THE CASE FOR SIMPLICITY

Ted Trainer Simplicity Institute Report 15c, 2015



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Why try to live more simply? I think there are two main lines of argument. The first is that global sustainability and justice cannot be achieved unless we live much more simply than the average person does in rich countries today. The second reason is that living simply enables a richer personal life.

'Simplicity' here refers to material 'living standards', i.e., to the amount we buy and consume. The fundamental assumption in consumer-capitalist society is that the more we are able to purchase and use and have, the higher our wealth and welfare and quality of life will be. That's why constantly increasing the GDP is claimed to be the supreme goal. But it is increasingly being recognised that this assumption is literally catastrophically wrong. The pursuit of greater material wealth is now the basic cause of the ecological and other global problems now threatening our survival. The main reason for transition to The Simpler Way is that it must be carried out if we are to achieve a sustainable and just world. However, the following discussion will deal mainly with the second point, to do with why living more simply can enable more meaning and satisfaction to be enjoyed.

1. The Personal Benefits: Enriching the Quality of Life

In a society obsessed with possessions and wealth it might seem silly to suggest that living in materially simpler ways can enable the achievement of a higher quality of life than most people have in consumer-capitalist society. Following are some of the reasons supporting this claim.

1.1 Liberation! Not having to earn and pay out so much

A 'normal' lifestyle in consumer-capitalist society is not possible unless one does far more working, earning and buying than we should have to. All that work is taking precious time that could be going into more fulfilling pursuits. Consider for instance the enormous cost in time, money, and worry involved in acquiring a 'normal' house, not including land.

If we assume the cost of building the house is \$150,000 then the sum to be repaid to the bank will be about \$300,000. But to be able to pay that much after tax is taken from earnings around \$400,000 will have to be earned. The cost of a medium sized house (e.g., 160 m² excluding land) per square metre would be around \$2,500.

In my *Transition to a Sustainable and Just World* (Trainer 2010) I detail the probable cost to build my ideal tiny mud brick house, which I believe would be suitable for a young couple. The floor area would be c. 40 square metres. If additional storage is needed it could be provided by a simple workshop and other sheds nearby, adding to rainwater collection area. Lifetime heating and cooling costs (in Sydney region, 34 degrees south) would be minimal, and there need be no cost for water supply and

sewage removal. The estimated \$4,500 cost includes water tanks and solar panels, and averages \$113 per square metre, around 5% of the above sum for a normal house. (Compared with the recent Australian average new house area the figure is 3%.) If we assume that a small family might be comfortable in a house four times as big as this example the total cost might be \$18,000 compared with \$400,000, assuming no borrowing is needed and that income is too low to tax significantly.

Much cheaper houses than this example can be built from cob. (See Bee, 1997.) Earth-built vault or dome dwellings are cheaper still, as curved roofs can be built from mud, surfaced by a waterproof skin.

No cost has been included for labour, because I would build the house myself with assistance from friends and a local builder, and count the time as enjoyable leisure.

About 100,000 Australians want a house but can't afford one. Another 100,000 are homeless and must live in friends' houses, or on the streets. In a market economy profits are maximised building big and luxurious houses, so no small, cheap and sufficient houses are built.

That's a lot of money and time that could be saved and put into interesting and rewarding activities. How long does it take to earn \$395,000? How much worry about losing ones job and being unable to meet the next payment could be avoided?

Now add the time and money savings that could come from using old, repaired and hand-made clothing, furniture, bikes, toys. Add the savings that might be made via a backyard vegetable garden and chicken pen, and via leisure interests that do not involve purchasing much commercially provided entertainment. Many arts and crafts produce useful things.

The huge amount of time all this would make available for enjoyable and fulfilling pursuits is only one of the benefits. There would also be enjoyment from the alternative activities involved, for instance in building your own beautiful and unique and ecologically admirable little house (with assistance from friends and experienced local builders), in repairing and keeping clothes and equipment in use, in developing a thriving and inspiring garden, and in finding and accumulating dollar-cheap local sources of leisure activity, (e.g. places to cycle to for a picnic).

1.2 The trap that is status and respectability

Much purchasing, especially buying housing, is driven by obsession with status. This is an absurdly competitive society in which there is much concern to impress by appearances and readiness to judge by appearances. There is great pressure to appear to be at least normal and respectable, certainly not odd or inferior, and if possible to be seen to be a success, prestigious, superior – and wealthy. 'Look at me, I can afford a Rolex watch and a Ferrari – I must be pretty good, eh?' One consequence is the enormous amount of time and money and resources going into the 'fashion', car and 'beauty' industries.

