy of the consumer culture narrative, we stand at the threshold of an important discovery: The cultural narratives are enormous collective artifacts. We shape them together and we suffer (or benefit) from their effects together. We all have a hand in creating and perpetuating them. This is an empowering discovery because it means we could create something different if we wish.

Resources:

Atlee, Tom 1990. "The conversion of the American dream. In: *What is enough?* 15. Context Institute, InContext Magazine, #26, Summer 1990.

Durning, Alan. 1992. *How much is enough? The consumer society and the future of the Earth.* New York: World Watch Institute, W. W. Norton & Co.

Kunstler, James Howard. 2005. "The long emergency: What's going to happen as we start running out of cheap gas to guzzle?" *Rolling Stone*, April 13.

Segal, Jerome M. 1999. "How did we get where we are?" in Jerome M. Segal. *Graceful simplicity: The philosophy and politics of the alternative American dream.* 199-156. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Nominal Group⁵ on Consumerism

Purpose:

- to sensitize participants to the fact that we live in a consumer culture and to pool group experiences and knowledge of what comprises consumer culture and its effects on people and the ecosphere

Framing:

Contrasted with Mother Culture's Story, the Nominal Group on Consumerism takes a more focused approach to assembling a group collage of what life is like in consumer culture—both the ideal of what it is supposed to be like, and the reality of what group members experience in their daily lives. One feature that distinguishes this exercise from others is that it gives specific attention to the question of freedom in relation to consumption, and to what degree we are really free to make the purchasing choices we do as well as the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways we are coerced into consuming things we don't want or need.

Group Size: 30 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (or more if group reports spark further discussion)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for all participants
- flip chart or white / black board for collating / summarizing responses
- odorless white board markers, felt tips, or chalk, depending on writing surface available

Process:

1. Assign participants to small groups of four or five people. Appoint as recorder / reporter whichever group member's birthday falls closest to Thanksgiving. Then, working as individuals without consultation, jot down a few thoughts about the following questions: (Time: Allow 15 minutes—or 2-3 minutes per question.)
- How would you define consumerism?
 - As you were growing up, what did you learn about the relation between consumption and the good life—for yourself and for the community?

⁵ A "Nominal Group" is a time-tested group process exercise format that generally allows individuals to reflect privately on stimulus questions or some other individualized activity, then retire to small group discussion followed by large group reporting of a summary of the discussion.

- In your experience, how often do the goods and services you consume deliver what they promise?
 - In your experience, what have been the rewards of consumerism?
 - In your experience, what have been the costs of consumerism?
 - How do you think you may be enticed and perhaps even forced to consume?
2. After some individual writing time, launch small group discussions where all members share their responses to the starter questions. Group recorders should take notes and summarize the discussion. (Time: Allow 30 minutes—or 5 minutes each for the five (or so) group members to report back.)
 3. After some small group time, assemble everyone and listen to reports from the recorders who present summaries of each group's discussion. Parse these reports for insights respecting:
 - What were we told as children about consumerism and how did this shaped our expectations for our futures?
 - Have the promises of consumerism been true for us?
 - What is rewarding about a consumeristic way of life and does this create a sort of hold on us, i.e., a dependency, an addiction, a continuing expectation about what the future should or might hold?
 - What have been the costs of a consumeristic way of life? Have the rewards been worth the costs?
 - How conscious are we of being coerced to consume?

Notes:

Consumer culture finds the meaning and value of human life in the cyclical stimulation, satisfaction, and re-stimulation of desire for the consumption of material things. Consumerism also deliberately confounds the satisfaction of non-material human needs with the production and consumption of material goods and services for profit. It's through consumption that we express love to others, that we entertain each other, that we demonstrate our esteem or appreciation, etc. All these things are mediated in consumer culture through market transactions and material exchanges.

Life in consumer culture generally doesn't allow much time for critical reflection or thinking back to compare what was promised with what was delivered. But this exercise can open awareness of this distinction with sometimes surprising results. Consumer culture rarely delivers what it promises, but one of the things it delivers most consistently is a steady stream of hope that tomorrow, things will be better. Someone once remarked that the genius of American culture was that poor people never fundamentally question the justice of the economic system. Instead, they think of themselves as temporarily financially embarrassed millionaires. Similarly, the consumer culture narrative of the good life seems to be Teflon-coated. It is valued for what it promises, not what it usually delivers.

Another key insight that can emerge from this exercise is the degree to which life in consumer culture is coercive despite the strong narratives of freedom and autonomy that run in the popular imagination. Consumer culture tells us that we are essentially sovereign economic actors, free to choose whichever product or service we wish, and free to forego consumption if we wish. Most of us, most of the time, are wholly absorbed in the business of increasing our supply of money so as to consume as much as possible. So the notion of forgoing consumption seldom arises. But on second thought, it can be truly startling to what degree consumption is actually forced on us, whether or not we want to participate. This coercion happens through a variety of mechanisms including:

- necessity of physical survival
- advertising, principally through television
- planned obsolescence in the design of products
- physical structure of human settlements that require automobiles
- use of media to create fashions, fads, and changing norms of decency
- peer, family, and community pressures
- professional expectations related to career or employment
- legislated requirements for certain occupational licenses and permits
- consumption arising from regulatory requirements, e.g., the requirement to purchase insurance before qualifying for a mortgage, etc.

This is only a partial list. Making this list conscious helps group members realize the degree to which consumer culture is not a culture of freedom and choice, but rather a system of oppression which really doesn't offer simple living as an option.

Resources:

de Graff, John, David Wann, and, Thomas H. Naylor. 2001. *Affluenza: The all-consuming epidemic*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. Explores the personal, social, economic, and environmental costs of overconsumption in America. Suggests strategies for rebuilding families and communities, respecting the earth, and restoring personal health and sanity in a world suffering from excess.

Durning, Alan . 1992. *How much is enough? The consumer society and the future of the Earth*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Chronicles in detail the environmental impacts of the consumer society and the spread of the ideology of consumerism. If you ever had any doubt that consumerism was damaging to children and other living things, read this book.

Kasser, Tim. 2002. *The high price of materialism*. Boston: MIT Press. Psychology professor at Knox College offers a scientific explanation of how our contemporary culture of consumerism and materialism affects our everyday happiness and psychological health, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and problems with intimacy.

O'Neill, Jessie. 1997. *The golden ghetto: The psychology of affluence*. Milwaukee, WI: The Affluenza Project. Psychotherapist who grew up with wealth explores the challenging and

potentially dysfunctional aspects of living with wealth. Provides an inside view of the myths that more is better and that wealth brings happiness.

Schor, Juliet B. 1999. *The overspent American: Why we want what we don't need*. New York: HarperCollins. Explores America's relationship with its spending patterns—why and how we spend and consume—focusing on the psychological motivations for excessive spending, including the desire to gain status relative to others. Profiles people who have downshifted as an alternative to a life heavily based on consumerism.

Schor, Juliet B. 1993. *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: BasicBooks. Discusses the evolution of American culture of work and consumerism, the work-and-spend treadmill. Charts the loss of leisure in America and offers compelling arguments for restructuring our work to provide more time for living.

Wachtel, Paul L. 1989. *The poverty of affluence*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers. This book begins as a fairly incisive discussion of the psychological and social maladies related to affluence and the pursuit of affluence. It tends to digress a bit into discussions of the shortcomings of various explanations which have been offered of the damage caused by affluence, but it contains many useful insights as well.

Community / Relationship

The exercises in this cluster focus on relationships, both between human beings in families and communities, and between people and other beings in the natural world. Some exercises also invite participants to appreciate how their relationships with others have and will extend through time and neither begin with birth nor end with death.

Community is a key theme in simple living for at least three reasons: First, there are many historical examples of people living simply in / as communities. These include monastic communities, intentional community experiments, and groups like the Puritans, Quakers, Amish, and Mennonites whose collective life stressed simple living. On a numerical basis alone, there have probably been far more people who have lived simply in community than the rugged individualists like Henry David Thoreau or religious hermits, who retreated to the wilderness in search of a mindful connection with life at its most basic.

Second, people are taking up simple living because they perceive how corrosive consumer culture is to family life, neighborhoods, and communities. In a recent policy paper prepared for the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, Bruce K. Alexander suggests that the very dynamics of free market societies propel people away from their geographic and social roots in search of economic security (Alexander 2001). This disrupts the social relationships that provide our psycho-social identities, thus dramatically increasing such problems as anti-social behavior, family violence, and addictions. Re-weaving the bonds of community takes time and commitment. In our current economic reality, it also often implies choosing between economic gain and maintaining relationships. This is a common occurrence in families, whenever parents feel they must choose between a higher income and being full-time care-givers to their children. People who are adopting voluntary simplicity often do so to preserve their relationships with their families and communities.

A third reason community is an important theme in simple living grows from the recognition that the institutions we create to promote our understanding of the good life constitute semi-durable social structures (shared understandings of how we will live) that can make it easier or harder for us to choose a simple life if we want one. Regenerating these structures requires collective action to develop a new consensus of social values that can include simple living. So voluntary simplicity thus acquires a political dimension.

Yet another side of this topic, is the fact that under regimes of consumer culture, we depend more and more on money and what it can buy in the market as substitutes for values we used to obtain at no cost from communities and families. Today, we turn to the market for entertainment, education, health care, many personal services, companionship, and old age security, whereas in earlier historical periods and in other cultural milieus, these are all partly or wholly found outside markets in relationships with others. In the process, we have become excessively dependent on money and what it can buy for many necessities of life. We suffer an epidemic obsession with how much money we have, especially as we approach “retirement”, and insecurity respecting our ability to maintain well-being in periods of illness, disability, bereavement, and old age. Many who are practicing simple living are renewing and strengthening family and community relationships as alternatives to the market.

It can also be observed that, despite its considerable achievements in delivering material comfort, consumer culture offers its members a sadly impoverished vision of relationships across time as well as across the full range of other living beings. We are not encouraged to think much about the continuity of the human story arising from the deep past, nor give much weight to the effects of our choices on those living in the deep future. Neither do we give much heed to our contemporaries who don’t happen to be human—the millions of other species with whom we share the planet and who give a very real meaning to word “community”. The exercises in this cluster aim to begin to soften this narcissistic shell of isolation in the present moment and re-weave bonds we have with the future, the past, and all the Others with whom we share the world and upon whom we depend for a good life.

Those Were The Days!

Purpose:

- to help participants recall some of their most meaningful and memorable experiences of family and community life at its best
- to help participants distinguish the role of material things versus personal and emotional availability in building family and community life

Framing:

In The Best Things in Life exercise above, we focused attention on moments of well-being. In general, we tend to discover that a great many of such moments come to us through our relationships with others. In the present exercise, we zero in specifically on experiences of well-being in relationship.

This exercise aims to help participants recall some of their most meaningful and memorable experiences of family life at its best. It is based on the presupposition that these experiences are mostly oriented around sharing of time and self rather than hyper-consumption, and sharing them sets the stage for discussions of gifting each other with time and personal presence rather than material things as a way of building family life. With slight variations, this exercise is also extremely useful in helping parents decouple the values of being good parents from providing a high-consumption lifestyle for their children--particularly useful around holidays.

Group Size: 40 – 50 people

Time: 1 hour (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for all participants
- flip chart or white / black board for collating / summarizing responses
- odorless white board markers, felt tips, or chalk, depending on writing surface available

Process:

1. Most of us like to tell stories and to hear stories. The stories we often like best are about our own lives. Storytelling is an intimate part of family life, and has always been a strong thread in traditional communities as well.
This exercise aims to highlight sources of value and meaning in our lives. Voluntary simplicity assumes that a “rich” life is full of inner value, regardless of its external characteristics or conditions.
2. Have participants privately recall and write a one-paragraph account of the three high points in their lives, moments of maximum well-being, joy, and reward as experienced in family, either their family of origin, or a new family they might have founded.

3. Select one account and re-open that experience and time by describing in greater detail:
 - What were you doing?
 - Who were you with?
 - What aspects of this time / experience were most energizing and joyous?
 - Were there material things essential to making this experience possible? If so, what were they?
 - What, if anything, prevents you from repeating this experience or others like it?
4. Invite participants to tell the story of their high-point experiences. Chart the different examples shared to help participants gain an overview of the high points in lives other than their own.
 - What does this say about how we find reward?
 - What does this say about the sorts of experiences that define family / community?
 - What role has consumption of material things played in these experiences?
5. Introduce (or re-introduce) the Gratitude Log and instructions on how to use it. Suggest that logging daily accounts of events for which we are grateful is one way of helping us develop mindfulness of what really matters to us.

Allow time for people to make sample entries to their gratitude logs for the previous day. Offer time to share these with the group.

Notes:

Voluntary simplicity assumes that our most rewarding experiences are generally quite simple and closely connected to our human and spiritual nature, not necessarily to technology or consumption of material things. By reconnecting with our experiences of simple and direct humanity, we can also reconnect to a rich and rewarding pattern of life and start to let go of addictive consumerism.

This exercise can provide a basis for discussion of our beliefs and expectations of ourselves as parents. What does it mean to us to be a good parent? What sort of model of the good parent does consumer culture advertise? Does the advertising line up with our own memories of what has been true for us? What then does this tell us about the expectations we should have for ourselves in our own parenting?

In groups experiencing this exercise with a special focus on parenting, it is remarkable how often our own best memories of our families of origin have nothing to do with consumption of stuff per se, but very much involve a sense that our parents were able to offer us unhurried, undistracted attention, or invited us to collaborate with them on some obviously useful project. Many of these experiences may not have had anything to do with “entertainment” per se. Occasions when we work together to some common purpose, building a birdhouse, canning vegetables, painting some old lawn furniture, etc., can be moments of strong bonding and relationship. Such experiences stand in stark contrast to the consumer culture stereotypes of having to take children somewhere special to consume expensive food and engage in unusual activities or else we aren’t being “good” parents.

This exercise can also be linked to the Family Action handout sheet on activities for families.

This same exercise, with a slight re-wording of instructions, can take on a community or neighborhood focus instead of a family focus. I tend to think of families as our first and most basic experience of community. But we are also members of communities that are far broader than our immediate or even extended families. In consumer culture, communities tend to be overly defined by their economic relations which tends to subordinate all conversations to matters of money, employment, sales, and other financial transactions. This becomes so much a part of back-ground consciousness that we scarcely have energy to consider anything else. Hence, this exercise can help people sharing community to reconnect with some of its extra-economic meanings through recovery of their own past memories of the good life in community. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

When the stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle together because you love one another?" What will you answer? "We all dwell together to make money from each other," or "This is a community"?

Resources:

Cloninger, Claire. 1993. *A place called simplicity*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers. A personal story of embracing voluntary simplicity for sake of family and Christian faith.

Dappen, Andy. 1997. *Shattering the two-income myth: Daily secrets for living well on one income*. Mountlake Terrace, WA: Brier Books. Thoughtful summary of why and how we evolved into a two-income society, as well as practical advice on how to live on one income.

Hayden, Anders. 2000. *Sharing the work, sparing the planet: Work time, consumption, & ecology*. London, UK: Zed Books. This book focuses essentially on the benefits of work-time reductions through limiting the work week and the value such a step would have in increasing employment opportunities and strengthening family life.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2001. *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Owl Books. Exposes negative cycle to American trend toward excessive work hours. When parents work too many hours, it creates stress at home, which in turn leads parents to spend more time at work to avoid stress at home. Discusses alternatives and solutions to this dilemma.

Action Planning for Families

Purpose:

- to help participants identify activities that enrich the quality of family life without expanding consumption of material goods
- to enhance our understanding of parenting as extending well beyond the provision of material goods and enrichments to include nonmaterial goods as well
- to recover awareness of the fact that family relationships can develop through shared work experiences as well as sharing entertainment

Framing:

The Those Were The Days! exercise often leads to an increased appreciation for the sorts of activities, interaction, and conscious attention that makes for a rich experience of family life. Families are strengthened not by how much they earn, spend, or consume, but by how much time they share creatively, actively interacting in an unhurried and mindful way. There is considerable social research to support this idea if mere recollection of participants' own experiences of family isn't sufficiently convincing. Action Planning for Families is a planning process for activities that help strengthen and enrich family life from a voluntary simplicity perspective, and in line with recent research on family psychology and what makes for a high level of reward in relationships. Planning guidelines are offered that help empower families through active, interpersonally directed activities rather than merely consuming as a group.

This exercise is highly relevant to learning more simply in that it begins by engaging mindfulness of our past rewarding experiences of family life, then directs our attention both toward community and toward taking a self-reliant approach to identifying family activities. The aim is not to identify specific products or vacation destinations or club memberships that will build family life, but rather ways of being together, ways of acting in the world that strengthen and enrich our communal lives together and our individual experience of living.

Group Size: 25 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for all participants
- flip chart or white / black board for collating / summarizing responses
- odorless white board markers, felt tips, or chalk, depending on writing surface available

Process:

1. Assemble group. In this session, we will identify some specific steps we can take to strengthen family relationships according to our individual interests and needs and the principles just described.
2. Assign participants to groups of five or six. Review group findings from all the preceding discussions. The task now is to:
 - Review Gratitude Log and Those Were The Days! exercises to identify the sorts of experiences that bring you the richest sense of family.
 - Identify three practical ways that you can simplify your own life that also strengthen or build up your family and give you more time / money / energy for the above.
 - Identify one positive action you can take that will move you away from consumer culture and toward a deeper experience of family. (Focus on positive actions you can take, not negative things you want to eliminate. The elimination of the negative occurs naturally as we adopt more actions that are positive.)
3. Work as groups to help each other develop these plans.
4. Conclude with a round-robin presentation of plans and resolutions.

Notes:

Adult learners have a way of taking things where they need them to go. But I think there are certain principles that distinguish a voluntary simplicity perspective of family life from other possible perspectives, among them the following:

- Does this family / community activity help us become more active (doing, speaking, making, creating, exploring, moving) or more passive (consuming, sitting, watching, listening, buying)?
- Does this family / community activity help us interact (converse, play, cooperate, puzzle-solve) or does it isolate members of the family (solitary, specialized, technical, exclusive rather than inclusive activities)?
- Does this family / community activity bring us closer to reality (Nature, each other, our neighbors, our community) or to unreality (television, movies, theme parks, etc.)?
- Does this family / community activity give us an opportunity to be productive (growing, making, finding, or collecting something) or must we be consumers (buy something, eat, drink, listen)?
- Does this family / community activity help all participants, regardless of age and while still including an element of fun, develop toward maturity (growing in empathy, honesty, constructive behaviors, etc.) or does it promote immaturity (narcissism, selfishness, infantilism, dependency, etc.)?
- Is this family / community activity restorative of the Earth (planting, cleaning, preserving, protecting, etc.) or does it exploit the Earth (require special facilities, high-tech equipment, consumption of resources, energy, travel, and productive of wastes, etc.)?

This is certainly only a partial list. Facilitators can challenge group members to identify additional principles that might guide discernment of family / community activities that are both in alignment with the spirit of simple living and also capable of bringing us pleasure in each others' company.

Another important consideration in this exercise is to challenge participants to re-evaluate their attitude toward "work", especially when that involves children. Of course, I'm not advocating exploitation of child labor here. But I'm struck by how often family time in consumer culture is oriented toward play and pure entertainment, and by contrast, how often great pains are taken to exclude children from sharing work with adults. The tasks we ask children to perform must of course be safe and age appropriate. But children spontaneously want to help adults whenever they see them doing anything. We exclude children from helping sometimes because we're in a hurry (consumer culture's hurry-up message again), we're unduly concerned for their physical safety, or we don't want to bother with the messiness of children learning something new. Again, however, a moment's recollection probably brings to mind examples from our personal histories where we shared work with adults in our lives and found it pleasurable and growth promoting. I learned more about my mother as a person doing dishes with her throughout my adolescence than in any other situation or activity. We certainly didn't learn anything about each other simply by watching television in the same room.

So challenge group participants to re-evaluate work and how to appropriately make room for children to participate in real, productive work and not just shoo them off to distracting entertainments they intuitively know have no value except keeping them distracted and out of the way. We need also to re-evaluate our attitudes toward work, even when we are working with other adults. How has it happened that work has come to mean a penance we pay in exchange for some time enjoying what life is really about—entertainment and distraction? When did we lose the ability to make of work an entertaining social activity rather than a grim, rushed, efficiency and output oriented ordeal? We might consider changing our perspective a bit. We could see work as one means of growing community relationships. It might even be, as E. F. Schumacher suggested, an individual spiritual practice (Schumacher 1973). We might thus rediscover some of the lost treasures hidden in work since consumer culture shifted all our attention to the end product, ignoring almost entirely the process of making it.

Sample Activities That can Enrich Family Life [SLIDE / Handout]

Here are some activities that express the spirit of voluntary simplicity as I understand it, because they are inexpensive and build quality into our time together rather than seeing consumption as the main family activity. Some activities are more appropriate for older children.

- Form a family band or choir (trio, quartet, etc.). This allows all members of the family to both learn music and become creators of music rather than consumers of entertainment. You could also form a block band or neighborhood choir with other families in your area. The quality of the performance should obviously be subordinated to the opportunity for participation.
- Organize a potluck BBQ inviting extended family, or your circle of friends, or make it an old-time block party and use a public park or community center. Have every member of the family prepare a dish. Be sure to include all the usual measures that reduce environmental impact, encourage composting, and recycling of wastes, etc.
- Plant a family garden, or join with neighbors to plant a community garden. Be sure to plant extra rows for the local food bank. Organize a harvest potluck for Thanksgiving (or other harvest celebrations).

- Organize a family play. Have kids write and rehearse the play. Invite other family members to participate as actors or audience members. Make popcorn and lemonade. Or, expand to form a neighborhood drama group for families. Offer free performances for elders' homes or shelters.
- Go on a Scrapbook Safari. As a family, take a walk around the neighborhood, through a park or in a wilderness area and sketch / paint / photograph key sights. Then assemble a scrapbook of the outing.
- Plan family picnics, hikes, identification walks, or camping trips. Refrain from killing, collecting, or consuming animals or plants except as pictures. Concentrate on identifying, learning, appreciating, and conserving them. If possible, engage a local interpreter or expert to help with plant / animal identification and history.
- Consider purchasing a family membership to a zoo, science museum, planetary or historical society. Such memberships often provide unlimited seasonal admissions, admissions to other associated organizations, a great opportunity for family picnics, and a great deal of learning about animals, habitats, and historical events and peoples.
- Check out local and regional parks and the outdoor activities, mostly free, associated with them, e.g., swimming, Nature interpretation walks, visiting archeological sites, etc.
- Check out the local library. They often have programs for families, children, and elders.
- Take a family class. Learn together how to do something. Subjects such as origami or art classes can be challenging for both adults and children. Better yet, teach a class to friends or neighbors in something about which you are expert (see Skills Exchange Exercise below).
- Have an "invention convention". Gather up old toilet paper rolls, paper towels, pipe cleaners, paint, glue, crayons, etc. Set the timer for an hour or so. Have everyone make / invent something. It does not have to be real or work. One time we had every one make an animal. They had to decide where the animal would live and what it would eat, etc. Let each child / person tell about their creation.
- Visit your local police / fire department / rescue squad / businesses, etc. They often offer tours to families or community groups.
- Volunteer with projects like Habitat for Humanity or your local shelter, food bank, or humane society.

Fellowship Night

Purpose:

- to offer participants a chance to rediscover their inherent powers to be creators of their own entertainment, rather than consumers of entertainment produced by professionals
- to renew awareness of simpler approaches to celebrations, holidays, and other activities that express true leisure in community, and in cooperation with others

Framing:

In consumer culture, we mostly consume entertainment produced by specialized professionals just as we consume medicines or food or financial services. Professional entertainers often display a high level of virtuosity in their performances. Exceptionally talented performers hold out the promise of exceptional profits for entertainment companies established under regimes of consumer culture primarily to realize returns for their shareholders. In addition to winnowing out mediocre talents, this system provides reasonable assurance that through the workings of the market, popular entertainment mostly reflects popular taste. We get what we are willing to pay for.

But this system also has down sides. With the commercial motive in high gear, local and regional style may be subordinated to what is currently getting attention in pop culture. Thus we find the somewhat ridiculous spectacle of Cree young people in the wilds of northern Canada rapping in imitation of black youth in Detroit. Whatever might have evolved as a style of singing unique to the Cree disappears in the imitation of what we see on television.

Another unfortunate corollary of the consumer culture approach to entertainment is that it tends to make most of us spectators rather than participants. This is probably because we compare our talents to the professionals, and not surprisingly, we feel inferior by comparison. But is the purpose of singing, dancing, acting, or storytelling to generate a performance suitable for sale, i.e., a professional performance? Or might there be more intrinsic values, both personal and communal, to be realized by taking a more self-reliant approach to entertaining ourselves?

The Fellowship Night exercise calls on group members to use whatever skills they may have to produce a live entertainment event for themselves. The aim is to build group rapport, have fun, and discover a self-reliant and creative approach to entertaining ourselves, hopefully in ways that are less consumptive and market-driven than in consumer culture. This exercise can have many layers of meaning and effects.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1 – 3 hours (as time permits)

Materials / Equipment:

- drama, theatre, production materials of all sorts

Can include as wide or limited a range of equipment and materials as the group process requires, given the exercise goals. May include sound equipment, musical instruments, props for skits, costumes for dancing, art materials, lights, natural materials from outdoors, etc.

Process:

1. Assign participants to groups of four to six members. Explain that the aim will be to create a variety show type entertainment event which we will stage for each other at an agreed upon time and place. Anything that might be entertaining is welcome, including solo performances, ensembles, music, dance, stand-up comedy, drama, spoken poetry or storytelling, etc. The only caveat is that all group members be involved both in creating the performance and in delivering it to the group. Spend the next hour or two devising presentations for the Fellowship Night.

What we have to work with is ourselves and each other. Our goal will be to create a program of entertainment for ourselves based on what we know how to do, or can devise together.

2. Set a time and date for the performance. It's especially interesting if this time is not too far distant in the future so that group members don't get overly preoccupied with rehearsals, polishing their performance, etc.
3. Appoint or ask for a volunteer to be Master of Ceremonies, assemble a list of performances for the event, and deliver the performances. Each small group will deliver its performance with the large group as audience.
4. When the performances are over, thank everyone for their efforts, and consider having a large group discussion to debrief this activity, including the following questions:
 - How did you feel as you prepared for the show?
 - What did this experience show us about our personal and collective richness?
 - In doing this exercise, did you in any way feel personally or culturally impoverished?
 - What might this experience have to say about education, culture, and development?

Notes:

This exercise can take considerable time and preparation and therefore is probably best included in a retreat or class context rather than shorter events like workshops or presentations.

From a simplicity perspective, it is amazing what group members can assemble from their own resources and their practice of self-reliance. This exercise releases considerable positive energy in groups and can result in a wide diversity of entertainment activities, depending on the tastes and talents of those taking part. An important take-away from the activity is a renewed sense of our creative abilities, how much we have to contribute to each others' pleasure, even though we aren't professionals, and how the professionalization of entertainment in consumer culture has often silenced our own songs within us.

This exercise can also be a powerful learning experience about our cultural poverty. It is by developing such an event together that we may hit a blank wall and not know what to do. This happened to me when I was involved in such an event while on an international education development assignment in the Philippines. When asked to perform a song or dance or poem that was uniquely Canadian, I was at first drawn up short. In struggling to come up with something, I discovered how little our education system prepares us for this sort of activity, how passively dependent I was on professional entertainers, how dominated Canadian culture is by American media, and how rarely I was ever called upon to entertain others. Certainly other Canadians would have done much better at this than me, and there is certainly a rich cultural landscape, especially regionally, in Canada. But the point was that the activity helped me

discover some personal limitations, my lack of knowledge even of what my own culture offered, and helped me become more aware of the degree to which our school system generally doesn't prepare us very well to be culture creators versus culture consumers. In a culture of simple living, there might well be room in the school curriculum to cultivate self-reliance in how to spend a productive leisure time entertaining ourselves and others without turning to the market.

The possibility of recovering this dimension of our collective life from the grip of commercialism and professionalization is another important lesson that can come from this exercise. Professional performers have an important role to play in our culture and their performances can be truly amazing. But, as mentioned above, the rest of us can be brought to silence if we compare ourselves to such people. An intriguing alternative to this is a group in Winnipeg, Manitoba, called the Spirit Singers—a choir specifically established by a woman who believed she could not sing, for other people who also believed they couldn't sing. Any expectation of matching professional performances simply was not on the agenda of this group. Within six months, the choir had grown to over 100 members. In the process of simply singing for pleasure and self-entertainment, many members discovered musical aptitudes they never knew they had. So in addition to the joy of making music together, the Spirit Singers also wound up actually developing their musical abilities. The group now tours Canada giving concerts.

Skills / Knowledge Exchange

Purpose:

- to elucidate the meanings and dimensions of the idea of culture as a human artifact
- to identify individual knowledge and skills relevant to a culture of simple and sustainable living
- to pair group members who possess these skills with others who want to learn them in mentor / mentee relationships
- to empower group members to construct a culture of simple and sustainable living

Framing:

The Skills / Knowledge Exchange is an extremely powerful exercise that energizes groups in very meaningful ways. It includes a short introduction to the meaning of culture (if one of the other culture-oriented exercises has not already been done) followed by group members developing a list of skills and knowledge they already possess, and that they feel are relevant to a new, future culture of simple living. Once this list is assembled, group members who are prepared to teach a particular skill or concept become mentors who then pair off with other group members wanting to learn that skill or concept as mentees. Every group member serves as both a mentor and mentee to someone else. The exercise is extremely effective at empowering group members to see themselves as the creators of culture rather than its passive victims, and as capable of creating many possible futures rather than resigning themselves to the one prepared by consumer culture.

Group Size: 40 people (approximately)

Time: 1.5 hours (carrying out all associated activities is variable depending on what group members choose to do)

Materials / Equipment:

- variable, depending on activities

Process:

Nominal Group on Meaning of Culture:

1. Working as individuals, write personal answers to the following questions:

- What is culture and what elements make up a culture?
- How does culture come into existence?
- Based on (course / workshop) readings and your life experience so far, what elements do you think would be important to a culture of simple and sustainable living?

2. After individuals have written some notes, assemble in small groups. Appoint a recorder (the person whose birthday is closest to January 1st). Discuss and collate individual responses.
3. Reassemble large group and debrief reports from small group recorders. Crystallize key elements of culture. Emphasize evidence and examples that illustrate how culture is a human artifact and therefore “re-inventable”. Assure that non-technical and non-material aspects of culture are included.

Skills / Knowledge Exchange:

1. Have each group member identify some skill, knowledge competency, or other personal asset that they possess and that they believe is relevant to the development of a culture of simple and sustainable living. Each member must be willing to teach this to someone else, and / or be willing to intensify their own study / practice of this skill in order to teach it in short order. List these on a flip chart, white / black board, or computer with LCD projector.
2. Now using the list of skills and knowledge assembled in Step 1, invite all group members to select one skill or knowledge they would like to learn. Each group member should therefore serve both in the role of mentor to someone and mentee to someone else. If it happens that person A wants to be the mentee of person B and vice-versa, then the same two people can fulfill both roles, but this isn't essential to the exercise. Individual group members can be mentors to one person and a mentee to someone else. (In cases where more than one group member wants to learn the same topic, draw lots so that dyads are maintained. Losers in the lottery must pursue their second choices, etc.)
3. These dyads now comprise the working combinations for the culture creation exercise. The facilitator (with group input if you wish) can decide how formal this relationship and its associated activities might be. It's generally desirable that mentors document to some extent what they plan to teach their mentees, while mentees can keep journals of their learning activities.
4. After some mutually agreed period of time, mentors and mentees can reassemble as a large group and tell stories (or make formal reports) about their learning activities together. The facilitator should be mindful to help the group discern how the beginnings of an alternate culture is being defined through these stories. The learning activities being described are only the first step in a process of evolution which could, if participants wished, unfold over generations.

Notes:

The foundation for this exercise is the Complex Living System theory that postulates that open systems always function in the given situation with the resources at hand to tinker together innovations to meet the ambient challenges of development. Furthermore, it casts everyone in the group into the roles of both experts and learners, calling them to be active co-creators of their learning experience in the spirit of Paulo Freire's popular education.

I used this exercise as a major assignment for the undergraduate university course I teach in simple living. It liberated tremendous energy in students who gradually awakened to becoming the active agents of an educational experience for someone else versus being mostly passive receivers of their education from professional “experts”. There was a tremendous range of skills and knowledge that appeared on the menu of ideas which only served to excite the class more. Students could perceive themselves as rich and resourceful in the circumstances and capable of accessing wide choices in what activities they pursued.

For readers who are working in a post-secondary education setting, this exercise can be driven quite far in terms of what can be expected from students. I required all mentors to write up a formal curriculum for what they would be teaching their mentees, including instructional objectives, learning activities, verbatims of field trips or other exercises, rationales for why they were requiring certain things from their mentees, samples of all learning aids, handouts or other support materials they used, and an evaluation protocol for how they would measure learning progress in their mentees. For their part, mentees provided me with copies of assignments they were given by their mentors, kept a journal of their learning activities, and offered both a “course” and an “instructor” evaluation of their mentors upon completion of their learning activities. Both mentors and mentees also filed written reports of their learning activities.

Whether this exercise is done in a formal education setting or in the community, a few caveats are well warranted.

Many of the skill exchange activities can take group members out of the group situation into one-on-one learning activities with other group members they have only just met. It's an unfortunate reality of modern life that such situations can sometimes present risks for some people, and safeguards should be in place to help everyone feel as comfortable as possible with the exercise. Certainly there should be an “opt out” available to anyone who would prefer working only in a group context and in public places. On the other hand, it's common for adults to go home with each other after meeting for a few hours in a bar. As group facilitators, however, I think it's incumbent on us to make these assumptions and responsibilities explicit and assure that group members take responsibility for their own safety.

Another aspect of this exercise is the possibility that group members will either choose an activity or skill that is so trivial it doesn't offer a very rich learning experience for their mentee, or more often, they will choose something so ambitious that learning it is truly daunting for their mentees. On one occasion, for example, a student volunteered to teaching garment mending—which turned out to be a fairly limited topic for a university paper(!), while another student offered to teach someone accordion—probably too ambitious.

In yet other situations, group members may offer to teach a topic that presents physical risks to their mentees because the mentor is either not properly qualified in the topic concerned, or else they over-estimate their level of qualification. A case in point was another student who offered to teach about herbal remedies without having any formal qualifications as a herbalist, and without bothering to take a medical history from the mentee, nor having the knowledge of how to assess a medical history for risk indicators had a history been taken. The student concerned felt sufficiently qualified after having read some websites about herbal remedies to start prescribing them to others.

Offsetting these risks, however, is the truly exhilarating potential of this exercise for participants to discover themselves as active creators of culture. We discover that we don't have simply to accept things as they are, but are continually creating and re-creating the culture we live in. With this discovery comes the possibility of creating something different than the status quo.

In addition, this exercise takes the subject of simple living out of the realm of theory and ideas and begins to manifest it as practices and activities. It invites people to start cracking the hard nut of what would be different if we took the message of voluntary simplicity seriously? What would be relevant and useful to us and what elements of consumer culture would now drop into the background or disappear altogether? And perhaps most important, what is already at hand that gets us to the future we envision? We cease speculating what the garden might look like and get on with planting it.

