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'Tis a gift to be simple

Joy Warner, Lay Spiritan

As a Lay Spiritan I am challenged by the Spiritan Rule of Life to wrestle with the meaning of a “simple style of life”: *“The gospel we are preaching ... becomes ... an invitation to adopt a simple style of life.”*

Living in Africa for three years had already opened my eyes to the wastefulness of our affluent First World. My Catholic faith had always proposed temperance, humility and dependence on God as virtues to be pursued. Our planet can no longer support our North American consumer lifestyle. Not only is there an extreme disparity between the consumption in industrialized cultures and agrarian cultures — our overall consumption is beyond the carrying capacity of the planet right now.

When you live in one of the richest countries of the world, surrounded by advertisements urging you to buy “bigger, better, newer” and where wants have been turned into needs, it is difficult to decide on an appropriate standard of living.

Simplicity circle

Reflecting together with others and holding each other accountable for our purchases and life style is very helpful. With this in mind, over ten years ago, a small group of friends and I began a Simplicity Circle which meets in each other’s homes every two weeks. We discuss one book per year and share our ups and downs on the path to simplicity — often confessing our failures, laughing at our mistakes and celebrating our small victories.

These might include such things as: washing and reusing plastic bags for food storage; buying and serving Fair Trade coffee; car pooling or taking public transport; making gifts instead of buying at a store; frequenting second-hand stores and charity shops; sharing vegetarian recipes; visiting organic grain mills and stores; buying our vegetables from local farmers; carrying a travel mug so as not to use Styrofoam; using a clothes line rather



than an electric dryer; using less water; buying energy-efficient appliances; using compact fluorescent bulbs and non-toxic cleaning materials; organizing a pot-luck wedding.

Small everyday acts can make a difference to the survival of our planet — but only if large numbers of people commit to doing them with persistence and faithful regularity.

Making a difference

People argue that such actions are just a drop in the ocean and won’t change the larger systemic problems. The answer is that they are linked in several ways, but foremost through our consumerism. Every plastic bag we use, every car we buy, every new house we build, not only use the earth’s resources, they pollute land, air and water. And, of course, burning fossil fuels is disrupting our climate globally.

But simplicity is central in even more fundamental ways. Voluntary simplicity questions the greed that runs rampant, e.g. companies willing to devastate the environment to make a profit.

Finally, voluntary simplicity questions the way we spend our time. If we rarely have time to feel connected to nature, because we are so busy working to make more money to buy more things, we probably won’t care enough to try to protect nature.

The simple living alternative provides distinct advantages for self-fulfillment, for other people in need, and for an overburdened earth.

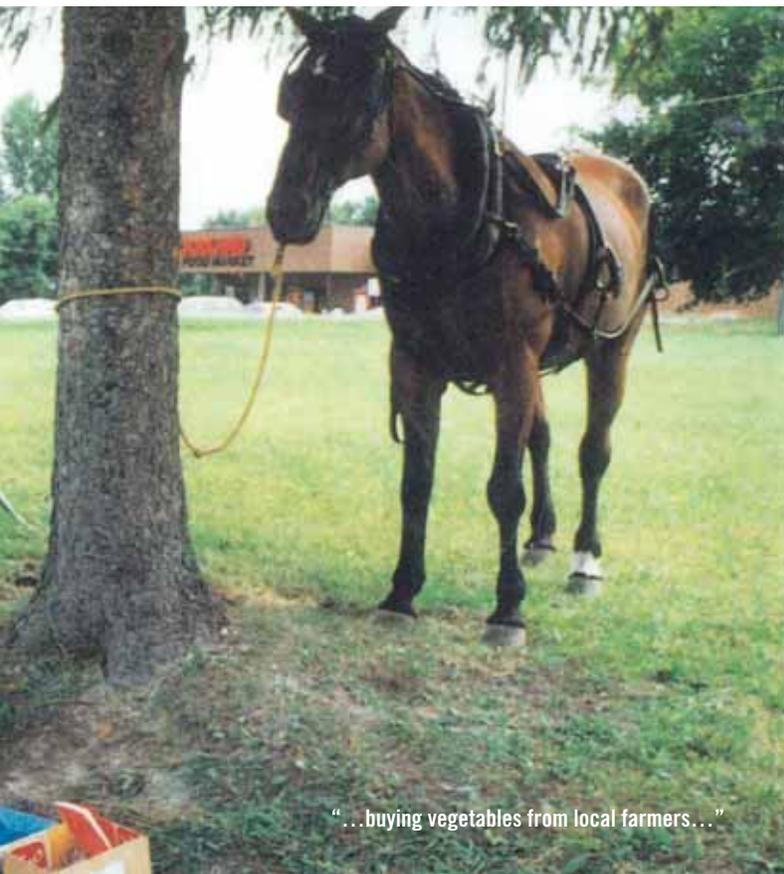


Photo by Jack Hourigan

“...buying vegetables from local farmers...”

The Spiritan Rule of Life goes further: “*In a world where the poor are often trampled on by the rich, we want our lived poverty to be a sign of the coming of a new world of sharing and of justice.*”

Simplicity of lifestyle at the individual level is not enough. We must also reflect on the impact of our consumer choices on all the members of our planet earth’s community. Working for systemic change through church groups like Development and Peace and KAIROS Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, we have helped organize campaigns on bottled water, climate change, sustainable energy and the negative environmental impact of Canadian mining companies in the global south. I sell Fair Trade coffee at my parish every month and attempt to educate parishioners on the benefits to coffee farmers and their land of buying fair trade, pesticide free products.

Temperance

E. F. Schumacher, in his most influential book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, writes: “Out of the whole Christian tradition, there is perhaps no body of teaching which is more relevant and appropriate to the modern predicament than the marvelously subtle and realistic doctrines of the Four Cardinal virtues, in particular Temperance, that means knowing when ‘enough is enough’”.

The idea of Living Simply in a World with Limits is rooted in the gospel: Don’t worry and don’t keep saying, “What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear? Your heavenly Father/Mother knows that you need them all. Set your heart on his kingdom and his goodness and all these things will come to you as a matter of course.”

Jesus’ whole life demonstrated that people are more important than possessions, that our riches need to be in relationship with God and with God-made-visible in other people.

What are the challenges?

In my experience simple living is anything but simple. It takes more time and effort to take public transport or walk, to cook from scratch, to look for fair trade products, to recycle, to wash and reuse containers, to check labels, to try to use locally produced and in season food, to give hand-made gifts.

I chose not to pursue a fulltime career, although I worked part time. This meant I could spend more time with my four children and husband. Living on one salary meant that we had less income than many of our peers, but we had a less pressured life and I was able to be active in the peace and social justice movements.

Surrounded by images of material wealth and luxury as the signs of a successful life, you have to have a strong sense of self esteem, know who you are and why you are living this way in

“The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.”

— Pope Benedict XVI

order to swim against the stream. Sometimes your friends, children or extended family may not be supportive.

Often the fruits of simple living are not evident in terms of immediate results or effective impact on the ecological crisis. Most of all, you are aware of your inconsistencies and hypocrisies as you compare the privileged conveniences which surround you with the stark struggle for survival of the two-thirds world.

“*Each day we are voting for the world we wish ... with our purse. With each purchase, we are sending out signals about the kind of world we want to live in.*” Pierre Pradervand, *The Gentle Art of Blessing*.

Next time we go to the store we would do well to remember, above all, that simplifying one’s life is an act of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the global South, with our planet Earth, and with future generations; and, finally, a very Spiritan source of deep joy as we try to be faithful to the Spiritan Rule of Life in our calling both as professed and Lay Spiritans. ■

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