Long ago Thoreau saw this trap, and avoided it, and badgered people to stop wasting all that time and energy. By living simply he gained a lot of time to devote to his writing and thinking and enjoying his garden and the woods at Walden Pond.

I wear tattered and patched clothes around my homestead, enjoy repairing them, and have the same old almost-passably normal set to wear when I go out in public, including my one pair of shoes. I think I have a suit somewhere, but haven't worn it for several decades and wouldn't know where to look for it. It would be interesting to calculate how much working-for-money time my wardrobe has saved me.

1.3. Less worry about 'success' and 'achievement'

Consumer-capitalist society makes people discontented, not just with their income, property and wealth. Even more important is the insistence that we must strive ceaselessly for 'success'. We are taught from the earliest years, especially at school, to work hard, do our best, improve, develop our talents, get on, achieve more, rise in the world, be successful. This connects with the mania with competing, beating others, being more successful than they are, being the best. Hence this society's obsession with gold medalists, superstars and celebrities, winners and record breaking.

But I don't want to be the best painter, or an excellent one, or even a good one. I just want to be a contented painter, one who is good enough to enjoy painting. Of course improving my technique might lead to more enjoyment but that's not very important to me. Similarly I only want to be *good enough* at tennis, gardening, carpentry and chess to enjoy these activities. I am not driven by any sense of obligation to improve. There are of course areas where it is important to try to be as good as possible, such as where a doctor's skill level affects the welfare of others. And being good enough does not necessarily mean mediocre or shoddy; it can be very satisfying to have 'mastered' a craft and to be able to do beautiful work, without fretting about constantly improving.

Essential in The Simpler Way is *being content with what's good enough*, not wanting to have the best or to be the best. This connects with appreciation, being more able to recognise one's own good fortune, one's worth and the value of what one has done, imperfect though they may all be. It also connects with the fact that in consumer-capitalist society people do far too much doing and far too little being. They strive constantly to perform, produce, achieve and improve, and they are not very good at just sitting and appreciating what they have and who they are. Again, to be more able to derive satisfaction from simpler things and from what one has and what one is brings at least some degree of liberation. The Simpler Way will make this easier to do because it involves a much more relaxed situation, enabling most people to work for money only a couple of days a week, and immersing us in a context where much life satisfaction comes mostly from just being in a beautiful landscape and community.

1.4 What makes you rich?

For many years now it has been clearly established that as a country's average income increases measures of the quality of life rise but after a quite low level of income is reached the measures do not rise much if at all (see Alexander, 2012). In fact for the very richest countries, especially the US, indices of the quality of life seem to be in a long term decline even though the GDP continues to rise. Surveys find that the factors people see as being most important for their life satisfaction are to do with having good friends,

good health, a good family, and satisfying work. The amount of property owned or monetary income or wealth they have are way down the list.

As I see it the most important factor in a rich life is having purposes, things you are interested in and want to do. This is the main thing lacking for people who are suffering depression or are dumped into unemployment. It is a glaring problem in many Aboriginal settlements and it is a major cause of addiction to alcohol and drugs. It is tragic that many people can find nothing more interesting to do than get high.

Many people are forced to live in circumstances which leave them with little to do and observe and think about, and many have to struggle with low incomes and worry, making it unlikely that much of their attention will given to spirit-lifting pursuits. Most consumption must be basically due to the fact that in consumer-capitalist society there is not that much else to do. Neighbourhoods are boring dormitories, there is little or no community and little incentive for citizenship in the sense of involvement in public affairs, let alone in running local social systems. The Simpler Way immerses the individual in many interests, activities, roles, interactions and contributions.

1.5 Debauchery blunts sensitivity

Australia's richest man once bet \$4 million at a casino in one sitting. Anyone who can afford that much is very rich. Anyone who needs to spend that much to get a thrill is very, very poor – spiritually impoverished. If you can derive interest, enjoyment and satisfaction from simple things you have access to many more life-enriching experiences than someone who can only be satisfied if he gets big and expensive things. Consumer society puts a massive effort into enticing you to spend on ever-more expensive, luxurious, rare, exclusive, extreme, spectacular, thrilling products and experiences. What is sufficient is not sufficient. The result is *debauchery*, the deadening of sensitivity, the raising of thresholds needed for satisfaction. Films must have at least two chain-saw murders and a train wreck or they are boring. But I once knew a little old lady who would delight in flowering weeds growing along the path.

