

A Necessary Simplicity

Some while ago, I was asked by *Resurgence* to review a book entitled *Timeless Simplicity*,¹ a book that provides an introduction to the history of simplicity and gives practical guidance as to how it might be lived today. However, as I wrote the review it seemed to me that it was possible that we might take ‘simplicity’ to be just another form of ‘lifestyle’, something available to those who already have enough; that it might be just another ‘product’ to be acquired and possessed. Certainly the coloured supplements and ‘glossies’ are not beyond presenting pictures of an idyllic ‘simple’ life, complete with wellington boots, 4 x 4s and beautifully photographed organic vegetables and home made jam – all to be purchased at a price.

I suppose that it would be reassuring to think that, without too much effort, we could buy our way into ‘simplicity’, having to make only minor adjustments to our present and untrammelled ways of life, and that this would save us from all those prophecies of ecological doom. But somehow or other this does not ring true. Indeed, the uncomfortable truth is that the underlying ethos of our present lives is not just mildly awry but fatally flawed.

The present rationale is that the common good is best achieved through economic growth and prosperity based upon an ever-increasing consumption of products and services. Since it represents convention, the foundation of this rationale is seldom discussed, but one must suppose that it is that human happiness is best attained through satisfying material needs. Ironically, however, if one probes a little deeper it becomes clear that this foundation is not quite as stated. Indeed, the doctrine of consumption and economic growth is *not* primarily founded upon ‘satisfaction’ but upon ‘dissatisfaction’. For the system to work it is essential that whilst there is the *promise* of satisfaction, that promise must never be fulfilled. The promise is a lie and is intended to be so – although we are not supposed to notice.

It is rather unsettling, but not surprising, to discover that this deliberately misleading promise was developed in America in the 1920s out of techniques of war-time propaganda, techniques originally used to persuade a reluctant populace to support the war effort. Apparently, after the First World War, a man called Edward Bernays, who had been very

¹ John Lane, *Timeless Simplicity*, Green Books, 2001.

much involved in the propaganda exercise, decided to make his fortune by adapting these techniques for commercial and political purposes. Based upon his war-time experience, his quite deliberate aim was to shape peoples' desires as part of a new consumerism, allied to an associated political agenda of 'keeping the voters happy'. He understood something rather important, that is that the appetite of our present materialism *depends upon* stirring up our wants – but not satisfying them.

This doctrine is reinforced in a more recent observation, again from America:

Although it is said that the function of the market is to satisfy human wants and so to maximise various satisfactions, it is not true that the function of advertising is to maximise satisfaction; rather its function is to increase people's dissatisfaction with any current state of affairs, to create wants, and to exploit the dissatisfactions of the present. Advertising must use dissatisfaction to achieve its purpose.²

Leaving aside the slight sense of repugnance that one feels on reading this, the real difficulty is, of course, that such a system is quite literally unsustainable. We – the peoples of the Earth – do not have the resources that are needed to continue to meet an ever-growing demand to consume. Nor do we have the capacity to absorb the consequential wastes without causing irreversible harm and putting at risk our lives and, of course, the lives of others, not least the lives of plants and animals. And yet the evident dangers of our continuing excess are largely ignored. Indeed, we continue to be urged to increase the volume of our consumption as *the only* recipe for sustaining our well-being.

The real danger that we face is that if, blindly, we continue to follow such a path we will, in time, and perhaps not a very distant time, meet catastrophe. There are those that regard such prophecies as overly gloomy but there are others that point to the growing evidence of catastrophe as natural systems appear to display worrying signs of disturbance and degradation, whilst, at the same time, and equally worrying, there is an ever growing gap between image and reality. In any event, if these prophecies are even half correct, change will be imposed upon us. So that our real challenge is not that we might *choose* to change our ways but that we will *have* to do so – and if this is so, 'simplicity' will not be a comfortable option but a *vital necessity*.

² Robert E Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Yale university Press, 2000, p. 179.

This poses another dilemma, for as we systematically colonise so-called ‘under-developed’ societies, bringing Coca-Cola and McDonalds to places that for centuries have been self-sufficient without them, we simultaneously destroy the knowledge of living within one’s means – of living simply. In her book *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*,³ Helena Norberg-Hodge chronicles not only the costs of ‘development’ on a society that for centuries has lived in a state of ecological balance and social harmony, but also the lessons that such a ‘simple’ and resourceful society can offer:

In Ladakh I have known a society in which there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually non-existent, communities are healthy and strong, and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle and affectionate with his mother or grandmother. As that society begins to break down under the pressures of modernization, the lessons are of relevance far beyond Ladakh itself.⁴

And in case the word ‘simple’ is taken to mean impoverished, the lesson of Ladakh is quite the contrary. Here are a people with a rich and satisfying culture, with music, song and story that give meaning and identity to their community. It is *our* way of life that threatens its destruction. Indeed, it is evident that it is our Western culture and not their simplicity that gives rise to poverty, not least as a consequence of the ever-growing gap between those that have most and those that have least and by the loss of diversity and local identity that results from the life-sapping monoculture of globalisation.

