



Soul Matters

June 2016

*What Does It Mean To Be
A People of Simplicity?*

**IT IS EASY TO BE
HEAVY: HARD TO
BE LIGHT**

G. K. CHESTERTON

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Simplicity?

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It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move
in the opposite direction. — E. F. Schumacher*

Courage. It's not your typical place to begin. But maybe that's good. It reminds us of what we already know but too often forget: there is nothing simple about simplicity.

Indeed to talk of simplicity requiring courage reminds us that the work of this month is not just about reduction but confrontation. Yes, editing our To Do Lists and eliminating clutter from our lives is part of it, but the deeper challenge involves rejecting our culture's values and attributions of worth. To be a people of simplicity is not just about saying yes to sunsets, walks in the woods and more dinners with those we love. It's also about saying no to status and society's affirmation. And that most certainly requires bravery.

And not just bravery, but honesty too. It's not just society that celebrates status, stuff and overscheduled lives; we cling to them as well. The busyness of our lives is not just overwhelming; it's also *seductive*. Overscheduled lives don't just tip us over; they tempt us. They promise us power, affirmation and proof that we are of more worth than the one standing next to us. There is a reason we go on and on about how busy we are. We aren't just complaining; we're bragging. To be busy is to have made it. To be over-committed is to be wanted and needed. No wonder we have such a hard time giving it all up.

And why is this frame important? Why dwell on how addictive and seductive this crazy game of chaotic living is? Well, because it reminds us that simplicity is not a single-player game. We forget this, you know. We make the work of simplifying our lives all about our own will-power. We treat our cluttered houses and full calendars like our problem and challenge alone. And then we beat ourselves up for being as materialist and status-driven as everyone else.

But the fact is no one stands outside of the status quo by themselves. No one can reject and confront a community of broken values without the promise and support of an alternative community that celebrates a different equation of "worthy living." That courage and genius of which Schumacher speaks: it's just not something any of us can pull off on our own.

That may be the most important and kindest message of this month. May we help each other remember it.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A: When Life Was Simple

This exercise invites you challenge your present with your past. We all remember a time when “life was simpler.” These are fond memories but also come with a sense of mourning. A part of us wishes we could return to the feeling of that time, but the biggest part of ourselves “knows” that’s not realistic. Maybe it’s time to take a second look. Here are your instructions:

1. **Bring the memory back to life:** Find a way to return to that time in your life when life was simpler and more nourishing. Journal about it, share the story with a friend, make it a part of your meditative practice.
2. **Work with the memory:** Spend time focusing on what was most nourishing or precious about it. Figure out why the memory anchors you or keeps coming back. Note what gift it gave you at the time and the impact on that gift being absent from your present circumstances. Again, do this reflective work using the form you are most comfortable with: journaling, conversation with a friend, personal meditation, etc.
3. **Let it challenge you:** Ask yourself “Why can’t it be this way again?” Play devil’s advocate with yourself. Challenge yourself justifications about why life just can’t be that simple now? Ask yourself if the barriers are really immovable and push yourself to consider how they might actually be self-imposed or more in control than you want to admit. You may not be able to return to the circumstances of that previous time, but what about reclaiming the feeling and the freedom it offered you.

Come to your group ready to share what going through the exercise was like for you and what you learned.

Option B: De-Clutter Your Decision Life!

Simplicity is not just about materialism. For many, the most oppressive clutter is not the stuff packed into our physical space but the millions of decisions we have to make each day. Psychologists have even given this struggle a name: “Decision Fatigue”:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html>
<http://www.businessinsider.com/decision-fatigue-and-productive-mornings-2015-4>

They see willpower functioning like a muscle that can get quickly exhausted. Too many decisions, they show, quickly weaken our ability to think clearly, and even be kind. Spending too much will power on the inconsequential stuff ends up damaging our ability to address the important decisions of our lives. For this reason, many people - including President Obama and Mark Zuckerberg - are now simplifying their “decision life” by routinizing basic daily activities, for instance wearing the same outfits or eating the same breakfast or lunch:

<http://www.businessinsider.com/barack-obama-mark-zuckerberg-wear-the-same-outfit-2015-4>
<http://www.becomingminimalist.com/wear-one/>

