
YOUR DELIGHTFUL DAY: THE BENEFITS OF LIFE IN THE SIMPLER WAY

Ted Trainer

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INTRODUCTION

Global problems cannot be solved unless we dramatically reduce the amount of producing and consuming going on. This means that people in rich countries must move down to per capita levels of resource consumption that are a small fraction of present levels (see Trainer, 2010, 2011a).

Understandably people think this would involve severe deprivation and hardship, and it is therefore not surprising that there is a general refusal to consider it. The assumption however is quite mistaken. Moving to The Simpler Way would enable a far higher quality of life than people in the rich and over-developed consumer societies have now. It would be a huge liberation from the rat race and the stress, depression and struggling to cope that it inflicts, even on richer people.

It is necessary to note briefly the main features of The Simpler Way as the benefits to be discussed derive from these. Because we would not be consuming more than we needed for a good life, and because there would be many non-resource intensive sources of enjoyment, we could cut a great deal off the present amount of producing, work, production, sales and GDP. There would be highly self-sufficient local economies using local resources to produce most of the basic things we needed, from the land and small firms within and close to our suburbs and towns. Thus there would be little need for transport compared with now, so most people could get to work on a bicycle or on foot and there would be little need for cars, little traffic or road expenditure. We would run those economies via participatory systems, such as town assemblies, to ensure that needs were prioritised. Most of the work needed to keep the town running well would be done by voluntary committees and working bees, for instance maintaining the many commons providing free food, materials and leisure resources. There would still be a national economy, some international trade and some functions for state governments, but relatively little. (For a detailed account of the new economy see Trainer 2011b).

It is now clearly understood that above a relatively low amount, monetary income is not very important for quality of life or happiness. (For an impressive review of the evidence, see Alexander, 2012.) This is the case even in consumer-capitalist society where many benefits cannot be accessed without money. The Simpler Way would enable many extremely important sources of life satisfaction that are not available in present society no matter how rich you are. Following is an indication of the many benefits we could be enjoying if most of us lived in the kind of communities outlined.

1. Time

There would be far less producing and work to do, firstly because we would be content to live without consuming much and secondly because localism would cut the need for ships, trucks, warehouses, roads to be built etc. Remember we have to cut the amount of producing and consuming to perhaps one-fifth or one tenth of present levels. Because it would be a zero-growth economy there would be little construction going on, only occasional maintenance and re-construction. Many of the things we need would come free from local sources, such as fruit from the commons and festivals and concerts, further reducing the need to work for money. There would be a lot of home gardening and craft production, enabling swapping without

money. Many of us would be able to live well on very low monetary incomes, and therefore probably on one day's work a week for money. Many of the things we needed would come from swapping surpluses, giving and getting produce and assistance. This means you would have maybe 5 or 6 days a week to do a wide variety of interesting things, including arts and crafts, gardening, engaging in community activities, studying, and volunteering on working bees and committees. Those who wished to work 5 days a week at a specialist job could do so of course.

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this. At present just about everyone has to work long hours, often at a boring and unfulfilling job. Even people on higher incomes worry about paying their bills. Large numbers struggle to run a small business, and go bankrupt at a high rate. Even well paid workers often do the same thing all day and derive no spiritual benefit, whereas contributing around the new neighbourhood would involve us in a very wide variety of activities that enabled social interaction, much learning, personal development, and a sense of contributing to the town.

2. Work

You would have much control over your "work", your productive contribution. In your home production you could decide what you were going to do next, when to stop and do something else, how to do it, and you would own the product and be able to decide what to do with it. In your paid work in a local firm you would probably be in a cooperative team sharing the decision-making.

It would be possible and important for all to do work that they enjoyed. There would be many small firms, e.g., family farms and small cooperatives. The town would have the responsibility to make sure everyone had a livelihood, the opportunity to share in the production needed and to receive an income. This means much of the local economy would have to be carefully monitored, planned and controlled by the community, via those town meetings and the committees. Their task would be to make sure no one was dumped into poverty, unemployment or isolation and that all people could contribute to town welfare. We need the inputs all can make so we would not leave productive people idle. This would mean making sure all were provided for well enough, especially by sharing out the necessary work, and making sure no one grabbed more than their fair share, e.g., of the bread baking business. (These points indicate the need for a new economy; see below.)

