

Simplicity Solutions

Why "less" can mean "more"

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(where sold)

Peak Energy will affect all our lives, but it is only one in a number of trends that are converging to make life difficult; debt, housing costs and climate change will also negatively affect our lives over the next two or three decades. There is a solution that is able to address many of these problems, but in today's "modern" society it's considered too extreme to advocate: *voluntary simplicity*.

The great growth fallacy: *More is Good*

A 'fallacy' is an argument that, on examination, is inconsistent with logic or the obvious facts of the case in question. Perhaps one of the greatest fallacies of the Twentieth Century was that "more is good". If we look at the trends today, after fifty years of consumerism, we find that there is ample evidence to contest this argument. For the (global) majority of the human population, and even for the minority population of the "westernised" states, a greater level of consumption has not brought about a similarly greater level of well-being.

In popular culture those who question or reject the idea that greater material wealth is good are derided as "hippies", or "hair shirts", or (perhaps a decade or more ago) "communists". But if we look at the results of recent economic and social studies it is those who advocate "more" who are acting irrationally:

- ◆ UK wealth has roughly doubled in the last forty years, but rather than being "better off", the levels of emotional distress in the population have increased proportionately (in surveys, a little less than one quarter of the UK population suffer from some form of emotional distress);
- ◆ if you plot the level of emotional distress in the population of western states versus the level of income inequality you get a very good correlation – showing that the income inequalities created by growing wealth have decreased our well-being;
- ◆ the growth of consumption is accelerating the depletion of important mineral resources, especially oil and gas, and the use of these resources will be limited by scarcity in the very near future – so "more" will be unattainable;
- ◆ there is a clear correlation between economic growth, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions - "more" is damaging the biosphere!

If we restate the phrase "more is better" in stronger terms we arrive at "greed is good" – which for some was the dominant economic mantra of the 1980s. Traditionally human societies have frowned upon greed but, in an age where certain people can consume far more than they need to live, we've abandoned this ancient principle. If we look at less developed societies, or our own society fifty or one hundred years ago, personal well-being was not defined by possessions, but by the ability to provide

for your basic needs yourself, using your own efforts. In an age of excess, what we have lost is the personal security of having "enough" to live.

Simplicity versus Modern Society

There are various groups and movements around at the moment who promote a broadly similar "simplicity" message:

- ◆ Voluntary Simplicity;
- ◆ Radical or Extreme Simplicity;
- ◆ Downshifting or Downsizing;
- ◆ Frugality or Simple Living;
- ◆ Deep Ecology;
- ◆ Self-Sufficiency or Self-Reliance;
- ◆ Slow Movement;
- ◆ Transition Culture;
- ◆ Affluenza.

Whilst subtly different to each other, are all very distinct from the mainstream campaign and political groups who promote "green" ideas, particularly "green consumerism" or "sustainable consumption". Although within the "simplicity" concept there is a lot of overlap with these more mainstream ideas, fundamentally the simplicity solution focusses on a transition to a lower impact lifestyle by reducing your consumption to a much lower level than that commonly practised today.

The problem at the moment is that mainstream society considers solutions based on "less" to be negative because they would create an economic recession. In fact, most solutions based on this premise have been rejected, irrespective of their merits, because they are in opposition to the dominant economic and political paradigm of "economic growth". But if we look objectively at the best ways to deal with the world's current problems – such as climate change – there is good evidence that, in terms of current economic evaluations, a long-term recession would be good for the planet and the human species. The fact that many in the mainstream react negatively to "less"-based solutions arises not because of a fault with the solution, but because economics cannot "internalise" the negative, damaging aspects of growth, and hence the positive benefits of contraction-based solutions.

Simplicity is a long human tradition

The Greek philosopher Epicurus stated, over 2,000 years ago, that the trouble involved in maintaining an extravagant lifestyle outweighed the pleasure gained from it. He believed that the basic requirements for sustaining your life should met as simply as possible, and all other non-essential costs should be avoided.