So if it is good enough for President Obama, why not you? Your Assignment: **Simply pick a daily routine and take the decision out of it.** For one week at least, wear the same basic outfit or part of the same outfit, eat the same breakfast or pack the same lunch. You get the drift. **Find some way of your own to de-clutter your decision life!**

Option C: Room for What's Inside You

This exercise is inspired by a quote:

I think you should learn, of course, and some days you must learn a great deal. But you should also have days when you allow what is already in you to swell up inside of you until it touches everything. And you can feel it inside you. If you never take time out to let that happen, then you just accumulate facts, and they begin to rattle around inside of you. You can make noise with them, but never really feel anything with them. — Elaine Konigsburg

This quote reminds us that simplicity is not just about pruning the world outside of us, but also about making space for the world inside us. The real tragedy of busy lives is often not about being overwhelmed by outside voices, but being cut off from our inner voice. Simplicity in this sense is less about clearing away the trivial and more about making room for the divine to speak.

So here's your assignment: **Make time to listen. It is as simple as that.** As Konigsburg puts it, "allow what is already in you to swell up." There are a myriad of ways to make space: meditation, walking in the woods, turning off the radio on your way to work. The goal is to have the experience of simplifying your schedule and your listening enough to fit the experience that Konigsburg describes in her quote. Come to your group ready to explain how you pulled that off, and what you heard.

Option D: Before I Die....

For some this may be too trite. For others it may be too tender and close. But the exercise of reflecting on what you want to do before you die or what you might do if you had only one to two years to live is a core spiritual practice for all religious traditions. It is the ultimate simplifying and clarify exercise. In fact, recently, it has caught the imagination of people from around the world in the form of giant chalkboards where people are invited to complete the sentence, "Before I die I want to..."

<http://beforeidie.cc/site/blog/category/walls/>

<http://beforeidie.cc/site/about/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/candy_chang_before_i_die_i_want_to?language=en

You do not need a giant chalkboard installation to achieve the same clarifying experience. Your Assignment: **Complete the sentence for yourself.** Spend time thinking about it. Talk with friends. Make it the core question of your meditative practice for the month. The challenge will be to pick just one thing. The gift will come if you actually commit to doing it and living out the sentence sooner than later!

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what simplicity means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a person of simplicity means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?

1. Are you trying to simplify all on your own? It takes a village to raise a child. Same thing goes for a simplified life. Busyness and complexity are too big for what for one person to handle by themselves. Who might be your teammates? Why haven't you asked them to help?
2. What about your children? Have you allowed your child's/children's life/lives to become too complex? Are you and your hopes for them a source of simplicity or a burden?
3. Are your judgements about others too complex? Sometimes the simplest judgment is to assume good intentions. Are you reading too much into things?
4. Do you surround yourself with people of simplicity? If not, do you understand why?
5. Does simplicity mean something entirely different for you? We all relate to it in a different way. Our need for it differs from person to person. Are you feeling that room is not being made for your way?
6. Have you already done it? All of our lives include existing simplicity strategies. Maybe your challenge is to notice what already exists and double down.
7. Who is doing it right? Have you told them you admire them? Don't assume they don't need the validation.
8. What do wish you could say "no" to in your life? Why haven't you? What would happen if you did?
9. Has one of your treasures become a burden? Is it time to let go?
10. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a people of simplicity*.

Simplicity

Definition: freedom from complexity; absence of complication, luxury, pretentiousness, or ornament

Synonyms: plainness; clarity; modesty; restraint; ease; clearness

Wise Words

Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction. — **E. F. Schumacher**

Simple things are always the most difficult. In actual life it requires the greatest art to be simple, and so acceptance of one's self is the essence of the moral problem and the acid test on one's whole outlook on life. — **Carl Jung**

Our lives are often filled with a million things to do and consume that distract us from simple living. When I pay attention and become mindful, I marvel at the simple things in life that I once passed over. Consuming less and living simply are the true conditions of happiness. — **Barbara Ann Kipfer in *201 Little Buddhist Reminders***

I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all incumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run. — **Henry David Thoreau**

Simplicity means not only letting go of attachments to material goods, but also to beliefs and judgments about others, and of how I think the world should be. — **Brad Ogilie, from <http://williampennhouse.blogspot.com/2011/02/paradox-of-simplicity.html>**

