

**The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: Countering
Consumerism for Greater Environmental, Societal,
and Spiritual Health**

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Table of Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	2
<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Positionality and Framework for Justice and Peace</i>	5
<i>Principles of Voluntary Simplicity</i>	8
<i>Historical Background</i>	13
<i>Collaborative Consumption</i>	16
<i>Conspicuous Consumption</i>	20
<i>Disposal of Products & Equitable Distribution of Resources</i>	24
<i>Overworked Americans</i>	27
<i>Loss of Community</i>	30
<i>Intentional Communities</i>	33
<i>Local Economies</i>	38
<i>Conclusion: Embracing Community</i>	41
<i>Works Referenced</i>	43

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the people of Belfast, Maine and its surrounding communities, who taught me the intense value of a loving, welcoming, vibrant community. While I could name many, I could not possibly list all of the members of this wildly special community who taught me to cherish my neighbors, to reach out to strangers, to live spontaneously and to be offbeat and unconventional, and to trust in the fundamental goodness of people. It is the people of the Belfast area who taught me to uphold social justice, to stand for equality, and to protect the Earth that provides for us. Without the influence, support, and friendship of the many members of this beautifully unique community—the kooks, hippies, musicians, activists, educators, entrepreneurs, farmers, friends, and family—this thesis may not have become a product of my academic and life passion. Deserving so much more from me than a thesis dedication, I have deep pride in calling myself a Belfastian. Thank you.

Introduction

*Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you imagined.
As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler, solitude
will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness, weakness. –Henry David Thoreau*

Simple living, or ‘voluntary simplicity,’ is growing as a movement, but its adherents currently represent only a tiny fraction of the American population. The simple living movement is about shifting from a life where the source of happiness is the acquisition of goods, to one centered on reduction of consumption and embracing community. It is about transforming our consumer culture into one that values abundance of time, health, community and relationships, new experiences, and connections to nature. It is a way of living that combats the terrible global effects of over-consumption that are highlighted in Annie Leonard’s short film, *The Story of Stuff* (Leonard, *The Story of Stuff*). The movement could be summarized by the adage of “living simply, so that others may simply live.” The term ‘voluntary simplicity’ was coined in 1936 by Richard Gregg, and describes a lifestyle geared against the notion that “bigger is better” (Gregg 1).

Most Americans, however, are continually saving for a bigger TV, a newer car, or another luxury. Since the 1950s, the average house size in the United States has gone from 1000 square feet to 2000, while the average family size has decreased. After the 9/11/2001 tragedy, President George W. Bush encouraged Americans to shop to help heal the nation, while his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, said, “We need to respond quickly so people regain confidence and consider it their patriotic duty to go shopping” (Norris 4). Politicians encouraged the American people to recover from tragedy not through emotional healing and community building, but by supporting the economy by spending money.

The voluntary simplicity movement is about creating an existence based not on conspicuous consumption and earning power, but on self-determination, self-reliance, and, overall, a more 'simple' life. It is about living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. Some of the basic values of the voluntary simplicity movement include material simplicity, human scale work, self-determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth. It is about not only living more responsibly, but also *living more*. As one simple living enthusiast I know wrote, "The more money you spend, the more time you have to be out there earning it, and the less time you have to spend with the ones you love" (Downshifting Week), or doing the activities that you love. Members of the voluntary simplicity movement work to change their own lives and their communities toward the broader goals of a sustainable global environment, sustainable communities, increased equality in access to resources, and economies aimed at human quality of life rather than profit. Many practitioners of voluntary simplicity have been inspired by the words of Socrates, Henry David Thoreau, and other philosophers and writers.

Economics, politics, and social justice motives all play into the voluntary simplicity movement. Adherents believe in simple living for a variety of reasons, including spirituality and health, an increase in time with friends/family/community, reduction of personal ecological footprints, anti-consumerist ideals, conservation, social justice, and sustainable development. For example, the relationship between economic growth and war has led to a form of tax resistance in which people reduce their tax liability by taking up a simple living lifestyle (Powers 3).

In an everyday conversation with two friends, the subject of the indoor ski slope in Dubai, United Arab Emirates arose. Having difficulty articulating how little sense I thought it made to have an entire building being kept frozen (the ski slope) in a 110-degree desert climate, I

asked my friends what they thought about it. One friend responded, “Well, they don’t have a Vermont or a Vail to go to, so they have to create their own.” Pointing out the complete lack of sustainability and the resource consumption that such a concept requires, the second friend responded, “Well, we could all live in teepees and stop drinking bottled water to save the world, but we’re not going to do that.” I went home and reflected on this conversation for the better part of an evening. How could two of my friends, educated and aware, have such troublingly different and apathetic views toward this monstrosity of 21st century hyper-consumption?

This thesis is not intended to preach to the choir of those who have already made the commitment to live simply in order to protect mother Earth and her future generations; nor does it exist to anger or provoke the more conservative people who are likely to deny the existence of global warming. The purpose of this thesis is to show that the world, and our place in it, is not one of black and white. We need not be liberal or conservative, live simply or live lives of rapid consumption. We need not choose between downhill skiing in a desert and living in a teepee, withdrawn from society as a recluse. There is a space between; a flexible medium which exists between becoming an ultra-hippy liberal and remaining a participant in the highly unsustainable behaviors to which we have become accustomed as Westerners in this age. That space between is a place in which the majority of the American population can work and live.

Positionality and Framework for Justice and Peace

It’s not that while trashing the planet the human race is having a party. Quite the opposite. We feel a malaise and a guilt that at another time in history might have motivated action, but that this time seems instead to be coupled with a terrible sense of helplessness. –Colin Beavan, “No Impact Man”

I consider myself a practitioner of voluntary simplicity. I am passionate about community, a fierce defender of social justice and global resource equity, and have reduced my

consumption as much as possible, buying locally whenever possible. I believe in the fundamental importance of a strong sense of community and local resilience for a high quality of life and am excited by their future prospects, but am, more so, disappointed by American trends in consumption and apathy. When I first learned of the voluntary simplicity movement, I knew that I had to learn as much as I could about it (and continue to do so), and that I needed to help spread its message to others. I hope that this thesis will allow me some level of success with regard to that goal.

As we progress into the 21st century, the damage resulting from our past 200 years' abuse of the planet is becoming increasingly evident. The global warming saga continues, species are becoming extinct, and oil spills are destroying ecosystems and local economies in the name of corporate greed. The natural systems supporting our lifestyles are gradually deteriorating as a result of those very lifestyles. At the same time, the complicated and unnatural systems upon which we have built our lives, economy, and nation are also beginning to crumble: the 2008 economic recession, the sub-prime mortgage crisis, and the undoubtedly dirty and bloody future of oil dependence are all results of a society of abhorrible overconsumption. As a highly industrial and developed society, we are facing a future in which little is guaranteed. Our habits of resource overconsumption have quickly erased much of what the Earth should have held for future generations. Our disregard for the future has only been matched by the disregard we have shown to the other peoples of the world, as we consume far more than our share of available resources, then put the nail in the coffin by dumping our trash in the countries from whom we took those precious assets. The solution to this environmental destruction and inequitable resource consumption across nations must start at the personal and community levels, and that is

how voluntary simplicity can contribute to bettering the world as we know it and life as others live it.