In the Seventeenth Century the Diggers, Quakers and other religious groups worked to develop simple lifestyles (e.g. the Quakers *Testimony of Simplicity*). In the Nineteenth Century Henry David Thoreau, William Morris and John Ruskin promoted a similar message. In the Twentieth Century Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Gregg and John Seymour continued to promote a message of simplicity.

Simplicity, whether for practical, political or spiritual reasons is a long human tradition. However, no matter what model of simplicity you follow, you need to make it relevant to you. It can be summed-up as:

The less money you spend, the less money you need to earn in order to live, the more time you can put into sustaining your life and family though your own efforts.

Step 1: Controlling Consumption

The entire purpose of modern retailing is to get people to buy something that they don't necessarily need. Be it toys, clothes or health foods, manufactures spend millions each year to create desires that we didn't know we had. The first step down the road to simplicity is therefore to counteract this force in your life by deciding what you really need.

The easiest way to counteract a trends based upon irrational desires is to rationally question it! So, before buying anything, get in the habit of running through the following check-list:

- Do I need it?
- Can I do without it?
- How many do I already have? (or, *do I need another if I have enough already?*)
- How much will I use it?
- How long will it last? (or, *if I spend a little more, could I get something that would last proportionately longer?*)
- Is it the best option, or could I find a better one if I looked a little harder?
- Can I borrow or hire one more cheaply, or get it on loan from the local library?
- Is there anything I already have that could be used instead of this, or made to?
- Can I maintain it myself, or will it cost me yet more money in the future?
- What's it made of, are any of the components hazardous, and is it recyclable?
- Is it made from renewable or non-renewable resources?
- Was it produced in a way which was exploitative? (or, *is it fair trade?*)

Skills for transition

More than anything else, if we compare previous generations to the present, ***we have been de-skilled by consumerism***. We might be better educated, we might know and possess more, but in terms of what we can practically achieve we do not possess the same set of skills as our grandparents. In the western world we don't question this trend – *it's progress*. But those who have been recently “civilised” find this aspect of western society disturbing – for example, in Australia, the Aboriginal peoples describe the skills lost through forced assimilation into western society as, “the great forgetting”.

Today, in order to get the things that we “need” (how much you actually “need” is the major question in terms of simplicity) we sell our labour to produce money. We then spend the money to obtain our “needs”. But, before we all became consumers, people produced varying proportions of their “needs” using their own skills. More importantly, because their “needs” were far less extensive, even with minimal skills they are able to produce a greater proportion of their needs themselves. This is where we have to get back to: Not “back” in terms of a

Step 2: Money and Debt

In order to live more simply you first need to control your spending and consumption – or, for many people today, controlling their spending *and debt*. This requires that you to work out precisely what you're spending today, and then commit to change your patterns of spending in order to reduce your debt and consumption in the future.

Spending –

- Set weekly or monthly spending limits and stick to them.
- Don't pay for things with credit or debit cards – take cash from the bank and use that (and only that) to pay for what you need.
- For utility bills (gas, phone, etc.) shop around and switch supplier to get the best deal (as well as cutting consumption – see *Step 3*).
- Set a weekly or monthly target to eliminate a non-essential item that you buy, and don't buy it any more.
- If you need to buy something “big” don't take out a loan (unless they give you a no-strings, interest free loan) – save up for it.

Debt –

- Get rid of your credit cards/store cards now!
- Set targets for reducing debt – short-term discomfort is better than long-term debt.
- Prioritise paying-off any unsecured loans (e.g., credit cards) first because they have higher interest rates, and worry about the secured loans (e.g., mortgages) later.
- Consider moving to a smaller/cheaper house, or swapping your current house for something of similar value with more saving potential (e.g., a large garden to grow food).

regressive process; instead we take the wisdom of our older “self-reliant” culture, and mix it with appropriate technologies from the present, to produce a low impact/low intensity system for living.

