



Choosing the Simply Beautiful Life

An off-course test pilot once radioed back to the control tower, saying, "I'm lost, but I'm making record time." Many of us are like that test pilot, moving faster, doing more. With little time for reflection, we squeeze one activity after another into our frenzied lives. But are we really getting anywhere, or worse yet, will we end up in the wrong place? What would it take to put you on course to a "simply beautiful" life—an uncluttered, focused, and rich life?

Letting go of nonessentials so that you can joyfully embrace what's most important to you - this is what it means to live a simply beautiful life. Choosing simplicity involves clearing away clutter that detracts from the true purpose and beauty of your life. It means taking a fresh look at what you really value and making sure you're spending your time, energy, and money to support your cherished goals.

Voluntary simplicity doesn't necessarily mean a bare-bones budget or shunning the wonders of modern technology. It may mean buying that new notebook computer so that you can spend time writing under the pine trees at your uncle's cabin. It may mean splurging for the month-long overseas trip you've been dreaming about for decades.

Because we all have different values, gifts, and dreams, our ways of simplifying life will naturally represent a delightful range of choices. There is no one right way; we each must follow our passions, listen to our heart of hearts, and create our own simply beautiful lifestyles.

Living Your Values

Take a few minutes to write out your responses to the following four items:

1. Think about your dreams, values, and life goals. List the five most important things you want to do with your life from this point on.
2. Next, pretend you'll die suddenly in three months. List the several most important things you want to do with your remaining time.
3. Look over your answers to the first two items. Are your two lists in harmony with each other: Of all the things you listed, put a star by the three most important.
4. What new steps toward your dreams and key goals do you want to begin taking?

Yearning for Balance and Simplicity

The excessive, frenzied quality of American life has left more and more people yearning for balance and simplicity.

According to national survey results, Americans, when asked to describe what would make their lives more satisfying, usually do not focus on material goods. Instead of new gadgets, more expensive cars, and bigger homes, most Americans say they want simpler lifestyles more in line with their core values.

In a recent study commissioned by the Merck Family Fund, 66 percent of Americans said they would be much more satisfied if they were able to spend more time with family and friends, while 56 percent wanted a less hectic, more relaxed approach to life. More than 80 percent agreed that most of us buy and consume far more than we need. Respondents expressed particular concern that today's youth are overly focused on buying and consumption. When asked what is causing so many of our society's troubles, the respondents basically said our values are out of whack.

Nearly 30 percent of the respondents had voluntarily downshifted to a simpler lifestyle. The most common changes were working fewer hours, opting for a lower paying job, and withdrawing from the workforce to stay at home. According to the Trends Research Institute of Rhinebeck, New York, simplification is a leading trend of our times. Institute director Gerald Celente estimates that 12 percent of Americans are currently engaged in a fairly major form of simplifying. He predicts that number will more than double by 2010.

Wake-Up Calls

Sometimes it takes a wake-up call to make us focus on what is important in our lives. Some wake-up calls are dramatic, such as surviving a plane crash with minor injuries, being revived from cardiac arrest after a near-death experience, clinging to life through the horrors of a concentration camp, or the death of a loved one. Other wake-up calls are more subtle, but the result is always the same: We are reminded that this life of ours is precious, that we no longer have time for pettiness, that we have much to give, and that the time for doing what is important is now.

The words of a cancer survivor echo sentiments common to many who have had close brushes with death: "In a way, I'm happy I got cancer. It changed my whole concept of what life is all about. My goals became different. My interests changed. The last eight years of my life have been much different from what they could have been if I hadn't been faced with the fact that my life might be coming to an end. I accomplished more, and I've experienced more than I could have imagined."

After a wake-up call, we become less interested in things and more focused on the treasures of relationships, spiritual growth, creative expression, and service to others. Clearly, wake-up calls remind us not to give undue attention to the material side of life.

Treat the world well. It was not given to you by your parents. It was lent to you by your children.

– Kenyan Proverb

Need or Greed?

The average American uses far more than his or her share of our planet's resources. And we generate more trash by far than any other citizens of the world. A similar imbalance is reflected even within our own country. Compared to other industrialized nations, the United States ranks first in billionaires and first in the number of children *and* elderly living in poverty. We rank first in big homes *and* in homelessness. Although we're last in savings, we lead the world in private consumption.

In our country and around the world, the differences between the "haves" and "have nots" are quite extreme. Each of us can play a small yet vital role in helping to bring more balance to these extremes. By streamlining our lives in simple, satisfying, and comfortable ways, we help to stretch our world's abundant resources so that the basic needs of all can be more fairly met. Every time we conserve, recycle, reuse, share, or forgo a marginally important purchase, we make a difference through our actions and by our example.