Resources:

Interesting to note in this connection is recent work begin done on Transition Town projects in which community groups undertake local or regional scale development projects designed to

take climate change, peak oil, and international financial volatility seriously. Google: “transition towns” for more information or try this link: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

Another interesting topic is development planning models that focus on local resilience, particularly development approaches that aim to reduce dependence on carbon-based energy sources. Google: “resilient communities” or try this link: <http://resilientcommunities.org/>

The Uses of Nothing

Purpose:

- to introduce participants to their inherent capacities to experience value in life and in relationships, with a minimum of possessions
- to help participants identify powers that reside in their simple humanity, and commit themselves to their development
- to help participants appreciate the difference between material and nonmaterial goods, and the curvilinear relationship between possession of material goods and well-being

Framing:

The Uses of Nothing is an extremely powerful simulation game in which group members explore the relation between material consumption, environmental impact, and well-being. Set on an imaginary tropical island, Uses of Nothing leads group members to directly experience the non-linear relationship between consumption and welfare, and discover that indeed, very little is needed for a good life, and affluence can actually erode well-being.

This exercise is somewhat complex and involves a number of steps. It's best to give instructions individually, step-by-step, as participants can easily become confused if they hear too many instructions at once. It's also important to be mindful of the time each step is taking and while allowing enough time for each step is crucial, not so much time should be allowed that group members are sitting around drumming their fingers waiting for the next thing to happen.

Group Size: 40 people

Time: 1.5 – 3 hours

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all group members
- flip chart paper
- odorless markers
- masking tape or push pins if meeting space has bulletin boards

Process:

1. Divide participants into groups of 5-8.
2. Select a recorder / reporter (the person whose birthday is closest to Henry David Thoreau's birthday—July 12).

3. For the first step of this exercise, group members work alone, without consulting each other, even though they have been physically assigned to small groups.

Invite participants to imagine that they are on a tropical (not a desert) island, along with the other members of their group. We have no tools or other possessions except for clothing, and if it's more amusing to think you don't even have clothes, then go with it! There is ample fresh water to drink, plenty of vegetables for the picking, and the climate requires no clothing or special shelter, although the island offers dry caves if shelter is desired. The island is densely inhabited with plants and animals but none of these present any real danger to human beings. Finally, our isolation on the island is complete. There are no other people in the world except us. Moreover, we have not arrived here due to some calamity or shipwreck or plane crash, so there is no grieving to do or healing to worry about. We simply find ourselves on the island with time on our hands. (Suggested times for each step are in parentheses.)

4. (5-7 minutes) Invite participants to list on the paper provided as many activities as they can think of which they could pursue both alone and together with others, given just their bodies and whatever the island may offer. This should be done without consulting other members of the group at this point. While listing potential activities, do not make plans to recreate material culture!
5. (10-15 minutes) Review each individual's list of potential activities in small groups. Have the recorder compile a summary list of everyone's suggestions on a page of flip chart paper. Group members should challenge each other to come up with more ideas. Tape the flip chart pages to the wall.
6. (3-5 minutes) When the group list is charted, have the group pick its top three (or four) preferences. Members will indicate preferences based on the personal value the activity holds until the most popular choices emerge. This can be done in a number of ways. Each group member can get three "votes" and individuals can assign their three votes to their top three activities. Then clusters of votes can often be identified to help with decision-making. Alternatively, groups can just discuss options until they arrive at consensus. Try to avoid letting this step degenerate into lengthy discussion, debate, or complex compromises. Just get to a list of three or four favorite activities upon which everyone can more or less agree.
7. (10-15 minutes) Ask each group to:
 - pick a name for their island
 - identify the likely environmental impacts of each of the favorite activities
 - identify what are the social effects of pursuing the favorite activities
 - after concluding this discussion, take the emotional temperature of the island at this time by assigning a number from "1" (Worst place in the world to be; I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!) to "10" (I've died and gone to heaven. This is the best island ever!)
8. (15-20 minutes, depending on the number of small groups.) The facilitator calls all the small groups back into the large group. In a round-robin fashion, have each reporter:
 - very quickly summarize the list of activities identified by group members
 - identify the top three or four favorite activities

- describe the environmental and social effects of engaging in each activity
- report the emotional temperature for the island

Do this review for all groups. Do not, at this point, in any way evaluate or comment on the results from the exercise so far, but do participate in the fun. While groups vary across different occasions, this exercise is generally hilarious.

9. (3-5 minutes) Tell participants to return to their original groups, and again to work on the next step without conferring with each other. Everyone should imagine that they have been whisked back to civilization as we know it and find ourselves in a very large shopping mall. Everything imaginable is available in this mall. All group members should understand that they will be returning to the tropical island shortly and once again the outside world will disappear. But before it does, each person has \$1,000 they can spend on anything they wish to take back to the island with them. DO NOT confer with other group members in making your choices. Note also that when returning to the island, there will be no outside world apart from the island, hence no communication or other infrastructure. So it wouldn't make much sense, for example, to purchase an iPad or a radio as there would be no Internet or radio stations broadcasting from beyond the island. Again, write down a list of what you would buy.
10. (5-10 minutes) Tell group members they are now being whisked back to the island and the outside world has disappeared. They should now compare lists of the things they purchased at the mall to bring to the island. Reporters should quickly compile a summary list from all the individual lists on a sheet of flip chart paper.
11. (15-20 minutes) All group members should now discuss:
 - What did you purchase at the mall?
 - What environmental effects, if any, are incurred by having these items on the island?
 - What social effects, if any, occur as a result of having these items on the island?
 - After concluding this conversation, take the "emotional temperature" of the island again.
12. (30 minutes) Facilitator again assembles all small groups into the large group and once again reviews the results of the discussions from each group. Reporters provide:
 - a brief summary of the items of material culture that were brought to their several islands
 - the environmental and social impacts of having these things on the island
 - the change, if any, in the emotional temperature of the island

Now is the appropriate time to facilitate a debriefing of this exercise, initially by reviewing and comparing the two sets of data collected from the two different phases of the exercise. Note in particular:

- Many enjoyable and playful activities are available to us completely free or very cheaply; this should confer a certain feeling of security.
- Activities identified in the first round of the exercise generally have little or no environmental impact and high social reward value, thus giving the lie to consumerism's claim that life

would be dull and uninteresting if it weren't for a steady stream of new products and services.

- In the second round of the exercise, we notice that as material possessions increase, so does environmental impact and so may social conflict, even though new opportunities are added to our lives.
- The relationship between added quality and added possessions is generally non-linear; that is, there is a curve of diminishing returns. Increase in the number of possessions is associated with a corresponding decrease in the time available to enjoy each one. Production and disposal of material possessions echoes back through the natural and social environments, to affect quality of life—well-being.
- The first round of the exercise generally shows that a wide array of powers and capacities to experience pleasure and well-being are rooted in our essential human nature and can be exercised entirely apart from what we may own.
- Adding to our material possessions does not correspondingly expand our experiential capacities, but does correspondingly increase the potential for social conflict because material goods are inherently limited (scarce) and this scarcity must be managed somehow—thus requiring rules, understandings and a concept of ownership or property rights.
- The environmental impact of our way of life and its potential for social injustice is directly related to its material complexity and affluence, but only very loosely related to our capacity to enjoy life.
- Material equity seems to contribute to social harmony and solidarity. Often, the emotional temperature of the islands is higher in the first round of the exercise than in the second. When all members of the island are “poor”, we tend to be happier than when we have more material goods.
- Consumer culture urges us to focus on the “foreground” of material accumulation as the pathway to the good life, yet it is the absence of things (e.g., superfluous complication, pollution, social competition, extraneous luxury, etc.) in many cases that contributes as much to well-being as the presence of them.

Notes:

I have done this exercise with many groups over the years, including my university classes on simple living. It is amazingly reliable in the results it produces, although sometimes there can be variation in results.

It's helpful to admit to group members that this is a thought experiment that involves an idealized situation—a particularly benign island, small population, abundant resources, and no outside interference. But the scenario controls for certain variables in order to more clearly highlight the relevance of others. In terms of its relation to simple living, the simulation clearly reveals that we humans have a huge capacity to enjoy life and find meaning in it with very few material possessions. As our complement of material goods and technologies increases, certain advantages are gained, to be sure, but they are never unmixed blessings. Each and every additional artifact that we add to our lives brings with it potential environmental impacts, interpersonal consequences, and management challenges. Material things can certainly improve our lives and we are certainly willing to pay for both the environmental and social costs of having such things available to us. But the exercise clearly illustrates the need for this to be a matter of conscious discernment rather than unconscious pursuit of affluence for its own sake.

Things have consequences. We do well to create them and use them with eyes open to this fact, and while always striving to discern when we are approaching the line where the next additional thing we want actually diminishes rather than enhances our well-being.

Also illustrative in this simulation is how private purchasing decisions by group members wind up creating consequences for others who had no role in making the decisions. This is typical of our daily lives in consumer culture. We seldom if ever consult with our neighbors about the things we buy. We all have to endure each others' choices. It's unlikely that my neighbor considers my asthma when he operates his leaf blower, or my propensity to migraines while he listens to his boom-box sound system. Moreover, these perversities of consumption can happen even when we try to make purchasing decisions with each other in mind, but fail actually to consult on the matter. With the best intentions, we can create problems for each other.

The disconnect between private consumption decisions and environmental and social impacts is strongly highlighted in a variation on this exercise that is particularly powerful when working with community or international justice and development audiences. The simulation can be run for a third time, but in this case, half of the group members return to the mall with \$100,000 to spend, while the other half of the group has no money. Group members then return to the island and recycle the same discussion questions respecting environmental, social and emotional impacts of having whatever stuff was brought to the island. In this version, however, the simulation much more strongly mirrors the actual economic and social situation in the world today. People who are unimaginably wealthy are sharing the same planet with people who are unimaginably poor and marginalized. The rich people buy what they like, even while trying to help the poor. But seldom is there mutuality in setting development goals. The poor must live with the consequences of consumption by the rich even when the rich try to do so with the poor in mind. Debriefing this version of the exercise can be a rich learning opportunity for everyone involved respecting equity, participation, unintended consequences, and social justice.

Voluntary Simplicity Pop Quiz

Purpose:

- to break the ice at the beginning of a presentation or workshop using humor
- to convey a voluntary simplicity sensibility through humor

Framing:

It has been said that, unlike school, life gives us the test first then follows with the lesson. This is a somewhat whimsical ice breaker activity especially useful for overly results-oriented groups who live in constant anxiety about “what will be on the test”. Consisting of an oral pop-quiz that the facilitator can administer immediately at the beginning of meeting a group, it uses humor to overcome the evaluation anxiety so many people experience when starting a new activity, while it also conveys some basic information about voluntary simplicity. It can also be modified and expanded by a skilled facilitator.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 5 minutes

Materials / Equipment:

None

Process:

1. Introduce yourself and suggest that when we attend workshops or presentations, they often remind us of our school years. For most of us, our school years were always over-shadowed by test anxiety. So in the interest of creating a relaxed atmosphere, we should get the test out of the way first. So here is an oral pop quiz about voluntary simplicity. Anyone can answer any question. Hallelujahs are also welcome.

Voluntary Simplicity Pop-Quiz

How does a voluntary simpleton retire her mortgage?
She sells her house.

How does a voluntary simpleton promote mental health?
He junks his TV.

How does a voluntary simpleton escape doing dishes?
He has only one dish.

How does a voluntary simpleton reduce energy use?
He turns off the lights.

How does a voluntary simpleton reduce taxes?

He quits his job.

How does a voluntary simpleton measure standard of living?

She estimates her joy-to-stuff ratio.

How does a voluntary simpleton fight crime?

He spends time with his kids.

Where do voluntary simpletons go on vacation?

To the park across the street.

How does a voluntary simpleton deal with road rage?

She walks.

How does a voluntary simpleton deal with the high cost of food?

He grows his own.

How does a voluntary simpleton reduce her debts?

She doesn't borrow money.

How many voluntary simpletons does it take to change a light bulb?

None. They use windows in the day time and they sleep at night.

How do voluntary simpletons have sex?

None of your business.

Notes:

I confess that in my experience with teaching simple living I have not fully exploited the potential of humor—either to promote simplicity or to critique consumer culture. The potential is vast. Opportunities abound for stand-up comedy for which I have utterly no aptitude. I admit that most of the time, I am too earnest, too serious, and take the prospect of human extinction far too seriously. Hopefully there are others who don't suffer from these disabilities. Please add to the list of pop quiz items as you wish, and feel free to explore the full potential absurdity of our on-rushing doom.

Letter to Descendants

Purpose:

- to help increase group members' mindfulness of their relationships with others through time
- to cultivate a psychologically meaningful bond with future generations through the practice of writing a letter
- to help participants compensate for the short-term thinking characteristic of consumer culture with a sense of their own presence in deep time

Framing:

Consumer culture isolates its members psychologically in their present lives, severing or at least devaluing the importance of relationships with ancestors and descendants. This exercise invites participants to cultivate an inner image of their future descendants by writing them a letter which can be held in trust and passed down to its intended recipient. The aim is to strengthen our appreciation of and emotional investment in future generations and allow mindfulness of this relationship to enrich and inform our present moment experience of life.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1 – 2 hours

Materials / Equipment:

- fountain pens with medium italic nibs for all group members
- recycled / recyclable foolscap paper for rough drafts
- vellum writing paper and envelopes
- India ink or ink cartridges for fountain pens
- letter sealing wax, matches, and signet press, if possible

Process:

1. Introduce exercise by reviewing the purpose as well as describing how awareness of our participation in “deep time” can enrich and broaden the meaning of our lives. Our aim is to establish a real psychological connection with future generations through the act of writing them a letter. This process will begin by increasing our mindfulness of past generations.
2. Working as individuals, invite participants to use a piece of draft paper to sketch out a family tree for their own family. They should take the tree back as many generations as they can remember. It can be edifying to note how many or how few generations we know about. What does this say (knowing something about many or few generations) about how growing up in consumer culture shaped our view of family and of relationships with figures in our past.

3. When the family trees are complete, invite group members to pick one ancestor about whom they know some story. Write this story down on another sheet of draft paper. When the draft stories are complete, divide the large group into small groups of four or five people and spend the next few minutes telling the stories of our ancestors. Debrief how it felt to tell these stories and what it added to our sense of self.
4. Now again, working as individuals, draft a letter to a descendant of yours whom you are certain you will never physically meet. This might be someone living, say, a century in the future. The person we write to might be a direct familial descendant of ours, or else some other person we care about—maybe a great-great-grand niece or nephew—or else a person with whom we have no direct biological relationship but with whom we still experience a spiritual or emotional kinship. Using draft paper, write a letter to this person.
5. After completing the draft letter, take up a sheet of vellum and an italic fountain pen and scribe your finished letter. Sign it, fold it and place it in the vellum envelope. Address the front of the envelope with the name of the person for whom you intend the letter. Use the sealing wax and signet to seal the envelope.
6. In the larger group, debrief this exercise:
 - How did you feel writing this letter? Was it easy or difficult, and what was easy or difficult about it?
 - What future person did you pick as the recipient of your letter and why?
 - How did it feel to physically write a letter using fine writing materials?
 - What was it like for you to visualize a descendant of yours living in the distant future and what did you most want to tell them?
7. Delivery of letters may present some challenges, but every effort should be made to assure that some sort of delivery process is secured. Participants should not feel that this is just an empty exercise, but rather a real act of theirs that will influence the future. Probably the simplest delivery approach will be for participants to include these letters along with other official documents or chattels from their estates and include directions for how to transmit the letters in their wills. We can designate heirs to receive objects with instructions about what to do with the objects, as well as money or other property. Thus, heirs to our estates might be directed to simply provide for safekeeping for the letters until they can be transmitted through this same testamentary process to their intended recipients. Other group members might elect to create time capsules, or some other method for preserving and transmitting their letters.

Notes:

This exercise can trigger a variety of responses in groups. Sometimes group members cannot relate to the concept of deep time at all. They are psychologically stranded, as it were, in their own generation and the present time. They cannot imagine why anyone would care much about the past, or the future for that matter. It's unlikely that such people would be attracted to the subject of voluntary simplicity in the first place, but it could happen.

More common is that individuals find it challenging to think in terms of personal actions that can have multi-generational effects. Consumer culture simply doesn't encourage this sort of

thinking or imagining. So some group members may simply experience some “strangeness” around trying to break out of this impoverished view of history and of the future.

Some group members may be surprised by the strength and nature of feelings they didn’t know they had until they started the exercise. For example, drawing up the family tree and recalling a story about an ancestor can evoke strong and complex feelings—nostalgia, delight, a sense of loss, or complex feelings around family in general and how our experience of family has or hasn’t fulfilled our hopes for it. We can remember past experiences of family with fondness, humor, regret, etc. Thinking about future generations can also evoke both hopes, optimistic dreams and aspirations as well as worry, guilt, apprehension, or sometimes just perplexity. All of this is part of our emotional tapestry and a skilled facilitator will welcome all of it. Educators can help group members integrate this material into a fuller awareness of our present cultural situation. As well, these experiences can be opportunities to enrich and renew our consciousness of family and the historical continuity of the human story.

The 20th-century depth psychologist Ira Progoff noted that not even death ends a relationship; it merely changes shape within our subjective experience. Correspondingly, neither does birth necessarily begin a relationship since we can imagine our future children, dream for them, be concerned about them, generate hopes for them even before they are born. If we take time to think about it, most of us care to some degree how we will be remembered by our descendants. If not, then why would there be so much interest in legacies? Thus, in addition to our physical, present moment relationships with others, we also participate in a psychological society some of whose members may be physically departed or not yet conceived, but nevertheless emotionally present to our subjective awareness.

Conscious recognition of the fact that all of us appear in this world from a long stream of ancestors that stretches back into the dim reaches of ancient history, and we are also the portals, through which future generations will issue, enriches our present identity and may even come to influence our present decisions and behavior.

In his recent book, *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken (2007) tells a story about The Clock of The Long Now. This is a device invented by Danny Hillis, one of the inventors of parallel processing in computers, as the world’s slowest computer. The Long Now Foundation (Long Now Foundation 2012) aims to promote long-term thinking, which seems fairly rare today; by giving people iconic devices that help them imagine really long spans of time. The Clock of the Long Now is designed to work by itself for a minimum of 10,000 years. It chimes just once every millennium. Hawken includes a story about author Michael Chabon who asked his eight year old son what he thought the future would be like. His son replied that he didn’t think humans had a future. He expected we will all die from floods or fires caused by climate change. When Chabon showed his son the website for the Clock of the Long Now, the boy asked, “Will there really be people then, Dad?” Maybe for the first time, his son started to imagine the possibility of a future for humanity and by extension, for himself.

One way that we might personally begin to access this sense of connection with deep time is through writing a letter to someone in the distant future. The physical act of writing an actual letter has become a rare thing in an age dominated by electronic media and very ephemeral forms of communication. There is something undeniably concrete, real, and weighty about a physical document you can hold in your hand. From ancient times the act of committing something to writing was a solemn sign of its significance. The process of writing a letter requires slowness and attention--also in short supply today. So this exercise invites participants to create a physical letter to be held in trust and delivered to a descendant who will be alive in the distant future. As we perform this act, we begin to think about how the letter will make its way to its intended recipient, how it can be kept secure until then, what sort of world our descendant will inhabit, and most of all, what we might want to say to them from our time to theirs. As the 17th-century Samurai warrior Yamamoto Tsunetomo observed:

...when one is writing a letter, he should think that the recipient will make it into a hanging scroll. (Tsunetomo 1716:41-42)

The relationship of this activity to voluntary simplicity may not be immediately obvious, but consider the following: Consumer culture tries to orient our attention strongly to the present moment, to our individual lives. In the process, it trivializes and devalues both the past and the future. Especially in North America, in trying to free ourselves from the bath water of dead European traditions, we have also thrown out the baby of historical rootedness and cultural depth. By focusing too much on our present moment experiences of pleasure, we also tend to behave irresponsibly toward future generations. The purported custom of First Nations people to consider their decisions in light of seven future generations sounds wonderful, but it's certainly not something consumer culture would promote in practice.

So a simple life, rooted in mindfulness and community, I think implies enriching the psychological landscape of such a life with a renewed sense of both our origins and our destiny. In our lives, we partly carry the hopes and aspirations of our ancestors. In how we live today, we also help to shape the future our descendants will inherit. These are weighty matters that cannot be ignored by people aware that they live in a connected universe. Writing a letter to our descendants may thus help us move a step closer toward a way of life that in Duane Elgin's phrase is "outwardly simple, inwardly rich".

Resources:

The Long Now Foundation, www.longnow.org

Environment

A major reason many people adopt a simpler way of life is to reduce their personal ecological footprint and hence their individual contribution to the environmental damage arising from the human economy and personal consumption.⁶ The exercises in this section conscientize participants to the links between personal consumption and environmental impact and how a materially simpler life can contribute powerfully to a healthier environment and relatedly to human survival and well-being.

For a number of years now, we've known about the lifestyle and consumption changes that are necessary for a more sustainable way of life (Brower and Leo 1999). They can be specified quite simply. A simple and sustainable way of life would be achieved by:

- adopting human powered transportation more or less exclusively (walking, cycling, skating, etc. with occasional use of public transit in the case of special need)
- adopting a vegetarian or better, a vegan diet based on locally produced, organic foods from rain-fed acreages
- living in modest, multi-family, energy and water-efficient accommodation
- procuring and using energy and water efficient appliances, lighting fixtures, and avoiding air conditioning
- refraining from a rather short list of especially damaging activities like using any yard or garden implement or form of transportation with a two-cycle gasoline engine, fireplaces, off-road recreational vehicles, power boats, consumption of products made from endangered species, improper use of hazardous substances like pesticides, herbicides, and toxic solvents, etc.

An individual living in this way would dramatically reduce their contribution to the environmental impacts that normally account for more than 90% of the ecological footprint incurred through mainstream consumption habits. There is nothing difficult to understand about these five steps. All are based on quantitative, empirical scientific research by the Union of Concerned Scientists, not ideology. It's also fairly obvious that such a livelihood would be considerably simpler and less expensive at every level than is the normal lifestyle in consumer culture.

Knowing what to do and wanting to do it are two entirely different things. The exercises in this section assume that educators and facilitators will be making available to group members practical information about how to reduce the environmental impact of their livelihoods. The exercises that follow give more attention to the motivational and psychological than to the technical aspects of making the transition to a more sustainable way of life.

⁶ Concern about the environmental impacts of over-consumption has been a key theme in the voluntary simplicity research literature for the past 30 years. It was prominently mentioned in Duane Elgin's seminal work, *Voluntary simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich*. New York.: William Morrow and Company, Inc.; 1981, in Linda Pierce's later survey study of voluntary simplicity practitioners, Pierce, Linda Breen. 2000. *Choosing simplicity: Real people finding peace and fulfillment in a complex world*. Carmel, CA: Gallagher Press; in Jim Merkel. 2003. *Radical simplicity: Small footprints on a finite Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers; and most recently by Samuel Alexander and Simon Ussher in the most comprehensive global survey of voluntary simplicity practitioners to date, "The voluntary simplicity movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context." Melbourne, Australia: The Simplicity Institute.

Vital here, in my opinion, is the sort of motivational appeals that we make while doing this work. It's been the case for a long time that environmentalists appeal to fear, guilt, or greed in hopes of goading their audiences to abandon environmentally harmful habits. Sometimes they add a dash of information as well because we have endless faith in the power of awareness to trigger constructive action. Clearly, we have to be aware of a problem before we can do anything about it. But there is abundant evidence that awareness by itself is not enough to spark action, and the action it sparks may sometimes not be the desired action (McKenzie-Mohr 1999).

The damage caused to the environment by human activities and the truly catastrophic consequences that are in store for us can certainly evoke fear. Fear can even sometimes be an effective short-term motivator. But the problems we face and what we must do to resolve them are not short-term in Nature, and short-term measures will not suffice. Fear is a negative mind state the cause of which people either try to escape or to destroy. Neither impulse is a healthy nor durable basis for a peaceable life rich in well-being.

Appealing to guilt is another popular approach, especially in faith-based communities who are trying to be environmentally progressive. While our relationship to the living world certainly includes a moral dimension, and many of our actions are worthy of guilt, guilt too is a negative mind state based on judging one's own behavior against some external norm, whether religious creeds or social conventions. In any case, appeals to normative standards and guilt miss the opportunity to act from internal motives and our innate, spontaneous sense of what will be life-giving in a given situation.

Appealing to greed is considered "realistic" or "rational" mostly by those with business and commercial interests and who ascribe to the 17th-century model of human motivation that underpins modern economic theory. According to this model, we should act to save the environment because a lot of money can be made by doing so. Greed is also a negative mind state and rests on the delusion that we are separate economic actors who can pursue our individual advantage more or less without reference to the welfare of others. This view makes utterly no sense, nor is it rational in a universe we now know is profoundly connected, and in which there is no such thing as individual action that can be isolated from the web of reactions and consequences that follow from every choice we make. Ignoring these connections does not make them go away.

Discarding all three of these approaches, I think a better way has been proposed by the Zen Roshi, Cheri Huber, (1990:117-124) who urges us simply to cultivate mindfulness of our relationship with the living world and of our spontaneous responses and feelings toward it. If we can leave aside our socially learned desensitization and denial and simply notice what we have done to ourselves and how we relate to both the living world of Nature and to each other, we discover grounds enough for making our choices. Guilt, greed, and fear are all forms of self-inflicted, and therefore avoidable, violence. Nothing good is achieved by multiplying violence in life. Our emphasis belongs on the cultivation of awareness of the emotional ethics which are a natural part of our original humanity, and then ground action in that awareness. Fear of the consequences of inaction, normative moral judgments, or greed for potential profits from environmental catastrophe are all unwholesome bases for decision-making. We act to save the environment because of what it does to us not to act. This is the approach we aim to take in all of the exercises that follow.

Consumer Culture's Big Foot

Purpose:

- to conscientize participants to the effects of consumer culture both on the bio-physical environment and also on their inner, psycho-spiritual "environment"
- to lay the groundwork for exploring a lower consumption way of life (voluntary simplicity) to help reduce ecological footprint

Framing:

Consumer Culture's Big Foot adopts the Ecological Footprint both literally as a way of measuring the area of land and water needed to support a high consumption way of life, and also metaphorically by referring to the emotional, physical and spiritual imprint that consumer culture makes on us. This nominal group discussion exercise invites participants to assess the footprint that consumer culture makes at every level of our experience, but with special attention to its environmental impacts, and how simpler living offers a immediate remedy for many of these impacts.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1 hour (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all group members
- flip chart paper
- odorless markers

Process:

1. Review the concept of an "ecological footprint," initially as a quantitative physical measure of consumer culture's environmental impact. If people aren't familiar with this idea, explain it in detail. If they are, move right into the nominal group.
2. Using paper and pencil provided, working as individuals:
 - Write a one- or two-paragraph story about what you think contributes most to the ecological footprint of consumer culture?
3. After some writing time, invite people to now consider the idea of an ecological footprint both as a physical measure, and as a psychological and spiritual metaphor.
 - Write a one or two paragraph story about how you experience the "foot print" of consumer culture within your body, your feelings, your dreams, your spirit?

4. Invite story sharing. Post two flip chart pages, one with a tree drawn at the top to record all the ecological impacts of consumer culture, and one with a heart drawn on it for recording all the psycho-spiritual impacts. Chart everything people share.

Depending on how conscious participants are of the psycho-emotional impacts of consumer culture, note the following:

- You have identified the hidden dimension of consumer culture's big foot—it's psycho-social impacts.
- To deal with the physical impacts of consumer culture, we need different technology; to deal with its emotional and spiritual sources, we need personal and collective transformation of our values and attitudes.
- These represent two different orders of reality, each of which demands attention at its own level, using its own tools.
- Pain is evidence of connection to each other, to the living world, and to larger than personal relationships.
- We are not alone, not powerless, and not without direction in this. We have found our voice.

Notes:

The ecological footprint is a remarkable pedagogical tool because it is highly visual. Group members seem immediately able to intuitively grasp its meaning and significance. It also offers a basis for considering both technical and non-technical (population and consumption levels) approaches to reducing footprints.

People who are likely to be attracted to a workshop or a class on simple living are probably already aware of many of the environmental challenges facing the Earth and human societies. In discussions of ecological impact, it's customary to reel off the usual litany of disturbing developments affecting every part of the ecosphere. But we tend to view these as external to ourselves—something happening “out there” to those people / trees / animals, etc.

In this exercise, we aim to take a more holistic perspective of the impacts of consumer culture by drawing the metaphor of a footprint into the subjective realm of participant awareness. Not only does consumer culture make an imprint on the physical world, it does so in intangible ways to our emotions, our bodies, our dreams (hopes, fears, aspirations) and spirit (the realm of sacred relationship). It's by conscientizing ourselves to these effects at every level of our experience that we come to appreciate the true dimensions of the fix we're in, and the urgency of fashioning a way out.

This exercise can evoke strong feelings as participants turn their attention not just to what they know about consumer culture impacts, but how they feel about it, how they bear it in their bodies, etc. Thus, the conversation becomes intimate and personal rather than merely a debate about objective facts. As this material surfaces and finds expression through group members' storytelling, I find it is important from time-to-time to remind everyone that we are in this together, we are not alone, and the measure of concern we feel is the measure of the reality of our connectedness. We can draw energy and inspiration and new hope from each other as we explore and create new ways of living that leave smaller footprints.

For some, perhaps many, group members, it will be important to have available information about practical steps they can take to reduce their ecological footprint. Taking in this information is part of how some people cope with the emotional side of the issue. But emphasis should be placed on directing whatever emotional energy is present toward the exploration of simpler

living, or more generically, low-consumption lifestyles. There are overwhelming numbers of practical suggestions about how to reduce our ecological footprints which nevertheless leave the central values and attitudes of consumer culture unquestioned. In educating for simple living, it's this unturned soil that we mean to cultivate.

Resources:

Wackernagel, Mathis, and William E. Rees. 1995. *Our ecological footprint: Reducing human impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

Merkel, Jim. 2003. *Radical simplicity: Small footprints on a finite Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

The Global Footprint Network offers a range of information resources and calculators for estimating your footprint: <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>

The Center for Sustainable Economy also offers a footprint calculator: <http://www.myfootprint.org/>

Also, an excellent organization called Redefining Progress offers a useful calculator and much background information: <http://www.ecologicalfootprint.org/>

Apple Demonstration

Purpose:

- to graphically illustrate the limits on the productive capacity of planet Earth

Framing:

This is a graphic, simple, and emotionally powerful demonstration of the proportion of land area on Earth that is amenable to human life and activities as compared to the whole. Because the demonstration is visual and uses an object whose dimensions are familiar, it strongly drives home awareness of the limited land and fresh water available for human use and the importance of bringing mindfulness and moderation to our stewardship of these resources. It's also an excellent demonstration to use as an introduction to Consumer Culture's Big Foot above.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 10 minutes (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- paring knife
- one large apple

Process:

1. Hold up one large apple for all the group to see. Breathe on the apple and note the thin film of moisture from your condensed breath. This layer of moisture is deeper than the deepest oceans of the world, if measured to scale.
2. Slice the apple into quarters. Set aside three of the quarters to represent the oceans of the world (70+% of the Earth's surface). The remaining one-quarter of the apple represents the land of the Earth.
3. Slice the quarter in half. Set aside one-half to represent land inhospitable to people: polar areas, deserts, swamps, very high or rocky mountains. The one-eighth of the land remaining represents where people live but not necessarily where the food is grown.
4. Slice this piece into four sections and set aside three of the four sections. The three sections represent areas too cold, wet, rocky, steep, or with soil too poor to produce food.
5. The remaining portion contains cities, towns, suburbs, highways, shopping centres, schools, parks, factories, parking lots, and other places where people live but do not grow food.
6. Carefully peel the remaining slice. This represents the soil surface on which humankind depends. It is less than two meters deep—a fixed amount of food-producing land. This fixed land is all that is available for the increasing number of people and other living things that

rely on the land for food. The Earth's population is now 7 billion people. By mid-century that number is expected to rise to more than 10 billion people.

7. Discuss: What does it mean to have finite resources? Compare this small fraction of arable land with the effect that humans have on the Earth as a whole.

Notes:

This exercise is powerful visually and has been very well received in classes of adults. It's also an effective teaching aid in the environmental education of children old enough to understand the concept of Earth as a planetary body and the fact that, while large compared to the scale of a single human body, the Earth is nevertheless limited in size.

Re-Membering Nature

Purpose:

- to help participants recollect and re-own their best experiences in Nature
- to elucidate the relation between simple living and ecological conservation, and between experiences in Nature and meaning in life
- to sensitize participants to how consumer culture is actively degrading the natural world in service of delivering more consumer luxuries to the marketplace

Framing:

Re-Membering Nature helps participants recollect and re-own their best experiences in Nature to elucidate the relation between simple living and ecological conservation, and between experiences in Nature and meaning in life. Many group sessions suggest that people find great reward and meaning in relationship to the natural world, yet it is precisely this world that consumerism is busy dismembering to manufacture its products. Sensitizing people to this relationship can be radicalizing. Re-Membering Nature is something we seek to do.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all group members

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise as the beginning of bringing mindfulness to our relationship with the environment. We want to begin by inviting our own deep wisdom to inform our conscious attitude. This is not a search for insight, or an exploration of inner guilt. Our sole purpose is to allow how we feel to surface into consciousness and to simply notice how it is we do feel in relation to the natural world.
2. Have participants position a sheet of paper in front of them and a pen within easy reach so that they can jot down impressions and memories as we go.
3. Invite participants to relax, close eyes, and just following the entrance meditation script as it is read out loud.
4. Read this meditation script very slowly, i.e., not so slowly as to put people to sleep, but slowly enough so that each inner image and intention has time to fully form within one's consciousness:

We come together tonight (today),
From all our various activities and responsibilities—(pause)
We come together in this place of quiet,
To reflect, to relax, to discover; (pause)
We are fellow explorers, and as we sit together,
Our eyes lightly closed,
We feel each other's presence—(pause)
Fellow explorers, fellow citizens of planet Earth,
Coming together in stillness, in peace. (pause)

We feel the day's busy-ness and tensions slowly draining away,
Here in this stillness; (pause)
We look within, focusing inward,
And we see the river of our thoughts. (pause)
The water is passing by, passing by—
Carrying all the concerns and thoughts of the day
Like muddy swirls and eddies in the flowing water.
But we find a place to sit still
By the edge of the flowing stream. (pause)
We gaze into the water which at this place pools before us,
Turning, turning, and gradually coming to a rest. (pause)
As the water turns slowly and finally comes to stillness,
It also grows gradually clearer
Until we can look down into it, into the depths.
There we see light reflecting back,
Shining with forms and images. (pause)

Ever so gently we form the intention to remember—(pause)
We let the shining pool become a reflecting mirror—(pause)
A mirror of memory and recollection.
We form the intention to remember ourselves
And times we have spent in Nature. (pause)
These may be recollections of experiences long ago
as children, (pause)
Or perhaps they are memories from only yesterday,
when we walked or explored or simply sat still, watching.
Whatever they may be, they come to us now
And as they do, opening our eyes only half way,
we note them with a word or a phrase.
We let these images well up from the mirror of memory,
seeing those moments when we felt most connected,
most at one with living nature. (longer pause)
We witness these memories, without judgment or attachment,
Simply noticing, taking note, honoring each memory
and particularly the feelings that accompanied each.
Like the images, we also note these feelings as they come to us,
honestly, gently, without judgment or attachment. (pause)

And now we again form a very gentle intention—
The intention to summon into awareness
Images of what is happening to Nature,
what we ourselves may be doing to the Earth,
of what others may be doing to the Earth on our behalf,
or yet other things of which we know and which concern us

but of which we are not the authors. (pause)
We allow these images and memories to come into awareness,
together with the feelings they evoke,
and we note them down, together with what we feel...(pause)
We notice, we record, we let these things touch us,
without censorship, without judgment, without attachment. (pause)
We honor these experiences by giving them our attention,
the time of day, a moment's thought...
We witness, we let what we witness touch us,
we note how we have been touched. (longer pause)

Now we gently release our intention to remember—(pause)
We let our memories and images return to the
swirling pool of consciousness, the river of our thoughts. (pause)
We sit quietly on the bank, watching them disappear
into the churning water.
Still the mirror rests before us in perfect clarity, stillness, and truth.
We gaze at it quietly,
letting its calmness and clarity
shine through our minds and every cell of our bodies. (pause)
And thus shining, we gradually and quietly return to this room. (pause)
We look about us, silently reconnecting with our fellow humans.
And we are back. (pause before resuming)

5. Have participants review their lists of memory images and feeling notes, and write short paragraphs that elaborate the most striking of these. Focus particularly on accounts of high points in their lives, moments of maximum well-being, joy, and reward as experienced in contact with nature or the outdoors.
6. Invite participants to tell the story of their high-point experiences in relation to the natural environment. Chart the different examples shared to help participants gain an overview of the high points in lives other than their own.
 - What do these memories tell us about our felt relationship to Nature?
 - What sort of feeling tone surrounds our favorite recollections of experiences being in Nature compared to the feeling tone surrounding images of what we see happening to Nature?
 - What role has consumption of material things played in these experiences?
7. Time permitting, if the Gratitude Log has already been introduced, reiterate the value of the Gratitude Log for helping us develop mindfulness (conscientization) of what really matters to us.

