

Simplicity *and* Success

Creating What Matters Most In Life and Work

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Sample Chapters

Chapter One

Solving Problems? Or Creating What Matters?

“How different are our lives when we really know what is deeply important to us, and, keeping that picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and do what really matters.”

Steven R. Covey

The telephone on my home office desk rang early one Monday morning.

“Good morning,” I answered, “May I help you?”

“I sure hope so,” said a worried sounding woman. “My name is Celia Carson.¹ My husband, Alverjo, and I have tried—several times—to simplify our lives, but we can’t seem to keep them simple. A friend told us you have a program that helps people make changes that last, in spite of circumstances or adversity. Is that right?”

“It is,” I said.

“Well,” she said, sounding more enthusiastic, “we’d like to hear about your approach.”

I get calls like Celia’s nearly every day. They come from those no longer willing to chase success at any cost but can’t, yet, define the success they want. They come from individuals who *do* know what they want but don’t know how to bring it about. They come from folks who have made changes but can’t sustain them. I get calls from couples looking to improve relationships, business owners eager to go beyond faddish approaches to change, boomers nearing retirement, and college students overwhelmed by their array of choices.

Most callers have read books or attended workshops on “how to succeed” or “how to simplify.” However, they tell me that they don’t know how to apply what they’ve learned to their everyday lives. Almost all of them tell me that they feel stressed. “I’m so confused,” says one. “How do we slow down?” asks another. “How do we get rid of the clutter?” Many seem to be on the edge of desperation, frazzled by the fast pace of frenetic lives. I often hear panic in

¹The names and descriptions of most clients have been disguised to ensure confidentiality.

their voices. “We’re overwhelmed with problems and choices!” Celia confessed. “We don’t know what to do. It’s so complex. Can you help us get rid of this mess?”

When I told Celia that the focus on “getting rid of” problems was probably the biggest obstacle preventing her and Alverjo from creating what they most wanted, an awkward silence came from the other end of the line. Some folks thank me politely at this point, then hang up. Those who stay on the line are often skeptical. “You want us to think about what we want *before* we solve our problems? How is that going to help?”

Celia, too, felt skeptical but agreed to do a short exercise from one of my workshops to see the difference between problem solving and creating as ways to produce results.

Solving Problems or Creating Results?

To experience that difference yourself, try the exercise now. It won’t take a minute.

First, I’d like you to think of the three worst problems you currently face. (If you’re one of those rare and lucky folks who has no problems, please recall or make some up so you can do the exercise.) Close your eyes and focus on each problem in turn. See them in all their detail. Imagine what will happen if you don’t or can’t solve them. Give your entire attention to these problems for a few moments. Then note how you feel.

Now, take a deep breath and let go of your focus on problems.

Shift your focus to what you would *love* to see exist in your life. Imagine three results you’d love to bring into being but have not yet done so. Don’t worry whether they are possible or not. Don’t worry whether you have what it takes to bring them into being. For now, imagine that they *are* possible and that you have *already* created them. Imagine each result as complete and part of your life. Focus on each in detail. Then note how you feel.

How did you feel when you focused on problems?

How did you feel when you focused on results you truly wanted in your life?

Almost 100 percent of workshop participants report that when they focus on problems they feel “depressed,” “dispirited,” “down,” “overwhelmed,” “frustrated,” “hopeless,” and so on.

However, when they shift their focus to results they want to create, they report feeling “hopeful,” “energized,” “excited,” “inspired,” “pumped,” and “ready to get at it.”

In which stance would you prefer to spend your days—and *your life*?

While most people *say* they would love to spend their life creating, they also confess that they spend most of their time reacting or responding to problems and circumstances. Not aware of the power of the creative process or how to invoke it, they’ve become dependent on problem solving. However, problem solving is a shaky foundation on which to create what matters. Crafting a simple yet successful life is not just about getting rid of what you *don’t* like and don’t want. It’s about creating—and sustaining—what you truly *do* want.

Over time, almost all my clients succeed in shifting their primary focus from problem solving to creating. As they develop their capacity to create what matters, they integrate simplicity and success. They move from a life of incoherence and fragmentation to one of clarity, coherence, and integrity. It’s not always easy. There’s no magical process. They have to develop and practice new skills and frameworks. They must make difficult choices, take challenging actions, and experiment with new strategies for organizing their life lives around what most matters. Most find the results are well worth the effort.

An Experiment in Simple Living

Celia and Alverjo walked into my book-lined office for their first coaching session with worried frowns etched into their foreheads. As we got to know each other, they told me that during college they had been committed to social and environmental causes. Once they’d graduated, however, they’d felt sucked into fast-paced corporate lives.

“We morphed into fast-tracking yuppies,” said Celia, a petite, bright-eyed, auburn-haired woman in her late thirties. “We loved the excitement. We got caught up in the game.”

“The challenge consumed us,” admitted Alverjo, his shy, handsome smile framed by carefully styled, jet-black hair. “Achieving success, winning, became our life. We were good at it. We enjoyed the challenge. We made big bucks, bought a BMW, the whole bit.”

“But it wasn’t really us,” added Celia. “We couldn’t keep it up.”

After twelve frenetic, materially successful years, they burned out. Depressed, on the edge of breakdown and break-up, they cashed their retirement fund and moved to the country.

“We had to escape,” Celia said, straightening the hem on her beige and blue print dress.

“The stress of work and the competitiveness of city life were tearing us apart.”

“We cleared out the clutter,” said Alverjo. “We sold our Jeep and the Beemer. We sold our waterfront condo, our ski cabin, our leather furniture, and bought a used VW van. We moved to a rented cottage on a small lake with not much more than we could pack into the camper. We planted a garden, bought chickens, and settled in to enjoy the simple life.”

“It was okay for a year,” said Celia, “I guess because it was new and novel. We read, went for walks in the woods, even joined a square dance club! But by the second year, we felt isolated and bored. The locals didn’t really accept us. And, I know this sounds awful, but nothing exciting ever happened out there.” She paused, raised her eyebrows, then continued. “I mean, you can only talk about crops or quilting for so long. I tried to paint, Al took up carving, but our hearts weren’t into it. We grew too dependent on each other’s company. We gave it another year, then headed back to the city.”

Celia and Al returned to the city frustrated by their short-lived simplicity experiment. Although they still aspired to live simply they were also hungry for a taste of the challenge and success they’d once had. Almost immediately, though they faced another “problem.”

“We didn’t want to plunge right back into the life we’d left,” said Alverjo, “but neither were we prepared to live without some of the comforts and conveniences we’d given up.”

“We thought the solution was to find a middle way,” said Celia, “a balance between challenging, good-paying work and a simpler, more spiritual and environmental way of living.” She glanced at Al, then continued. “But we can’t find the balance point. We told ourselves ‘Go slow, be careful!’ but within months we got caught up in the craziness again.”

“We tried part-time contracts,” added Alverjo, leaning forward in the wicker chair and gesturing with his hands, “but we either got too much work and tons of stress, or no work and couldn’t pay our bills. We felt trapped. We still do!”

A Dichotomy of Desires

This kind of dilemma is not unique to Celia and Alverjo. Many of my simplicity-seeking clients experience variations on it. It arises, in large part, because we unconsciously divide sets of highly desired values into *either/or* structures. Setting up a dichotomy of desires like *success or simplicity* creates a dilemma that can seem impossible to overcome.

We come by such dilemmas honestly. We have been raised in a culture that values material comfort, competitive achievement, and the status, rewards, and respect that come with mainstream success. However, we’ve also been taught to share, cooperate, and value the higher things in life. Even as we strive for status, comfort, convenience, and material well being, we also yearn for a simpler, more fulfilling, and soulful way of life. Caught in this confusing tug of war between opposing desires, many of us feel forced to trade off one desire for the other.

“We didn’t want to look poor or have people feel sorry for us,” said Alverjo, “so we let ourselves get overextended again.” Celia looked at me, her eyebrows raised in a pleading look.

“It sounds to me,” I said, “as if your approach to simplifying is limited to getting rid of what you don’t want.” Celia shrugged her shoulders; Al raised his hand, palms up. “If you simplify that way,” I continued, “you often toss out more than you intend to.”

Both nodded agreement.

“When you merely get rid of what you don’t want, you end up longing not just for lost luxuries and conveniences but for the excitement, challenge, and rewards of achievement. You yearn for the respect and sense of identity that come from successfully giving your gifts to society. You can learn to live without luxuries but it’s difficult—and self-defeating—to live without engaging what matters to you, without what truly excites you. One of my favorite definitions of success is the place where your passion intersects with the world’s need.”

Vigorous nodding now. Both leaned forward in their chairs.

“However,” I added, “because it can be hard to get simplicity and success into your life at the same time, it can feel like your lives are being driven by forces beyond your own control.”