To clarify how voluntary simplicity can further social and environmental justice globally, this thesis will begin with an introduction to voluntary simplicity and its historical and spiritual backgrounds. It will then describe the rise of collaborative consumption, and how this new trend can be used to combat conspicuous consumption and provide for a more equitable distribution of world resources (while, simultaneously, reducing the amount of waste shipped to other nations). The discussion will then progress into the subject of American workforce fatigue, continually increasing productivity and decreasing leisure, and the need for each worker to regain understanding of the inestimable value of his time. The next section will describe one of the repercussions of the American workaholic model of economy and society, which is the distinct loss of community in contemporary American history and society. The next two sections offer advice on how community can be restored in America, through membership in intentional communities and support of local economies, including local currency and agriculture. This focus on local community and economy will help to reduce consumption and strengthen our bonds with others, while also increasing fair labor practices and offering numerous other social justice benefits. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of how embracing community and voluntary simplicity can help to curb hyper-consumption, alleviate or diminish multiple national and global social justice issues, and increase quality of life.

There exists a wide spectrum of ways in which we can reduce our negative impact on the planet and increase our positive effect on our own lives and those of others, without a decrease in quality of life or perceived ‘normality.’ To those of us who have had the good fortune of being well educated, aware, and in a comfortable situation in life, it is our duty to acknowledge the

impact that we each make on this world, and the impact that our actions will have on the world of our progeny. Once we have taken the initial steps towards acknowledgment of responsibility, we must begin to behave, and live day-to-day, in accordance with that responsibility. We are each not only stewards of our own lives, but of the land on which we walk and from which we eat and thrive.

Principles of Voluntary Simplicity

To be content with what we have is the greatest and most secure of riches. –Cicero

There are four main practices characteristic of those who practice voluntary simplicity—which, as noted, can be done for many different reasons, or a combination of them. The first practice is reducing consumption and expenditure, income, and possessions. The second is increasing self-sufficiency, and the third is reconsidering technology and our culture of rapid development and advancement. The fourth frequent practice, and certainly not the least important, is simplifying and reconsidering diet, while often focusing on supporting local agriculture and local economies.

The first practice—reducing consumption and expenditure, income, and possessions—may well be the most important in adopting a life of voluntary simplicity and in increasing global social justice and resource equity. By reducing expenditure on goods and services (and therefore the need for excess money), one can consequently reduce income by reducing his or her time spent working. In turn, one can use this time to spend with family or community, or to help others. Another opportunity created with a reduction in working hours is that of improving quality of life through community service, pursuing creative activities or hobbies, traveling, or generally building relationships with those who are important in our lives. Additionally, simple

living's suggestion of consuming as few resources needed to sustain life and happiness fundamentally questions the motivation of buying and consuming the high amount of resources that is now seen as a prerequisite for a good quality of life in America. With our excess cash (but, too infrequently, no excess of spare time), we often attempt to buy happiness in the form of goods. Time and again, however, we find that materialism does not satisfy the heart or the spirit—and frequently has adverse affects on life stress and health.

Author David Shi once said, “The making of money and the accumulation of things should not smother the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of the society” (as quoted in Elgin). Unfortunately, as we have found in the contemporary American experience, this is often the case. The pursuit of monetary wealth ‘smothers’ the cohesion of the family, as parents work more and families spend less time together around the dinner table and more time eating dinner in the car or in front of the television. In addition, it diminishes the good of the society, as there is less value placed on community cohesion and support and more placed on the construction of individual wealth.

At the same time as reducing consumption, reducing possessions can form a strong part of simple living. Some adherents of voluntary simplicity attempt to pare down their possessions to a mere 100 or 300, but all agree that life is simpler with fewer possessions. Freeing ourselves of possessions allows us to inhabit smaller (and potentially nicer) space, helps to free us from financial burden, keeps us less constrained, and, if the former possessions are donated, helps to ensure more equitable resource distribution.

Increasing self-sufficiency is also a method that can contribute to voluntary simplicity. Attempting self-sufficiency reduces the need for outside aid or resources, thereby reducing consumer demand. This type of autonomy can be collectively pursued, known as community

vitality or local resilience (Hewitt 19). Community self-sufficiency, or the fight for local resilience, is put into place through the Transition Town Movement. The goal of the transition town project is to prepare communities to deal with climate change and peak oil (the point after which global petroleum production enters terminal decline). The transition initiative, which can be found in communities throughout the US, UK, and elsewhere, is an effort to increase local resiliency and community self-sufficiency. According to the Transition Town website, the vision is that “every community in the United States will have engaged its collective creativity to unleash an extraordinary and historic transition to a future beyond fossil fuels; a future that is more vibrant, abundant and resilient; one that is ultimately preferable to the present” (www.transitionus.org). By increasing community self-sufficiency, the Transition Town Movement hopes to better communities by creating a more interdependent and resourceful population in each transition town. Both personal and community self-sufficiency are important for simple living and reduced demand on global natural resources.

Reconsidering the use of technology is a third principle of voluntary simplicity. Although frequently a secular endeavor, the pursuit of voluntary simplicity often involves the sort of avoidance of technology that can be found among religious groups such as the Amish or Mennonites. Those adopting a simple living lifestyle often take time to reconsider the technologies that are appropriate or desirable in their lives. Some simple living advocates are strong critics of modern technology, such as television advertisements that encourage consumerism and wasteful behavior. It is partially for this reason that many simplicity advocates encourage cutting down on or cutting out entirely the viewing of network television. As alternative sources of news and entertainment, many simple living advocates support community radio, podcasting, or borrowing books or movies from local libraries. At the same time, however, many proponents

believe that technology will be a key tool to making simple lifestyles possible within mainstream society (Merkel 156). The use of computers and the Internet for work at home and telecommuting increases sustainability and reduces an individual's carbon footprint (or, negative effects on the environment) through less reliance on paper for office work and fossil fuel for commuting to work. In addition, there are many high-tech tools necessary for the increased self-sufficiency that is closely associated with simple living: solar photovoltaic arrays, wind and water turbines, and high-efficiency automobiles all allow an individual to greatly diminish their "footprint" and reduce demand for global resources.

The fourth considerable practice of simple lovers is simplifying diet and increasing consumption of locally grown and raised food, thereby increasing support of local agriculture and the local economy. The adoption of a vegan or vegetarian diet, or reducing the consumption of meat, greatly simplifies an individual's diet and reduces demand on the earth. In the US, the factory-farmed meat industry (to provide for Americans' intensely meat-heavy diets) contributes more to global warming than all methods of transportation in the country. Increased pollution and CO₂ emissions, heavier agricultural acreage use, and increased chemical runoff and soil depletion are only a few of the negative effects of the mass-production meat market in our country. On a personal level as well (with the typical inactive lifestyle of a contemporary American), a high level of meat consumption can be detrimental to health. As Michael Pollan, food activist and author, writes in *In Defense of Food*, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" (Pollan 1). Pollan encourages his readers to eat real, well-grown, unprocessed food.

It is for this reason that many proponents of voluntary simplicity significantly change their diet. The lack of sustainability or authentic nutrition in the contemporary American food system is one of the great flaws in our society today, and the factory agricultural system is a

force against which many simple living advocates battle. In an American supermarket, the average food item has traveled 1500 miles from producer to consumer, requiring a substantial amount of fuel for transport and refrigeration and delocalizing the money spent by food consumers (Priesnitz 1). Simple living advocates sometimes use food miles, or the number of miles a specific food item or ingredient has traveled between the producer's farm and the consumer's table, to argue for consumption of locally grown food. By changing diet, practitioners of voluntary simplicity can radically alter their levels of consumption and demand on the national and international markets.

