

Simpler Living Compassionate Life

Study Guide

by Michael Schut

How to Use This Material

Welcome to the study guide designed to accompany *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*. We are very excited to offer this course and glad for your interest in it. We have tried to make this curriculum both flexible and easy to use. Because going through all 12 sessions, the most comprehensive option, is not possible for some church and/or small group situations, we suggest **optional course lengths of 4, 6, or 8 weeks**. (See the section on page 232 titled “If You Have Four, Six or Eight Weeks.”) Some groups desiring to explore all 12 sessions may find it appealing to spread the course out over a longer time period—six sessions in the fall and six sessions in the spring, or even four sessions in the fall, four in the spring and the remaining four the next fall. Whatever your group’s special needs, this guide can be custom fit!

Before you gather for Meeting One, be sure to read the introductory material and the essays to be discussed at the first meeting. (See top of page 234 under “Read Before Meeting One.”)

Course Goals

Your own goals and hopes will surely vary, but below are a number of the goals which guided us in the writing of this course:

- To make connections between faith and simplicity;
- To build a sense of community and support within the group;
- To understand the connections between consumption, global economics and increasing inequity between rich and poor;
- To encourage actions and lifestyles which more deeply reflect your core Christian values and result in more meaningful, joyful living.

Course Organization

Facilitator: The role of Facilitator rotates each week; the course does not require an experienced leader, expert, or teacher. This should contribute a shared sense of ownership, responsibility, and community to the course. The Facilitator for Meeting One will likely be the person who organized the class. Some groups have found it helpful to designate a Facilitator for each of the remaining meetings during Meeting One. Others choose someone to facilitate the next meeting at the end of each meeting. It will be helpful if the Facilitator reads all the material (readings and curriculum) for “their” meeting thoroughly before the group meets to have a feel for timing, flow and content.

Setting and Timing: Ideally, this course would be held in group members’ homes with enough time (about 1 1/2 to 2 hours) to experience and go through the material fully. Such an informal setting contributes to a more relaxed, community-building atmosphere.

The course can also be used in a Sunday School hour or adult education forum. Unlike other study guides which often specifically state how many minutes should be spent on each section, we chose to allow the group to make such decisions based upon the flow of the discussion and interest of the group. However, the Facilitator should have a general idea of how time might be spent during the meeting.

For those using the course in a 45-60 minute time slot, we suggest you start with the questions in bold text and address other questions as time allows. That said, feel free to modify meetings as you see fit. Some groups may choose to take two weeks to cover all the material in each meeting.

Group Size: Ideal group size is between six and eight participants. If your group is larger, we suggest breaking out into appropriate size groups for the discussion periods.

Book Sharing: Of course, it's best if everyone has a copy of *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life!* On the other hand, and in the spirit of this book, if sharing works out well, great. It is important for the person facilitating the next meeting to make sure they have a copy of the book the week prior to "their" meeting.

Journal: There is space within the study guide—though you may also wish to bring a journal or notebook—to take notes and jot down feelings, ideas and impressions while you are together and during the week. Your notes will become a valuable resource, charting how your thoughts and feelings may have changed over time.

A Note on the Readings: We see this study guide as an attempt to help you form a learning community. This community will hear from a variety of "voices." Some of those voices will be your own and those of your fellow group members. There are also readings. We feel it is important not to treat these readings as authoritative. Think of these as the stories and ideas of other group members not able to join your discussion in person. Not all of the perspectives will be meaningful or useful to everyone. Focus on what you do find meaningful. In a learning community different people find different things helpful. The object is not that everyone will emerge from this experience thinking, doing, and believing the same things. Rather, that in an open sharing of ideas and experiences, each individual's own exploration of the issues will be enhanced and supported.

Length of Readings: There are approximately 30-60 minutes of reading each week. If you think you may not have time, we suggest you read the brief introduction (found on the first page of every reading) to each essay and decide which one you would like to start with. (As much of the learning and discussion emanates from your perceptions and thoughts on these readings, we think your experience will be more full if you can complete the suggested articles. If not, perhaps you can get to them at a later date.)