Work could be an enjoyable and fulfilling activity, providing a sense of contributing and exercising skills in the creation of good quality products. There would of course still be a place for some mass production factories but there would be much scope for hand production and craft production, which is enjoyable; no one likes working in a factory. The pace of work could be very relaxed, enabling enjoyment of the activity.

3. Housing

One of the main ways to reduce our dollar and resource costs is by living in small, ecologically designed houses, using locally grown timber and eventually tiled from local clay, and all built from earth. Mud bricks or rammed earth construction is by far the best, costing little or nothing in energy or non-renewable resources, being fire-proof, cool in summer and warm in winter, quiet, and lasting maybe a thousand years or more!

In recent years new Australian houses were being built with the biggest floor area of any country in the world. The first benefit of a small but big-enough house is that anyone can afford one, thereby avoiding decades of work and worry about paying the bank 2.5 times the cost of a too-big McMansion (see Trainer, 2010). That's probably \$ 400,000 to \$800,000 and ten years work saved! Many single people or couples would be delighted to live in a one or two room tiny-house, which they could build for under a thousand dollars.

The second major benefit is the satisfaction that can come from building your own house, assisted by friends and guided by experienced people in the neighbourhood. You might pay

your building adviser by helping him build from time to time. Your house is then not a commodity or an investment, it is an important part of your life. Remember in a stable economy there will be far less mobility so people will be more able and willing to put down roots in a town and live there a long time.

4. Activity, producing, craft, self-sufficiency, making, growing...

A huge amount can be cut off the money we have to earn to buy things if we make and grow and do things ourselves. The typical Simpler Way of life is very productive at the level of the home economy, involving gardening, preserving, repairing, fixing, looking after animals, making furniture, toys, chicken pens and gadgets, keeping bikes going, recycling, cutting fire wood, maintaining pumps and machinery, and engaging in hobbies, arts and crafts. Most of us will be a Jack-of-all-trades most of the time, although many will also become specialists and experts in one or more fields. Respect and reputation will depend largely on how capable you are at doing many varied useful things. Grandmas will be recognised as among the most valuable people in the town!

Being as self-sufficient as is reasonably possible is central to The Simpler Way, especially at the household and community level, but also at the regional and national level. (Thus there must be little international trade; it uses too much energy). The central theme must be the highly self-sufficient local economy. The town's resilience will be a function of the number of its people who can make and grow and do and fix many things. It will not depend much on highly credentialed specialised experts, professionals, let alone on corporations or government bureaucracies. If/when the global economy self-destructs the supermarket shelves will be bare within a few days, but we will be all right if we have a town full of skilled productive people capable of running a highly self-sufficiency local economy that depends mostly on simple technologies.

This means you will have an abundant range of interesting and useful things to do all day and you will be able to enjoy exercising many skills. Most of these are not difficult to master but there will be many people close by who are experts in anything you need to know and are eager to advise and help.

This will give you a sense of being competent, effective, able to do many important things, and an important contributor to the welfare and security of the town.

5. Living frugally and self-sufficiently

At first a frugal lifestyle might sound like an intolerable cost, not a benefit. It can be very satisfying to run a household economy effectively and efficiently, using as little as you need to, recycling, avoiding waste, and planning and organising the use of the resources you have. When you are producing some of your own food, entertainment, repairs etc. you have an incentive to save time and materials, and there is satisfaction in being able to organise and produce well. You will be proud of your well-stocked pantry, your safe chicken pen fences, your well-mulched rows of corn. One of the activities I enjoy is gathering sticks for lighting the open fire. This gives a sense of being able to provide for myself, and not having to use fossil fuels to keep warm. I made the open fire that the sticks light. When I pass a neat stack of sticks or firewood ready for next winter I recognise my wealth, and my skill and good sense in organising this aspect of my "oikos", my household economy.

Another treat is taking a bucket to collect horse manure. I also enjoy dismantling unused machinery and putting the greased bolts back on the shelf for re-use. There is satisfaction in not using much, not having to buy much, being able to make it not buy it. I like the fact that I have only one pair of going-out shoes.