On the political front, the Green Party often advocates simple living, based on the consequent reduction in consumption of natural resources and a less burdensome environmental impact (www.gp.org). Inversely, simple living advocates use reduction of income and consumption to ideally affect politics. When a simple living advocate reduces his income to a nontaxable level and greatly reduces his demand for manufactured goods, he does not contribute (or contributes less) to war or exploitation of natural and human resources, as economic growth is often linked to war. Thus, by reducing his contribution to economic growth, he helps to reduce the likelihood and support of war or resource exploitation. At the same time, however, many practitioners of voluntary simplicity wish to localize their political involvement as much as possible. It is for this reason that some simplicity advocates become members of an intentional community or an ecovillage. Intentional communities have a long and spirited history, as does the simple living movement as a whole.

Historical Background

*There is great happiness in not wanting, in not being something,
in not going somewhere. –Jiddu Krishnamurti*

There have been many reasons throughout history for the practice of voluntary simplicity, and one of the principle drivers has been religion and spirituality. Many religious and spiritual figures, both western and eastern, have advocated for leading lives of simplicity. Buddha, Laozi, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton, and Confucius were all religious or spiritual leaders who were inspired to lead lives of simplicity. Mohandas Gandhi claimed that spiritual inspiration led him to a simple lifestyle (Gandhi). Confucius once said, “Excess and deficiency are equally at fault” (Leonard 154). The Bhagavad Gita (11.71) of Hinduism says, “That person who lives completely free from desires, without longing...attains peace.” Proverbs 30:8 of the Jewish Old Testament reads, “Give me neither poverty nor riches,” and the Tao Te Ching says, “He who knows he has enough is rich.” Shaker elder Joseph Brackett once proclaimed, “Tis a gift to be simple.”

Mark 8:36 of the Bible reads, “What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” As Geoph Kozeny writes, “It is well documented that early followers of Jesus banded together to live in a ‘community of goods,’ simplifying their lives and sharing all that they owned.” Long before we had reached the levels of consumption at which we find ourselves today, there were sources of wisdom throughout the world and her cultures where materialism was denounced and living a life of sufficiency was praised. Since the Industrial Revolution, the materialism, consumption, waste, and abuse of resources that were deplored so long ago have only skyrocketed.

The Amish, a group of Christian fellowships forming a subgroup of the Mennonite churches, are a still-vibrant religious group known for plain dress, simple living, and a strong

reluctance to adopt most conveniences of modern technology (Ericksen). Among the fastest-growing populations in the world, with about 250,000 in America and an average of 6.8 children per family, the Amish reject pride and highly value humility, while denouncing the majority of modern technologies and leading highly localized, simple lives (Ericksen). Maintaining 18th century lifestyles in the 21st century, the Amish do not have or want electricity in their homes, and most are involved in labor-intensive work such as farming or hand carpentry. Leading lives independent of modern developments, their religious beliefs require the Amish to remain separate from the non-Amish world.

In addition to religious and spiritual movements, there have been many secular examples of the practice of voluntary simplicity throughout human history and geography. In ancient Greece, the Epicureanism movement prescribed the untroubled life for ultimate happiness, reached by making careful choices and acknowledging that the troubles inherent in maintaining an extravagant lifestyle often outweigh the pleasures of living it (Epicurus). Epicurus, the philosopher who taught this, believed that we should maintain that which is necessary for happiness, bodily comfort, and life itself at minimal cost. Anything beyond this, according to Epicurus, should either be heavily moderated or entirely avoided. Diogenes was another ancient Greek philosopher (412-323 BCE) who lived a life of extreme simplicity, sleeping in a bathtub in the city's market and carrying a lamp in the daytime, claiming to be looking for an honest man among the sea of rascals in which he saw himself. His single earthly possession was a wooden bowl for drinking. Upon seeing a peasant boy drink from the hollow of his own hand one day, Diogenes decided to give away his drinking bowl.

Over 2,000 years later, in his 1854 masterpiece *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau wrote,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

Thoreau, in his Walden experiment, wanted to live as simply as possible, in order to experience life in its most pure form. From ancient Greece to Thoreau's 19th century Concord, Massachusetts, and to today, the idea of voluntary simplicity has been woven throughout history in the lives of philosophers, adventurers, and those who have wished to not simply get through life, but to advance "confidently in the direction of his dreams," to live deeply and deliberately, and to enjoy "life near the bone [,] where it is sweetest." In creating the *Walden* experience, Thoreau had three goals. He wished to escape the dehumanizing world of the Industrial Revolution by throwing himself into a more self-sufficient, simple, agrarian lifestyle. The book, even in the 19th century, challenged contemporary western culture's consumerist and materialist way of life, as well as its separation from and disregard for nature. Secondly, in an initiative found in almost every practitioner of voluntary simplicity, Thoreau simplified his life, reduced his material 'needs,' and consequentially reduced his expenditures in order to increase the amount of leisure time he had. This allowed him to spend more time on his own writings and on reading the works of others. *Walden* inspires readers to be more aware of how their lives are lived, materially, spiritually, and otherwise, and encourages them to make the choice of living more deliberately. His third goal at Walden was to experience the Transcendentalist theory that one can best encounter the ideal through nature. In surrounding himself by and working in nature at Walden, Thoreau hoped to 'transcend' normality and live the *idea* of the ideal.

Overall, Thoreau wanted to escape 'over-civilization' and strip away the superfluous luxuries of modern life, while living simply in search of the 'savage delight' of wild nature.

Inspired by transcendentalist philosophy, Thoreau's time at Walden was an adventure into self-reliance and a voyage of spiritual and intellectual discovery. Thoreau, a naturalist and author of multiple books and essay collections, is frequently noted as being the classic contemporary secular advocate for sustainable living and voluntary simplicity.

These historical movements and figures suggest that the answer to reducing our demand on the planet, and consequently reducing consumption (and, probably, increasing personal satisfaction) is voluntary simplicity. Focusing not on the acquisition of monetary and material wealth, but instead on building lives of community involvement, education, wide-ranging experiences, strong relationships, and deep personal satisfaction. Not only will voluntary simplicity help reduce individual impact on the planet and her resources (and other populations), but it is highly likely to increase personal satisfaction in life. There are many ways by which we can downsize our lives, thereby freeing time and resources for the pursuit of meaning and happiness. One of them is through participation in collaborative consumption.

Collaborative Consumption

We're wired to share [...] Access is more important than ownership. –Rachel Botsman

Within urban (and some rural) communities, many people have become practitioners of a component of voluntary simplicity, without realizing it. Collaborative consumption, a growing trend and strongly related to the voluntary simplicity and anti-consumerist movements, has allowed many people to see the value of *access* to items and services over *ownership*.

Collaborative consumption allows us access to that which we need, yet relieves us of the stress and worry of actually owning it. Examples of collaborative consumption include participation in car sharing services such as Zipcar (becoming a "Zipster") (www.zipcar.com), movie-sharing

services such as Netflix (www.netflix.com), and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. Promoted by advances in social media and peer-to-peer online platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Groupon), collaborative consumption has become a cultural and economic trend that drives us away from previously encouraged life styles of hyper-consumption.

