

Not So Simple

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I'm not sure I know anyone, these days,
who isn't seeking a simpler life.

In this modern, 24-7 world of ours,
many of us feel we spend most of our time
drinking from the proverbial fire hose.

Often overwhelmed by social media and marketing,
heartsick by what we hear about the state of the world,
stretched by the daily demands of living,
it's understandable why any of us
might desperately want the world to slow down, if just a bit.
Why we might want to hop off, at least for a time.

As Danielle spoke to so well last week,
there's something within us
that can identify with Henry David Thoreau's
retreat to the woods at Walden.

His two-year attempt to "live deliberately," and
"front only the essential facts of life."

There's something deeply human about this need we have
to connect and reconnect with the core of who we are,
with the source of life that sustains us on every level.

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It sounds like that's what a group of people
may have been trying to do in Scotland over the past year.¹

¹ Christopher Mele, "Alone in the Wild for a Year, TV Contestants Learn Their Show Was Canceled," *The New York Times*, 24 March 2017.

Twelve months ago, 23 people, including “a doctor, a chef, a carpenter and a shepherd,” committed to a social experiment, as they left behind the lives they had known.

Their goal was to build a new life, and to start a society from scratch.

This experiment offered them a chance to “challenge everything about modern living,” to question the meaning of human happiness, and to explore what they really wanted and needed from their community and the wider world.

It was up to them to determine the laws and rules that would govern their lives for these twelve months, as they took over an abandoned 600-acre parcel of land on the rugged west coast of Scotland.

Now, true to our times, this experiment was, of course, filmed. It’s actually a reality TV series in the UK.

The show is called “Eden.”

But as it turns out, the experience wasn’t quite the garden many of them had hoped for.

By the time filming ended recently, only ten people remained.

The others had left because of health and safety concerns, over political intrigue and frayed relationships, and, it seems, because the irritating midges, those tiny Scottish bugs, had got the best of them.

This week, the few who made it to the end of the year learned that the series was taken off the air last summer, after only four episodes, as their viewership had fallen by more than half in just a few short weeks.

As the cast learned, during their year and after,
the simple life isn't always so simple to come by.

* * *

Still, that certainly doesn't kept us from trying.

I'm struck by how we've created a social short-hand
for this yearning for simplicity.

I imagine you know what I'm talking about.
You almost certainly know it when you see it.

Marketers have perfected the sort of images
that evoke in us that longing for a simpler life.

Ripples radiating from a single drop in a pool of clear water.
Three smooth river stones stacked just so.
A single daisy, or a dandelion.
A perfectly still pond,
or a highly-polished apple cupped in human hands.

It's probably true, just by looking at such photos,
that our heart-rate slows right down.

That is, if we can resist the accompanying urge
to buy the miracle mud mask that they're really trying to sell!

Truth be told, I'm a bit skeptical of this approach to simplicity.

Now, I'm all for rest and retreats, for stilled winds and calm waters.
I want every person to find and know true tranquility.
I want us all to know at least something of the simple life.

But in our quest for simplicity,
in our quest for a simpler life,
I don't want us to settle for the simplistic.

I don't want us to settle for what is superficial,
or merely another form of escape.

Instead, I want our quest to carry us on
to the simplicity **that** comes out of our struggles with life.

The struggles which can give way to simplicity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes perhaps put it best:
“I would not give a fig
for the simplicity this side of complexity,
but I would give my life
for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

“The simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

Now, this take on simplicity is about far more than
relaxing or slowing down or decluttering your home.

It’s about gaining the hard-won perspective that comes
from living through life’s complications.

It’s about living an examined life.

And it’s about emerging on the other side with clarity,
with a better understanding of what life means,
with a deeper appreciation for what’s truly important.

It isn’t easy to live an examined life,
because such a life involves
contending with the real challenges that come our way.

It involves risk, and it offers transformation.

It means having our assumptions confronted,
and, perhaps, even our minds changed.

* * *

In his book, *Transforming the Mind, Healing the World*,
the Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein tells a story
from the time when he lived in India.

