

## BEYOND SIMPLICITY: TOUGH ISSUES FOR A NEW ERA

Albert J. Fritsch

Today in the light of the War on Terrorism and conflicting views on globalization, it is important that we relook at issues of simple lifestyles to which we are all called in one way or other. We need to remember that any authentic **simplification process** must be directed to a fairer distribution of the world's available resources. My own ideas have changed from that of merely vowing to try to live simply, to placing it in the context of personal lifestyle, to hoping to demonstrate to others the need for simplification, and to discover effective ways of effecting change. While in theory the freedom to choose to live simply is present, the practical ability to spread the word and to persuade others of its necessity has many current road blocks. Let us look at --

- \* the need for simplification of life;
- \* the temptation to view catastrophe as a desired change agent;
- \* the limited testimony of voluntary simplicity;
- \* the possibility of revolutionary change; and
- \* the call for greater simplicity through regulations and incentives.

**The year is 1822,** a simpler time during the final term of a Democratic/Republican administration in the recently painted White House occupied by a southerner. It is an expansive period immediately after the Second War of Independence, with the burning of forests throughout the southeast for agriculture, the largest export to the Orient being ginseng, and rapid textile and heavy industrialization occurring at the river falls of New England and other parts of the east coast.

Philip Kunhardt, Jr. and associates writes in *The American Presidents* about Monroe "the last leader to spring from the revolution and the first to make politics his life work. He is to be known for the Monroe Doctrine ... *the American continents are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European Powers*, a document that Monroe's friend Thomas Jefferson heralded as *the most momentous pronouncement which has been offered since that of Independence*. Monroe longs to return to his estate, since his second term is not a happy one. William Cranford, the secretary of the treasury raises his cane at the president and calls him a scoundrel. Seizing the tongs from the nearby fireplace, Monroe orders him out of the White House. Revolutionary War simplicity is already under strain. Monroe's wife Elizabeth is the first Lady activist, who once helped free Lafayette's imprisoned wife, about to be guillotined.

**The year is 2005,** and we have George W. Bush, another southerner, and world stage president in a second term president who wants to

bring and preserve democracy in our Hemisphere but also throughout the world. It is a Bush Doctrine that works hand-in-hand with corporate powers to deliver a special form of Capitalism to all the less developed nations. It is a doctrine that advocates consuming as many products as we want, advocating everything from SUVs to prescription drugs through massive advertisement plastered on buses, urinals and school soft drink machines, an unbridled power of large corporations which regard themselves as persons with all rights and few duties, a growing movement to impress consumer greed on all especially youth, a massive four trillion dollar individual indebtedness with tighter bankruptcy laws, a globalization and resulting indebtedness on the part of nations in part orchestrated by America's cohort of economic hit men, and a false sense of patriotism which extols material consumption as an economic good.

### **Reasons for Simplification**

These new trends lead us to pause as much as it caused Lafayette or Dickens or Emerson to pause one hundred and eighty years ago. Today we all believe in our heart of hearts that the simple unhurried life of the 1820s -- ill health, northern factory work conditions, southern slavery -- is not worth revisiting.

Today, people of all stripes seek more. They generally recognize the need for good health and nutrition. However, they are also realizing that striving to gain all possible comforts takes a heavy toll on one's mental life. Research articles appear time and again telling us that the affluent of our land and especially the younger generation are affected by depression. This condition occurs even in this time of immense prosperity and exercise of global power by our country. An uneasiness comes upon those with plenty, a gnawing feeling that bounty needs to be shared -- and that it is unpleasant to have the destitute around to prick our conscience. This is a destitute which is daily dying of malnutrition and disease at a rate ten times the death total of the 9-11 disaster.

The 1820's had their debates on slave trade and the peculiar institution itself. Currently we are concerned about global trade, distrust and breakdown of communal relationships, poor working conditions, AIDS, and crushing national and personal economic debts. We need to reduce waste of resources, expect a higher quality of life coming from living more simply, and share, not hoard, material things -- all good reasons for simplification of lifestyle.