This growing trend has led to collaborative lifestyles, based on the sharing of assets and resources such as skills, time, space, and money. This trend diminishes demand for production of new goods, and has become popular in transportation (cars, bikes, ridesharing), food (farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture), living spaces (couch surfing, AirBnB), money (social lending, time banks, local currencies), and space (parking, community gardening). In their book, *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, authors Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers write,

At the heart of this transformation are two interlocking phenomena. The first is a values shift. There is a growing consumer consciousness that finite growth and consumption based on infinite resources are not a viable combination. Consequently, we are finding ways to get more out of what we buy, and more important, out of what we don't buy. At the same time, we are coming to realize that the constant quest for material things has come at the expense of impoverishing relationships with friends, family, neighbors, and the planet. This realization is causing a desire to re-create stronger communities again (44).

The rise of collaborative consumption in the US and other western countries has been a product of several factors: the faltering national and international economy, increasing environmental awareness, and the rise of technological systems and online platforms that allow us to participate in an increasingly high number of collaborative services and ownerships. In general, the time has ended for twenty-somethings to drive a new BMW off the lot with zero money down, or to relay the cost of a fancy hotel room to the future payment of a credit card; instead, that same young professional may become a Zipcar member for driving needs and couch surf or rent a room from AirBnB when traveling. After the sub-prime mortgage crisis, the obvious was

revealed to the general population. The American dream of owning a house is *not* possible for everyone: you must have *money* to purchase a home. The days of signing a mortgage without a down payment are over. The economic downturn and the mortgage crisis (in spite of the many legitimately sad stories it has produced) have begun to forcefully curb the American culture of massive debt.

At the same time as curbing the uptake of debt in housing, transportation, and credit cards, the economic downturn has forced many Americans to take a more serious look at their own consumption, and the things they own and of which they dispose. As Botsman and Rogers write, “there is a growing consumer consciousness” (Botsman 44) that the world’s resources are finite, and that we cannot continue the rate of consumption that we have sustained over the past few decades. One way of combating over-consumption is the sharing of resources as part of a larger community, which is enabled by modern methods of collaborative consumption.

Collaborative consumption brings about several positive contributions to contemporary society, in ways that were not possible before we became so technologically connected. Zipcar enables us to own fewer cars, while Craigslist’s rideshare (www.craigslist.org) enables us to drive fewer miles in those that we do own. Couch surfing (www.couchsurfing.org) and AirBnB (www.airbnb.com) allow us to spend less money on hotels, and to meet new people in the process. Netflix gives us unlimited access to arguably the largest movie library in the world, while allowing us to free up space in our homes and be weighed down by fewer possessions. Using the laundromat instead of purchasing our own washers and dryers allows us to worry less about machine maintenance and energy costs, while also affording us the potential to meet our next friend or partner.

Many of these services, programs, and ideas include face-to-face interaction with strangers, and that is part of the beauty of collaborative consumption. It puts to rest the mindset that everyone must have his or her own car (better than the Jones's) and an impressive DVD collection, and relieves the perceived need to show off monetary wealth and "accomplishment" through the acquisition of goods. Instead, participants in collaborative consumption, while generally saving money, reducing consumption, and lessening their impact on world resources, begin to become members of a greater community. As a component of voluntary simplicity, collaborative consumption thus lends itself to simplifying and enhancing life in several ways. The burden of every person owning his own things is gone—services and items are freely shared between acquaintances and strangers—and therefore each affected life is simplified: there are fewer possessions to worry about, fewer to maintain and clean, and fewer by which the participant is held down. Collaborative consumption allows us to be liberated of some of our possessions, and liberation is a perfect descriptor for this. We may think that we own our possessions, but in truth, our possessions own us. They tie us down; they require constant care; they require a place to stay (and therefore a larger apartment/home, or a storage locker); they clutter our lives; they stress us out. Relieving ourselves of these possessions, being liberated, participating in collaborative consumption—simplifies our lives.

Using collaborative consumption to simplify our lives, however, is one of the less significant benefits of the concept. On the personal level, it simplifies our lives, allowing us to worry less about the things we own (being fewer), and affording us more time to spend doing that which we enjoy. On the local and national level, collaborative consumption helps to build a trusting community, whether face-to-face or through the Internet. It is on the global level, however, that collaborative consumption, combined with personal consumption reduction, makes

a significant effect. In *The Story of Stuff*, filmmaker Annie Leonard lays out some very disconcerting facts about American consumptive behavior, and its impacts on the world. For example, Americans comprise about 5% of the Earth's population, yet consume 30% of world resources and produce 30% of worldwide waste (Leonard, *The Story of Stuff*). Through television, the Internet, billboards, and magazines, the average American is targeted with more than 3000 advertisements per day, while that same average American produces 4.5 pounds of garbage per day (presumably, from purchases encouraged by some of those 3000 advertisements) (Leonard 163).

Conspicuous Consumption

The lust for comfort murders the passion of the soul, and then walks grinning in the funeral. –Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

Money in my pocket, but I just can't get no love. –Simply Red, "Money in My Pocket"

It is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly. –Bertrand Russell

In simplifying life through reduced consumption, what exactly is being combated? Conspicuous consumption, leading to hyper-consumption, has been a spike driven into our society since its emergence in the 1920s and the 1950s consumer goods explosion that has resulted in the dire situation in which we find ourselves today. The term “consumerism” first appeared in 1915, and was used to refer to “advocacy of the rights and interests of consumers.” Today, however, it refers to “emphasis on or preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods” (Oxford English Dictionary). Consumerism, now used to describe the effects of the capitalist market economy on the mind and actions of the individual, and is sometimes associated by activists to environmental degradation, war, crime, greed, the breakdown of values, and a

general social malaise. Critics of materialism, or consumerism, have included Pope Benedict XVI, German historian Oswald Spengler (“Life in America is exclusively economic in structure and lacks depth.”) (Stearns), and French author Georges Duhamel, who held “American materialism up as a beacon of mediocrity that threatened to eclipse French civilization” (Stearns). The culture of proving self-worth through the acquirement of visible goods—jewelry, clothing, electronics, and cars—in an attempt to appear prosperous, has become a tremendous force in the American economy and society. As German philosopher Karl Marx argued that the capitalist economy would lead to the fetishization of commodities (Marx), so began conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is used to describe peoples’ tendency to identify strongly with commercial brand names and status-enhancing products they consume, such as expensive cars, electronics, or jewelry. The normalization of conspicuous consumption in a consumer culture compels people to consume as a method of social signaling or for representation of status or belonging.

As economist Victor Lebow said in 1955, regarding American economic growth and the increasingly consumptive mindset of the general population,

Our enormously productive economy... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption...we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate (as quoted in Coghlan 2).

This general attitude toward economics and consumption clearly still exists in America today. Nearly 40 percent of baby boomers in America have less than \$10,000 saved for retirement—after having earned an average of over \$750,000 over their 30-year careers (Merkel 83). Where did the other \$740,000+ go? A significant portion was, almost always, spent on unneeded purchases encouraged by advertising. According to Merkel, “On average, we spend what we

earn” (Merkel 83). Advertisements often portray commodities as the key to securing personal happiness and confidence, and convey the message that acquiring more and more possessions will ensure them the self-actualization for which they strive.

Hyper-consumption, the seemingly endless acquisition of more ‘stuff’ in ever-greater amounts, is rampant in America today. As Colin Beavan writes in his book, *No Impact Man*,

Those of us lucky enough to be well compensated for [our] sacrifices get to distract ourselves with expensive toys and adventures—big cars and boats and plasma TVs and world travel in airplanes. But while the consolation prizes temporarily divert us from our dissatisfaction, they never actually take it away (Beavan 8).