Course Ethos and Guidelines:

This course seeks to value your own perspectives, life-experiences and wisdom. We encourage you to interact with each other and the materials honestly and to be open about your questions, misgivings and hopes. The Seattle guru of simplicity

study circles, Cecile Andrews, has a number of helpful guidelines for creating a community-oriented group. Below find her suggestions:

- *No leaders. Be participatory.* This is a circle, not a pyramid, so no one can be a dictator, everyone is responsible.
- *Respond as equals.* In this course we act on the idea that we are all equal.
- *Be authentic.* We spend a lot of our lives trying to look successful. No one really gets to know us. In this group, try not to pretend. Describe what you really think or feel.
- *Focus on the heart.* Some conversations come just from the head. When you communicate from the heart you bring in the whole of yourself: emotions, imagination, spiritual insight and thoughts.
- *View conversations as barn-raising instead of battle.* Ways to do this include:
 - Listen and focus on understanding. As others speak, try to suppress the instinct to criticize or compare;
 - No attacking, dismissing or denigrating.* The facilitator should be especially committed to responding to others with support, thus modeling a caring response;
 - No persuading.* It is enough to state what you think—you do not have to convince people that you are right;
 - No playing devil's advocate.* Although this is a common form of communication, it violates just about all of the above guidelines.
- *Question conventional wisdom and seek out alternative explanations and views.*
- *Discover wisdom through stories.* Throughout human history people have learned through story-telling. Everyone can tell their story and there's no right or wrong interpretation. Ultimately, stories connect people; in listening to someone else's story, we often hear strains of our own.

(These guidelines are taken from two sources: Cecile Andrews' *The Simplicity Circle: Learning Voluntary Simplicity Through a Learning For Life Study Circle*, 1994; and her more recent book *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* published by HarperCollins, 1997.)

Meeting Format

The meeting format is fairly self-explanatory. Each meeting has all or most of the following components:

The "Facilitator Overview" should be read by the facilitator prior to the meeting. Specific instructions for the meeting will be given in this section.

"Tools Everyone Needs" generally include this book and, if you wish, a pen and journal/notebook. If other supplies (such as a flip chart) are suggested, they will be indicated in this section.

Participants should be familiar with the "Purpose" and "Overview" sections before the meeting starts.

The “Opening Meditation and Prayer” provides a brief centering time, reminding us of the spiritual essence of simplicity and the foundation for this course. This time can be led by the facilitator or whoever feels comfortable doing so. Feel free to bring in prayers of your own or pray spontaneously as you are comfortable. This goes for the “Closing Prayer” as well.

The “Check-In” is a *brief* (one-minute) report back to the group about the “action step” you took during the week. If you are pressed for time, you may wish to skip this section. People should also feel free to pass.

A few of the meetings include a “Group Reading” which should be read aloud cooperatively by the group.

Each meeting’s discussion emanates from that week’s readings. There will be time for “Group Discussion” as well as “Small Group/Pair Discussions.” The themes of these latter discussions will frequently be shared with the whole group.

Many meetings end by considering and sharing with the group an “Action Step” which would be both meaningful and “do-able” for members. Integrated into a number of the meetings’ action steps is a powerful tool developed by The Center for a New American Dream. Called “Turn the Tide,” this tool consists of nine simple actions you can take individually and as a faith community, which have a positive, measurable impact on the well being of God’s Creation. What is especially exciting about Turn the Tide is that you get immediate feedback about that “measurable impact” via web-based technology. Using The Center’s website, you can record your action and find out just how much water, or how many trees, you and your group have saved—or how much you have cut your emissions of climate-warming gasses. (Further information about Turn the Tide for faith communities is available at (301)891-3683 or at www.newdream.org/turnthetide/faith.) We hope this tool will help many put their faith into action!

Finally, the shaded column on each Meeting’s opening page lists readings for the next meeting under “Read Before Next Gathering.”

One Final Important Note

This is *your* course. Use it as a resource to engage your life with the ideas presented, not as a course to be “mastered.” Your creative adaptation to your own needs is encouraged. You may find you don’t have time to answer every question, or feel drawn to discuss only a few of the suggested questions, or have questions of your own. Perhaps you will want to spend two weeks on certain meeting topics. Please modify as needed.

Course Overview

Below find brief summaries of each meeting. Following the summaries are possible shorter and theme-based alternatives to the twelve week course. As you read through the meeting summaries, you may also find another theme or length that works well for your group. Be creative!

Meeting One sets the tone for the course by providing time for participants to share a piece of their own story. Our hope is that the group becomes a community of support for those interested in simplifying their lives. We also wish to value the perspectives of each participant as much as the perspectives represented in this curriculum and the readings. Beginning with personal stories and sharing of one's experiences is a good place to start.