The focal concern here is what's good enough, what will do the job well enough. This contradicts the obsession in consumer society with maximising, with having the best, the most luxurious (car, house, clothes, handbag, etc.). There is satisfaction in knowing you are living

lightly on the earth. We are not likely to save the planet until most people come to see being a heavy consumer is wrong. That's why I don't travel.

When you have thought about global problems and resource limits you come to see frugality, simplicity, recycling, repairing, old things and the good-enough as not just morally preferable, but as noble and beautiful. I find most new, glitzy and expensive things disturbing and ugly; they are not nice. They are often not much good either, being shoddily built not to last. The tools I buy at second hand and antique shops have far better steel in them. Most furniture is trashy; my lounge was acquired second hand in 1950.

So far the focus has been on individual lifestyles which involve far less consuming than at present. However there is a much more important factor in getting our national resource and footprint figures right down; we also need fundamental system change, especially to a new economy, a new settlement geography, and a new political system. These points are elaborated on below.

6. Collectivism, community, solidarity

In the coming era of intense scarcity it will not be possible to develop and run satisfactory societies unless most of us live in small self-sufficient and self-governing communities that are focused primarily on the common good, the welfare of the town. These cannot exist unless we manage to replace the individualistic, competitive quest for profit and wealth that drives consumer-capitalist society. People will have to be content with a sufficient, stable "income" or "living standard", and to derive satisfaction from living in and contributing to a spiritually rich town, and they will have to think all the time in terms of what is good for the town. The dominant orientation will have to be giving not getting, and people will have to derive satisfaction from caring, helping, seeing others and their town/ thrive – and knowing that the more they do of these things the richer their own lives will be. In other words the main source of our individual wealth will not be our bank balance or property but the richness of the town, its gardens, committees, skills, leisure resources, activities, institutions and arrangements, and above all its spirit of comradeship, solidarity and helpfulness.

Unless we get to this situation our communities will not work well; people will not contribute to working bees eagerly, the informal networks that spot problems and head them off will not function satisfactorily. The town cannot thrive without good, responsible, conscientious citizens. Nothing is more important than maintaining the town solidarity, community, cohesion, which both requires and produces good citizenship.

Community is made up of these social and spiritual bonds, feelings of familiarity and friendship, mutual dependence, good will to others, appreciation for benefits received and obligation to reciprocate, and concern for the welfare of the town. Living in settlements which are highly dependent on themselves will generate and reinforce community; all will be acutely aware of how much their own welfare depends on the town being in good spiritual shape, with a strong collectivist climate.

The collectivism required does not have to interfere seriously with the freedom of the individual. Sensible communities would strive to maximise the freedom for individuals to do what they wished. The crucial element is ensuring sufficient concern, and action, to ensure sufficient town cohesion, morale and satisfaction. Town control of town affairs does not mean total control of everything. What we want are citizens who go about their private and individual affairs but have considerable, and sufficient, concern for the welfare of the town, and a readiness to take collective action if and when a problem emerges.

This concern and readiness will be there if people are aware that public spirit is crucial, and if they find it satisfying to think and act to build and maintain an admirable community. But this goal would not be left just to the good will of individuals. In addition a sensible community would have formal arrangements and procedures for constantly monitoring, reviewing and managing solidarity, morale and how satisfied people were with arrangements, just as it would constantly oversee its water and food systems. Contrast this with the present situation in which

people live in isolated households with no involvement at all in the running of their localities, let alone any incentive to think collectively about the welfare of the place.

7. Town self-government

This has introduced the need for towns to be largely self-governing, via the thinking, values, interactions and institutions run by all ordinary citizens, as distinct from being run by external, professional governors. People must take responsibility for running most of their town's systems, from orchards, water retention, care of old people, to cultural affairs such as leisure committees and drama clubs. This is partly because in the coming era of resource scarcity centralised governments will not be able to afford to run everything. More importantly, they couldn't run our town; they couldn't possibly understand its unique situation, the soils, the needs, what people want, its history. Only the people who live there can make the right decisions, they will have to implement them, and do most of the maintaining of systems and they will not do those things well unless they feel in control.