“That’s it exactly!” said Alverjo, snapping his fingers. Celia smiled and nodded.

Recognizing the Unseen Forces

We are influenced by unseen forces, many that we can’t control. However, there *are* forces that we can influence and ways to work with those we can’t. The way, for example, that we mentally arrange our values, desires, beliefs, and perceptions of reality sets up organizing *structures*, guiding frameworks that underlie and give rise to day-to-day behavior. Like the shape and structure of a streambed determines the flow of water along a path of least resistance, our life structures guide the flow of our energy, choices, and actions their own paths. Some of those paths lead to real and lasting results, others do not. Only by changing the structures that guide our actions can we change our paths and our surface behavior in ways that consistently produce the real and lasting results we want.

When we can do that easily and naturally, we feel as if we own our own lives.

Getting Rid of What You *Don’t* Want Does Not Bring You What You *Do* Want

However, unaware of the deeper dynamics that give rise to behavior, most of us see value conflicts and dichotomies of desire as “problems” we must “solve”—usually by getting rid of one of the conflicting values. Celia and Al called this approach “reprogramming ourselves.”

“We took a workshop,” said Celia, “in which they taught us to delete negative values.”

“Did that work?” I asked.

“No,” she said, laughing, “the conflict always came back. It was *so* frustrating!”

I explained that deleting values doesn’t work because are our minds are not machines. We want what we want, even if values conflict with another. We all contain contradictions; that’s part of being human. The best way to deal with contradictions is to not to eliminate them, but to

transcend them. Forcing ourselves to deny or get rid of a value that (at some level) we still want to express will only lead to frustration. That frustration becomes a new “problem.” Getting relief from frustration appears to be “the solution.” Over time, problem solving draws us further away from our deeper desires. Our lives spin out of control. Our efforts become distracted. Complexity threatens to overwhelm us.

“At first, we thought that getting rid of stress and clutter by moving to the country would solve everything,” said Alverjo. “But once the relief wore off, all that simplicity left a big hole. We missed the excitement and challenge of our city lives.”

“We were just stumbling from problem to problem,” added Celia. “We weren’t moving toward anything. We weren’t growing.”

“But in the city,” Al continued, “we find that even as one set of forces pulls us toward simplicity, others suck us toward a whirlpool of career and consumerism. It so confusing.” He raised his arms, palms up, looking exasperated, then added, “What can we do?”

Celia forced a smile onto her face and brushed her hand lightly over Al’s knee. “For the last two years,” she said, “we’ve gone back and forth between one pole and the other. It’s so frustrating. Finding a simplicity that works is not as simple as the books make it seem.”

“Yeah,” echoed Al, “I don’t think simplicity and success fit together all that well.”

It’s true that when simplicity and success are arranged in an *either/or* structure, they conflict. That leads to fragmentation, confusion, and unnecessary complication. Values can, however, be arranged so that simplicity supports success and success supports simplicity. It’s the structure *not* the values themselves that gives rise to conflict. Surface level, problem-focused changes rarely lead to unified structures that integrate values and consistently lead to desired results; not in individuals and not in the larger culture.

Simple Living: Lasting Trend or Shifting Tide?

I sympathize with Celia and Al’s frustration. But it’s not just individuals who oscillate between simplicity and success. The simple living movement has a history of such shifts in

interest and commitment. “Again and again,” said David Shi in *The Simple Life*, “Americans have espoused the merits of simple living only to become enmeshed in its opposite.”

Twenty-five years ago, for example, the buzz about the simple life was nearly as loud as it is today. In 1976, a Harris poll claimed that 77 percent of North Americans would rather change life-styles and consume less than face continued unemployment and inflation. In 1977, Harris reported that *most* people preferred non-material pleasures to more goods and services. In 1976, the Stanford Research Institute estimated that, by 2000, there could be up to 90 million individuals practicing “voluntary simplicity.” A major “transformation of traditional values,” the authors suggested, could be just around the corner.

Instead, we got the eighties.

During that Decade of Greed, we shopped ‘till we dropped, swapped compact cars for gas guzzling sport utes, and gulped down designer water, watches, and wearables with a vengeance. In spite of what we’d told the pollsters, most of us did just the opposite. As a long-time practitioner of simple living myself, I watched sadly as friends and colleagues traded jeans and chinos for pinstriped suits, and VW vans for Volvo station wagons. I listened as dinner conversations shifted from excited brainstorming around social, political, and environmental issues to serious, long-faced discussions about careers, stock trends, and increasing opportunities to make money in the financial markets. Instead of the transformation the pollsters predicted, the eighties saw much of the simplicity trend quietly ebb away on a turning tide of public interest, leaving behind what Juliet Schor called “the new consumerism.”

Since the eighties, says Schor, the Harvard sociologist who wrote *The Overspent American*, consumers are no longer content to merely keep up with their neighbors next door. They now feel compelled to live the kinds of upscale lifestyles they see in glossy magazines and on TV programs like “Friends” and “Frasier.” What were once luxuries have become needs. No wonder so many people today can have so much stuff and yet still *feel* poor.

Now, the pollsters are telling us that the tide is shifting again. “Along with self-creation and save the earth,” says trend watcher Faith Popcorn, “simple living is hot.” In a report for the

Noetic Institute, researcher Paul Ray estimates that 24 percent of US adults—44 million people—are “cultural creatives,” strong advocates of ecological sustainability and simpler lifestyles. “The transformation,” Ray exclaims, echoing SRI’s enthusiasm of two decades ago, “is happening right in front of our eyes.”

But Will It Last?

Before we trumpet “transformation” in the streets, we need to ask, *Will it last?*

The simple living trend of the sixties and seventies was not the first attempt at simplicity. Wave after wave of experiments in “plain living and high thinking” has washed across North America. In *The Simple Life*, David Shi traces what he calls “the fluctuating popularity” of the simple life in American history. It has he says, experienced “frustrating failures.” Yet, it has also “displayed considerable resiliency over the years.” It may decline in popularity but never seems to disappear. Even Socrates, the Athenian philosopher who lived in the 4th century BC, grasped the impact of dichotomies of desire on behavior.

“Many people,” he said, “will not be satisfied with the simpler way of life. They will be for adding sofas, and tables, and other furniture; also dainties, and perfumes, and incense, and courtesans, and cakes.” It seems that even 2400 years ago the desire for comforts and conveniences competed with the desire for “plain living and high thinking.”

So, will the current wave of simplicity seeking be any more sustainable than previous waves? Will it take hold in the mainstream? Will it lead to the transformation the pundits predict? Or will we again tell the pollsters one thing then do another?

Although it is too soon to tell, I fear that enthusiasts may be overselling the extent and impact of the current simplicity movement. I’m not alone. Although enthusiastic about the potential of downshifting, Juliet Schor points out that few downshifter progress to deeper simplicity. “The voluntary simplicity movement,” she says, “is too small to be represented in the downshifter surveys I have conducted.”

One reason that practitioners of deep simplicity succeed, she suggests, is that many start with substantial savings or own their own home. They are also “rich in cultural capital...and human capital.” They are educated, experienced in the ways of modern society. They have contacts, connections, and support. In a word, “unlike the traditional poor,” Schor says, “they have *options*—including the option of jumping back into mainstream culture.”

Most of “the rest of us” don’t have those options. For us, simple living is a nerve-wracking, two-sided challenge to make enough money to pay the rent or mortgage without being sucked into what Alverjo called a “whirlpool of career and consumerism.” It’s people like us who tell the pollsters that we value, simplicity, sustainability, and spirituality. However, if we can’t figure out how to live simply and richly, transformation won’t happen.

Even Faith Popcorn has mixed feelings about transformation. She predicts that many urban professionals, although they feel “restless, overburdened and depressed,” will not make the shift toward a simpler life. They’re still too locked into the success side of the equation, or at least to the idea of *looking* successful. Popcorn sees instead an increased demand for “relief products” that will ease the burden, and lessen the stress of a complex life and work style.

Wily marketers have already co-opted the “relief” aspect of simplicity seeking. Relief products like rugged looking SUV’s, designer outdoor gear, and Log Cabin Chic decorating tips provide upscale consumers with the illusion of a simple outdoor life, a kind of vicarious transformation through consumerism. A magazine ad for *Simple*® shoes exhorts us to “Sell everything you own . . . none of it will make you happy anyway . . . all you need are the clothes on your back and . . . well . . . some shoes of course.”