**Furthermore, the trickle-down theory** -- that if wealth is created it will automatically go in some amounts to all -- is wishful and even dangerous thinking. It does not fit emerging facts or current economic conditions whether in this country or the world. We hear there were 66 billionaires in 1989 and now 268, and during that decade

31.5 million Americans living below the poverty level which has now climbed to 34.5 million. At the end of the 20th century the top one percent of American households had more assets than the entire bottom 95% combined. In the world the top three billionaires have more money than the entire least developed portion of the world (600 million people). The growing gap between rich and poor becomes all the more critical when we realize that mass communications allows even the destitute to hear about and observe that conditions are better elsewhere. They know that concentration of wealth is also concentration of power, and that fragile democracy can easily become an empty term when big money is involved. How can even small nations stand up to multi-nationals?

**The Question is --** Can we continue in a world two-thirds enslaved by poverty and indebtedness and one third in affluence? Besides political health there is growing evidence by epidemiologists around the world that the greatest danger to public health is inequality of resources - children going without the simplest vaccinations because public health programs are curtailed to pay debt service -- a deliberate condition imposed by undercover agents from our own country. This growing inequality also affects our spiritual health and well-being, making people insensitive to the genuine needs of others and more ready to distance themselves from conditions requiring responsible action. What about the ever escalating price of necessary oil for irrigation pumps when those with SUVs may consume as much as their pocketbooks and their own addictions allow -- a famine in which only the wealthy can afford the price. One can make an effective case that actual available resources are limited just as food is limited during a famine -- and some do not have the means to obtain their fair share.

Abraham Lincoln struggled with his earlier held position that this could be a nation half-slave and half-free, tolerating the former as long as the latter could thrive -- and not wanting to extend slavery to the new territories, e.g., Kansas and Nebraska. In the middle of that terrible Civil War, in the awful gloom of 1862, he would retreat late at night into the telegraph office in the Executive Office Building and there write and rewrite the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Then he delivered it first to his Cabinet and then the nation after the Battle of Antietam. Are we arriving at the same situation but more universal conclusion through similar struggles of human suffering and mental anguish that we cannot continue in a world which is two-thirds hopelessly in debt and one-third with concentrated and over-bearing affluence? Is not debt forgiveness a necessity?

### **A Catastrophe Model is Simply Unacceptable**

The temptation exists even with some learned persons that the only solution is an unspecified Catastrophe -- a meteor strike, economic depression, worldwide epidemic, famine, earthquake, or war -

as long as these occur elsewhere. When this daydream ends we realize that disasters do not work magic -- The Black Death brought out the worst in some people through their turning toward isolation and failure to help others; disasters always affect the poorest first and most; disasters move beyond predictable boundaries; they do not rectify things; they should never be called **Acts of God**. Disasters may happen but this does not excuse us from acting politically in a socially just manner. The Y2K banter of 2000 proved over-drawn, but the 9-11 episode tempts us to reconsider catastrophic catalysts. But should it?

### **Voluntary Simplicity Model is Restricted**

A second route towards simplification which differs considerably from awaiting manageable disasters is that of voluntary simplicity. This approach to simplification has many good characteristics:

- \* it champions good healthy food in moderate amounts as well as lower impact on the environment for use of less resources and less time consuming practices of upkeep of complex technologies;

- \* it builds on the solid achievements of the past without ignoring or belittling them;

- \* it is basically conservationist in nature and leads to reduced use of available non-renewable and renewable resources;

- \* it professes the power of demonstration as a way to show others what to do and affirms our solidarity with others in the world who try to get by through an involuntary simple life of poverty;

- \* it respects the practices of others without directly curbing them;

- \* and it affirms the translation of individual proper action into a grassroots groundswell that is expected to carry the day.

**Granted we have witnessed partial success.** We see small groups living simply in various places and communities, namely community land trusts, eco-villages, religious communities. We read materials which are long on technique ranging from organic gardening to building solar greenhouses. I was one of the early proponents of this movement as lead author of a book entitled *99 Ways to a Simple Lifestyle* by Anchor/Doubleday three decades ago. The statements in the *Simple Lifestyle Calendar* which ASPI has produced for 28 years and the *ASPI Technical Paper* series, along with many talks and conferences given on conservation would make one conclude that I am firmly committed to voluntary simplicity.

I must share with you emerging doubts -- not about the validity of

the message, but the ability to remove ourselves from the margins that seemingly triumphant high technologists have relegated us. And the mass media reenforces this by making the quest for affluence the norm.