In other words it is very important to work at acquiring simple sources of interest, meaning and inspiration. The 'spiritual' quality of one's life is what matters most of all, the extent to which one can be inspired, cheered up, delighted, or interested. There are immensely powerful forces at work in consumer society producing the opposite – depression, boredom, anxiety, worry, and despair. Depression is probably the most widespread illness today. Many plod on in a grey world of more or less mindless dull routine most of the time. Those who can avoid this fate by finding interest, delight, meaning and inspiration in the simple things around them have a key to a much richer life; they are spiritually wealthy.

Much of the planet-destroying consuming going on must be due many people lacking interesting things to do. Bored? Go shopping. Hobbies are a powerful antidote, especially creative activities such as arts, crafts and gardening. They provide daydreaming material available anywhere anytime.

I was a student within the formal 'education' system for about twenty-seven years. Among the things I learned was a lot of Shakespeare, Latin and Ancient Greek. I think all that remains from that is a detestation of Shakespeare in particular and languages in general. But once when I was about nine years old two big kids came around to our classroom with a

couple of boxes in which they had built dioramas, little farm scenes. That made such an impression. I have been a model builder ever since and that is one of the best things in my life, providing hours of enjoyable creative activity and spirit-lifting daydreaming. Especially blessed are the gardeners, for wherever we are we have abundant things to observe, think about, do, learn about and/or delight in. In a sane world a high priority of Education would be to equip everyone with hobbies.

So it is important to work at finding interest in simple things, in noticing things and being curious, in looking for connections, significance, puzzles, meaning, explanations. The more able one is to do this, the richer one's world is. The more things that catch your attention and interest and prod questions and connections as you go about, the more meaningful everyday experience is. If only big, expensive, spectacular things grab your interest, you will be much less often interested in anything. This can be put in terms of openness, awareness, sensitivity and the capacity to be observant. Some people notice things that might have gone unseen, or realise there is significance and meaning in things others might miss. We adult humans have a strong tendency to get bogged down in a normal, every-day, routinized, take-it-for-granted consciousness that makes us oblivious to the wonders and miracles all around us. 'That is only an ant.' That is only a daisy.' But some people are struck by what they run into and see in them interesting aspects to mull over.

Today I came across a little cone in the sand, and ant lion's trap. I know a bit about them but it struck me for the first time that the condition of the sand in the cone must be crucial, because if the slope is not steep enough the ants could climb out after falling in. The slope will be set by the laws of physics operating on grains sliding down, and the kind of soil at the site, so this probably determines where ant lions can and can't live. Wet or clay soils wouldn't do. Is the slope always the same? Why does it form at that angle? Maybe different soils have different shaped sand grains and some slide more readily and would form more shallow cones. Could sand form at a slope I couldn't climb? Is there a size limit here, so that big ant lions couldn't evolve? Must look this up tonight.

This connects directly with John Dewey's conception of Education. He saw the point of Education as becoming more able to make meaning out of the things one encounters. This is the point of gaining knowledge. The more I know about the world the more able I am to interpret it, to make sense of what I see or experience. Compare what I see when I walk through the bush with what an Aboriginal hunter sees. He knows that the broken twig there, and that mark in the sand mean that an animal went this way not long ago. His knowledge enables him to literally see things I do not see. The geologist sees far more than I do when we both look at the same landscape, because she understands the significance of what we are looking at, and her knowledge enables her to make connections and interpretations. Thus she is more sensitive, open to interesting observations and ideas than I am. Her world is richer and her life is richer by virtue of her greater capacity to see and be interested.

So the more I accumulate knowledge about, and interest in, the ordinary and everyday things I encounter in the world, the more sources of meaning I have access to, the richer and more awe inspiring is the world I live in. One of the most important goals of Education should be developing the readiness and desire to observe, question, look for

connections, explain, find out about, and be awed and inspired by every day things. To Dewey, Bertrand Russell and the Progressive educators, the supreme goals of Education are to do with creating and harnessing interest. As Socrates said, 'Wisdom begins in wonder.'

1.6 Mindfulness

I think there are important connections with 'mindfulness' here, but I am not sure I understand them well. This discussion is about attention, what we attend to, think about, focus on, in the present moment. We can choose what we attend to, although most of the time most of us plod along thinking about whatever comes into our heads, and spending a lot of time dwelling on tasks, problems and worries. But we have the capacity to flip the switch and stop thinking about that and start thinking about something nice, calming and inspiring, if only for a moment. I'm not much good at this but sometimes when I'm grinding along a bit bogged down I have the wit to stop and look up at the trees or the garden or the sunlight and look for and attend to something nice. The effect can be an instantaneous mental housecleaning, a switch of consciousness to the new vision and the nice feelings that come with it and a sudden sweeping away of all the rubbish I was stumbling through an instant before. Is this what the Zen master can do anytime, anywhere? My mantra is 'Count 'em boyo' – count your blessings you lucky little fellow.

