
SIMPLICITY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

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I don't claim any professional credentials or special expertise with respect to human rights. My perspective is that of a layperson, not a jurist or human rights specialist. What I can bring to the conversation, however, is my perspective on simple living. About simple living I know a little, I love a great deal, I have tried to practice nearly my entire life, and which I believe to have central relevance to sustaining and extending human rights.

I also confess to certain feelings of irony. I've been talking about voluntary simplicity to anyone who will listen for almost twenty years. I've written seven books on the topic. I've given scores of workshops and taught a university undergraduate course about simple living to packed classrooms twenty-one times. I've been on television and radio and podcasts, in newspaper columns and on the Internet. I've done this because I'm utterly convinced that the broad voluntary adoption of a mindful way of life in pursuit of sufficiency rather than the mindless pursuit of affluence would, if not completely cure, then dramatically reduce much of what ails humanity, including violations of human rights. What I have to say is not hard to understand. It costs nothing to do. It requires no one else's permission, and no new "apps." After hearing about what voluntary simplicity is, many people wind up agreeing with me that, yes, adopting a simpler life probably would make everything a lot better. Now the irony here is that I think most of my listeners return to their familiar daily round of stress, over-work, haggling, competition, debt slavery, conflict, suffering and insecurity, now and then punctuated by weekends at the lake that only partly compensate these afflictions. So here we are: We have in our own hands all the skillful means we need to live well, but most of us don't seem able or willing to employ them. Is this not ironic? Is this not so? So please consider, if only for an hour, how you might bend all your considerable creative talents to the task of learning how to live simply and well—rather than how to live more consumptively. It's our last best hope of conserving human rights, which I aim presently to demonstrate.

My thesis is this: Environmental issues are human rights issues. We cannot hope to conserve human rights without also protecting the ecological and biophysical integrity of the Earth. Since consumer culture and its associated economic and technical developments are the prime drivers of ecological destruction, the active promotion of a culture of voluntary simplicity is essential to conserving the ecosphere, and with it, human rights. Our roles as educators place us in a singularly advantageous position and imply a special responsibility to do this.

Beliefs, ideologies, and the general run of humanity's inhumanity to itself are perennial threats to human rights. They are mainly the issues we feature in our museums and public rhetoric. But

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the newest and most serious threat to human rights is the changes wrought in the ecosphere by consumer culture and its obsession with economic growth. This presents a paradox for advocates of human rights since many of the entitlements we claim as human rights consist of guarantees of participation in consumer culture—the same culture that is undermining the very basis of human rights. Again ironically, this amounts to claiming the right to participate in species suicide.

2. VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Since we all live in consumer culture, I'm going to assume that we all know more or less what it is. So I'll introduce a bit about what I mean by voluntary simplicity, which may not be as familiar.

Voluntary Simplicity is a way of life—a philosophical outlook—as well as an aesthetic and a spiritual sensibility. Some might say it's also a direction for cultural and technical development that calls for its own politics, its own economic institutions and its own creative process.

Voluntary simplicity is rooted in the practices of mindfulness and material sufficiency. Through bringing mindfulness to our daily routines, we seek the maximum of well-being achievable through the minimum of material consumption. Well-being applies to all life on Earth, not just human beings. It is about enough, for everyone, forever.

In addition to mindfulness and material sufficiency, voluntary simplicity includes the practice of ecological trusteeship, nonviolence, individual and local economic self-reliance, and community solidarity. It prefers sufficiency to affluence. It values leisure, relationships, and community involvement more than profit. It values spiritual development without endorsing a particular doctrine or tradition. It seeks ways of integrating meeting human needs with those of the natural world rather than merely “balancing” them as if they stood in opposition. Many people who share this perspective have experienced how a good life, rich in meaning, love, community, and reward, can flourish on very modest material resources. They have discovered that it is the single-minded pursuit of luxury affluence that undermines the long-term sustainability and well-being of both human societies and Earth's natural communities.

Voluntary simplicity is not new, not a celebration of poverty, not a religion, not exclusively rural, and not at all opposed to beauty or artistic expression. It affirms the value of technology when selectively developed and employed to serve purposes worthy of humanity. While the frugal use of money and resources certainly has its role, voluntary simplicity is not primarily about living cheaply. Most of all, it is certainly not about going back to any previous period in history. I believe that only by pursuing sufficiency can both the injustice of poverty and the unsustainability of affluence be resolved without harm—and discerning sufficiency requires mindfulness.