He had moved there to practice meditation after discovering Buddhism as a young adult while volunteering in Thailand.

He says:

Anybody who spends any time at all in India
must come to terms with the countless . . . people begging.
It is just part of reality there, . . .

I was in the bazaar one day buying some fruit.

There were a lot of beggars around,
and one little boy was holding out his hand.

He looked hungry, so I took one of the oranges I had bought
and gave it to him. It felt good to respond to him.

But he just took the orange and walked away.
Not a smile, not a nod, not a thank-you, nothing.

Only when he did that, . . . did I see clearly
that some part of my . . . generosity, my motive,
had wanted an acknowledgment.

I had not been expecting effusive thanks. . . ,
but I had wanted something.

And this child just took the orange and walked away.

Even on a meditation retreat,
maybe especially on a meditation retreat,
the simple life is not so simple.

* * *

The Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi said that,
“Simplicity is complexity resolved.”

“Complexity resolved.”

In this sense, simplicity is an achievement.

It's the release that comes from the tension before it.
It's the refinement of what was once only rough and tumble.
It's the elegant equation that emerges after great effort.

And it is the way, I believe, that we gain true wisdom in this life.

This isn't merely the notion
that "what doesn't kill us makes us stronger";
it's the recognition that the complications that attend any life
provide the raw materials from which we can,
if we are awake and if we are willing,
cultivate our character, to grow our soul.

This is, I believe, life's most basic spiritual practice.
The work at the heart of being alive.

* * *

A few months ago, at a memorial service celebrating
Dr. Ursula Franklin, the eminent Canadian physicist
who was a Holocaust survivor,
the University Professor at UofT who gave
the 1989 Massey Lectures,
the peace activist who was a deeply devoted Quaker,
there was an anecdote shared
of a conversation she once had with June Callwood.

Callwood asked her how she had acquired such
"an exquisitely developed conscience."

And Dr. Franklin replied:

You tune it like an instrument.
You know, when people start singing they develop an ear.
They develop their voice.
They begin to hear dissonances that they didn't hear before.
You become attuned to having to make
responsible and moral decisions. ...

[In Quakerism] you don't have a creed,
you don't sign something;

the only proof of your faith or lack of faith
is how you conduct your life.

Consequently it's like singing.
At every point you [ask], "Am I in tune?"

I wonder whether we ask ourselves that question enough.

Do we wonder if we're truly in tune?

Are we able to listen for life's dissonances
and, in response, make "moral and responsible decisions" that move us into harmony
with the world around us?

Admittedly, this may not come to us naturally.
And it may, at times, feel like more than we signed on for.

As Adrienne Rich reminded us earlier
in the poem² we read together:

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence, take the chance
of breaking down the wild arpeggio
or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.
—And in fact we can't live like that: we take on
everything at once before we've even begun
to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hardest movement,
the one already sounding as we are born.

* * *

In design theory, it is understood

² "Transcendental Etude"

that complexity always comes at a cost
and should, whenever possible, be minimized.

Making things easier, though,
getting to a simpler design,
almost always requires complexity.

It's usually only after things have been thoroughly complicated by complexity
that the simpler solution begins to shine through.

This doesn't always happen, of course.

We can find ourselves bogged down
in a complex problem for a very long time.

But, to circle back to Holmes,
I, too, would rather know the
“simplicity on the other side of [such] complexity,”
than settle for the ease of a simplistic and superficial understanding
of the world around me.

* * *

Each week, as we move into the meditation sequence of our service,
the choir sings “Come and Find the Quiet Centre.”

I hope the words they sing have sunk into your soul,
as they have into mine.

“...clear the chaos and the clutter,
clear our eyes that we can see
all the things that really matter,
be at peace, and simply be.”

That is my hope for us all.
That our eyes may be clear to see what matters.
That our voices may be trained to truly sing in tune.
That we may live genuinely, and joyfully examined lives.
And that, through it all, we may be at peace, and simply be.

Amen.