We each inherit a certain worldview (way of perceiving reality) which colors our whole life, from our relationship with the natural world to our views on simplicity. **Meeting Two** takes a look at the Western view of reality and suggests characteristics of a worldview which can help us address our society's ecological and social ills.

Meeting Three reviews the rich history of simplicity within both American culture and the Christian tradition.

We feel that movement toward simplicity is intimately connected to caring for the earth and environmental justice. **Meetings Four and Five** include discussions of environmental theology, and how that theology challenges our culture's central value of economic growth. Meeting Five especially focuses on ways to express that theology in the daily practice of simplicity.

Meeting Six emphasizes our experience of time (how busy we are!) and contrasts time as a commodity to be spent with time as a sacred gift to be fully experienced and offered back in gratitude to God and our communities. Meeting Six sees simplicity as making room (time) in our lives for an awareness of God's presence.

Meeting Seven highlights our relationship with money, an issue which often serves to first draw people to simplicity.

Meeting Eight takes a revealing look at our economic system. It does so not in an esoteric or theoretical way but with the purpose of discussing some of that system's fundamental problems and how those problems impact daily life. It introduces the topic of overconsumption in Western nations and how today's global economy affects the poor and the land.

Meeting Nine continues the themes introduced in Meeting Eight. Within the context of present-day inequity and injustice, it asks the important and difficult question, "how much is enough?"

We have no more intimate connection to the land than the food we eat. **Meeting Ten** provides time to consider food, and how our eating habits affect land and people. This meeting ends by providing hopeful alternative food purchasing options based on supporting local food economies, one practical expression of a move toward simplicity and living more lightly on the earth.

Meeting Eleven focuses on the very important (but often neglected) reality that the simplicity movement needs a “politics of simplicity.” Ways to create a society which encourage the values and practices associated with simple living are explored.

Meeting Twelve focuses on simplicity and community. There is an exercise to help participants reflect on how they may feel motivated (or called) to respond to this course. It concludes with a potluck and time for individual participants as well as the group to decide what next steps, if any, they may wish to take.

If You Have Four, Six Or Eight Weeks. . .

If your group has **eight weeks** in which to complete the study, we recommend the following:

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
- Meeting Two—Worldviews: The Lens Through Which We See
- Meeting Three—Simplicity Is Nothing New: A Brief Historical Overview
- Meeting Five—Theology for the Practice of Simplicity
- Meeting Seven—Your Money or Your Life: The Place of Money in Modern Life
- Meeting Eight—The Big Economy, The Great Economy
- Meeting Ten—Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices
- Meeting Twelve—Widening Our Circle of Community: Journey to Abundant Life

We recommend the following if your group has **four weeks** in which to complete the study:

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
- Meeting Five—Theology for the Practice of Simplicity
- Meeting Seven—Your Money or Your Life: The Place of Money in Modern Life
- Meeting Ten—Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices

If your group would like to concentrate on a theme, we have identified the following six week thematic options:

Theme: Money, Economics and Justice

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
 - Meeting Four—Theology in Support of Simplicity and Eco-Justice
 - Meeting Seven—Your Money or Your Life: The Place of Money in Modern Life
 - Meeting Eight—The Big Economy, The Great Economy
 - Meeting Nine—How Much is Enough? Lifestyles, Global Economics and Justice
 - Meeting Ten—Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices
- (If you have time for a seventh meeting, conclude with Meeting Twelve.)*

Theme: Community—Extending Our Circle of Compassion

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
- Meeting Four—Theology in Support of Simplicity and Eco-Justice
- Meeting Eight—The Big Economy, The Great Economy
- Meeting Ten—Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices
- Meeting Eleven—The Politics of Simplicity
- Meeting Twelve—Widening Our Circle of Community: Journey to Abundant Life

Theme: Simplicity in Personal, Everyday Life

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
- Meeting Five—Theology for the Practice of Simplicity
- Meeting Six—Time as Commodity, Time as Sacred
- Meeting Seven—Your Money or Your Life: The Place of Money in Modern Life
- Meeting Ten—Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices
- Meeting Twelve—Widening Our Circle of Community: Journey to Abundant Life

Theme: History and Theology Applied to Everyday Life

- Meeting One—Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives
- Meeting Three—Simplicity Is Nothing New: A Brief Historical Overview
- Meeting Four—Theology in Support of Simplicity and Eco-Justice
- Meeting Five—Theology for the Practice of Simplicity
- Meeting Eleven—The Politics of Simplicity
- Meeting Twelve—Widening Our Circle of Community: Journey to Abundant Life

Or, design your own course tailored to fit your group's needs!



