

Book Club Discussion Starters

The Hidden Door: Mindful Sufficiency as an Alternative to Extinction

By

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The Door Hidden in the Wall

- In *The Hidden Door*, the author takes a perspective of life in mainstream culture as locking us within a confined social space that threatens our future in significant ways. Do you share this perspective or not? Why or why not?
- Reference is made to the literature about voluntary simplicity. Have you read other works about this topic and what did you think of them?
- What do you think of the author's attempt to "re-brand" voluntary simplicity as "mindful sufficiency"? Why do you think he did this? Do you agree or disagree with construing the subject this way, and why?
- The author provides a brief overview of voluntary simplicity per se before introducing his collection of essays. How did this description of voluntary simplicity compare with others you may have encountered? If the concept is new to you, was the introduction lucid or did it leave you with many questions? If so, what are they?
- The author describes the DNA of simple living as consisting of two strands: mindfulness and sufficiency. Does this metaphor make sense in this context or can you think of other ways to describe the relationship between these two life values that makes more sense to you?

Mindfulness: The Door to Simple Living

- In *The Hidden Door*, the author suggests that a durable commitment to simple living grows first from a transformation of consciousness which only later on expresses itself as a taste for material minimalism. What are your thoughts?
- Do you pursue a mindfulness practice of some sort? What is that like for you? Could you relate to the author's description of mindfulness and in what ways?
- The author raises concerns about the ethical context from which mindfulness practice can sometimes be isolated and he argues that this should not occur. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
- The author writes: "I'm convinced that a sustainable culture will be one that voluntarily and consciously embraces both *simple living* and *mindful living* as its core values of the good life." Your thoughts?

- The author spends considerable time outlining the changes in thinking, feeling, desiring and perception that can occur with the cultivation of mindful awareness. How does this compare to your own experience?
- The author suggests that the whole purpose of the human experiment is to qualitatively develop consciousness through activities like mindfulness practice. What do you think is the purpose of human life and to what extent do you agree with or differ from the author's perspective?

Sufficiency: Enough For Everyone Forever

- The author begins this essay with a reflection on how the language of simplicity and consumption has changed over the last century so to establish a bias in advertising and public discourse to the prejudice of simplicity but in favour of conspicuous consumption. Do you agree or disagree and why?
- What thoughts do you have about the wisdom of calling people to a way of life that aims to maximize well-being while at the same time minimizing consumption? What might be the upsides and downsides of such a lifestyle?
- The author is careful to distinguish *sufficiency* from extremes of minimalism. Why is this the case? Does this distinction seem justified?
- In exploring the meaning of sufficiency, the author distinguishes physical and material needs from psychological and social needs. What do you think of this distinction and is it a useful one for understanding how consumer culture affects the world?
- The author suggests that consumer culture does not exist so much to meet needs and to manufacture them. What do you think of this claim? Do think this is a sustainable way to live or not?
- The author suggests that mindfulness can be brought to our desires and consumption habits and that growth in awareness of these things offers an alternative to impulsive, thoughtless consumption. What do you think of this assertion?
- The author brings specific attention to the question of luxury consumption. On what grounds does he question luxury consumption and what approach to it does he recommend? What do you think about this recommendation?

Communicating Simplicity

- The author distinguishes between communicating simply and communicating simplicity. What is meant by this, and do you think the distinction is useful?

- The author suggests that the metaphors we apply to make sense of our experience shapes how we perceive and think about the world—such as the metaphor of being passengers on the *Titanic* as expressing our environmental predicament. How do you experience metaphors shaping your awareness every day? What are they and what doors do they open or close for you?
- The author doubts that commercially owned mass media are compatible with increasing awareness of simple living as a lifestyle option. Why is this the case? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- What does the author mean by “communication of the first kind”?
- What does the author mean by “communication of the second kind” and how does he distinguish it from communication of the first kind? In what ways do you find this distinction helpful in offering potential avenues for promoting simpler and more sustainable lifestyles?
- Given the strengths, limitations and character of the two forms of communication discussed, what approach does the author recommend for diffusing the message of simple living throughout society? (Social modelling, immersion learning, artistic pursuits, viral memes.) What are your thoughts about how effective this approach might be?