Another way to describe voluntary simplicity is to contrast some of its key elements with their counterparts in consumer culture:

- In consumer culture people want to go as fast as possible, wield as much power as possible, and amass as many material goods as possible. This leads to a rushed, inattentive and unappreciative way of life. Voluntary simplicity cultivates a slower, more mindful approach to life, less cluttered with stuff and more appreciative of the present moment.
- In consumer culture people want to increase their consumption of everything because they think this makes them better off. For practitioners of voluntary simplicity, the goal is sufficiency of consumption with both under-consumption (poverty) and over-consumption (affluence) viewed as harmful.

- In consumer culture people pursue external sources of reward such as social status, material possessions, money, power over others. Simple living promotes cultivation of internal sources of reward such as friendship, strong families and healthy communities, expansion of knowledge, aesthetic values, spiritual insight.
- In consumer culture, the main engine of “production” is the corporation. For voluntary simplicity, the main engine of production is symbiotic relationships between the ecosphere and human communities. Therefore, environmental stewardship is basic to simple living.
- Consumer culture is structurally violent whereas practitioners of simple living strive to minimize structural violence by changing their consumption choices, especially for luxury goods.
- In consumer culture, we meet all important life needs through earning income and spending the income in markets that supply goods and services. In simple living, there is more of a do-it-yourself ethic, more production occurs at or near home, or outside money exchange markets. (self-reliance: e.g. collaborative consumption; production for own consumption)
- Consumer culture requires far-flung global markets and resource supplies. Living simply values local production, working with and for one’s neighbors, and keeping social and economic relations close to home and under local control. (e.g. transition towns movement)
- Consumer culture focuses on production and consumption of luxuries while simple living focuses on production of leisure and well-being provisioned by sufficiency of necessities.
- In consumer culture, technology is an end in itself, a profit center, and the main measure of progress. For simple living, technology is a means to an end and only one condition for a good life.

I see voluntary simplicity as a highly progressive socio-cultural development. It aims to take us beyond the obvious failures of consumer culture to deliver a healthy, environmentally and socially sustainable, way of life. Voluntary simplicity is about qualitative deepening, not quantitative growth. It therefore implies a steady-state economics with a focus on qualitative development as a barometer of progress—not mere expansion of GDP per capita. I’m not inviting you to explore simple living because it may be a good idea (even though it is); or because the consequences of not living simply might be horrific (even though they will); or even because a consumeristic lifestyle is morally questionable (even though it is). What I am suggesting instead is that you simply pay attention to what you feel and know to be the facts of your own daily experience. These provide enough basis to decide.

To date, voluntary simplicity has been mostly an individual choice. But over the last ten years, it has become obvious that social and economic structures play a significant role in making it easier or more difficult to choose a simple life. A politics of simple living is beginning to emerge which will address these issues.

3. THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I would like now to dip my toe into what might be meant by human rights, and then presently I will bring the voluntary simplicity and the human rights threads together to see what sort of weave they make.

I warned you that I am a layman in these matters, so I must start this discussion with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR, 1948). I do so in the hope that this document is generally recognized as a useful touchstone for understanding what we mean by human

rights. I hope we have all read it. In case we haven't however, I just want to make the following observations:

First, the UDHR consists of 30 articles that by my reading fall into three categories:

Articles 1 and 2 consist of affirmations that we hold to be true for everyone: that we are born with rights, reason and conscience, and that everyone is equally entitled to enjoy these rights without limitation or qualification based on race, nationality, gender, etc.

A much larger group of articles, twenty in all (Articles 3-13, 15, 16, 18-21 28-30) consist of declarations that people should be free of certain forms of abuse or oppression such as slavery, arbitrary restriction of their freedoms, threats to life and property, and the right to conditions of life which assure human dignity. I assume that this declaration applies equally to relationships between individuals, and between individuals and states. Taken together I think they express the universal human aspiration to live without suffering violence or inflicting it on others. We might think that these rights to freedom and dignity of the person would be relatively easy to secure insofar as they call on us simply to refrain from doing bad things to each other. But there is a very real ecological dimension to these rights.

The very first item in this second group of rights affirms everyone's right to life, liberty and security of person. But for those whose consciousness has grown to include an ecological awareness of the world, this is a rather limited view. It's all about us. But in the connected world of nature, there is no "us" without "them" also. Human life is possible only in synergy with all life on Earth. Therefore our right to life and whatever we think makes for liberty and security of person, must be nuanced with what assures the lives, freedom and security of all life on Earth. We must hang together to flourish or surely we will hang separately, disappearing one species at a time. Humans are not exempt from this.