Nothing matters more than feeling good, now, in the present moment. If I could give you a magic wand that enabled you to feel good, calm, contented, appreciative, at any moment you chose, would you want a Ferrari, or a trip to Bali or a chateau in the South of France? Why would you if you could feel good without all that bother? The debauched mind of the over-consumer can't feel contented without buying a bigger, more luxurious or exciting or expensive item. The person who can feel good by a simple act of mind or will, by choosing to set aside negative concerns and to attend to nice, simple, everyday things that inspire, is very very rich.

This is a matter of attention, mood, how we think or react, and what's in our minds, not a matter of our actual circumstances. You can be in lousy circumstances and something flips you into feeling OK for a moment, and sometimes you don't feel so good even though there's no particular problem bugging you at that moment. To a considerable extent it is our mind not our situation that determines our condition or experience. That expectations can be powerful determinants of mental and physical outcomes is evident in the effect placebos can have in medicine. Our mind perceives and interprets and sets the tone. Some of us are blessed with a tendency to optimism or cheerfulness, and so they tend to see things and events as better, nicer than those of us in the habit of seeing the glass half empty. A person who has this tendency, whether by nature or via years of discipline in a monastery, is rich in his capacity to go through life feeling good, and is unlikely to owe much if any of this form of wealth to the amount of possessions he has. Mark Burch puts it this way: 'How we think about our lives, and that we reflect on them at all, plays a greater role in determining our wellbeing than do our material circumstances.' He continues: 'What can most deprive us of a good life is not so much material scarcity as it is a host of psychological and emotional habits, delusions and logical mistakes.' (Burch, 2014, p. 227.) Was this what the bard had in mind when he said, 'Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.'

The aspect of mindfulness that seems important here is not to do with thinking about what comes into mind or attention in a non-judgmental way, but about realising that what one focuses on, attends to, thinks about, or notices can profoundly affect one's

sense of calmness, appreciation and well-being. We can work at being more able to shift attention to and dwell on things that lift our spirits.

Material affluence is likely to contradict all this. At least it can be expected to distract and interfere with an effort to derive at least some degree of contentment through habits of mind. Someone once suggested that to get to paradise you first have to give all your possessions to the poor, and related this to camels having difficulty getting through the eye of a needle. Diogenes said '…perfect indifference to wealth is the root of all virtue and happiness' (see Alexander and McLeod, 2014, p.12).

Education in a satisfactory society would be primarily about helping us to develop these kinds of skills, along with helping us to appreciate the abundant, materially simple sources of interest and enjoyment. It would help us to find and accumulate our personal stock of simple spirit-lifting devices, images, places, thoughts and activities.

1.7 The connection with self-sufficiency.

Because living simply means not purchasing much it means producing as much as you reasonably can for yourself; in other words, it means high levels of self-sufficiency. This opens up a universe of interesting activities, knowledge, traditions and skills. I can sew, weld, solder, do basic woodwork and metal work, build a chicken shed or a windmill or a house, draw, paint pictures, sculpt, make candles and paper and mud bricks, do pottery, wood turning, plumbing, blacksmithing, make lead-light windows, do 12 volt wiring, grow vegetables and fruit and flowers, make mosaics and ornamental garden pots, cook a tolerable meal, build in rammed earth, cob and mud brick, model in clay and plaster, keep chickens, compost, make model ships - none of them very well but all of them enjoyably and usefully. There are many more things I want to learn how to do, including grow fish, play beginner's violin, make electronic gadgets, preserve fruit, etc. These capacities enrich my life. They fill it with interesting things to think about and do. I feel good seeing the chicken sheds in use, the models built, and jobs done well. The ultimate consumers who just buy everything and make nothing for themselves do not have access to the good feelings that come from having some degree of self-sufficiency. Among the best of these are to do with 'oikos', running a good household economy: the well stocked pantry full of home-made preserves; the veggie garden organised to provide a steady flow of crops throughout the year; the neat firewood stacks ready for winter; the sound chicken pen fences ready for Reynard's examination; the job list with some items crossed off today.

In sustainable, local communities we would be among people expert in many skills and so we would learn them easily, and much of the time we would be discussing arts and crafts and technologies and projects we and others were working on.