Educating for Simple Living

- The author distinguishes the perennial role that education plays in the search for a good life, and its shorter term role in fitting us to meet short term survival challenges. Can you identify examples of both sorts of education and what do you think about the usefulness of these forms of education?
- The author quotes from Thomas Moore that education is a process of drawing forth what is potential in the psyche and the soul. Do you think this is a valuable goal for education? Why or why not?
- The author then outlines several purposes or goals for education in a more sustainable culture including, education for mindfulness, in service of cultural memory, in service of a life-oriented economy, for local and personal self-reliance, to front the cultural transition that lies ahead of us, and for survival itself. What are your thoughts about these key goals for education?
- When the author discusses educating for survival, he suggests educational projects that help us replace mistaken beliefs, shift our focus from growth to the sustenance of life, from sheer technical innovation to the development of consciousness, from the pursuit of affluence to sufficiency, from markets to ecosystems, from individualism to community, from private property to a commonwealth of goods, and from competition to cooperation. Unpack and discuss each of these proposals. What are your thoughts about an agenda like this?

- How does the author distinguish between informational learning and transformational learning? What do you think of this distinction? Have you ever experienced transformational learning and what was that like for you?

Simplicity and Economy

- The author begins this essay by debunking the elevated place that economics holds in our culture. Do you feel this is justified and why?
- The author takes up one by one various objections that have been raised against simple living based on economic arguments—that widespread adoption of simple living would trigger a depression, that it threatens globalization, that it reduces the tax base, and that it would deprive people in developing countries from important income opportunities. What do you think of the rebuttals the author offers in response to these objections?
- The author outlines an economy designed to serve simple living rather than the pursuit of wealth and affluence, mentioning primary production, transportation, construction, manufacturing and services. Is the vision he offers plausible to you, and if so why, and if not, why not?
- Finally, the author proposes a cashless economy structured around a commonwealth of goods similar to those practiced in monastic communities for centuries. Does this proposal seem plausible to you? Appealing? Your thoughts..?

Twenty Questions: Technology and Simple Living

- The author describes the denizens of consumer culture as “enchanted” by our technology. Do you think this is true, and if so, how do you see it manifesting in your daily life?
- The author asserts that our current technology is a manifestation of our values and that in consumer culture technology is developed that is profitable, helps control nature, serves the security state, provides comfort, convenience and entertainment, and to increase consumption itself. In what ways do you find this portrayal of technology compelling, and in what ways might you disagree with it, and why?
- What arguments does the author offer in support of the idea that relying on technology is a necessary but not sufficient approach to meeting our sustainability challenges?
- What is Jevons’ Paradox and how, if at all, do you see it operating in your own life?
- The author suggests that we create Development Review Panels with authority to interrogate corporations and their technical innovations at the environmental, social and economic levels. He offers a number of questions that could frame this process. What do you think of this idea?

- Is it alright with you that individual or corporate entrepreneurs invent technologies whose primary purpose is increasing consumption (voluntary or not) in pursuit of private profit?

Simplicity, Sustainability, and Human Rights

- The author begins this essay by asserting that environmental issues are human rights issues, that we cannot say we value the latter without preserving the former, and that consumer culture is a singular threat to both the environment and human rights. Your thoughts?
- In what ways might the assertion of human rights present claims to material entitlements? How do you feel, and what do you think about, such claims?
- What key threats to human rights does the author see as arising from popular culture? Do you see others?
- What is meant by “elite panic” and how do you see it manifesting in emergency situations even now? How does it pose a threat to human rights? What would you propose as a remedy for elite panic?
- The author proposes that mindful sufficiency helps protect and promote human rights in three specific ways. What are they, and what do you think about his assertions?