Notes:

On occasions when I've used this exercise, I'm impressed that people have strongly evocative memories of nature which are especially strongly linked to memories of childhood, playfulness, sensuality, and Nature-based spiritual intuitions. The exercise also resonates with individuals who may not often think about human relationships or theological abstractions, but have highly emotional connections with Nature.

The aim of this exercise is to lay a foundation for living simply for ecological stewardship through a transformation of awareness—not because of guilt for what we are doing to the

environment, nor from fear about what will happen if we don't change our ways. Guilt is based on self-judgment and external moral norms, both of which can be self-imposed forms of violence. Fear is also a violent emotion, and not a lasting motive for doing anything. But growing awareness of how we feel in relation to Nature, and rooting future actions in that felt-sense of awareness offers the possibility of deep-seated and long-term change.

It's helpful, perhaps imperative, that educators and group facilitators bring emotional maturity to this exercise. There is lots of potential in the guided imagery part of the activity to discover deep wells of joy and awe, but also sometimes grief, sadness, and anger when we honestly recall what is happening to the natural world. It is natural to want to avoid these feelings, or minimize them, or trivialize them in some way. But if we bring sufficient mindfulness and maturity to the experience of these feelings and allow them to be present to us long enough to actually register in awareness, they can change how we see the world, how we set our priorities, and how we move forward with our life choices. Such decisions arise from both positive and negative feelings. Our aim is not to evaluate or classify feelings, but to notice, name, register, and honor them.

Resources:

Macy, Joanna, and Molly Young Brown. 1998. *Coming back to life: Practices to reconnect our lives, our world*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

Planet Jeopardy

Purpose:

- to use a game show format to convey to participants information basic to environmental literacy, but in an amusing and mildly competitive way
- to engage participants in a process of environmental conscientization through an initial exercise that is playful and entertaining

Framing:

The game show Jeopardy may be the longest-running program of its type in television history. It is so widely recognized in popular culture that most people know the rules, have seen at least one (and perhaps many) episode, and many have played the at home game board version as well. Some can even hum its jingle. Contestants in the game can select answers from various categories for each of which they must produce the appropriate question to score points, depending on the level of difficulty.

Planet Jeopardy is essentially a take-off from this game show, but one in which all the members of the studio “audience” are players and all the questions pertain to basic environmental literacy trivia. Answers provide information about current environmental issues or threats, while group members are challenged to frame the question that corresponds to the answer. The game is highly effective and can be configured around voluntary simplicity information as well, although this will not be as well-known as environmental information. The game is a “painless” method for teaching key concepts and awakening participants to pressing issues. It can also engage the competitive habits most of us were indoctrinated with as children and thus result in some friendly competition between group members—which can also be entertaining for others.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people (approximately, I once used this activity with a group of over 100)

Time: 45 – 60 minutes (depending on how many categories of answers are offered and how many levels within each category)

Materials / Equipment:

- about 66 sheets of 8.5 x 11 inch paper
- odorless marker
- masking tape
- back board, black / white board large enough to create a 6 x 5 matrix of cells comprised of two sheets of paper each (see below)
- funny ooga horn or squeaky toy for signaling different game situations (correct answer, error, etc.)

Alternatively, a Laptop computer, LCD projector and screen with suitable presentation software could be used.

Process:

1. When I first designed this exercise, I defined six categories of answers and five levels of difficulty for each category, which yielded a “playing board” with thirty cells. I used one letter sized piece of paper (8.5 x 11 inches) to write each answer in felt marker which I then used masking tape to mount on a blackboard in an array of six columns and five rows. Over each cell, I used masking tape to attach another sheet of paper that concealed the answer beneath it and also showed the point value for that cell on the front. Participants then saw an array of six columns each with a heading designating a different topic for each column, and five cells within each column ranging in difficulty from 100 to 500 points.
2. So that everyone can be a participant instead of having just three contestants, divide the group in half so that each half can play the other.
3. Run the remainder of the exercise exactly like a game of Jeopardy and let ‘er rip.

Notes:

People very much enjoy this game. It could be assembled around any topic of interest as mentioned above. I found that one of the most challenging aspects of preparing the game was identifying answers for various items of environmental information which were reasonably well-known and also reasonably undisputed. Moreover, they need to be framed in language that is lucid and gives contestants a reasonable chance of getting the question right. It’s one thing, for example, to offer a clue like “Author of Macbeth” to which the question is indisputably, “Who was William Shakespeare?” compared to “400 ppm” the question for which might be more arguably “What is the current concentration of CO₂ in Earth’s atmosphere?” (depending on whom you cite as your authority).

It’s incredibly fun being the game show host for this exercise and using squeaky toys or kazoos to signal right answers or do-overs on questions.

The preparation of the game board itself is relatively labor intensive but a person with the appropriate skills could probably create the entire thing in a PowerPoint or Keynote presentation format and use no paper at all. This would also render the exercise in a format that would make it easier to update. I trust that using this for educational purposes will obviate the usual turf battles and lawsuits over any proprietary interests Jeopardy may have in maintaining control over its game. It is apparently available in flash format online for free. Simply Google: Jeopardy game.

Personal Plan for Reducing My Ecological Footprint

Purpose:

- to provide a tool to assist participants in making specific practical actions that reduce their personal ecological footprint
- to extend the idea of taking personal action to include forming partnerships and alliances with others to take collective action as well

Framing:

Conscientization to our environmental challenges is helpful only if it motivates decisive action in what Paulo Freire called “limit situations”. These are moments when we see that our choices and actions are capable of opening new historical possibilities for us. As we become more aware of how consumer culture affects the environment, it’s natural to feel motivated to take constructive action. In this exercise, we focus specifically on actions we can take to reduce our ecological footprint.

This exercise also offers participants a pathway to move beyond most of the advice offered on footprinting websites which is almost exclusively focused on individual lifestyle changes. Need we face environmental challenges alone? Might we think of ways we can assist each other in meeting our life needs that also have the effect of reducing our collective ecological footprint?

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1 – 2 hours (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
-
- recycled / recyclable paper
-
- computers with access to the Internet

Process:

1. Assemble participants in a large group and offer direction to websites and other information resources relevant to reducing ecological footprints (See Notes and Resource sections below). It probably isn’t necessary that the facilitator be personally conversant with all these sources, but the participants need to be made aware of where and how they can be accessed. Allow time for participants to explore some of these resources.
2. Distribute the Personal Plan for Reducing My Ecological Footprint worksheet to all group members. Have participants complete this worksheet for themselves.
3. Divide the large group into smaller (4-6 person) discussion groups. Appoint as small group reporter the person whose birthday is closest to July 1. Have participants discuss:

- Their personal plan to reduce their ecological footprint.
 - Their willingness to make a commitment to the group to carry through on their plan.
 - Offer ideas and suggestions to each other to supplement existing plans and make them easier or more efficient to implement.
 - Brainstorm collective actions we could take the effect of which would be to reduce the ecological footprint of those participating, or make this process easier and more fun.
4. After some time for small group discussion and brainstorming, reassemble large group and ask for reports from small group discussions. Focus especially on collective strategies groups came up with.
 5. Convene a “public signing ceremony” where each group member signs off on their action plan with all other group members witnessing. This is our public commitment to implement our plans.

Notes:

Taking constructive action in response to pressing problems is a hopeful and radical act. It is something that asserts our faith and power to direct our own destinies in constructive ways. These days, there is a great deal of bad environmental news. So taking specific action to reduce our personal ecological footprints is a vote for a positive human future as well as for a healthy planet.

There are a number of resources that I have found consistently helpful over the long-term in visualizing and helping guide my personal actions to reduce my ecological footprint. Some resources are fairly theoretical and need some translating from the level of abstract principles to concrete application. So these tools won't be accessible for everyone. But for those who can make the connections, some of these tools can be very powerful.

The source cited below by Wackernagel and Rees (1995) is the classic source that introduces the concept of ecological footprinting. It's a great resource for introducing the idea of the ecological footprint and illustrating its uses as a way of measuring human impact on the environment. Its weakness is that it offers relatively few specific suggestions for individuals who want to take personal action.

Merkel (2003) is much more practical in focus and applies the ecological footprinting method, together with consideration of the financial dimension of sustainability, to the task of making individual decisions. Merkel's book is sometimes tedious in the level of quantitative detail he brings to his analysis and is weak in helping readers really zero in on a short list of important things to do, versus generating a lengthy list of possible actions that may feel overwhelming. Nevertheless, the source is extremely informative and well-written.

Another extremely useful tool, although perhaps the most abstract of all, is The Natural Step model from Sweden. Interested readers can Google “The Natural Step” and access resources about it. It is a list of only four non-negotiable system conditions, three of them based on laws of physics and ecology, which, if satisfactorily met in making our consumption choices would, assure sustainability. The Natural Step system was developed from a broad consensus of over 6,000 world experts on what is required for environmental sustainability. The weakness of the system is the difficulty most people who lack a scientific background have with understanding its many implications and applications. Its strength is its simplicity, its wide applicability, and the fact that it is rooted in science, not politics or ideology.

In terms of practical action, I have yet to find a better source than Brower and Leon (1999), which today is a bit dated, but I think the general principles of which are as valid as ever. This source reports research from the Union of Concerned Scientists respecting the environmental

impact of specific consumer choices in the marketplace. These were scientifically assessed, and most important for our purposes, ranked in terms of their relative impacts on air, water, habitat and climate change. What emerges is a short, specific list of lifestyle changes we can make which taken together account for over 90% of environmental impacts arising from ordinary household consumption. So the virtue of this source is that it offers a very short, understandable, practical list of things to do which have been empirically proven to be important. They are also ranked, thus allowing us to take on the most important things first. So, if group members think their lives are already so busy or demanding that they simply can't commit to very many lifestyle changes, they should pick from Brower and Leon's short list. They can then stop worrying about how many sheets of paper they used today or whether they should wash all their clothes in cold water.

Information from sources like these can be made available for group members to explore on their own. It could also be delivered in other ways such as a lecture, through videos, etc. Undoubtedly, individual educators will have their own favorite suggestions and tips. But I think it's important to stay mindful of the fact that many people want "to do something!" while, at the same time, they are very quickly overwhelmed by too many suggestions. I have opted for offering a short list of what I consider very, very important things to do rather than offering four or five hundred suggestions that will have only marginal environmental benefit, be applicable only in very specific circumstances, and in any case, leave group members feeling like they've just survived a tsunami of ideas—none of which they will act on.

Another important consideration for this exercise is working more with the collective aspect of reducing ecological footprints. A great deal of the activism literature on environmental issues, as well as sources about simple living, stress personal action. This is logical because it is in our personal lives that we can exercise the greatest autonomy of choice and perhaps make the "deepest" change. But the focus on individualism may also partly reflect an unconscious despair many of us feel with the seeming impotence of institutions and organizations to come to grips with the sustainability crisis.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that none of us lives on Earth alone. We can support each other, collaborate on new action strategies, form symbiotic partnerships that multiply effort and rapidly communicate innovations, as well as just offering emotional and spiritual support to each other in what is admittedly a very challenging undertaking—evolving our whole culture. But there are numerous issues relevant to reducing ecological footprints which are inherently collective in Nature, or which require collective action to address effectively. I can certainly reduce my personal ecological footprint by getting rid of my car. I might even feel terrific about the decision. But making such a choice is inescapably configured and constrained by the fact that most towns and cities in North America are designed for cars, not pedestrians. This makes my choice to forego owning a car more difficult to live out than would be the case if our settlements were designed differently. Settlement design is inherently a collective undertaking and requires collective involvement to change the process.

This exercise offers the opportunity to lead the group through the individual action contracting, to be sure, but also toward a consideration of larger-than-personal systems and conditions that contribute to footprint and how we might act collectively to address them. Informed educators will be able to think of dozens of examples, so I won't belabor this point. Suffice it that I feel certain that both personal and collective action will be required to make meaningful progress toward real planetary sustainability.

Resources:

Brower, Michael, and Warren Leon. 1999. *The consumer's guide to effective environmental choices*. Union of Concerned Scientists, New York: Three Rivers Press.

Merkel, Jim. 2003. *Radical simplicity: Small footprints on a finite Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

Wackernagel, Mathis, and William E. Rees. 1995. *Our ecological footprint: Reducing human impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

The Global Footprint Network offers a range of information resources and calculators for estimating your footprint: <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>

The Center for Sustainable Economy also offers a footprint calculator: <http://www.myfootprint.org/>

Also, an excellent organization called Redefining Progress offers a useful calculator and much background information: <http://www.ecologicalfootprint.org/>

For those interested in The Natural Step, a good place to start is with the global home page for TNS organization, as well as simply Googling: “The Natural Step” for more information: <http://www.naturalstep.org/>

Personal Plan for Reducing My Ecological Footprint

We contribute directly to large scale changes through personal decisions and action. This is one of the lasting insights from the feminist movement—that the personal is political. Unless you are currently living below the global average income (c. CDN\$ 4,500 per capita per year), there are probably ways you can reduce your ecological footprint.

1. Do an online ecological footprint quiz: <http://www.myfootprint.org/en/> and click on “Take Quiz” at the bottom of the homepage. It’s easy to do, clear, and returns a lengthy list of things you can do to reduce your ecological footprint, no matter what your living situation.
2. Make a plan. What specific steps or lifestyle changes are you prepared to make to reduce your ecological footprint. Be specific. Small steps count. There is no need to change everything over night, but it is important to get under way. Identify three (3) feasible, affordable, practical changes you can make:

(1)

(2)

(3)

3. What benefits can you foresee as flowing to you by making these changes? How will they enhance your quality of life?

4. What benefits can you foresee as flowing to the Earth, other species, and other human beings as a result of your plan:

Sufficiency

Exercises in this section take up one or another aspect of the question “How much is enough?” Group members are invited to distinguish needs from wants, bring mindfulness to the material possessions they already have and aspire to have, discover in collaboration with others ways of liberating themselves from bondage to possessions, and assess the necessity and relative merits of different technologies to increase well-being.

The value of “sufficiency” is central to the practice of voluntary simplicity. Therefore, the question of how to discern how much is enough is of considerable practical importance. There is no consensus on this question in the voluntary simplicity literature, or among practitioners for that matter.

Getting a grip on this important question is made easier, I think, by helping group members make certain important distinctions.

First, I don't think the practice of voluntary simplicity is about minimalism in every aspect of one's life. Some respected thinkers would likely disagree with me. But I think simple living is about more than having the bare minimum needed for basic survival. We also want margins wide enough so that we can flourish and also make prudent provision for emergencies, for philanthropy, and for hospitality.

Second, it is helpful to distinguish between material and non-material goods. Material goods consist of “things” like clothing, houses, bicycles, and shoes. Because material goods are material, they are also inherently scarce. Anything which can be scarce correspondingly and necessarily becomes an issue of justice and equity as well as an environmental concern. I think it is with respect to material goods that we aim to discern and practice sufficiency—being guided in our choices by necessity rather than desire, and always mindful of what is our “fair portion” on a planet we share with other people and species.

In the case of non-material goods such as love, esteem, friendship, knowledge, spiritual awareness, aesthetic appreciation, self-giving of time and attention, etc., there need be no concern with sufficiency since all these goods multiply through being shared, and abundance should rightly be our aim. Non-material goods are the real requirements for a good life, once sufficient provision of material goods have been secured in just relationships with others which then assures the security of those goods.

Third, growing in our ability to discriminate the difference between what is sufficient and what is more than sufficient, and therefore harmful, also implies discriminating between desires and the objects we think will satiate those desires. Consumer culture is obsessed with objects, and finding the “right” objects to satisfy various desires. But consumer culture offers no analysis of desire itself. As a result, it misses the whole basis for well-being in relation both to material and non-material goods. The key question we need to ask is not “How many things are enough things to satisfy my many and ever-changing desires?” but rather, “How many desires are enough desires for a good life?”

De-Junking: The Gentle Art of Self-liberation

Purpose:

- to offer a mindfulness-based method for reducing material clutter in our lives which avoids impulsive cycles of bingeing and purging our possessions
- to help group members appreciate clutter as both an environmental and social justice issue

Framing:

The De-Junking exercise is a take-home activity which can be paired with a group discussion or follow-up review. It presents a method for bringing mindfulness to the process of reducing our material possessions, not randomly for the sake of simplicity as such, but mindfully so our emotional investments in the things we own is honored. Decluttering is guided by awareness of our life purpose, and releasing possessions is done in a way that increases the likelihood of reuse, recycling, and repurposing.

Group Size: 40 people

Time: Time varies depending on group size and how much debriefing group members require for the exercise. The exercise is normally split over two days with the de-junking activity being a take-home assignment.

Materials / Equipment:

- Clearing: An Exercise for De-Junking Your Life worksheets for all group members

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise as an opportunity to practice mindfulness and also make some progress on reducing whatever physical stuff clutters up our lives. Clutter is anything we own that we don't use regularly and the presence of which detracts from other important life values like leisure, efficiency, availability to others, etc. Note that in addition to simply cluttering up our surroundings, there are several other levels of significance that can attach to the unused material objects that we own:
 - environmentally—unused material possessions represent resources that are “frozen” in our closets and garages, neither serving the purpose for which they were manufactured, nor entering the recycling stream where they might offset the use of new materials
 - aesthetically—unused material possessions can detract from the spaciousness of our home and also distract attention from attractive things of good quality that we are using
 - socially-just concerns—unused possessions like clothing or food could be providing something necessary to someone who needs it, whereas for us it's merely excess clutter
 - financially—and in terms of our most precious resource—time, clutter can incur extra expense for insurance, storage and maintenance, as well as unnecessary time spent in

housekeeping chores to clean, organize and sort through excess possessions to get to the ones we want

2. Invite group members to take their copy of *Clearing: An Exercise for De-Junking Your Life* worksheet home and focus on decluttering one room or one closet. Go slowly with this activity. Take time to sit and enter a mindful state of awareness before beginning. Proceed slowly, noting changes in your feelings and thoughts as you proceed. Jot down a few notes for subsequent group discussion.
3. When group members reassemble, assign them to small discussion groups and appoint a reporter whose birthday falls closest to the Spring Equinox (March 21st). Discuss the following questions:
 - How did you feel doing this exercise and how did your feelings change as you worked on it?
 - Did you experience any particular emotional connection or investment in particular objects? If so, of what sort and why do you think this was the case?
 - As you moved forward with your de-junking work, how did you feel?
 - In the case of possessions you decided to hand along to others, did the idea that they might make a positive difference in the life of someone else who needs them make it any easier to part with your stuff? If so, how do you think this happened, and if not, why not?
 - How likely is it that you will replace all your discarded possessions with other ones within the year, and why or why not?
4. Reassemble the large group and debrief the exercise. Try to identify common themes and experiences.

Notes:

This has been a wonderful activity for group members who are very practical and action-oriented. It makes them feel like they are doing something concrete that embodies their desire to live more simply. They are clearing off the rubble of their lives.

In such cases, however, it's important to inquire as to how this material accumulation happened in the first place? It may feel liberating to discover a more spacious, calm, and light-filled way of life, but ridding ourselves of past rounds of accumulation won't represent real progress toward simplicity until we get deeper into the reasons we accumulate in the first place. These reasons can be diverse and sometimes pathological. Mostly though, they tend to be attributable to unexamined habits of accumulating without discarding, passive acceptance of gifts we don't really want, sometimes a bit of laziness in caring for our own living quarters, and quite often, an irrational fear that if we discard something, we may need it sometime later and then it may not be available—i.e., fear of scarcity.

I think the fear of future scarcity is pervasive and significant. It can therefore be extremely liberating for group members if educators urge them to bring a close practice of mindfulness to the emotions and imagery that constitute this fear. It also helps to interrogate the reason for our possessions closely as to the basis for our anxiety. Do we hang on to our high school bomber jacket because we really believe we'll be going back to high school some day, or might possibly fit into it, or because they aren't making those anymore? Are these good reasons for keeping something? The truly liberating paradox that educators should point out here is that the practice of simply living is specifically an experiment in how to cultivate well-being amidst relative

material scarcity. Thus the circumstance we fear and are trying to avoid by hanging on to stuff is the exact circumstance that the practice of simple living liberates us from!

Another thing that often happens during this exercise is that group members discover and more fully appreciate the emotional hold that material objects can have over us. I think this is because of a very primitive, perhaps even archetypal, capacity we have to associate material objects with nonmaterial emotions, memories, and values. I have a completely threadbare robe that my mother made for me. It doesn't fit anymore and after twenty-five years of washing barely holds together. It has no value as a useful object, but its emotional significance to me resides in the fact that my mother made it, touched it, thought of me as she fashioned it, etc. So some of what anthropologists would call her "manna"—her spiritual power or essence—got transferred into the robe, as if this power could "rub off" of her onto something she made. This is a magical notion—the same idea as that behind the "laying on of hands" when bishops or priests are ordained, together with similar rituals that pass on ancient powers or significant feelings. At some level, perhaps we all still believe in a sticky spiritual power or emotional adhesive that can transfer from people to objects and then the objects come to represent those people at the heart-level of our awareness.

The association of possessions with relationships, experiences, and important emotions and values isn't particularly problematic from a simple living standpoint. Psycho-spiritually, however, it's probably very important that we honor these relationships to such objects and respect their value in our lives as we clear away the real clutter. I don't advise that anyone part from an object that has a real inner value to them. But our daily reality is that very few objects we own have this sort of significance. In doing the sorting and tossing therefore, it's important to bring mindfulness and respect to the process of sorting the wheat from chaff.

Another discovery that can arise from this exercise is that our emotional relationship with material things is often extremely ambivalent and can be quite conflicted. Some of our possessions, for example, can be associated with moments of great craving, or pleasure, at least in the desiring, followed by indifference or disappointment in the possession. Sometimes we hoard things thinking that having them will somehow increase our security or provide safety in a changing and uncertain world, but once we get this stuff, it becomes a nuisance. We loved the idea of owning a Porsche but hate what it costs us and how much time we spend with it in the shop. So we desire and love our stuff at the same time as we feel burdened by it and crave liberation from it. Thus, this very complex and layered relationship we have with things needs to be properly acknowledged and respected as we make our way toward greater "lightness of being."

There is a story about a conversation between Richard Gregg, the originator of the phrase "voluntary simplicity" and Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi with whom Gregg lived and worked for a number of years. Gregg confessed to Gandhi that he could clean latrines, and eat simple meals, and have only one change of clothes. But something he found it very hard to give up was his books. Gandhi advised Gregg not to give up his books. As long as something gives us authentic inner consolation, Gandhi said, we should not give it up. But when that inner consolation comes to an end, then we must part with the object immediately as it might be of use to others.

Some group members seem susceptible to intense enthusiasms when it comes to purging their possessions. I find this impulse as questionable as the attitude of extreme retentiveness. In the matter of learning how to live more simply, I think a slower, more mindful, and more organic approach is desirable. We want deep change that lasts. Our relationships with material objects are no exception. So I always urge groups to take it easy, take time to feel connections (or the absence of them), honor them appropriately, and then make their decisions about what to keep and what to pass along.

Finally, educators should note that this exercise is the equivalent at the material level of our lives to the Inner Clearing exercise included in the Mindfulness section of this book. The two exercises can be used in tandem (following instruction in basic mindfulness practice) as the sequence that can lead from our outer life to our inner life.

Resources:

- Aslett, Don. 1984. *Clutter's last stand: It's time to de-clutter your life*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books. Discusses the "stuff" in our lives—why we buy it, why we hoard it well beyond its pleasurable or useful life, and how to let go of it. Also explores mental clutter, such as money (tracking it, investing it, and managing it), people, and activities that complicate your life.
- Burch, Mark A. 2007. *De-junking: A tool for clutter-busting*. Winnipeg, MB: Simplicity Practice and Resource Centre. This book offers over one hundred practical suggestions for reducing the material scale of our possessions organized in increasing degree of challenge. It also includes a method for bringing mindfulness to the practice of de-cluttering your home.
- Campbell, Jeff. 1992. *Clutter control: Putting your home on a diet*. New York: Dell Publishing. Discusses both the physical and psychological aspects of managing material possessions. Suggests ways to minimize the negative impact of too much clutter.
- Cox, Connie, and, Cris Evatt. 1998. *30 Days to a simpler life*. New York: The Penguin Group. Practical guide for organizing living spaces, including offices, wardrobes, photos, books and magazines. Travel, financial planning, and leisure are also covered.
- Culp, Stephanie. 1991. *Streamlining your life: A 5-point plan for uncomplicated living*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books. This book has many tips about organizing our lives through reducing clutter and focusing on clear goals. It doesn't advocate voluntary simplicity so much as personal efficiency in applying effort. Nonetheless, for some people, the suggestions in this book may prove valuable.
- Thomas, Kim. 1999. *Simplicity: Finding peace by uncluttering*. Your Life. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman. Offers practical guidance and inspiration on uncluttering your physical environment and nurturing the soul and spirit, including topics such as relationship maintenance, conflict management, repairing the conscience, and sincerely practicing forgiveness.

“Clearing” An Exercise for De-junking Your Life

De-junking is getting rid of material clutter and complication. It's the first step in simplifying your outer life. De-junking is a real-life, practical way to begin simplifying. Each person can decide how much they want to de-junk. You can also decide what areas of your life you want to simplify first. There are no rules where to begin, how far to go, or when to start. But like every real life change, we have to start sometime, somewhere.

1. Pick an area of your life or household where it feels safe to experiment. For example, you may not be keen on tackling the kitchen or the basement on the first pass. O.K. So don't do a whole room! Start with one of the dresser drawers in your bedroom, or the “everything drawer” in the kitchen. Work on the linen closet or a corner of the garage. But do start somewhere, and do start now. For sake of this exercise, write down here the area of your life you have chosen to “clear”:

2. Take time as you de-junk to think about what you're doing, and especially how you feel as you go about de-junking this part of your life. If getting rid of spare nails, burnt out light bulbs and broken Christmas ornaments is something that causes you anxiety or sadness, take time to look more deeply into the nature of these feelings. Ask yourself how such feelings came to be associated with these particular things. If you feel relief, lightness, freedom, or pleasure as your linen closet gradually becomes tidier, more streamlined and less cluttered, let yourself enjoy those feelings as you go about your de-junking work. Write down the feelings and thoughts you have as you begin this clearing exercise:
3. Empty out the drawer, box, closet or room you've chosen so you can see everything it contained. Make five piles of stuff:
 - Keepers—Stuff you use all the time and are sure you still need.
 - Doubtfuls—Stuff you're not sure about. Arrange a “trial separation” from this stuff by placing it in a dated box handy but out of the way. If you don't go looking for this stuff within a year, get rid of it.
 - Hand-alongs—Stuff that's of no use to you but could be reused by someone. Donate this to a second-hand store or charity.
 - Recyclables—Stuff that's of no use to anyone but could be recycled as a recoverable material or resource, e.g., rusty, bent nails.
 - Waste—Stuff that can neither be reused by anyone, nor recycled.
4. Keep your keepers and restore them; store your doubtfuls, trash the waste, and make a trip to the second-hand store and recycling centre to drop off the rest. Return home and admire your work. Write down your thoughts and feelings as you conclude this clearing exercise. What has changed? How do you feel?
5. Advanced Studies: Apply this process to clearing a non-material part of your life, e.g., your social appointment calendar or your organizational memberships.

Media Fast

Purpose:

- to increase our mindfulness of the pervasiveness of electronic media in our daily lives and its influence over our daily round of activities
- to sample the experience of living without media and to discover how this affects us emotionally, intellectually, socially, etc.
- to help identify any aspects of our use of media which might be “addictive” and thus lay the ground work for different choices that might liberate us from such dependency

Framing:

Life in consumer culture is saturated with media of all kinds. In the last few years there has also been an explosive growth in “social media” where electronic communication competes with face-to-face communication. The boundaries between news media, advertising, and entertainment have blurred. This exercise invites participants to explore how much exposure to media is sufficient. It also offers us a chance to grow in mindfulness of the effects that media have on our lives and discuss this with others.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1 – 2 hours. The time requirement for this exercise is only partly accounted for by actual time “in group” which amounts to 1-2 hours over two sessions. Additional time is required for the media fast itself which should last at least three days, but preferably for a week.

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- scribblers or journals for keeping a daily log of the media fast activity and for answering questions

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise with the common place observation that media pervade modern life in consumer culture. The presence of media bring us many benefits. But our exposure to media is so frequent, our use of them so routine, and some of their influences on us so subtle that we scarcely ever take time to bring mindfulness to this form of consumption. While some people recognize some limits on material consumption, we seem to recognize no limits on the consumption of information or entertainment. How does this affect us? Is it consistent with what makes for well-being?
2. Read this quote from Henry David Thoreau and note that this was written in 1854:

“...Hardly a man takes a half hour’s nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, ‘What’s the news?’ as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. ... If

we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers on the winter,—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea.” [Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.]

3. To prepare for this exercise, ask group members to set aside four or five pages of paper and make a one line entry that summarizes every news story they hear, see, or read about during one full day. It's especially interesting to include here updates to all RSS feeds we may be subscribed to, unsolicited emails, Skype calls, as well as status updates and pokes from friends on Facebook or the like. Leave some space between each of your entries and in this space, answer the following questions:
 - Could you realistically do anything about the subject of this story even if you wanted to?
 - What does awareness of this event bring into your life? How do you feel about it? How will awareness of it change your behavior, if at all?
 - How does hearing about this event empower you in a positive way, if at all?
 - Is a story such as this something which could be “cleared” from your inner awareness without compromising your moral or spiritual sensitivity or sense of personal responsibility?
4. After answering these questions, “fast” from all news media for a period of at least three days—print media as well as Internet or electronic media such as cell phone supported services and communication. During you fast:
 - Make entries at least twice per day summarizing your experience of the day. How easy or difficult was it to avoid media?
 - How did you feel at first when you began the fast and how did these feelings change as time went along?
 - What do you perceive as being lost from your life as a result of the fast, and what is being added, if anything? How much do you value what is lost and added and why?
5. After your fast, consider the following questions:
 - How do you feel following your fast?
 - When you went back to viewing / listening / reading these media, what did you miss? How do you feel about this? Why?
 - During your fast, did you feel that anything important was missing from your life? If so, what? If not, what do you think would be the consequences of continuing your fast?
6. Reconvene the group and offer people time to debrief this experience. Discuss how the process of the fast evoked different feelings and different awareness as time went by. What insights arose from this experience? Do any of the feelings that group members have suggest a compulsive relationship to media? What were the positive discoveries arising from this exercise that reflect back on the role consumption of media might play in personal well-being?

Notes:

This exercise is deceptively simple and yet can reveal some quite startling discoveries regarding our relationship with media. Nearly all group members find the media fast challenging and some find it unendurable. It's easy to see how physical clutter can reduce our quality of life. What to do with material clutter is also more straightforward than what to do with information clutter. But the first step involves becoming more aware of the role media play in our lives.

One thing many group members first discover is how much time they devote to consuming media on an average day. Stepping back from this, even if only briefly, gives a perspective that we wouldn't have if we stayed immersed in the media ocean we swim in all the time. Stepping back gives us a chance to ask the question: Do I really want to be spending this much of my life watching television / on the Internet / on Facebook? How much does this form of consumption really contribute to our well-being, if at all?

Educators should also be mindful to notice group members who react to the exercise with anger, annoyance, avoidance, or outright refusal to participate. Of course everyone is at liberty to refuse to participate. But emotional reactions like these suggest very strong, perhaps even addictive, attachments, in that life without such media has become inconceivable. One of the signal indications that an addiction is present is the addict's readiness to defend access to their preferred substance, secure their supply, and prioritize this security ahead of most other values in life. Yet addiction can hardly be consistent with authentic well-being.

The addictive potential of video games was highlighted in a recent CBC documentary which reported the case of a California teen who underwent leg amputation because he was so engrossed in playing video games he never moved away from his game console, thus contracting gangrene in both legs from inactivity (DocZone 2010).

Other group members may discover that they experience boredom, disorientation, anxiety, and even mild depression while fasting from media. Many of these feelings arise from discovering how dependent we have become on media to fill time in our lives, and perhaps how rarely we actually spend quality time with other people as compared to texting them, talking with them on the phone, or Skyping them. Fasting from media can also bring into conscious awareness how well we use solitude. If we turn off the computer or the cell phone, how do we use the freed up time and solitude? Do we know what to do apart from turning them all on again as soon as possible?

The significance of all these questions to voluntary simplicity is considerable. In simple living we are aiming for a more direct, involved and real connection to life. We don't want to settle for second hand, mediated, pre-digested, edited, or souped up ersatz substitutes for real, first-hand experiences. Consumption of media can make us dependent on others for what we think, what we want, what we care about, when it's self-reliance we aim to cultivate. Over-consumption of media is clearly correlated with reduced participation in community and volunteer activities (Edsall 1995), another key value in simple living. Moreover, TV viewing has also been linked to a wide range of negative physical and psychological effects, none of which are consistent with well-being (Burke n.d.; Hanson 1996). Perhaps most important, media can be an open sewer of every sadistic, banal, trivial, degrading, and despairing image or message on the planet. It's difficult to imagine how we could maintain the health of our souls if we feed them a diet of such fare.

As an adjunct or extension to this exercise, I recommend the Zen TV Experiment designed by Bernard McGrane cited in the Resource section below. McGrane proposes bringing mindfulness to our relationship specifically with television by offering a series of exercises like viewing TV for thirty minutes with the sound off; or watching a TV for two and half hours (the average length of a movie or sporting event) which is turned off. By doing these things, we begin to notice the effects that indulging these media have on our bodies and consciousness. McGrane is particularly articulate in his analysis of how TV news programs have become just

another form of entertainment and the implications this has for a society that aspires to be democratic. His arguments could easily extend to Internet based media as well.

