

## Chapter 24

# Voluntary Simplicity

### The Shift from Material Success to Voluntary Simplicity (from Monetary Greed to Defining “Enough”)

It is understandable that human beings, like all animals, seek to find a way beyond grueling poverty and other forms of economic hardship. But in modern industrial society, monetary success has been viewed as the main game of life. Happiness, we are taught, will follow wealth and the privileges, possibilities, and possessions that wealth can provide. This assumption is in contradiction with many ancient teachings that remind us that wealth cannot fill all voids, that wealth can even be a barrier to happiness.

“Voluntary simplicity” does not mean the same thing as involuntary poverty. Voluntary simplicity does not mean being poor. It means volunteering to be rich in an alternative way -- rich in a way that does not necessitate a huge put through of Earth resources. Voluntary simplicity also means breaking the monetary addiction that seeks more and more and still more. Voluntary simplicity means defining for ourselves what is enough.

### The Objective Facts

Little needs to be said about widespread emphasis in our society on material success. Conspicuous consumption not only applies to those few who buy \$2000 shower curtains and \$300,000 automobiles; it also applies to much poorer people who make shopping for things and having things the focus of their living. This style can be such an addictive practice that people buy themselves into untenable debt, destroy their true dreams, wreck their families, and become slaves to whatever sources of money they can find.

Furthermore, such an addiction is encouraged by our advertisers and stock market promoters who see the consuming public as the key to their monetary success. And it is true that if masses of the citizenry found their own happy way to consume less, many sectors of the economy would take a serious hit.

Voluntary simplicity is an alternative way of living that would affect each person’s life and impact the entire society. It would mean a new sense of what is moral and what is immoral, what is beneficial and what is detrimental. For example, having free time and time for public participation and service would increase in value in relation to having another part time job to keep up in the competitive game of having more.

### The Spirit Challenge

The Spirit challenge in moving toward a thoroughgoing voluntary simplicity entails overcoming some serious fears – the fear of not having what is needed to be happy, the fear of not being secure, the fear of being thought odd by others, the fear of being bored, and this list goes on. Part of the fear is realistic. Our current society does not provide adequate safety nets for every member of the population. This general insecurity inclines all of us to exaggerate our need for monetary accumulations that might be needed someday. But most of our fears have to do with false understandings of what makes for genuine happiness. Winning status through success in the economic game does not in itself make anyone happy. Happiness has far more to do with our relations with our own deep being and with our participation in communal associations that truly work for us.

But so deep is the hope that monetary goods will make us happy that most citizens of the modern world find the following teaching totally incomprehensible: "It is harder for a wealthy person to find the bliss of authenticity than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle." How on Earth could such a thing be true?

To deeply understand this teaching we need to understand what is actually taking place in a person's life who already has more money than he or she could spend in six lifetimes, but who is still primarily focused on increasing economic success. That person is not seeking to fill some actual outward need but is seeking to fill some inward sense of lack, some interior hole in his or her life. Inner holes cannot be filled with external products and activities. Surely it takes only a little life experience to learn that this is true. In fact, inner holes do not need to be filled at all. Holes in our habitual personality are actually doorways to the vast space of our Spirit lives.

Our industrialized, advertisement-driven cultures encourage us to hope to feel better about ourselves through purchasing another pair of shoes, a new music system, a better car, a larger house. We eventually learn that the promised fulfillment does not happen. We may feel a burst of buoyancy, but it does not last. We are soon back in the same place wanting something more. Why? Because we are attempting to fill inner holes with outward goods rather than exploring the vast world of our own Spirit being.

As e. e. cummings put it in one of his poems, we don't simply want "much" or even "most" but "more and more and more." "Are we all more-ticians?" he chides us. Indeed, the game of money-measured success is an addiction, a mania, a death-dealing perversion. And to the extent that we cling to this game and count on it to make us happy, we will be disappointed. And this is true whether we currently have a billion dollars or very little. Even our popular culture sometimes sees through this delusion. I like the bumper sticker that says, "Those with the most toys when they die, win."

But people in our culture drool over money-awarding television game shows, allow themselves to be sucked into the blatantly false promises of product advertisers, choose work on the basis of which job provides the most money, make shopping an addiction, make monetary status and security the most important motivator in life.

## **The Needed Consensus**

In our proposals for the future we need to be aware that it will not be easy for many people to give up this game of more and more and still more. We may need to promote twelve-step programs for those who are severely addicted to this culturally approved and encouraged mania. When we are severely addicted to monetary accumulation, we are indeed like camels who can never make it through the needle's eye. But the needle's eye is plenty big enough for anyone who is willing to define "enough" and live within those limits. Some do not even know what they spend; they are simply an unconscious flow-through. Defining "enough" does not mean ignoring our money; it may mean paying attention to our money for the first time. Such wisdom about living must be patiently taught to millions of people.

Not only do we need to teach one another how to restyle our own personal lives, but we need to transform the habitual practices of our entire society. We have built an economic system that has built insatiable greed into huge social institutions that have no other purpose than to make a maximum return for their investors. Those who manage such corporations may enjoy the additional purpose of feeling powerful using other people's money in support of their own greed and ideological biases. This entire game must be dismantled and rebuilt on the basis of voluptuary simplicity axioms.

We also need to build consensus on what is “enough” in the relation of entire cultures with the natural planet. The human species deserves food and shelter and living space like all other species. But clearly it is “too much” for untold numbers of our species to be on a trajectory of unlimited increase in their material usage. “There are no limits” is a demonic teaching. Human cultures can and need to define limits and live within them. So let this be our new game – to use our vast technological imaginations to see how lightly we can live upon the earth, to see how equitably we can distribute the possibilities and responsibilities of creative living among us, to see how competently we can schedule our number of births to match our number of deaths. Surely living within realistic limits has a nobility and happiness that perpetual economic growth and seeking to reach the top of the pack does not. The human species has always been and still is capable of nobility. Voluntary simplicity is the nobility now required of us.