The third group of articles, eight of them (Articles 14, 17, 22-27), consist of claims to rights that imply material entitlements, or which are contingent on consumption, access to consumables, economic benefits, etc. These rights depend much more on intact ecosystems and making a transition away from consumer culture toward a steady-state economy with equitable sharing of economic benefits and risks.

In my view, in addition to its considerable and often trumpeted material benefits, consumer culture constitutes a system of oppression which paradoxically undermines both categories of rights I have just mentioned—those pertaining to the affirmation of human freedom and dignity on the one hand—and those relating to material security and well-being on the other. It seems very frequently the case that it is our pursuit of material affluence which inclines us to treat each other badly. I think this is far more often the case than the abuses that arise purely for ideological reasons. The benefits conferred by consumer culture are the velvet glove that covers the iron fist of its systemic violence.

That human rights are constantly under threat is nothing new. But what I find puzzling and paradoxical in our current approach to securing rights is that we believe it consists mostly of getting admission for all the world's people to consumer culture's pursuit of material affluence. This is peculiar because it is precisely the pursuit of affluence which is most undermining human rights. Voluntary simplicity interrogates all these fundamental beliefs of consumer culture in the most radical way.

4. KEY THREATS TO HUMAN RIGHTS.

Issues of human rights are being reframed worldwide by the fact that exercising these rights no longer amounts to equalizing access to an ever-growing material pie. Rather, it means equalizing the consequences of energy descent and the transition to a zero-carbon economy amidst sovereign budgetary constraint, economic contraction and social polarization.

I see the most urgent threats to human rights today as arising from four sources:

4.1 Traditional threats to human rights arising from ideological differences between groups

We have lots of historical examples of these from the last century alone when European cultural arrogance fueled human rights abuses in numerous colonized territories; when Nazism threatened the extinction of Jews; when Stalinism ended the lives of millions of Ukrainians; when the Cultural Revolution in China claimed the lives of millions more; when free market fundamentalism in the United States and its allies operated through the CIA to subvert democratic elections in Central and Latin American countries; and most recently when the ideology of international jihad has cost millions of lives in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is not likely that people will soon come to a consensus on what constitutes the good life so that these sorts of threats to human rights disappear. Moreover, they would continue to constitute threats even in a world where simple living was broadly adopted. But a very convincing case has been made by Amy Chua (2003) in her book *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, (New York, Doubleday) that underlying economic inequity is very often the source of what later manifests as ideological conflict when one group has made life intolerable for another and ideology merely provides the rationale for violence. To the degree that simple living can reduce economic inequity by shifting the conversation about what really contributes to well-being—while it could never eliminate ideological disagreement—might still reduce its more virulent manifestations.

As the famous British economist and philosopher E. F. Schumacher (1973: 146) observed:

Simplicity and nonviolence are obviously closely related. As physical resources are everywhere limited, people satisfying their needs by means of a modest use of resources are obviously less likely to be at each other's throats than people depending upon a high rate of use. Nonrenewable goods must be used only if they are indispensable, and then only with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. To use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence, and while complete nonviolence may not be attainable on this earth, there is nonetheless an ineluctable duty on [us] to aim at the ideal of nonviolence in all [that we] do.

4.2 The threat posed to democracy by consumer culture itself

If human rights includes an entitlement to democracy—and most of us think it does—and even if there was no extinction event staring us in the face—democracy doesn't mix very well with consumerism. If democracy is casting a ballot once every five years, then we should all be able to spare time for that. But voter participation data show nearly half of us don't even bother to

do that much. Participation in democratic activities seems to be inversely proportional to national prosperity.

But if democracy means election of public officials by an informed and engaged citizenry who stay engaged with the political process especially between elections—then this sort of democracy takes time and energy. Citizens must study issues, organize around common concerns, represent their views to policy makers, counterbalance the power of corporations, persist in the face of resistance. This takes more than half an hour every five years. In the current reality, it's nearly impossible to sustain a democracy of involved citizens and run the treadmill of consumerism faster and faster at the same time. People who are running harder and harder just to stay in place are not likely to afford the luxury of personal engagement in the issues of the day.

Relevant to the question of human rights is the likelihood that people who live simply will have more leisure. Having more leisure, they will have more time and energy for participation in democratic governance. They will be more available for community-based projects that contribute to economic equity, social inclusion, and protection of human rights. They would also be more available to contribute to Transition Town projects at the local level. These would set down the real foundation for economic and physical security. Such a way of life takes control back from globalized corporations, financial institutions and their government cronies who have created an economic system heart-stoppingly vulnerable to peak oil and disruption by the corrupt, the incompetent and the fanatical.

