

# A DIFFERENT WAY

LIVING SIMPLY IN A  
COMPLEX WORLD



Northwest  
Earth Institute  
DISCOVER CHANGE, TOGETHER.

# A DIFFERENT WAY

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Please email us at [contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org) if you have any questions. We'd love to hear from you!

Best regards,  
Lacy Cagle, Curriculum Director,  
and the Northwest Earth Institute Team

DISCUSSION COURSE ON

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# A DIFFERENT WAY



Northwest  
Earth Institute  
DISCOVER CHANGE, TOGETHER.

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By



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# ABOUT NWEI

## **We believe every person has the power to create positive action.**

There's no shortage of information about the serious challenges facing our planet — and although most people say they would like to do more, they don't know where to start.

That's where we come in.

## **We believe change should be fun.**

For over 20 years, Northwest Earth Institute has helped make change more possible, more social, and yes, more fun by helping people connect with their communities and take action, together.

## **We believe the little things make a big difference.**

NWEI was founded in 1993 with a simple objective: to give people a framework to talk about our relationship with the planet and to share in discovering new ways to live, work, create and consume.

And (as more than 170,000 NWEI participants worldwide have discovered since then) it turns out that within that simple objective is a recipe for powerful change.

When you break big issues into bite-sized pieces, and talk through them with the people who matter to you, you discover insights and inspiration. You learn, together. You build a personal network of shared stories and support that makes it easy to take action. In short, you become part of a community for change.

## **We believe in change that works for you.**

From the beginning, we have been committed to meeting people where they are. We don't tell you what to think, or buy, or do. And we believe no change is too small — in fact, those tiny choices we make every day, by rote or by habit (paper or plastic? take or toss? borrow or buy?) are exactly where change is most possible and powerful.

Through our discussion courses and the EcoChallenge, we help people discover shared learning, shared stories and shared action.

## **We discover change, together.**

"The key to NWEI is the deep conversation, the networks and the friendships that continue to occur beyond the circle. The discussion circle is the initial spark that sets things aflame, and things continue happening after that. You do not put out the fire."

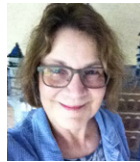
— Lena Rotenberg, NWEI course participant

# ABOUT THIS CURRICULUM

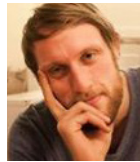
**Lacy Cagle** (Editor) is the Director of Learning at NW Earth Institute, where she oversees the development of NWEI's discussion courses and other educational programs, and chairs NWEI's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. She holds a MS in Educational Leadership and Policy with a focus on Leadership in Sustainability Education from Portland State University. She enjoys urban exploring, cooking, playing trivia, volunteering for transit advocacy, and hanging out with her amazing rescue pup, Huey, in St. Louis, Missouri.



**Margaret Parker** (Layout Editor) is a freelance graphic artist in Portland, Oregon. She says that after taking several NWEI courses that were "life-changing," she jumped at the opportunity to be involved in the creation of NWEI course books. Margaret is a native of the Pacific Northwest, spent a year in Poland, and has lived in Portland for the past 11 years.



**Lee Benson** (Cover Designer) is a freelance graphic designer living in Portland, Oregon. After obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Film & Digital Media, he moved to Portland to study design, earning an AAS at Portland Community College. Since graduating, he has been sole proprietor of City Limit Design. He enjoys working with local nonprofits that work to improve quality of life. In his spare time, he enjoys crafting cocktails, riding his bike and watching classic movies.



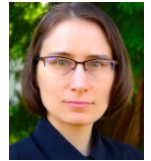
## CURRICULUM COMMITTEE

This discussion course would not exist without the expertise and time volunteered by the people on our curriculum committee. NWEI would like to offer sincere and deep appreciation for the many hours of time they collectively invested in this project.

**Millicent Zimdars** (Curriculum Intern) is a graduate student in the Leadership for Sustainability Education program at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she is considering how to engage in media literacy as a means of sustainability education and transformation. Millicent welcomes this opportunity to support the reinvigoration of the voluntary simplicity curriculum as a praxis for engaging her values and reassessing her own lifestyle. She enjoys storytelling, biking and, when she has time, painting and other crafts.



**Veronica Hotton** (Fellow) was a 2016 Fellow at NWEI. She co-teaches Senior Inquiry at Westview High School in Beaverton, Oregon for Portland State University. She also teaches Geography at Portland Community College. Veronica completed her PhD in Education at Simon Fraser University (Canada) and also has an MA in Geography from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.



**Shamili Ajgaonkar** is a Professor of Biology and Environmental Science and Co-Director of the Community Education Farm at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Environmental biology is her passion and it is the primary course she teaches at COD. Over the last 24 years, she has developed and taught this course in various formats from traditional classroom, to in-the field, to online, to self-paced, and as part of interdisciplinary seminars. She is deeply committed to advancing ecoliteracy by engaging students in experiential and service learning in the STEM fields particularly centered around biodiversity, resource use, and food and agriculture.





**Jennifer Jordan** is the Recycling Coordinator for the City of Iowa City, in which capacity she coordinates the City's waste reduction, composting and recycling programs. Jen has a BS in Geography and MA in Urban Planning from the University of Iowa and has served on the board of directors of the Iowa Recycling Association and several state-level advisory councils and committees. Her pastimes include spending time with her wife Renee, family, friends and ferrets as well as reading, baking, vegetable gardening, triathlon and environmental advocacy.



**Kerry Lyles** is the Development and Communications Director for the NW Earth Institute, and has been with NWEI since 2008. Kerry is passionate about living simply and simplicity parenting. She's active in the Portland community where she lives with her partner, Mark, and two young kids. When she's not at work, you can find her and her family on urban adventures, bike rides, and hikes.



**Alex Mihm** works in sustainability for Portland Community College and Clackamas County, Oregon, and he is a proud member of the NWEI employee family. He has a professional background in sustainability education and cooperative-based green renovation. Alex volunteers with a number of local sustainability-focused organizations and is a graduate of Marylhurst University, where he earned his degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in sustainability and writing.



**Kelly Northcutt** is an outdoor enthusiast and passionate environmentalist. She recently earned a Masters of Environmental Management and hopes to educate others about living simply and sustainably upon the earth. She currently lives in a 120 square foot home in Bend, Oregon, with her spotted dog and potted plants.



**Russ Pierson** has a DMin from George Fox University (2012), is an APPA-Certified Educational Facilities Professional (CEFP), a Certified Sustainable Building Advisor (cSBA), a GreenFaith Fellow, and a 2013 USGBC Greenbuild Scholar. Russ came to the Eugene, OR, campus of Lane Community College in 2010 with a varied background in construction management, the faith community and higher education. He served as Associate Director of Facilities Management and Planning and the Transportation Coordinator at Lane prior to accepting his current assignment as Dean/Director of LCC's Florence Center on the Oregon coast in March of 2015.