Meeting One:

Storytelling: Listening to Our Lives

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To briefly introduce the course as a whole and clarify/discuss course guidelines;

To begin to create a comfortable setting and sense of community within the group by telling life-stories;

To share expectations and hopes for this course.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“Worldview as Inheritance” —p. 191

“Traditional Western View of Reality” —p. 194

“Healing Ourselves and the Earth” —p. 196

If time allows:

“Sacred Cosmology and the Ecological Crisis” —p. 200

Read Before Meeting One

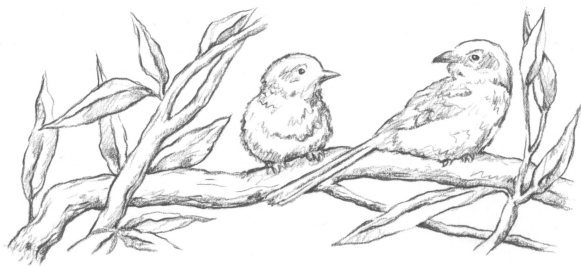
“Overview” —p. 11
Introduction to “The Sacred Journey” —p. 19
The Good Life and The Abundant Life” —p. 23

Facilitator Overview

This is an important meeting as it sets the tone for the rest of this course. As today’s group facilitator, please:

1. Welcome everyone and make sure everyone has access to a copy of this book;
2. After introductions, follow the flow of the readings and associated questions;
3. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Read aloud the group reading (we suggest members take turns reading);
5. Keep track of time, ensuring that all have adequate time to tell their own stories;
6. Determine how the group wants to choose each meeting’s Facilitator and designate one for the next meeting.

Important Note: If you are not going through the curriculum in order, the articles listed in the shaded box to the left are not your readings for next week! If, for example, your next session is Meeting Four, refer to Meeting Three for the appropriate readings.



Overview

This first meeting is dedicated to hearing a portion of each person's story and a little about why they feel drawn to a course combining faith and simplicity. The entire course emphasizes and values individuals' experiences and wisdom. Themes: *Simplicity as enjoyment of each other. Simplicity and our own stories: an element of our calling.*

Introductions

Briefly introduce yourself. (Soon you will get a chance to say more!)

Opening Meditation

Read aloud to the group:

The call to simplicity and freedom for Christians is the call to move from achievement-oriented spirituality to a

life centered on a shared vision of relatedness to people and things, a relatedness of gentleness, of compassion, of belonging to one another.

—Richard Bower, *Living Simply*

Ask:

In one sentence, what does the title of this book, "Simpler Living, Compassionate Life," suggest to you? (Feel free to use the space below to jot down your ideas.)

Group Reading (We suggest members take turns reading.)

An introductory reading by Michael Schut.

So, here you are! Beginning a course on simplicity. Perhaps you are excited, expectant; perhaps wary, nervous, unsure of what this is all about; perhaps wondering if you can hang out with these assembled folks!

No matter how you are feeling, we hope this first meeting is fun and relaxed. All you have to do is listen to stories and tell one of your own. So settle in and enjoy the undivided attention of the group and the opportunity to talk about yourself.

This entire course can be seen as a sharing of stories—your own as well as those represented in the readings. In other words, this course begins with you, where you

Prayer

Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, thank you for the gift of another day and for the chance to be together. We remember that you have promised your presence where "two or three are gathered." May we grow in compassion as you are compassion. May we learn from our own lives, from each other and from your presence in our world. *Amen.*

are, who you are, and what brings you here. You will also see that there is great emphasis placed on sharing your own life-experiences within a supportive environment. Doing so is, in itself, participating in one of life's simpler joys: learning more about other people and developing a sense of community.

Hopefully, you have had a chance to read today's articles. "How to Use This Material" provides a brief overview to the course and also suggests guidelines for group interaction. Those guidelines are important and can help create an open and caring community as you meet together. The introduction also briefly discusses logistics. Everyone should be clear about how this course is organized, the role of the Facilitator, course guidelines and so on. Take ten minutes or so to answer the following questions, or other ones group members may have, about these guidelines and logistics.

Group Discussion

- **Are there any questions about course format, organization or leadership?**
- **Any questions or comments on the Facilitator's role?**
- **Any comments or questions about the group process (see "Course Ethos and Guidelines") hoped for?**

Group Reading—continued

As you begin today, remember Cecile Andrews' guidelines for interaction: Listen carefully and non-judgmentally to one another. Speak from your hearts, from the depth of your own experience. We all long for connection and to be known on more than a superficial level. This requires a certain amount of openness and trust, and Cecile's ideas can help in this process.