Resources:

McGrane, Bernard. 1998. "The Zen TV experiment." January <http://adbusters.org/Articles/zentv.html>

Nominal Group on Enough

Purpose:

- to help group members become more mindful of how we discern how much is enough or sufficient for a good life
- to distinguish between sufficiency of material goods versus sufficiency of nonmaterial goods
- to discern some of the influences that shape our perception of how much is enough
- to assemble tips and ideas on how to protect ourselves from forced consumption

Framing:

This exercise engages group members in exploring the criteria we use for deciding how much of anything is “enough”. Discussion is focused on enough stuff, education, and relationships. But in reflecting on how we decide how much of these is enough, and how much might be too much, we discover the basis of how we decide these things. We also become more aware of how we might slip unconsciously toward over-consumption or over-possession, or how we might be coerced by consumer culture to acquire (and desire) more than is sufficient for a good life.

This exercise can also be used to open up the topic of forced consumption. It is a popular myth in consumer culture that we are all free to purchase what we wish, and desist from purchasing if we choose to do so. But this is a highly equivocal matter. Consumption is both coerced and enticed by consumer culture and consciousness of this fact can motivate the search for steps we can take to defend ourselves from these forces. While it may at first seem over-dramatic to use such forceful language, the more we examine this issue, the more obvious it becomes that our freedom is literally at stake before the forces of coercive consumption.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, longer if more discussion items are included)

Materials / Equipment:

None

Process:

1. Assign group members to small groups of four or five people and appoint as recorder the person whose birthday falls closest to the Winter Solstice (December 21st).
2. Introduce the distinction between material goods (food, clothing, furniture, housing, transportation, etc.) and non-material goods (friends, esteem, love, recognition by others, beauty, knowledge, etc.). In small group, discuss the following questions:
 - How much is not enough / enough / too much material goods? After identifying these for yourself, what criteria did you use for each category?

- How much is not enough / enough / too much non-material goods? After identifying these for yourself, what criteria did you use for each category?
 - Do you want more and more of either of these, and if so, why do you think that is?
 - Does having more and more effectively silence your desire for more? If not, why do you think this is and what does it say about consumer culture?
3. After some time for small group discussion, return to the large group and listen to summaries from recorders. Debrief this part of the exercise and note both common themes that emerge and the diversity of views present. Return to small groups for another round of discussion.

Introduce the idea that consumption in consumer culture may not be wholly a matter of choice:

- How do you experience consumer culture promoting consumption in your experience?
 - How do you feel enticed to consume?
 - Do you think you are ever forced to consume, and if so, how?
 - Have you ever felt you wanted to protect yourself both from enticements to consume and from forced consumption? If so, do you have any tips you can share about how to do this?
4. Again, allow time for small group discussion, then reassemble in the large group and debrief these conversations. Many group members will probably be able to identify advertising as a key mechanism for enticing consumption. But they need considerably more help conscientizing to the process of coerced consumption. Continue to ask questions until some of this awareness begins to surface.

Notes:

Many people find this exercise quite challenging because in consumer culture we are never asked to consider how much is enough. It is simply taken for granted that everyone will be after as much as possible. When the game ends, then and only then, will we stop, count up our spoils, and decide who won. Many of us don't have conscious criteria for how much is too little, how much is sufficient, and how much is too much. So educators should not be surprised if gears grind audibly during this exercise as group members wrestle with these questions for the first time. This by itself makes the exercise worth doing. Debriefing the exercise can then consist merely of pointing out the obvious: That nothing in consumer culture ever invites us to consider these questions. It's new territory for us. But discerning sufficiency rather than blindly pursuing more is central to the practice of simple living. It requires shifting our frame of reference and the criteria we use for discerning sufficiency and insufficiency.

Taking the exercise the second step into consideration of both enticed and coerced consumption can be both more emotional and also more entertaining.

Most of us think we are savvy consumers and that we can see through the ploys of advertisers out to tempt us to consume. Few people appreciate, however, the science, technology, and massive budgets that are now being brought to bear in service of marketing. Toddlers as young as eighteen months are being branded with corporate logos and product placement promotions during the television shows they watch. There are dedicated advertising channels in the schools children attend. And marketers are using MRI scans to associate various advertising messages with desired patterns of brain activation—an emerging field called

neural marketing. Far from simply informing us about various product options available in the marketplace, modern advertising aims to reach down to the cellular level of brain functioning to encourage hyper-consumption. Information technologies are being used increasingly to link advertising specifically to our individual past consumption choices and easy credit makes the mere lack of money no barrier to purchasing. In any group, there will be members with varying levels of awareness of these developments and every opportunity should be taken to shape the group discussion to invite and incorporate what these people can contribute.

The question of forced consumption strikes squarely at the heart of one of consumer culture's most cherished myths: That we are all sovereign economic actors completely free to make whatever purchases we wish, and to desist from purchasing if we choose. This article of faith is central to the ideology of free markets and conservatism generally. So in opening up this topic for discussion, educators will be inviting group members both to bring light to a subject which is largely unconscious in consumer culture, and also to overcome whatever resistance we might understandably have to the idea that we really don't live in a free market society at all. It is a chilling thing to realize that not only are we at risk of addictive consumption, we are also oppressed under regimes of forced consumption.

A major mechanism of forced consumption is designed obsolescence, especially when applied to products people can't do without. Both computer hardware and software are notoriously "perishable", and so are cars, home appliances, and even houses themselves. Anything that is not designed to last as long as technically possible is being designed for premature replacement, hence, forcing its owner back into the marketplace sooner than necessary. Other examples of forced consumption include "tying" the consumption of one product to the use of another as when purchase of one article requires the purchase of a number of accessories or options which are essential to its proper operation or maintenance. We're also forced to consume through the design of cities and transportation systems that make car ownership a necessity, artificially inflated standards of decency, advertising generated fads, regulations and statutes requiring the over-credentialization of workers in professional and paraprofessional services, building codes and zoning regulations that require overly large houses or unsustainable landscaping practices, and a host of other examples. As group members brainstorm these examples from their own experience, they can uncover increasing levels of outrage and helplessness in the process.

I have therefore found it helpful when doing this exercise to invite participants to brainstorm their favorite tips and strategies for counteracting the pressures arising from consumer culture. For example, what are some entertaining ways to discourage telemarketers? How can we discourage ad mail and door-to-door salespeople? What steps can we take to protect ourselves when buying a used car? While this conversation can veer off into consumer protectionism when it's really consumption avoidance that is the aim of voluntary simplicity, protection isn't a bad thing.

I recommend assembling as a handout or website page a list of "Consumer Proofing Strategies", or else make it a group activity to compile one. I've included a sample in the Resource section below. The contents of this one reflects a Canadian jurisdiction and we might expect the contents of the list to vary depending on where in the world you live and the services, agencies, and non-governmental organizations that might be available in your area. It's most helpful however, to include as many specifics as possible so that group members interested in using it have all the information they need to do so.

Resources:

I strongly recommend *Adbusters*, and their "culture jamming" campaign. *Adbusters* uses humor and satire, based on real advertising and using real marketing techniques, to spoof consumer culture as well as offering incisive critiques of consumer culture values and attitudes. See: www.adbusters.org

Consumer-Proofing

Here is a list of actions you can take to reduce the influence of the consumerist culture on your life.

1. Practice voluntary simplicity. Commitment to simple living automatically orients your whole life away from consumerism and toward values which are most authentically your own.
2. Turn off your television and radio. If possible, dispose of them both. If you choose to keep them, discontinue subscriptions to cable channels with heavy advertising. Restrict viewing to selected programs or videos. Avoid passive viewing, watching television as a time killer, and leaving the TV on even though no one is watching it.
3. If you subscribe to a newspaper, notify them that you don't want advertising fliers delivered to your home. Post a sign at your mailbox saying that you don't want to receive unaddressed "ad mail" or unsolicited fliers. This will only work part of the time because Canadian postal workers are required to deliver all personally addressed mail.
4. Contact the Canadian Direct Marketing Association (1 Concord Gate, Suite 607, Don Mills, Ontario, M3C 3N6) to have your name removed from all advertising mailing lists. This will greatly reduce your junk mail. Should you subscribe to magazines or other services that ask your permission to resell your name and address, refuse permission. Whenever you are asked for address or other personal information during completing a sale, you can assume that this information will be resold. Refuse to give it and tell the sales clerk why.
5. Make lists before you go shopping and delay shopping for at least one day. Avoid shopping malls or other commercial establishments as a form of entertainment. Avoid shopping without a list or a specific goal in mind. When contemplating a major purchase, research the purchase thoroughly and if possible, defer the purchase for 30 days. If you still want / need the item after that period of time, then get it.
6. Think of personal development and well-being in terms of skills, appreciations and knowledge rather than the acquiring things. Take steps to de-materialize your consumption. Focus on increasing your knowledge and capacity for appreciation rather than increasing your stock of material possessions.
7. Adopt an active approach to your own well-being. Consider family and community-based activities as sources of entertainment and personal growth and select (or learn) activities that are less consumptive, e.g., learn a martial art, or dancing, or storytelling rather than taking the family to a theme park or movie.
8. Consider moving to accommodation which requires less consumption. Living closer to your workplace, working at home, reducing the size of your home, and living in a condominium or apartment may all weaken the grip of consumerism by reducing your involuntary consumption.
9. Avoid products designed to make you consume more. If possible, avoid single-use, special purpose, and disposable products which must be repurchased after every use. Avoid purchasing a disposable version of a durable product, e.g., disposable contact lenses to replace eyeglasses, or disposable razors to replace a reusable one.
10. Make a joke of it! A great deal of advertising is crude, absurd and quite funny. Make a game of twisting advertising messages into jokes; share this in your family. Exaggerate,

satirize, pun, and ridicule. Subscribe to Adbusters Magazine or checkout their website:
<http://www.adbusters.com>

Consumer Self-Defense

We are increasingly involuntarily subjected to advertising and marketing efforts from a variety of sources. If you would like to reduce your personal visibility to direct mail and telemarketing come-ons, here are agencies and organizations you can contact to have your name and address removed from direct marketing lists.

Telephone

Manitoba Telecom Services routinely sells its telephone directory listings to telemarketing organizations by publishing a Who Called Me? directory twice yearly (publication deadlines are April 1 and October 5). To have your name removed from the Who Called Me? directory, you must write (No, they don't make it convenient!):

MTS Allstream Inc.
Delisting Requests
P.O. Box 6666 (F100)
1700 Ellice Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3C 3V6

Canada 411 is an Internet-based directory with white page listings for all of Canada. To be delisted from this directory, submit name, complete address, and phone number to:

Canada 411
Attention: Webmaster
Suite 600 – 20 Richmond St. E.
Toronto, Ontario
M5C 3B5

or by email: canada411@sympatico.ca

Check into similar de-listing options in your own country.

Junk Mail (Unaddressed Ad-mail)

The Canadian Marketing Association (responsible for 80% of direct marketing in Canada) is an association of over 500 organizations that do direct marketing. Four times per year, a list of individuals indicating their preference not to be included in mailing or telephone marketing is forwarded to the membership. You can send written requests to be delisted by indicating name, complete address, and phone number to:

Do Not Mail, Do Not Call
Canadian Marketing Association
P.O. Box 706
Don Mills, Ontario
M3C 2T6

or visit their website at: <http://www.the-cma.org>

MasterCard, and probably other credit card companies, resell your name, address, phone number and other personal information to marketing organizations. To have your name removed from these lists, you must contact MasterCard directly by phone at 1-800-561-7849, or write to CU CREDIT, 2055 Albert Street, Regina, SK, S4P 3G8

Advice from www.snopes.com Very important!

1. Any time you see an email that says "forward this on to '10' (or however many) of your friends", "sign this petition", or "you'll get bad luck" or "you'll get good luck" or "you'll see something funny on your screen after you send it" or whatever—almost always has an email tracker program attached that tracks the cookies and emails of the addresses you forward to. The host sender is getting a copy each time it gets forwarded and then is able to get lists of active email addresses to use in SPAM emails or sell to other spammers. Even when you get emails that demand you send the email on if you're not ashamed of God / Jesus—that is email tracking, and they are playing on our conscience. These people don't care how they get your email addresses—just as long as they get them. Also, emails that talk about a missing child or a child with an incurable disease and, "How would you feel if that was your child?"—email tracking. Ignore them and don't participate!
2. Almost all emails that ask you to add your name and forward on to others are similar to that mass letter years ago that asked people to send business cards to the little kid in Florida who wanted to break the Guinness Book of Records for the most cards. All it was, and all any of this type of email is, is a way to get names and 'cookie' tracking information for telemarketers and spammers—to validate active email accounts for their own profitable purposes.

Do yourself a favor and stop adding your name(s) to those types of listings regardless of how inviting they might sound! Or how guilty you feel if you don't! It's all about getting email addresses and nothing more.

Also: Email petitions are not acceptable to the U. S. Congress (not sure what their legal status is in Canada) or any other organization—i.e., social security, etc. To be acceptable, petitions must have a "signed signature" and the full address of the person signing the petition, so this is a waste of time and you are just helping the email trackers.

3. Don't want to pass on your favorite email address? Be sure to use "Bcc" (blind copy) instead of "To:" when emailing to multiple friends. Also, remember that when forwarding you can edit and erase every address that has received the email you want to forward, thus protecting all your friends from unwanted spam and / or email!

Tips for Handling Telemarketers:

1. The three words that work: 'Hold on, please ...' Saying this, while putting down your phone and walking off (instead of hanging-up immediately) would make each telemarketing call so much more time-consuming that boiler room sales would grind to a halt.

Then when you eventually hear the phone company's beep-beep-beep tone, you know it's time to go back and hang up your handset, which has efficiently completed its task. These three little words will help eliminate telephone soliciting.

2. Do you ever get those annoying phone calls with no one on the other end? This is a telemarketing technique where a machine makes phone calls and records the time of day when a person answers the phone. This technique is used to determine the best time of day for a real sales person to call back and get someone at home. What you can do after answering, if you notice there is no one there, is to immediately start hitting your # button on the phone, 6 or 7 times as quickly as possible. This confuses the machine that dialed the call, and it kicks your number out of their system.
3. Junk Mail Help: When you get 'ads' enclosed with your phone or utility bill, return these 'ads' with your payment. Let the sending companies throw their own junk mail away. When you get those 'pre-approved' letters for everything from credit cards to second mortgages and similar type junk, do not throw away the return envelope. Most of these come with postage-paid return envelopes. It costs them more than the regular 44-cents postage, if and when they receive them back. It costs them nothing if you throw them away. The postage (in Canada) was around 50-cents before the last increase and it is according to weight. In that case, why not get rid of some of your other junk mail and put it in these cool little, postage-paid return envelopes? Send an ad for your local chimney cleaner to American Express. Send a pizza coupon to Citibank. If you didn't get anything else that day, then just send them their blank application back. If you want to remain anonymous, make sure your name isn't on anything you send them. You can even send the envelope back empty if you want to just to keep them guessing. It still costs them 44-cents.

Nominal Group on Needs and Desires

Purpose:

- to invite group members to bring mindfulness to the differentiation of needs and desires
- to interrogate desire itself to discover the nature of desire, its evolution, and the role it plays, if any, in human well-being

Framing:

This nominal group exercise again takes up the question of what is sufficient, but from a different perspective than the Nominal Group on Enough. Here the focus of attention is on distinguishing needs from desires, and desires which are apparently innate from desires we acquire through social learning, social comparison, and the media. The exercise also helps participants learn the distinction between physical needs and psychological needs, and the difference between “How many possessions are enough to satisfy my desires?” versus “How many desires are sufficient for a good life?”

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper
- flip-chart, white / black board for collating responses
- odorless markers or chalk

Process:

1. Working initially as individuals, have group members jot down a few thoughts about each of the following questions:
 - What is a “need”? (Physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual...)
 - What is a “desire”?
 - How do you distinguish needs from desires, if at all?
 - How do you know when a need has been satisfied?
 - How do you know when a desire has been satisfied?
 - How do needs and desires appear in your awareness when they occur to you?

- Where do needs seem to come from?
 - Where do desires come from?
 - In your experience, what the similarities and differences between needs and desires and how are they both related to well-being?
2. Assign participants to small groups and ask the person whose birthday is closest to the Autumn Equinox (September 22nd) to serve as recorder / reporter. Groups should further discuss the questions above and recorders take summary notes. Allow at least 30 minutes for this discussion.
 3. Reassemble the group and have a general discussion of these questions based on the summary reports from the recorders. Chart the results and debrief.
 4. Depending on the outcome of the discussion, perhaps have group members brainstorm self-defense strategies, or share their favorite tips, for avoiding the artificially-generated desires so strongly promoted in consumer culture.

Notes:

Educators may want to supplement this exercise with additional information or examples that help group members zero in on key aspects of needs and desires relevant to simple living. There are many.

It's now a commonplace beginning in many elementary school social science classes to introduce children to the difference between needs (life necessities without which we die) versus desires (learned wants). We need food. We learn to desire Russian caviar. But this exploration generally ends pretty soon after that. The assumption is that children will be somewhat less vulnerable to the appeals of advertisers simply by learning the distinction between needs and desires.

Added to this rather superficial perspective of desire is the common practice in consumer culture of taking desire, more or less, for granted. Desires themselves are never questioned, nor is the relation between desire and well-being. In consumer culture, desires are accepted *sui generis*, and the hunt goes forward to find the best desire satisfiers without ever asking whether pursuing the things we desire is really a pathway to well-being or not.

Depending on how many group members have cultivated an introspective approach to life, this exercise can be very challenging. In consumer culture, we're not accustomed to interrogating desire itself. While appearing quite simple, it aims directly at many of the key insights of Buddhism in its analysis of desire. We invite group members to examine their subjective experience closely to see if they can distinguish between needs and desires, where these come from, and how they evolve in consciousness. This takes considerable self-awareness and self-acceptance.

If consumer culture has it right and the good life is found in desiring more and more, and consuming more and more desired objects, then well-being should increase as consumption increases. But numerous social surveys over many years have shown just the opposite. While consumption between 1950 and 2010 has quadrupled in North America, people are generally no happier now than in 1950, and in many cases there has even been some decline in life satisfaction. So while there is clearly some relationship between consumption and well-being, that relationship is not strictly linear.

From the voluntary simplicity perspective, or we might say the "sufficiency" perspective, well-being increases as we make sufficient provision of what we need, but well-being is not increased by endlessly pursuing what we've been taught to desire. So optimizing well-being

entails making sufficient provision for authentic needs and cultivating insight and self-understanding that can loosen the grip of learned desires.

As group members explore the questions above, educators can look for the following insights to emerge from the discussion:

- Both needs and desires manifest in consciousness as imagery and felt sensations in the body.
- Desires arise like any other thought or feeling. They are temporary and prone to disintegrate if we ignore them i.e., we form no attachment to them and we give them no energy.
- Both needs and desires arise incessantly.
- Both needs and desires are aversive. They manifest as a painful, unsettled feeling we want to escape by obtaining a need / desire satisfier.
- Both needs and desires can only be temporarily satisfied.
- Needs are few in number and relatively “organic” whereas desires can be countless and relatively “psychological”.
- Satisfying needs is generally simpler and more direct than satisfying desires.
- Desires can be endlessly multiplied through social learning while needs cannot.
- Desires grow stronger if we give them attention while needs do not.
- Desires can be created and inflamed by advertisers and marketers while needs cannot.
- Obtaining the objects we think we desire does not eliminate desire. Desire simply fixes on a new object.
- Pursuing desires as a pathway to well-being simply leads into a hamster cage of desiring, temporary satisfaction, followed by renewed desiring—not well-being.
- While desire itself continues to arise in us as long as we’re alive, we can learn that pursuing the objects of desire is not a pathway to well-being. This insight is liberating because we now have a choice between pursuing desires or not. We can decide to do something else, i.e., cultivate what really is conducive to well-being.

I strongly encourage educators who undertake this exercise to read Timothy Miller’s book, *How to Want What You Have*, cited in the Resource section below. Miller really does offer a pathway to what is probably our best chance for cultivating well-being in an uncertain world. It begins with discovering and really internalizing the lesson that pursuing what we don’t have, i.e., what we desire will not lead to contentment or well-being. This is not an insight which is original to Miller, but it seems to warrant endless repetition. So the first step to cultivating well-being is to cease looking for it in what we lack. This insight is hugely liberating all on its own.

If we resign from chasing after what we don’t have, or chasing after what others are chasing after, how then do we cultivate well-being? Miller proposes that this can be achieved by cultivating conscious habits of mindfulness, gratitude, and compassion. While not easy, this simply consists in substituting the practice of non-judgmental attention to our present moment experience for our usual habits of inattentive judgmentalism, thoughts of gratitude for indifference or ingratitude, and thoughts of compassion for others in all the moments when we are prone to take offense or somehow think that we are suffering in ways that others do not.

Personally, I have found these insights and practices life-changing. They are essentially the same doctrines as can be found in Mahayana Buddhism but in Miller's case, they surface in cognitive behavior therapy. Moreover, the values represented by these practices should be compatible with any creedal allegiance as well as acceptable to people of no particular faith affiliation.

As I've already mentioned, this is one of the more challenging exercises in this collection and we should therefore bring modest expectations to it. Much is accomplished if group members simply begin thinking about the question of the relationship among needs and desires and well-being. Generally, I've found it best to avoid preaching the insights we hope participants will discover from the exercise and try instead to be a true educator—someone who draws forth (educes)—from whatever manifests during group discussion those insights that help people in the general direction of freedom, spaciousness, and well-being.

Resources:

Miller, Timothy. 1995. *How to want what you have*. New York: Avon

My Planet for a Cup of Coffee

Purpose:

- to think about the meaning of progress, diminishing returns and the displacement of creativity to profit
- to consider the value of things in relation to the needs they serve rather than their marketing characteristics

Framing:

This exercise is designed to conscientize group members to “technological creep” and “status creep” in the things we purchase and use. It is based on the observation that product development over the last half century has done very little to actually improve the function of the goods we buy. In place of improved quality or function, extraneous features, options and choices have been added. Apparently shoppers will pay more just to have options and choices, even if we don’t use them. In this exercise, we explore whether this is a sustainable recipe for progress and whether a good life might be possible with less choice and fewer options.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper

Process:

1. Assign group members to small groups of four or five people. Then read Quinn's Coffee Story:

I met Quinn, hermit and storyteller extraordinaire, living in the backwoods of Northern Ontario in the early '80s. He ranted about many things, but one morning he got going about his cup of coffee.

“Know what coffee costs ya these days?” he fumed. “Arm and half o’ leg, that’s what!”

“And how’s that?” I asked.

“Well,” he began, “when my pappy came into these parts, he made ‘camp coffee’. That’s where ya just dump some coffee into a pan o’ boilin’ water and let ‘er brew. Then ya take ‘er off the heat, drip in some cold water to settle the grounds and have yer brew.”

“Well, pappy kept gettin’ grounds in his cup. So he took a sock and put the grounds in his sock and soaked it like a tea bag in the boilin’ water and that gave coffee too, only better, ‘cause it had no grounds.”

“Later then they came up with them metal pots with the little basket for the grounds and the las’ bubble on top so ya would tell how dark yer coffee was gettin’. All in all, it tasted better than socks! So, coffee was a little better.”

“Now one day, they drove hydro in here and ya could put yer coffee pot on an electric stove and heat it that way instead o’ on the wood stove. That didn’t make the coffee any

better a'tall, but I guess the electric stove was good fer some other stuff, so it sorta made sense."

"Then somebody decided 'twern't good enough to make yer coffee on the stove and ya better have a different gizmo fer it. So they come up with them plug-in coffee pots that like had their own little stove right inside 'em, 'cept you couldn't use 'em fer nothin' else but coffee. They made a bundle on them, they did!"

"Well, once they got people into buyin' them things, they got them computer chips and all. Now ya can get a coffee pot with brains yet! It's got programs and dials and settin's and needs to have is innards flushed out every week just like a fastin' yogi. It'll make coffee even if ya ain't there! Makes the same coffee as pappy's sock, 'cept pappy's sock was free and these gizmos cost ya a hundred bucks. They call that progress." (Burch 1995:81-82)

2. Invite groups to select some item of material culture which has undergone considerable "development" since it was first introduced, e.g., refrigerators, telephones, washing machines, cars, etc.
 - Identify the need this device was created to fulfill.
 - How has this device "developed" over the years since its invention?
 - Was there ever a point at which changes in the device failed to produce improvements in its function? If so, when?
 - What have been the results of the additional changes? Who has benefited from these changes?
 - At any point, did development become "over-development"?
 - What relation exists between this device and the need it is intended to fulfill at the end of its course of development compared to the beginning?
3. After some time for small group discussion, reassemble the large group and discuss and debrief:
 - What does the consumer culture approach to development cost each of us in terms of time, money, the environment, aesthetic quality of life, spiritual peace, international and inter-cultural understanding and harmony?
 - What alternatives to this sort of system can we imagine?
 - What steps can we take immediately to move toward such alternatives?

Notes:

Consumer culture promotes a blind faith in progress and uncritically conflates true progress with mere novelty. It's often the case that new products come to market, but not as often the case that they are also improved. In recent years, the obsession with adding options and enhancements to existing products has been taken to literally life-threatening extremes. Two cases in point are cellular telephones and navigation and entertainment accessories in cars. Both examples of over-developed technologies, they represent irresistible distractions for many people—both distractions from driving and in the case cellular phones, a distraction from almost every other life activity.

Quinn's coffee story illustrates how something simple like a coffee pot can be over-developed to such an extent that its connection with its original function becomes tenuous at best, and the functions which have been added wind up being costly and rarely useful. It can be argued that in consumer culture this has happened to a great many things. Progress now seldom means the invention of something new which serves an authentic purpose efficiently and affordably. Most truly useful household appliances were all invented in the late 19th century, soon after the broad electrification of urban centers in Europe and North America. Since then, there have been many cosmetic changes to the external appearance of these devices, but not many substantial changes to their inner workings, their efficiency, or their environmental sustainability. In cases where special features have been added, like the bewildering combinations of settings on modern clothes washers and microwave ovens, most of them probably go unused or make only a marginal difference in the results we get from using the device.

In terms of voluntary simplicity, progress which isn't really progress is just a costly lie. Clearly, the inflation of extraneous features and options and models and variations in the things we need for a good life simply comes down to trying to secure a larger market share against one's competition, or to inflate the price and thereby the profitability of a product. None of this adds to our quality of life, although it does enrich corporations. Living simply implies first of all being mindful of what material goods we actually need, and then provisioning those needs both sufficiently and efficiently. Extraneous decoration, useless features, over-refinement of function, and excess cost are all the enemies of simplicity because they make our material life more complex and labor intensive than necessary. Over-development is a direct tax on leisure. It detracts from our quality of life by adding annoying complexity rather than enriching complexity. Personally, I would rather spend my time enjoying the complex plot of a really good novel than spend it deciphering a really complex owner's manual in order to set the time on my Personal Video Recorder.

We can all come up with examples of this process at work in our own lives. It's helpful for group members to discover from their own experience the diminishing returns of over-development and then appreciate the toll it imposes on our well-being. Only then do we really start to question whether more is better, or whether less might really be more.

In the Resource section, I cite two references that are useful in this connection. Barry Schwartz' book on *The Paradox of Choice* (2004) directly addresses the question of whether inflating choices increases well-being. His studies of how people react to the proliferation of options, while they certainly do expand the opportunity to customize some products and services to our individual needs, in most cases proves extremely stressful to consumers concerned to make the best possible choice from the available alternatives.

Eric and Mary Brende in their book, *Better Off* (2005) launched a modern day homesteading experiment, the key aim of which was to discover just how little technology was necessary for a good life. While their story is entertaining, the conclusion was quite simple: Very little. What I found most interesting was the fact that the decision to make the quantum leap from gardening with hand tools to farming with horses incurred a huge increase in hours of work, difficulty of work, and the extra land that had to be put under cultivation, nearly all of which went to support the horse! The economics are even worse if you switch to a mechanical tractor. These discoveries are nearly identical to those reported in an essay by Wendell Berry (1987:179-192) chronicling the transition of rural communities in Tennessee in the 1930s and '40s that were making the transition from subsistence and surplus production to large-scale, mechanized production regimes for profit. The general effect of modernizing agriculture has been to depopulate rural communities, shave profit margins razor thin, increase debt, and destroy soil fertility.

I don't mean to imply that simple living requires rural living or an interest in farming. I just cite these examples as ones of over-development and instances where our uncritical faith in technology, mechanization, and excessive complexity may be misplaced. Simple living looks for shorter routes with more direct contributions to well-being.

Resources:

Schwartz, Barry. 2004. The paradox of choice: Why more is less. New York: HarperCollins.

Brende, Eric. 2005. Better off: Flipping the switch on technology. New York: HarperCollins.

How Little Technology Is Enough?

Purpose:

- to conscientize participants to their individual daily use of the artifacts of technology
- to heighten awareness of our expectations for technology
- to sensitize participants to their actual experience of technology
- to relate this discoveries to an alternative perspective of technology proposed by voluntary simplicity

Framing:

Technology is pervasive in consumer culture and has come virtually to define progress. Technology is understood today as humanity's main adaptive mechanism in the evolutionary struggle for survival. It is also a major profit centre for the economy. We not only need technology for many reasons, we love it, sometimes worship it, fear it, and often think of it as something almost independent from human hopes, fears, or dreams. Technology is often reified as an autonomous force all its own. We are passengers on the Titanic which symbolizes both our feelings of inflation before our own creative powers, and the unfeeling, mechanical relentlessness with which we sometimes feel we are carried to our doom by them. By cultivating mindfulness of our relationship to technology, it becomes easier to discern how much technology and what sorts of technology are sufficient for a good life. Mindfulness also helps us discern when technology begins to diminish our well-being.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1 – 2 hours (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for participants
- Technology and Simplicity Surveys for all group members

Process:

1. Have participants complete the Technology and Simplicity Survey in the Resource section below. Be sure not to limit 'technology' to the idea of machines or electronic devices. Technology also includes things like drugs, hybrid seeds, processed foods, hand tools, etc.
2. Assign group members to small discussion groups of four to five people, and appoint as recorder / reporter the person whose birthday falls closest to Valentine's Day (February 14). Discuss the following questions:

- What technologies do you use in your life on a daily basis (at home, at work, for entertainment, etc.)?
 - Which of the technologies you use on a daily basis were adopted by you voluntarily and which ones were not? What forced you to adopt unwanted technology?
 - What benefits do you expect to gain (or were you promised you would gain) by using this technology?
 - What benefits have you actually experienced from using this technology?
 - What have been the costs of using this technology? Were the costs / risks of using this technology pointed out to you when you were deciding to adopt it?
 - Are their technical artifacts you want to simplify from your life as a result of this exercise?
 - Are you really free to let go of unwanted technology? If not, why not, and what does this say about the sort of society in which we live?
3. Reconvene the group and have a discussion about what insights or discoveries the participants may have gained in this exercise.

Notes:

My brother is a natural practitioner of voluntary simplicity. As a young man, he adopted the rule that, with only a few exceptions, he would use no electrically powered or automatic appliances if a human powered alternative was available. One of his only exceptions to this rule was an automatic clothes washer. His philosophy was that we may voluntarily decide not to adopt a time- or labor-saving technology, even when it's available, depending on how we define a good life. We may decide instead to forego the use of technology, or even adopt a labor-using technology to (a) save money and thereby reduce the need for income generating work, (b) encourage a more physically active lifestyle, (c) deliberately slow down to smell the roses, and (d) benefit from learning to use simpler technologies in a more self-reliant way. In short, we might forego the use of technology because of what it can add to our lives, or because we don't want to pay the price the technology may require in exchange for whatever benefits it offers.

Consumer culture media often portray simple living as both rural and anti-technological. These stereotypes play on the modern urban dweller's lack of direct experience of what rural living is actually like these days—farm life often being intensely technological—and also an effort to make simple living seem backward or culturally regressive.

As an interesting supplement to this exercise, you can incorporate a historical sketch of the Luddite movement in 18th-century Britain, since practitioners of simple living are sometimes compared to Luddites. Today, we think of the Luddite rebellion as an uprising of uneducated people fearful of the technical advancements being achieved through water-driven automated weaving machines of the day. On the contrary, however, the uprising consisted of independent cottage-based weavers who manufactured good products on a basis which left them working at home with their families and as fully independent tradespeople. They weren't against technical improvements per se, but rather resisted monopolistic capitalists who were driving down the price of their product and forcing people to work excessively long hours under horrible and dangerous conditions for wages they couldn't control. What the Luddites were protesting was the disappearance of their way of life and of their freedom to determine their own incomes, hours, and conditions of work. It all seemed to them a sorry bargain for cheaper cloth.

In consumer culture, technology is almost worshipped with a blind faith that it can solve all problems, surpass all limitations, and continue to square the circle of ever-expanding

consumption on a limited planet by means of sheer ingenuity. But while technical artifacts are themselves works of scientific and engineering genius, their effect on the general population is often to make us more stupid and more dependent. A recent CBC (Canada) documentary entitled “Are We Digital Dummies?” (DocZone 2010) chronicles the measurable impacts that electronic entertainment technologies are having to reduce attention spans, memory, and problem solving ability in young people. There is also concern that the ascendancy of Google as offering access to a global bibliography of almost everything is eroding our ability to remember facts and concepts on our own. And who, in a modern North American city, remembers how to provide the necessities of life for him or herself?

From the perspective of voluntary simplicity, technology per se is not a problem. Everything depends on how it is used, and what it's used for. When technology is used entirely to increase profit and promote affluence, then it is likely to run unchecked as to its scale and extent, because there is no natural limit to the fantasies of people who prize affluence and luxury. In such a case, technology becomes the means of consuming the world. If, however, it's oriented to serve a mindful, active, self-reliant, and conserving ethos, the results can be much more constructive. But this may well mean less technology!

This exercise is very effective at conscientizing group members to how pervasive technology is in our daily lives, how dependent we are on it, and how often this is not a matter of choice. In effect, we are not free in this respect. We take technology so much for granted that we seldom stop to ask ourselves what effect these devices and techniques are having on us, how much they contribute to well-being—if at all—and what price we pay for its benefits.

Resources:

Brende, Eric. 2005. *Better off: Flipping the switch on technology*. New York: HarperCollins. Brende and his wife undertook a Thoreau-like experiment by moving to a rural farming area to explore how little technology is necessary for a good life. Their discovery: Very little.

Technology and Simplicity Survey

On the table below, list as many of the technological devices or products as you can think of that you use on a daily basis at home or at work. Consider the following general categories of technology: (a) shelter; (b) transportation; (c) housekeeping; (d) yard care; (e) communication; (f) entertainment; (g) health; (h) power tools; (i) personal care.

Technology	Hoped-for / Expected Benefit(s)	Actual / Experienced Benefit(s)	Costs / Unforeseen Consequences

A Sample of Examples

Shelter: artificial shelter; artificial lights; pumped water; domestic hot water service; domestic sewage systems; artificial heating, ventilation, air conditioning; humidifier; de-humidifier; electrostatic precipitator; mechanical ventilation system; fire alarm; smoke alarm; fire-suppression system; burglar-intrusion alarm; surveillance system; garage door opener; mobile home; houseboat.