**Voluntary simplicity** is not popular and can be easily misinterpreted. For individuals, the practice has meant much and they have been able to live healthy, productive lives, and find great satisfaction through proper use of renewable energy, organic foods and clean domestic environments. However, all is not roses. Offspring sometimes want junk food and designer clothes; quality public education of simple lifestyles is lacking; escalating costs of medical treatment (often unneeded) and drugs cause hardship with those seeking to live on a non-money economy or seek to skip through life without health insurance altogether. The higher costs of both medicine and education makes simplicity a receding dream for working folks.

We have schools which do not teach; medical programs that do not reach; and churches which do not preach; except the materialism of ever bigger sports arenas and air-conditioned interiors. Our individual voluntary practices may be tolerated, but it is becoming difficult to express their health, environmental and social justice values in such a powerful and covertly oppressive culture, with its rich media and impoverished democracy. Choosing simplicity is one thing -- but try biking on a highway built for the auto, try to get low-cost solar energy when all governmental subsidies go to the non-renewable energy sources, or try to discuss simplicity in a world filled with higher and ever higher technological innovations with their aspiring affluent corporate types. We are theoretically able to preach simplicity but, practically speaking, we are drowned out.

The SIMPLICITY model is powerful as demonstration go but these require time to maintain, touch only a limited number of people, and are generally not press-worthy as such. Voluntary Simplicity is certainly not dead, but it isn't a popular issue either. We must not abandon our goals and the beauty of affordable housing built with local materials, dry composting toilets, and solar projects. However, we are now becoming more concerned here about practical implementation and spreading the word -- advocating for a national and world program of simplification.

### **A Revolutionary Model is Hard to Control**

Another simplification alternative is for violent change through revolution. In an ideal world it would be far better that the poor would not attempt to invade gated communities and take from the wealthy what is rightfully the poor's, but that the wealthy enter knowingly and, to some degree, willingly in a grand redistribution. What is at issue is the powerlessness and disunity of the poor and the gross addictive behavior of the wealthy who spread their condition to others as well. And military power stands behind the affluent.

**Grievances.** Democracy was threatened in the last part of the 18th century by the Alien and Sedition Act and the suppression of dissent during the John Adams Administration. It is just as threatened today in more liberal times but in far more subtle ways. The power of corporations is so vast that it overwhelms us. This power has usurped its so-called right as a *person*; it has spread its attack to the far reaches of its realm -- the world; it has trampled on the rights of small farmers and tradespeople. Our list of grievances is surprising similar to, but far more far-reaching, than in 1775 at the eve of the Declaration of Independence.

Affluence and the power that ensures it has taken its toll on our nation. We as a people lack --  
a shared sense of moral outrage,  
a willingness to unite for the good of all, and  
a risk of putting ourselves on the line.

**The shame** is that our lack of simplicity  
\* has dulled our senses,  
\* has turned our attention to manage and upkeep our  
expensive gadgets, and  
\* has diverted simplicity from being a tool for change  
to becoming a refined time-consuming technique always in need  
of further fine-tuning.

**The shame** is that environmental groups are often at odds over what constitutes a victory or the need for further work. A prime example is the recent Kick-66 campaign over a billion dollar 30-mile stretch of unneeded highway I-66 in south central Kentucky.

**The shame** is that all people do not share the prosperity of the few who make their billions and retain their six or seven-digit salaried CEOs -- the latter day King Georges.

**The shame** is that people do not burn with indignation over what is happening to the "little ones," the poor who are our neighbor. And the poor must also include the threatened plants and animals as well as impoverished people.

**The shame** is we do not share the spirit of the founders of this republic.

Any revolutionary movement would have to consider simplicity not as an end, but as a means to a better life. It would have to use volunteer services for staffing, the Worldwide Web for communications, and modern training and organizing techniques for making the movement function better. It would have to be grassroots-based and thus decentralized in structure. Its vision could not possibly be totally decentralized, or how could a new world order control pollution on the

oceans or on Antarctica?

A totally decentralized economy espoused by some voluntary simplicity people is as unrealistic as a totally globalized one which would become the ultimate triumph of Big Brother. Revolutionaries know that simple appropriate technology has value and that the Internet can help bring this about. Was the "I Love You" virus and others of various degrees of malice a latter day Boston Tea Party? Was it a wake up call that says OVER-COMPLEXITY IS EXTREMELY VULNERABLE? And has this message been heard in Silicon Valley, the United Nations, and the halls of Congress? Throwing a monkey wrench at a pony express may hurt a horse or rider; placing it in the Internet system could paralyze the modern world. Terrorists are beginning to sense their destructive power, something which may continue in various forms unless we look more deeply at our contribution to the root causes.