Buechner and Storytelling

Frederick Buechner (pronounced *Beekner*), author and minister, is someone who has listened deeply to his own life and shared it in such a way as to bring light and hope to many others. Buechner believes that all good theology is autobiography. He thus begins his celebrated autobiographical trilogy with the following:

What I propose to do now is to try listening to my life as a whole for whatever of meaning, of holiness, of God there may be in it to hear. My assumption is that the story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all.

He listens to his life as a whole for whatever "of meaning, of holiness, of God there may be in it to hear." This course asks you to do the same. Listen to the joy, for therein lies the kernel of God's call and

passion in your life. Listen to the laughter, for laughter is immeasurable. Listen to that which society often tells us to muffle—the pain and alienation—for therein lie clues to that which needs healing and hope.

I would like to tell you about a time when I “listened to my life as a whole” and heard a good deal of pain. It is a story of how over time, with the help of friends and community, that listening led to greater freedom and joy.

I went to a Christian college that preached the gospel of grace, freely given to all. But the stronger, implicit message (at least for me) told me I had to be a *certain kind of Christian* to receive such grace. This silent instruction communicated a gospel of its own—a gospel of duty and guilt. That dualistic message and the “do’s and don’ts” I thought I had to follow became life- and spirit-draining for me. What mattered was “following God’s will,” something I wanted to do. But as I felt the gospel of duty and guilt more and more strongly, I began to believe that if I were doing God’s will, I would be miserable. That, however, was inconsequential because my own feelings of gladness and joy were not to be considered.

After college I moved to Washington, D.C., where I worked with Church of the Savior’s Samaritan Inns, a program providing a home for homeless men. While there, I realized that what I really wanted in my life was to ultimately *share love*, and yet I felt I had little experience of God’s love—in spite of all my efforts. Most all that effort had been motivated by duty and obligation. I had to start over. Within the context of a caring community I began to feel the pain of living a prescribed Christianity and the exhaustive effort of trying to please everyone else.

I began to listen to my joys and passions. I began to accept that, perhaps, such joys were hints of God’s call in my life. I began pursuing an earlier love, being in the out-of-doors, and gradually gained enough skill to become a wilderness backpacking and rock-climbing guide. This whole process began by facing loss: the many years of trying to please a seemingly overly demanding God, of not valuing many of my own joys, and the sense of burden and “heaviness” I felt as a result.

Facing the pain associated with that loss has made a wonderful difference in my life. Pain (whether emotional, mental or physical) is often a sign of a broken relationship and of that which needs healing and restoration. In this case, it actually seems God used that loss to help heal my relationship with God. God no longer seems so much the never-to-be-pleased, demanding divinity, motivating through duty and guilt, but rather more of a relational being, wooing us with love and deeply interested in healing our relationships with self, God, each other and all of creation.

In our day, one relationship in need of restoration is the relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world. As David Orr, a leading environmental thinker and educator, states, “Our alienation from the natural world is unprece-

dened. Healing this division is a large part of the difference between survival and extinction.” So while this course emphasizes listening to *your* story (particularly as it relates to simplicity), it is set in the larger context of recognizing all of our relationships, not only those with people, but also with the larger community of life. It is also set in the larger context of the effects of our lifestyles on those relationships.

I believe that if we listen, the larger community (of all creation) has a story to tell as well. Surely part of this story is heard in the environmental crises facing our earth-home as the creation groans under the weight of our consumer society. Moving toward simplicity and reducing consumption is one important step toward healing the division to which Orr refers.

Finally, the psychologist Rollo May suggests that “only the truth that is experienced at all levels of being has the power to change the human being.” Education capable of bringing about change, then, will educate not only the mind but the heart and soul as well. This course will focus on such an educational process, where reflection on experiences, feelings, and thoughts (your own, those of other group members, and those of the authors we will read) might lead to healing alienation in our own lives and our communities.

It is my hope that this course will engender a simplicity of compassion. That, as possible connections are seen between simplicity and the Christian faith, between simplicity and consumption, between simplicity and contemplation, we might move toward compassionate responses.

Storytelling

The rest of this meeting is dedicated to introducing yourselves more fully. Take your time; say more, and in more depth, than your name and your job. Try to let people see *you*. Below are some suggested questions. Each person should have equal time to speak. (Reminder: for those going through the course in a 45-60 minute time slot, we suggest you start with the questions in the bold text.)