Transportation: car; light truck; motorcycle; moped; scooter; snowmobile; all-terrain vehicle; dirt bike; dune buggy; recreational vehicle; camper; speed boat; canoe; pontoon boat; sail boat; rowing scull; ice-boat; wind surfer; personal watercraft (skidoo); inflatable raft or zodiac; swamp boat; hover craft; commercial watercraft (cruise ship, ferry, etc.); train; subway; bus; private aircraft; commercial aircraft; hot air balloon; hang-glider; para-sail; parachute; rocket; space shuttle; space station; bicycle; inline skates; skis; snowboard; bobsled; dog sled; toboggan; snow sled; animal-powered cart, wagon or sleigh.

Housekeeping: vacuum; dust-buster; washer; dryer; dishwasher; microwave; range; fridge; hand mixer; blender; food processor; kettle; toaster; coffee-maker; coffee urn; waffle iron; slow-cooker; electric knife; bread maker; freezer; ice-cream maker; deep fryer; floor polisher; power can opener; cleaning products; electric clock; mechanical clock; radio / stereo / CD alarm clock.

Yard Care: lawn mower; garden tiller; leaf-blower; weed whacker; pressure washer; compost grinder / shredder; hedge trimmer; lawn sprinkler; yard chemicals; pruning tools.

Communication: telephone; fax; cell phone; text messaging; Internet; email; web cam; web telephone; web cast; web chat; web newsgroup; e-zine; ham radio; CB radio; walkie-talkie; marine radio; flight navigation radio; aircraft radio; GIS receiver; video conferencing; teleconferencing; telex; telegraph; overhead projector; slide projector; computer palate projector; video projector; intercom; bull horn; PA system.

Entertainment: stereo vinyl disks; CD player; television; radio; home theatre; VCR; DVD; video game; online game; computer-mediated audio /video gaming; print media; electro-mechanical toy; digital photography equipment; craft and hobby tools and equipment; hot tub; swimming pool.

Health / Hygiene: toilet; bidet; shower; bathtub; sink; exercise machine; electronic monitor (BP, pedometer, HR meter, etc.); medical prosthesis; air purifier; water purifier; vibrator-massage bed or furniture; whirlpool bath; heating pad; "magic bag"; muscle stimulator; biofeedback monitor; ion generator; pulse-massage stockings; oxygen generator; ice bag; hot water bottle; bathroom scale; heat lamp; UV lamp / tanning lamp; S. A. D. array; biophysical test kits (blood sugar, pregnancy, etc.); electronic fever thermometer.

Power tools: numerous, but common ones include hobby specific tools; power saw; power drill; dremel tool; sander; compressor; nail gun; staple gun; hot glue gun; router; power plane; lathe; grinder; heaters of various kinds (torches, elements, wood burners, etc.); powered pottery wheel; pottery kiln.

Personal Care: hair dryer; vibrator massager; foot / hand spa; powered cosmetic table; powered manicure tools; electric toothbrush; home spa; sauna heater; steam bath equipment.

Worldly Possessions Inventory

Purpose:

- to increase our mindfulness of our true inventory of material possessions
- to provide the information necessary to support decision-making for down-sizing or de-junking
- to heighten appreciation for the possessions we do own and decide to keep

Framing:

The Worldly Possessions Inventory exercise invites group members to inventory every single material possession in one room of their home and then interrogate each object with respect to its purpose, its actual performance, the last time it was used, etc. Much of what we own is unconscious. Doing an inventory of what we own increases our mindfulness of what it may or may not be doing for us lately. This is an eye-opener activity that can feed very funny and insightful group discussion and greater consciousness of how much is enough.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1 hour (approximately, depending on group size) The exercise requires more than one day to complete since there is a pre-exercise homework assignment.

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- Worldly Possessions Inventory worksheets for every group member

Process:

1. Share with group members the purposes of this exercise, distribute Worldly Possessions Inventory Worksheets for everyone, and send them off with whatever time they think they require to perform an inventory on one room in their home.
2. Reassemble the group and either divide people into small groups to compare and discuss their inventories, or simply debrief the activity as a large group. I suggest the following questions:
 - When you were doing your inventory, were you struck by any new insights or awareness?
 - Did you discover that most of your possessions were in routine use, or did you discover a considerable inventory of unused possessions? If the later, how did you feel about this, and do you plan to do anything about it? Is so, what and why?
 - In how many cases did you feel significant emotional attachments to your possessions and what sort of attachments were these?

- In most cases, what effect would there be on your quality of life if you passed this possession on to someone else? What effect would there be on the Earth?
3. If this exercise is left with the common place observation that we all have lots of stuff stashed in closets we haven't seen or used in a long time, then it will be trivial. But there is potential in close questioning and thoughtful discussion to begin to perceive (a) how few material things we actually need for a good life, and (b) how often our possession of things is driven by fear, sentimentality, neglect, and unawareness. The question is: Are these good reasons for owning things that we are not using or perhaps don't even remember owning, when others might have use for them or the environment might be preserved to some small degree by recycling them?

Notes:

This exercise shares the same spirit as the De-Junking activity described above except it doesn't go quite as far. Here, we are satisfied with sparking awareness and discussion. Group members are often surprised by the sheer number of things they own, including those who think they already live quite simply. They are often surprised by how seldom they actually use what they own even when they know they have it. Bringing mindfulness to this aspect of our lives can lead to "ah-ha!" moments like the one I had after viewing two pictures. One picture was that of a typical North American family with all their material possessions arrayed in front of their suburban house together with their two cars, boat, camper, and a huge ocean of mostly plastic consumer goods for a family of four. The other picture was of a Kenyan family in East Africa and all their possessions correspondingly on display—a family of six with a few sticks of wooden furniture, a small assortment of cooking pots, a transistor radio, and a family bicycle. The contrast was stark, and to some extent artificial, but nonetheless edifying. North Americans can't live like Africans for a variety of reasons, and such comparisons are to some extent unfair, but even allowing for that, the point is obvious: North Americans consume at unsustainable and inequitable rates. A simpler life would be socially more just, environmentally more sustainable, and probably better too.

Resources:

Ryan, John C., and Alan Durning. 1997. *Stuff: The secret lives of everyday things*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Environment Watch. Enlightening read that traces the environmental history and impact of goods consumed by the average American. Recommended for further background reading on the significance of our inventories of possessions.

Worldly Possessions Inventory Worksheet

INSTRUCTIONS: Select one room of your house or apartment and prepare an inventory of *every single material possession* in the room. Then fill in the blanks for each item. Add extra sheets if necessary.

[illegible]

Nonviolence

The desire to live in a less violent world and inflict less violence on others is a perennial theme in simple living. The exercises in this cluster bring mindfulness to how luxury consumption can contribute to otherwise avoidable violence in life.

The exercises in this section incorporate certain important distinctions that group participants will hopefully learn to include in their consumption decision-making.

First, because of the sort of creatures human beings are, we must feed upon other living things to survive. So we must consume to live, and this consumption can be viewed as necessary. But beyond the margin of necessary consumption lies a broad territory of consumption for comfort and luxury—of living to consume—the domain of what I call elective violence. I'm not Puritanical by nature and therefore have no problem with pleasure or comfort per se. But anyone who views the human-Nature relationship with an open mind must note that every increment of luxury consumption by human beings has life and death consequences for other species which, strictly speaking, could be avoided if people simply consumed fewer luxuries. Where the line may be between the amount of death and suffering we can tolerate inflicting on other beings for the sake of our own comfort and luxury is probably a matter of personal conscience. But it is both a moral and a practical question for anyone who wants to adopt voluntary simplicity. It's a question of pragmatic significance even for the ethically challenged in the sense that there must be some limit beyond which humans can no longer consume other species merely for our pleasure and amusement without threatening ecosystems upon which we also depend for our survival. It seems clear, then, that the world generally would be a less violent place to the degree that we humans are prepared to forego luxury consumption and thereby diminish elective violence.

Second, even with respect to necessary consumption, there are often different choices available which represent differing levels of violence imposed on other people and the natural world. While food is a survival necessity and we may not be consuming a "luxury diet", even the food we do need can be produced in more or less violent ways. So there are degrees of freedom even here, which the ethically sensitive person will want to take into account when making decisions.

Another important distinction is that between "direct" and "structural" violence. In direct violence, we ourselves inflict violence on another through our own actions. But in consumer culture, a very large share of the violence incurred by our consumption choices is "structural"—that is, inflicted on our behalf, but out of sight and out of mind through the economic structures of globalization and industrialization. Most of us would be horrified if we directly witnessed or had to personally perform the acts of violence required for a consumptive lifestyle. But since we are insulated from these realities by geographic distance, class boundaries, and the physical barriers erected by factories and processing plants (for our safety!), it's very easy to remain unaware of the true costs of our lifestyle. So mindfulness of structural violence is another important element in living in a way that minimizes suffering and harm.

Vicki Robin, co-author of *Your Money or Your Life* (Dominguez and Robin 1992), and noted American simple living advocate, has said that, "Every dollar we spend is a vote for the kind of world we want." In this connection, the exercises that follow construe voluntary simplicity as a campaign of satyagraha—the nonviolent approach to social change pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi in India and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the U. S. A., as well as others over the last half century. Every campaign of satyagraha includes two elements: (a) actively and non-violently withholding our participation, collusion and cooperation with a violent system of oppression, and (b) simultaneous construction of a positive, nonviolent system which functions as an alternative to the established order of oppression. To the degree that we withdraw our participation and financial support to a structurally violent global economy and substitute active support for more localized, participatory and nonviolent approaches to meeting our legitimate life needs, we are practicing a campaign of satyagraha.

Nominal Group on Simplicity and Nonviolence

Purpose:

- to sensitize group members to the violence inherent in consumer culture
- to introduce the distinctions between “necessary” and “elective” violence, and between “direct” and “structural” violence
- to identify examples of how consumer culture manifests violence in our daily experience

Framing:

This exercise invites participants to consider whether or not consumer culture is structurally violent, the forms this violence takes, and how we ourselves suffer violence from consumer culture, even as it claims to serve us and satisfy our desires. Given some background in the meaning of voluntary simplicity, group members are invited to explore how voluntary simplicity might offer a less violent way of life, hence increasing well-being both for people and for infra-human species.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all participants

Process:

Key Question – Does an overly consumptive lifestyle promote or even require violence?

1. Assign participants to small groups of four or five people and appoint as recorder / reporter the person whose birthday falls closest to Kwanzaa (December 26th).
2. Introduce to the group the concepts of necessary versus elective violence, and direct versus structural violence. A good way to do this is simply to sketch out a “window” with four panes in it. Write “Necessary and Direct” in the top left pane, and “Elective and Direct” in the top right pane. Then write “Necessary and Structural” in the bottom left pane, and “Elective and Structural” in the bottom right pane. To start the juices flowing, brainstorm with the entire group examples of violence they see in consumer culture which could fit in each pane, i.e., necessary forms of both direct and structural violence, and elective forms of both direct and structural violence. It is often readily apparent that the most frequent and large scale form of violence in consumer culture are examples falling in the Elective / Structural cell.
3. Now invite individual participants to write brief personal reflections on each of the following questions, followed by some small group discussion. Recorders should summarize key points from the discussion:

- Identify products, services or other aspects of life in consumer culture the production, consumption, and disposal of which might entail violence of one form or another?
 - How would you classify these products and services as necessary or elective? Provide your rationale?
 - What additional examples of violence can you identify at the following levels: (a) your physical body; (b) relationships with family and neighbors; (c) the natural environment; (d) international and trade relationships?
 - What steps could you take to reduce violence (a) toward ourselves, (b) in our relationships, (c) toward the ecosphere, and (d) toward more distant others?
 - What value do you think voluntary simplicity might have in achieving these goals?
4. After appropriate discussion time, reassemble the large group and ask for summary reports from small group recorders. Debrief this exercise with participants, but conclude with special attention and emphasis on the value of focusing energy on an alternate constructive program. Invite participants to either brainstorm alternatives to the violent systems just discussed, or share information about existing alternatives they know of, or both.

Notes:

This exercise can be a real eye opener for people who comfort themselves with the illusion that we North Americans live in a safe, civilized, and humane social environment compared to many other parts of the world. As the group discussion unfolds and participants give themselves permission to actually think about the distinctions offered at the beginning of the exercise, and examples of different forms of violence, it readily becomes obvious that our “peace-loving” lifestyle is purchased at the cost of considerable displaced violence happening to other species and people who are out of sight, out of mind. As the farmer / philosopher Wendell Berry has noted:

“We must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration.” (Berry 1981:281)

Given this discovery, it is easy for this exercise to veer off into guilt-tripping or self-flagellation about consumerism. Alternatively, some group members can feel defensive and manifest this as hostility toward the message, the messenger, or the whole process. It’s helpful then, to frame our conscientization to violence as the first step in a more important process of building a constructive program. Recall that all our work with these exercises proceeds not from a desire to lay blame, or evoke fear, but rather simply to wake up so that different choices become possible. Once group members become more conscious of how violent consumer culture is, then concentrate on the constructive alternative program. Note that a great deal of violence in our society is elective, not necessary. We have a choice. We can choose simplicity and sufficiency rather than luxury and affluence. Note that voluntary simplicity is a nonviolent personal alternative to consumerism; we must also work on how to build a society of justice and peace.

If the violence of consumer culture is not apparent to group members as a result of the preliminary brainstorming of examples of necessary / elective, and direct / structural violence,

then we can also ask people to consider examples of the levels at which this violence can manifest and examples at each level. I arbitrarily suggest that educators consider:

- the physical body and emotions
- relationships both with intimate others like family members and more distant acquaintances in community
- impacts on the physical environment and biosphere
- impacts on other countries through trade inequities, hidden conditions of work, transshipment of wastes and toxic materials, oppression and exploitation by local authorities, and wars over access to resources or to secure foreign interests, as potential levels at which violence can be considered

Most group members will be able to think of examples for every level, but facilitators can also prepare some of their favorite stories to share with the group if discussion lags.

I've already indicated in the Approach to Learning section of this resource, however, that dwelling on the sins of consumerism is both tempting (because they are so easy to identify) and depressing. Educators are urged therefore not to dwell overly much on the violence of consumer culture if this leaves no time to explore an alternative constructive program. I think it's certain that, as deplorable as group members may find the violence of consumer culture, they will continue to collude in this violence unless they discover, create, or learn about realistic alternatives. More important then, than assembling a lengthy list of examples of how consumer culture propagates violence, is assembling an even longer list of local resources, people, information sources, and ideas for less violent ways of meeting our life needs. It may also be necessary to point out that while voluntary simplicity is not a luxury-centered way of life, some luxuries are certainly welcome from time-to-time, provided we consciously and honestly stand in the tension we will feel as we are mindful of the price other beings paid for our indulgences.

Resources:

Crocker, David A., and Toby Linden, ed. 1997. *Ethics of consumption: The good life, justice, and global stewardship*. Published by Rowman & Littlefield, 1997; ISBN: 0847684954

de Graff, John; David Wann, David, and Thomas H. Naylor. 2001. *Affluenza: The all-consuming epidemic*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. Explores the personal, social, economic, and environmental costs of overconsumption in America. Suggests strategies for rebuilding families and communities, respecting the earth, and restoring personal health and sanity in a world suffering from excess.

Durning, Alan. 1992. *How much is enough? The consumer society and the future of the Earth*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. Chronicles in detail the environmental impacts of the consumer society and the spread of the ideology of consumerism. If you ever had any doubt that consumerism was damaging to children and other living things, read this book.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2001. *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Owl Books. Exposes negative cycle of the American trend toward excessive work hours. When parents work too many hours, it creates stress at home, which in turn leads parents to spend more time at work to avoid stress at home. Discusses alternatives and solutions to this dilemma.

- Kasser, Tim. 2002. *The high price of materialism*. Boston: MIT Press. Psychology professor at Knox College offers a scientific explanation of how our contemporary culture of consumerism and materialism affects our everyday happiness and psychological health, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and problems with intimacy.
- Schor, Juliet B. 1999. *The overspent American: Why we want what we don't need*. New York: HarperCollins. Explores America's relationship with its spending patterns—why and how we spend and consume—focusing on the psychological motivations for excessive spending, including the desire to gain status relative to others. Profiles people who have downshifted as an alternative to a life heavily based on consumerism.
- Schor, Juliet B. 1993. *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: BasicBooks. Discusses the evolution of the American culture of work and consumerism, or the work-and-spend treadmill. Charts the loss of leisure in America and offers compelling arguments for restructuring our work to provide more time for living.
- Wackernagel, Mathis, and William E. Rees. 1995. *Our ecological footprint: Reducing human impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers. Presents concept of an ecological footprint—the amount of land that's needed to sustain the lifestyle of an individual or an entire country—as a tool for measuring humanity's impact on the earth.

Voluntary Simplicity as Satyagraha

Purpose:

- to understand more fully the meaning of satyagraha and its relationship to voluntary simplicity
- to identify specific ways in which we can become satyagrahis in our individual practice of simple living

Framing:

Campaigns of nonviolent social change (satyagraha) as described by Gandhi included elements of both nonviolent non-cooperation with systems of oppression, and the creation of positive alternatives. In this exercise, group members explore how voluntary simplicity may constitute a campaign of satyagraha both in opposition to consumer culture and as an alternative to it. In the Nominal Group on Simplicity and Nonviolence exercise, we touched on satyagraha somewhat obliquely. Our principle aim was to conscientize ourselves to the difference between necessary and luxury consumption, and the several different levels at which consumer culture manifests violence structurally on our behalf. Here, we focus more specifically on satyagraha as a way of understanding the value of voluntary simplicity as applying to broader than personal issues of social evolution.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, more for a larger group)

Materials / Equipment:

- recycled / recyclable flip chart paper
- masking tape or push pins if peg boards are available in the meeting space; an alternative would be white / black boards with appropriate markers or chalk
- odorless, washable markers

Process:

1. Since this process uses brainstorming rather than nominal group discussion, somewhat larger discussion groups of 8-10 people are feasible. For each group, appoint a recorder / reporter who is familiar with brainstorming process and willing to facilitate it for the group (see Notes below). If the overall group is small (less than 15 people), facilitators may not want to further subdivide the group.
2. Review with the group the defining features of campaigns of satyagraha. Bring as much historical depth and as many examples as seem appropriate to this review. Depending on the group, more or less detail may be called for.
3. Given the preliminary descriptions of brainstorming and satyagraha, give small groups 10-15 minutes to brainstorm as many aspects of voluntary simplicity as they can think of that

constitute examples of nonviolent non-cooperation with consumer culture or an alternative constructive program to consumer culture. Recorder / facilitators should make two columns to record these ideas on the flip chart pages, or two different pages for the different ideas.

4. After completing the brainstorming phases of the exercise, invite group members back into large group and have a more critical discussion of the ideas generated.
- Which ideas are most clearly values, practices, attitudes or preferences characteristic of simple living that are also examples of nonviolent non-cooperation with consumer culture?
 - Which ideas are most clearly characteristics of simple living that offer constructive alternatives to consumer culture?
 - What would be needed to evolve simple living from an agenda for personal lifestyle reform to a full-on nonviolent campaign for social change? Do you think this would be desirable or not, and give your reasons.

Notes:

This exercise can be used either on its own, or as a sequel to the Nominal Group on Simplicity and Nonviolence. Its main strength is its positive focus: We are aiming consciously to evolve our way of life beyond the trade-offs and vicious contradictions of consumer culture, and to do this in a way that is both ethically and operationally consistent with simple living values.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming seems to be widely misunderstood today, even among fairly skilled group facilitators. This is my understanding of what brainstorming is, and the approach I assume is being taken to it in this exercise:

- Brainstorming is a pre-critical process for generating lots of ideas. The aim is to generate as many ideas around a particular goal or topic as possible. During the brainstorming phase of group activity, the ideas generated are not discussed, evaluated, elaborated, or developed.
- Facilitators encourage and record the ideas generated without censorship or selection. Group members are encouraged to be as imaginative as they wish. No ideas are excluded unless they are clearly off-topic.
- Group members should generally not interact with each other, neither to encourage nor to critique each others' suggestions. Facilitators should enforce this non-interaction rule. The facilitator drives the process and assures group members that a discussion will follow, but not to self-censor based on the assumption that one's contributions will later be discussed.
- Facilitators should drive the process somewhat quickly so that group members don't have too long to ponder or formulate their ideas. Spontaneous moments of insight and lateral thinking are more welcome at this point than carefully framed proposals.
- A good brainstorming session produces lots of ideas which can later be parsed, grouped, discussed, and elaborated toward a smaller number of ideas that are useful for whatever the goal of the group meeting may be.

Satyagraha

There are many excellent sources that deal with campaigns of satyagraha, so I won't attempt to address this complex subject in detail here. Some key points bear noting:

- Satyagraha (soul force, truth force) is an active, though nonviolent, force for social transformation, not, as is often believed, a passive lack of resistance to injustice. Jonathan Schell (2003) describes it: "... Violence is a method by which the ruthless few can subdue the passive many. Nonviolence is a means by which the active many can overcome the ruthless few." So these two principles, active engagement and nonviolence, are at the core of satyagraha.
- Moreover, every campaign of satyagraha includes two key elements: (a) active non-cooperation with the system of oppression one is seeking to change, and (b) an alternative constructive program embodying the obligation to actively pursue social betterment that creates a parallel system expressing the values one seeks to establish, which at first co-exists with, and eventually replaces, the system of oppression. We aim to "become the change we want to see in the world."
- Gandhi believed that satyagraha was superior to physical force because it required more courage, because a nonviolent actor was freer than someone bound into the paradigm of violence, and because the decisive element in every conflict is the ability to win the hearts and minds of the people, an essentially political and therefore nonviolent objective in the pursuit of which violence plays no role at all.
- Today, campaigns of nonviolence are often conflated with a misunderstanding of civil disobedience as well. Civil disobedience, as originally proposed by Henry David Thoreau (also of simple living renown) is indeed a tactic of nonviolent social change. But in the popular media today, civil disobedience is used as a synonym for riots and vandalism to property—violence directed toward the property of others bizarrely believed not to be an act of violence at all when compared to violence directed to persons. In Thoreau's construction, however, civil disobedience consists in publicly refusing to obey a law which one believes to be unjust, which action is taken only following a proper notice to public authorities that one is intending to violate the unjust law, in continual and open communication with law enforcement authorities prior to, during and after the act of law-breaking, and with full willingness to accept the legal consequences of one's act of disobedience. The aim is to amend unjust laws by violating them so that one is brought before a court and thus has an opportunity to argue the injustice of the law and get the law changed by new precedent or repeal. Thoreau's understanding of civil disobedience is based on a belief in the rule of law and the capacity of legal institutions to reform themselves when confronted with proof of injustice. It has nothing at all to do with fighting police, defacing or destroying property, or creating violent disruptions of public order in pursuit of often ill-defined and poorly communicated objectives.

Voluntary Simplicity as Satyagraha

Group member brainstorming will hopefully generate many examples of values, principles, and practices drawn from simple living that also serve as a campaign of satyagraha. But examples might include:

- Voluntary simplicity is an active, mindful approach to living and therefore participates in the active force principle of satyagraha;

- Voluntary simplicity springs from an exercise of human freedom and choice; it chooses not to be driven by the constraints, ideology and manipulations of consumer culture;
- Simple living often takes the form of non-cooperation in consumer culture through working less, spending less, participating less in relationships of competition and social comparison;
- Voluntary simplicity can represent a constructive program because it re-orientes personal and communal energies from achieving material affluence to focus instead on other goals, such as material sufficiency and equity of provision, nonviolence, social justice, ecological stewardship, intergenerational equity;
- Voluntary simplicity often entails participation in alternative social institutions like barter networks, cooperatives, study circles, EcoVillages, etc.
- Many practitioners of voluntary simplicity specifically and consciously espouse a nonviolent approach to living. In surveys of people who describe themselves as practitioners of simple living, nonviolence is an important principle that guides their lives.

Practical steps we might consider taking to actually implement simple living as a campaign of satyagraha might include ideas like:

- Practice voluntary simplicity to mindfully reduce luxury consumption. Consciously develop interests and relationships that are low on the consumption food chain. Seek ever higher levels of well-being on ever lower levels of consumption.
- Be mindful of the social and environmental effects of consumption choices. Attend to highest priorities first (transportation, food choices, household management) but also consumption choices that incur particularly onerous effects on people or the planet (e.g., luxury goods produced under regimes of forced labor or using highly toxic materials and processes).
- Purchase fairly traded goods, e.g., chocolate, coffee, tea, etc., that are produced in environmentally and socially sustainable ways.
- Consider ethical investing to minimize the negative effects of investment decisions. As you will soon discover, if you investigate this subject, it is extremely hard to find investments that pass all the relevant ethical screens we might like to apply and offer a decent rate of return as well.
- Create or participate in alternate social / economic institutions, e.g., barter networks, community shared agriculture arrangements, local currency systems, conservation land trusts, co-ops, EcoVillages, co-housing developments, car-sharing co-ops, etc.

Resources:

- Schell, Jonathan. 2003. *The unconquerable world: Power, nonviolence, and the will of the people*. New York: Metropolitan Books (Henry Holt and Company). A splendid series of historical “case studies” of nonviolent social change, clearly illustrating the power of nonviolence even before the appearance of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Sharp, Gene. 1973. *The politics of nonviolent action*. Vol. 2: Methods of nonviolent action. Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers. Probably the foremost living authority on nonviolent social change, Gene Sharp’s multivolume *Politics of Nonviolent Action* is the

final go-to source on this subject—as relevant for those interested in simple living as for those into politics.

Simplicity Aikido!

Purpose:

- to enlist participants in brainstorming self-defense strategies to deflect and control aggressive marketing campaigns and forced consumption

Framing:

Aikido is a defensive martial art that uses the strength and aggressiveness of one's opponent to one's own advantage. Advertising, marketing, debt promotion, telemarketing, workplace exploitation, and designed obsolescence to name just a few, are all ways that consumer culture seeks aggressively to promote its agenda and interests. In this exercise, we assume that group members want to live more simply, but are fashioning this way of life in a hostile and intrusive cultural environment. The exercise invites participants to share tips, especially ones that are funny or fun, about how to protect ourselves from the most egregious abuses of consumer culture.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 – 2 hours

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for notes

Process:

Aikido is an ancient Eastern martial art that uses the cultivation of mindfulness and inner balance to turn the energy of an attacker away from oneself. Assemble your at-home simplicity discussion group or partner and do the following exercises:

1. Brainstorm as long a list as possible of “self-defense” measures you can take to reduce the impact of advertising, marketing and commercialism in your life. This can include such innovative ideas as “TV-Out Nights,” “Buy-Nothing Days,” literally freezing credit cards or bank cards in blocks of ice you have to thaw before you can use them—let your imagination run free. By all means, use humor. By all means, include serious strategies like contacting the National Direct Marketing Association office to get your name removed from telemarketing and junk mail lists if you wish. But have a good time hatching ways of evading consumerism's radar and developing the practice of “practical invisibility” in your life! Afterward, journal what you did and what you learned in the process.
2. Pair off with a discussion partner, and / or divide your discussion group into pairs. Now do the following role-playing game: One of you is a telemarketer who has just phoned the other member of the pair with a “they just can't pass up!” Use high pressure if you want or be really smooth and indirect. Be sure to start out by asking very simple leading, closed-ended questions that your partner already knows the answer to and which must be answered “yes,” e.g., Your name is Jane Doe? You live at 228 Oakbluff Avenue? etc. Then start your pitch.

As soon as possible, the second member of the pair should try to turn the tables on the telemarketer—not by saying “No, I don’t want any thanks,” and hanging up—but by using the call as an opportunity to counter-sell the salesperson on voluntary simplicity. Be polite, be firm, and have a good time! Instead of seeing the telemarketer’s call as a nuisance (which it may be), practice compassion by understanding that this person is just as much enmeshed in the consumer system as you are, just trying to support their kids or satisfy their incessant desire for more stuff—but also treat it as a “play opportunity” and a “teachable moment” for the telemarketer.

Continue this role play until you both get tired or somebody gives up. Then switch roles and try again. Try several partners as long as you’re having fun. Then make a journal entry about this experience.

Notes:

This exercise can be further enriched simply by Googling: “Fun Things to do When You’re Bored at Walmart,” or “Fun Things to do at Walmart,” both of which return hits with dozens of guerilla counter-commercial activity suggestions. Of course, care should be taken not to damage property or break (just) laws.

I have also heard of groups who organize mindfulness walks through malls by adopted the Zen practice of kin-hin or walking meditation—very slow, silent, walking meditation. Especially at holiday times and special sales events, this can offer a highly visible alternative to the rush and competitive frenzy that often fills the air at such times.

I once had a student in one of my voluntary simplicity classes who was also a minister of the United Church of Canada and a community poverty activist. He amused himself while also trying to make a point, but standing silent and motionless in various shopping malls holding a 3 x 5-inch recipe card in front of his chest with “The Police State is Coming” written on it. The card was not readable unless you were only a meter or two away. The student enjoyed comparing the response times of mall security to remove him from the premises. In surroundings which are supposed to be so welcoming and relaxed, he was consistently impressed by how quickly force was brought to bear to remove anyone with a message that questioned business as usual.

Time

Time-stress, the feeling of being constantly rushed, under pressure to meet deadlines, and always hurrying from one activity to another without really having time to savor even the good things in our lives, is one of the most prevalent and destructive aspects of consumer culture. It ranks right up there with debt stress as a major source of dis-ease in contemporary life, and a considerable threat to both physical health and emotional well-being.

Usually, the perspective taken on time in consumer culture is that time is something that requires management. If we are feeling stressed, it's because we are poor time managers. All we need are a few more skills and time stress will go away. Ironically, however, many methods recommended for time management amount to strategies for doing more tasks in the available time, e.g., speed reading, using productivity tools on computers to increase work output, speeding up the process of communication by adding devices, hurrying meetings by shortening agendas and truncating discussions, etc. The consumer culture approach to managing time is thus to cram as many tasks as possible into a given interval of time on the assumption that this will somehow save time at the end of the day. But often, just like the increased income we may enjoy when our productivity increases, we very seldom actually save the extra income. We just wind up spending it on something else.

Another hallowed consumer culture myth is that of time-saving technology. Technology has certainly reduced physical toil in our daily lives, and can reduce the time we spend directly on performing a task. Microwaving a lamb chop is probably quicker than roasting it over an open fire. But not only do we fail to notice other activities rushing in to fill the time we supposedly save by using the microwave, we very seldom do a full-cost accounting for the microwave in terms of time. It's easier to see the time the microwave saves every time we use it, than the time it takes out of our lives to earn the money to buy and operate the microwave, the taxes we pay on the after-tax income we spend to get the microwave, or the hidden after-market costs we will pay both in time and money should the manufacture or use of microwaves turn out to incur environmental, social, or health-related "externality costs." I can't imagine that many of us take the time to estimate these different costs, but it's only by doing so that we can actually tell whether this or that bit of technology is really reducing the time we spend on particular tasks or not.

To be clear, time is something we cannot save. Time passes at the same rate for everyone, rich or poor, and it passes away inevitably. We cannot save ten minutes today by using a microwave or productivity tool and add it to tomorrow, or to the end of our lives for that matter. We all have the same amount of time, twenty-four hours per day, no more, no less. Moreover, short of jumping into a worm hole or something, there is really no way to manage time itself. While our subjective experience of time is to some degree elastic, depending on a number of attentional and situational factors, objective time is passing at a uniform rate we can do nothing to change.

What we can do is conscientize ourselves respecting how many and what sorts of activities we are spending our time on. Managing time is actually about selecting and managing our activities. Reducing time stress thus amounts to reducing the number, intensity and meaninglessness of the activities that fill our lives.

Exercises in this cluster increase mindfulness around our use of time, the prevalence of time stress in consumer culture, and providing a basis for setting priorities, assessing the full cost we pay in time for the time-saving technology we desire, and lay the foundation for making conscious choices in how we use the time we have. We cannot make more time in our day nor can we save time itself. We can, however, bring more mindfulness to what we're doing and perhaps aim to do fewer things and do them better, thus increasing our sense of quality in life.

Logging the Daily Round / Ideal Daily Round

Purpose:

- to increase mindfulness of the activities that actually fill our day
- to provide a concrete record of how we spend time every day so that a basis exists for conscious choices, or changes to our choices, in how we spend time

Framing:

There's an old maxim in management studies that "you cannot manage what you cannot measure." It's very difficult to make changes in our way of life if we are unaware of what we want to change and how to do so. In Logging the Daily Round, group members keep detailed logs of how they spend their time during a typical day or week. This activity greatly increases our mindfulness of how we, in fact, spend our time and provides the basis for making different choices if we wish and are able. The Ideal Daily Round is an associated exercise that provides a method for charting out an alternative use of our time.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1 hour (approximately) Gathering the log information may take anywhere from one day to a week if participants want to be very thorough. The more data the better the result.

Materials / Equipment:

- Daily Log worksheets for all group members
- Ideal Daily Round worksheets for all group members

Process:

1. Introduce idea that we gain control over our time by increasing awareness of how we use it. The purpose of this exercise is growth in mindfulness, that is, to become more aware of what we are doing with our time so that new choices become possible if we want them.
- Much of what we do much of the time is more or less unconscious. Much activity is habit-driven, or simply "going through the motions."
 - Interacting with machines that operate on repetitive cycles, our activities can become even more automatic.
 - We are clinically conscious, of course, but not mindful of what we are doing.
 - Voluntary simplicity assumes that activities which are entered into with mindfulness, that is, with full attention to the voluntariness of our actions, are more rewarding and pleasurable than habit-driven or semi-conscious routines.

- To grow in mindfulness, it is helpful to prepare a log record of our daily round. Like a ship's log, this is a diary-like record of what we do all day.
2. Using the log sheet(s) provided, group members should log all of our activities for the last 24 hours, hour by hour. We log everything no matter how personal or trivial it may seem. Our log is for our eyes only. Make no judgements and don't censor entries. If the logging can be extended to several days, or a whole week including a weekend, it will be even more useful.
 3. When group members have returned with their completed daily logs, have participants review their own entries and ask some questions about them. Remind them to be gentle with themselves. All of us drift into patterns of behavior which are sometimes out of sync with our intentions and desires.
 4. Form small groups and discuss the following questions:
 - How many of your daily activities do you find rewarding and meaningful? (This doesn't imply that our days should be filled with non-stop peak experiences. But rather, we're looking for a certain basic wholesomeness, a sense that these activities are worthwhile, meaningful, constructive, etc.)
 - If some activities are not rewarding or satisfying, what are they for? Are they necessary or could they be changed, reorganized, or eliminated to free more time for more meaningful activities?
 - Is your daily round helping you live out your "seed potential"? Is it achieving someone else's goals? If so, whose? How do you feel about this?
 5. When group members have had a chance to discuss these questions, reassemble as a large group and share insights and discoveries. Then distribute the Ideal Daily Round worksheets and invite group members to outline a daily round for themselves that brings them closer to the sort of daily routine they would find healthy and most meaningful.
 6. When the ideal daily rounds have been crafted, invite general comments from the group. How do our ideal daily rounds differ from how we are living now? Where was time discovered to do things differently? What different things have been added to the day and which ones deleted? Invite group members to each openly voice some specific change they will make in the days ahead that will bring their actual use of time more into alignment with the ideal daily round.