**Lena Rotenberg** lives in Keedysville, Maryland, and has been involved with the NW Earth Institute for more than a decade. She is a physicist turned educator turned community activist, who's trying to make more time for her grandchildren, for photography (for fun's sake), and for gardening. She is currently growing Valley Co-op, a local food cooperative in the outskirts of Hagerstown, MD, and also works as Director of Impossible Projects at her husband's dental office.



**Philena Seldon** is a native of Cleveland, Ohio, where she serves as the Office Manager/Outreach and Education Coordinator with the Mayor's Office of Sustainability in the City of Cleveland. Philena also is a Continuing Education Instructor for Cuyahoga Community College - Metropolitan Campus; Program Developer and Lead Facilitator for the Union Miles Urban Agriculture and Landscaping program at Union Miles Development Corporation; and Group Facilitator, volunteer and regional contact for the NW Earth Institute. Ms. Seldon holds certifications as a Landscape for Life facilitator and Roots of Success instructor. Ms. Seldon is also the Neighbor Up Wealth Collective Fellow for Neighborhood Connections. In her "spare time" she is the owner of two small businesses; an avid cyclist and member of the City of Cleveland's Team Cleveland and Over the Wheel Gang cycling teams; and serves as a Eucharistic minister and youth mentor.



**Betty Shelley** has been a NW Earth Institute volunteer since 1994. During that time, she has served on numerous discussion course curriculum committees. Betty often tells people, "NWEI has changed my life." She is a Master Recycler and a Recycling Information Specialist for Metro Regional Government in Portland, Oregon. She and her husband have produced just one 35-gallon can of garbage per year since 2006. Betty teaches "Less Is More" classes in the Portland area.





# GUIDELINES

## FOR THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER

This discussion course is designed to be much more than a reader; it is designed to be a guide for transformative learning and life-changing action.

When you break big issues into bite-sized pieces, and talk through them with people you trust, you discover insights and inspiration that are hard to find on your own. You learn, together. You build a personal network of shared stories and support that makes it easy to take action. In short, you become part of a community for change.

Below you will find guidelines for three of the roles participants will play in this course: the facilitator, the opener and the notetaker. For each session of this course, one participant brings an “opening,” a second participant facilitates the discussion, and a third participant takes notes on each person’s commitment to action. The roles rotate each week with a different group member doing the opening, facilitating and notetaking. This process is at the core of Northwest Earth Institute culture — it assumes we gain our greatest insights through self-discovery, promoting discussion among equals with no teacher. Learn more about organizing a Northwest Earth Institute discussion course at [nwei.org/get-started](http://nwei.org/get-started).



### FOR THE SESSION FACILITATOR

As facilitator, your role is to stimulate and moderate the discussion. You do not need to be an expert or the most knowledgeable person about the topic. Your role is to:

- Remind the opener ahead of time to bring their opening.
- Begin and end on time.
- Ask the questions included in each session, or your own. The circle question is designed to get everyone’s voice in the room — be sure to start the discussion with it and that everyone answers it briefly without interruption or comment from other participants.
- Make sure your group has time to talk about their commitments to action — it is a positive way to end each gathering.
- Keep discussion focused on the session’s topic. A delicate balance is best — don’t force the group into the questions, but don’t allow the discussion to drift too far.
- Manage the group process, using the guidelines below:

A primary goal is for everyone to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don’t let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.

Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

The focus should be on personal reactions to the readings — on personal values, feelings, and experiences.

The course is not for judging others’ responses.

**Consensus is not a goal.**

The facilitator should ensure that the commitment to action at the end of the discussion:

- allows each person’s action to be stated briefly;
- remains non-judgmental and non-prescriptive;
- focuses on encouraging fellow group members in their commitments and actions.

**FOR THE SESSION OPENER**

Bring a short opening, not more than a couple of minutes. It should be something meaningful to you, or that expresses your personal appreciation for the natural world. Examples: a short personal story, an object or photograph that has special meaning, a poem, a visualization, etc. We encourage you to have fun and be creative.

The purpose of the opening is twofold. First, it provides a transition from other activities of the day into the group discussion. Second, since the opening is personal, it allows

the group to get better acquainted with you. This aspect of the course can be very rewarding.

**FOR THE NOTETAKER**

At the end of each session, each participant will commit to one action they will complete before the next meeting. They will share their actions with the group, and it is your responsibility as notetaker to record each person’s commitment to action.

Each week the notetaker role will rotate. During the portion of discussion focused on actions, the notetaker from the previous meeting will read aloud each person’s action item, and group members will have the opportunity to share their successes and struggles. The new notetaker for that week will then record each person’s commitment for the next meeting.

**COURSE SCHEDULE FOR A DIFFERENT WAY**

This course schedule may be useful to keep track of meeting dates and of when you will be facilitating or providing the opening.

Course Organizer : \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Info : \_\_\_\_\_

Location for Future Meetings : \_\_\_\_\_

SESSION	DATE	OPENER	FACILITATOR	NOTETAKER
FindingYour “Why”: Living A Life of Happiness and Meaning	_____	_____	_____	_____
Times Change: Busyness, Distraction and Mindfulness	_____	_____	_____	_____
Lighten Up! Consume Less, Create More	_____	_____	_____	_____
Technology: Connection and Disconnection	_____	_____	_____	_____
Media Literacy: Resisting Materialistic Values	_____	_____	_____	_____
Moving Forward	_____	_____	_____	_____

# EVALUATION

You can choose to print out this evaluation or complete it online at [nwei.org/evaluations](https://nwei.org/evaluations)

## **PART 1: Please fill out from your weekly notes.**

Rate each session.

### **1. FINDING YOUR 'WHY': LIVING A LIFE OF HAPPINESS AND MEANING**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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### **2. TIMES CHANGE: BUSYNESS, DISTRACTION AND MINDFULNESS**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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### **3. LIGHTEN UP! CONSUME LESS, CREATE MORE**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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### **4. TECHNOLOGY: CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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**5. MEDIA LITERACY: RESISTING MATERIALISTIC VALUES**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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**6. MOVING FORWARD**

Not at all    Very much

How informative was this session? (Did you learn anything new?)

1 2 3 4 5

How much did this session help you in changing your behavior or committing to action?

1 2 3 4 5

Did you complete the activity for this session?

YES    NO

Additional thoughts or comments:

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**Part 2: Please complete at the end of the course.**

Has this course made a difference in your life (i.e. your attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, goals, habits)? If so, how?

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Please describe what actions you are taking or you plan to take in response to this course.

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What has been the most valuable aspect of this course?

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Are there other resources you would like to see included in this course?

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Do you have any additional thoughts or comments to share?

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Complete your evaluation online at [nwei.org/evaluations](http://nwei.org/evaluations), or send your completed evaluation via email to [contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org) or via snail mail to NWEI, 107 SE Washington St., Suite 240, Portland, OR 97214. Thank you for your participation!

