

# Book Club Discussion Starters

## *Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet*

By

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*Stepping Lightly* was originally written as a primer about voluntary simplicity for use by undergraduate university students, but written at a level that is accessible to a literate adult readership as well. It was first published by New Society Publishers in British Columbia and is still available in .pdf and .epub formats from New Society Publishers or in Kindle version from the Kindle Store on [amazon.ca](http://amazon.ca)

### **Introduction**

- In the Introduction, the author describes his reasons for his own adoption of voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle. What were some of these reasons? Have any such motives drawn you out of the mainstream in search of alternatives? When the author claims that in the end we are drawn to simple living not by good reasons for doing so, but by something else entirely, what does he mean? Can you relate to this assertion?

### **Voluntary Simplicity: The “Middle Way” to Sustainability**

- The author begins by suggesting that how we live in the world is an expression of a story we are telling ourselves about the meaning and purpose of human life. Our culture is the embodiment of that story. If our present story is proving unhealthy for us and for the Earth, we need a different story. What do you think about this assertion? Do you ever feel that you are living within a story you are telling yourself through your actions and choices? What is this like for you?
- Voluntary simplicity has been defined by Duane Elgin as: “A way of life that is outwardly simple but inwardly rich.” What do you think is the meaning of “outward simplicity” and “inward richness”? When have you experienced these in your own life and what was that like?
- The author outlines nine characteristics of voluntary simplicity. Which of these did you find most and least appealing and for what reasons? Do any of these characteristics resemble values that are found in other social movements? Describe and discuss.

- The author shows that the modern simple living movement arises from a long lineage of earlier historical expressions. How do you feel when you discover the ancestry of simple living?
- The author attempts to remedy misconceptions concerning what simple living is about, e.g., that it is always rural, that it's the same as poverty, that it's a passing fad, etc. Can you say that you might have shared these misconceptions at some point? How might your thinking be changing?
- The author argues that the practice of simplicity is helpful in clearing away distractions? Distractions of what sort? And distractions from what?
- The author argues that simplicity is not a panacea and does not automatically make us better people. It is a means, not an end in itself. But if our goal is to perfect character rather than accumulate possessions, how might living simply be a skillful means?
- The author suggests that popular culture today often confuses the practice of simple living with mere financial frugality. Why is this a mistake? Have you been attracted to simplicity because of financial stresses in your life? Has living more simply been helpful in this regard and in what ways?
- The author questions the widely held belief that accumulating financial assets will provide security against the various forms of risk that life presents. What does he say in support of these questions and where does he think truer forms of security can be found?
- The author presents the Dr. Seuss character, the "Push-me-Pull-you"—a llama-like animal with two front ends pulling in opposite directions—as a metaphor for forces which are pushing people away from mainstream consumer culture and other forces that are pulling them toward more attractive alternatives. What is your experience of these pushes and pulls in your own life, perhaps in relation to voluntary simplicity specifically, or motivating a search for more satisfying alternatives generally?

## **Why Practice Voluntary Simplicity?**

### **Simplicity and Self**

- The author proposes that the modern concept of self is grounded in a Cartesian/Lockean perspective of human nature. What does this amount to and what difference does it make?
- Voluntary simplicity is generally embraced for a variety of personal, indeed individual, reasons. What personal reasons motivate your interest in voluntary simplicity?
- What effects do you see consumer culture having on you as an individual—effects upon health, your financial resources, your peace of mind, your spirituality, and your relationships with the important people in your life? How might living more simply affect all these considerations?

- The author suggests that consumer culture tries aggressively to recruit our attention outwards toward what it wants us to buy. What is the price we pay for allowing this to happen?
- The author argues that we are perhaps hearing two different stories about ourselves at the same time. One story comes from outside us, from society, from the market and from advertisers. The other story comes from inner sources and concerns the purposes that our lives want to achieve by acting through us. How would you describe the difference between these two narratives in your experience? Which feels more authentic, more secure, and more genuinely you own?
- The author asserts that adopting a simpler way of life offers an opportunity to turn away from distraction and toward the most authentic sources of our identity, i.e., to come home to ourselves. What does this mean? Do you experience consumer culture as taking you away from your most authentic self or closer to it, and how does this happen?
- The author asserts that we begin to find ourselves again if we remember and honour the reality of who we have been and also by dreaming and honouring the dream of who we aspire to be. What meaning do you attach to remembering and dreaming in your own life and how are these expressed in your daily round?

### **The Uses of Nothing**

- The author claims that part of the psychological transformation that is required for embracing simplicity involves learning to value the absence of things (material clutter, stress, debt, distractions, unhealthy relationships, etc.) Discuss some things from your own experience which would improve your life by their absence.
- The author describes a simulation game he calls “The Uses of Nothing”. What is this game and what happens to people as they move through its various phases? Have you ever participated in anything like this game and what was that like for you?
- What is the essential intent behind The Uses of Nothing game? How do you think you would feel after participating in such a game and why do you feel that way?
- One of the goals of The Uses of Nothing game is to demonstrate that most of what is needed for a good life is ours by birthright, or very easy to obtain. Do you agree with this point of view, and if not, why not?
- The author references the work of cognitive behavioural psychologist Timothy Miller when he notes that no species on Earth has evolved with an “enough” switch. What is the meaning of this and its consequences for the Earth and for our own security?
- The author suggests that many of things we do to try to secure ourselves against suffering, loss and death, are actually causing what we are trying to avoid. What does this mean? Can you think of examples from your own experience? Where does this leave us?

