

# Reflections on Live Simply

✘ “Reflections on Live Simply” by Edward P. Echlin (**Honorary Research Fellow, University College of Trinity & All Saints, Leeds; Visiting Scholar, Sarum College, Salisbury.**)

I was born and grew up in north-west Detroit, just south of the then ‘water wonderland’ of Upper Michigan. Expanding Detroit proudly called itself ‘the motor city’, ‘the city that put the world on wheels’, and, during World War II, ‘the arsenal of democracy’. We learned as youngsters that one should ‘get ahead’ and ‘do well’, meaning that the good life consists in gathering a lot of money, owning a large house, and driving a big car or two. I now notice some of this same dysfunction ‘over here’. Needless to say to readers of this thoughtful journal, people who did ‘do well’ didn’t seem very happy. Neither did those left behind.

Fortunately I also learned from Jesuit and lay teachers at secondary school that there was a ‘third way’, the intriguing lifestyle of the long and varied ascetic and religious community tradition. Indeed live simply roots even predate the early ascetics, we notice it in the Bible itself, in the freely chosen lifestyles of people like Abraham, Moses, and John the wilderness baptizer, and Jesus himself. I eventually discovered – and have always been fascinated by – the intriguing description of the first Jerusalem Christians and their simple sharing lifestyle. (Acts 2.45-46)

After high school I spent young adulthood as a Jesuit, in communities with the vow of poverty, and appreciated the peace and freedom that freely chosen – if *genuinely* lived – ‘detachment’ from personal possessions brings. After leaving the Jesuits for married life in ‘the world’, my wife Barbara and I chose a lifestyle where ‘doing well’ is not gathering possessions but living simply and trying to respect earth’s beauty and restraints. We resonate wholeheartedly with the

German astronaut Sigmund Jahn's words about our planet, 'Only when I saw it from space, in all its ineffable beauty and fragility did I realize that our most urgent task is to cherish and preserve it.'

Soon after retiring from lecturing I met, and heard speak, Horace Dammers at Ripon Cathedral. He explained his conviction that a minority of people mostly in the west but increasingly elsewhere, possessed more than they needed, with the resultant poverty of millions. He explained the Lifestyle Movement and his 'Live simply, let others live' shibboleth. Thereafter I joined the Lifestyle Movement.

As human population surges beyond what the planet can accommodate, and as even 'developing' regions rush to 'get ahead' and 'do well', earth's biodiversity suffers daily extinction. Human induced climate change approaches a point beyond human control. Overpopulation, biodiversity loss, and climate change are the three salients followed by the UN Environment Programme in its four quinquennial reports since the Brundtland Report of 1987. After its recent fourth and sombre Assessment in 2007, Austrian Chair Achim Steiner commented, 'We will shortly be in trouble if indeed we are not already.'

When we ask ourselves – or are asked by others – what we small players can do, we can respond by living simply and sustainably ourselves and encouraging others to live simply too. A woman who stood as Green Party candidate in a national election said that by learning how to live simply and sustainably we will be able to help others to survive when the now almost inevitable catastrophes come as they will soon, certainly in the lifetime of our children. Similarly another person said we can be like bridgeheads or toeholds of sustainable lifestyle around which others can gather and spread out when denial becomes impossible.

We're all familiar with the 'three Rs' – reduce,

reuse, recycle. Some live simply people add three more – refuse, especially packaging and damaging travel, repair, and restore our local part of the earth to biodiverse health again. All six – or more – Rs are self explanatory, all need adaptation to our own situation and context. By growing some of our food and sharing with neighbours, and supporting local producers and farmers' markets and traders, and by nurturing our own garden, no matter how small, we help to sustain the health of our biosystem. Water is a vital resource too, or, perhaps better, gift. Each of us can harvest water in ponds, cisterns, containers, butts, and equally important, in our porous soil. Remove any lingering slabs or concrete or leylandii equivalents, and let rain through again Some people pump roof water back into bathrooms from a buried cistern. We harvest in a pond, and in three butts, each of which has its own butt, installed courtesy of a former Kenyan farmer who values water. We can also 'harvest' sun with solar panels and become micro-generators. Or we can harvest wind power or even geo-thermal. In our own situation here on the coast, where clouds are thinner, we generate through photovoltaic panels and have solar thermal heated water.

Much of a simple lifestyle favours the 'proximity principle', fulfilling our needs as locally as possible, with minimal lorry and air miles, and helping those close to us. The less we indulge in distant 'trade', even if 'fair', the better. Needless to say this includes bioregional holidays. Here in the UK one could never exhaust the depths of these islands and northwest Europe. Indeed we can have eco-education holidays, especially with children. Holidays on a farm – or near a nature reserve – or doing some genuine earth restoration, are three examples.

Living simply we influence others, we become healthily contagious, mostly by witness, just being there. We should also support valiant NGOs, and, with them, try to persuade councillors, officers, and other leaders to reject excessive

'globalisation', 'growth', and 'regeneration' (i.e. relentless 'development') and to help their local community live within the restraints under which life on planet earth is given.

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