So where can we turn to for the guidance that we need to find a more sustainable path? Fortunately, despite the awesome and potentially destructive power of our consumerism, there is a long and ever-present tradition of wisdom that awaits our attention. Every culture, and not least our own, has a treasury of stories and myths that tell of the ways to live in harmony with the land. In Britain, such stories are part of the Celtic *Mabinogion* and of Arthur and the Grail Quest. In America there are the stories of the Native Indians and in Australia there are the ‘songlines’ of the Aborigines. Most especially, such teaching lies at the heart of the great spiritual traditions. Take, for example, the lessons of sufficiency of the Jains, the Middle Way of Buddhism and the teachings of selflessness given to us by Christ and by Christian saints such as St. Francis. In all of this there is a code that can lead us along the path of simplicity. At its

³ Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, Rider, London, 1992 and Revised Edition, 2000.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 4.

root are qualities that contrast markedly with our present culture: co-operation instead of competition, generosity instead of greed, patience instead of haste and sufficiency instead of indulgence. And, of course, underlying it all there is the mysterious and awesome teaching of Love as being not just virtue or emotion but as being of the very essence, *being with* not apart from, a teaching of the very connectedness of life.

In a sense, then we do have a choice. Not whether to move towards simplicity – for, in reality, that is no longer a matter of choice – but whether to challenge and change convention; to have the courage to let go of the myth of prosperity and, in breaking loose from the hidden compulsion of consumerism, to rediscover a foundation for well-being. To do this we have to awaken our senses so that we can see the emperor's nakedness and hear once more the timeless teachings of how to live well.

I guess that such a change in our way of being will not come easily. For most of us, not only will it require a painful breaking of habit but also a willingness to accept a discipline and a change of pace that are unfashionable. We live in a society that associates freedom with individual rights. Most especially there are the much-trumpeted 'rights of the consumer'. Of course, such rights are more apparent than real. For as Edward Bernays (whom we have already met) would no doubt have recognised, consumerism requires the illusion of the 'right to consume' but in reality seeks to enslave rather than liberate. It certainly has nothing to say about the freedom that might come from consuming less; the delight that might come from being able to let go of the incessant chatter of our senses to find, in Eliot's words, the still point where the dance is – freedom *from* self rather than freedom *for* self.

Indeed, such a proposition is so subversive and counter to the dogma of our time that it may be difficult for us to accept that attentiveness and slowness might add to our well being, that silence and compassion might bring happiness. But that, of course, *is* the teaching of the sacred tradition of holiness – that to become whole, to be fully ourselves and at one with all that *is*, we have to learn to let go and *to dwell* in the Divine with an open heart.

Such a dwelling requires a certain spontaneity, a vivacity of spirit, but above all else it requires an uncommon capacity for slowness. Like many of us I suspect, for most of my life I have had an obsession with 'doing' and it is only recently that I have come to see this as a mighty hindrance.

Some while ago I read the following extract from *The Curly Pyjama Letters*⁵ on the notice board at Schumacher College:

Dear Vasco, in response to your question “What is worth doing and what is worth having?” I would like to say this. *It is worth doing nothing and having a rest*; in spite of all the difficulty it may cause, you must rest Vasco – otherwise you will become RESTLESS! I believe the world is sick with exhaustion and dying of restlessness....
Yours sleepily, Mr Curly

At once, I can hear the outraged voices of those who can see that there is much to be done and who, like me, carry the childhood burden of always having to have something to do. But on reflection, is not Mr. Curly right to point out that our restlessness and consequent fatigue are “ultimately soul destroying as well as earth destroying”?

Again, the great spiritual traditions have understood this and have always taught of the need for attentive silence, for the regular practise of meditation and contemplation. Indeed, in these traditions such practice is regarded as the very foundation of true action. And for those who have had the privilege of living, even for a short while, with those that most patently lead a holy life, it will be clear that the distinction between contemplation and action is a false one. Indeed, by contrast, it seems to me that it is our thoughtless and compulsive urge to ‘do’ that so often leads to harm.

What is required is a confident statement of the possibility and delight of greater simplicity, the practical working it out in our daily lives, and a vigilant resistance to the dominant propaganda of growing consumerism. In my experience this can be very uncomfortable because so much of our present culture is taking us in the opposite direction; but this discomfort is as nothing to the evident catastrophic consequences of our failure to change our lives and find a more sustainable path. To find simplicity, what we need is reflection, attentiveness, compassion and courage.

David Cadman, *Resurgence*, 2002

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⁵ Michael Leunig, *The Curly Pyjama Letters*, Viking, 2001.