Become a member of NWEI today at [nwei.org/membership/](http://nwei.org/membership/)

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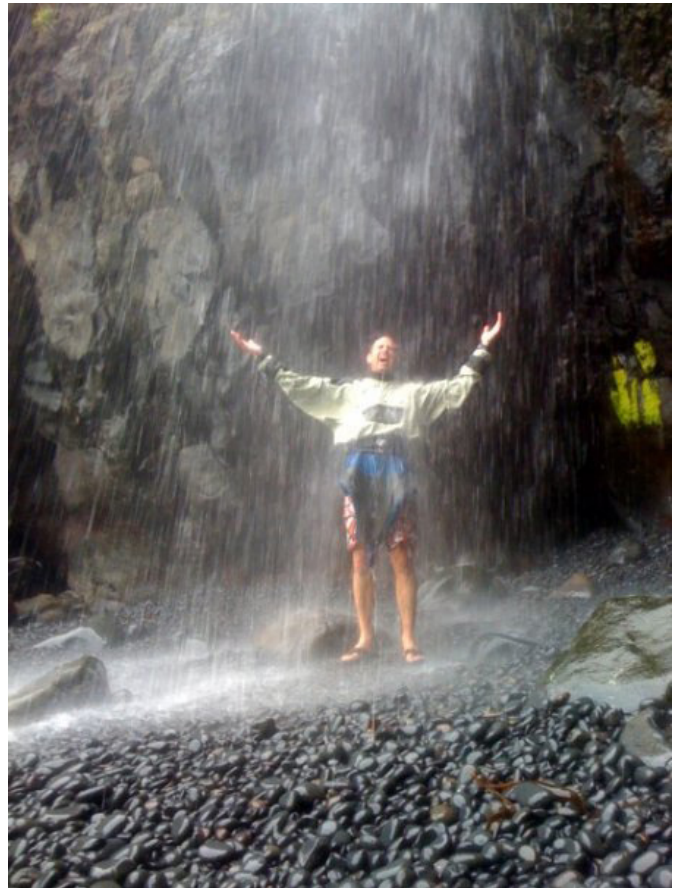
# INTRODUCTION

The concept of “living simply so that others may simply live” is not a new one, though it grows increasingly relevant as the world around us grows more complex. We’re faced with new challenges and new opportunities thanks to technology and the global nature of the world we live in. We need an authentic way of living simply that is both inwardly fulfilling and outwardly focused — creating real, positive change in our personal lives and in the world at large.

These days, thousands of books, magazines, advertisements, blogs and Instagram feeds are filled with pictures of uncluttered lofts with the sun shining in, a few pieces of modern furniture, perfectly placed books on a table, and well-organized kitchens free of signs of cooking. Minimalists tell us to own only what sparks real joy (where does my bathroom plunger fit in?) and that our lives will instantly feel less busy if we get rid of ten things a day. It seems that many people are looking for a different way to live. Many of us are seeking a way of life that is fulfilling, respectful of the environment and people, ethical, and intentional. Simplicity is trending, and we’re all seeking the tools to put it into practice.

While today’s popular version of simplicity seems to obsess about how little one can own, people have long chosen lives free of material excess for many different reasons, from environmental to esthetic, personal to global, religious to financial. Some choose to live simply in the woods or on farms. Others live intentionally in cities or travel the world. Overall, people who choose simplicity are united in wanting to create and live lives that are meaningful to them. They don’t want to follow a path that has been laid out before them. For simplifiers, living with less is a path of freedom — freedom from environmental degradation, from the stresses of clutter, from worrying about money, from feeling too busy, from the pressures of consumer culture. Simplifiers pursue non-materialistic paths to satisfaction and meaning, choosing a life they find more authentic and less wasteful.

Some folks choose simplicity as a path toward peace. Others choose it as an adventure. Neither motivation is wrong or right — it’s all about aligning your actions with your personal values. Regardless of your personal motivations, *A Different Way: Living Simply in a Complex World* will help you and your friends or colleagues connect your personal values and actions to the larger picture and find power to make real change in your lives, communities, and in the world at large.



There is nobody that embodies the spirit of simplicity better than NWEI’s former Executive Director (2007-2015), Mike Mercer. Mike chooses simple living as a way to reduce his negative impact and increase his positive impact on the planet. He is deeply committed to environmental sustainability and ecological values. He also chooses simple living as an adventure. Mike loves to have fun. Whether it’s biking to commute or cyclocross racing, kick-starting NWEI’s EcoChallenge in 2009, organizing a “move by bike” into his 160- square-foot tiny house in 2014, getting his friends and co-workers outside for a group hike near Mount Hood, or engaging over 150,000 people in NWEI’s discussion courses, throughout the years Mike has shown by example that living simply can be fun and a rewarding adventure. Mike has inspired all of us to see simplicity as an adventure, as well. It is with great pride and gratitude that the NWEI staff dedicates *A Different Way: Living Simply in a Complex World* to Mike Mercer.



# FINDING YOUR 'WHY'

## LIVING A LIFE OF HAPPINESS AND MEANING

*The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.*

— HANS HOFMANN

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define simplicity.
- Discuss the many personal and global issues we face that a simple lifestyle can help to address.
- Determine which of your values leads you to an interest in simple living, and how simple living will help you live more in line with your values.
- Explore how simplicity can benefit you physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially.

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Voluntary simplicity has grown and waned in popularity over the last several decades, but the concept of “living simply so that others may simply live” has been around for hundreds of years. People choose to live simply for many reasons, usually to live in alignment with their values, whether they are religious or spiritual, environmental, social justice-oriented, community-oriented, financial or for their own well-being. As our world changes, the motivations for and benefits of living a simple life also evolve. This session helps you figure out how to live life in a way that is better for yourself, for others, and for the planet.

Thanks to **Resilience Guild** for providing support for this session.

Circle Question

What is your "why," your reason for learning about living a simple or intentional life?

Reminder to the facilitator: The circle question should move quickly. Elicit an answer from each participant without questions or comments from others. The facilitator's guidelines are on page 8.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Several articles in this session define simplicity. When you hear the word "simplicity," what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
2. How would your life change if you embraced simple living? How does a simple lifestyle differ from a mainstream one?
3. In "Marie Kondo and the Privilege of Clutter," author Arielle Bernstein said, "It's easy to see the items we own as oppressive when we can so easily buy new ones." Which objects in your life feel oppressive to you? Which objects confirm your own sense of who you are? What is the difference between the two?
4. Arielle Bernstein highlights the privilege that leads to the desire to de-clutter. In what ways can simplicity become an act of privilege? How can simplicity be practiced to the benefit of people with less opportunity?
5. There is a historical and philosophical context to the concept of simple living, which varies by place and culture. For example, Marie Kondo originally wrote The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up for a Japanese audience. Are there aspects of simplicity which are universally applicable? Are there aspects which are particularly relevant to your own experience?
6. What do you want to prioritize over material "stuff" in your own life?
7. In "A Different Way: Miguel Arellano," Miguel talks about the challenges of living a simple lifestyle. What stands in your way when you try to pursue simplicity in your own life?

- 8. Do you have a "mantra," or have you ever been given advice that helps you live more authentically? If so, what is it?