It is easy to be heavy; hard to be light. — **G. K. Chesterton**

Simplicity boils down to two steps: Identify the essential. Eliminate the rest. — **Leo Babauta**

A door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact. God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. God moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. — **Thomas Merton**

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. — **Henry David Thoreau**

I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life—achieving a sense of peace within oneself, I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest. — **Oliver Sacks**

I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies,
you accord with the way things are.
Compassionate toward yourself,
you reconcile all beings in the world.
— **Lao-Tzu**

from Credo

I am not in love with holidays,
birthdays—nothing special—
and weekends are just days
numbered six and seven,
though my love
dozing over TV golf
while I work the Sunday puzzle
might be all I need of life
and all I ask of heaven.
— **Donna Hilbert**

full poem here: <http://tinyurl.com/jmasb36>

A Quiet Life

What a person desires in life
is a properly boiled egg.
This isn't as easy as it seems.
There must be gas and a stove,
the gas requires pipelines, mastodon drills,
banks that dispense the lozenge of capital.
There must be a pot, the product of mines
and furnaces and factories,
of dim early mornings and night-owl shifts,
of women in kerchiefs and men with
sweat-soaked hair.

— **Baron Wormser**

full poem here: <http://writersalmanac.org/episodes/20160209/>

Simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful. — **John Maeda**

My Hero

Just as the hare is zipping across the finish line,
the tortoise has stopped once again
by the roadside,
this time to stick out his neck
and nibble a bit of sweet grass,
unlike the previous time
when he was distracted
by a bee humming in the heart of a wildflower.
— **Billy Collins**

from Sabbaths 1999, VII

... What more did I
think I wanted? Here is
what has always been.
Here is what will always
be. Even in me,
the Maker of all this
returns in rest, even
to the slightest of His works,
a yellow leaf slowly
falling, and is pleased.
— Wendell Berry

full poem here:

<http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2015/11/wendell-berry-sabbaths-1999-vii.html>

Videos & Podcasts

“Less Stuff, More Happiness” (TED Talk)

Writer and designer Graham Hill asks: Can having less stuff, in less room, lead to more happiness? He makes the case for taking up less space, and lays out three rules for editing your life.

http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_less_stuff_more_happiness

“Towards a Science of Simplicity” (TED Talk)

Simplicity: We know it when we see it — but what is it, exactly? In this funny, philosophical talk, George Whitesides chisels out an answer.

http://www.ted.com/talks/george_whitesides_toward_a_science_of_simplicity

“The Art of Stillness” (TED Talk)

The place that travel writer Pico Iyer would most like to go? Nowhere. In a counterintuitive and lyrical meditation, Iyer takes a look at the incredible insight that comes with taking time for stillness. In our world of constant movement and distraction, he teases out strategies we all can use to take back a few minutes out of every day, or a few days out of every season. It’s the talk for anyone who feels overwhelmed by the demands for our world.

<http://tinyurl.com/lonrc5m>

“Repossessing Virtue: Marie Howe on Greater Simplicity and Laura Ingalls Wilder” by Trent Gillis for On Being

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/repossessing-virtue-marie-howe-greater-simplicity-and-laura-ingalls-wilder/4365>

“Living the Questions: What is Enough?”

podcast with Caroline Howe, environmentalist and entrepreneur

<http://livingthequestions.squarespace.com/blog/2014/11/3/episode-1-what-is-enough>

“Living the Questions: How Can I Live More Simply?”

podcast with Zach Kerzee, a Methodist minister, bread-baker and part-time farmer. He's a recent grad of Harvard Divinity School and the founder of Simple Church, a church without a building that meets for dinner every Thursday. His central spiritual practice is simplicity.