“It’s hard to live simply in the city,” Celia lamented, during another session. “We’re bombarded by ads for stuff we don’t need. We *know* we don’t need things like a DVD player or a big screen TV, but our friends have them, our colleagues have them, even our parents have them, so it feels like we’re missing out on something. I don’t know....” She paused, shifted her eyes back and forth between Alverjo and me, then continued. “It’s like we’re somehow less successful than them, you know... if we don’t have a new SUV. We’ve been trying to find our

middle way. But Al and I can't even agree on the balance point." She leaned her head toward Al and lifted her eyebrows.

"Well," he said, sitting up and buttoning his navy twill blazer over a beige flannel shirt, "I'm all for simplicity, but not if it's boring and not if I can't achieve the success and respect I think I'm capable of. Lately, I've been thinking it has to be one or the other. Go full-tilt, make money and prove you can cut it while you can, then retire. Either that or just give up and go live in a tent. This back and forth, halfway stuff is too draining for me, too confusing. I'm starting to feel like my life is spinning out of control."

"Oh, Al," said Celia, squeezing his knee and smiling at him. Her usually bright blue eyes dimmed to a flat grey. Her chin trembled. Alverjo turned and stared out the window.

Before they left my office, I gave them an article describing the oscillations of individual simplicity seekers within the tidal ebb and flow of simplicity at the societal level. I assured Alverjo that I understood his need to integrate simplicity with the sense of purpose, engagement and respect that he so obviously longed for.

"I don't think it's all or nothing," I told them both. "And, I'm sure that it's more than merely balancing conflicting values. Success—in simplifying and in all aspects of life and work—is about integrating your values into a simple, unified, and powerful organizing framework. It's about creating life structures that embrace and transcend circumstances, problems and complexity in favor of results that matter. To craft a simplicity that lasts, you'll do best if you avoid forms of simplicity that deny or struggle *against* problems and complexity. I'm not suggesting that you don't deal with problems. I am suggesting you come at them from a different direction."

I told them that I'd describe that different direction in our next few meetings.

Chapter Two

The Simplicity on *This Side of Complexity*

*I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity,
but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.*

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

“Do you really think people like us can create an enduring simplicity?” Celia asked during our next session. “I mean,” she said, waving the article I’d given them to read, “you’ve written about trends petering out. Do you still have hope that we can create both simplicity and success—in spite of the problems and complexity we face?”

“I do,” I said.

“Really?” she said, smiling.

“Really!” I said, smiling back at her.

I think the best way to transcend problems and complexity is to shift your primary focus from solving problems to creating what matters. When faced with the power of *creating*, problems tend to shrink, even dissolve. With a creating focus, you’re more relaxed, at ease, better able to flow as you engage with what matters. Your life still contains complexity but it is a simpler, more engaging complexity. It’s like the complexity that underlies a beautiful painting, a gripping novel, or an airplane in flight. To make this shift, it helps to understand there are two kinds of complexity: that which is forced upon us and that which we freely chose.

Involuntary complexity is driven by problems and circumstances. It leads to distracted effort. It confuses, even overwhelms people when they fight against it, seek relief from it, and try desperately to get rid of it. However, even if they succeed at simplifying, it is usually a reactive temporary form of the simplicity *on this side* of complexity.

Voluntary complexity is freely chosen and focused. A potter throwing a thin-sided pot, a writer crafting a poem, and an entrepreneur growing a socially responsible business also

experience complexity. However, because it is freely chosen, that complexity brings a focused simplicity to their tasks and their lives. By embracing rather than fighting it, simplicity seekers are more likely to *create* the rich, deep and lasting simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Varieties of Simplicity

Simple living strategies can be arrayed along a continuum from temporary reaction to stress and financial difficulties all the way to the deep and lasting shift made by those who choose “voluntary simplicity” as a way of life. The most popular form is “downshifting,” the practice of voluntarily adopting a lifestyle in which you earn less money so you can have less stress, more time, and balance in your life. Others downshift because they want to do something meaningful and to spend more time with their children. However, for many, downshifting is a problem-solving strategy chosen to provide relief from the stress of a competitively consumptive life/work style. Indeed, just under half of downshifters do so *involuntarily*, when they lose a job, are shifted to part time work, or have to take a pay cut. The downshifter’s desire for money and material things does not go away; it still acts as a force. When conditions change, as we’ll see shortly, there is often a shift of dominance wherein material values reassert themselves as the driving force, especially among those forced to downshift.

Voluntary Simplicity

Although downshifting is growing in popularity, the most dramatic and usually the most enduring form of simplicity seeking is “voluntary simplicity.” Practitioners of voluntary simplicity reject the notion that becoming wealthy and accumulating piles of stuff is the best path to success. As Michael Phillips, author of *The Seven Laws of Money* puts it, “We offer our contribution to society by living in a way that shows others it is not necessary to ‘make a lot of money’ to live joyfully.” Those who practice voluntary simplicity either have the material goods and services they need, or have decided that they don’t need most of them. Secure in home

ownership and finances and/or focused on a larger purpose, they choose time over money, meaning over materialism.

True simple-livers go further than most downshiffters do. They transcend the trade-off between the desire for more money and the desire for a higher quality, more integrated life. As we'll see in the next chapter, most of them use simplicity as a strategy for deliberately ordering their lives around a purpose that has meaning and passion for them. Simplicity is, for them, a way of focusing on what matters. Instead of shifting away from what they *don't* want, as most downshiffters do, most simple-livers wholeheartedly shift toward what they *do* want. By doing so, they are better able to create what matters to them, and to satisfy their most important values in a simple, elegant, yet deeply fulfilling way.

Two Ways To Be Rich

I met my first simple-liver in the early seventies. Ralph, a fifty-year-old family man, was a kind, rural, somewhat red-knecked amateur philosopher who chose to live simply so he could “have time to just be and enjoy it.” One day he told me, “A few years ago, I realized there were two ways to be rich. Either have unlimited funds, or don't need much money at all. I opted for the second way and have been happier ever since.”

“I don't understand,” I said, “How does *not* having money make you rich and happy?”

Ralph was an inveterate storyteller. “Well,” he said, “some of my old college buddies had done well in business. They owned fancy horses and rode every weekend in the foothills. At least their wives and kids did.” He punctuated this last remark by spitting some of the tobacco he habitually chewed onto the dusty ground, then continued.

“I'd dreamed about riding like that since I was a kid. But when I looked into what it cost my friends to buy their horses, pay for stabling, feed, and lessons, then outfit themselves and their families with all the tack, clothing, and other paraphernalia that goes along with being part of the horsey set, I realized I'd just never be able to afford to do those things.

“However, a year or so after I started living simply on purpose, I helped a neighbor convert an old WWII supply warehouse into a riding arena. Naturally, we got to talking horses and I started whining about how I’d never be able to afford to own one.

‘Hold on, Ralph!’ my neighbor said. ‘I know a purebred Appaloosa gelding you might be able to afford. It’s never spotted out so it can’t be registered. The owner wants to sell him. Cheap.’ My neighbor said that he knew the horse, knew its gentle temperament and its fancy bloodlines. ‘It’s a fantastic opportunity to own a great horse, Ralph,’ he said.

‘But where would I keep him?’ I asked.

‘Keep him here,’ he said, his eyes starting to sparkle.

‘But I can’t afford stable fees or feed,’ I said.

‘Keep on helping me with the arena and he can stay free. I’ll throw in lessons and an old bridle and saddle. Help me with the haying each fall and he can eat free all year.’

“Well,” said Ralph, smiling at me, then clearing his throat again, “I didn’t have much money, but I was rich in time. I could afford to trade. So I bought that Appaloosa by paying half in cash and half in odd jobs. My friend put my horse up at his stable, and taught me how to ride properly. Now I ramble in the foothills any time I want—without the pretentious horsy-set stuff my friends put up with. That’s a kind of happy money can’t buy.”

I stared at Ralph as if I’d just seen the trick behind the magic.

He chuckled, picked up a hammer, then added, “My kids didn’t think it fair that just I got to ride, so they made a deal with the neighbor to muck out stalls if he’d let them exercise his horses. And you know, son, there’s no richer feeling in the world than riding along the top of those foothill ridges with your whole family and knowing it’s hardly cost you a cent.”

Amazed, I stood there shaking my head.

The Beauty *and* Dangers of Downshifting

Although I prefer voluntary simplicity to downshifting, I'm not suggesting that it is the only or best way to live a simple life. I am suggesting that some ways of simplifying produce more satisfying and lasting results that others do.

The beauty of downshifting is that most of the boomer generation *can* afford to cut back their income in order to do things that matter to them. For some, simplifying parts of their lives leads to simplifying all of it. Moreover, it seems that when boomers take the lead, the rest of society follows. The danger lies in the fact that downshifting is often a temporary compromise between the desire for more stuff and the desire for a simpler life.