4.3 The collapse of consumer culture under the triple stresses of ecological, economic and social dislocation

Not only do human beings continue to find new and ingenious reasons to hate and abuse each other, the very biophysical basis for consumer culture is being exploited well beyond sustainable levels. This in turn threatens any possibility of actually exercising the right to various forms of material provision and economic participation mentioned in the Declaration on Human Rights. The Transition Towns movement has focused on four factors that have particular significance:

4.3.1 *Peak Oil*

Peak oil is a major issue for us since virtually our whole transportation system runs on petroleum as does the plastics industry, construction of civic infrastructure, the rubber industry, much of our food production, and a significant share of textile manufacturing. Despite steadily rising demand, global oil production has not increased since 2006. (Heinberg, 2011: 107.) Discovery of new reserves peaked globally in 1965 and we discover less than 25% of our current annual consumption in new reserves every year. There have been no large new oil deposits (500,000 bbls or more) discovered since 2003. There is no more spare production capacity in the world oil supply. Spare capacity peaked in 1985 at 25%, but by 2004 it was down to < 2%. In September 2012, Saudi Arabia announced it now has no spare production capacity, meaning that the Saudis have reached peak, which means the world has reached peak. Finally, estimates of total reserves are probably inflated because OPEC countries may have exaggerated their reported reserves. In 1986-87, all OPEC countries, including Saudi Arabia, revised their estimated reserves upward nearly 100% (Beriault, 2005). Need I point out what an unlikely scenario it is that all OPEC countries suddenly discovered they had twice as much oil as they thought? Not only have we very likely reached peak oil, we have or will soon reach peak

for a lot of other things including water, world grain production (peaked in 1984 at 342 kg/cap. (Heinberg, 2011: 133)), many metals and rare earth minerals, as well as peak Phosphorous essential for fertilizers (Heinberg, 2011: 124-143).

Despite how much debate swirls around the world's total oil reserves, however, the amount of oil left in the ground is largely irrelevant. Far more relevant is what is called the EROEI ratio, or the ratio that expresses the energy returned by exploiting a given deposit compared to the energy that must be invested to achieve that return. If it takes more than a barrel of oil energy equivalent to retrieve a barrel of new oil, there is very little point in developing the deposit, no matter how much oil might be present. It's exactly like deciding to drive to gas station to fill up your car knowing full well you don't have enough gas to get to the station. Over the past several decades, the EROEI ratio has been trending downward for many major oil deposits. Energy Return on Energy Invested (EROEI) pre-1950 was 100:1 in areas like Texas and Saudi Arabia. By the 1970s this ratio had plummeted to 30:1. In 2005 it was 10:1. The EROEI for tar sands development in the Athabasca region of Canada, one of the world's largest and as yet mostly undeveloped petroleum plays, is 4:1 (maximum) and some authorities estimate as low as 2:1. At the end of the day, many of these extraction operations will be shut down long before their oil is completely gone because more energy will be needed to bring the oil to market than is contained in the oil itself. This is simply the Second Law of Thermodynamics at work, a law of nature far less flexible than those of economics.

To illustrate just one of the many potential consequences of peak oil, consider the connection between slavery and fossil fuels. Prior to about 1750, nearly all large public works projects were constructed by slaves and animals who were worked like slaves. Fifty years later, it seems that humanity made a moral quantum leap. We recognized the evil of slavery. Within a couple of generations, it practically disappeared worldwide. Or did we make that quantum leap after all? Is it just coincidence that also around 1750, fossil fuels came into wide use to power agricultural, construction and manufacturing machinery? Why employ slaves who get sick, get tired, and sometimes rebel, when the same work could be done with less expense and more reliability by fossil fueled machines? Note also that in areas of the world where slavery or near slavery is still in vogue such as West Africa, parts of Asia and Latin America, it is most prevalent where fossil fuel supplies are expensive, scarce, or non-existent or the work the slaves are doing cannot be easily automated. What do you suppose might happen, then, in a world that has not conserved these precious energy resources? Who will do the heavy lifting in a carbon constrained future?

4.3.2 Climate change

Climate change is another dramatic challenge facing the entire human family. Ironically, it has been our profligate over-use of fossil fuels such as oil which is now stoking the planet to what, by mid-century, will be truly torrid temperatures not seen here since the Paleozoic 60 million years ago. Of course in the entire history of the Earth, such temperatures are not without precedent; but they are without precedent since the human species has been around. We have no idea how to live in such a world.