<http://livingthequestionspodcast.libsyn.com/13-zach-kerzee>

Embodied Simplicity

<https://www.facebook.com/morgan.burks.92/videos/10153769033350630/>

Articles & Online

“Simplicity on the Other Side of Complexity” by Parker Palmer, including a poem by Mary Oliver

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/simplicity-on-the-other-side-of-complexity/6482>

Something to make you smile

<http://tinyurl.com/js6jvf7>

People reflect on the question, *What does the simple life mean to you?*

<http://simplicitycollective.com/what-does-the-simple-life-mean-to-you>

Website with reflections and resources on simple living

www.simpleliving.org

The 7 Reasons That Science Says You Should Pay For Experience, Not Things

<http://www.fastcoexist.com/3046696/the-7-reasons-that-science-says-you-should-pay-for-experience-not-things>

The Spirit of Sauntering: Thoreau on the Art of Walking

“I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to Society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is — I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?”

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/11/17/thoreau-walking/>

The Evolution of Simplicity by David Brooks

“[M]any of us are on a wireless hamster wheel, running furiously to keep the inbox in the same place. ... After a while there’s an ache from all the scattered shallowness. So of course there’s a mass movement to combat mental harriedness, the epidemic of A.D.D. all around. Of course there’s a struggle to regain control of your own attention, to set priorities about what you will think about, to see fewer things but to see them more deeply.”

<http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/opinion/the-evolution-of-simplicity.html>

Movies & Television

Into the Wild

The engrossing true-life drama of an idealistic young man who yearns to live alone in the Alaskan wilderness.

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/17672/into-the-wild>

No Impact Man

“A bold and astonishing documentary about ... a radical idealist willing to put his ecological commitments to a test. He starts out with serious intentions, goes through some very funny unintended developments, and ends up with some surprising results for his whole family of their year-long project.”

<http://tinyurl.com/gtab6fc>

Blackish (short clip from the television show)

The devastating simplicity and complexity when it comes to hope and racial justice

<http://tinyurl.com/j9o29u6>

Seeking God: The Way of the Monk at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert

A fascinating look inside a community of Benedictine monks.

<http://tinyurl.com/z55egzn>

Songs

“Tis a Gift to Be Simple” (“Simple Gifts”)

A song that invites humility and walking gently upon the earth as a spiritual practice.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWTDgc96bg8

“Simplicity” by Bob Seger

www.metrolyrics.com/simplicity-lyrics-bob-seger.html

“Give Me the Simple Life” by Ella Fitzgerald

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub7A9mK_vX4

Books

Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World by Shirley Showalter

“‘I promise: you will be transported,’ says Bill Moyers of this memoir. Part Mennonite in a Little Black Dress, part Growing Up Amish, and part Little House on the Prairie, this book evokes

a lost time, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, when a sheltered little girl named after Shirley Temple entered a family and church caught up in the midst of the cultural changes of the 1950's and '60's. With gentle humor and clear-eyed affection the author, who grew up to become a college president, tells the story of her first encounters with the glittering world and her desire for fancy forbidden things she could see but not touch.

<http://www.amazon.com/Blush-Mennonite-Meets-Glittering-World/dp/0836196260>

The Art of Racing in the Rain by Garth Stein

A heart-wrenching but deeply funny and ultimately uplifting story of family, love, loyalty, and hope, *The Art of Racing in the Rain* is a beautifully crafted and captivating look at the wonders and absurdities of human life...as only a dog could tell it.

<http://tinyurl.com/gnz7tas>

Everyday Simplicity: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Growth by Robert J. Wicks

Too often we long for a spiritual life, but dismiss it as impossible in a hectic world that hardly allows time to eat and sleep, much less to nourish and replenish our souls. But Robert J. Wicks says we all have the path to spirituality within us, if only we would follow it.

<http://tinyurl.com/jrf8w7n>

Voluntary Simplicity - Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich by Duane Elgin

This is a book about “living with balance. Elgin illuminates the changes that an increasing number of Americans are making in their everyday lives -- adjustments in day-to-day living that are an active, positive response to the complex dilemmas of our time. By embracing the tenets of voluntary simplicity -- frugal consumption, ecological awareness, and personal growth -- people can change their lives and, in the process, save our planet.”

<http://tinyurl.com/jy7htl5>

List of books for children and families about simplicity:

http://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/189VKXTIH8Q1D/ref=cm_sw_su_w

If you've enjoyed this packet and are not a part of a Soul Matters congregation, please learn more about how to join us at www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com

Join the Soul Matters Facebook page to engage in the theme with participants from around the US, Canada and Europe: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>