Juliet Schor underscores this dichotomy that often derails downshifting. Although the downshifters she studied said they wanted a more meaningful life, most did *not* say they wanted a less materialistic life. "They would *prefer* more of both," Schor says, "but forced to choose, they make a lifestyle change that increases their time and reduces their earnings." Nearly half said that their shift was only temporary.

Downshifters do live simpler lives, and should be applauded. Many learn to transcend the time *vs.* money dichotomy as they experiment with simpler living. However, because the trade-off between time and earnings involves an *either/or* structure in which they feel forced to choose between one value or the other, they risk falling into the same frustrating back and forth pattern that Celia and Al struggled so hard to overcome. If the trade-off between conflicting values and desires is not *fully* transcended, downshifters' behavior will be inconsistent.

We want what we want, all of it, even if "it" contain contradictions and conflicting values. When key values are not aligned in support of what matters, we're likely to oscillate between values. If downshifters feel "forced" to choose simplicity over stuff, there is always the danger that they will suddenly *upshift* when the circumstances of their lives change.

Upshifting

As a community organizer in the seventies, I took part in several experiments in cooperative simplicity. Although group members had a variety of reasons for living simply, I never would have guessed that any of them would suddenly drop simple living and become voracious upscale consumers. But in the eighties, that's exactly what many did!

It was as if a pent-up demand for sacrificed comforts and conveniences exploded into an orgy of consumption. However, I discovered later that those who jumped aboard the consumption bandwagon did not value simplicity for its own sake. Some were young and saw simple living as a cheap alternative to school or work. Others were activists who *forced* themselves to live simply as a way of fighting against things they didn't want, such as globalization and environmental degradation. Simplicity was a tactic in their battle plan; it wasn't integral to their lives. When the spending spree erupted in the eighties, many from both groups dropped simplicity and flocked to the malls with most everyone else.

"I was tired of fighting," one of the ex-activists told me over lunch at his golf club years later. "People weren't getting it. And I was tired of being poor. What was the point? Back then I thought if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Well, I couldn't stop the juggernaut, so I thought I might as well get on board. Maybe I could change it from inside. Besides, I figured I deserved a reward for working so hard for so long."

When I asked him if he thought he created change in his current position, he shrugged, took a sip of wine, then said, "I don't know. At least I have nice stuff to show for my efforts. And a good pension plan!" When I asked if him if he was doing what he loved, his eyes glazed over. He turned away and stared out the window at the mountains on the far horizon.

Later, he told me he was depressed and thinking about simplifying again.

Involuntary downshifter, dedicated downshifter, or practitioner of voluntary simplicity—all are worthy experiments. However, if an approach is based primarily on reacting to problems and circumstances, it will almost always produce temporary, incomplete, and unsatisfying results.

Unless the trade-off between values is *fully* transcended, the simplicity produced will almost always be the simplicity on *this* side of complexity.

The Simplicity on *This* Side of Complexity

To understand the simplicity on this side of complexity, it helps to distinguish between the terms *simple*, *simplistic*, and *oversimplification*.

The Oxford dictionary defines “simple” as “easily understood or done; not compound; consisting of only one element or operation.” To simplify means to make things easier to understand or do, primarily by organizing them into some sort of meaningful unity. As we’ll see in the chapters that follow, the power of the creating comes from its structure, which simplifies complex challenges by unifying pieces and parts into a unified whole. We’ll also see that most problem solving approaches are either too *simplistic* or *oversimplify* things.

The Oxford defines “simplistic” as “excessively or affectedly simple.”

Edward De Bono, author of *Simplicity*, says that simplistic often means jumping from an observed phenomenon to a direct and simple explanation, missing out all the true complexity of the situation. When my activist friends adopted simplicity as the solution to complex problems, they took a *simplistic* approach. Many people still simplistically believe that “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” Many simplicity approaches still focus their followers on surface changes in behavior based primarily on problem solving. The assumption seems to be that if you rid yourself of what you *don’t* want, then what you *do* want will magically flow into the vacuum created by clearing out all that clutter.

That’s not simplicity, it’s merely a *simplistic* reaction to unwanted circumstances.

It’s like me assuming that my writing is blocked because my desk is cluttered and my notes are strewn about in piles. Thinking simplistically, I might assume that if I just clean my desk, file my notes in new multicoloured folders, and arrange them in alphabetical order, then, magically, the words *should* flow. As my teenage neighbor might say, *WRONG!*

Once my desk is clear and my notes neatly tucked away in new folders, I still have to put words on paper. I have to shape the messy, confusing blur of ideas, fears, and desires that whirls about my mind into a coherent whole. I have to sort out what matters from what does not. I have to take action to bring into being what I *do* want. Assuming that clearing out the clutter will cause the words to flow is a simplistic, almost magical, way of thinking. It's not likely to lead to real or lasting results.

Taking Simplicity Too Far

De Bono also distinguishes between *simplistic* approaches and *oversimplification*.

“Simplistic,” he suggests, “means that you do not understand the subject and so come up with a simplistic approach. Oversimplification means that you have simplified the matter too much and have left out important aspects of it. The oversimplification is not wrong, but it is inadequate because it is incomplete.”

Oversimplification is simplicity taken too far. That's what Celia and Al did when they moved to the country. Over-simplifying their lives, they ignored values that were crucial to their long-term fulfillment. Without that fulfillment, their lives became *too* simple to sustain.

“A thing should be as simple as possible,” said Albert Einstein, “but no simpler.”

I've had numerous clients who simplified so much that their lives became too austere to sustain. By adopting simplistic, unimaginative approaches, they threw the baby of fulfillment out with the bath water of excess. One couple, for example, cut out books and magazines, although they got great pleasure from reading. “Even used books are expensive,” they explained. Another couple, who enjoyed a glass of wine and a quiet chat before dinner, cut wine out of their budget. “It was self-indulgent,” they said. A single man quit downhill skiing although he was exceptionally good at it and derived deep satisfaction from it. All of them lost something important by simplifying this way. Few of the changes they made lasted.

As well as introducing these kinds of clients to the skills and process described in this book, I do two things to help them recognize and get beyond their oversimplification. First, I tell them

what Mohandas Ghandi told the Trappist monk, Richard Gregg, when he confessed to Ghandi that he had a greedy mind and wanted to keep his many books.

“Then don’t give them up,” said Ghandi. “As long as you derive inner help and comfort from anything, you should keep it. If you were to give it up in a mood of self-sacrifice or out of a stern sense of duty, you would continue to want it back, and that unsatisfied want would make trouble for you. Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you, or when it seems to interfere with that which is more greatly desired.”²

Simplicity is not about sacrifice. It’s about focusing on what matters, on what you truly want to create. When you simplify in this focussed way, you do not have to give up things you care about. There is no “unsatisfied want that would make trouble,” no conflict between desires that are left hanging. There is less chance of falling into an oscillating pattern.

Of course, if you’re not sure about what you want, it becomes much harder to focus.

The other thing I do for clients who oversimplify is point them to the chapter on fulfillment in Joe Dominquez and Vicki Robin’s book, *Your Money or Your Life?* I suggest that before cutting back some aspect of their lives, they ask themselves these two questions:

1. *Do I receive fulfillment, satisfaction, and value from this item or activity in proportion to the life energy I have to spend to get it?*
2. *Is this expenditure of life energy in alignment with my values and life purpose?*

If the answer to both these questions is *yes*, I suggest they keep the item or activity in their lives. If the answer to either or both is *no*, perhaps they should try cutting it out.

When the couple who cut wine out of their budget examined their strategy through these two lenses, they decided they had gone too far. They decided to put wine back into their daily routine by learning to make their own. Over time, they became excellent wine makers. Their conversations—and their lives—were enhanced not only by the pleasure of sharing great wine

² In *Voluntary Simplicity*, by Richard Gregg, *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Summer 1977

but also by the pride and self-respect that came with successfully mastering the complexities of the wine maker's art.

The fellow who quit downhill skiing realized that he too had cut out one of his major sources of satisfaction. When he decided to return to his sport, though, he did so without feeling obligated to buy into all of the faddish consumption that surrounds it. He volunteered as a "visitor's guide" at his local ski hill and got to ski free each day he did. "That's how I met my wife," he told me, grinning like a man who's just won the lottery.

When the couple who'd cut out books reconsidered their decision, they too saw that they had sacrificed fulfillment to achieve frugality. When I asked why such strict frugality was so important, they realized they had been applying the same competitive approach to simplicity that they had used to generate professional success before simplifying. They realized they had simplistically tried to become, as they put it, "the most frugal simplifiers around." Realizing that such a rigid, policy-driven approach had "given them great grief" before simplifying, they relaxed their approach and reintroduced books into their lives.

"That was a great lesson," one of them told me. "Because it wasn't just about books. It helped me recognize that I'd made a competition even out of simplifying. I'd been unconsciously following a simplistic policy that I'd imposed on myself. After I got over feeling foolish, I was happy that I'd discovered that tendency in myself. It's much easier now to channel my competitive urges in richer, more beneficial ways."