According to Beavan, many Americans use money not only to create appearances of success, but also to divert their attention from a lack of satisfaction in their personal or professional lives.

America now has more shopping malls than it does high schools, and there exists 16 square feet of shopping mall for every citizen and resident of the United States.

In *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, classic economist E.F.

Schumacher describes the direction in which the modern American economy is aimed:

A modern economist is used to measuring the ‘standard of living’ by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is ‘better off’ than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption [...] The less toil there is, the more time and strength is left for artistic creativity. Modern economics, on the other hand, considers consumption to be the sole end and purpose of all economic activity (Schumacher 61).

The Buddhist economist’s approach, as Schumacher (61) calls it, makes sense and sounds ideal.

Why would we consume any more than we needed for well-being? We do this because our society is one of never-ending consumption, encouraged by economists, where consumption in itself *is* well-being. We are encouraged to consume for the sake of consumption, to shop for the

thrill of shopping, to pamper ourselves with the most unnecessary of things. Schumacher considers consumption to be a means to an end (to human well-being), to consequentially allow for free time for “artistic creativity,” community involvement, civic engagement, time with family and friends, adventure, travel, and life experiences. Unfortunately, this is not how the typical economist views consumption. As American economists and, generally, politicians, encourage, consumption is a means to more consumption. Consumption is American.

Perhaps the ultimate example of how out-of-hand consumption has become in the US is a November 28, 2008 incident in Valley Stream, New York. At a Wal-Mart department store, after a crowd of over 2000 shoppers had been gathered outside for 12+ hours, the mass of people itching to get a black Friday deal shattered the front doors of the store, and a 34-year-old security guard was trampled to death. When emergency medical officers responded to the scene, even they were stepped on by shoppers. Even after police closed the store and declared it a crime scene, many people refused to stop shopping, yelling, “I’ve been waiting in line since yesterday morning.” When the store reopened the next day, shoppers again lined up to “blitz” (Botsman & Rogers 19). While some people have made jokes about this well-known incident (Marco 1), it serves as a disturbing metaphor for our consumer culture as a whole. In what culture are we raised to shatter glass doors and mow people down, simply to buy more stuff? How much is a cheap deal on the latest appliance really worth? Hyper-consumption has brought our culture to a place where the hunt for a good deal merits trampling a fellow human. In this case, it would seem that a bargain is worth a human life.

As noted in *The Story of Stuff*, Americans consume far higher than their proportion of world resources (Leonard 153), fueling not only increased and unsustainable resource use but also increasing the amount of waste produced, eventually finding its way into the nation’s

landfills and soils. Our consumption and reckless usage of natural resources is taking a toll on the Earth and her other species. The Earth can only produce a certain amount of sustainable resources, and the human population is currently consuming far above that sustainable amount. The world's wealthiest one billion people alone consume the Earth's entire sustainable resource yield, and the overall population is consuming 20 percent over that yield. It is estimated that between 1,000 and 100,000 species of life go extinct every day—a rate 100 to 1,000 times higher than the natural rate (Merkel).

With regard to oil, the US imports \$19 billion annually and spends an additional \$55 billion each year to safeguard the supplies from which we draw, primarily (70 percent) from Middle Eastern nations. We actively promote military intervention and violence in order to protect the precious (and dwindling) resources on which our highly mobile consumer nation depends. In the first Gulf War, 19 Americans died and between 160,000 and 220,000 Iraqis were killed. Annually, US military spending accounts for nearly half of all worldwide military expenditures (\$380 billion of \$780 billion spent worldwide) (Merkel 9). The amount we spend to protect the resources from which the products we buy are produced, is not insignificant when considering the overall amount we end up spending on those products. Are there, however, non-economic or resource-related costs to our high consumption?

Disposal of Products & Equitable Distribution of Resources

You will never understand violence and nonviolence until you understand the violence to the spirit that happens from watching your children die of malnutrition. —A Salvadoran peasant

After disposing of it, most Americans never consider what will happen to the plastic wrapper in the trash can, the computer that quickly reached its planned obsolescence, or the car that became

too old for their taste. American consumer waste, especially that which contains dangerous chemicals (including most electronics), is frequently shipped to other countries, to be dealt with by a foreign population in exchange for a cash payment. How does our trash, in turn, affect these foreign populations? A great example is a used computer, of which thousands are thrown away yearly in the US. There are 1,000 substances, including 350 different hazardous chemicals, used in the production of an average computer. Much of America's computer waste is sent to the rural rice-growing town of Guiyu, China, where women and children are paid \$1.50 per day to strip these waste computers down to components. According to soil tests done by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Guiyu, lead levels in soil and water there are now 2,400 times greater than those permitted by WHO guidelines. There were several other heavy metals for which the soil and water of Guiyu tested far above the standards of the US Environmental Protection Agency: barium by 10 times; tin by 152 times; and chromium by 1,338 times. A year after the opening of the electronic waste processing operation, the village began to need to truck in water daily for consumption—the local supply had been destroyed by the runoff of electronic waste substances. Many of these substances are known carcinogens, and some cause birth defects or lung or skin irritation. Electronic waste is a strong example of how American consumption can have terribly negative effects on other groups of the world population (Merkel).

At the same time as we dump our unwanted, often unhealthy, waste on other population, we are not allowing for equitable distribution of world resources to those populations. As Merkel describes,

In 1998, half of the 1.2 billion people who lived on less than \$110 per year have stunted growth or mental retardation from insufficient caloric intake. The poorest 3.6 billion—60 percent of humanity—live on less than \$520 per year. A third of the world's children suffer from malnutrition [...]. Only 30 percent of the wealthiest billion report being very happy. In America, according to a poll of those earning \$274 a day, 27 percent stated,

“I cannot afford to buy everything I really need” (Merkel 61).

Trade organizations and agreements such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) have found ways to legally break down borders to push raw material flow toward the industrialized world, far away from the hands of those dying of malnutrition in the third world. Agreements such as these drive further wealth concentration for the top percentages of the global population, and drive down opportunities for the poorer, much larger, population. Unfair WTO agreements even led to massive violent protests in Seattle, Washington in 1999, when a WTO ministerial conference was held there (these protests were the basis for the 2007 film *Battle in Seattle*). Members of industrialized populations cannot continue to consume at current levels—there is no way to ratchet up resource use or production in order to assist those populations stricken with poverty, while we maintain an abominable level of mass consumption. As Merkel declares,

In the 150 or so years since the Industrial Revolution, we’ve doubled the population four times and doubled the size of the global economy 20 times [...] Currently, humanity takes 20 percent more than is produced; thus wearing down the Earth’s systems (Merkel 64).

In other words, according to Merkel, we are not only consuming at 100 percent capacity (thus precluding any additional resource production for poorer populations), but we are digging into the resources necessary to sustain future generations for one-sixth of our current consumption.

This is a clearly unsustainable rate of consumption. In *Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money*,

Woody Tasch begins:

Capitalism and the global economy have reconceived of development as a linear process that has no end. They have conceived of nature as a resource that is infinite. Today we stand as witnesses of the environmental disaster this has caused (Tasch ix).

When well aware of the destruction our consumption causes, how do we, as Americans, afford to (and knowledgeably) consume and continue to demand so many more resources than are necessary for the sustenance of life?