Have nothing in your home that you do not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful.

– William Morris

Clearing Away Clutter

How much clutter is there in your drawers, closets, attic, basement, or garage that is taking up space and is seldom or never used?

As you think about these and similar storage areas in your home or work space—or better yet as you actually look through them—you may be amazed at the amount of stuff you've accumulated. Clearing away physical clutter is

one of the first steps to a simply beautiful life. Break the job of uncluttering your life into manageable portions, perhaps clearing out and organizing one drawer or shelf every few days.

Next, with a fresh eye, browse through the rooms of your home, following the advice of Sarah Ban Breathnach, author of *Simple Abundance*: “Let the Divine Spirits of simplicity, order, harmony, and beauty accompany you.” Are there changes you want to make, items you want to let go? If you’ve not used something in the last year—and it’s not a treasured item with high sentimental value—why not pass it on to someone who would appreciate it?

Soon your living area or office will feel decidedly more open, organized, and pleasant. Chances are you will feel different too—less burdened, more refreshed, and more open to new perceptions and possibilities.

Making Fresh Starts

Another kind of clutter gets in the way of a simply beautiful life—old hurts and resentments of which we’ve been unable or unwilling to let go. The process of clearing away these inner blockages to the good life is similar to housecleaning. It usually works best to concentrate on one area at a time, in a way and at a pace that feels good to you.

Friends, mentors, and perhaps a professional counselor can help you through the process of finishing old business and letting it go. If you are spiritually inclined, prayer, meditation, and inspired reading can do wonders to assist you.

At the very heart of making new starts is giving and receiving forgiveness. At times we all have felt mistreated, neglected, or rejected. Letting go of our grudges and grievances can be hard. Often, however, we have the most trouble forgiving ourselves.

Learn from mistakes and let them go. Don’t imprison yourself or others because you are unwilling to forgive. Remember, forgiveness doesn’t condone behavior that caused suffering, and it doesn’t keep us from speaking out and taking strong action to prevent future hurts and mistreatment.

When it comes to getting rid of old emotional clutter and preventing new inner clutter, forgiveness is the treatment of choice. A truly miraculous process, forgiveness heals,

refreshes, energizes, and opens an array of new possibilities.

Universal Shopping List

During recent decades our habits of consumption have expanded significantly. As we consume more, we have more to care for and we take on more debt. We drain the earth’s resources, contribute more to pollution, and spend more time on the job to pay for the things we consume. The authors of *Your Money or Your Life* point out that the average North American works 20 percent more today than in 1973 and has 32 percent less free time. (Of course, due to loss of higher paying jobs, some individuals have been forced to work more hours just to break even.)

Shopping has become one of the most popular away-from-home activities. Not surprisingly, most teenage girls report that shopping is their favorite activity.

In *The Circle of Simplicity*, Cecile Andrews recommends that we ask ourselves a series of questions before making a purchase. Here is a *Universal Shopping List*, drawn in large part from Dr. Andrews’ work, to help you think through your purchasing decisions:

1. Do I really need this item? Is there anything I can use instead?
2. Will this item bring enjoyment and beauty into my life?
3. Will it benefit others?
4. Will this item help me to engage in life more fully?
5. Is the cost of the item worth the time it takes to earn the money to buy it?
6. Could I buy it used? Borrow it? Rent it? Share the purchase with someone else?
7. How will this purchase affect the environment?

Intuition Simplifies Decision Making

On the journey of simple beauty, your intuition is one of your best friends. It is your inner sense of what is true or what is best to do. It will guide you in making decisions, both large and small. It will bestow inspiration, and it will assist you in scattering kindness and serving others.

Pay attention to the feelings, thoughts, and pictures that seem to just “pop” into you awareness. Honor your gut feelings about what to say and what not to say and about what to do and when to do it. Heed your conscience—the still, small voice within. Exercise discrimination and courage in following through on what you believe is best. Listen to the whispers of your heart, not just sometimes, but regularly. Doing so will enable you to make better decisions and will enrich your life.

You should carefully observe the way toward which your heart draws you, then choose this way with all your strength.

– Martin Buber

The Time Eater-Television

High-definition television, e-mail, the World Wide Web, alphanumeric pagers, cell phones, digital cameras – the offerings of modern technology are truly amazing. But don’t let technology clutter and dominate your life; instead, use it to support what’s really important to you. Question how much, if at all, you want to use the various gadgets that beckon for your money, time, and energy. Consider TV, for example. If carefully chosen, television can be a wonderful source of news, entertainment, and education. But how much is enough? Do you really need a satellite dish or cable service that will give you a choice of more than 200 channels: At the end of this precious life of yours, will you look back on thousands upon thousands of hours spent passively watching TV as a truly wise use of your priceless time on earth?