If, after thinking about Ghandi's advice and Dominquez and Robins' questions, clients still want to give something up, so be it. However, most find that simplicity becomes easier to create and sustain if they consider fulfillment as well as frugality as criteria for success.

Transformation Is Not Likely On *This* Side of Complexity

Living by self-imposed policies rather than by a vision of what matters, giving up things from which you draw inner comfort, adopting simplistic, quick-fix, problem-solving approaches, and over-simplifying are all strategies that lead to the unfulfilling and difficult to sustain

simplicity on *this* side of complexity. They are all partial strategies—driven by a desire for relief not results—that focus on pieces and parts rather than the whole. They are reactive; they turn away from complexity. Worse, they deny reality. Therefore, they can not provide a stable foundation upon which to create what matters. The simplicity they produce neither satisfies, nor lasts. It will not lead to the transformation predicted by the pollsters.

However, as I told Celia and Al, I *do* have hope that simplicity can be an essential element in the rich, well-lived lives of millions throughout this country and the world. There *are* hopeful signs in the latest wave of simplicity seeking. It is more mainstream and urban than the last wave. Paul Ray's Cultural Creatives are approaching the age when meaning takes precedence over materialism. Millions of copies of simplicity books have been sold. The trend has spawned simplicity circles, study groups, on-line forums, magazines, and microcosmic cultures of simplicity in cities like Seattle and Eugene, Oregon. The movement is diverse. A great deal of exploration and experimentation is taking place. There are as many different approaches to simplicity as there are seekers after it.

My concern, however, is that many approaches rest on oscillating, problem-focused foundations. Such platforms rarely generate results that can be sustained over time or in the face of adversity. “The key to sustaining results in our own lives *and* in the simplicity movement,” I suggested to Celia and Al, “is to develop approaches that move from the reactive simplicity on this side of complexity to the deeper, more engaging simplicity on the other side.”

They were excited by the prospect, but still skeptical about what they called “having it all.” I could see it was going to take both explanation and experience to convince them.

Chapter Three

The Simplicity on the *Other* Side of Complexity

*“Simplicity before understanding is simplistic;
simplicity after understanding is simple.”*

Edward de Bono

It’s not easy to grasp new concepts. We tend to hold on so tightly to what we think is “the answer” or “the way” that we find it difficult to grasp the new. However, just as you don’t have to give up English to learn Spanish, you don’t have to give up or get rid of old ideas, concepts, or skills to learn new ones. Over the next few sessions, Celia and Al worked to relax their grip on their problem-focused approach. After a bit of resistance, they began to take in and make sense of the difference between what I’d called “the reactive simplicity on this side of complexity” and “the deeper, more engaging simplicity on the other side.”

“I see,” said Celia, “that reacting to problems without being clear about what you want can lead to more problems. But I don’t get why simplifying isn’t about getting rid of complexity.”

“Yeah,” added Alverjo, “Isn’t increasing complexity one of our biggest problems? Isn’t that what’s making so many lives so messy and miserable?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t think so. Complexity is an integral part of well-lived lives. It’s what we do with complexity’s messes that makes us miserable.” Celia and Al scrunched up their faces, but leaned forward in the wicker chairs that formed the “chat” area of my office. They seemed eager to hear what I had to say.

Messiness is Beautiful

Complexity, I suggested, is not a problem. It is not something to avoid or eliminate. Complexity keeps good novels interesting. It makes fine wine enjoyable. It keeps airplanes in the air, and living systems healthy. Yes, it *is* often messy, but it doesn’t have to be miserable. Life, leading-edge theorists tell us, thrives on messiness.

“Let’s face it,” said Donella Meadows, a systems thinker and practitioner of deep simplicity, “the universe is messy. It is nonlinear, turbulent, and chaotic. It is dynamic. ... It self-organizes and evolves. It creates diversity not uniformity. That’s what makes the world interesting, that’s what makes it beautiful, and that’s what makes it work.”³

Messiness is an essential aspect of life. And our lives. “Through messy, parallel activities, life organizes its effectiveness,” says complexity expert Meg Wheatley in *A Simpler Way*⁴. “It looks like a mess. It is a mess. And from the mess, a system appears that works.”

Wheatley is referring to the concept of “emergence,” to the idea that order can arise out of chaos. That doesn’t mean we should tolerate messes, or let ourselves be overwhelmed by them. It means that instead of focusing on problems and complexity and trying so hard to get rid of them, we’d do better to accept messiness, work with its complexity, and rise above it by focusing on what we most want to create.

To navigate complexity, we need to embrace *and* transcend life’s messes.

Embracing and Transcending Messiness

Everyone’s life can and does get messy. That’s why simplicity appeals to so many. However, you do not have to become upset at messiness. You don’t have to “solve” it. In fact, as we’ll see later, trying to “solve” situations and challenges that are not really problems can lead to far worse problems.

Moreover, it’s a mistake to “fix” messy systems. Lives, careers, relationships, families, even businesses are, in many ways, inherently unpredictable systems. But although they can appear messy, it doesn’t help us to think that they are broken; they’re not. This might explain why in spite of the billions spent each year self-help, therapy, and organizational consulting, the market for relief products and solutions continues to grow. A growing body of research in both self-help and organizational fields shows that most problem-focused approaches do not work. At

³ Donella Meadows, “Dancing With Systems,” *Whole Earth*, Winter 20001

⁴ Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, “*A Simpler Way*,” Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco (1996)

best, they provide temporary relief from intensity; at worst, they produce more and worse problems. This is because messy systems don't lend themselves to "solutions" or "fixing." A basic feature of *complex living systems* is that, to a very large degree, you *can't* control them.

However, you *can* influence them.

Influencing messy systems is different than controlling mechanical systems. It's not a direct cause and effect process. It's more organic, more like growing results in a garden than producing them on an assembly line. A more subtle kind of action is needed. "We can't control systems, or figure them out," said Donella Meadows. "But we can dance with them!"

The word "control" comes from Middle English meaning to "exercise restraint over."

"Influence," on the other hand, is derived from the Latin word *fluere*, "to flow."

To influence complexity—to produce results you want in spite of complexity—you need to go with the flow, to work *with* whatever forces are in play. Like an ocean going sailor, you don't "exercise restraint over" forces like wind, tides, and currents. You don't force things to happen. You don't try to get rid of them. Instead, you dance with them. By knowing where you want to go *and* where you are, you can use the energy of the forces to set up a path of least resistance and to steer a gentle course toward what you want to create. Seeking to control complexity is a simplistic strategy that leads to more complication and confusion. Embracing and transcending complexity through skill, talent, experience is a complex strategy that leads to simplicity.

Creating Makes the Complicated Simple

Instead of trying to *make* things happen, you'd do better to create spaces in which what you want is likely to emerge. That's how creating works. By keeping vision and reality in mind simultaneously and working with the tension between them, creators set up a framework that organizes energy and action like a magnetic field organizes iron filings. That framework acts as a container for creativity, aligning choices and actions in support of desired results.

It helps to be open to surprise and novelty, to take what emerges and shape it into what you want. "The future can't be predicted," cautioned Donella Meadows, "but it can be envisioned

and brought lovingly into being. Systems can't be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned." If you think of your life as a complex, self-organizing system, you'll see that life design and life creation have far more power than problem solving.

In Chapter 5, we'll see that much of what we call complexity is really the confusion and complication that comes from trying to "solve" divergent challenges with convergent problem solving techniques. It comes from reacting and responding to complexity that is forced upon us, not complexity we freely embrace. Most of this kind of complexity is self-created because we lack the sense of purpose and focus that would shape it into a unified, simple-to-manage whole.

"Anyone can make the simple complicated," said jazz giant, Charlie Mingus, referring to both music and life. "Creativity is making the complicated simple."

Think of *complicated* as referring to unrelated and disconnected parts; confusion. Think of *simple* as unified, and easily understood or done; coherent; integral. Then relate these terms to your own life. What do you see? What would you prefer?

Creating makes the complicated simple through *focus*. Focus cuts through clutter. It brings the disparate elements of life into alignment. As in laser light, focus generates coherence. It generates energy, the power you need to make your dreams a reality. Moreover, by unifying all aspects of an undertaking in support of a deeply desired result, focus simplifies, making things easier to do, more enjoyable. What doesn't matter stops acting as a force; the unnecessary falls away. You're left with what truly matters, with the simplicity on the *other* side of complexity.