1.8 Earth bonding

In the new settlements of post consumer-capitalist society we will live very close to nature. Our quality of life will depend heavily on our local ecosystems surrounding and intimately shaping our small local economies. We will be acutely aware that we can enjoy our perfect food and water and landscape because of Gaia's generosity and our readiness to treat her well. This will generate humility, respect and appreciation for Gaia's gifts. We will delight in our many necessary interactions with nature, digging potatoes, composting, picking fruit, smelling rich soil, welcoming the rain, watching the forest gardens thrive. Over time we will become wiser about Gaia's ways, about the best

varieties for our soils, what to plant where, the fire danger direction, where the frosts occur.

In this situation of dependence the human/nature gap diminishes, as does any sense of superiority or mastery over nature. We are more likely to see ourselves as part of nature and to be sensitive to her ways and to see her other creatures as colleagues cooperating in our ecosystem. When I come across a black snake I wish him a good day and watch him go about his business; he has as much right to be here as I have – and he does less damage. I thank the bees and apologise when I steal their hard-won honey. When you live close to the ground you are constantly confronted with things to think about, attend to, be grateful for and be sensitive to.

1.9 Work

One of the greatest tragedies wrought by consumer-capitalist society has been the destruction of work. Hunter gathering societies don't do any. They just play all day, including the fun that is going on the hunt and the community ramble that is finding plant foods. Even for many of those in consumer-capitalist society lucky to have 'good' jobs, and lucky enough to be 'satisfied' with them, work is not fulfilling. In post consumer-capitalist Simper Way settlements we will be able to work in order to enjoy a) the activity, mostly exercising creative skills, and b) contributing to our admirable community. Most production will be at a leisurely pace and via craft activity. We will have the time to do the job well, to experiment, to learn about different techniques and materials and about the history of the craft, and to 'work beautifully'. Ruskin and William Morris saw this long ago. When you watch an experienced crafts person you are struck by the ability to do the job with a minimum of effort and materials use, to use just the right amount of wood or nails or hammer blows, and to avoid mistakes. Ruskin and Morris wanted almost all production to be a beautiful performance, creating beautiful objects. Morris insisted that man is Homo Artis, not Homo Faber.

1.10 Community

In my view the Eco-village movement's most important contribution to this revolution is in demonstrating the value of community. Members of a village are very secure from adversity, isolation or loneliness and more importantly they have access to the satisfaction that comes from sharing, cooperating and working with others, giving, and helping others to thrive. These benefits and delights have nothing whatsoever to do with material wealth. Indeed they tend to be found among poorer rather than richer people. This is another realm where we have much to learn from tribes and peasants.

Living in a thriving community means being exposed to interesting activities, ideas, projects, artists and artisans and people to talk to. This will make it easy for us to find and develop interests that do not involve much material consumption. The above discussion of topics such as mindfulness can give the impression that to move from the consumer way to being content with simpler things requires a lot of arduous self-discipline. When the individual is trying to make the transition alone this might be so, but it is not likely to be the case in an Eco-village.

2. The Global Benefits - Saving the Planet

The case for simplicity is not primarily to do with the personal or lifestyle benefits it can bring to the individual. It is to do with the fact that unless simpler material lifestyles become the norm there can be no solution to the many alarming global problems now threatening our survival.

For decades it has been obvious that rich world per capita levels of resource use are far higher than could be sustained, or extended to all the world's people. 'Footprint' analyses and various other measures indicate that rich world consumption rates are probably around ten times those that all people could have sustainably. We few could not have these rates if we were not taking most of the world's resource output, thus condemning most people to living on far less than their fair share. This situation cannot be remedied without scrapping and replacing the present economic system, building highly self-sufficient and self-governing local communities, and adopting very different values. The most important of these would have to be to do with moving to much more simple material simple living standards. (This perspective is detailed in Trainer, 2010.)

However, simplifying our lifestyles is far from sufficient if the transition to a sustainable and just society is to be achieved. Eventually we must face up to huge and radical structural and cultural change, especially at the level of national an international government. For instance, national economies must abandon growth and must prevent the market from determining our fate. What we must work on here and now is the raising of the critical awareness in people in general that these changes must be pushed through some day.

2.1 Will this case succeed?

The forces against us are gargantuan. More than \$500,000,000,000 is spent every year on trying to get us to buy more; the hours worked to get money are increasing; alarmingly rising debt levels represent more money borrowed to spend; national treasurers constantly wear themselves out trying to increase purchasing; progress is seen as moving towards greater complexity and pace; no one has enough time; and getting richer without limit is the almost never-questioned supreme goal of virtually all countries and people. But there is increasing disenchantment, evident in things like the voluntary simplicity movement, the slow food movement, and downshifting. At present these moves are small and optional. But before long they will not be. Our task is to increase the chances that when the time of troubles begins to impact seriously in rich countries many will at least have been acquainted with the possibility that simpler ways might make more sense.

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