In order to live at a lower level of energy and resource consumption we have to re-learn all of those skills that we have lost in our own, British, “great forgetting”. However, if we look at the information provided by the government, and environment groups, we see three general options for change:

- ◆ you can spend money on courses to learn, professionally, how to do certain things; or
- ◆ you can buy “black boxes” – “green” consumerism solutions that you buy, use, but you have no clue how they work inside (hence, “black box”); or
- ◆ you just get on and do it, muddling through the best you can, one step at a time.

We are usually urged to aspire to the middle option, when in fact for most people it's the last. In reality, it's mostly the rich, “middle class”, people who are able to afford the first and second options, and who are able (to a certain extent) to change their lifestyles.

Step 3: Minimise

Modern society is designed to make you use more energy and resources. As you get your simple life under greater control you have to attempt to minimise your use of “bought energies” (gas or electricity) and focus on your use of “life energies” (that's you, and what you can produce).

- First, turn down your heating thermostat so that the temperature in the main living spaces doesn't exceed 18°C during the day – and set the timer to turn the heating off at night and when the house is unoccupied during the day. Also, try to heat only the rooms in regular use.
- Inspect your gas or electricity water heater to see if you can turn the water temperature down – ideally to around 55°C.
- If you turn down the heating you're going to feel cold – get some thicker trousers and jumpers to wear in the home.
- Clean your windows, and if necessary, repaint around the sills with light/white paint, to get more daylight into the house.
- Switch every light in the house to low energy equivalents – but more importantly use light colours on the ceilings and walls to improve the amount of light available.
- Unplug all electrical devices when not in use – even videos/set top boxes (for simplicity, buy a strip plug so you only need unplug/switch off one plug, not many).
- Don't use a car, use your feet. If that's unrealistic, use a bus or train. If that's unrealistic try to eliminate the need to go there.
- Buy yourself a rucksack (or panniers for your bike) to go shopping on foot/the bus.

What we need is an alternative route that assumes that you have very little resources (in fact, one that assumes you have to tackle debt) and that puts the emphasis on the learning the skills required to do things yourself (or co-operatively with others). More than anything, it needs to stress reducing consumption as the main route to change because this is the only option that will work with the restrictions we will face as we reach Peak Energy.

There are few, UK based, examples of an approach that stresses the need to contract consumption. This is where the Free Range Network will guide the *Energy Beyond Oil Project* over the next few years.

One step at a time...

If we are to recognise that everyone is different then the process of transition to a more simple lifestyle can't be proscribed. You're going to have to make it up for yourself as you go along. The problem is, after fifty years of consumer de-skilling, and more recently mass produced culture, encouraging people to improvise their own, unique solution is difficult! An important part of the myth of consumerism is the

Step 4: Food and Cooking

Don't treat learning to cook as a quick and easy process – gaining food preparation skills, and building-up a repertoire of meals, takes a while!

Growing food is equally important. Again, start small, and grow the scale of production with your confidence – the important act is learning the skills to grow food, not just producing something to eat.

- Your first target should be to cook your main meal using raw, seasonal, and where possible local, ingredients.
- If you use a lot of something find a source to buy it in bulk – consider setting up a food co-operative to buy what you need in bigger volumes, and at a lower prices.
- Experiment one dish at a time, and practice, to slowly extend your repertoire of dishes.
- Experiment with making larger volumes of food and storing or freezing the excess for later use (saves time if you're busy).
- Avoid using “labour saving devices” – often they're more hassle because they have to be cleaned (use simple, traditional hand tools).
- Set a target to take one pre-prepared food item that you buy each week or month (e.g. bread, jam, coleslaw, or soup) and make it yourself – then don't buy it any more.
- Grow food, even if it's only in a window box or container – start small and simple (e.g. lettuces or tomatoes) and slowly work your way up to larger/more difficult produce.
- If possible, find a plot of land (allotments are good but often hard to come by) to scale-up your food production – perhaps begin small by sharing a plot with someone else.

focus on “instant gratification” – we've abolished stress and pain because you can access anything, any time you want. This is where the “simplicity” ideal has problems selling itself. It can't promise instant gratification, or non-stop pleasure. It's all about slowing down, scaling down, doing it yourself and taking pleasure from this process of creation.