Working Through Complexity

Thirty years ago, for example, I found myself in a terrible, complicated mess from which it seemed impossible to escape. As a young high school teacher, I loved kids, teaching, and learning but I hated the rigid policies, and procedures of the system in which I taught. Feeling trapped in an untenable situation, I suffered a kind of perambulating nervous breakdown and stumbled through several difficult years on the edge of deep depression and almost unbearable anxiety. I did not feel I acted with integrity. Marking time, doing what other people thought

was best, I failed to express my higher values and aspirations. During my last year as a teacher, confusion and stress so nearly overwhelmed me that I relied on daily doses of Valium and before-dinner beers to keep the ferocious anxiety I called “the Terror” at bay.

I see now that my depression and anxiety arose out of my inability to recognize or deal with a complex dichotomy of desires. I wanted to experiment in my classroom and beyond it. I wanted to design more open, freedom-based, student-centered “environments for learning.” Ironically, although I had higher expectations for students and higher performance standards, my authoritarian colleagues objected to my flexible, student-centered methods. They wanted me to “stick to the curriculum.” I saw that the curriculum bored the kids as it had bored me when I’d been in high school. It didn’t challenge them or engage them. Rather than bringing out their best, it depressed them as it depressed me. Every day, I thought about quitting. I didn’t, though, because I didn’t know what I wanted to do instead.

I’d already completed eight years of post secondary schooling in sociology, psychology, and education. I thought about becoming a journalist but couldn’t imagine going back to school to train for another profession. Moreover, I had debts to pay. In spite of my high thinking principles, I craved the security of that regular school board pay cheque.

So, in a compromise that came close to killing me, I stayed on. I experimented some but caught so much flack from colleagues that I acquiesced. Teaching became a dismal, passionless chore. My depression deepened. I slid into a downward spiral of helplessness and hopelessness. I felt trapped, as if my life would be forever this way. I experienced an almost constant state of near panic. In my most vulnerable moments, the Terror would scream down on me like a dense, dark cloud of sharp-clawed raptors, ripping at my confidence and self-esteem. There were times I thought it would never end, times when I considered taking my own life.

Somehow, with the help of a sympathetic principal, a job teaching skiing at night, and my daily regimen of Diazepam and Dutch beer, I struggled through the year. During the last quarter, I heard about a new graduate program in Environmental Design that claimed to integrate environmental studies, architecture, and urban design. I applied and was accepted based on a

proposal to “design and develop experiential environments for learning.” I wasn’t sure I knew what that was, but I looked forward to exploring it.

Being accepted into Design School brought relief from the worst of my anxiety. I still felt uptight, but the Terror stayed away most nights. However, once in the program, I found myself pulled in too many different directions. One professor suggested I focus on ecology. Another wanted me to focus on urban design. For a while, I considered designing ecologically friendly buildings. Then I’d think, What about all the environmental issues that need immediate attention? I careened from one area of interest to another like a ball in a pinball machine. My anxiety levels crept steadily higher. The Terror began to haunt my nights again. Sleep became a forgotten luxury.

Late one sleepless night, while trying to calm myself by reading about “The Land Ethic” in Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, I had a kind of epiphany. Leopold claimed that, “Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.”

I read and re-read that line a dozen times, letting it burn through the mess in my mind.

That was it! Suddenly, I knew what I wanted to do. Out of the mess of the past year and a half, a clear and powerful focus emerged. I realized that I wanted to build receptivity toward nature and the processes of life into young people’s minds. I wanted to build receptivity in them toward their own power. I wanted to help them develop their capacity to create what truly mattered in their lives. Instantly *my* life became both simpler and richer.

Everything I wanted to do coalesced around my emerging purpose. Decisions, choices, and actions lined up in a coherent way. What didn’t matter fell away like eggshells off a newly hatched chick. The confusing mess in my mind formed itself into a clear, focused, and purposeful plan of action. What had been so complicated became elegantly simple.

Over the next few months I drafted a rough design of a wilderness-based learning program that would help young people develop character and personal mastery through challenging, but environmentally sensitive outdoor experiences. Because the faculty refused to support my

proposal, I left the university. I found sponsors in the local school board and the YMCA. I spent the next year working part-time for the school board, developing my environmental education skills, and learning how to develop character and creativity in kids. The next summer, I piloted two three-week long sessions of *Earthways: Experiences in Personal and Environmental Exploration*. *Earthways* turned out to be a great success. During the three years I ran it and the follow up programs we offered during the winter, I learned much about navigating complexity and integrating the bits and pieces of my life into an integrated whole.

From A Heap to A Whole

I learned, for example, that just as a heap of disconnected bicycle parts does not give you a bike that you can ride, neither does a heap of disconnected reactions to problems and circumstances add up to a simple, yet rich, whole, and satisfying life. I'd lived a materially simple life as a graduate student, but the simplicity I achieved was only external. My interior life was a grotesque example of complicated messiness caused by trying to solve too many problems and fight too many battles at one time.

However, when I started to develop *Earthways*, and the pieces and parts of my life began to line up around my newfound purpose, the shape of my life shifted from a heap to a whole. I took on more of the attributes of healthy, fully functioning systems. I became more creative. I became stable in my moods and consistent in my actions. I became resilient, able to bounce back from setbacks quickly and easily. I reached out to others to help me with *Earthways*, adding a diversity that hadn't previously been part of my life. Most of all, keeping my purpose in mind and steering off my vision, I sustained the changes I made in my lifestyle. I lived simply because doing so made it much easier for me to focus on *Earthways* and because my lifestyle came to be seen by participants as a model they wanted to emulate. Besides, I deeply enjoyed the simple elegance of the lifestyle I lived.

Although running a wilderness-based program with up to 24 kids and 6 staff each session was itself a complex undertaking, my focus and my passion to build receptivity into young

people's minds carried me through that complexity to the simplicity on the other side. The simplicity that I discovered during that time came from ordering and guiding my energy, desires, and actions so they consistently supported the results that I so deeply desired to produce.

Today, 25 years later, staff, participants, and I all look back on those years as amongst the best in our life. In fact, as I worked on this book one summer afternoon, a woman showed up at my door with three lovely daughters and a handsome husband in tow.

"Hi," she said, "Remember me?"

"No," I said, although I sensed something familiar about her.

"I'm Jan," she said, "the Earthways troublemaker? You remember that wretched little witch you wanted to send home?" I nodded. "Well, I'm her." Thanks so much for not doing that. I owe all this to that summer at Earthways." She scooped her daughters into her arms and pointed her chin at her husband. "I came there depressed, addicted to booze and pills, and feeling like a bitch on wheels. When I got home, though, things changed. In spite of myself, I started using that framework and skills you'd taught us at Earthways. I realized what I wanted to do and started doing it. One thing led to another and here I am. Whaddya think?"

I was stunned. Tears welled in my eyes. Lost for words, I reached out and hugged her. Then her kids and her husband hugged both of us. We all cried tears of joy.

I ran Earthways for three years. When the program in operation looked exactly like the program I'd envisioned, I turned it over to others. I headed to a teaching job at a West Coast university, resolved to continue living simply yet richly. It hasn't always been easy. I haven't always succeeded at keeping my focus clear. At times, I slid back into the complicated messiness of involuntary complexity. So far, though, I've always pulled myself back into the simple elegance of a life focused on creating what matters. My purpose has evolved to include helping adults, couples, groups, even organizations "discover what works and create what matters." So long as I've kept focused on that purpose, and practiced the skills that I share in the rest of this book, my life has continued to feel much more like a whole than a heap.

Freedom From... or Freedom To...?

Another useful lesson that I learned about navigating complexity and creating the simplicity on the other side of complexity had to do with freedom. Most people think of freedom as merely the absence of restraint or restrictions, or relief from the bad feelings associated with problems. However, there is more to freedom than relief or merely being free of restraints. As with simplicity and complexity, there are two kinds of freedom: “freedom *from*” and freedom *to*.”

Freedom *to* is harder to define than freedom *from*. It involves the complex interaction of all the skills, knowledge, abilities, and tools that a person needs to actually do something. Without the ability to act—to create what matters, for example—freedom from restrictions means little.

Imagine a steep cliff at the top of a high mountain. If there were no restraints like fences or guards preventing us, we would all be free to jump from that cliff. Exercising that kind of freedom *is* simple in the *simplisitic* sense; you just step up to the edge and jump off. However, the results is the simplicity on this side of complexity, and not one that many of us would aspire to. Unless you can fly, you’re not really *free to* jump off such a cliff without dying.

If, however, you stood at the top of the cliff equipped with the skills, abilities, tools, and knowledge of an experienced parasailer, you would be free to step off the cliff. Stepping off the cliff with your parasail filled with wind, which involves a very complex set of actions and interactions, would give you the power to transcend gravity, at least for a time. It would yield the flowing simplicity of flying, a kind of simplicity found only on the other side of complexity.