Overworked Americans

“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” –Henry David Thoreau

While most people would never knowingly contribute to such a tragedy as that which occurred at the Valley Stream Wal-Mart, most would trade life for stuff. Every day that is worked to pay for anything more than life’s essentials (food, housing, healthcare), is a day of life that is sold. With the exception of those who are passionate about their work, time spent at work is life sold. We exchange our precious hours for cash, then use that cash to purchase goods in a vain and desperate attempt to make up for the unhappiness that is brought about by sitting in an office chair and commuting nine hours per day, five days per week, fifty weeks per year. As Beavan writes in *No Impact Man*,

Many of us work so hard that we don’t get to spend enough time with the people we love, and so we feel isolated. We don’t really believe in our work, and so we feel prostituted. The boss has no need of our most creative talents, and so we feel unfulfilled. We have too little connection with something bigger, and so we have no sense of meaning (Beavan 8).

Many people spend their entire lives trying to find some sort of balance between time, money and possessions, and happiness. The equation is not an easy one, and most often goes unanswered. As American record producer Rick Rubin once said, “Time: If not aware of its inestimable value, sell it to the highest bidder for cash, and always be cheated. No one but a fool ever sold more of his time than he had to.” To live life most fully, one must work (sell time) only as much as is necessary—any time beyond that should be used for personal enrichment.

As Juliet Schor writes in her book, *The Overworked American*, “Time has become a currency, which we ‘spend’ instead of ‘pass.’ Many of us need to relax, to unwind, and, yes, to work less” (Schor xv). Schor comments that we no longer leisurely ‘pass’ time, we ‘spend’ it, relegating it to certain tasks, rather than passing it in relaxation. She continues, “I found that far from raising leisure time, the development of capitalism involved a tremendous expansion of human effort. People began to work longer and harder. As profits increased with industrialization and capitalism, leisure time decreased. Schor continues:

In the last twenty years the amount of time Americans have spent at their jobs has risen steadily. Each year the change is small, amounting to [...] slightly more than one additional day of work [...] When surveyed, Americans report that they have only sixteen and a half hours of leisure a week, after the obligations of job and housework are taken care of (1).

Again, as the amount of time that the average American spends at work increases, so his leisure time decreases. Schor’s next point is most striking:

The decline in Americans’ leisure time is in sharp contrast to the potential provided by the growth of productivity. Productivity measures the goods and services that result from each hour worked. When productivity rises, a worker can either produce the current output in less time, or remain at work the same number of hours and produce more [...] [;] either more free time or more money. [...] Since 1948, [...] the level of productivity of the US worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services in less than half the time it took in that year. We actually could have chosen the four-hour day. Or a working year of six months. *Or, every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work—with pay* (2).

The amazing thing, however, is that, between 1948 and today, we, as a population, have not used any of this productivity dividend to reduce the number of hours we spend working. The average number of hours worked has actually increased over the past two decades, and, in 1990, “the average American owns and consumes more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, but also has less free time.” How is it possible that we, as a population, have more than doubled our

workplace productivity, but have, at the same time, *increased* the amount we work and *decreased* our leisure time? How have we, as Schor calls it, created a profound ‘structural crisis of time?’ The answer is that, with greater productivity, we have increasingly become a consumer nation, working extra hours to be able to afford more luxuries—both goods and services. We sell our time to employers, not considering the fact that we are essentially trading time of leisure, friends and family, adventure, civic engagement, or community-building, for mere material goods.

Thus, one of the tenets of voluntary simplicity is presented. Life is not to be sold away to the highest bidder; spent at a thankless and unrewarding job in exchange for a big paycheck. Life is to be *lived*. As Rick Rubin suggests, if you sell any more of your time (work any more) than is necessary to comfortably sustain yourself and those you support, you will always be cheated. No matter how high the salary may be, time is, as Rubin says, of “inestimable value.” Every day sold is a day that will never be regained. Time, that is, life, does not have a monetary, per-unit value. Our lives, and the relationships, experiences, and feelings with which we fill it, are of incalculable value. There is no bargaining in the endgame—your prime years of life, that is, your twenties through sixties, are irreversible. If those years are spent behind a desk, that is an irreparable definition of a significant portion of your life. If those years, however, are spent in self-, partnership, community, and world exploration, they are bound to be fruitful, both for the individual and for those affected by his participation in partnership and community. Once our basic material needs are met, the greatest determining factor of happiness has proven time and again to be time and relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and community members. Working increasingly long hours to pay for material wealth beyond our basic material needs,

however, decreases our time with family, friends, and community—and increases time spent alone (physically or emotionally).

Loss of Community

What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously.

But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured. —Kurt Vonnegut

Today, Americans spend more time at work than the people in almost any other industrialized country. Increasing time spent working has not only led to less time with loved ones, but also to a decrease in time spent on civic engagement and community building. As Annie Leonard writes in her book, *The Story of Stuff*,

*In **Bowling Alone**, Harvard professor Robert Putnam chronicles the decline in participation in social and civic groups, ranging from bowling leagues to parent-teacher associations to political organizations. We end up with a situation in which we have fewer friends, fewer supportive neighbors, less robust communities, and near total apathy about our role within a democratic political system (Leonard 149).*

Our increasing fascination with “stuff,” and the subsequent need to work longer hours to acquire that stuff, subtracts from the time and energy that we have to develop relationships and affirm our commitment to and involvement in community, education, social organizations, and politics. This lack of participation, in turn, results in our communities being unable to offer what they did in the past. Twenty-five percent of Americans currently identify themselves as socially isolated, saying they have no one in their lives with whom they can discuss personal trouble (Leonard 150).

With that social isolation and lack of community support comes a loss of logistical support—childcare, moving help, assistance when sick—that has been historically available in

tight-knit communities. Americans are increasingly too busy or isolated for these things—yet there is still a need, so it is filled by the market. We now pay for services, assistance, and conveniences that used to be the fruits of community membership and support. We now pay people, rather than relying on family and friends, to help us move our stuff, guide us through a difficult breakup, or watch our pets while we are away. We can even buy sports video games to simulate community soccer games or tennis championships. Things that were once considered neighborly activities or the role of a friend's shoulder are now purchasable commodities and services. In a continuous loop of negative feedback, in which we pay for the services previously supplied by community, thus increasing our need to spend time working for money, and consequently reducing our ability/availability to spend time building and contributing to community.

What repercussions, as Americans, are we feeling from this distinct lack of community involvement and support? With continued economic growth, there seems to have been an inverse relationship to societal progress. With over 30% of adults and 20% of children (aged six to eleven) being obese (Leonard 150), we find obesity at record levels. Teen suicide is at an all-time high. Clinical depression among Americans was ten times higher in 2005 than in 1945. Between 1994 and 2004, the use of antidepressants tripled. The average American sleeps 20% less at night than (s)he did in 1900. That same average American holds 6.5 credit cards, with the average cardholder owing over \$5000 (Leonard 151). Nearly every indicator used to measure progress as a society shows that the physical and emotional health of Americans has decreased with increased economic prosperity (and the decrease in community involvement that has accompanied that development). The United States is listed last among industrial countries on the United Nation's Development Programme's Human Poverty Index, which examines factors

such as poverty, longevity, and social inclusion in populations (Leonard 151). The Happy Planet Index (2009), which essentially measures how well countries convert resources into wellbeing, rates the United States as number 114 of 143 countries (www.happyplanetindex.org). As a society, we are suffering; from overwork, from lack of human and emotional connection, from the loss of community we have experienced.