Munich Re, the insurance company that insures insurance companies, reports that weather related disasters have tripled since 1980. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in the U.S. reported that average temperatures in June in the U.S. were a full 2°C higher than the 20th century average. Meanwhile up north, the extent of summer sea ice in the Arctic was measured this year to be only 24% of its former extent, 4% less than the lowest year on record which was 2007. Scientists expect the Arctic to be ice free within three or four years with truly momentous effects on global weather patterns and food production. Climate change

is already costing the global economy an estimated US\$ 1.2 trillion and 1.6% of GDP growth, plus contributing to an estimated 400,000 excess deaths annually (Reguly, 2012).

If Munich Re is right and weather-related catastrophes are becoming more frequent due to climate change, then events like Hurricane Katrina and the floods in Pakistan help us see that one of the first casualties in such situations can be our human rights. As authorities struggle with the operational collapse of most services and institutions during these disasters, they can also become pretty heavy handed in what they call “re-establishing civil order.” That may call for pretty rough and tumble tactics and some extra-judicial killings here and there. Maybe Americans watch too many of their own disaster movies. So, when it came to a real disaster like Katrina, they got trigger happy. But maybe not. In both the New Orleans and Pakistani events, help was available both from within and outside the affected regions. What will happen if, in a world more broadly and frequently impacted by climate change, there is no “outside” where help can come from?

I hope it’s obvious that if society broadly embraced simple living, a way of life that focused on well-being rather than material affluence, there would be less consumption, and hence less production, and hence less extraction and degradation of resources, and hence less environmental impact, including the drivers of climate change. More fuels would be conserved for future generations and also to help make the transition to a renewable energy economy.

4.3.3 Economic contraction.

Economic contraction is also a staple of the daily news these days. Economic growth worldwide is grinding to a halt. In October 2012, the IMF released a report predicting the global economic growth would be less than 2% in both 2013 and 2014, well below the 3.5% required to absorb new workers into the economy and alleviate poverty (CBC-TV Newsworld, Business Report, 9 October 2012.) Everywhere governments are priming economic pumps, trying to induce householders to square the circle by consuming but at the same time avoiding increasing their personal debts, which now in many Canadian households exceeds 150% of annual income. The entire European Union teeters on financial collapse as its more profligate members threaten to drag the frugal and the prudent into the abyss of financial ruin along with them. In some European countries like Greece and Spain, GDP has already turned negative, their economies are actually contracting, and social services and benefits are being curtailed with all the social unrest we might expect. Economic recovery from the 2008 debacle in the U.S. continues to be sluggish and uneven. Even the great engines of the world economy, China and India, are now showing declining rates of growth. In a debt-based monetary system that uses fractional reserve lending continuous growth is imperative. Moreover, doing what we need to do to reduce our use of fossil fuels and forestall even worse climate change would likely further slow the economy. So consumer culture demands ever expanding consumption that neither the planet nor households can afford.

Needless to say that in economies that are shedding jobs, suffocating from both sovereign and personal debt, and suffering real losses from environmental mismanagement, it’s rather hard to see how the economic “right” to gain entry to, and participate in, a consumer culture lifestyle will ever be realized by the majority of humanity. In consumer culture money is so central that access to it can literally constitute rights, as described by Raj Patel (2009: 112-113):

The late Oxford philosopher Jerry Cohen conceived a thought experiment that helps us to understand how money works, and the way that it intersects with the liberty offered by free markets. When the market rations goods on the basis of money, he argued, there’s reason to quarrel with the idea that markets

make freedom. Imagine that we live in a world where we have little tickets distributed at random. On these tickets are rights—the right to go visit your sick mother, the right to cross a particular road, the right to live somewhere, the right to eat a steak, the right to treatment for a disease and so on. You don't have to do what's written on any given ticket—they simply limit the extent of your freedoms. If you try to do something for which you do not have a ticket, the law intervenes. The tickets map out the degree to which you are free (or not free) to do something—they are a complete accounting of your liberties. The more tickets you have, the freer you are.

So here's the twist: Money is just like these tickets. What, after all, does money offer in a market society if not the ability to buy liberty, to afford health care, decent food, housing, the security of not working in retirement, insurance against accident or unemployment? Those without money are as unfree as those without tickets. Without cash in a market society, you're free to do nothing, to have very little and to die young. In other words, under capitalism, money is the right to have rights. [*Italics in original.*]

So I suggest that peak oil, climate change and economic contraction are all direct threats to human rights in and of themselves. If conserving human rights matters to us, then I think it requires taking steps to reduce our use of fossil fuels and transition away from using them altogether. We need to do what we can to mitigate climate change even though it is now impossible to escape it. We also need to move immediately toward a lower consumption steady-state economy which demotes growth and promotes sharing more equitably the resources Earth can sustainably provide. All of these steps must be accompanied, in my view, by a very comprehensive and deliberate effort to evolve our values and desires and consciousness toward understandings of the good life which give less emphasis to accumulation and consumption and more emphasis to non-material sources of reward in life.