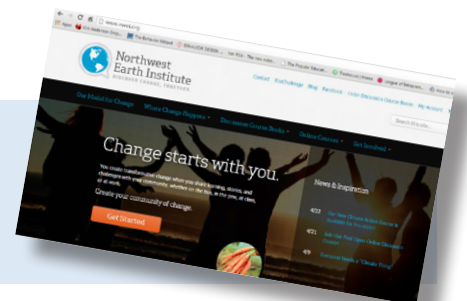
YOUR QUESTIONS

(Write your own questions here.)

Lined writing area for user questions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Interested in finding out more about the topics presented in this session? Please visit www.nwei.org/resources for suggested resources.







## THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH . . . ... FOR OUR CURRENT PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION

By Lacy Cagle

Information abounds on the large issues we as a planet are currently facing, from a changing climate to pollution injustice to widespread social unrest. Even though the existence of some of these issues is denied by many politicians, everyone has been impacted by them in some way: increasingly intense weather events like hurricanes and droughts, lead in our water and asthma-inducing pollutants in our air, police shootings and civil war are just a few of many possible examples. Scientists propose that we are living in the age of the Anthropocene, a geological epoch defined by human-caused acceleration of carbon dioxide in the air, sea level rise, mass species extinctions and deforestation. Scientific data show we are not taking very good care of the planet, or of each other.

If you have ever used an environmental footprint calculator, you are probably aware of the “how many Earths we would need if everyone lived your lifestyle” analogy. And

if you live in the US and have calculated your footprint, you probably found out it would take multiple Earths to globally sustain your lifestyle. There are many ways to calculate the number of Earths needed for any particular lifestyle, all a little inexact because of the enormous complexity of our lives, supply chains, transportation systems, and energy use. That particular metric helps us to remember, though, that in reality we only have one Earth to work with. How do we sustain it while decreasing inequity and injustice, and increasing quality of living for those who need it most?

A new UN Environmental Programme report advocates for us to “decouple economic growth and human well-being from [our] ever-increasing consumption of natural resources” by more sustainably producing and consuming resources, increasing resource efficiency, and minimizing waste.<sup>1</sup> *Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity*, a 2016 Assessment Report from the UNEP International Resource Panel (a consortium of 34 internationally renowned scientists, over 30 national governments, and other groups), confirmed recently that global consumption of resources is out of control. By separating economic growth and human well-being from resource consumption, we can elevate the well-being of those who have less in a way that does not continue to use more resources. Some of the IRP’s key findings that led to this conclusion include:

**Global natural resource use has accelerated.** The assessment found that the global economy expanded more than 300% between 1970 and 2016<sup>2</sup>. Population almost doubled, and global extraction of material resources tripled. In the report, “material resources” includes minerals, metal ores, fossil fuels, timber and biomass. So, less than twice



**PRACTICE:** Calculate your own environmental footprint! We recommend Earth Day’s Ecological Footprint Quiz to get started: [earthday.org/take-action/footprint-calculator/](http://earthday.org/take-action/footprint-calculator/)

as many people use three times the materials — a pretty scary statistic in itself. In fact, the report predicts that if we continue on our current trajectory of resource use, we will be using about three times as many resources in 2050 as we are today, and paying the environmental consequences through intensifying climate change, increasing air and water pollution, reduced biodiversity and ultimately depleted natural resources — which can risk critical shortages and heighten risk of local conflicts. “The alarming rate at which materials are now being extracted is already having a severe impact on human health and people’s quality of life,” said IRP Co-Chair Alicia Bárcena Ibarra. “It shows that the prevailing patterns of production and consumption are unsustainable.”<sup>3</sup>

The 2016 UN report highlights the close relationship between economic trends and natural resource use, showing that global material use slowed in 2008 and 2009 during the global financial crisis but is growing now. As the material standard of living increased in many parts of the world over the past four decades, so did global material extraction, increasing from 7.7 tons per capita in 1970 to 11 tons per capita in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

**Consumption has been driving the increase in material use.** “Globally, growth in per capita income and consumption has been the strongest driver of growth in material use, even more important than population growth in recent decades, especially since 2000,” the report indicates.<sup>5</sup> While population growth has contributed to rising material demand during this time, it has not contributed to the same extent that rising per capita income has. As a new middle class has emerged in developing countries, consumption has increased more than pure population growth would predict. An increase in material efficiency helped to mitigate some of the growth in material use between 1970 and 1990. But since 1990, efficiency has not increased significantly, and it actually started to decline around 2000.

**Trade in materials has grown dramatically.** In fact, the global economy needs more material resources per unit of GDP now than it did 100 years ago. This is because production has shifted from more material-efficient places like Japan, South Korea and Europe, to far less material efficient areas like China, India and Southeast Asia. We have increasingly shipped materials around the world as different countries specialized in extracting and



## DEFINITIONS OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Simplicity is about knowing how much consumption is enough. — *Mark Burch*

Voluntary simplicity is a manner of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich, a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more of life will be returned to us in the process. — *Duane Elgin*

Voluntary simplicity refers to the decision to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. — *Amitai Etzioni*

Voluntary simplicity involves the quest for calm, balanced, integrated lives; less clutter, less artificiality, and lessened impact on nature; and the elevation of quality over quantity, time over money, and community over competition. — *Eric Freyfogle*

Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. 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 greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. — *Richard Gregg*

## OTHER RELEVANT DEFINITIONS

**Decluttering:** removing unnecessary items from a space, particularly an overcrowded or untidy space

**Downshifting:** trading an often financially successful but stressful career or lifestyle for a less pressured and less highly paid but more fulfilling one

**Mindfulness:** the practice of or state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations

**Minimalism:** can refer to an art movement that started in the 1950s, a design esthetic that focuses on simple forms and lines, or an intentional lifestyle that promotes the things one most values while getting rid of all of the excess that distracts from those values

exporting particular resources. Between 1970 and 2010, direct trade increased 400%. All of that trade requires even more material and energy inputs than what actually gets shipped. Because of the overall loss in efficiency, low-income countries will continue to require more quantities of material resources to achieve the same level of development as high-income countries.

**Despite gain in some areas, large gaps in material standard of living persist.** The report shows that inequity has grown as well, with the richest countries in the world consuming on average 10 times as many material resources as the poorest countries, and twice as much as the world average. In other words, the richest countries are taking more than their fair share of all resources, particularly those that do not replenish themselves. As mentioned above, because of a loss in overall efficiency, low income countries will require increasing amounts of material resources, per capita, to achieve the sustainable development goals that the UN aims for.



Because of these findings, the report claims that changes in economic policy, lifestyles and consumption behavior are imperative. We have a tendency to focus on “conspicuous consumption” like luxury yachts and shopping sprees and private jets when we condemn consumer culture. But our culture gets to the “10 times as many material resources as the poorest countries” figure by the mass accumulation of many middle class lifestyles, as well. In order to ensure “the prosperity of human society and a healthy natural environment,” we all have to be willing to evaluate our lifestyles and how they might rely less on material resources. This will require both broad individual effort that leads to culture change and significant political pressure that leads to policy change. It will require recognizing the limits to our planetary systems and focusing on alternative ways to improve equity, generate energy, meet material needs, and sustain our economies. These changes in lifestyle and policy can benefit individual well-being, public health, and environmental health all at the same time. As the UN report concludes, “A prosperous and equitable world calls for transformative changes in lifestyles and consumption behavior.”<sup>6</sup> In short, we need to change our relationship to stuff to preserve our home on the one Earth we have.