It is time that this loss of community in America is reversed. Social disintegration resulting from the decline in American community has resulted in decreases in social justice, individual wellbeing, and individual connection across America. According to psychologist Seymour Sarason, community “is one of the major bases for self-definition.” Sarason describes the psychological sense of community as

An acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure (28).

The majority of Americans, unfortunately, no longer feel this connection and interdependence with others. There is less and less time spent among neighbors and building community within a neighborhood, and the idea of interdependence between neighbors has sharply decreased. With the advent of television, it has become commonplace to come home from work, eat dinner and watch television, and repeat the same process the next day. The numbing glow of television, and the number of hours spent in front of it (five hours per day for the average American) (Leonard 167), detracts from our desire to spend time interacting with each other. 99.5 percent of American households have televisions, 95 percent of the population watches TV every day, and the average home has a TV on for eight hours per day (Merkel 6). Other than sleep and work, TV, it seems, is America’s primary activity. The average American sees 40,000 TV commercials per year, which continues to drive the hyper-consumption that contributes to loss of

community (Merkel). Television sucks us out of reality and into fictional communities. However, what happens on television has absolutely no bearing on our realities. This distraction from reality was one of the prime focuses of the Situationists in 1960s France. Members of Situationist International (SI), with ideas rooted in Marxism, advocated for the fulfillment of primitive human desires and the pursuit of a superior, passionate life alternative to that prescribed by the capitalist economic order. Capitalism, for the Situationists, was the principal obstacle against passionate living. Peaking in Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the Situationists believed that features of 'spectacle' such as mass media and advertising played a central role in capitalism, portraying a fake reality and masking the degradation of human life occurring in capitalist reality (Elliot). The American population needs to draw itself away from the fictional escape of television and the artificial allure of advertising in order to reinvest in authentic community membership and participation.

Intentional Communities

What make the larger social entity possible are the smaller communities that continue to offer the face-to-face existence that is at the heart of human experience and necessity.” –Susan Love Brown

To combat this loss of community in contemporary America, there are many who are creating and joining intentional communities. An intentional community is one that is planned with a purpose, often to foster a much greater degree of teamwork, or a sense of true community, than other communities (in which residents often only have geographical location in common). In contrast, however, residents of intentional communities often hold a common vision—political, economic, social, religious/spiritual, or other. In a sort of alternative lifestyle, there are

often certain responsibilities and resources shared among community members. Neighborhoods within intentional communities tend to be more family-oriented, self-supporting, and interdependent than typical communities. The focus is, frequently, the importance of living together and sharing life. This is in direct contrast to the independence of a typical American household. An ecovillage is a specific type of intentional community, in which residents focus on leading ecologically sustainable lives. Members of ecovillages often consider wasteful consumerist lifestyles, factory farming, disregard for nature, urban sprawl, and the breakdown of traditional communities as trends that must be stopped to assure an ecologically sustainable world for future generations. Beavan describes this phenomenon well in *No Impact Man*:

Not only have so many of us discovered that we've been working our years away to maintain a way of life that we don't really like, but we are waking up to the fact—I hope—that this same way of life is killing the planet (9).

Ecovillages, in general, are made up of residents who have come to this same realization, and who have made serious life changes to combat it. In Belfast, Maine, one such example currently in development is the Belfast Cohousing and Ecovillage (www.mainecohousing.org).

According to the Belfast Ecovillage website,

We seek a close-knit, cooperative, and ecologically conscious way of life... We want to maintain the land around us... We value community activity, shared resources, self-sufficiency, local food production, simplicity above complexity, [...] integration with our wider local community through outreach, education, CSAs, etc, and connections with larger cultural circles.

The Belfast Ecovillage, like many intentional community models, features a highly participatory process for residents in both the development and the management of the neighborhood, deliberate neighborhood design (physically designed to foster a strong sense of community), extensive common facilities—for community dinners and events, shared office and exercise space, and other amenities—and a non-hierarchical decision-making structure. Under this

model, all families within the community are financially independent, but all contribute (financially and otherwise) to the maintenance and vitality of the community. All residents know (and can depend upon) their neighbors, and there are many community-building activities.

Residents of an ecovillage or other intentional community will almost certainly not be found among the 25% of Americans who feel they have no one to share their concerns or troubles. Instead, residents of these communities will have trusted neighbors and an entire, supportive community on which to rely. One of the most well known ecovillages in the United States, Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI), is located in Ithaca, New York. As Joan Bokaer, one of the founders of EVI, wrote in 1991,

[EVI] would address many of the problems faced by modern families such as chronic time crunch, isolation, and lack of care for young children and the elderly. In addition, energy-efficient housing, the sharing of many resources, the lack of needing to own a car, and the production of food on-site can push the cost of living way down (Walker 13).

As most intentional communities do, Ecovillage at Ithaca provides to its residents a solution for the loss of community in America. For its residents, no longer must they feel isolated from others. No longer must they work extra hours to pay for care for their children or elderly parents while they are away. No longer must they feel the intense time crunch that is partially driven by lack of communal support. Within the village, and within any successful community, residents are provided solutions to these contemporary problems. In addition, within the ecovillage, energy-efficient housing, communally shared resources, diminished need for car ownership, and locally grown food make simpler living possible. As cost of living decreases, each resident needs to work less in order to live a comfortable life and provide for his family. With the time saved from working less, each resident is then afforded more time to explore his passions, to spend time with his family and friends, and to contribute to the community, continually enriching

his life and building the community's network of support and solidarity. The ecovillage model is inherently supportive of voluntary simplicity, which in turn continues to drive community development.

Intentional communities, as the name suggests, are made up of residents who have designed their lives with intention and purpose to create a desired lifestyle. This lifestyle, sculpted through an individual's choices of community, vocation, friendships, and pastimes, will allow the person to live—ideally—entirely according to their values or beliefs. When done in community, intentional living allows for a life surrounded by others of similar conscience and integrity.

Intentional living, like the practice of voluntary simplicity, is frequently a backlash against the commercialization of mainstream society, with advertisements found at every street corner, on magazine pages, and on screens throughout peoples' homes. Intentional living often strives to oppose this, creating a nurturing environment for the individual and his family. According to Marguerite Bouvard's *The Intentional Community Movement*, intentional communities "are addressing an eternal problem of man in society: the search for purpose and for mutual support which is the crux of community" (21). At the same time as grouping together individuals of similar beliefs, intentional communities allow their residents to live together in harmony, to rely upon each other, and to appreciate each other. The intentional community model goes against that with which many Americans grow up, in which households must be essentially self-reliant within their communities. Many Americans grow up without knowing their neighbors, and certainly not participating in regular community events with them.

The loss of community in America has been a great detriment to many peoples' happiness and sense of purpose and camaraderie. While it is important (especially in the

voluntary simplicity movement) to build a sense of self-sufficiency and to develop skills and abilities that reduce personal dependence on the consumer economy, it is not a goal to become independent of community or of others. In his article, “Intentional Communities: Lifestyles Based on Ideals,” Geoph Kozeny writes,

The advent of the isolated nuclear family is, in fact, a fairly recent phenomenon, having evolved primarily with the rise of industrialization, particularly the development of high-speed transportation. As transportation has become cheaper and faster, we’ve also witnessed an increase in transience, and the demise of the traditional neighborhood.