Notes:

This exercise can be quite challenging for many people, especially those whose work or temperament is such that they are not creatures of any sort of routine. Sometimes I've seen people balk at doing the exercise, especially if it is only covering one day, as they claim there is no such thing in their lives as a "typical day." While this may be a form of resistance to the exercise, it may also be true, in which case the multi-day sample should be recommended. Group members who want to "complexify" the exercise even more will say that their activities change by season, and certainly vary over holidays and vacations, etc. In such a case, I recommend simply inviting participants to focus on the week ahead, no matter how typical or atypical it may be, and assemble the information necessary for awakening to how it is they actually spend their time. The sheer act of recognizing that no two days or weeks are ever the same is itself a stunning testimony to time-stress and some basis for asking whether such a chaotic whirl of activity is really conducive to well-being.

There will be a tendency among group members also to gloss over what they think are trivial or automatic activities such as meals, or daily grooming activities, etc. But bringing mindfulness to how we use time consists in noticing what is actually happening, without judging it to be trivial or non-trivial. In fact, it's impossible to assess the significance of a thing until after we know what it is. Therefore, encourage group members to log every activity, however minor they may think it is, and then decide later its significance and how much latitude they have for changing the activity if they decide to do so.

In taking the exercise the second step into the Ideal Daily Round, it's helpful to encourage group members to take this part of the exercise seriously and really ponder what sort of daily routine they would find wholesome and life-giving. Just beneath our surface awareness, there is a great deal of despair in consumer culture about whether we are ever being in control of our time or personal activities. Enjoying this sort of freedom is something we tend to displace to "retirement" or fantasize as part of winning a lottery. So it's tempting to dismiss this part of the exercise as an "as if" speculation.

I think this exercise gains value when we encourage group members to see the Ideal Daily Round as an incremental movement toward a more desirable, simpler way of life. Of course we can't leap directly to a life of total leisure on a desert island somewhere. But we can often look at our existing daily round and fashion from it an alternative that is more in alignment with what makes for well-being. Until doing the actual daily round logging exercise, maybe we weren't fully aware that we spend an average of four hours per night watching television to "relax", and thereby discover the basis for taking a one-hour walk in place of one TV show, which we know would probably contribute more to our well-being. Such changes don't require winning the lottery and they certainly move us more in the direction of a simpler, more wholesome way of life. The ideal daily round worksheet provides a concrete, written record of our intentions which can provide a handy reminder when we plunge back into our old life habits.

Another thing I find helpful to suggest is, especially for people who have also experienced the Best Things In Life exercise described above, we might use our Ideal Daily Round worksheet to schedule no alternate activities at all. Introducing some un-programed, slack time into our day can bring a measure of relaxation to the entire day. It also makes a conscious allowance for some periods when we don't have to be results-oriented, but can let our minds spin free, leave our hearts open and available to whatever that particular moment may offer. There is definite value in providing "nothing times" for ourselves, which of course don't turn out to be nothing at all—but rather filled with whatever the universe is offering us at that moment. The consumer culture obsession with productivity at every moment can easily squeeze out such unstructured time and the refreshment and value it offers.

Resources:

Davidson, Jeff. 2000. *Breathing space: Living and working at a comfortable pace in a sped-up society*. Chapel Hill, NC: Breathing Space Institute. Explores the complex life of the typical, working American—too rushed and harried, overwhelmed with too many choices, working too many hours, and insufficient sleep. Suggests ways to create more breathing space by taking responsibility for how you spend your time and what you allow to be a part of your environment.

Drake, John D. 2001. *Downshifting: How to work less and enjoy life more*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. Psychologist and former CEO of large human resources consulting firm offers practical advice on how to cut back on work hours. Discusses options such as flextime schedules, gradual retirement plans, and requesting a lower level job within the same organization.

Hayden, Anders. 2000. *Sharing the work, sparing the planet: Work time, consumption, & ecology*. London: Zed Books. ISBN 1-896357-28-8. This book focuses essential on the

benefits of work-time reductions through limiting the work week and the value such a step would have in increasing employment opportunities and strengthening family life.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2001. *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Owl Books. Exposes negative cycle to American trend toward excessive work hours. When parents work too many hours, it creates stress at home, which in turn leads parents to spend more time at work to avoid stress at home. Discusses alternatives and solutions to this dilemma.

Schor, Juliet B. 1993. *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: BasicBooks. Discusses the evolution of American culture of work and consumerism, the work-and-spend treadmill. Charts the loss of leisure in America and offers compelling arguments for restructuring our work to provide more time for living.

Zelinski, Ernie. 1997. *The joy of not working: A book for the retired, unemployed, and overworked*. 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press. Explores the positive values of leisure time and activities. Examines the difficult challenges of embracing leisure joyfully in a culture that celebrates workaholism.

Daily Log Worksheet

Log every activity you perform throughout the day and how much time you spend on it. Omit nothing. This is only for your personal use. Use more sheets if you are logging activities from more than one day.

[illegible]

Ideal Daily Round

To help further clarify reasons you might have for wanting to live more simply, use your imagination to outline for yourself an ideal daily round of activities. If you were free to choose—which you are!—what would your daily schedule look like? What would you be doing? Who would you be with? What do you think stands in the way of this sort of life, if anything?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Whose Emergency Is This Anyway?

Purpose:

- to conscientize group members to the sources of urgency and importance assigned to our use of time
- to discover a basis for re-prioritizing the tasks we use our time to perform
- to identify the specific perspective of time offered by voluntary simplicity

Framing:

One of the things that can increase the painfulness of time-stress is the perception that we are not in control of our choices as to how we use time. In this exercise, participants learn to distinguish when their use of time is arising from matters that are truly urgent and important, or whether we are spending too much time on unimportant activities or in response to agendas that are not our own.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1 hour (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- Urgency / Importance worksheets for all group members.

Process:

1. Introduce to group members the concept of urgency and importance for various life activities. These can be illustrated by using a chart of four cells such as in the diagram below. Brainstorm examples of activities that might fit in each category:

	URGENT	NON-URGENT
IMPORTANT	Avoid auto collision Exit a burning building Apply CPR	Relationship with spouse & kids Personal growth Achieving major life goals etc.
UNIMPORTANT	Answer telephone Make decision re telemarketer Answer door bell Reply to staff party memo	Clean out files Wash car Revise Christmas card list Set up recipe card index

2. Making changes in how we use time requires promoting activities related directly to our governing values (making important tasks urgent). Simplifying our use of time involves removing activities / commitments over which we have control that don't contribute to our governing values or well-being.

One of the key practices of simple living is to learn to control what we can, adapt to what we can't control, and plan activity so that we infuse important tasks with a sense of urgency rather than being overwhelmed by urgent, but unimportant tasks.

3. Invite group members to review their Logging the Daily Round worksheets and identify examples of activities that fit into the four different categories described above. Transcribe these examples to the Urgency / Importance worksheet provided. If group members have not done a Logging the Daily Round exercise, then invite them to recall examples from their personal experience that fit the categories outlined.
4. Assign participants to small groups of four or five and invite them to discuss:
 - How many activities are both urgent and important? Is it ever the case that important things are often non-urgent? What would happen to your quality of life if the activities you feel are most important we also given greater urgency?
 - For activities that are unimportant but still urgent, who / what is conferring this urgency? How do you feel about this? If this situation could be changed, would it enhance your well-being?
5. Reassemble the large group and debrief the discussion. Were participants struck by any new insights or ideas? Will this exercise lead to new decision-making about how to prioritize our use of time? In prioritizing our use of time, the following tips might be helpful:
 - Stay clear on governing values (what matters most to your well-being). Refresh this awareness in daily mindfulness practice.
 - Deliberately schedule time for high importance / low urgency activities.
 - Allow time in the daily round for honoring the dialogue between the inner and outer worlds that occurs best when there is some slack in our day.
 - When possible, plan activities according to their soul value rather than their dollar cost or opportunity cost.
 - Do careful mindfulness exercises around the real and full cost of gadgets that are advertised as "time-savers"—both money cost and time-cost. Everything takes time and money to own, maintain, acquire, and dispose of.

Notes:

This exercise is fairly straightforward. The main thing that can surprise some group members is the change in feeling we have respecting our use of time when we really absorb the idea of deliberately making important things urgent by promoting them in our use of time. Much of life in consumer culture consists of exposure to urgent trivia made urgent by advertisers to satisfy their agenda to bring their products and services to our attention and get us to purchase them quickly. In the process, however, really important life values get subordinated to the urgent trivia because it's often easier to defer important activities. The risk, however, is that in the process of attending to the urgent trivia, we wind up never taking time for the stuff that matters. Our lives fall under the control of marketers and supervisors rather than our own governing values. This can be a source of regret.

Resources:

See Resource section for Logging the Daily Round / Ideal Daily Round exercise.

Urgency / Importance Worksheet

Referring to your “Logging the Daily Round” worksheets, classify each of your daily activities according to whether it was: (a) both urgent and important; (b) urgent but unimportant; (c) non-urgent but important; (d) non-urgent and unimportant.

	Urgent	Non-Urgent
Important		
Unimportant		

The Full Cost of “Saving” Time

Purpose:

- to conscientize group members to the fact that every time-saving product or service also comes at a cost in time
- to provide the factual basis and a quantitative method for assessing the net time benefit to be realized from any given time-saving product or service
- to deflate the myth that modern technology is creating abundant leisure

Framing:

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote: “... The true cost of a thing is how much of our life-time we are prepared to trade for it.”

Consumer culture strongly promotes its products and services as time-savers and yet how often do we put these claims to the test? This exercise invites participants to interrogate some of their previous product and service choices in terms of how much time these actually “saved” and whether simpler, lower-tech alternatives might in fact liberate more time for activities that matter.

Group Size: Any size

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, but the exercise can require varying amounts of homework time for research and observation)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils and note pads

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise as an opportunity to assess the truth of various claims that products or services save us time. A wide array of products and services can be assessed using the general method outlined below. In this example, we will use an automatic dishwasher because most homes have one, many people think they are a necessity, and many also believe the machines save time. But we could equally as well pick other products such as cars, automatic clothes dryers, microwave ovens, etc.
2. In doing this full-cost accounting exercise, we will compare both the time it takes to do a task, in this example, wash dishes, and also the money required for the time-saving appliance translated back into the time required to procure the money. So we will be both clocking time, and translating money costs back into time equivalents before making our comparison.
3. Have group members complete the Full Cost of Saving Time worksheet. Then return to the large group and discuss the following questions:

- How did your comparisons work out between the time required to do dishes by hand compared to using the dishwasher? How much time was actually saved per load?
- How much investment of time was needed to purchase the dishwasher, supply it with electricity, water, and special cleaning agents, maintenance, etc., and pay taxes on the money earned to purchase these things?
- If there was an actual saving of time in using the dishwasher, was the time-saving worth the cost, including costs to the environment, resource depletion, etc.?
- If you continue to choose to own a dishwasher, do you feel more conscious now of the full costs of doing so?

Notes:

There is no doubt that some technologies, products and services do save us time, relieve us of onerous labor, and protect us from certain risks. But in my experience of doing this exercise with various products and services, I've discovered that these gains are by no means certain to apply across the board, and some products actually result in negative time-savings. Moreover, the value that many of these products add to our lives is systematically exaggerated by consumer culture. Where benefits exist, they are often more modest than we might expect, given the claims that are made for some of them.

An imponderable impact that arises from this exercise, but which we might appreciate more fully from doing the exercise, is the still hidden or difficult-to-quantify cost of environmental and social externalities incurred from consumption of time-saving products. Currently, there is no way to charge back to consumers the full costs of climate change, resource depletion, pollution, recycling, and so on, associated with all the products we consume. For this reason, even this exercise probably underestimates the full cost of trying to save time.

Resources:

See worksheet for Real Hourly Wage.

The Full Cost of Saving Time - Worksheet

In this exercise, we will be focusing on the example of an automatic dishwasher. But the same general approach could be applied in principle to any product or service.

Time In Use

To begin, use a clock, stop watch or wrist watch to time how long it takes you to wash and dry an average load of dishes working by hand. If you want to be even more accurate, time five loads of dishes, sum the times and divide by five to get a true arithmetic "average":

_____ mins. (A)

Now time the same load of dishes being washed in a dishwasher. To be fair, this should include all the time you take to pre-rinse the dishes, load and unload the machine. The time required for the washer cycle itself can be omitted because presumably this is the time saved by using the machine, time that you can use doing something else:

_____ mins. (B)

To make this comparison as fair as possible, accumulate a full washer load equivalent before doing the dishes by hand. The two loads should be comparable in size. It might be argued that a dishwasher can clean a whole day's worth of dishes whereas one might do dishes two or three times in smaller numbers by hand.

Translating Costs Into Time

The net time actually saved by the dishwasher should include the time needed to procure and operate the machine itself, even though this isn't readily evident simply by timing how long it takes to load and unload the machine. To obtain the net time actually saved, assemble the following information:

Retail purchase price of dishwasher:	\$ _____
Sales taxes, if any:	\$ _____
Special warranties, if purchased:	\$ _____
Shipping and delivery fees, if any:	\$ _____
Installation fees, if any:	\$ _____

Lifetime electricity cost:
(Take the EnerGuide estimated annual electricity consumption X estimated service life of the machine (e.g., 10 years) X cost of electricity per kWh):

\$ _____

Lifetime water cost:
(Take the EnerGuide estimated annual water consumption X estimated service life of the machine (e.g., 10 years) X your local cost of water per liter):

\$ _____

Lifetime detergent cost:
(Cost per bottle / package of dishwasher detergent / number of loads it will wash X 365 days per year X 10 years):

\$ _____

Other costs: (Routine annual maintenance, if any; cost of special cleaners or other products needed to keep the machine operating properly pro-rated for service life of machine): \$ _____

Procurement and Annual Operating Sub-total: \$ _____ (C)
(Add all the costs listed above)

Income tax:

The money you need to buy and operate the machine is paid for with “after tax” dollars. That means that you must earn not only the money to buy and operate the machine, but also pay the income tax on that money.

Income tax = \$ C X your marginal tax rate: \$ _____ (D)

Full “dollar” cost of owning and operating a dishwasher: (C) + (D) = \$ _____ (E)

Daily dollar cost of owning and operating a dishwasher: (E) / 365 = \$ _____ (F)

Time-cost of Ownership and Operation of Dishwasher

The next step in our comparison is to translate the dollar cost of owning and operating the appliance into an equivalent amount of life-time. We do this by dividing the total dollar cost by your “real hourly wage”. You guessed it—more math.

Your Real Hourly Wage

It seems common for people to over-estimate their actual income and under-estimate the costs associated with working. We also tend to under-estimate the time we spend in order to maintain our employment in addition to the actual hours we spend in the office or the factory working for pay. Yet this extra time is essential to keeping our job and would not be required if we didn’t have the job, or made our living in some other way. When we fully account for and subtract the costs of working from our gross income, then divide by a full accounting of the hours we actually devote to work and work-required activities, we come up with our real hourly wage. This is often far less than the hourly pay rate that appears on our pay checks every week. To calculate your real hourly wage, go to the Income and Expense Tracking exercise below and use the Worksheet on the Costs Associated with Having a Job.

Real Time-cost of a Dishwasher

The time-cost of our dishwasher is now within sight: \$(F) (see daily dollar cost of owning and operating a dishwasher above) / (real hourly wage) = Daily Time-cost of Dishwasher (G).

To complete our comparison, we just add the Daily Time-cost of the Dishwasher (G) to the Actual Time In Use per load of dishes above (B), (G) + (B) = (H).

Conclusion

Compare (H) and (A) above. How different are they? How much reduction in work time do we actually realize by owning a dishwasher? Perhaps the activity time is reduced by the machine to some degree, but is the extra time “worth” the extra cost in lifetime we need to pay for it? Is the

environmental cost worth it? Doing comparisons of this sort, somewhat laborious though they may be, provides a more factual basis for making these judgments. While we don't recommend doing this for every item of consumption, it certainly does make sense for major acquisitions like large appliances, automobiles, and other items whose appeal is the time-savings we think they will bring us.

Money

Money is the major obsession of consumer culture, and frugality has an honored place in simple living. But both have to be kept in perspective. Exercises in this group aim to cultivate mindfulness in our use of money, the role played by effective stewardship of our financial resources in simple living, and in particular, the psycho-emotional hold that money has on us.

In offering these exercises, I don't claim any particular financial expertise, training, or competence. My management of money has been totally restricted to my personal affairs, and whatever budgeting exercises I have been required to perform in the line of my work—which were very limited. In my personal affairs, I'm extremely conservative and risk-averse. So readers seeking advice on how to invest or how to make killer profits from the manipulation of money are urged to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, money is a major part of modern life and it cannot go entirely unaddressed in any source purporting to help people learn simple living. The first few times I offered a university level course on simple living, I included a unit on money, which in later versions of the course I deleted. There was strong interest among students in all things financial, but the “center of gravity” of the course kept moving in the direction of mindfulness, environmental stewardship, and health and well-being, with money eventually playing third or fourth fiddle.

Whatever might be the voluntary simplicity perspective of money, it undoubtedly is open to interpretation. While it must include frugality, it will aim to “include and transcend” mere frugality which can become as pinched and preoccupied with monetary matters as is the pursuit of wealth. I think the elements of a recognizable voluntary simplicity perspective of money can be identified in:

- distinguishing voluntary simplicity from mere frugality
- distinguishing money itself from the “mercenary spirit” which presents more of a problem for us
- emphasis on bringing mindfulness and financial literacy to our use of money, particularly respecting cultivating insight into the motives at play, and the feelings we have in relation to money
- introducing a demand-side (desire / need reduction) approach to thinking about money rather than strategies for how to make more money (supply-side perspective)
- highlighting the fact that, with rare exceptions, debt is a form of servitude and unfreedom, not a status symbol or proof of financial power
- offering alternative means of meeting life needs without the use of money per se, e.g., barter networks, production for own consumption, cooperative enterprises, etc.
- offering insight into how consumer culture propagates debt, dependency, over-consumption, over-reliance on borrowing, and essentially parasitical financial service businesses
- specific methods / resources for reducing debt, cultivating mindfulness of money, and locating information about how to reduce expenses and provide essential life needs outside the cash exchange economy
- suggesting alternate investment strategies with financial pay-offs such as investment in a water conserving toilet or compact florescent lights

- practicing plain-speaking by correcting the distortions of language which have been propagated in consumer culture in relation to money, e.g., calling debt, credit, or calling people who pay off their credit card balances every month “deadbeats”
- demythologizing money as it is portrayed in consumer culture, especially the idea that money can be substituted for nearly every other value, including environmental services, extinct species, health impacts of development, etc.
- offering perspective that is rooted in the historical simplicity literature and practice

The exercises that follow by no means cover all of this territory, but they do sample some of it. Books about frugal living have a long standing and honored place in the voluntary simplicity literature, perhaps chief among them is *Your Money or Your Life* by American authors Vicki Robin and the late Joe Dominguez. This book offers solid financial advice as well as breathing a simple living spirit. In addition, there is a vast array of resources on the Internet for anyone who wants to become more financially literate and I encourage you to consult these resources if you have interest in this dreary subject. There are few areas of human endeavor which have received more time, attention, cunning effort or personal sacrifice than our pursuit of monetary riches—which is amply attested by the sheer complexity and extent of the information available. For my own part, I have always made it a rule never to invest in anything I don’t completely understand and can see operating locally before me. At the end of the day, this has meant that my investments have remained few, simple, and in the popular mind, probably far less profitable than would have been the case had I ventured more aggressively into the financial surf. On the other hand, in the last few years, many of the boldest surfers have wound up drowning while my modest little raft remains afloat. Go figure.

Income and Expense Tracking

Purpose:

- to conscientize group members as to all the sources of income entering their household and all the sources of expenses leaving it
- to provide a factual basis for assessing our financial well-being and the choices available to us if we wish to change something
- to help identify household needs that might possibly be met in other ways than through the expenditure of money

Framing:

Money is the number one source of marital conflict, coming ahead of even sex and child rearing. Given the sheer intensity of the lusts and anxieties with which the denizens of consumer culture surround their dealings with money, you would think that everyone would be hyper-conscious of how much they make and spend. But this is seldom the case. Tens of thousands of people file for bankruptcy every month, and thousands more seek financial advice as they teeter on the brink. Any attempt to offer assistance always begins with gathering information about the sources and amounts of household income and expenses. No rational planning or decision-making is possible in the absence of current, relatively complete and accurate information.

This activity is analogous to Logging the Daily Round above, but pertains to establishing a log of all income and expenses for a specified period of time, an entire year being ideal, but a month being adequate. Only by first becoming aware of how we do in fact spend money, can we find the basis for changing our spending decisions if we wish, gains greater self discipline, and an exit from debt and financial stress. A worksheet helps participants identify many different categories of income and expenses which are helpful to differentiate.

Group Size: Any size

Time: Varied. Time can vary depending on group size and amount of discussion. This exercise also includes a homework component of assembling one's financial information which, depending on individual circumstances, might take some time indeed!

Materials / Equipment:

- Income and Expense Tracking Worksheet for all group members

or

- Worksheet on Costs Associated with Buying Some(any)thing

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise in terms of voluntary simplicity perforce including some attention to how we manage our financial affairs. Distinguish voluntary simplicity as a broader approach

to livelihood than mere frugal living. But frugality certainly plays an important role in simple living. We begin our explorations by becoming more mindful of our own personal and household expenses.

2. Distribute Income and Expense Tracking Worksheets to all group members and allow at least one day for them to assemble all the necessary information. Note that if a year's worth of information is available so that monthly averages can be calculated for routine and recurring expenses, this is very helpful. Moreover, an annual perspective of financial planning incorporates occasional but sometimes large expenses that don't happen every month such as birthdays, vacation expenses, seasonal expenses for home or garden, and gifts for holidays.
3. Point out to group members that they will be recording not only the total dollar amount they spend for various categories of consumption, but also rating the contribution each category of expenditure makes to our overall level of well-being.
4. Also point out the thought experiment at the end of the Income and Expense Tracking worksheets that invite group members to think about the effects on well-being of systematic and planned reductions in expenditure. What can be cut from their present budgets which might also increase well-being?
5. When group members return with their completed worksheets, assign everyone to small groups of four or five people to discuss this exercise. Focus especially on the Freedom Budget exercise:
 - What changes did participants make in their budgets to achieve a 25% reduction? How much effect did they think such a reduction would have on well-being?
 - What goals were group members setting for their financial management?
 - What specific changes would be required to achieve their goals?
6. Debrief the exercise. Discuss:
 - What sorts of changes were we prepared to make in our budgets in order to achieve the hypothetical reductions?
 - How do we feel about making these sorts of changes?
 - What would be gained?
 - What lost?

Invite any further observations group members wish to offer.

Notes:

Some group members may find the assembly of the information for the Income and Expense Tracking exercise tedious or even intimidating. Others find it fascinating and revealing. Avoiding the tracking exercise might suggest many things, e.g., discomfort with financial matters per se, a bit of laziness in taking on the real work of becoming financially conscious, anxiety concerning what we might discover, "math blocks", etc. All of these represent potential major personal discoveries that on their own would make the exercise worth doing. Educators should take the

opportunity to gently probe whatever reactions group members had to the exercise. Insights can be teased out of these responses that are truly liberating, or at least challenging.

Considerable advice is available on various websites (caveat emptor!) as well as in the Resource section listed below for anyone wanting to delve further into financial management strategies.

As a supplement or alternative approach for this exercise, I suggest assigning the Worksheet on Costs Associated with Buying Some(any)thing. This is a slimmed down version of the more extensive exercise above in which we assess the full cost in money and time of purchasing and using a dishwasher versus doing dishes by hand. This worksheet is a generic checklist of questions we can use to interrogate any potential purchase to try to do a more thorough job of assessing the actual costs involved. If nothing else, it is a splendid way of avoiding impulsive purchases!

It is edifying to apply the worksheet to some lines of the Income and Expense Tracking worksheet and interrogate these expenses for more of the factors that contribute to making them as high as they are. By becoming more mindful, for example, of how often we are enticed into purchasing extended warranties on various products, or perhaps our reluctance to ask about all the associated fees and taxes and preparation charges associated with some purchases, we can make more deliberate and informed choices in the future. Using this information, we might be able to achieve that extra measure of financial self-liberation that can be so—pleasant!

The Freedom Budget Exercise can also provide teachable moments when we reflect that some employers who offer their employees the opportunity to work four years at 80% salary so that in the fifth year, the employee can take a “sabbatical” also at 80% salary. But if we were anxious to expand our leisure and practice a simpler way of living in order to achieve it, why couldn’t this same financial strategy be used to simply work four days per week rather than five? Would perpetual three-day weekends be worth the financial adjustments necessary to free up the time? If we can imagine such changes to obtain a “sabbatical” vacation for a year, why not a permanent change of lifestyle? And if we could thrive on 80% of our income, why not 60%, thereby shifting our entire life balance toward four days of leisure per week and three of “bread labor”? It may even be that by making this shift in time allocation, we can use some of our four days per week of leisure to produce goods for ourselves, such as growing our own garden, preserving food, making clothes, etc., that eliminate the need for money altogether! Sparking conversations like this with group members during debriefings can open up the potential of the exercise both for deeper mindfulness of how we in fact use money, and also a broader perspective of some of the opportunities that might be available to us.

Resources:

Callenbach, Ernest. 1992. *Living cheaply with style*. Berkeley, CA: Ronin Publications, Inc.

Dacyczyn, Amy. 1993. *The Tightwad Gazette: Promoting thrift as a viable alternative lifestyle*. New York: Villard Books. Amy Dacyczyn presents a compendium of practical tips on how to recycle, reuse, reclaim and recover all sorts of items to sustain a frugal lifestyle. The book is more about thrift than simplicity, but is still readably amusing and very useful.

Dappen, Andy. 1992. *Cheap tricks: 100s of ways you can save 1000s of dollars*. Regina, SK: Brier Books

Dominguez, Joe, and Vicki Robin. 1992. *Your money or your life: Transforming your relationship with money and achieving financial independence*. Philadelphia, PA: Penguin. This must-

read book has introduced many to voluntary simplicity and financial integrity. There is an audiotape series to match it.

Long, Charles. 1993. *How to survive without a salary*. Toronto: Warwick Publishing Group. This book contains scores of innovative suggestions on assembling a living from part-time, short-term, intermittent employment augmented with barter, scavenging, bargaining and bargain-hunting and voluntary simplicity. More about self-reliance and maintaining personal autonomy and freedom than about simplicity per se, the book still includes a wealth of practical ideas on self-reliant living.

Income and Expense Tracking Worksheet

Voluntary simplicity suggests that freedom to live according to our own goals and values is gained as much through reducing needs as through increasing income. Our ability to make decisions leading toward greater freedom depends in part on becoming more mindful of how we now use money and how much of it we have. In the following exercise, prepare a summary of how you currently use your money. Beside each entry, add an estimate of how much well-being (life satisfaction) you gain from the money spent (High, Medium, or Low). Then answer the questions at the end of this worksheet.

Income:

Annual NET earnings from employment
(earnings after taxes and deductions):

Annual NET earnings from second income, if any:

Annual earnings from investments, bank interest, etc.:

Income tax refund, if any:

Social allowance, Employment Insurance, etc.

Gifts, inheritances, tips, commissions, etc.

Income from Alimony, child support or spousal support

Child Tax Credit, if any

Other income:

Total annual Net income last year:

Expenses: (Total annual expense for items shown)

Housing

Rent or mortgage payments

2nd mortgage, if any

House or apartment insurance

Electricity

Water & Sewer

Property taxes

Strata fee / pad rental

Gas, fuel oil, wood, etc.

Telephone (including long distance)

Maintenance and repairs

Memberships (store, online, family, etc.)

Storage locker

Security / alarm service

Redecorating

Yard and garden expenses

Special services (e.g., snow removal, etc.)

Other _____

Cost

Well-being
(High, Med, or Low)

Furnishings

Food and Household Supplies

Groceries and cleaning supplies

Special Meal Plans (e.g., Jenny Craig)

Personal care items (shampoo, deodorant, etc.)

Baby / infant needs (diapers, formula, etc.)

Household hardware items (batteries, twine, light household repair items, etc.)

Linens and towels

Laundry and dry-cleaning expenses

Clothing

Adult clothing

Dry-cleaning Services

Clothing repair or seasonal storage charges

Communications & Media

Cell phone charges

ISP / Internet Service

Satellite radio or cable TV subscription

Data plan or other services

Entertainment

Babysitting fees

Movies, videos, theater tickets, etc.

Cable television

Country / Community Club Memberships

Restaurant meals

Alcoholic beverages / Recreational drugs

Tobacco products

Sports activities, lessons, equipment, and fees

Hobbies, collections, conferences and junkets

Fitness memberships

Lottery / gaming / bingo

Vacations and trips

Tours, concerts, museums, etc.

Newspapers, magazines and books

Club dues and membership fees

Education and Development

Course fees for self or children

Lesson fees or tutorials

Professional development expenses

Hobby costs

Insurance and Medical

Life & Health Insurance premiums

Disability Insurance

Extended Health Care Plans / Catastrophic coverage

Provincial medical premiums

Specialists (Massage, chiropractic, etc.)

Medications and medical expenses

Dental expenses

Eyeglasses or other prostheses

Deductibles (out of pocket)

Other medical / dental _____

Personal Care

Hair care

Salon services / spas

Personal trainer fees / yoga / t'ai-chi, etc.

Transportation

Car payments or lease payments

Fuel, oil, washes

Repairs and maintenance

Financing charges

Automobile insurance

Auto supplies and gadgets (car wax, etc.)

Parking fees

Tickets, charges, court judgments, license surcharges

Driver's License fee

Cab fares

Bus fares / passes

Airline tickets

Subway, mass transit, boat fares, other

Child-Related Expenses

Child care costs

Special courses or lessons

Activity registration fees (e.g., summer camps, etc.)

Toys, gifts, allowances

Special trips, outings, school activities

Special school fees, art supplies, band instruments, etc.

Sports equipment

Orthodontic services

Children's clothing

Professional Fees and Services

Legal fees

Accounting fees

Bank / Credit Union service charges

Safe Deposit Box fees

Pets / Vet Bills / Insurance

Donations (church, charities, etc.)

Credit card service charges

Postage and postal services

Other special services

Payments

Child / spousal support

Secured debts

Money owed to family / friends

Credit cards

Loans

Line(s) of credit

Student loan

Lease

Other debt payment

Emergency savings

Income tax (not withheld)

RRSP (or similar)

RESP

TFSA

Regular purchase of bonds, securities, etc.

Other payments _____

Miscellaneous Expenses

Total Annual Expenses:

Divide by 12 for Average Monthly Expenses:

Freedom Budget Exercise

1. Perform the following thought experiment: Suppose that for some good reason, or from necessity, you had to live on 75% of your present income. Review your expenses and make a new budget which would allow you to live on this amount. What would you have to change in your present lifestyle? What would be the consequences of these changes?
2. Prepare other budgets for 50% and 25% of your current income. What would you change? How would these changes affect your real quality of life?
3. Set one goal for yourself for the next year (financial or otherwise) which is clearly related to where you find reward in life as discovered so far in this course / workshop. Amend your budget to achieve this goal.

My Goal: _____

Budgetary changes required: _____

Worksheet on Costs Associated with Buying Some(any)thing

When we are in the market to buy something, it can be extremely helpful to cultivate mindfulness of the full costs associated with buying some(any)thing. Depending on the product or service in question, these costs can vary widely. Many people look only at the sticker price of their desired purchase. However, listed below are some considerations that can, or will certainly, add to the final bottom line of almost all purchases made in formal markets. They apply far less to barter transactions, trades, cash-for-product, or service exchanges, etc., and not at all to production for own consumption.

Purchase price of product or service	\$ _____
Sales tax(es)	_____
Extra fees (deliveries, set-up fees, preparation fees, installation, required maintenance to maintain warranties, etc.)	_____
Extended warranties	_____
Licensing fees (if required, as for a car)	_____
Insurance (as for car or expensive jewelry, etc.)	_____
Lifetime operating costs (fuel, electricity, consumables like chemicals or replacement parts and supplies)	_____
Disposal fees (e.g., enviro-taxes for e-wastes, tires, etc.)	_____
Extra incurred costs (e.g., having to build a garage to shelter a car, add storage space to home, etc.)	_____
Financing costs to purchase (interest on loans, credit card, lines of credit, etc., these costs can be enormous, especially for things like mortgages.)	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
Subtotal (add all of the above):	(A) _____
Now multiply (A) by your marginal (high-end) income tax rate:	(B) _____
True Cost of Purchase = (A) + (B)	\$ _____

This is the money you will actually have to earn plus the income taxes you will pay on the earned income in order to obtain enough money to pay for the purchase.

Group Discussion of Income / Expense Tracking

Purpose:

- to further conscientize group members on the relation between their current household expenditures and the contribution each makes to well-being (life satisfaction)
- to heighten awareness of the factors at play that affect the expenditures we make and how many of them are freely chosen versus imposed
- to better align our use of money, as much as possible with the values that guide our lives

Framing:

This exercise uses the Income and Expense Tracking activity results from the exercise above to provide grist for a lively group discussion and analysis of how spending decisions are made, what influences affect those decisions, how much life satisfaction was derived from these expenditures, and how much in alignment our spending is with our personal values and life goals.

Group Size: Any size group

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately). Time required will depend on group size and how engaged group members become with discussion, but approximately 1.5 hours for a group of 25 or so.

Materials / Equipment:

- completed Income and Expense Tracking worksheet
- completed Freedom Budget thought experiment

Process:

1. If group members have not already completed the Income and Expense Tracking worksheet, now would be the time to assign it. When these have been completed, have participants review their one-month records of expenditure.
2. Invite group members to review their worksheets with particular attention to the well-being they gained from each category of expenditure. While it is certainly true that few adults will expect that every purchase they make will leave them feeling elated, it is still useful to apply this screen to our monthly expenditures, especially in areas where we still have discretion in the purchase.
3. Also invite group members to review their expenditures with reference to how well they align with key life values. Is our purchasing mostly in alignment with our life values or do they conflict? If they conflict, how often and how important are these conflicts? Recall that Vicki Robin once observed: "How we spend our money is how we vote for the sort of future we want."

4. Now assign group members to small discussion groups. Working as groups, review the expenditures that make little or no contribution to well-being, and expenditures that are clearly in conflict with important governing values:
 - Brainstorm strategies for reducing or eliminating expenditures that make no contribution to well-being, or that might actually undermine it. Share tips and ideas to help each other.
 - In cases where expenditures are in conflict with important life values, share information and tips on alternative products or services that might be more in alignment with our governing values.
5. Reassemble large group and invite general observations and collaboration on sharing tips and suggestions.

Notes:

Particularly interesting is the comparison between the amount of money we spend on a given line and how much well-being we derive from it. Consumer culture bills itself as fun and games for all. But when we actually do the numbers, it can be striking how much money we spend on things and services from which we not only derive little pleasure, but which may be a source of vexation. Never in my life, for example, have I ever been a happy car owner. I resent every dime I spend on cars and a new car smell is not sufficiently rewarding to resolve my buyer's remorse.

Group members are often surprised to discover how much money they spend on things like servicing debts, financial transaction fees, and the coerced consumption arising from design obsolescence, etc., which bring us no satisfaction at all. We tend to accept these as cost of doing business or the cost of convenience, but the contribution to our well-being can be marginal at best. It can then be positively exhilarating to engineer solutions to these situations. How can we minimize or eliminate expenses that make no contribution to our well-being?