## **Simplicity, Family and Community**

- In addition to individual or personal reasons to embrace simple living, the author asserts that there are people who embrace simplicity for the sake of their families and communities. How do you see life in consumer culture affecting your family and community? Do you feel there are solutions available from within consumer culture to address the concerns you may have, or is all well and good as it stands?
- The author cites a study which claims that the main determinates of quality of life are not related to consumption at all. How does this match up with your own experience? What do you think makes for a good life and how many of those things relate to consumption?
- One of the main reasons many people choose to live more simply is to find more time for family relationships and community activities. Do you feel under pressure to work longer hours or multiple jobs simply to get by? Where do you think this pressure comes from? Do you think the global economy is working to your benefit? What alternatives do you see to the status quo?
- Many people are concerned these days with the state of democracy yet we seem to have ever less time to participate as active citizens in the governance of our communities. What relationship might exist between the decision to embrace simple living and our ability to participate more fully in our communities?
- The author makes reference to “Newtonian” institutions of business and governance. What does this mean? What alternatives to Newtonian institutions might be possible and how would these affect the quality of community life?
- The author describes voluntary simplicity as a *social innovation* that is more flexible, creative and locally adapted than traditional, policy and regulation oriented approaches to community development and governance. Would you agree or disagree and why?

## **Simplicity and Environment**

- The author links environmental impacts with the pursuit of economic growth. What examples can you find from your own experience that testify to this connection?
- Many politicians and business leaders cheerfully claim that the environment need not be sacrificed to the pursuit of economic gain. Can you name one instance of any resource or natural system that is as abundant and healthy as it was a generation ago?
- The author contrasts two different perspectives of nature and discusses how they affect our relationship to All Life and our use of resources. With which of these perspectives do you feel most in alignment and why?
- The author claims that voluntary simplicity has clear and direct relevance to preserving the ecosphere for our own well-being and that of future generations. By living simply we reduce

consumption and hence the drain on resource and hence waste. Discuss this approach to environmental trusteeship.

- The author argues that the application of voluntary simplicity to environmental trusteeship can take three forms: reduction of waste, de-junking (reduction of excess possessions) and reducing consumption. In your opinion, are these effective means of reducing environmental damage? How willing or unwilling would you be to adopt one or all of these practices in your daily life, and why?
- The author cites work done by the Union of Concerned Scientists concerning the choices that average people make which have the greatest environmental impacts. They also make recommendations about how to reduce these impacts. What do you think of their suggestions? Do they seem like realistic choices to make in your own life? Why or why not?

### **Simplicity and Spirituality**

- The author offers an outline of the meaning of “spirituality.” How close, or far distant, is this description from your own understanding of spirituality? How much of a role does spiritual practice currently play in your daily life?
- The author suggest that spiritual practice is made more difficult by life in modern consumer culture. In what ways is this the case? Does this fit or not fit with your personal experience and why?
- How do you see the recommendation to live simply in order to nourish your spirituality manifesting in different traditions?
- How can simple living itself be a form of spiritual practice and help us grow spiritually?
- The author suggests that simplicity, in addition to being an aid to spiritual practice, can also be a fruit of spiritual practice, that is, our spiritual practice simplifies us. Have you experienced anything like this yourself? Discuss with others while also respecting the privacy of some of these experiences.

### **How to Practice Simple Living**

#### **Cultivating Mindfulness**

- The author offers a definition of mindfulness practice as the starting point for a practice of simple living. How closely does his definition match your own understanding of mindfulness? Is mindfulness practice part of your daily round and what do you perceive that it brings into your life?
- How do mindfulness and simplicity feed each other?

- The author outlines a procedure for practicing mindfulness. Does this appeal to you? Why or why not? What similarities or differences does this method bear to other forms of mindfulness practice with which you are familiar?

### **Knowing When Enough is Enough**

- The author asserts that learning to recognize how much is enough begins with consciousness of our governing values, or the central purpose of our lives. What do you think he means by this and what practical difference might it make?
- The author proposes that another helpful practice in discerning how much is enough consists in understanding the nature and dynamics of desire, and the relation between desires and contentment. What does he mean by this and how does this relate to your personal experience?
- The author cites work by Timothy Miller which asserts that humans have evolved to have no “off switch” for consumption. Hence we are biologically programmed to over-consume. What problems does this present for us now that human populations are very large and we no longer live in the jungle?
- How can pursuing desires produce suffering? Has this been true in your experience?
- The author contrasts Buddhist and Christian perspectives of what is the problem with desire itself. With which of these two perspectives are you most in agreement and why?
- What effects does the author think consumer culture and mass advertising have on our ability to find contentment?
- The author asserts that growing more mindful of what we consume and the contentment each instance of consumption brings are critical to discerning how much is enough. Do you share this perspective or not? Why or why not?
- In your experience, does your family and society more generally help or hinder your ability to know how much is enough? How does this happen and how do you feel about it?
- The author suggests that how much is enough is also situated in a context that includes environmental considerations, social and economic equity, and the relative level of affluence enjoyed by one’s society. What are your thoughts?
- The author states that consumer culture entices people to live as if they had no ancestors and will have no descendents. Do you think this is true or not? Why or why not?