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References and citations for this article can be found at [nweil.org/a-different-way-resources](http://nweil.org/a-different-way-resources)

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## EXCERPTS FROM VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

By Duane Elgin

After two hundred or more years of material growth, we are confronted with an unyielding question: *If the material consumption of a fraction of humanity is already harming the planet, is there an alternative path that enables all of humanity to live more lightly upon the Earth while experiencing a higher quality of life?* This question reaches deep into humanity’s psyche and soul. Transforming our levels and patterns of consumption requires our looking directly into how we create our sense of identity and seek our happiness. Furthermore, because the ecological challenges we face are global in nature, so too must be our conversation concerning how we are to share the Earth with one another and the rest of life.

Despite the necessity for change, it is hard to believe we humans will turn away from the lure of materialism and growth until we collectively recognize that this path leads, as Professor [Jared] Diamond warns, to “warfare, genocide, starvation, disease . . . and collapse.” A turn also requires compelling visions of the future that act as beacons for our social imagination. We do not yet carry in our social imagination clear compelling visions of the opportunities afforded by new forms of growth. Instead of visualizing how material limitation can draw out new levels of community and cooperation, many people see a life of greater “simplicity” as a path of sacrifice and regress.

What kind of “stewardship” fits our emerging world?



When we consider the powerful forces transforming our world — climate change, peak oil, water and food shortages, species extinction, and more — we require far more than either crude or cosmetic changes in our manner of living. If we are to maintain the integrity of the Earth as a living system, we require deep and creative changes in our overall levels and patterns of living and consuming. *Simplicity is not an alternative lifestyle for a marginal few. It is a creative choice for the mainstream majority, particularly in developed nations.* If we are to pull together as a human community, it will be crucial for people in affluent nations to embrace deep and sophisticated simplicity as a foundation for sustainability. Simplicity is simultaneously a personal choice, a community choice, a national choice, and a species choice.

With lifestyles of conscious simplicity, we can seek our riches in caring families and friendships, reverence for nature, meaningful work, exuberant play, social contribution, collaboration across generations, local community, and creative arts. With conscious simplicity, we can seek lives that are rich with experiences, satisfaction, and learning rather than packed with things. With these new ingredients in the lives of our civilizations, we can redefine progress, awaken a new social consciousness, and establish a realistic foundation for a sustainable and promising future.



There is no special virtue to the phrase “voluntary simplicity” — it is merely a label, and a somewhat awkward one at that. Still it does acknowledge explicitly that simpler living integrates both inner and outer aspects of life into an organic and purposeful whole.

To live more *voluntarily* is to live more deliberately,

intentionally, and purposefully — in short, it is to live more consciously. We cannot be deliberate when we are distracted. We cannot be intentional when we are not paying attention. We cannot be purposeful when we are not being present. Therefore, to act in a voluntary manner is to be aware of ourselves as we move through life. This requires that we pay attention not only to the actions we take in the outer world, but to ourselves acting — our inner world. To the extent that we do not notice both inner and outer aspects of our passage through life, our capacity for voluntary, deliberate, and purposeful action is diminished.

To live more *simply* is to live more purposefully and with a minimum of needless distraction. The particular expression of simplicity is a personal matter. We each know where our lives are unnecessarily complicated. We are painfully aware of the clutter and pretense that weigh upon us and that make our passage through the world more cumbersome and awkward. To live more simply is to unburden ourselves — to live more lightly, cleanly, aerodynamically. It is to establish a more direct, unpretentious, and unencumbered relationship with all aspects of our lives: the things that we consume, the work that we do, our relationships with others, our connections with nature and the cosmos, and more. Simplicity of living means meeting life face-to-face. It means confronting life clearly, without unnecessary distractions. It means being direct and honest in relationships of all kinds. It means taking life as it is — straight and unadulterated.

When we combine these two concepts for integrating the inner and outer aspects of our lives, we can then say: *Voluntary simplicity is a way of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich.* It is a way of being in which our most authentic and alive self is brought into direct and conscious contact with living. This way of life is not a static condition to be achieved, but an ever-changing balance that must be continuously and consciously realized. Simplicity in this sense is not simple. To maintain a skillful balance between the inner and outer aspects of our lives is an enormously challenging and continuously changing process. The objective of the simple life is not to dogmatically live with less but to live with balance in order to realize a life of greater purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

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Duane Elgin is an author, speaker, educator, consultant, and media activist. He pioneered the “Voluntary Simplicity” Movement with his now classic first book of the same name, which he published in 1981. Elgin has co-founded three nonprofit organizations concerned with media accountability.



**PRACTICE:** This week, take a few moments to reflect on how simplicity might address the big global problems you read or hear about in the news. Keep your thoughts in a journal and review them before the next meeting.



## WHY MILLENNIALS ARE TRENDING TOWARD MINIMALISM

By Joshua Becker

If you pay much attention to the world of retail sales, you will notice a trend: *worry*.

You will certainly find short-term worry about not enough people buying enough stuff — but that worry has always existed. In a society that bases its measures of success in terms of home prices, market values, and GDP, there will always be a need to prompt citizens to buy more and more.

But beyond the short-term unease, there is a long-term anxiety clouding the retail market. This long-term worry is far more significant and can be summarized in one sentence: *Millennials don't want to buy stuff*.

Business publications have been covering the story for years: *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, *TIME*, *The Atlantic*, *Bloomberg*, *The Wall Street Journal*, even *Goldman Sachs*.

Recently, in a radio interview for a station in Montreal, I was asked if I thought the desire to downsize was age-related. In the mind of the interviewer, it seemed to make sense that the older one got, the more they recognized the emptiness of material possessions and the need to minimize.

I assured the interviewer this was not always the case. In fact, from everything I can tell, the desire to minimize and declutter stretches across each of the generations. It is growing among the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomer Generation, Generation X, and the Millennials. In my new book, *The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own*, I highlight each of the unique forces drawing people of every age to minimalism.

But for the sake of this post, let's consider some of the reasons Millennials are refusing to partake in the retail game as the rules are currently constructed and why retail giants are worried about it:

**Technology and Mobility:** The Millennials are the first generation born after the technological revolution. The world feels smaller to them than previous generations and they are intimately connected to one another — regardless of geography. Coffee shops have become the new office, collaboration has become the new competition, and mobility has become the new stability. And, as many Millennials will tell you, it is difficult to live a mobile lifestyle with a house full of stuff.

**The Sharing Economy:** Technology has ushered in a new connectedness with one another. Additionally, it has provided a platform on which access can take precedence of ownership. With the touch of a thumb, we can now borrow someone else's home, bike, car, book, music, unused stuff, or countless other possessions. Ownership has never been less necessary.