Another variation on this exercise that works well is that instead of doing the overall Income and Expense Tracking exercise, complete instead the worksheets on Costs Associated with Having a Job as well as The Costs Associated With Buying Some(any)thing applied to the purchase of a house and a car. Having a job, a house, and a car are hallmarks of adulthood in consumer culture. For several generations they have defined the "American / Canadian Dream." Because many of us decide we want these things based on their dream value rather than a rational assessment of their true value, including their costs, we tend to over-estimate their rewards and under-estimate their true costs. Of course we all need a place to live, an income, and transportation. Seldom, however, do we question whether living in single-family fully detached houses, hiring ourselves out full-time to others, and driving automobiles are the solutions to these needs which will return the greatest well-being.

The connection to simple living here is to cease making assumptions and to pause from blindly following the dreams offered by consumer culture, at least long enough to assess mindfully whether these goals are really our goals, or whether they are images and feelings we absorbed from the surrounding culture before we could be conscious or critical. Voluntary simplicity calls us to a life of deliberate choices, made with as much mindful awareness of the consequences as we can muster. We prize social justice and ecological sustainability. We practice self-reliance in community with others. It's important therefore to take our time with decisions as weighty and complex as those of how to spend our working career, in what manner we shall live, and how we shall get from place to place.

Resources:

Dominguez, Joe, and Vicki Robin. 1992. *Your money or your life: Transforming your relationship with money and achieving financial independence*. Philadelphia, PA: Penguin. This must-read book has introduced many to voluntary simplicity and financial integrity. There is an audiotape series to match it.

Worksheet on Costs Associated With Having a Job

We usually think of having a job as a way of making money. Often we don't consider what it costs us to be employed. It also costs time. Our true rate of pay can be found by subtracting from our take home pay all the expenses we incurred in earning it, and then dividing the remainder by the true number of hours needed to earn it, both on and off the job. The costs incurred because of working are expenses we would not otherwise have except for our jobs. We deduct these from our wages or salary to learn what are our true net earnings. Finally, there can be very significant "opportunity costs" associated with employment, i.e., things we might have learned or done to cultivate our own self-reliance and productive capacities instead of spending our time working for someone else. These are harder to estimate, but likely very significant. Only then can we decide whether we feel fairly compensated for continuing at a particular job in exchange for our life/time.

What is your Gross weekly take-home pay?
(Total pay before deductions)

_____ (A)

Now find total deductions from your gross pay:

Deductions from income:

Income tax	\$ _____
Statutory pension deduction	\$ _____
Statutory unemployment insurance or like deduction	\$ _____
Charitable donations	\$ _____
Union or professional dues	\$ _____
Group Long-term disability insurance	\$ _____
Group Life Insurance	\$ _____
Company pension deduction	\$ _____
Group medical, dental, or extended health care insurance	\$ _____
Workers Compensation premiums	\$ _____
Other _____	\$ _____
Other _____	\$ _____
Total weekly deductions (add all of the above):	\$ _____ (B)

Net weekly pay = (A) - (B) = (C) **\$ _____ (C)**

Now summarize your other employment-related costs. For costs which occur only occasionally rather than weekly, e.g., professional development conferences or donations to office pools, take the annual total cost and divide by 50.

Other employment related costs:

Parking fees	\$ _____
Pro-rated cost of car ownership and operation if necessary for work	\$ _____
Average weekly cost of clothing or special equipment needed for work	\$ _____
Weekly cost of business lunches or other meals related to work	\$ _____
Donations made at office for weddings, bereavements, etc.	\$ _____
Cost of mandatory professional development or training programs	\$ _____
Weekly cost of coffee breaks or meals out incurred because of work	\$ _____

Cost of medications needed to perform at work (e.g., anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications, etc.) \$ _____

Cost of counseling or other services if work-related issues impact marriage and family in a negative way \$ _____

Cost of decompression activities if clearly related to work, e.g., rehab services used because of work stresses or injuries \$ _____

Cost of gifts to children or other family members to compensate for absences or other work-related impacts on family \$ _____

Cost of home office space, utilities, equipment and supplies if you are offered the option of working from home \$ _____

Other _____ \$ _____

Other _____ \$ _____

Other _____ \$ _____

Total "Other" employment expenses (add all the above): \$ _____ (D)

Now record the costs in hours per week (annual total divided by 50) for each of these work-related types of activities. Add you own items at the end of the list as well:

Activity	Hrs. / Week
Weekly total commuting time round trip to work	_____
Costuming (time spent on special clothing & clothes shopping)	_____
Meals and break time that is work-related	_____
Decompression (daily relaxation time that is that job-related)	_____
Time spent on "escape" entertainment	_____
Time spent on professional development and training	_____
Vacations	_____
Time for work-related illness or stress leave	_____
Other: _____	_____
Other: _____	_____
Other: _____	_____
Actual hours on the job:	_____
Total Hours Working & Work-related:	_____ (E)

Your True hourly rate of pay = $\frac{\text{Net Weekly Take-home Pay (C)} - \text{Cost of Working (D)}}{\text{Total Hours on Job and in job-related activities (E)}}$

Are you prepared to sell each hour of your life / time for this rate?
 As you purchase things, remember, too, what the price of each purchase represents in terms of life / time. Is it worth your investment?

[Adapted from: Dominguez, Joe and Robin, Vicki. 1992. *Your money or your life*. New York, NY:Bantam.]

Mindfulness of Money

Purpose:

- to help participants recollect and enrich their awareness of the felt-sense surrounding their relationship to money
- to begin to tap insights that help liberate us from the powerful emotional hold that money can have in our lives, and to place the meaning of money in a more realistic context

Framing:

Money is a complex social and psychological invention. Mindfulness of our emotional reactions to money and the role it plays in our relationships, self-esteem, sense of security, and well-being contributes greatly to the prudent use of financial resources. This exercise explores some of the non-financial but nevertheless significant aspects of our relationship with money, hopefully giving us an alternative perspective that opens new choices in our use of money that are more supportive of simple living, if we so desire.

Group Size: 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for all participants

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise as the beginning of bringing mindfulness to our psycho-emotional relationship to money. Economists think we are rational actors, but financial decisions very often arise from deeply non-rational sources. We want to begin by inviting our deep-wisdom to inform our conscious attitude. This is not a search for insight, or an exploration of inner guilt. Our sole purpose is to allow how we feel to surface into consciousness and to simply notice how it is we do feel in relation to money.
2. Have participants position a sheet of paper in front of them and a pen within easy reach so that they can jot down impressions and memories as we go.
3. Invite participants to relax, close eyes, and just follow the “entrance meditation” script as you read it.
4. Read the entrance meditation script in a meditative way. Allow sufficient pauses and silences between thoughts so that they can percolate down and make an impression:

We come together tonight (today),
From all our various activities and responsibilities—
We come together in this place of quiet,

To reflect, to relax, to discover;
We are fellow explorers, and as we sit together,
Our eyes lightly closed,
We feel each other's presence—
Fellow explorers, fellow citizens of planet Earth,
Coming together in stillness...in peace.

We feel the day's busy-ness and tensions slowly draining away,
Here in this stillness;
We look within, focusing inward,
And we see the river of our thoughts.
The water is passing by, passing by—
Carrying all the concerns and thoughts of the day
Like muddy swirls and eddies in the flowing water.
But we find a place to sit down
By the edge of the flowing stream.
We gaze into the water which at this place pools before us,
Turning, turning, and gradually coming to a rest.
As the water turns slowly and finally comes to stillness,
It also grows gradually clearer,
Until we can look down into it, into the depths.
There we see light reflecting back,
Shining with forms and images.

Ever so gently we form the intention to remember—
We let the shining pool become a reflecting mirror—
A mirror of memory and recollection.
We form the intention to remember ourselves
And our history of experience with money.
These may be recollections of experiences long ago
as children,
Or perhaps they are memories from only yesterday.
Whatever they may be, they come to us now
And as they do, opening our eyes only half way,
we note them with a word or a phrase.
We let these images well up from the mirror of memory,
seeing those moments when we felt most
impressed, most influenced by the role of money in our lives.
We witness these memories and feelings, without judgment or attachment,
Simply noticing, taking note, honoring each memory
and particularly the feelings that are present.
Like the images, we also note our feelings as they come to us,
honestly, gently, without judgment or censorship.

And now we again form a very gentle intention—
The intention to summon into awareness
Images of what is happening to us now in our financial lives;
how we are feeling about these events;
of what others may be experiencing in our communities,
workplaces, and families;
or of yet other things of which we know and which concern us
but of which we are not the authors.
We allow these images, feelings and memories to come into awareness,
and we note them down...

We notice, we record, we let these things touch us,
without censorship, without judgment, without attachment.
We honor these experiences by giving them our attention,
the time of day, a moment's thought...
We witness, we let what we witness touch us,
we note how we have been touched.

Now we gently release our intention to remember—
We let our memories and images return to the
swirling pool of consciousness, the river of our thoughts.
We sit quietly on the bank, watching them disappear
into the churning water.
Still the mirror rests before us in perfect clarity, stillness and truth.
We gaze at it quietly,
letting its calmness and clarity
shine through our minds and every cell of our bodies.
And thus shining, we gradually and quietly return to this room.
We look around us, silently reconnecting with this community of simple living.
And we are back.

5. Have participants review their lists of memory images and feeling notes, and write short paragraphs that elaborate the most striking of these. Focus particularly on accounts of experiences that have the greatest emotional charge, for good or ill.
6. Invite participants to tell the story of their experiences in relation to money. Chart the different examples shared to help participants gain an overview of the high points in lives other than their own.
 - What do these memories tell us about our felt-relationship to money?
 - What sort of feeling tone surrounds our recollections of experiences with money?
7. Note that simple living is not necessarily about eliminating money from our lives, or living with strict frugality. It is, however, about changing our perspective of money and the emotional influence it has over us. Simple living tends to demote the importance of money in order to promote other values. Money has its place and its uses, but it does not stand in first place and its uses are limited. Debrief group discussion. Ask group members if they think it is possible to change their relationship with money and if it would be desirable to do so?

Notes:

The intention in doing this exercise is to lay a foundation for changing our relationship to money through a transformation of awareness—not because of guilt we may feel for past decisions, nor from fear about what will happen if we don't change our ways, nor from greed over how we might profit if we thought of money differently. Guilt is based on self-judgment and external moral norms, both of which can be self-imposed forms of violence. Fear is also a violent emotion, and not a lasting motive for doing anything. Greed leaves us in the power of money. But growing awareness of how we feel in relation to money, and rooting future actions in that felt-sense of awareness offers the possibility of deep-seated and long-term change.

It's helpful in this exercise to invite group members to work together to disentangle money, and especially how they may feel about money (elated, powerful, greedy, secure, threatened, etc.) from reality itself. Money is a medium of exchange which makes it easier to store value and

transact business, but it is not the same as the things it can be used to buy, nor does it have any tangible reality apart from the social contract that makes its existence possible. Realizing for the first time that money has no reality apart from a fragile system of social beliefs and agreements can be disorienting and anxiety-provoking. Many of us associate having money with security, but that security depends entirely on the social contract of trust, which makes it possible to exchange money for things of real value. Cancel the contract for any reason, and money loses its meaning and its power.

As group members explore their felt relationship to money, it also often happens that some people will have extremely strong feelings that they interpret as positive—excitement, power, an expansive anything-is-possible sense of inflation, feelings of elitism or distance from people with lower incomes, feelings of invincibility, etc. These are strongly encouraged in consumer culture because it is people in pursuit of larger and larger supplies of money that is the boiler room of economic expansion and consumerism. But these feelings can be interrogated as well from the perspective of realism and wholesomeness. Not everything that feels pleasant is wholesome, i.e., life-giving in the long run, in accord with justice, or in any sense sustainable. Positive feelings of inflation and elation can be just as destructive to a good life as feelings of guilt or depression or anxiety around money. Invite group members to discuss why this might be the case.

In addition to the characteristics of a voluntary simplicity perspective of money offered in the introduction to this section, some additional thoughts might be in order, which you can incorporate into framing this exercise before you start working with group members, or you can use them as prompts for further discussion:

- Simplicity and frugality are related but not identical. Frugality is the virtue of prudence in the exercise of financial affairs. Taken to an extreme, it can become miserly and selfish, and just as preoccupied in its own way with money as is the pursuit of wealth. Practiced in moderation, frugality helps us keep money in its place, make adequate provision of the things that money can buy, and also help us discern when to turn our attention to other pursuits.
- Simplicity promotes financial security because businesses devoted to luxury are the first to be negatively affected in hard economic times.
- Simplicity prepares us to weather economic reverses because our regular practice of simplicity helps us develop the skills, tastes and habits that protect our leisure, and even our material security, during downturns. People who cultivate self-reliance are less concerned with the ups and downs of the macro-economy if their micro-economy is in good order.
- Simplicity proposes that wealth (well-being) is different from and not interchangeable with money (riches). Money is a medium of exchange that can be useful in obtaining some of the pre-requisites of wealth, but mostly the material ones. Helpful to our psychological hygiene is remembering that a lack of money doesn't mean a complete deprivation of well-being. A belief that it does, however, can prevent us experiencing the forms of well-being that are still available to us, even when we are living on slender financial means.
- A high income is not necessary either to live well or to live long. This is not to say that money makes no difference in provisioning complex human needs. But rather, the case for simple living is that beyond a certain level, higher income adds remarkably little to our well-being, and if we live properly, we can attain a very high level of well-being at a very low level of income.
- Another observation is that many people have found ways to substitute ingenuity and creativity for money. This is not to say that we should be using ingenuity to strive for

affluence without monetary income, but rather, that ingenuity can aid self-reliance in the provision of what is necessary at very low cost. We strive not for affluence without money, but rather sufficiency through the application of ingenuity and self-reliance.

- It has also been observed that the love of money (the spirit of commerce) and the accumulation of it generally inflames the desire for more of it. In this sense, the spirit of commerce more closely resembles an addiction than it does a mere need fulfillment. When asked how much money they would need to feel financially satisfied, people at all income levels tend to respond by saying they would need about twice as much as they currently earn, whether their earnings are \$20,000 per year or \$2,000,000. Clearly this has nothing to do with sufficient provision.
- While money has its uses, it also tends to attract financially parasitical people and enterprises. These are companies (e.g., financial services industries) and individuals (e.g., lawyers, accountants, financial advisors, etc.) who don't actually produce anything themselves but rather profit by creating ways of taxing ordinary financial transactions (e.g., credit card interest, service charges, transaction fees, etc.) or dispensing information and advice about how to maneuver through a maze of regulations and contractual complications which they themselves invent. Since none of this actually produces anything of value, it is parasitic on people whose work does produce value.
- From a simplicity perspective, there is probably no such thing as good debt. There may be necessary debts such as mortgages, but even here, as recent history has shown, changing market conditions beyond the control of individuals can wipe out a lifetime of careful financial management. Many financial advisors will also argue that money borrowed to make more money through investments may also be advantageous—which is true as long as the investments turn out to be profitable. But in general, debt always limits our freedom, can be stressful to relationships and tends to increase fear and insecurity.
- The creative challenge from the simple living perspective is not to increase our incomes but to reduce desires to the fewest necessary for the greatest well-being, and as much as possible to simplify how we provision them.

Handy Money / Tricky Money

Purpose:

- to continue our exploration of money from a voluntary simplicity perspective, particularly with reference to the uses of money and its pitfalls and illusions
- to develop creative approaches to maintaining mindfulness of the pitfalls of money and counteracting their effects

Framing:

Money is an extremely complex invention. In any conversation of open-minded people, for every questionable aspect of money, an off-setting advantage can often be cited. It's not the purpose of this exercise to forge agreement on whether money is a good thing or not, since the use of money tends to follow the inclinations of our hearts in any case, but rather simply to begin bringing into awareness as many aspects of this complicated invention as we can. With greater awareness, we can then think of ways to off-set money's negative impacts while realistically acknowledging its legitimate uses. Of course, all of this we explore with a simple living bias. It's simple living we want to use money prudently to promote, not money we want to make more of by living simply.

This exercise uses a combination of lively debate and brainstorming to identify both the handy things about money and the tricky things. Based on these discoveries, group members go on to "accentuate the positive while minimizing the negative" and develop strategies for taking best advantage of what money has to offer while hopefully avoiding its many pitfalls.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 – 2 hours (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- white board, black board, or recycled / recyclable flip chart paper
- white board markers, chalk or odorless markers, depending on your writing medium

Process:

1. This exercise proceeds in two parts: (a) a debate format, followed by (b) brainstorming and group discussion.
2. Divide group into two debating teams—the Handy Team and the Tricky Team. If the group is large, this will take the form first of assembling discussion groups that develop the various speaking points and examples that will be used by their team. Some smaller numbers of individuals (3 or 4) are then recruited from each group to actually make up the debating teams.
3. Handy Team members should assemble and identify all the ways in which money is a handy invention. What does having money add to our lives? How can money make our lives easier? What is it about money that makes these advantages possible? Handy Team

members should assemble a list of debating points that demonstrate the positive things about money. The actual debating team members will consist of three group members whose birthdays fall closest to Ground Hog Day (February 2nd).

4. Tricky Team members will do the same as the Handy Team members, but the focus of discussion will be the “tricky” things about money. How is money a mixed blessing? What can be the pitfalls and hazards associated with the use of money? How does the existence of money in consumer culture make our lives more difficult, multiply suffering, or bring out the worst in people? Tricky Team debating members will be the three group members whose birthdays fall closest to Canada Day (July 1st).
5. Once the teams have had about 30 minutes to prepare their debating points, the educator / group facilitator should facilitate a formal debate. Debate team captains have 3 minutes to present an overview of their teams’ respective positions, present the key reasons they think money is either handy or tricky. Then open the debate with each team member having 1 minute to rebut a point made by each team captain, and then 1 minute each for a reply to the rebuttals. Allow enough time for each team member to cycle twice through this process (about 24 minutes), then allow 1 minute more for each team captain to offer a closing final argument / summary.
6. The object of the debate is not to win over the larger group to one or another point of view, but rather to more fully expose the complexities and richness of the concept of money and its place in modern life. The debate process can be useful in identifying flaws in logic, questionable factual support for various arguments, or bias in presentation.
7. As the debate proceeds, the educator or facilitator should be logging the handy and tricky features of money in two separate columns on a white / black board or on two separate sheets of flip chart paper.
8. At the conclusion of the debate, the facilitator should reassemble the large group, thank the debating teams, and then facilitate a discussion and brainstorming session based on the handy and tricky aspects of money identified during the debate:
 - Were you swayed one way or another by either of the debating team positions? If you came to adopt a more (or less) positive perspective of money, what in particular influenced your position?
 - Did information or points of argument you heard during the debate cause you to completely change your opinion about money from the one you had before the debate, and what was the coup de grace argument that changed your mind?
 - What things in particular about money might be helpful to a simpler lifestyle?
 - What things about money might make simple living more difficult or risky?
9. After this discussion, facilitate a brainstorming exercise with the large group pertaining to the following questions:
 - Given that our interest is learning to live more simply, how might the handy things about money be strengthened or best applied in support of a simpler lifestyle?
 - Given that our interest is learning to live more simply, what steps can we take to minimize or protect ourselves from the tricky things about money?

Notes:

The debate format for this exercise has both advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of simple living. In general, I try to promote a collaborative approach to learning in which group members see each other as learning assets rather than adversaries against whom they are trying to score points or win an argument. In this exercise, you may wish to take that approach by modifying the process so that two collaboration teams are formed who simply work in smaller groups to assemble a list of handy and tricky things about money.

In my experience, however, it is possible to shift the debate format slightly to one side so that it becomes not a contest to win an argument, but the collaborative development of two points of view which can then interact critically in a formal discussion the effect of which is to clarify and amplify each point of view. This takes careful framing of the exercise from the beginning as well as skillful management of the discussion once it gets under way. Debate team members should not see each other as adversaries, but rather as refiners of each other's view points. Ideally, the statement—critique—rebuttal—summary arc of discussion will produce better, more deeply considered, and more informed conclusions than would have been the case if the two discussion groups simply reported the results of their conversation. Moreover, there are just enough adversarial connotations that surround debates in our culture that this energy can be used to sharpen thinking and anticipate how one's debating points may be critiqued. It makes for livelier interaction and, if properly supervised, does not entirely depart from the spirit of collaborative inquiry.

For additional information, I've assembled below some key points about what I consider to be "handy" versus "tricksy" aspects of money:

Handy Things about Money

- Money is light and portable, so we don't have to take a tonne of turnips to swap for a pair of shoes.
- Money is universally convertible, meaning that nearly everyone will accept money in exchange for what they are selling rather than us needing to find a specific combination for someone else who has what we need and is willing to exchange it for what we have to offer.
- Money is a handy way to "store" the value of our labour today in order to redeem it at some future time for the labour or goods of others.
- Money is a very flexible medium of exchange, e.g., cash, credit cards, bonds, equity shares, etc. It can take both material and non-material forms.
- Units of money can be divided without losing value, e.g., a five-dollar bill is worth half as much as a ten-dollar bill, but a five-carat diamond is worth much less than half of the value of a ten-carat diamond.

Tricksy Things About Money

- Money can be "reified", i.e., even though it is purely an idea, a medium of exchange, people come to think of it as something real and valuable in its own right.
- The supply and the value of money are controlled by others, such as currency traders, central banks, etc. This means that despite the labour we put into accumulating money, the

value of the money we save can fluctuate wildly because of currency markets, exchange rates, government decisions to revalue / devalue money their currencies, wage / price inflation, etc. There have been many examples in history of money being devalued to zero.

- Money does weird things to people. Because it can be reified and therefore becomes something of value in its own right, people hoard, compete, envy, lust after and even kill each other for money—not the way they would behave in relation to a cow, or a shirt, or a bag of chips.
- Because of its flexibility, incomprehensible things can be done with money, e.g., the invention of “investment instruments” (derivatives, credit default swaps, asset backed commercial paper, etc.) that no one fully understands. This means that the less well-informed of those with modest financial aptitudes, can easily become the victims or the dupes of unethical financial advisers.
- Money can blind us, by making us think we cannot act without it, e.g., not being able to build a house for lack of inches (a medium of measurement as compared to a medium of exchange). Money can also block us from acting in situations where action is clearly called for, because we think we need money to take action, e.g., in international aid situations.
- Money can be conflated with self-worth. In our society, how much we think a person is worth is often equated with how much money they have, or might “cost” us if they disappeared or died. Moreover, people with low incomes can even come to think of themselves as of less value than people with higher incomes.
- Money can evoke intense emotions and is therefore inherently tricky to deal with, particularly when “rational” decisions are required.
- Money is often associated with other forms of power and influence, therefore creating continual pressures in consumer culture toward “plutocracy”—rule by the rich.
- Money can be conflated with security, when in fact it has little capacity to confer security. We will die, get sick, suffer loss, etc., regardless of how much money we have. There is no such thing as security.
- The value of things can be conflated with their price. This leads to two specific forms of blindness: (a) we tend to measure the value of things by their price (e.g., valuing diamonds highly because they are costly, when in reality, they are just shiny bits of gravel), and (b) we tend not to see the value things that have no price (e.g., being unable to fix a price on the ozone layer, species diversity, or a stable climate, yet all of these are essential for human survival). Both of these can be dreadful mistakes.
- There is no correspondence between the use-value of a thing and its market price. e.g., the use-value of a liter of water is high (essential for life itself), but its market price, set by the cost of supplying one more liter of water at the margin, is very low because supplies are abundant and cheap to obtain.
- The value of money diminishes rapidly “at the margin.” We think it retains value, but while some money is quite valuable, the value of each additional dollar at the margin diminishes rapidly with each additional dollar earned or saved.

Resources:

Houston, John H. 1996. "Understanding money." *PCD Forum* Article #15 Release Date: June 1st.

Myers, David G. 2000. "Wealth, well-being & the new American dream." Center for a New American Dream: *Simple Living Newsletter*, Issue # 30, July-September.

Raven, John. 1995. *The new wealth of nations*. Unionville, N.Y.: Royal Fireworks Press.

Alternatives to Money

Purpose:

- to begin to create the distinction between monetary values and use values in our daily lives
- to discover alternatives to money in the provision of key life needs
- to place money in a more proportionate and realistic perspective within a life of simplicity

Framing:

Is money necessary? If so, what is it necessary for? In consumer culture, this question is absurd because money is assumed to be the essential pre-requisite to every other work, the irreplaceable measure of value, and the indispensable basis for security. In this exercise, group members learn the difference between monetary costs and use values of goods, as well as brainstorm various approaches to meeting important life needs without using money. This exercise also highlights the difference between the price of a thing and its value, and how many extremely valuable things are not or cannot be priced at all.

This exercise can also be approached from a couple of different angles. From one perspective, we consider how it would be possible to live entirely without money. Clearly, humans did so before money was invented, and some people live without money even today, and even in urban settings. Whether we want to accept the trade-offs and living conditions that would go with such a choice is another question.

Alternatively, the exercise can be approached in terms of generating ideas that take us incrementally out of the cash-exchange economy and place us more and more in the realm of self-reliance and production for own consumption. In addition, since we are taking a gradualist approach here, we also consider ways of simplifying our financial affairs to make them less demanding, more transparent, and more under our own control.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 – 2 hours

Materials / Equipment:

None

Process:

1. Unless you have specific training and qualifications as a financial advisor, it is probably prudent to begin this session with a disclaimer. The ideas and suggestions for doing without money or for simplifying our financial affairs are for discussion / educational purposes only. Group members choose to implement these ideas at their own risk and no guarantees or warranties are being made, either implied or expressed.
2. In this activity we will be doing two thought experiments about (a) how it might be possible to live entirely without money, and (b) how to reduce the role that money plays in our lives by simplifying and clarifying our financial affairs.

3. Assign group members to small discussion groups of four or five people each. Appoint a recorder / reporter whose birthday is closest to May Day (1 May). Use brainstorming or group discussion to come up with as many ideas as possible in response to the following questions:
 - What do you think your life would be like if you tried to live entirely without money? Describe how this would be possible, if at all. What advantages and disadvantages do you think would accompany such a lifestyle?
 - What methods can you identify for reducing the role that money plays in your life at a practical level? How can the use of money be replaced to meet key life needs? What advantages and disadvantages would accompany such changes?
 - What steps can we take, or have you taken, to simplify your relationship with money, i.e., spend less time and energy thinking about financial affairs, keeping them more under your personal control, assuring the security of your financial assets, assuring that financial transactions are honest and transparent?
4. After some small group discussion, reassemble as a large group and listen to reports from the recorder / reporters. Assemble an aggregated list of ways of replacing money with other activities that supply the same needs, and methods of simplifying management of money.

Notes:

Usually the initial reaction of many group members to the question of living entirely without money is that it's a preposterous notion. The concept of money is very deeply entrenched in popular consciousness. This is true to such a degree that people who have no money often feel paralyzed in providing for themselves in any way, even for things that don't require money. They see money as the indispensable means to meeting every other life need.

A particularly pernicious manifestation of this belief occurs where some money is available, but fear of losing it inhibits any attempt to meet life needs without it. I once served for a couple of years on a Social Planning Council in a Canadian city. The Council was made up mostly of community poverty activists and people who were social allowance (welfare) recipients. Every month they came with a laundry list of complaints about household repairs and maintenance tasks that needed doing that they didn't have money to pay for. I suggested that the community simply set up a needs and skills exchange where people with needed skills could link up with those who needed their services. If necessary, we could create a community currency and barter exchange network to facilitate these exchanges. The proposal was immediately discarded because of the fear that the market value of such services might be deducted from the cash payments that social allowance recipients received from the province, even though no money changed hands! So even people willing to exchange skills and services for free or on a barter basis felt inhibited from doing so for fear of losing what little money they were being given. No more socially corrosive system could have been invented if it had been designed on purpose.

If the initial categorical skepticism toward living without money can be dissolved, it's extremely useful to explore how we might actually live without money—as many homeless people do every day, and as traditional hunter-gatherers did for millennia before the invention of money. While most of us would not actually want to live as the homeless do, much less return to a hunter-gatherer way of life, considering the possibility helps soften and moderate an overly rigid attitude that money is essential for everything. The results from this question can be both funny and insightful. Over the years I've had several individuals appear in my workshops who dumpster-dive for their food and clothing and couch-surf or squat in abandoned buildings for shelter. In Canada, essential medical services are available free, and entertainment is what you

make of it. Living without money is challenging. When it is done by choice, it is probably mostly the province of the young and fit. But it can be done, even in modern urban settings, and is being done by some people, by choice. The fact that it is being adopted by choice also implies that it is not without its own rewards. Readers interested in learning more about this lifestyle option can Google “freeganism” for many information sources, or use the link provided in the Resource section below.

When discussion moves to how we might reduce our need for money, help group members get beyond the idea of just becoming more savvy shoppers. While useful in a limited way, the idea of using more coupons, or seasonal sales, etc., still amounts to trying to use shopping as an exit from shopping—or more precisely, trying to spend money as a way of saving it. This is one of consumer culture’s favorite delusions: If I find a pair of shoes for \$50.00, but have a coupon that allows me to purchase the shoes for \$40.00, I have not saved \$10.00. I’ve just spent \$40.00 rather than \$50.00. In fact, I haven’t saved anything at all unless I can discover a way of doing without the shoes entirely and put my \$40.00 in the bank instead. So finding lower prices for products or services is not saving money in any other sense than expense avoidance, and only then when the product or service is something we actually need.

Living Without Money (Or Less of It)

The following are ways of reducing dependency on money and involvement in a monetized economic system:

- **Reduce / Avoid Debt** – Reducing debt reduces the need for money, especially money needed to pay interest and other administration and legal fees associated with acquiring debt. Actions: pay down debt; reduce / eliminate credit cards, or don’t use them as credit vehicles. If possible, never get into debt. The larger our debts, the more debt itself can become a self-driving problem. The larger our debt, the greater the cost to service the debt, which may wind up adding to the debt itself.
- **Reduce waste** – Wasting anything is a waste of money, but obviously wasting energy, food, water, clothing, etc., all represent avoidable demands for money. Actions: Any steps to conserve, reuse, or recover any resource that would otherwise have to be purchased again.
- **Reorient consumption** – A variation on reducing waste, but the acquisition of higher quality, more durable and more serviceable goods reduces expense by prolonging replacement times. Actions: Do lifecycle cost analysis on prospective purchases before making a decision. Invest in things that reduce your need for money (e.g., compact florescent light bulbs) rather than in things designed (uncertainly) to increase your supply of money (mutual funds).
- **Reduce scale** – Small is beautiful; smaller cars, houses, yards, etc., all generally incur lower costs.
- **Share** – Whatever can be jointly owned and shared is something that doesn’t have to be individually owned. Actions: Form car-sharing cooperatives, tool-sharing, toy-sharing, libraries, etc. See the Resource section below on “collaborative consumption”.
- **Direct production for own consumption** – Whatever can be produced directly in or by the household is something that doesn’t have to be purchased, e.g., food, water, household repairs, clothing, even some services like haircuts, entertainment, etc. For some households it may even be feasible to produce energy.

- Reduce taxable income – The largest single household expense for most families is taxes. Reducing income by itself can reduce the need for income to pay taxes on the income earned! It also reduces expenses incurred directly because of working, i.e., costs of being employed.
- Substitute – Substituting lower cost forms of activity for higher cost ones, e.g., bus instead of drive, use libraries instead of purchasing books, potluck instead of eating out, Hotmail instead of personal ISP, change landscaping to reduce costs and maintenance, etc.
- Reorient goals / desires – A psychological shift involved in deliberately exploring and cultivating forms of life activity that don't require money (or much money) to pursue. Do yoga, t'ai-chi or learn a foreign language rather than go to Vegas or Disney World.

All of these proposals taken together with whatever is generated from group discussion comes close to a pathway for financial independence that is based on demand-side management rather than the supply-side approach always promoted by consumer culture. In consumer culture, whatever may be the need or desire, the answer is always more money—increasing our supply of money. The voluntary simplicity sensibility I would think involves looking for ways of reducing desires, and when desires cannot be further reduced—or we choose not to reduce them for some reason—then to fashion the least money-intensive approach to meeting those needs.

Simplifying our entire relationship with money takes this discussion to the next level in the sense that it may imply activities that trade off some convenience in exchange for greater transparency in our financial affairs, or greater control and protection of privacy. It also requires a deeper level of questioning in that we begin here to interrogate particular products and services as to whether or not we even need them, and can therefore potentially eliminate them entirely from our lives. Adult group members with some history of managing their own money can be rich sources of ideas about how to simplify financial affairs. Probably the “simplest” approach, of course, is just to hand over management of our money to someone else, ask for a weekly allowance, and not bother about the details. But this hardly seems to be in the spirit of the self-reliance so beloved of voluntary simplicity practitioners, nor is it a particularly adult approach—even though it amounts to the same thing when even adults surrender their financial affairs into the custody of bankruptcy trustees or credit counseling services.

Ideas arising from group discussion should always be given pride of place on the suggestion wall. What follows are some additional ways we can simplify our financial dealings, or render them more transparent and under our personal control.

Simplifying Our Relationship to Money:

- Stay clear on governing values. Refresh this awareness in daily mindfulness practice.
- Increase mindfulness of how you in fact use money at the present time.
- Develop ability to distinguish which needs and goals that can be attained with money (e.g., purchasing food or transportation services) and which cannot (e.g., friendship, esteem, security, etc.).
- When practicable, meet basic life needs directly through production for own consumption (e.g., growing some of your own food) rather than through market transactions.
- Pay off debt and avoid incurring further debt of any kind for any reason.

- Shop with cash and log purchases to heighten mindfulness of how you are using your money and to provide sound information for making financial decisions.
- Establish an efficient budget to save ahead for predictable and recurring expenses (insurance payments, holiday gifts, etc.) and to limit how much is spent on routine, non-recurring expenses. A sound and livable budget is one effective means of reducing anxiety over having enough money to pay routine bills.
- Review your demand-side options (reducing needs, substitution, sharing, cooperation, efficiency investments) for dealing with any financial need before concluding that a supply-side (adding more working hours, high risk investments, gambling, crime, etc.) approach is the only way forward.
- Adopt consumer self-defense strategies (See Nominal Group on Enough) that reduce opportunities to spend money so that less money is needed in your life. Especially, avoid shopping as a form of entertainment.
- Continuing to cultivate mindfulness of and insight into what motivates consumption (Impacts of advertising, peer pressure, family / friends / colleague expectations, loneliness, fear, boredom, etc.).
- We need freedom from the illusion that pursuing the satisfaction of desires will lead to lasting contentment. Desire is cyclical and endless. Instead of trying to satisfy something which can never be satisfied, we need to understand the nature of desires in order to let go of the expectation that contentment can be found there, and then focus attention on habits and practices that really can bring lasting contentment.
- Strive consciously to avoid complex, long-term, murky investment schemes or services. Most of these are parasitic on your income. If the contract has pages of fine print or terms you don't understand, beware! Be especially cautious around any transaction that urges you to rush: "Call NOW!", "Hurry, while supplies last!" Henry David Thoreau urged us to live in such a way as to "keep our accounts on our thumb nails."
- Try not to fall prey to financial exploitation, e.g., "payday lenders", loan sharks, sales pitches that promise you will save money by spending it, impulse buying, etc.
- Cooperatives offer opportunities to cut out middlemen, reduce exploitation, regain community control, and share benefits flowing from economic activities. Credit unions in particular can offer lower fees on financial services and much better terms on mortgages and other lending services.
- If we need more motivation for simplifying and reducing our participation in the monetary economy, we need to remember that every financial transaction usually also incurs an environmental impact of some sort. Reducing our pursuit of "getting and spending" thus can also reduce our ecological footprints.
- Consider forms of investment that are non-monetary but which help reduce the need for money in the long run, e.g., efficiency investments such as better insulation, high efficiency furnaces, LED lights, etc.