The rise of rapid transport and the industrial and economic development of the US has, thus, isolated families from one another and brought down the sense of unity that was once found in most communities. It has become standard for families to be independent from those around them, yet this has only been the human experience since industrialization. While this development brings about a greater sense of self-sufficiency among families, there have been many social ills that have resulted from it. Self-sufficiency is admirable and important, but becoming entirely independent from a greater community detracts from a happy or social lifestyle. Neighbors need to be able to rely upon each other for favors, to celebrate together, to live together as friends and as a unified community. Being involved in community allows for a more social, less financially stressed, more content existence.

As positive as these communities can be, residents of intentional communities make up a very small proportion of the American population. So how can the millions of other American, not involved in this movement, become involved in their communities? In an area with no apparent sense of community, how can community be built? Community development can occur in many different ways, through potluck meals, groups such as book clubs, large festivals, or construction projects involving local participants, rather than outside contractors. Community

development must include consensus decision-making, focusing on the health and success of the community as a whole.

Local Economies

At the most basic level, when you buy local more money stays in the community. Those purchases are [more] efficient in terms of keeping the local economy alive. –Judith Schwartz

To enhance sense of community and to encourage economic growth, some communities even develop local currencies or time banks for their residents. Local currencies, independent of national currencies, can protect a region from national or international economic fluctuations or turmoil. Local currencies foster localized economies by not only protecting a specific community from fluctuations in standard (national/international) markets, but also by encouraging the use of locally produced and available goods and services (as a local currency can only be used within a specific community). Consequently, for any economic activity using local currency, more of the benefits remain locally and fewer benefits (profits or production) leave the community. As Ben Brangwyn, cofounder of the Totnes Pound currency in England, explains, “A local economy is like a leaky bucket. Wealth is generated then spent in chain stores and businesses. It disappears, leaving an impoverished local economy. Local money prevents that from happening and keeps the money bouncing around the bucket, building wealth and prosperity” (Jackson).

One example of a local currency in the United States is the Ithaca Hours system in Ithaca, New York, with over \$100,000 worth of currency in circulation among individuals and businesses in Ithaca. According to the Ithaca Hours website, the currency “Promotes local economic strength and community self-reliance in ways which will support economic and social

justice, ecology, community participation and human aspirations in and around Ithaca.” The enhanced community benefits that result from the use of local products, services, and currency develops into a great incentive to continue using them, further developing the community’s economy and sense of identity and vitality.

Furthermore, use of a local currency or system of exchange enables a community to more efficiently use its resources, such as unemployed community members. An unemployed resident can offer goods or services in order to earn currency, which can then be used to purchase local goods or services, which catalyzes the growth of the local economy. This develops into more efficient use of community resources, increased local purchasing power, and an increase in economic activity and community interaction. While use of a local currency does diminish a community’s contribution to the national economy and detracts from the population’s purchasing power nationally, it can positively contribute to community building, local goods production, and community resilience. Furthermore, as it reduces the use of external goods and services, it helps to reduce the “footprint” of each of its participants.

Another excellent way to contribute to and develop local community is through the local food movement. Local food is a “collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies—on in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and social health of a particular place” (Feenstra). The local food system reconnects food producers and consumers (“locavores”), redevelops their relationships and consumer understanding of the food consumed, and encourages increased quality control. This can be done through farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares, or through direct farm sales. The local food movement offers greater care for the environment, better working conditions, better treatment of

animals, less processing, and greater community connection within the food system. In the interest of self-sufficiency, some simple lovers take the local food movement a step farther, and grow some of their own food. This reduces personal dependency on money and the economy, and increases self-sufficiency. Even city dwellers can grow small amounts of food in pots, and, for simple lovers, that which is not grown at home is often purchased from area farmers at farmers' markets. In their book *Extreme Simplicity: Homesteading in the City*, Christopher and Dolores Nyerges write, "We ourselves see the land as a primary source of sustenance, whether that land is rural acreage or an urban or suburban yard. There is no good reason why urban dwellers cannot produce at least some of their food" (Nyerges 19). It is sure that far from every city resident will attempt to grow his or her own food, but for those attempting to live simply and localize their money and food, that which is not grown at home can, in most cities, be fairly easily bought at a farmers' market or a local foods market.

In *The Town That Food Saved: How One Community Found Vitality in Local Food*,

Vermont author Ben Hewitt writes:

It's no great secret that over the past century, America's food system has become increasingly industrialized and centralized. It's an economy of scale that has served us well, at least in strict economic terms. In 1930, the average American family spent 24.2 percent of its income on food. That number has declined in every single decade since; by 2007, it had fallen to 9.8 percent. Of course, there are hidden problems in the form of health problems wrought by processed foods and an agriculture industry that has become heavily reliant on subsidies paid out of your taxes. But the fact remains: [...our food...] has never been more corrosive to our health and environment (4).

Participating in the local food movement, either by growing some of our own food or by buying primarily or solely locally-grown food, we can not only aid in community development, organizing, and resilience, but we can also enjoy increased health, economic, and social security. Local food, being inherently fresh, does not require the fuel for cross-country shipment or

packaging for protection and display that commercially grown or processed food does. For this reason, it is significantly more sustainable, and helps to ensure increased global resource distribution equity, as food items are produced in they same area in which they are consumed. This prevents trash (from excessive food packaging) from being distributed in landfills and garbage dumps throughout the world, potentially damaging the living environments of other peoples. Within the community in which food is grown and consumed, the local economy will benefit. This will almost certainly result in increased support within, success of, and cohesion of the local community.

Conclusion: Embracing Community

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

Since the industrial revolution, the United States and the majority of the Western world has been on a track of increasing and unsustainable consumption. Encouraged in the name of economic progress and growth, the negative aspects of hyper-consumption have become clearer as we have progressed in the experiment. We have become detached from our partners and siblings, our children, our neighbors, and our communities. As we increasingly replace love and mutual respect and appreciation with cash currency, we are neglecting the people that we turn to when we need help. Rapid industrialization, consumption, and being overworked have resulted in a severe and tangible loss of community. At the same time, we have become the targets of advertising in nearly all of our waking hours, and are sustaining ourselves on, in general, the most unhealthy food in the history of human civilization. We are attempting to support a growing population, while increasing consumption. Are we, however, living passionate lives?

Are we spending time with those we love; are we focusing our lives around that which we cherish?

Unfortunately, too many Americans feel they have to wait until retirement to lead this type of life. The pressure from advertisers, politicians, and other Americans drives many to abandon their families, communities, and passions 40 hours per week for work in which they are not genuinely invested and by which they are not satisfied. Voluntary simplicity, however, is a way to change this. By reducing consumption, and therefore financial need, one can not only reduce his negative impact on the environment and increase global resource equity, but he can also gain more time to pass with those he cares about and doing what he loves.

At the same time, he can use this time to embrace community, to support his local economy, and to enjoy local food—nourishing his mind, his wallet (and his neighbors’), and his body. Reducing conspicuous, empty consumption and embracing community is a rewarding way to improve personal, local, national, and international health and quality of life. As Pope John Paul II once said, “A community needs a soul if it is to become a true home for human beings. You, the people, must git it this soul [sic].” It is time to, once again, focus our lives around that which is most important: the people and communities around us, our contributions to them, and the experiences that increase social justice and build truly remarkable lives.

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