

At the Heart of a Simple Life
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It is an idea that winds through all of human history. Socrates spoke of a golden mean in which either the excess or dearth of material things weakens the soul and intellect. Shakyamuni's Middle Way similarly describes a sensible balance between what is necessary to sustain life and what is aesthetically pleasing. In America, the Puritans, Quakers and Transcendentalists all practiced variations of this same basic idea, the most famous of these experiments captured in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. Native American culture embodies profound respect for a balanced way of life in harmony with nature.

So it is considerably ironic that the notion of the American Dream has been turned into a bumpersticker that reads, "Whoever dies with the most toys wins."

Author, speaker and futurist Duane Elgin has been examining this phenomena of human consumption and our civilization's evolution for more than 25 years. His book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* finds signposts at which humanity must inevitably make a choice — to walk the road to a sustainable future or one of voracious want.

"Since World War II," Elgin says in an interview with Sarah van Gelder in *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, "we've seen the most massive experiment that's ever been undertaken in programming the psyche of a civilization. The advertising culture has succeeded in creating a sense that our meaning in life depends upon the significance of what we consume."

The problem is not simply that greed is an undesirable trait. Imbalance in the world today is largely tilting along consumer lines, between developed nations and "developing" ones: 1.2 billion people live in absolute poverty, while 1 billion people hold 83 percent of the world's wealth.

Elgin sees a great desire in Americans today to live a simpler existence — to have less and enjoy it more — and posits patterns of behavior that can help create a less adorned, more soul-satisfying life. While Elgin states emphatically that "there is no dogmatic formula for simpler living," he suggests that one might begin by consciously investing more time in family, children, friends, civic affairs, as well as in developing a more intimate, reverential connection with nature. Compassion and a sense of kinship with the poor and concern for social justice and equity in the use of resources can come, he says, from adopting a simpler lifestyle, as seen, for example, in Gandhi's life.

After another holiday season, with all its familiar pleasures and indulgences, the new year may be a good time to more soberly examine our behavior and responsibility as consumers.

As Elgin says: "We have to see we're being consumed by our consumerism, instead of being supported by it. We're in the watershed of the American Dream. We have the choice of discovering and building a sustainable, satisfying, soulful way of living upon the Earth."

Or not.

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