**Environmental Concerns:** The Millennial generation is the most environmentally conscious of all age groups and this influences their buying habits significantly.

**Living Preferences:** *The Wall Street Journal* once reported 88% of Millennials desire to live in an urban setting and that one-third of the generation is willing to pay more because of it. Over the past several decades, retailers have banked on the growth of suburbia — bigger and bigger homes, further away from town-centers, fostering isolation, individualism, and personal ownership. As younger generations migrate toward smaller dwellings in walkable communities with shared amenities, consumer consumption will continue to slow.



**PRACTICE:** What could be more simple than a haiku about simplicity? Create a haiku that expresses your own simplicity mantra.

**Experiences > Possessions:** As I have argued in the past, minimalism is not the end of spending. Even when minimalist principles are adopted on a large scale, the transfer of money will still take place — money will just be spent on different things than physical possessions. The Millennial generation is proving this to be true, spending less on possessions, but more on wellness, food, drink, and experiences.

**Debt/Unemployment:** Certainly, significant economic trends have brought with it new shopping habits. The Millennial Generation has graduated college and entered the workforce in the middle of the Great Recession. In fact, most economic studies would indicate this generation is entering one of the worst working environments in modern history burdened with more student loans than ever.

**Corporate Mistrust:** Economic forces (housing bubble, student debt, shrinking of the middle class) and generational preferences (the environment, social justice) have resulted in a generation distrusting of large corporations and “the 1%” who run them. According to one study, 75% said that it’s important that a company gives back to society instead of just making a profit. While it would be interesting to know how previous generations would have answered the same question, one thing is for certain: the Millennial Generation is acting on this belief and choosing smaller, local retailers for their purchasing needs because of it.

There is one more factor that I think is quite significant. There is growing evidence that the Millennial Generation is “delaying adulthood.” At least, they are delaying adulthood as defined by economists (getting married, buying homes and cars, having children). Researchers point out that marriage is important to Millennials, they just want to do it later — the same with parenthood.

It remains to be seen whether the economic conditions of their upbringing have shaped Millennials to be minimal by nature or whether future economic growth and rites of passage will cause them to slip into the same excess of ownership that previous generations have fallen into.

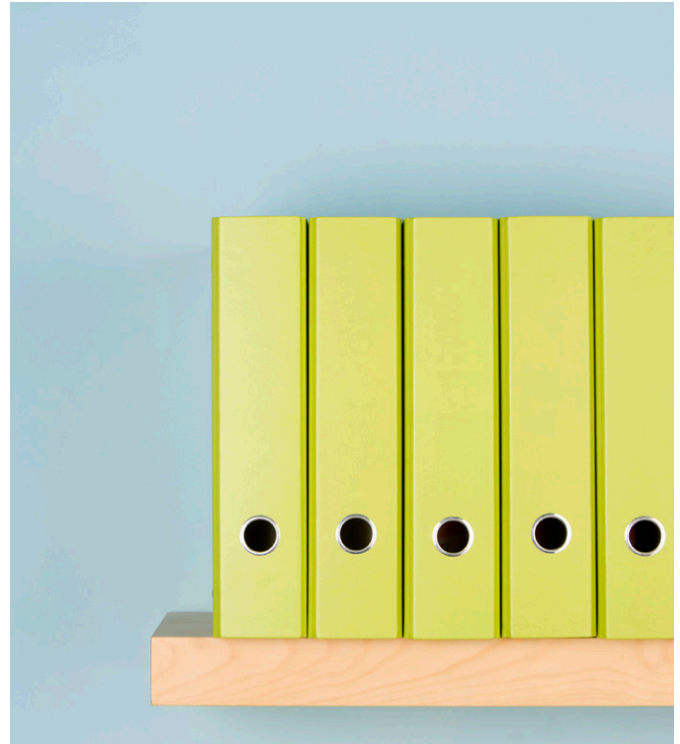
But I am hopeful for the Millennial Generation. At the very least, they have examples to learn from. For example, both their parents and their grandparents continue to live beyond their means in crippling debt.

Millennials appear to be a generation hard-wired for minimalism.

I hope the trend continues.

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Joshua Becker is the author of numerous books on the topic of minimalism, including the blog *Becoming Minimalist* where he documented his and his family of four’s transition to a life of abundance unencumbered by material possessions. Their story has been seen on the CBS Evening News, NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Guardian* and in countless media interviews around the world.



## MARIE KONDO AND THE PRIVILEGE OF CLUTTER

By Arielle Bernstein

At every wedding I’ve been to this past year, the event space has been decorated with family portraits — black-and-white photos of grandmothers and grandfathers, pictures of parents with giant smiles and ‘70s hairstyles. Meanwhile, the bride and groom wear family relics and heirlooms: jewelry passed from mother to daughter, cufflinks and ties passed from father to son.

As a child I used to cry when looking at those kinds of photos and mementos. But it wasn’t until this past summer when I was planning my own wedding that I understood just why these kinds of items inspired so many complicated feelings. When my now-husband asked if we wanted to make a slideshow of our family photos for our own wedding, I realized we barely had any. Both my grandmother and grandfather emigrated from Poland to Cuba in the years preceding the Holocaust: my grandmother by boat with her mother in 1930 when she was 8 years old, and my grandfather in 1937, at the age of 18. They fell in love with each other and the country that took them in, even as they grieved the family members who didn’t make it out alive.

After Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, their lives changed once more. Their small store was closed for periods of time by the government (the boards covering their storefront were frequently graffitied with threatening swastikas, a sign that they may not have entirely escaped the frightening environment they tried to leave in Europe).

As the revolution began, material comforts began to disappear. Eventually, their business and home were both shut down by the Cuban government and, in 1968, my grandparents, mother, and aunt came to the U.S., leaving everything but a few pieces of clothing behind.

In the U.S., my grandparents and mother responded to the trauma they'd experienced by holding on to things. My grandfather was a collector who was prone to hoarding. He'd often find random trinkets on the street and bring them home, and he kept everything, from books to receipts to costume jewelry. My grandmother and my mother were more practical, saving and storing canned foods, socks, and pantyhose. In my home, we didn't throw out food or plastic bags, or clothing that was out of style but that still fit us. We saved everything.

Today, when my mother comes to visit she still brings bags full of useful items, from Goya beans to cans of tuna fish and coffee: things she knows will last us for months and months. It doesn't matter if I tell her we just went to the store, or that we have plenty of food, or that I don't need any more socks or underwear. A full pantry, a house stocked with usable objects, is the ultimate expression of love.

As a girl growing up in the U.S., I was often exhausted by this proliferation of items — by what seemed to me to be an old-world expression of maternal love. Like many who are privileged enough to not have to worry about having basic things, I tend to idolize the opposite — the empty spaces of yoga studios, the delightful feeling of sorting through a pile of stuff that I can discard. I'm not alone in appreciating the lightness and freedom of a minimalist lifestyle. The KonMari method, a popular practical philosophy for de-cluttering your home, has tapped into a major cultural zeitgeist.