4.4 *Elite panic*

The final key threat to human rights that I want to mention is what Rebecca Solnit (2009) has aptly called “elite panic.”

Elite panic includes fear of social disorder; fear of the poor, minorities and immigrants; obsession with looting and property crime; tendency to conflate looting (theft) with emergency requisitioning of materials and supplies; willingness to resort to deadly force without due process; actions taken on the basis of rumor; belief that in disasters the general population degenerates into a mob and that only the elites using armed force can re-establish social order. What distinguishes elite panic from regular panic is that it is largely driven by the deep-seated fear that others will panic unless restrained by force. Elites, however, are in positions of power and can martial deadly force to do their bidding whereas ordinary citizens cannot. As Solnit (2009: 152-153) has described this:

... In the absence of governments, people govern themselves. Everyone from Hobbes to Hollywood filmmakers has assumed this means ‘law of the jungle’ chaos. What in fact takes place is another kind of anarchy, where the citizenry by and large organize and care for themselves. In the immediate aftermath of disaster, government fails as if it had been overthrown and civil society succeeds as though it has revolted: the task of government, usually described as ‘re-establishing order,’ is to take back the city and the power to govern it. ... So the

more long-term aftermath of disaster is often in some sense a counterrevolution, with varying degrees of success. The possibility that they have been overthrown or, more accurately, rendered irrelevant is a very good reason for elite panic if not for the sometimes vicious acts that ensue.

To the extent that our society is impacted by climate change-driven natural disasters in the future, and our capacity to respond to and rebuild from these disasters is seriously curtailed by peak everything, I'm concerned that elite panic will become more common as well. We already see many signs of this with the hugely amplified emphasis on "security" in the face of global terrorism, with the effect that many human rights have already been eroded.

The point I want to make here is that as natural disasters become more frequent and intense, the best way to conserve human rights is by organizing and empowering communities, e.g. the Transition Towns initiatives, rather than investing in systems that maintain "order" and "security" and elite privilege at the expense of human rights. We need to prepare society at the grassroots level to be resilient in the face of crisis and change, not merely obedient to authority. In all past natural disasters, your first responders are your neighbours and there's no reason to think this will be different in the future. Again, ironically, in the future consumer culture offers us, governments and security institutions, the very institutions charged with protecting human rights, may become one of the greatest threats to them.

5. VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY PROTECTS AND PROMOTES HUMAN RIGHTS

5.1 Voluntary simplicity is strongly oriented to nonviolence

The orientation of simple living toward nonviolence is most relevant to human rights that call for changes in social relations such as refraining from imposing slavery or discrimination or systematic abuse of each other. Consumer culture aims to consume more and more with the result that both people and other species are oppressed by violence.

One way of thinking of the relationship between consumption and violence is to consider the following distinctions: Violence can be characterized as direct or structural. When violence is direct, then we as individual actors inflict violence on other people, other species or physical objects. If I punch someone in the nose, I am inflicting direct violence on them.

In the case of structural violence, however, some harm is being inflicted on our behalf and usually at a distance, and as a result of the structures that characterize our economic arrangements. I perpetrate structural violence when I consume chocolate confections made with cocoa harvested by child slaves in West Africa. I am not inflicting this violence directly, but rather indirectly through the structural economic arrangements that inflict this violence on my behalf because I consume the product harvested by the slaves. I can inflict structural violence every day and still think of myself as a fine, upstanding fellow, because mostly this violence occurs far away and to other people. Out of sight and out of mind is the motto of consumer culture.

To this distinction between direct and structural violence we also need to add the distinction between necessary and elective violence. It happens in the current state of things that almost all consumption incurs violence of some sort because human beings are heterotrophs. We must consume other beings in order to live because we cannot produce our food in our own tissues as plants do. So the consumption which is inescapably required to support our lives also necessarily implies killing, dismembering, grinding and digesting at least plants and often other animals as well. Several spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism have been particularly sensitive to this issue and have endeavoured, by mandating

vegetarian diets for their followers, to reduce the suffering of sentient beings, living things clearly capable of experiencing pain and suffering. In any case, however, the violence we inflict on other beings probably cannot be much reduced below what is inescapably required to support our own lives. Happily, this can be a very low level.