- 1. Briefly, what are your historical and geographical roots? (Where are you from, your family background, what sort of work have you done, etc.)**

2. “The Good Life and The Abundant Life” discussed just that. When have you experienced the abundant life? Besides those things mentioned in the essay, what else is good about the good life?

3. How does listening to one another foster your understanding of simplicity as compassion?

4. How did you come to be interested in this course?

5. In your own life, do you perceive connections between your faith and simplicity? What might they be?

After everyone has spoken, take a moment to consider your answer to the following:

6. What are your hopes and/or expectations for this course? *In one phrase or sentence* share those with the group.

Action Step

As this course on simplicity has started with an emphasis on listening, with an ear toward healing relationships (with human and non-human members of our communities), is there some relationship in your life which could use a little more time and attention?

Can you think of some

small step you might take in that direction this coming week? Although thinking of the step is all that is asked for now, you might choose to actually try taking it and notice what happens. If you are comfortable doing so, take a moment to share this with the group.

A Reminder

Select next week's Facilitator! You may also want to look ahead and choose facilitators for each of your gatherings. (If some do not feel comfortable, they should not feel pressure to facilitate; someone else could do two meetings if necessary.)

Closing Prayer (Read in unison.)

Creator God, you have made us and our world; you have made us as deeply relational beings; you have put in us a hunger for love and joy. Help us to listen attentively to our lives; help us to discern the leaning of our hearts; help us to hear your calling to us out of the dailiness of our own experiences. In your name we pray, *Amen.*



Meeting Two:

Worldviews: The Lens through Which We See

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To share our personal views about simplicity;

To discuss how our worldviews shape our lives, relationships, and views about simplicity.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“Introduction to *The Politics of Simplicity*” —p. 141

“Epilogue from *The Simple Life*” —p. 144

“Simplicity Among the Saints” —p. 149

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator.

Overview

This meeting encourages reflection on the effects our worldviews have on our lives and includes discussion of our individual feelings and thoughts about simplicity. Theme: *Simplicity: how do we experience it?*

Opening Meditation

You may wish to begin with a few moments of centering silence and then read aloud:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”



“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

—Matthew 6:25-34

In this well-known passage, what particularly speaks to you?

Check-In

Share thoughts about the Action Step from the last meeting. Did anyone think about, or take, a step toward healing a relationship? *Briefly* share about your thoughts and experiences.

Opening Prayer

God, it is difficult to not worry, to trust in you, to seek your kingdom first. We ask for your help in discerning what often seems a murky path. Grant us courage. Amen.

Small Group Discussion

Break up into groups of two or three members, and use the following questions as a guideline for your conversation. Add questions of your own.

1. Reflect on your childhood: How did the church and those significant in your life help to define your sense of self?

In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch glimpses. The life of simplicity is simple, but it opens to us a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable.

—Dag Hammarskjöld,
Swedish (1905-1961)

2. As you grew up, did you receive a worldview and language that included care for and connection with the natural world? Share your thoughts.
3. How is your worldview similar to or different from Elgin's description?

Group Discussion

Gather together as one group again and discuss:

1. In what ways does the western worldview nurture, or fail to nurture, compassion (empathy and justice) toward others, both human and non-human?
2. Share your thoughts about Bhagat's essay. Are there other "beliefs that need rethinking" within Western Christianity? What are they?
3. What two words would you use to describe *your feeling*, on a gut level, when you hear the word "simplicity?"
4. What two words or phrases would you use to capture the essence of *your ideas* about simplicity? Share your thoughts with the group.

Closing Prayer (*Read in unison.*)

Loving God, you have created a vast, rich and beautiful world, of which we are a part. In our search for you, help us not to assume our picture of you or your world to be *the* truth. Grant us an honest humility in all these undertakings. *Amen.*

Action Step

What more could you do to stay centered and focused on your deepest values and heartfelt aspirations? (Keep a journal? Meditate? Pray? Take time in nature? Slow down? Work less?) Choose one, share it with the group, and work on that this week.



Meeting Three:

Simplicity Is Nothing New: A Brief Historical Overview

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator.

Overview

This week provides a historical overview of simplicity, in American culture generally and Christianity specifically.