Above all the town must control its own economy, making sure it has the capacity to produce basic necessities, that all are provided for, that social and ecological needs are being met, that no one is unemployed, poor or neglected. Most of the things needed would have to come from the local economy of the town and its surrounds. We would study the town's needs and resources, and when a need is seen, we would organise to deal with it, using those powerful working bees and the skills the town has. For instance it might set up a fish tank cooperative, or assist a family to establish a bee-keeping venture. (The Mondragon cooperatives show what can easily be done along these lines.) If a small enterprise were failing we would help to find a solution, possibly providing a loan from the town bank, organising skill development, or helping the owner to move to some other activity. It's our town and we must make sure it works well.

Thus we would have the sense not to leave the town's fate to the predations of the market system. We would not let a small firm become bankrupt because it couldn't compete, wasting its resources and skills. We would support or help to restructure or to transfer, to ensure town productive capacity was retained and used in the best way.

Note that the goal of town government will be to maximise the welfare of the town, via its capacity to provide for itself. (Obviously some important goods will always have to be imported from outside the town.) This is quite different to the role government mostly plays today, which is as an arbitrator in disputes between interested parties out to maximise their gains in zero-sum competition, as when a citizens action group wants the forest preserved but a developer wants to put up a supermarket there. Town government will focus on the question, what can we the people of this town get together to do to meet the needs of this town and provide all its members with a good quality of life.

Again it is important not to give the impression that the town assemblies must run everything. Eventually the town's government might not need to do much at all. Even in the early stages it would only need to do what is sufficient, to attend to neglected needs, e.g., to make sure no one was unemployed, that no elderly people were lonely, that there were enough orchards, and that the local environment was not being damaged. Outside this sphere there might be a very large area in which people could set up whatever kind of business they wished. It is obviously important in a good society to guarantee as much freedom as possible. If someone wanted to try selling fashionable hats that should not be any problem. However the community would have to decide whether a proposal had harmful effects, e.g., whether it would take up too many scarce resources or would enable someone to take over the livelihoods of others.

The community must retain the power to come in and guide or block, although in a good society this power would be exercised by citizens simply refusing to buy from the shopkeeper who is trying to drive the others bankrupt, etc. Ideally it would deal with problems in a friendly and helpful way, knowing that the top priority is town solidarity, looking after everyone and finding win-win solutions for all.

Now consider the immense sense of security and support this situation would give us. We would know we were valued members of a supportive community and if we got into difficulties there would be help available. We would especially be reassured by the fact that the town would not let anyone fall into unemployment or go bankrupt. Of course we would also need ways of making sure that people didn't loaf or run inefficient firms, but there are far more sensible and humane ways of doing that than letting the market bankrupt businesses and dump people into unemployment.

Consider also the security that comes from your town's fate not being left to the whims and predations of the global economy. That economy can self-destruct if it wishes and we will still be able to provide ourselves with food and entertainment etc.

Also, knowing that the town cared about you would reinforce your commitment to it. You would appreciate the security and care, and thus be more inclined to contribute conscientiously. This illustrates the synergism that works powerfully in a good community. When you know people care about you and will assist you, you are more likely to care about others. Goodness multiplies goodness, whereas in competitive, selfish consumer society we are typically in situations that require us to beat others or be suspicious and thus unfriendly. This destroys friendliness and good will.

Thus living in a strong and supportive and self-conscious community would be a major source of life satisfaction. You could feel proud of your town, knowing that it was run by values prioritising the welfare of people and the environment, and not driven by the selfishness and acquisitiveness of entrepreneurs big and small. We would have more sense than to let our town's welfare be determined by how profitable isolated individual business ventures are. Instead we come together to take control and responsibility for the town's welfare. And we have the sense not to leave our individual and collective fate to be determined by the global economy. That is a very silly thing to do. The global economy will do what suits international capital. It forces you to find something else to sell into it, in order to buy from it. It will dump you into squalor if it thinks it can make more profit somewhere other than in your town.