Since the Japanese "professional organizer" Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* was released in 2014, it's become a *New York Times* bestseller and sold over 3 million copies. Kondo's tips on de-cluttering have been featured everywhere from *The Today Show* to *Real Simple* to *The Guardian*, and have inspired the follow-ups *Spark Joy*, an illustrated guide to tidying things up even more, and *Life-Changing Magic*, a journal where you can ruminate on the pleasures of owning only your most cherished personal belongings.

At its heart, the KonMari method is a quest for purity. To Kondo, living your life surrounded by unnecessary items is "undisciplined," while a well-tidied house filled with only the barest essentials is the ultimate sign of personal fulfillment. Kondo's method involves going through all the things you own to determine whether or not they inspire feelings of joy. If something doesn't immediately provoke a sense of happiness and contentment, you should get rid of it.

Kondo seems suspicious of the idea that our relationship with items might change over time. She instructs her readers to get rid of books we never finished, and clothes

we only wore once or twice. She warns us not to give our precious things to our family and friends, unless they expressly ask for them. She's especially skeptical of items that have sentimental value. In her first book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Kondo says:

*Just as the word implies, mementos are reminders of a time when these items gave us joy. The thought of disposing them sparks the fear that we'll lose those precious memories along with them. But you don't need to worry. Truly precious memories will never vanish even if you discard the objects associated with them . . . No matter how wonderful things used to be, we cannot live in the past. The joy and excitement we feel in the here and now are most important.*

Throughout *Spark Joy*, Kondo includes adorable minimalist drawings of happily organized bathrooms, kitchens and closets. Sometimes she even includes drawings of anthropomorphized forest animals lovingly placing items into drawers using the KonMari method.

Kondo is unfailingly earnest in her assertion that the first step to having a joyful life is through mindful consideration of your possessions. Emotions throughout both of her books are presented as being as simple as her drawings. You either feel pure love for an object or you let it go. But beneath some of the self-help-inspired platitudes about how personally enriched you'll feel after you've discarded items you don't need, there's an underlying tone of judgment about the emotional wellbeing of those who submit to living in clutter. Those who live in KonMari homes are presented as being more disciplined: invulnerable to the throes of nostalgia, impervious to the temptation of looking back at something that provokes mixed feelings.

Though an article on Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness website Goop claims that American culture is the embodiment of excess, it's pretty clear to me why the KonMari Method has caught on in the U.S. A recurring emphasis on self-improvement and an obsession with restriction can be found in everything from diet trends (where we learn to cut calories in order to be smaller and less encumbered by literal weight), to the consumer culture fixation with replacing old things that no longer provide joy with new, "improved" things that will.

For affluent Americans who've never wanted for anything, Kondo sells an elegant fantasy of paring back and scaling down at a time when simplicity is a hot trend. The tiny-house movement, for example, urges consumers to eschew McMansion-style houses for the adorably twee simplicity of a 250-square-foot home.

Of course, in order to feel comfortable throwing out all your old socks and handbags, you have to feel pretty confident that you can easily get new ones. Embracing a minimalist lifestyle is an act of trust. For a refugee, that trust has not yet been earned. The idea that going through

items cheerfully evaluating whether or not objects inspire happiness is fraught for a family like mine, for whom cherished items have historically been taken away. For my grandparents, the question wasn't whether an item sparked joy, but whether it was necessary for their survival. In America, that obsession transformed into a love for all items, whether or not they were valuable in a financial or emotional sense. If our life is made from the objects we collect over time, then surely our very sense of who we are is dependent upon the things we carry.

It's particularly ironic that the KonMari method has taken hold now, during a major refugee crisis, when the news constantly shows scenes of people fleeing their homes and everything they have. A *Vice* article, "All the Stuff Syrian Refugees Leave Behind During Their Journey to Europe" shows discarded things ranging from trash to toys to ticket stubs. Each item looks lonely and lost: like evidence of a life left behind. For a project titled "The Most Important Thing" the photographer Brian Sokol asks refugees to show him the most important thing they kept from the place they left behind. The items they proffer range from the necessary (crutches), to the practical (a sewing machine), to the deeply sentimental (photographs of someone deeply loved, treasured instruments, family pets).

Against this backdrop, Kondo's advice to live in the moment and discard the things you don't need seems to ignore some important truths about what it means to be human. It's easy to see the items we own as oppressive when we can so easily buy new ones. That we can only guess at the things we'll need in the future and that we don't always know how deeply we love something until it's gone.

In this way, I was built for the KonMari method in a way my mother never was. I grew up in a middle-class American home. While we were never wealthy, we also never truly wanted for material things. As an adolescent, I would tell my mother that I was an American, and that, as an American, I didn't have to be loyal to anything or anyone if I didn't want to. I'd throw away the last dregs of shampoo or toothpaste, which my mom would painstakingly rescue from the trash before scolding me for being so wasteful. I'd happily throw out or donate clothing I didn't want any more.

My quick disposal of things always made my mother irreparably sad. She mourned the loss of my prom dress (which I gave to a friend) and the pots and pans she gave me for college (which I left in the group house I lived in), and she looked horrified when I once dumped a bunch of letters from friends and family in the trash. For me, being able to

dispose of things has always been one of the ways I learned to identify as an American — a way to try and separate myself from the weight of growing up in a home where the important things that defined my family had long been lost.

To my mother, the KonMari method isn't joyful; it's cold. "Americans love throwing things away," she tells me, "And yet they are fascinated by the way that Cubans have maintained their houses, their cars. Yes, growing up we took great pleasure in preserving things. But we also didn't really have a choice."

Today, of course, my mother has plenty of choices, but throwing things away still makes her anxious. Now that my grandparents have both passed away, my mother still struggles to decide what to do with all that stuff. It's very painful for her, and my father's encouragement that she sift through everything, organize it in some kind of clearly delineated way, often falls on deaf ears.

A few months ago, when I was visiting home, my father asked if I would help go through some of the items. Now that he and my mom are older and my brother and I are grown, they've both expressed a desire to downsize. In the car, my dad recommended starting with my childhood bedroom, which looks exactly as it did when I was 14 years old, pink and purple, filled with childhood books and stuffed animals, half-filled journals, and never-worn shoes. At first I was enthusiastic about the project. "We can give a lot of those things to charity," I said.

But at home, I sat in front of my bookshelf and did exactly what Kondo cautions most against: I started my project of decluttering by going through the things that mattered most to me: the books I loved when I was a child; the CDs made by dear friends and stacked high in no particular order; the college textbooks I never remembered to return. Objects imbued with memories of a person I once was, and a person that part of me always will be.

I didn't want to give any of it up.

Kondo says that we can appreciate the objects we used to love deeply just by saying goodbye to them. But for families that have experienced giving their dearest possessions up unwillingly, "putting things in order" is never going to be as simple as throwing things away. Everything they manage to hold onto matters deeply. Everything is confirmation they survived.

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Arielle Bernstein is a writer based in Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, and *Pank Magazine*. She teaches writing at American University.