## **Simplicity, Time and Money**

- Many practitioners of simple living have taken up the practice to liberate more time for themselves, their relationships, and the pursuit of values that matter more to them than affluence. How does this compare to your own experience? How might living more simply liberate time and money?
- The author suggests that both time and money are conceived in consumer culture in terms of quantity and speed whereas in the practice of simple living they are thought of in terms of depth and quality. What do you think of this difference and how does it manifest in your own life?
- The author offers a time management practice that includes classifying our activities in terms of their importance and urgency? What do you think of this approach?
- With respect to money, the author asserts that simple living is mostly about living with a conscious focus on our highest values, not living cheaply for its own sake. What do you think about this claim?
- Have you ever lived with little or no money? What was that like?
- What steps does the author suggest for reducing the role that money plays in our lives, and what approaches can help us meet our life needs outside the monetary/market economy? Have you ever tried any of these strategies and if so, how did it work for you? What other methods can you think of for reducing our entanglement in money?

## **Simplicity, Work and Livelihood**

- In fashioning a means of livelihood consistent with our desire to live simply, the author recommends a middle way between indigence on the one hand and affluence on the other. What is this middle way? Do you find it appealing or not, and why?
- The author provides a description of education in service of a consumerist way of life. How accurate do you think this outline is and in what respects does it match, or mismatch, with your own experience? Do you think this is what education should be like? If so why, and if not, what alternatives can you imagine?
- The author adopts Ira Progoff's concept of a "seed potential" to distinguish a "work" from a "job." What does this distinction mean? What is your present job and how is it related to your works?
- What is the difference between a job and a vocation? In your own efforts to sustain yourself and your family in the world, are you pursuing job opportunities or a vocation? What difference would it make to you to pursue one at the expense of the others, and how in practical terms can both be honoured?

- What practical “skillful means” does the author discuss as offering alternatives to a nine-to-five-to-sixty-five approach to earning a livelihood? Have you tried any of these methods yourself and how did they work for you?
- In addition to the changes we can make to our livelihoods as individuals, the author discusses a range of ways in which people can act collectively to meet their material needs more efficiently and perhaps more pleasantly than flying solo all the time. What experience have you had with these other approaches to meeting your life needs and how do you now feel about those experiences?

### **Simplicity and Economy**

- When the author takes up the effects that the widespread adoption of voluntary simplicity might have on the economy, he begins by asserting that “our economy” really isn’t ours. What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- The author argues that voluntary simplicity would not cause an economic collapse. On what basis does he make this claim and explain why you may agree or disagree with him.
- If simple living became the cultural mainstream, would this abolish opportunities to get rich? Please explain why you think it would or wouldn’t.
- The author stresses that respecting the economic impacts of simple living, it is important to ask the right questions. Is it fair to ask the practitioners of simple living to explain the impact they may have on the economy, or would it be more appropriate to ask corporations about their impacts on communities and the environment? Your thoughts?
- The author proposes a number of ways businesses might reshape their role in society and their operations. What do you think of these proposals?
- The author states that economic values should not be the only values we consider as we make life decisions and development decisions for our communities. How do you see other values coming into play in your own community or household that affect the decisions we make and the future we choose? Your thoughts?

### **Simplicity and Equity**

- The author asserts that the existence of private property and social values that stress distinguishing oneself from others virtually guarantees violence. What do you think of this assertion?
- What is a “fare earth share”? Do you think everyone is entitled to a fare earth share, or are some more deserving than others? What role does simple living play in this discussion?

- In consumer culture, economic growth is the means to equity; for voluntary simplicity, it is sharing. Which of these do you see working most effectively and why?
- How is voluntary simplicity an “act of nonviolent insurrection?”
- How might living more simply constitute an act of solidarity with marginalized members of society and a sign of the more equitable society we desire?

### **Writing a New Story for Our Culture: Simplicity and Belonging to the Earth**

- The author asserts that the adoption of voluntary simplicity opens “space” in our lives. Space of what kind, and to what end? If you practice simple living now, can you say that space has been opened by it in your own life? How?
- When the author suggests that consumer culture is a kind of story, and adopting simpler living opens a space for a new story to emerge, what does he mean? Describe why you might agree or disagree with the idea that this opening of space might be a good idea.
- When the author calls for the development of livelihoods that manifest the truth that we belong to each other and we all belong to the Earth, what does he mean?