There is of course only one way that you can learn new skills at a low cost, and with a minimal investment – you're going to have to read a lot, and then practice them yourself, at home. It helps if you can share the burden with others, but ultimately, you have to devise your own way past Peak Energy. To help get you started we've produced this “six step summary” guide to get you heading in the right direction. The ideas are simple, and very general, and you'll have to interpret each one as it applies to you. You can do each step separately, in any order, but we advise that you try doing each in

parallel – carrying out those parts that seem do-able at the time.

Change is hard – but inevitable

Peak Energy is inevitable: we consume so much energy today; the limits of production for oil and gas are so close; and the growth trend is so entrenched; that we'll definitely see a downturn in global energy supply over the next one or two decades.

In an era of over-consumption, solutions that stress the need to have less are the only logical solution. If you start now, before we reach the peak in energy, with all the economic problems that will create, then you will be far better off. More importantly, if you start now, because you'll be consuming less by the time of the peak, and you'd have made efforts to address our modern life-skills deficit, you'll have many more options to deal with the uncertain future that we all face.

Step 5: Stuff

Our homes are full of stuff – in fact, recently people have found that their stuff no longer fits in and they have to rent more space to house it (hence the growth in 'self-storage' recently).

The point about getting rid of “stuff” is more psychological than practical: it's about de-cluttering your life to make what's left easier to look after; it's about learning to value what you have; and it's about keeping only the essential goods in your life so that you can eliminate the non-essential items more easily.

- Your initial task is to sort out your unnecessary junk, or excess books and videos, and take them to a charity shop – unless it's useless in which case try and recycle it (if that's a daunting task, try one room try a time).
- Unless it has some other intrinsic value, try valuing items on the following basis – if you don't use it once or twice a year, do you really need it, or could you get rid of it?
- Switch off the TV and turn on the radio – you have to “watch” a TV whereas you can listen to the radio whilst doing something else (if you don't watch the TV when it's on you're using a wasteful radio!).
- Stuff eats time, especially video games, DVDs and on-line communities (don't forget to clean out your virtual stuff as well!) – learn to value your time and get rid of those items that eat it up (because you'll need that time for other, “life energy” things).
- Clearing out is an iterative process – go through once, then a few months later go through again (if you don't keep on top of it, the stuff might start building up again!).

Step 6: “Getting Serious”

In terms of your whole life impact, steps 1 to 5, if practised for a few years, will make a big change to your ecological footprint. But you're still going to be wedded to “the system”, and that'll require you to make compromises on your simple lifestyle – e.g., in order to keep your job.

Simplicity is not just a series of actions, it's a state of mind. That means you have to begin tackling the “totemic” parts of our modern culture – holidays, flying, eating out or watching TV. This is where things may get personally difficult because the focus for change will shift from you, to those around you, because they will have to begin the process of change to fit in with your new patterns.

- Scrap your mobile phone.
- De-mechanise your leisure: don't watch TV, go for a walk; don't watch a video, read a book; don't eat out, cook it and eat in.
- Outwardly express your simplicity – start working on your family and friends using your growing experience as as inspiration (e.g., invite them round to dinner, or to stay).
- Don't buy gifts – draw them a card and “say it with flours” (i.e., bake them a cake with your new found cooking skills), and ask for the same in return.
- If you can control your spending/ debt, consider cutting down the amount of time you spend working for money and spend more time reducing your costs by working to support yourself (gardening, cooking, etc.).
- Stop flying, altogether – don't take holidays so often and try to stay in your own country (and try lower intensity forms of holiday, such as camping and travelling by bus or train).