Contrasted with necessary violence, however, is the elective violence we inflict when we orient our way of life around the consumption of luxuries. All production of luxury goods also incurs violence through the harvesting of resources and the killing of animals to procure the materials needed for luxury manufactures. It also tends to subject other human beings to working in conditions that are toxic or hazardous since many luxury goods acquire their status as luxuries simply from being scarce or difficult to procure. Since these products and services are luxuries and by definition unnecessary to supporting our livelihood, their consumption is clearly unnecessary and the violence inflicted is therefore clearly elective.

These fundamental distinctions can be arranged as a two by two grid that helps us classify most forms of violence as being (a) necessary and direct (e.g., acts of violence inflicted on others in self-defense), (b) elective and direct (e.g., acts of violence inflicted on others as recreation, such as participation in martial arts tournaments or boxing matches), (c) necessary and structural (e.g., the provision through the general economy of basic food stuffs and clothing) and (d) elective and structural (the entire realm of consumer luxury consumption including such ordinary indulgences as meat, coffee, gold, liquor, tobacco, chocolate, tea, etc.).

The case of violence has been of special concern among practitioners of simple living, both today and throughout its history. It is often observed that what people actually need for a good life is easy to provision, rarely pushes ecological limits, minimizes the suffering inflicted on other beings, and is of such a scale that equity of provision can be realistically achieved among all people. But of luxury consumption there appears to be no limit as to what people can learn to want. The same can be said about the pursuit of monetary gain for its own sake. And it is the pursuit of luxuries and monetary gain which has called people to the most dangerous, exotic, toxic, and precarious sorts of enterprises, overworking both people and animals, exploiting and oppressing both nature and human communities. Consumer culture is nothing if not a full on effort to continually develop new varieties of luxury consumption and bring them to market in pursuit of monetary gain. In demoting the importance of luxury consumption in particular, and the spirit of commerce in general, voluntary simplicity aims to counteract these fruitful sources of violence and abuse of human rights. In consumer culture people live to consume; in living simply, we consume to live.

One further observation might be worth making at this point: Voluntary simplicity might be considered an exercise in what Gandhi called satyagraha or nonviolent social change driven by "spirit force". Every campaign of satyagraha consists of two simultaneous movements. First, we withdraw our cooperation from a system of oppression by refusing to participate in it, and often actively opposing it by nonviolent means. At the same time, we set about establishing new social and economic arrangements that meet the same needs but do so in ways that respect human rights and ecological limits. I believe voluntary simplicity is a campaign of satyagraha to replace consumer culture since non-consumption, especially of luxuries, is definitely a form of nonviolent non-cooperation with consumer culture. To the extent that practitioners of simple living withdraw their energies and imagination from consumer culture and apply them elsewhere to create alternate institutions and economic arrangements that honour human rights, we are also constructing an alternate positive system to replace the system of oppression now in place.

Apart from, but related to, the question of violence is the fact that in consumer culture there is also a strong belief in corporations to provide a better life. But it has been convincingly demonstrated that corporations are unaccountable tyrannies that in many respects behave like psychopaths (Anchon, et al., 2002). It is unlikely that institutions with no conscience and no

capacity for empathy will treat human rights as anything other than “externalities” to production. Any institution that automatically treats every humane value as an externality of its operations must on that account alone be considered violent. A glaring example of this is noted by Raj Patel (2009: 54):

[To make cellphones, Nokia] uses minerals extracted from bloody conflict in the Congo, where 70 percent of the world’s reserves of coltan are found. Coltan is the source of niobium and tantalum, used to make the capacitors at the heart of most portable electronic gadgetry. In patrolling access to these resources, military units in the Congo have raped, tortured, enslaved and killed. Women struggling to bring up children in the Congo have a life expectancy of forty-seven years, continue to suffer through the world’s worst rape epidemic and earn just over half what men do—\$191 per year.

5.2 Voluntary simplicity reduces material consumption and re-orient human motivations

The practice of mindfulness within a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity helps to reorient human motivations toward intrinsic, nonmaterial rewards, thus conserving resources and ecosystem integrity which is the source of the material means we need for well-being. It is also the basis for any future claims to material entitlements as human rights. As the American farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry has so poetically observed:

The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It is also a Creation, a holy mystery, made for, and to some extent by, creatures, some but by no means all of whom are human. This world, this Creation, belongs in a limited sense to us, for we may rightfully require certain things of it—the things necessary to keep us fully alive as the kind of creature we are; but we also belong to it and it makes certain rightful claims upon us: that we leave it undiminished, not just to our children, but to all the creatures who will live in it after us. [Wendell Berry, source / date unknown.]

