Voluntary Simplicity
by Duane Elgin

What kind of "stewardship" fits our emerging world? When we consider the powerful forces transforming our world — climate change, peak oil, water and food shortages, species extinction, and more — we require far more than either crude or cosmetic changes in our manner of living. If we are to maintain the integrity of the Earth as a living system, we require deep and creative changes in our overall levels and patterns of living and consuming. Simplicity is not an alternative lifestyle for a marginal few. It is a creative choice for the mainstream majority, particularly in developed nations. If we are to pull together as a human community, it will be crucial for people in affluent nations to embrace a deep and sophisticated simplicity as a foundation for sustainability. Simplicity is simultaneously a personal choice, a community choice, a national choice, and a species choice.

What does a life of conscious simplicity look like? There is no cookbook we can turn to with easy recipes for the simple life. The world is moving into new territory and we are all inventing as we go. For more than thirty years I've explored contemporary expressions of the simple life and I've found such diversity that the most useful and accurate way of describing this approach to living may be with the metaphor of a garden.

A Garden of Simplicity

To portray the richness of simplicity, here are eight different flow­erings that I see growing in the "garden of simplicity." Although there is overlap among them, each expression of simplicity seems sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. These are pre­sented in no particular order, as all are important.

1. Uncluttered Simplicity: Simplicity means taking charge of lives that are too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. Simplicity means cutting back on clutter, complications, and trivial distractions, both mate­rial and nonmaterial, and focusing on the essentials — whatever those may be for each of our unique lives. As Thoreau said, "Our life is frittered away by detail…. Simplify, simplify." Or, as Plato wrote, "In order to seek one's own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life."

2. Ecological Simplicity: Simplicity means choosing ways of living that touch the Earth more lightly and that reduce our ecological impact on the web of life. This life-path remembers our deep roots with the soil, air, and water. It encourages us to connect with na­ture, the seasons, and the cosmos. An ecological sim­plicity feels a deep reverence for the community of life on Earth and accepts that the nonhuman realms of plants and animals have their dignity and rights as well.

3. Family Simplicity: Simplicity means placing the well-being of one's family ahead of materialism and the acquisition of things. This expression of green liv­ing puts an
emphasis on providing children with healthy role models living balanced lives that are not
distorted by consumerism. Family simplicity affirms that what matters most in life is often
invisible — the quality and integrity of our relationships with one an-other. Family
simplicity is also intergenerational — it looks ahead and seeks to live with restraint so as
to leave a healthy Earth for future generations.

4. Compassionate Simplicity: Simplicity means feel-ing such a strong sense of kinship with
others that, as Gandhi said, we "choose to live simply so that oth-ers may simply live." A
compassionate simplicity means feeling a bond with the community of life and being
drawn toward a path of cooperation and fair-ness that seeks a future of mutually assured
develop-ment for all.

5. Soulful Simplicity: Simplicity means approaching life as a meditation and cultivating our
experience of direct connection with all that exists. By living simply, we can more easily
awaken to the living universe that surrounds and sustains us, moment by moment. Soul-ful simplicity is more concerned with consciously tasting life in its unadorned
richness than with a par-ticular standard or manner of material living. In culti-vating a
soulful connection with life, we tend to look beyond surface appearances and bring our
interior aliveness into relationships of all kinds.

6. Business Simplicity: Simplicity means that a new kind of economy is growing in the
world, with healthy and sustainable products and services of all kinds (home-building
materials, energy systems, food pro-duction, transportation). As the need for a
sustainable infrastructure in developing nations is being com-bined with the need to
retrofit and redesign the homes, cities, workplaces, and transportation systems of
developed nations, it is generating an enormous wave of green business innovation and
employment.

7. Civic Simplicity: Simplicity means that living more lightly and sustainably on the Earth
requires changes in every area of public life — from public transporta-tion and education
to the design of our cities and workplaces. The politics of simplicity is also a media
politics, as the mass media are the primary vehicle for reinforcing — or transforming —
the mass consciousness of consumerism. To realize the magnitude of changes required in
such a brief time will require new approaches to governing ourselves at every scale.

8. Frugal Simplicity: Simplicity means that, by cutting back on spending that is not truly
serving our lives, and by practicing skillful management of our per-sonal finances, we can
achieve greater financial inde-pendence. Frugality and careful financial management
bring increased financial freedom and the opportu-nity to more consciously choose our
path through life. Living with less also decreases the impact of our consumption upon the
Earth and frees resources for others.

As these eight approaches illustrate, the growing culture of simplicity contains a
flourishing garden of expressions whose great diversity — and intertwined unity — are
creating a resilient and hardy ecology of learning about how to live more sustainable and
meaningful lives. As with other ecosystems, it is the diversity of expressions that fosters
flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Because there are so many pathways into the
garden of simplic-ity, this self-organizing movement has enormous potential to grow....

The Choice for Simplicity

The circle has closed. The Earth is a single system and we humans have reached beyond
its regenerative capacity. It is of the highest urgency that we invent new ways of living
that are sus-tainable. The starting gun of history has already gone off and the time for creative action has arrived. With lifestyles of conscious simplicity, we can seek our riches in caring families and friend-ships, reverence for nature, meaningful work, exuberant play, social contribution, collaboration across generations, local com-munity, and creative arts. With conscious simplicity, we can seek lives that are rich with experiences, satisfaction, and learning rather than packed with things. With these new ingredients in the lives of our civilizations, we can redefine progress, awaken a new social consciousness, and establish a realistic foundation for a sustainable and promising future.