Opening Meditation/Prayer

Begin with a few moments of silence to prepare to hear the following quotes which represent a few Christian historical perspectives on simplicity:

(Job, speaking to his "counselors" about his life, recognized the wisdom of the natural world):

But ask the animals, and they
will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they
will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and
they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare
to you.

—Job 12:7-8



Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider historical Christian traditions of simplicity as background and support for a contemporary expression of simple living.

Read Before Next Gathering:

"Some Notes from
Belshaz'zar's Feast"
—p. 161

Prayer

Thank you, Creator God, for the gift of breath. Be here with us. In humility, we ask for the grace to seek first your kingdom and to trust ever more fully, resting in you. *Amen.*

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

—Acts 4:34-35

(**Note:** Remember to feel free to pick and choose questions as interest and time permit. Also, please remember that the authors you read are not meant to be “authorities,” but voices of other group members not able to join the discussion in person.)

Pairs

Members pair up to discuss the following questions on David Shi's "Epilogue":

1. **What draws you to simplicity?**
2. **Do you agree with Shi's assessment that the movement toward simplicity will remain a minority concern? How might it become a "majority concern?"**
3. How do Shi's views fit with your own experience?
4. Shi quotes Mumford, "If our new philosophy is well grounded we shall carry into the future many elements of quality that this culture actually embraces." What "elements of quality" would you carry into the future while still expressing your sense of living simply?

Group Discussion

A member from each pair should summarize and share their impressions to the group (briefly, with no group discussion). Then discuss together:

1. **Did any common themes emerge in the pair discussions?**

Regarding Foster's "Simplicity Among the Saints," and/or Segal's introduction to "The Politics of Simplicity":

2. Did any of the described traditions intrigue or attract you? Were you wary of or "turned off" by any? Why?

Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but His spirit, which lies hidden in His words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct.

—Albert Schweitzer

3. How do these traditions relate to your own experience?

Action Step

(Facilitator: please read the action step aloud, provide enough time for people to reflect and "answer" the suggested action, and then begin the closing prayer.)

Here's an idea to help you simplify one thing in your life. Take out a piece of paper. On one side jot down three or four things that you own, from which "you derive inner help and comfort" (Gandhi). On the other side jot down three or four things that do not offer that inner help and comfort. These have to be things that you currently own. Over the next week, you might try to give away one of the items in your unnecessary column to someone who may find it necessary. Next week, you'll have the chance to report back on your experience.

Dependence on God is the only independence, for God has no heaviness; only the earthly and especially the earthly treasure has that.

—Vernard Eller,
The Simple Life

Closing Prayer

Creator God, thank you for the depth and richness of our own tradition. It is good to know that in our interest in, and expressions of, simplicity we stand in a long line of "witnesses and supporters," from our Jewish roots, through Jesus, the early church, and throughout the history of Christianity. May we go from this place in peace and joy. Amen.



Meeting Four:

Theology in Support of Simplicity and Eco-Justice

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider one example of a theologian's call to reform theology to include the natural world and to a life of greater simplicity and justice.

Read Before Next Gathering:

"Creation's Care
and Keeping"
—p. 175

"The Discipline of
Simplicity"
—p. 180

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Remind group members to bring something from home to the next meeting for the meditation (see below);
2. Serve as timekeeper;
3. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity;
4. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation and prayer;
5. Designate next meeting's Facilitator.

Overview

This meeting (and next) connects simplicity to a theology of care for the earth and all her creatures. Theme: *Simplicity: connection to all creation.*



Opening Meditation

Begin with a few moments of silence and then read aloud:

Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly, more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love.

—Fyodor Mikhail Dostoevsky

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth... all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

—Colossians 1:15-17

Share any comments or reflections on the above passages.

Check-In

For those who feel so inspired, *briefly* share your experience of working through last meeting's action step.

Group Discussion

Note: "Some Notes from Belshaz'zar's Feast" can be a disturbing essay. It's hard to know what would happen to our economy, and our well-being, if the religion of growthism was seriously challenged. In this context, keep two things in mind. One, as Weiskel recognizes in his closing paragraph, the global economic system does not currently serve the well-being of "the mass of humanity," or the rest of the natural world. Second, if growthism is challenged there will need to be something better in its place. Certain characteristics of that "something" will be found in future meetings. For example, meetings 8, 9 and 10 address characteristics of a more sane and fair economic system.

Prayer

God, thank you for our time together, for the gift of life, for your ongoing work of creation in our world, and for your presence in each of our lives. Be with us now and when we leave this place. In your name, *Amen*.