And what about our children? Most American youngsters spend more time watching TV programs laced with enticing advertisements than in any other activity except sleeping. According to one estimate, if today’s children were to continue in their current television habits, by the time they are 70, they will have watched TV for a full seven years of their lives. Not surprisingly, for an increasing number of Americans, reducing TV time is a favorite strategy for simplifying and enriching their lives.

If you would like to arrange more free time in your life – time for expressing your creativity, visiting with others, and doing whatever it is that your heart desires – try this: limit your TV watching to seven or fewer hours a week.

Based on typical American television habits, you’ll gain at *least* 700 hours of free time each year. Think about that!

Drowsy America

Millions of Americans are seriously sleep-deprived, and about half of us don’t get enough sleep. This is a surefire signal that we need to slow down, simplify, and re-prioritize our lives. Sleepiness and the related lack of alertness are principal or contributing factors in accidents of all kinds. For example, drivers who fall asleep behind the wheel account for nearly 50,000 collisions and 1,500 deaths annually. Aside from accidental injuries, think of how much we miss in daily life because of varying degrees of exhaustion. And consider how lack of rest affects relationships, judgment, school performance, our immune system, and our creativity.

It’s clear that simply getting enough rest could drastically improve our individual and collective well-being. Sleep doesn’t cost money, it’s not controversial, and for most of us, it’s a pleasant, no-effort activity with lots of positive aftereffects. So turn off those lights a little earlier, and if you haven’t already discovered the pleasure and productivity-enhancing effects of a daytime nap, try it the next time you’re feeling a little tired.

What a wonderful life I’ve had! I only wish I’d realized it sooner.

– Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette

Do What You Love

Although it’s been said, “Do what you love and the money will follow,” it’s not always that simple. Yes, it can work that way and often does. However, sometimes an individual launches out and does what he or she loves, and enough money to live on does not follow. Or it may take a long time before sufficient financial abundance starts to flow.

Nevertheless, a key element in leading a simple, focused life is following your passion and doing what you love as much as reasonably possible. Listen when your heart says, “‘Wasn’t that fun!” or “‘Wouldn’t you like to do more?” Your soul often speaks to you in signs of joy, satisfaction, and increased life energy. Pay careful atten-

tion. Either you will receive confirmation that you're already on target, or you will be prompted to make minor, or perhaps major, changes in your life. As you move through life, your aspirations naturally may shift as new opportunities arise and fresh insights dawn.

Starting a "Simply Beautiful Journal," in which you record your dreams, goals, struggles, and progress, will help you weather the storms of opposition and discouragement.

Support Yourself

When we start to make positive changes in our lives we often run into resistance. It can come from fears, doubts, and old habits as well as from family and friends. Just knowing opposition may crop up can help you get through it. You'll be more prepared to face it and respond creatively.

Starting a "Simply Beautiful Journal," in which you record your dreams, goals, struggles, and progress, will help you "weather the storms" or opposition and discouragement. Although having a spouse or other family member who shares your interest in voluntary simplicity is ideal, it is by no means required. An invaluable aid is exchanging support with like-minded friends. Many also report that inspirational reading, quiet time, being with nature, and learning to say no have smoothed their way to the simply beautiful life.

Surround Yourself with Beauty

What sings to you? What pulls your heart? What do you find pleasing? Engaging your heart and all of your senses, begin paying more attention to aspects of everyday life

that enchant you. Focus more on beauty – in household items and belongings and in people and nature. As you dwell on beauty, you attract its healing qualities into your inner and outer worlds. Beauty delights the heart. Beauty creates comfort and harmony. Beauty nourishes our souls.

Pause and Enjoy

Every day, all of the time, life surrounds us with countless wonders. Make it a point to tune in more frequently, to pause for a few seconds, and to enjoy what is.

Tune into life's simple joys: The invigorating spray of shower water cascading down your back, the colorful faces of wayside flowers, the warm touch of a loved one, the delight of interesting conversation with a good friend. Make a list of simple pleasures that truly appeal to you. Costing little or nothing, they are yours to embrace.

Remember: The past is a memory, the future a dream. But right now – this moment – is a gift. That's why it is called *the present*.

To be content with what we have at this moment, to bloom now where we are planted – this is the very foundation of a simply beautiful life.

A Grateful Heart

Heartfelt thankfulness is a simple practice that awakens us to the goodness of life and reminds us that we are awash in a sea of blessings. The more we count the many gifts of life, the deeper our appreciation and contentment grow. Gratitude helps us attract what we truly need and opens doors where before we saw none.

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