And finally, we might also identify some financial pitfalls that we can help each other avoid through greater community cooperation, encouraging each other to cultivate mindfulness, and continuing a critical and insight-seeking approach toward all the claims of consumer culture.

Some Common Financial Pitfalls

- Don't spend money you don't have (or only buy what you actually have money to pay for—don't use credit). Exceptions might include purchase of major assets such as a house or tools for a business. But even a car is not an appreciating asset—it is an expense.
- Credit is Debt. Debt is bad. Debt is not a sign of power, or personal value, or adulthood. Debt is indentured servitude to others and limitation on our own freedom to do what we wish with our time.
- We cannot save money by shopping sales unless we needed to buy the item on sale anyway and have done the comparison shopping homework.
- An increase in the market value of something is not the same thing as savings. In the mid-2000s, home buyers in the U.S.A. were convinced by both realtors and financial advisers that the market value of their homes would continue to increase steadily over time. A person buying a \$400,000 house in an inflating market might come to believe that two or three years later that their house was now “worth” \$600,000, and thus conclude that they had just “made” a \$200,000 profit by doing nothing more than waiting for the market to rise. This is true only for people who happen (and it's usually by sheer chance) to buy into the housing market when prices are low, and who also actually sell their property before prices peak. If they are too greedy or hold the property too long, such housing bubbles can experience corrections where the \$200,000 “paper profit” (and sometimes more) evaporates over night. This exact process has happened several times since 1995, where increases in the market value of equities and real estate led brokers to tell people that these increases could be treated as “savings” or tax-free “capital gains” and hence used to finance credit card debt. In fact they could only be realized as savings if the assets were actually sold. When markets went down, people still holding those assets saw their “savings” evaporate because they were never real to begin with. In our example, if a homeowner now finds themselves with \$600,000 of debt on a house which can only be sold for \$350,000, far from having a savings account for a house, there appears a black hole instead. Increases in the market value of an asset only become real when the asset is sold. Furthermore, some of the conditions that can contribute to declines in market value may also contribute to unemployment. If our investor was particularly unlucky and lost her job in a declining market for real estate, she might lose her house as well if she couldn't keep up the mortgage payments—thus facing a \$600,000 total debt with no asset at all to offset it. This happened to millions of home owners in the U.S.A. in 2008.
- Never borrow to pay for current consumption or consumables, e.g., food, vacations, clothing, etc. Consumables, unlike houses or other tangible assets, disappear as soon as they are consumed, but still leave behind a debt. If money is borrowed to invest in tangible assets and something goes wrong, at least the asset can be sold again (provided there are buyers!) to partially or completely retire the debt.
- Minimize use of financial services (banks, brokerages) that charge you money to use your own money (deposit, withdraw or transfer money, make purchases as with fee-incurring debit cards, credit cards, etc.).

Resources:

- Botsman, Rachel, and Roo Rogers. 2010. *What's mine is yours: The rise of collaborative consumption*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. This book explores both the potential and the actual rise of shared consumption mediated by social networking and the Internet. New technologies are offering a net-savvy generation new mechanisms for sharing of material goods and collaboration on social change.
- Dacyczn, Amy. 1999. *The complete Tightwad Gazette: Promoting thrift as a viable alternative lifestyle*. New York: Random House. Consolidates material from the author's former newsletter and books. Includes detailed, practical, and thoroughly researched ideas for ways to live frugally.
- Long, Charles. 1996. *How to survive without a salary: Learning to live the conserver lifestyle*. Toronto: Warwick Publishing. Discusses the "conserver" lifestyle – reducing expenses, saving, and earning casual income. Promotes value of earning casual income rather than work in a salaried job.
- McCoy, Jonni. 2001. *Miserly moms: Living on one Income in a two-income economy*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House. Practical guide by stay-at-home mom on how to reduce family living expenses. Emphasis on food costs, planning, and recipes.
- Mies, Maria, and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen. 1999. *The subsistence perspective: Beyond the globalized economy*. London: Zed Books. A hard-hitting and well researched exploration of subsistence living as both the pre-cursor of, and an alternative to, globalized capitalist consumerism.
- Nearing, Scott, and Helen Nearing. 1970. *Living the good life*. New York: Schocken Books. This book helped launch the "back to the land" movement of the 1970s with the personal account of the Nearings who left the city, and returned to rural homesteading to discover a simple and satisfying life. While readers may choose not to duplicate the Nearing's experiment in every detail, it is a rich exploration of the practical meaning of self-reliance.
- Susanna, Sarah. 1998. *The not so big house: A blueprint for the way we really live*. Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press. Best-selling architect / author argues that what we really want in housing are informal, beautiful, and cozy spaces that serve the functions we do in the home rather than large, formal rooms that serve more as a status symbol than a retreat from the outside world.
- Tillotson, Betty, ed. 1998. *Skills for simple living*. Vancouver: Hartley and Marks. Compiled from "The Smallholder," a long established extraordinary newsletter about small homesteads, this book contains a wealth of practical, creative know-how from people living frugal, mindful lives. Suggests hundreds of approaches for dealing resourcefully with the everyday demands of a simple, land-based lifestyle. (\$14.95) Elijah Company catalog (1-888-2-ELIJAH).
- Winter, Barbara J. 1993. *Making a living without a job: Winning ways for creating work that you love*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell. Advocates self-employment, sometimes in multiple services or businesses, as an alternative to a salaried position working for others. Offers specific guidance and encouragement for those who want to combine their personal goals with their income-producing activities.

And for information about freeganism, visit: <http://frugalliving.about.com/od/bargainshopping/p/Freegan.htm>

Meanings of Wealth

Purpose:

- to conscientize group members to the distinction between riches (money) and wealth (well-being)
- to place material wealth in the context of other forms of wealth so that the meaning of material riches becomes more proportionate and nuanced

Framing:

Consumer culture strongly conflates money with wealth and wealth itself with material goods. In this exercise, group members explore the meaning of wealth as a synonym for well-being or welfare, and what a complex idea this is. The roll of money and the power of money to confer real well-being is thus brought into a different perspective and participants begin to discover a different basis for valuing life experiences, “resources” and the meaning of “investments”.

For many centuries, the message of simple living has been that material wealth is an important part, but only a part, of what makes for overall well-being. Non-material forms of wealth also make critical contributions to well-being which are not interchangeable with material goods. A great fallacy of consumer culture is the idea that the “universal convertibility” of money applies not just to things that can be bought and sold for money, but to most other life values as well. We begin to explore simpler ways of living in part when we discover that there are no material or monetary substitutes for many of the necessary conditions for well-being. A good life is found not through trying to amass as many material riches as possible, but in knowing how much is sufficient and hence when to apply effort in those other directions that are also necessary for well-being.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 – 2 hours

Materials / Equipment:

None

Process:

1. Introduce this exercise by defining the word “wealth” (derived from the Old English root, wele meaning “hale, healthy, vigorous, free from disease...”; also related to weal meaning “wellness, well-being...”). For purposes of the following discussion, we will distinguish wealth (well-being) from riches (an abundance of money). Since these words are often used interchangeably in consumer culture, some discussion might be necessary to establish a consensus on what the words shall mean for purposes of this exercise.

Also, introduce the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions for well-being. “Necessary conditions” consist of circumstances or goods without which well-being would be impossible. “Sufficient conditions” for well-being are the circumstances or goods the presence of which are certain to result in well-being. The distinction between these two sets of conditions (many of which may be the same) is subtle, but important. Meeting all

necessary conditions for well-being does not assure that it will happen, or cause it to happen. When sufficient conditions for well-being are met, however, well-being results just as an effect follows from a cause.

2. Assign group members to small groups of four to six people and appoint as recorder / reporter the person whose birthday falls closest to Hallowe'en (October 31st). Invite participants to discuss the following questions with recorders taking summary notes:
 - How would you define well-being?
 - What conditions do you think are necessary for well-being?
 - What conditions do you think are sufficient for well-being?
 - What role does money play in each of the necessary and sufficient conditions for well-being?
3. Reassemble the large group and have small group discussion recorders deliver their summaries of group discussion. Then as a large group, consider the following questions:
 - Give some examples of the necessary and sufficient conditions for well-being from your own experience.
 - To what extent do money or material possessions influence the necessary conditions for well-being in your experience?
 - In what ways, if any, can the single-minded pursuit of material riches undermine or compromise the necessary and sufficient conditions for well-being?
4. To extend this discussion to overlap the time and money topics, if desired, ask:
 - How much time do you spend each day to attain each necessary and sufficient condition for well-being?
 - Why has society been organized with these sorts of time allocations and whose interest does this arrangement promote / demote?
 - Do you want to change how you budget your time and if so, how will you do so?
5. Debrief this exercise and if necessary add some information from the Notes and / or Resource sections below.

Notes:

Consumer culture strongly conflates monetary riches and overall well-being. Sometimes riches are thought to be pre-requisite to other aspects of well-being, and sometimes it seems that riches are just portrayed as a substitute for other determinates of well-being. If we have enough money, we just don't need to bother about such things as friendship, health, spiritual meaning, etc. Most group members will have absorbed these ideas with their mother's milk. So disentangling well-being from monetary riches may be a bit challenging. It is nevertheless pre-requisite to all the rest of the exercise. Learning to think of well-being as something separate from monetary riches is extremely liberating all on its own. When we make this discovery, we cease looking for love in the wrong places.

In many repetitions of this exercise, I've found that group members mostly come up with their own multi-dimensional models of wealth, or the necessary and sufficient conditions that make for well-being. Jerome Segal (1999) introduced the idea that there are many factors (necessary conditions) that contribute to well-being. Certainly material security is one such condition, but not the only one. Moreover, material goods cannot be substituted for other necessary conditions such as healthy relationships (social wealth), spiritual meaning (spiritual wealth), opportunities to grow and develop intellectually (intellectual wealth), aesthetic experiences (the wealth of beauty), etc. To these, I would add physical, mental and emotional health, and ecological assets like wilderness, diverse species, abundant accessible resources, intact ecosystems, etc. All of these might be considered necessary conditions for well-being.

Over the last decade there has been exploding interest in the "economics" and psychology of well-being. Both streams of thinking move away from too limited conceptions of what wealth consists of and both adopt a more holistic perspective of how we can live well. Work in Bhutan is noteworthy in that measures of national happiness were added to Gross Domestic Product per capita as measures of development, the aim of which obviously should be increasing well-being, not just expanding riches. Other work on measures of well-being have identified dozens of necessary or contributing conditions that have both individual and collective application.

Finally, in his discussion of well-being, Jerome Segal raises an interesting point: Even when all the necessary conditions for well-being are secured, they may not be sufficient for a good life because fashioning a good life also requires a measure of luck and also skill. It is completely possible that a person who lacked sound judgment or a sense of life as an artwork, might squander the necessary conditions for well-being and create a miserable life for himself instead. Moreover, even skillful people with good judgment can be overtaken by circumstances beyond their control. War, civil upheavals, natural disasters, etc., can all derail the most diligent efforts to use one's blessings wisely to fashion a good life. This point is work making with any group with whom this exercise is engaged. There is always basis for gratitude and humility when we find ourselves enjoying a good life, and realize it is never solely because of our own efforts, but always with an admixture of good fortune and gratuitous grace. And it is always possible to squander the legacies of our ancestors if we act like fools.

Resources:

Segal, Jerome. 1999. *Graceful simplicity: The philosophy and politics of the alternative American dream*. 245 ff. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Segal's book is an interesting take on voluntary simplicity in its own right, but especially pertinent to the exercises related to money is his discussion of wealth beginning on p. 245 and following. Segal clearly imagines the necessary and sufficient conditions for well-being as being multi-dimensional, not solely determined by financial resources.

Alternative ways of measuring (and therefore thinking about) well-being can be found in the Happy Planet Index: <http://www.metafilter.com/61746/The-Happy-Planet-Index-a-Better-Way-to-Measure-WellBeing>

The Genuine Progress Indicator: <http://www.pembina.org/economics/gpi>

The Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP): <http://www.globalideasbank.org/site/bank/idea.php?ideald=2101>

Work done by Calvert and Henderson in developing their Quality of Life Indicators: <http://www.calvert-henderson.com/>

And many others...

Group Discussion on work and Works

Purpose:

- to conscientize group members to the distinction between work (jobs that make us money) from Works (the artworks that feed our souls)
- to encourage an inner dialogue which respects and integrates both the rational and transrational aspects of life
- to provide a practical basis for melding work and Works in our daily round so that making a living means more than simply pulling down a pay check

Framing:

In our daily experience, money and work are closely associated. In this exercise, group members have an opportunity to reflect and collaborate on work that is necessary to acquire money, and the “Works” that fill our lives with poetry and inspiration. The exercise offers a basis for distinguishing the pursuit of our Works from the mere process of working at a job. Mindfulness of this distinction provides the basis for possibly finding Works which can also provide part or all of our living.

This exercise is relevant to simple living because we seek not necessarily the highest income from our work, but rather, the maximum contribution to well-being and personal and planetary development. But many of us living in consumer culture spend the better part of our days working in jobs that serve mostly instrumental ends: they earn us the money we think we need for survival but often also force us to relegate the most meaningful aspects of our lives to the margins of our leisure time. By offering skillful means for reducing the income we need, voluntary simplicity holds out the possibility that we might be able to find work which is more in alignment with our deeper values and goals and experience thereby a higher level of well-being.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 2 hours (approximately)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all group members

Process:

1. The 20th-century depth psychologist Ira Progoff introduced a distinction between “work”—the jobs we do to earn money, and “Works”—activities that have for us the quality of an “opus”, a work of art, a passionate musical composition, etc. Of course Works needn’t be works of fine art. But they do engage us as passionate creators with engaged imaginations and a deep sense of caring about how our Works come to fruition. “work” leaves us tired at the end of the day. Works keep us awake at night with lively visions of what we are bringing into existence. “work” serves the purposes of our employers, while Works have a purpose of their own that springs up from deep inside us. When we finish “work” at the end of the week,

we get paid some money, but when we complete a Work, some part of the soul has been made manifest and we move another notch forward in our spiritual and personal development.

2. Ask group members to begin working as individuals and take some time to come to stillness and write one or more brief accounts of the Works which are important in our lives at this time. There is no need to be “realistic” or “practical” about our Works. These are projects of the heart. There is no need to censor our list of works because we won’t be defending them in terms of their practicality.
3. After allowing some individual writing time, assign participants to small groups of five or six, and invite sharing of the Works that are important to group members.
4. Have participants set aside their descriptions of their Works, and again working privately, jot down answers to the following questions:
 - What have you learned from your family, friends, teachers, counselors, community leaders, advertisers, etc., about how to make a living?
 - What are supposed to be the rewards of following this path?
 - What do you expect to be the pitfalls, if any?
 - What have you done so far to pursue it?
 - Compare this account with your own account of your Works...What relation exists between the two?
 - Is “making a living” in this way a skillful means to your calling?
 - What makes attending to your Works more difficult?
 - What would make it easier to attend to your Works?
5. Chart participant’s livelihood models on the white board or flip chart. It may resemble something like: training→ job→ income→ providing for livelihood needs→ leisure→ attention to personal works. Draw an ellipse around this model of livelihood and draw group attention to the borders around these concepts, the blank edges of the “map”. Ask what might lay outside those boundaries?
6. Have participants brainstorm, solo, what they can do as individuals to empower themselves to live out their personal Works in the context of the livelihood model we just discovered?

After some writing time, have groups assemble and ask participants to share suggestions with each other on personal skillful means of creating an integration between the work we must do to live and the Works we need to do to self-actualize.

Gather reports from the small groups and chart findings on the white board or flip chart.

7. Reassemble participants and ask them now to privately consider:
 - How might we work collectively to provide for our life needs and also support each other in pursuing our Works?

8. Re-assemble participants in large group and share results of individual brainstorming. Then work together to develop more ideas. Chart these.

Notes:

It's obvious that even people who live simply must make a living. At least part of the time, perhaps most of the time, this will still involve wage labor of some sort. So we have the practical consideration of how we get our living to attend to, otherwise we become parasites on others.

It's also fairly clear that most of us lead double lives in the sense that as we go about doing the work that earns us money, we also live a sometimes secret parallel dream life. Manifesting our dreams in the world of waking reality is something that we often relegate to vacations, spare time, or retirement—in short, we marginalize our soul's work in order to promote wage earning.

The creative challenge in simple living is to bring these two lives more into alignment. Sadly, consumer culture has its own agenda which largely comes down to accumulation of profits. But our Works are not always profitable. Maybe we don't have to choose one or the other. Maybe it's possible to stand in the tension between the practical need to make a living and soul's need to create. I don't have a quick and easy method for achieving this, but the challenge is well worth posing, and specific solutions to the challenge will depend on individual group members' resources, creativity and determination. The contribution that simple living can make to this effort is perhaps to partly relieve financial demands by reducing the scale of our material consumption and in the process liberate us more to pursue activities that don't pay but that are rewarding.

One of the parts of this exercise that group members can respond to most strongly is making conscious the standard career path that society prescribes for a good life (education / training → first job → career advancement / increasing income → providing for livelihood needs → leisure → eventual pursuit of Works in retirement—if you live long enough). Many of us don't think about this very much. We just absorb it during our growing years and take for granted that it represents the only reality possible. It can be an "ah-ha!" moment however, when we actually chart out the arc of a "normal" working life and then start asking ourselves who benefits from this? Does my life have to be this way? Are there alternatives to passive acceptance on the one hand or adolescent rebellion on the other when we don't see alternatives? Especially what do we do when we discover that after completing most of this career arc, it doesn't deliver the good life it promises anyway?

Another powerful aspect of this exercise is the fact that it acknowledges and values both the claims on our time made by the practical contingencies of everyday life and also the claims of our soul for a poetical existence with room for beauty, the numinous, the metaphorical and symbolic, the romantic—in short, room for all the transrational values that are so marginalized from the rapacious, grindingly practical and utterly unpoetic realm of commerce.

I would encourage readers to consult the work of Ira Progoff (Progoff 1969), an American psychologist of the 20th century who was also a protege of Carl Jung. Progoff also makes much in his work about the idea that each of us harbors a deep "seed potential" which seeks to actualize itself through Works that take form in the world through our personal efforts. These may be artworks, of course, but they may also be any life work that has the same significance as an artwork in our subjective experience. A good life, as Progoff would understand it, must take account of practical realities, to be sure. But it also gives attention and space to what the seed potential demands, the works we must complete to flower fully. Surely, the actualization of our full humanity must be part of what makes for well-being.

Finally, I think it's important to challenge group members to take up the question of how they will get their living and also realize some of their dreams through this activity as a creative challenge requiring work of its own. Often we seem to be searching for the "perfect job" as if the world of commerce was out there conspiring for our happiness and our only task is to find the right job, ready made, and then land it through a combination of preparatory training and

excellent interviewing skills. We are passive in taking what consumer culture has to offer rather than actively creating the world we want. Work is a huge part of life. The opportunities that work offers to shape the world differently, both through our own efforts and through collaboration with others, are immense.

Resources:

Progoff, Ira. 1969. *Depth psychology and modern man*. New York, NY: Dialogue House Library.

Sineta, Marsha. 1995. *Do what you love, the money will follow*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press. Marsha Sineta is also author of *Monks and Mystics in Ordinary Life*, and has a fine sense of how spirituality permeates the ordinary acts of living. In *Do What You Love...* she zeroes in on one of the main principles of voluntary simplicity—that our lives gain coherence and meaning when we attend to our loves.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1989. *Walden and other writings*. New York: Bantam Books. This is a classic account of Thoreau's two years living by the banks of Walden Pond in 19th-century New England. It is loaded with insightful critique of the vain strivings of ordinary mortals after peace through possessions and an unparalleled anthem to simple, self-reliant living.

Vision

As described in the Approach to Learning section of this book, imagination, dreams, visions, and transrational intuitions and fantasies can be powerful drivers of personal and collective change. In this group of exercises, we invite these voices to speak in our experience and help guide us toward deeply wise and wholesome expressions of simple living.

A continuing source of encouragement in my own practice of simple living is a tenaciously positive image of myself being extremely well, within a healthy community, which in turn subsists within a healthy and thriving ecosphere—and this whole community is little by little evolving toward full and perfect spiritual realization. We all need “energizers” that have the power to renew our dreams and re-inspire us in moments of laziness or fatigue. Our ability to dream what could be, to envision what does not yet exist, and to summon images that represent our deepest intentions, these are powers that can drive changes that serve life and goodness.

Using some elements from the exercises presented below, I have been offering what I call “Re-Visioning” workshops where participants engage the power of imagination to transcend despair and dismal forebodings of what the future may hold. Spoken or unspoken, we all harbor anxieties about what consumer culture is doing to our communities and to the planet. Imagination is a powerful antidote in resolving these anxieties and orienting our energies toward creating alternatives.

Honouring Dreams

Purpose:

- to reconnect with our life's dreams as the source of our inner promptings for the next steps in our lives—lived and un-lived
- to honor our dreams through remembering, recounting, respecting, and perhaps re-owning and giving them our time and energy

Framing:

The dreams we have for ourselves are a significant way we have of transcending our present circumstances. In consumer culture, we are psychologically colonized to frame our dreams in terms of the material things we aspire to own. But this exercise returns to the more authentic meaning of “dreams” as the aspirations we have for our lives, apart from what we may own. Participants are invited to recollect both their current dreams and aspirations and the dreams of the past, and to reflect on how we honor them, to what extent we are able to honor them, and how living more simply might make honoring our dreams easier or more challenging.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, depending on group size)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable writing paper for all group members

Process:

1. Invite group members to individually and privately remember and write down the dreams we have at this time in our lives. By “dreams” we can mean night dreams that may be recurring with some urgent message for us, but more typically we mean those recurring images (images can be feelings of attraction, inner visual images, intuitions, and even extended fantasies of things we aspire to do or experience). There is no need here to be realistic. We just “log” the dream content / imagery as it appears to us.
2. Now we individually and privately write down as many examples as we can recall of dreams we had in the past. Now we review the progression of our past and present dreams.
 - Is there a flow, a continuity, or a theme in our dreaming?
 - What are our dreams seeking to become or express?
 - How do we currently honor our dreams in daily life? (We “honor” dreams when we give them serious attention, when we record them somehow in journals or artworks, when we partly bring them into real world manifestation by building something, making a sculpture, acting out a drama, etc.)

- How does consumer culture affect our ability to honor our dreams, if at all?
 - How might living more simply affect our ability to honor our dreams, if at all?
3. In small groups, invite participants to:
 - share one of their dreams with the group
 - discuss their answers to the questions above
 4. Reassemble in large group and debrief this activity. While not at first having a direct connection to simple living, it's worthwhile to explore how living more simply at a material and practical level might be of help in living more deeply, more poetically, and in a way that, in the words of Thomas Moore (1996), "re-enchants everyday life."

Notes:

At one level, voluntary simplicity is about living with greater balance, and according to some authors like Duane Elgin (2009), it's about achieving a greater balance through dialogue between the inner, subjective aspects of our lives, and the outer, more physical and social aspects. Our dreams, both waking fantasies and sleep dreams, spring from our inner life and express our passions and values. They carry messages and wisdom about where our lives want to go next. It is partly for the sake of our dreams, in order to honor our dreams that we take up the practice of simplicity.

Another link between honoring our dreams and simple living can be found in the practice of material sufficiency (frugality). When we remember our dreams, past and present, we can see that the practice of frugality may offer the most practical way of realizing our dreams. We can ask what are the things we hope to do in life, whether it is a trip around the world or taking in foster children or getting a Ph.D. in Classics. If we present frugality as a means to achieve our deepest dreams or to enjoy a creative life, it helps illustrate the practical power of a frugal lifestyle. Surprisingly, very few of us ever look at frugality in those terms i.e., recognizing a direct link between our consumption patterns and the likelihood of actualizing our dreams.

I once had a workshop participant who was in her early sixties and whose sole passion was walking. She had no idea why she needed to walk so much. She didn't question her dream of walking. She simply accepted it as a fact of her inner nature that needed to be realized in outer activities of her life. So she arranged her affairs in such a way as to work for pay for three or four months every year so she could be free to walk for the rest of the year. This woman wasn't just walking around the block either: Her excursions took her from Tierra del Fuego to the Alaskan peninsula, and from Florida to Labrador. She lived simply in order to walk, which was the dream in her bones that needed to be lived out.

I had another workshop participant whose passion was Chinese martial arts, t'ai-chi and Qi-gong in particular. Like the woman who walked everywhere, this person simplified her lifestyle so that she could live on the earnings from a part-time waitressing job that required the minimum of her time so that she could spend the rest of it learning and practicing martial arts.

Finally, there are examples of whole cultures in which dream work is a central part of the daily round. The Senoi people of Malaysia (Stewart n.d.) incorporate dream circles and dream interpretation as part of a morning ritual that starts every day in their villages. The contents of the previous night's dreams are interpreted by village elders and guide some part of the day's activities. If we dream that we may have had an argument with some other member of the village, after discussing this with an elder, we may give that person an apology or a gift in our waking life. In this way, the Senoi integrate their dream life with their waking life and

anthropologists have noted the near total absence of both crime and mental illness among them.

Visioning Simplicity

Purpose:

- to engage the power of imagination to discover guiding images for a simpler, more peaceable, and more environmentally sustainable way of life
- to discover the basis for group collaboration and vision sharing in planning for communities that foster simple living and high levels of well-being

Framing:

This is another guided fantasy exercise which relies on imagination to help group members visualize the positive future we want for ourselves rather than the future we are likely to get if consumer culture continues with business as usual. Participants are invited to time travel to a future community where both they and most of their neighbors have adopted a simpler way of life. A tour of the community ensues and then group members return to the present to share our visions. The exercise can be varied to inform personal goal setting following the class or workshop, or can be configured to provide the basis for neighborhood or community development planning as well.

Group Size: 10 – 40 people

Time: 1.5 hours (approximately, longer for larger groups and more iterations of the visioning experience)

Materials / Equipment:

- pencils
- recycled / recyclable paper for all participants
- flip chart paper
- odorless markers

Process:

1. Do opening reading:

One of the most empowering discoveries we can make when we cultivate mindfulness and simple living is our individual power of imagination. The consumer culture runs on images. It entrains our imaginations to visions of the good life which have been fashioned by someone else. These images of the good life have two effects. One is to alienate us from the power of our own imagination, convincing us that we cannot imagine a world better than the one being offered to us by the corporate consumer culture. How often have we been promised experiences, benefits, or payoffs beyond our wildest dreams? This is as much as to say, 'We, the manufacturers of this product, sold by means of these fantasy images, have imagined the future even better than you could! Therefore, you should buy our vision of the good life.'

The second effect of this process is that we tend to lose touch with and cease to believe in the value of our own visions as guiding stars for our living. This may mean that we begin trying to achieve goals in life which have come into us from outside, from someone else, and which serve someone else's purposes, rather than responding to images which spontaneously spring from within ourselves and which express our own development needs. In the long run, this means that our life energy is spent achieving goals which belong to someone else but which we have let ourselves be convinced will really bring us well-being.

None of this is to say that we necessarily have to follow our own dreams, no matter what. There is room for dialogue with others, for 'collective dreaming,' where we can fashion visions which are shared by a group or a community. It is only to point out that very little dialogue based on equality and mutual respect characterizes the approach of consumer culture to the visioning process.

We may find that visioning and imagination are very important activities because we usually don't change either our habits or our values because of rational decisions based on facts. Rather, we fall in love with some inner image of what we want to experience or become. We are informed by facts, but we are moved by images.

In the following exercise, we reconnect with our own imaginative powers and in the process seek a vision of inner simplicity and spaciousness. We all carry within ourselves such an image of wellness. We have only to turn our attention in the right direction and take some time to discover it. (Burch 1995:89-91)

2. Invite participants to work initially as individuals and keep close at hand their pencils and note paper.
3. Invite participants to relax, close their eyes, and follow along the guided fantasy script, making any notes with half-opened eyes at any point if they wish. Slowly read the following script, allowing pauses and time for group members to fully and richly visualize each stop on the tour:

Imagine that outside our meeting room is parked a large hot air balloon with a spacious basket underneath and many seats for us to occupy. We get up from our seats and file out the door of our meeting room, out of the building, and into the balloon hanging brightly over the yard.

Once we are all in the passenger basket, the balloon begins to lift gently upwards until we are a hundred or so meters above the ground. Now we notice something strange. The balloon goes nowhere. It just hangs in the air without moving. Then we notice something else strange. The day seems to be passing very quickly. Suddenly it's dark and then just as suddenly, it's morning again. Then the days start flipping by like pages flipping in a book. Now we realize that this balloon doesn't travel in space, but rather, it travels in time.

The days flip by faster and faster until we start to see seasons passing below us with amazing speed...summer, fall, winter and spring, rolling by like the credits after a movie. In due course, we find ourselves twenty years in the future, floating above a community whose citizens have learned to live simply, at peace with each other and in harmony with the environment. We also see our own future lives in this community. The balloon starts slowly to descend back to earth and we all file off and start exploring the community.

- First you want to visit your own future home in this healthy community of the future. What does your home look like? How are you practicing simple living in this time? What new habits have you adopted? What do you have time for now that you didn't have twenty years ago? What sounds surround you? What aromas?
- What has changed most about your home from ten years ago?
- How do you make your living now?

- Go into your kitchen. What sorts of foods do you eat now? Has there been any change in what you eat or how you prepare it?
- What do you do now for entertainment? For self-care? For social activities?
- Leave your home and stroll around the neighborhood. Most people in your community have adopted voluntary simplicity. How does the neighborhood look, sound, feel, smell?
- How are people making a living....entertaining themselves....maintaining their health....traveling from place to place?• What is the most popular place in town? What do people do there? What does it feel like to be there? How much time do you spend in this place and who do you spend it with?
- As you made progress toward simplicity and clarity in your practice of living, what did you most have to let go of?

Now we all gather again at the hot air balloon and we file back in to take our seats in the basket. Again the balloon lifts up from the yard and we sail now into the past. The days and then months and then seasons pass by in a flickering spectacle like a time-lapse movie. Presently we find ourselves back in our own time, in this place. The balloon descends; we file out and return to our seats in this meeting room. Little by little, we open our eyes and we are back.

4. Now invite group members to write down an account of their visions. What did they see? This work should begin individually.
5. After allowing some independent writing time, invite participants to form small groups of five or six people and read from their vision accounts. There is no need to come to agreement or to compromise these visions. Just listen to each other and note common and differing elements in the stories. Do they fit together, or are they wildly different visions of the future?
6. After some small group time, invite everyone to rejoin the large group. Ask for volunteers to share their visions with the large group. Use a flip chart or white / black board to capture key elements of these visions. Note the degree of commonality among the visions, as well as respecting differences.
7. After reviewing the various vision stories, ask participants to individually decide on two specific, concrete life changes they can implement immediately which would bring their present life habits more into alignment with their visions. Welcome people to openly voice these ideas in the large group.

Notes:

This exercise is modeled on a common visioning exercise that is widely used in all sorts of community and organizational development settings. It is one of the most “sure fire” exercises I have ever used and tends to generate consistently positive results.

Without in any way forcing the issue, or communicating to group members that we expect them to generate visions of a certain kind, in my experience it is remarkable how synergistic, if not identical, the visions tend to turn out. I don’t find people creating wildly different images of what a society oriented around simple living would look like. I find this “spontaneous consensus” both encouraging and rather mysterious. It hints that we are all carrying similar images of

wellness, both for ourselves and for our communities. Given half a chance and permission to do so, these images manifest quite readily.

It's important in this exercise not to bias the imaginative process by using cues that are too specific or that suggest particular imagery. Just let group members see what they see, without suggesting any sort of normative agenda about what simple living should look like. The degree of spontaneous consensus will be remarkable nonetheless, and following the exercise, this can be pointed out to group members.

Another thing I find remarkable is how out of synch most of these visions are with the sorts of communities we are busy all day building. Almost no one envisions more cars or highways or big box malls in their healthy communities of the future. To come to a workshop or class on simple living and do an exercise like this only to return to one's workaday life creating the exact opposite must require repressing a truly monumental quantum of psychological dissonance! And it must take a lot of energy to keep one's lid on this in place.

A variation on this exercise that adds quite a lot of time is to do the vision sharing after the visualization and then repeat the visioning exercise immediately. We do this without analysis or comment on the results from the first round of vision sharing. The effect of repeating the exercise—as long as people have energy to stay with it—is that individual visions tend to come into alignment. The truly adventurous can combine this over a period of several days with sleep dreaming elements, in which case participants literally “sleep on” the previous day's visioning activities, and then engage a second day of visioning work informed by their night dreams. An intriguing feature of this is discovering that we have the capacity for a sort of “shared dreaming”. We can conjure collective images of a desired state of affairs which have practical value if adopted as community development agendas, contributions to community based consultation processes for architectural or community design projects, or as political platforms for elections or other forms of civic engagement.

It's hard to over-emphasize the point just made. Much voluntary simplicity literature and practice focuses on individual lifestyle change. This visioning exercise can certainly take that perspective—that the conditions we visualize for our future life are those of our individual households without much regard for the community or our neighborhoods. But I think it's helpful if educators invite participants to broaden this somewhat narcissistic perspective of simple living. This can be done by varying the guided fantasy script to include more questions that focus attention on aspects of community life rather than individual households. How are people helping each other create this healthy community of simple living? How have we learned to cooperate and share rather than carve out our solitary little islands of simplicity within a community of indifference (if such a grouping could be called a community at all)?

There is also considerable value in “back-casting” both for individuals and for groups. Back-casting is an approach to planning and development that builds backwards from a shared vision of some desired future state of affairs by thinking of the steps needed, beginning from the present, to bring about the circumstances we envisioned. Back-casting can be contrasted with planning based on “forecasting” which merely projects present trends into the future. Forecasting assumes no surprises in life—that the future will resemble the past with change following smooth, predictable continuums from now until then. Of course nearly everyone knows that such an assumption is hogwash, but it's no less popular on that account.

With back-casting, we visualize how we will be living twenty years (or weeks, or days, or hours) in the future. Then we imagine in backwards order the steps we had to take to get to this future. As the steps are more clearly defined, as much detail can be added as seems useful. We can then set out to build our vision, even if it may turn out to be achieved sooner or later than we plan. The virtue of back-casting is that it assumes historical discontinuity all along the line. It frees us from our history to a greater degree than forecasting does because we don't accept the status quo as an immovable set of given conditions. We more or less ignore the status quo and move directly to building the sort of future we want—immediately being the change we want to see in the world, rather than asking permission to change.

Finally, I've found this exercise to release a lot of energy in groups. I think this happens because once people make the transition from thinking of this as an amusing exercise to thinking of it as an actual life-change process, it feels creative and positive. I think most of us want to respond to the conditions of our present life with creative and positive energies. Visioning can liberate such energies. It certainly beats wallowing in critiques of consumer culture or enduring the dismal forebodings we might feel around how development planning is done today.

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