Problem solving focuses primarily on “freedom from.” Creating focuses on “freedom to.”

In *To Have or To Be?*, psychologist Erich Fromm described the difficulties faced by young people like my old coop colleagues who, in the sixties, “had not progressed from freedom *from* to freedom *to*: they simply rebelled without attempting to find a goal toward which to move, except that of freedom from restrictions and dependence.” Fromm called this approach “naïve narcissism” and said it worked only as long as the euphoria of rebellion lasted. However, he added, “many passed this period with severe disappointment, without having acquired well-founded convictions, without a centre within themselves. They often ended up as disappointed,

apathetic persons—or as unhappy fanatics of destruction.” Many of them, in my experience, became the upscale consumers of the eighties and nineties.

Fromm does have hope that those who focus on freedom *to* are “moving in the direction of being” and that “they represent a new transcending the having orientation of the majority, and that they are of historical significance.”

Fighting against what we don’t want leads to involuntary complexity and efforts to simplify that almost always result in the simplicity on *this* side of complexity. Taking a stand for what matters and taking action to bring it into being leads to voluntary complexity and to the simplicity on the *other* side that can only arise out of the creative process.

Your Soul’s High Adventure

Your version of the simplicity on the other side will arise out of your own fierce focus, out of your own passionate sense of purpose, and out of your deep commitment to your own, authentic desires. Moving from a heap to a whole and from freedom *from* to freedom *to* is a matter of setting out what matters most, then setting yourself firmly on the path toward creating it.

When I’d finished telling them my story and what I’d learned from it, Celia and Alverjo sat back in their chairs, smiling, nodding their heads. “That’s a great story,” said Al. “I think I’m starting to get it. Complexity seems much simpler now.”

“Me too,” said Celia, “It reminds of that George Bernard Shaw quote that says the true joy in life is being used by a purpose you recognize as a great one.”

Purpose and passion focus our lives. They unleash our creative spirit. They cut through clutter and mess taking us to the heart of what matters, to the soul of our being. Creating a rich, engaging, and rewarding simplicity is an example of what Joseph Campbell called “the soul’s high adventure.” The challenge is to embrace and transcend the circumstances of our lives and world as we bring into being what we most want to create. If soul is, as some suggest, the unifying principle, the power and energy that arises from the center of our being, then *creating* the simplicity on the other side of complexity is surely a soul-making adventure.

Chapter Four

Embracing Complexity; Creating Simplicity

One must feel chaos within to give birth to a dancing star.

— **Friederich Nietzsche**

Simplicity is not just about sorting out the material aspects of your life. It's about embracing and transcending the complex messiness that occurs in all aspects of your life, work and relationships. As such, it's not a linear, mechanical process. It doesn't necessarily follow straight line logic. It begs for a more playful, creative approach.

“When you engage complexity,” I cautioned Celia and Al, “try to embrace the messiness. Play with it. Get to know it. Whatever you do, don't fight it. Don't throw out any of the parts. Accept and embrace them all as natural parts of your life. Don't worry if you sometimes feel confused and chaotic inside. Take whatever comes, go with the flow, and, steering off of what matters, dance your way through that chaos and confusion into simplicity.” The keys to creating results you most want, I suggested, are:

- 1) Keep your focus on what matters,
- 2) Accept reality as it is—tell yourself the truth about whatever happens, then
- 3) Deliberately make choices and take actions that support what you truly want.

If you give the messy system—be it a life, a career, a relationship, even a business—the right kind of nudge here and the appropriate creative intervention there, what emerges can be rich yet simple, easy to use, and lasting. It can be engaging and richly rewarding. It can result in the simplicity on the *other* side of complexity.

Love As A Simplifying Force

As Celia and Al grasped the difference between the two types of simplicity, they began to recognize examples in their own lives. In one of our coaching sessions, Celia described a familiar situation in which a mess transformed into simple, elegant order. “We were in the

middle of a bitter, messy argument,” she said. “Al accused me of all kinds of things and I defended myself by accusing him of worse. Things got so heated and complex that we both forgot what we’d started arguing about. We were dredging up all sorts of ridiculous stuff from the past. I felt so confused. All the arguments and counter-arguments were so complex. It was a real mess. I didn’t think we’d ever get out of it.

“Then, out of nowhere, Al stopped arguing and just looked at me with compassion in his eyes. “I’m sorry Cee,” he said. “I love you. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“In an instant, all my defenses and counter-defenses fell away. I felt the power of his love. It struck me that this experience of love and connection was so much more important than winning the argument. My own love came surging back to the surface. I smiled and threw my arms around Al and kissed him. I knew in that moment that we’d made it through the mess and were headed for the simplicity on the other side.”

Celia clarified that this moment didn’t magically solve all their problems. However, it did help them reconnect with what really mattered. They found that their newfound focus on love caused many of their problems to dissolve. “They just melted away,” Celia said. “What was left were the core issues. Buoyed up by our renewed feelings for each other, we were able to focus on those issues from the creative stance. By agreeing about what we really wanted, we were able to accept that there could be differences in how we each created our part. We experimented with new ways that let us both get what we wanted. And it worked.”

Love is a powerful simplifying force. It pulls together divergent thoughts and behaviors into one, simple, easy-to-grasp way of understanding and dealing with messiness. Moreover, love is the primary driving force behind creating. “The creation of something new,” said Carl Jung, “is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.” Creators love the idea of their creations enough to do whatever is needed to bring them into being.

Acting with the force of love—for each other and for what they want to create—couples, too, can more easily co-create what matters. Indeed, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said in his book,

Wind, Sand, and Stars, “love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.” As Celia’s and Al’s love became more complex, fuller, and deeper, their relationship became simpler, yet richer, fuller, and more fulfilling. They had created, as Celia said, a form of the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Simple Enough for What?

From a creator’s point of view, complexity is not the enemy. It is a raw material of creating. It is something to embrace and transcend by moving through mess to create the simple yet rich order that emerges on the other side. The result is a simplicity that is simple enough, but no simpler. However, that begs the question, “Simple enough for what?”

Richard Gregg explored this question in a 1936 article entitled “Voluntary Simplicity,” which was reprinted in *Co-Evolution Quarterly* just as the last simple living wave crested in 1977. Gregg’s definition of simplicity is, I think, the most comprehensive and inspiring description of the simplicity on the other side of complexity. It contains essential clues about how to engage the messiness of life and navigate through it toward what truly matters to you.

“Simplicity,” said Gregg, “involves both inner and outer conditions. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity, and honesty within as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose.”

“Simple,” as we saw above, means “easily understood or done; not compound; consisting of only one element or operation.” Gregg seems to have understood that to simplify is to unify, to make whole. Living simply was for him a strategy for “ordering and guiding” his energy, desires, and actions around a *singleness of purpose*. Simplifying was not about moving away from things but about moving toward what mattered, toward what he loved and wanted to see exist, toward what he described as an “abundance of life.” Like a sculptor, he carved away the extraneous to express the essential.

Gregg's purpose in life was to create a life of purpose. He also knew that each of us must discover what we love enough to create, that each of us must answer the question *Simple enough for what?* in our own way. The challenge for each of us is to craft our own purpose, envision a life that supports it, and then wrap the diverse aspects of our lives around that vision so all our actions consistently support what matters.

Unfortunately, most of us do not live such passionate, love-driven, and integrated lives. An American philosopher, Michael Polyani, I think, suggested that most of us go through life doing what is *not* most important to us because we're afraid to risk failing at what we love. What matters most is left undone. The fact that we fail by omission seems to escape us. As does the self-respect and satisfaction that come from doing and creating what we truly want.

Richard Gregg clearly understood the connection between simplicity, self-respect, and satisfaction. "We cannot have deep and enduring satisfaction, happiness or joy," he wrote, "unless we have self-respect." He believed that self-respect underlay all higher morality. "We cannot have self-respect," he said, "unless our lives are an earnest attempt to express the finest and most enduring values that we are able to appreciate. Therefore simplicity is an important condition for permanent satisfaction with life."

Simplicity was not sacrifice for Gregg. On the contrary, it allowed him to express his finest and most enduring values. It brought him the joy and satisfaction of pursuing a life of purpose in an integral, focused way.

Embracing Complexity, Creating Simplicity

I've known people who, like Gregg, crafted a simple life that expressed their finest values and brought them great joy and satisfaction. Marla, for example, is a writer, a woman of passion and purpose who continues to live simply in spite of both social and personal changes. Twenty years ago, Marla, as a high school English teacher, struggled with a system she too did not fully believe in. She asked to job share or teach part time but was refused. Frustrated by the trade-off between the comfortable security of a full-time teaching and the risky, but deep desire to be a

writer, she took the plunge. She quit teaching, cut her expenses, worked part time in a bookstore, and focused almost all of her attention on a novel that she felt called to write and publish.