8. Your landscape

Imagine what those working bees could quickly do to the landscape you live in. Your suburb or town could be a magic world of beautiful gardens, forests and woodlots, animals, little lakes and ponds, ornaments, small firms and farms, idiosyncratic earth-built cottages, ornate public buildings, wilderness areas, magnificent community-built public buildings, and commons. Your garden might be one kilometre across, all fussed over by a thousand manic gardeners, but yours to walk through and enjoy. A major leisure activity would be simply going for a ramble or a bike ride.

9. Your wealth

Your personal wealth, savings, income property, would be of little no significance for your welfare or quality of life. Your wealth would depend on how good a town you lived in. In other words what would matter would be public wealth, the quality of the community orchards, the committees, the concerts, the networks you could get advice from, the readiness with which people would help you out if you had a problem, the familiar people you could get into conversation with. That readiness to come to your assistance could not be bought. It would depend on your reputation as a person who has helped others in the past. Thus money, income, property and material wealth would be of no importance.

10. Health

Most of us would be very active most of the day, working in our own gardens and home workshops, and contributing to working bees. We would move around mostly on foot or

bicycle, getting exercise. Our food would be perfect: varied, fresh and without pesticides etc. Above all, being embedded in a strong and supportive community, not having to fear unemployment or how to pay the mortgage would mean that there would be far less stress, mental illness, alcoholism, eating disorders, suicide or other forms of illness.

11. Leisure

We would be living in a leisure-rich situation. At present most people live in suburbs or high-rise units that are leisure-deserts, with little or nothing interesting to do other than watch TV, play computer games or go out to an expensive restaurant or commercial entertainment. Just going for a walk would be an interesting leisure activity. In addition to the rich and diverse garden landscape the town would contain many little farms and farms to drop into, many familiar people, many animals, and many activities and leisure resources that have been set up by the leisure committee.

There would also be a lot of arts and crafts practised; remember people will have a lot of time to give to them and they will be important in production. (All your pottery will come from the local potters.) You will be able to learn anything from the local amateur experts. There will also be drama clubs, book groups, ballet classes, and you will have the time to do formal courses in anything that takes your fancy.

The leisure committee will also organise the picnics, hay-rides, mystery adventure tours, concerts and dances. It will monitor the wishes of old people, kids, invalids and other groups and seek to build better leisure resources for all.

Then there will be the education and culture committee which will organise visiting speakers, educational tours, displays, and the festivals, celebrations and rituals.

This realm is especially important because it will provide the alternatives to resource-intensive leisure in consumer society. It will be crucial that people find these leisure activities to be very satisfying alternatives to consuming, especially to tourism and travel. The locality must be made leisure-rich so that people are happy to spend most of their time close to home. This will not be difficult to do if we apply those committees and working bees to the task. Your suburb or town has abundant talent to provide these entertainments, many dramatists, poets, musicians, magicians, jugglers, acrobats, artists etc. who at present cannot do their thing because the scarce opportunities have been taken by a few mega-stars and global media corporations. Many will be able to enjoy performing at the free neighbourhood concerts and art shows.

12. Peace of mind

One of the biggest benefits would be the peace of mind that would come from the relaxed pace and the freedom from the need to struggle and work hard, the security that would come from knowing that, for instance, you need not fear being dumped into unemployment by the economy and knowing that you have a community that cares about you, and above all from knowing that you were not living in ways that cause global problems and that all people could practise. You could feel pride in your town and its citizens for exemplifying a sustainable and just society.

CONCLUSIONS

As I see it, living in the ways indicated would make life far more interesting and satisfying than the lives of people in consumer society today. Many of us would be happy to live on 5% or less of the dollar, footprint, and non-renewable resource and energy and costs typical of rich countries. In conventional economic terms we would be extremely poor, but our quality of life would be much higher than it is even for high-income people today. There would be many things we couldn't have, most obviously lots of travel and big and expensive houses and

possessions, but the important point is that there are alternatives to consuming. In my view those provided by the kind of society outlined would be far more enjoyable than those offered by consumer society. We would have been liberated from having to work perhaps three times too hard, from insecurity and isolation, and from needing a high income to purchase a lot of expensive things. More importantly, we would have gained great spiritual riches: time, community, opportunities to create, learn, give and contribute, to be appreciated, to reflect and to grow.

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