5.3 Voluntary simplicity promotes personal and community self-reliance

Personal and community self-reliance are seen within the simplicity movement as effective approaches to providing for security, e.g., alternate “investing” in community and production for own consumption to meet essential life needs. The value of self-reliance also promotes security by disengaging from the systemic violence of consumer culture, e.g. Gulf Wars, terrorism, etc. It is our “addictions” to oil and opiates which drive wars, terrorism and abuse of human rights as much as ideological differences.

6. CONCLUSION

I’ve tried to present the relationship between voluntary simplicity and human rights first by distinguishing human rights that have to do with maintaining the dignity and freedom of persons from those which imply claims to material entitlements. If we destroy the basis for

material entitlements through over-population, over-consumption and waste, then this will rebound not only as expanded conditions of material poverty, but also elite panic which will undermine human dignity and freedom.

When I parse this issue as deeply as I can, I see consumer culture not as the path to realizing our human rights, but rather as a thoroughgoing threat to human rights. I truly believe that we can live justly and honourably in relation to each other, and sustainably in relation to nature, only if we live simply. This is a challenge for educators.

Our dreams matter. Our beliefs about what the “real” world is like and how to do well in it matter. Different dreams and assumptions can be carried within us, but they never stay contained. They seep out of us like a vapor that our kids inhale from the very air they breathe. Do we gas them with frenzy and structure and self-centeredness and mindless obsession with technology for its own sake? Or can we refresh them with mindfulness, calm, gentleness, appreciation for what is simply here and simply ordinary? Are we in touch with these things ourselves? Do we believe the future needs extremely more of what we’ve already got, or is it time for a change? I would offer a few suggestions:

- Teach everyone mindfulness practice. The last thing the future needs is more people living with chronic partial attention. Nor does the future need more emotional hot heads screaming from the nightly news. We need instead to introduce practices that cultivate mindfulness, especially ones that focus attention, slow the pace of activities, and give serious attention to the proposition that value in life is constituted by that to which we give our time and attention.
- Teach everyone the skills necessary for sufficient provision. Much of the anxiety and fear that permeate daily life arises from the sense that we are vulnerable and at the mercy of forces we can’t control. Learning how to grow food, build a simple house, or make music can dramatically reduce this anxiety.
- Model hope in how we live. Young people can feel hopeful about the future if they see their elders doing hopeful things. If we ourselves consume like there’s no tomorrow, chances are the kids will get the message. If we model joyful simplicity, the kids get an entirely different message and maybe there’s hope for us.
- Think locally. Focus on knowledge of, and appreciation for local places, and what inhabits those local places. Teach about the plants, animals, history and people just outside the window. Of course global awareness is important and enriching.
- Build community. Focus on cooperating with others and finding pleasure in social interaction rather than the possession and control over things, machines, tools or technology. Facebook is not a substitute for actual life. Relationships involve more than just finding other people fiddling with the same technology you fiddle with.
- Celebrate the small, the slow, the close at hand. Take time. Slow down. Cultivate appreciation for the marvelousness of the “ordinary.” Avoid portraying exotic, expensive and distant locations as more desirable than local ones. Another thing the future needs less of is “eco-tourism.” We do nothing for the planet by flying to Antarctica or Greenland to watch the last glaciers melt.
- Encourage cooperative activities rather than exclusively competitive ones. Help kids thrive both in community and in solitude.

- Invite kids to value both the old and the new. Newer is not always better. Change is not always progress. Elders add richness to our social life and they are found everywhere, not just on First Nations.
- Consciously claim your role as mentors and leaders. Our children already have friends. They need also to have people they can look up to who are worthy of respect.
- Call on the good angels in human nature. To a very great degree we tend to fulfill our expectations for each other. Call kids to creativity, community and wisdom and they will come.

In closing, I just want to say that I have never been comfortable with the metaphor that the human race resembles the passengers on the Titanic, although I must admit the resemblance is often striking. While humans obviously built the Titanic, we are different from our machines and we need not think that we are carried along by mechanical forces beyond our control. I prefer to think of us as a flock of birds, or a school of fish. Given a relevant and inspiring message, we can turn en masse, on a dime. Where we must apply ourselves is making sure we turn in the right direction. I believe we're up to the challenge.

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