“My life didn’t get easier when I simplified,” she told me over coffee one afternoon at a street cafe near the restored cottage she shared with her partner. “In some ways it got harder. Focusing full-time on writing was much more complex than working for a living, but it was a complexity I accepted and enjoyed. I never felt like I sacrificed.”

She paused and looked out at the cars passing on the street outside. She turned back to me and continued. “I guess it’s because I *chose* that complexity, rather than had it forced on me. No matter how hard the writing process got, I always knew I was focussed on something larger than my self, something worth all the effort. And that made the hard things easier. It kept me going.” She leaned forward with an intense, questioning look in her eyes. “Does that make sense?” she asked. “Yes,” I said. “It does.”

Marla isn’t famous yet but she does well as a writer and teacher of writing workshops. Her success could have gone to her head, changing her in ways that were not authentic. It could have made her life complex in more difficult ways. This is another reason some people find simplicity hard to sustain. Stewart Brand, founder and first editor of *The Co-Evolution Quarterly*, remarked that, “There’s a couple of hazards in Voluntary Simplicity. One is arrogance. Another is success (artistic, commercial, personal) which leads to temptations which lead back again to Involuntary Complexity—too much going on to do anything right.”⁵

That didn’t happen to Marla. Because she’d voluntarily engaged complexity, she kept writing the kinds of novels she wanted to write and living the life she felt best supported her work. “Once I got my focus clear,” she said, “the rest of it just kind of fell into place.”

As we left the cafe, Marla stopped, touched my arm, and said, “Living simply is not just about being frugal. For me, it’s mostly about freedom. I need to focus on what speaks to me, to

⁵ Stewart Brand, “Living Below Your Means,” *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Summer 1977

write in a way that my readers and I both respect. It's also about wholeness and authenticity. By letting go of the extraneous and focusing on what truly matters, I feel my life is fuller, more authentic, and whole. The richness and satisfaction I get from living with such focus more than makes up for any loss of luxury. I feel very good about myself and my life."

I smiled and nodded. We started walking again. Marla, like Richard Gregg, clearly understood the critical connection between simplicity, self-respect, and satisfaction.

What's Driving the Action?

To be able to express our "finest and most enduring values," we need to be clear about our motives and their relationship to each other. Knowing what motivates you can help you understand the structure of your life. It can explain the sometimes-erratic behavior that unconsciously created structures give rise to. If, for example, you are primarily driven by short-term demands, your life will unfold quite differently than if you were driven by a desire for real and lasting results. Knowing what motivates you helps you to recognize what drives your action. It can also help you consciously create structures with which to integrate simplicity and success and create what matters.

If, for example, you long to be the architect of your own life, but discover that your habitual way of dealing with life's challenges is to react or respond to them as problems, don't despair. By recognizing that pattern, you are halfway to success. Once you see the pattern, you are better positioned to transcend it. You have the option to approach life's messiness from a reactive, problem-solving stance *or* from a results-focused, creative stance. You can fight it or embrace it. It is up to you. You make the choice. However, knowing that you have that choice greatly increases your power to influence the course and shape of your own life.

I know a finishing carpenter, Brent, who has lived this way since the mid-seventies. A Buddhist, he chooses to live near the poverty line in a luxuriously wood-paneled school bus in a small tourist and retirement town. He takes great pride in his craftsmanship, and his reputation for quality allows him to choose when and for whom he works. Brent's results are so exquisite

that an upscale couple recently paid him \$25,000 to build them a kitchen. “That’ll get me through most of the year,” Brent told me. “If another interesting project comes up, I’ll think about it seriously, but I’ve got lots I want to do if it doesn’t. I might drive the bus down to Mexico and hang out there for a few months. I’ve been thinking about re-reading all of Ken Wilber’s stuff. Maybe I’ll do a little writing. And, of course, there’s always my Buddhist practice.”

The couple for whom he built the kitchen were as impressed with the elegant simplicity of Brent’s way of life as they were with the beautiful work he’d done. “I envy that simplicity,” one of them told me. “Watching him work, listening to him describe how he lives, made me think about my approach. I mean, I like this kitchen, don’t get me wrong. But while he’s sipping margaritas and sleeping in his own bed beside a Mexican beach, I’ll be busting my hump at a job I don’t even care about any more just to pay for all this.” He paused, chuckled to himself, then added, “Something’s not quite right here.” I knew what he meant.

Brent loves beautiful things. He makes his living hand crafting beautiful things for others. But money and things do not drive his actions. The deep values of his faith, his daily practice, and his vision of a simple yet fulfilling life are the forces that drive his life.

“Underlying it all,” he told me, “is choice. Even when things are tough, I can fall back on the fact that no one forces me to live this way. I chose it. And I keep choosing it.”

Brent’s and Marla’s lives are no less messy than others’ are. Both own a minimum of material things and sometimes wish they had more. Both live close to what many would consider poverty and worry about slipping over into *involuntary* simplicity. Both struggle with the complexities of intimate relationships and other difficulties in their personal lives and in their work. And, like so many of us, both flirt with fears that what they’re doing is not good enough. However, out of this messiness, both have crafted a simplicity that is rich, authentic, *and* fully engaged. Both have found the place where their passions and the world’s needs intersect. By deliberately focusing on creating what matters to themselves and others, both have crafted a

simplicity that is successful, satisfying *and* enduring. Both live in ways that give them a deep sense that their messy lives are creative, coherent, and fulfilling wholes.

“I’m not always wildly happy,” Brent said, “and I’d worry if I was. But I love what I do and I’m definitely content with what I have. Life is good. And that’s good enough for me.”

From A Middle to A Higher Way

As Celia and Al grasped the difference between the two kinds of simplicity, they worked hard to let go of their need to control or fix their messes. They opened to the riskier but more exciting prospect of dancing with the forces. And it paid off.

“Through our work,” a bright-eyed, smiling Celia told me about a year after we’d finished our sessions, “we learned that our problem-solving approach to simplicity had been a reaction to what we didn’t want. We saw that what we wanted wasn’t so much a middle way as a higher way. Instead of balancing our values, we learned that it worked better to integrate them so less important values supported the important ones. Now, simplifying become a way to organize all the confusing bits and pieces of our life around one powerful yet easy-to-manage purpose that expresses our highest values. For us, that means arranging our business and management skills so they support our social and environmental goals. Getting involved with the Urban Design Group was the best thing we ever did, personally and professionally.”

“We wanted simplicity,” added Alverjo, looking more relaxed and energetic than he had in a long time. “We wanted purposeful, engaged lives. But problem solving didn’t give us results. When we flailed at things with our problem solving hammers, our lives felt like scattered, unfocused heaps. Now, we’re focused on creating what matters. Personally and in our urban sustainability work, we hardly ever solve problems. When we do, we make sure the solutions support the results we desire. It works. We pretty well consistently produce the results we really want. It’s gratifying to finally figure out how to simplicity and how to succeed at exciting, challenging work. I’m proud of how we live now. It’s like we have it all.”

They both laughed. Then Celia added, “Just so long as we keep practicing.”

Al squeezed her knee with his hand, then said, “Yeah, we don’t want to get too cocky.”

In their eyes, I was sure I saw see a dancing star emerging.

A Caveat: You Can’t Change What You Don’t Acknowledge

I wish I could tell you that all it takes to create a simple, successful life is to read this book or attend one of my retreats, but I’d be lying. Creating takes as long to master as any complex skill such as skiing or playing the piano. Although my clients make changes quickly, most take from six months to two years of focused practice before they fully grasp the skills and framework of the creative process and can consistently apply them to creating what matters.

That so many succeed gives me my deep hope and faith that, with mastery of the skills and framework outlined in this book, all of us—simple liverers, downshiffters, cultural creatives, and ordinary folks—can *create* the lives, work, relationships, neighborhoods and communities, even the world that we long for. However, a caveat is in order.

After twenty-five years of helping would-be creators, I have found that the most difficult hurdle they confront is the habit of problem solving. I’ve discovered that *before* they can fully embrace the creative process, they must first recognize and understand the limits of problem solving. As De Bono said, “Simplicity before understanding is simplistic; simplicity after understanding is simple.” Those who rush into the creative process before they fully understand problem solving’s limits inevitably try to force their creating skills into a problem-focused framework. The result, “creative problem-solving,” is, as I’ll show in the next section, a dangerous, energy-sucking oxymoron that fails to produce real and lasting results.

Before we dive into learning and practicing the skills and framework of the creative process and applying them to creating a simplicity that works for you, I ask that you be patient. Bear with me while quickly explore the structure and limits of problem solving. Understanding how deep life structures can work *against* your dreams and desires will help you appreciate the new structures you will need to create what you most want.