**PRACTICE:** Do you find yourself caught in a cycle of getting rid of unnecessary stuff, only to buy more stuff, then get rid of more? (This often happens with clothes!) How can you move away from the consumption treadmill for good?





## A DIFFERENT WAY: MIGUEL ARELLANO

By Lacy Cagle

As the coordinator for the Multicultural Center at Portland Community College's Sylvania campus and a person who is committed to conscious living, Miguel Arellano often finds opportunities where his decisions impact many people. His choice to live an intentional life reaches beyond his personal decisions to recycle, not waste food or use public transportation — he recognizes his interconnectedness with the rest of the world and wants to have the most positive impact he can in all of his spheres of influence. From his personal life to his professional life, Miguel endeavors to apply an intersectional lens to all that he does.

Miguel grew up in Woodburn, Oregon, a town of around 25,000 people, 60% of whom are Latino and 10-15% of whom are Russian immigrants. Born into a working class, migrant worker family, Miguel is a first generation U.S. citizen. He and his seven siblings helped their parents in the fields from an early age. By necessity, Miguel grew up living a “simple” life. But it was not at all voluntary. Miguel remembers wanting to buy things — shoes, toys, and other things that most children take for granted. He really didn't like being seen as poor, but with his family living paycheck to paycheck, Miguel and his family had to make do with what

they had.

In high school and college, Miguel started becoming involved in environmental justice and social justice issues. With education, his perspective changed. Growing up as an undocumented immigrant in a very poor family, Miguel was very aware of the injustices his family and the community around them experienced. But college helped him to explore how those experiences were interconnected with other issues in the world.

As a child, Miguel grew up regularly asking the question, “What do we truly need to survive?” As he became more privileged through education, that perspective helped him to become a conscious and critical consumer. When he bought things, he was aware that there were people who grew or made those things, including kids like him and his siblings. He was aware of the environmental and health issues they might have had to endure, like his father and siblings who have health issues even today because pesticides were sprayed on the fields they worked while wearing no protection. He was also critically aware of the “consumerist, capitalist messages everywhere we turn.”

As Miguel's values started to shift, he wanted to make sure his actions were in congruence with his values. As he grew in his realization of interconnectedness, he became more aware of how all of his actions impacted others. As Miguel puts it, “I don't live in a vacuum. Even my words, even what I say, impacts others. . . Learning about all of these things can be really difficult. While complexity is easy to see, it is also easy to fall into despair when we become more aware of the negative impacts of our actions and the large, complex systems that uphold injustice.” Miguel believes that recognizing our shared humanity can keep us going. “Learning about social justice and environmental justice makes me more human,” says Miguel. “I had the privilege of starting to think about all of these things at an earlier age than a lot of people who start asking these questions (later in life).”

Miguel practices intentional simplicity in his life in many ways. Partially because of his strong ties to food production, he makes sure to only buy the food he needs, and he will not throw away food. He gets much of his family's food from his brother, who still works on a farm. He takes public transportation as much as possible, although particularly with a five month old daughter, it takes much more time and planning. He recycles.

But Miguel's intentional decisions go beyond personal ones. He practices intentionality in the decisions he's



**PRACTICE:** Start a gratitude practice! Take 5-10 minutes each morning to meditate on or journal about that which brings you gratitude and joy in your life.

responsible for at the Multicultural Center. He has worked to get healthy, locally grown food to people who need it most. He does his best to make all of their events zero waste. And he sees that we are all tied together in the struggle to create a sustainable world. By building relationships with other organizations like the campus Environmental Center and Learning Garden, sitting on the Sustainability Council, and having conversations with many other people, Miguel builds partnerships and friendships across disciplinary lines.

Through the Multicultural Center, Miguel works closely with student leaders who he trains to become peer educators. “My goal is to challenge them to think critically about themselves, their community, and the world, in hopes of better preparing them to deal with the world’s most complex social ills,” he says. “Over the course of the academic year, these students lead and program a combined 50-60 events and reach thousands of their peers.” The events focus on raising consciousness. The student leaders “begin to see that if we are truly trying to have a just society and eradicate one –ism, such as racism, we cannot do it without addressing other issues such as classism, sexism and environmental injustice. I also try to get them to think about their own personal life, behaviors and actions, and analyze if they are either disrupting systems of oppression or upholding them.”

“Lastly,” says Miguel, “I have them think critically about their area of study, and career aspiration. Many of the students who attend community college are first generation, and oftentimes community college is a path out of poverty and into financial security for these students. All the students who go to school with the goal of attaining a better job enter institutions in our society that help our society function. Whether that institution is law, journalism, medicine, engineering, education, business, agriculture — all these institutions play a key role in maintaining the status quo and perpetuating hegemony. I lead a few activities that discuss the connection between all these social institutions the students are entering in the workforce, and how they are connected to each other and uphold systems of inequity. These activities allow students to see that we need to build coalitions among all aspects of society in order to disrupt systems of inequity and create new systems and institutions that do not otherize, harm, and oppress people and our environment. Students begin to understand how

big, complex, and overwhelming these issues are. Students begin to see that they cannot tackle these big issues alone, but they have comrades and allies who are entering other institutions and will be working towards making the world a better place. I believe instilling hope in these students is very important, letting them know that we can all make a difference. Oftentimes, when we begin to learn about social injustices and our society, we can fall into despair.”

Miguel’s personal and professional decisions to live with intentionality aren’t exactly convenient. Both he and his partner are new professionals, often working more than 40 hours a week, and caring for their 5 month old daughter, Luna Love. What is easiest and most convenient is not often what is most sustainable. Public transportation takes more time and planning than driving, and zero waste events and local sustainable food cost more money than their alternatives. Miguel can face the same discouragement as his students — sometimes it is hard to maintain hope in the face of the complex injustices of our world.

Now that he is a parent, Miguel strives to be intentional in how he parents his daughter. “We used to work 60 hour weeks in 100 degree weather. That was a hard life, but I learned so many valuable lessons. How do I teach my daughter the same values and perspective without her having to feel the pain of that struggle?”

Through all of this complexity and difficulty, Miguel’s relationships keep him hopeful and joyful. “Family and people come first,” Miguel says. “I think it’s easy for us to forget that sometimes. . . My daughter’s smile and laugh are the best part of my day.” He stays in close contact with his siblings, and he values being an educator. He loves seeing students make the connections and learn “to be better citizens of the world.”

Keeping his values and actions in alignment in his personal life, in his larger spheres of influence, and with the people that are closest to him helps him to move forward with hope and courage.

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## SESSION ONE ACTIVITY: FINDING YOUR “WHY”

**What is your “why”?** Why are you drawn to the ideas of simplicity and intentionality?  
How can living simply help you to align your life with your own values and beliefs?

A manifesto is “a public declaration of intentions, opinions, objectives, or motives.”  
Tsh Oxenreider has written a manifesto for her blog, “The Art of Simple,” which includes statements of belief like  
“People are more important than things” and “Debt is not a tool.”

Using [theartofsimple.net/manifesto/](http://theartofsimple.net/manifesto/) as a guide, write your own “manifesto” for simple living.