**Spouting "revolutionary jargon"** will not ensure success. Revolutions -- American, French, Russian -- involved disorder and violence. And just the possibility is not going to be a popular alternative to our comfort-laden and consumer-addicted people.

**The threat of Internet viruses** of a more widespread and serious nature is here, but it does not guarantee a better life. Neither does 9-11 events. In fact, these may incite more repressive measures and governmental practices in order to preserve the status quo, which some find quite comfortable. Current conditions bring us to a moment of decision-making. Must we simplify in order to share? Must we continue as a world of haves and have-nots?

### **Regulatory Redistribution is an Answer**

A sustainable decentralized system operating in a world with some functioning global communications requires the full assent of all the people. Over-affluence is simply not sustainable, for it is divisive and encourages dissent by those who regard their only voice to be violent action. On the other hand, an aroused citizenry can do things and do them now.

Certain trends such as a powerful independent United Nations police force as proposed by many of the smaller democracies would start small and move rapidly to greater demands of resources. Obviously, this would demand much more on the part of the wealthier nations. The same could be said for a regulated debt forgiveness program, or for making solar energy incentives available at least at 1979 United States levels. In fact, a surer course of simplification is available through legislation and reapportionment of funding for the benefit of more people and the Earth. But it would require readjustment of national priorities and curbing of our all-consuming military budget.

Simplicity coupled with a political will would allow us to focus so that we can --

- \* refrain from giving tax breaks to the wealthy;
- \* raise the minimum to a living wage;
- \* require imported goods from escape industries to meet minimum environmental, safety, and occupational health standards;
- \* shunt national military expenditures to world peace projects such as low-cost decent housing and immunization programs for all children;
- \* give as much attention to bike networks as to Superhighways;
- \* and direct solar and other renewable energy to replace the non-renewable energy system that is both tottering and polluting.

**We need an old and new vision.** In 1822 we had a nation that was half-slave and half-free. Today, in 2000, we have an indebted world which is two-thirds technically enslaved and one-third free. And any amount of slavery reduces the freedom of the whole planet. As promoters of democracy, we know that the lowly must be raised up to levels of human dignity; but those in high places through clever coverups and legalisms are consuming most of the world's resources and thereby denying limited amounts to the destitute. The global challenge is greater than that facing our nation at the time of the Monroe Doctrine. All must be free -- and all includes lesser developed lands and all their inhabitants.

**How do we bring up those in low places?** Through an awaited natural disaster, by voluntarily giving up affluence, or a modern day slave revolt? The first is full of despair, the second is tolerated but marginalized, and the third is out of the question for violence is not a viable option. What have we left? Must we impose certain forms of coercion so that those in high places are brought to lower more healthy and ecologically viable lifestyles? A Simple life must be a necessity goal for a higher quality of life of our American people and for the world. And it must be available for all, not the few. Over-affluence is anti-democratic and should not be tolerated in a fragile democracy and can be curbed through governmental regulation.

Recall the issues facing our American founders. They were focused on independence from a repressive regime. Today we are cowed by materialism and excess consumption. We are marginalized by a media which does not regard simpler ways as worthy of consideration. We are dependent on corporate powers beyond the control of nation states. Our modern prophetic message is becoming clear -- we cannot have a better world, a sound environment, or a genuine peace unless we do the following --

- \* reduce world indebtedness and begin the process of redistributing the wealth of the world;



\* move toward a global renewable energy transition within a decade, as leading scientists say in the context of **global warming**) "with the urgency of the Manhattan Project;"

\* set up alternative networks of safe travel for pedestrians, hikers, and bikers as the new greenway;

\* address our health concerns for all people both on a national and a global level -- and that includes affordable prescription drugs free of advertising to consumers;

\* make and observe a distinction between the paper wealth of money and Wall Street and the real wealth of human and environmental quality;

\* and address all aspects of globalization issues so that no one gets left out.

In conclusion, simple living is both a worthwhile goal and the incentive for a profound change of heart. We need to become authentic and credible political activists and to go beyond mouthing mottos. We must show we have that trust in the Creator by translating words into deeds of justice for our state, nation and world. It is not enough for the wealthy to give up power, or for the destitute to seize power. The challenge is to bring about a mutual letting go and taking on responsibility through democratic processes. The tough question is whether this can and will occur in this post 9-11 era.