Discuss:

1. Did anything especially “grab you” in this essay? Share with the group your reactions to Weiskel’s thoughts.
2. Weiskel states “our theology determines the character of our engagement with [the world].” How do you see this as true in your own life?
3. Weiskel identifies “growthism”—more is better, growth is good—as our culture’s most pervasive religiously held belief. Do you agree? What are some of the ramifications of this belief?

Pairs

Weiskel says “a sense of moral compulsion cannot be imposed effectively from above... moral and ethical imperatives emerge spontaneously from a shared sense of community—a feeling that what ‘I’ do or what ‘we’ do matters to others within a community of which I wish to be a part. Our past record as a species is not encouraging in this regard. Historically, those considered to be outside the moral community have simply been ignored or—worse yet—persecuted....Clearly, our notion of what is outside and what is inside must change if we are to survive much longer as a human species in a wider biological community.”

Form pairs to discuss the following questions:

1. Do you agree with Weiskel, that our notion of community must expand? Can you think of, and share with your partner, a time when your sense of community expanded? How did that happen and what was the experience like?

2. To quote Weiskel again: “what we need... is a thoroughgoing reformation of our public theology of growthism.” Drawing on your life experiences and the readings and discussions in this course so far, what might some of the characteristics of that reformation (and resulting theology) be?

Pair Share

Each pair summarizes their answers to the whole group.

Discuss the common themes that emerged.

Action Step

Today’s action step has two parts. First, for the next meeting’s opening meditation, please bring something natural—rocks, plants, bark, dirt, etc.—that has some special significance for you. (This can be an object or a picture.) Plan to briefly describe the story or significance behind the object you choose.

Second, this meeting has suggested various connections between justice, theology and caring for creation. One way to express those connections is to modify certain everyday actions. For example, global warming is already impacting island nations as sea levels rise. To decrease your contributions to global warming, you could try a couple of Turn the Tide’s action steps: install four compact fluorescent lights and move your thermostat 3 degrees.

See www.newdream.org/turnthetide. For an introduction to Turn the Tide, see page 230.

Closing Prayer *(Read in unison.)*

Loving God, thank you for this time together. Spark our thinking, enliven our hopes, enter our worlds in ever-surprising and life-giving ways. Help us to listen to better understand your ways; help us to know “enough is enough and balance is best.” In Jesus’ name, *Amen*.



Meeting Five:

Theology for the Practice of Simplicity

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life

pen or pencil

Optional:

journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider biblical principles and the Bible as an “ecological handbook”;

To specifically explore a perspective on biblical teachings as they relate to simplicity.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“Excerpt from *The Overworked American*” —p. 33

“The Spirituality of Everyday Life” —p. 37

“Entering the Emptiness” —p. 41

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity;
3. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Designate next meeting’s Facilitator.

Overview

Both DeWitt and Foster come from Evangelical backgrounds which they effectively apply to the many practical questions raised by everyday choices. Among other things, today’s meeting shows that one’s theology and beliefs have very practical ramifications in daily life.

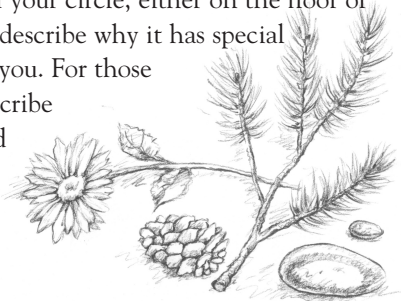
Opening Meditation

Begin with a few moments of silence and then read aloud:

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...

—Romans 1:20

Take turns placing your natural object (or picture) in the center of your circle, either on the floor or a table. Briefly describe why it has special significance to you. For those who forgot, describe what you would have brought.



Small Group Discussion

In groups of three, discuss any of the following questions on Calvin DeWitt's "Creation's Care and Keeping: A Biblical Perspective."

1. Which of the principles (earthkeeping, discipleship, Sabbath, fruitfulness, contentment, and practical application) most surprised you? Which did you find most helpful?

Prayer

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for
everything
which is natural which is infinite which is
yes

—*e.e. cummings*

2. Do you see connections between DeWitt's principles and the pursuit of simplicity? Between his principles and a simplicity of compassion?

3. What did you think of this reading?

4. How does it relate to your experience (of God's creation, of how the Bible is taught, of being in the outdoors...)?

Small Group Reports

Anyone have a "hot topic" that came up in your small group which you would like to discuss with everyone?

Group Discussion

Discuss as a group any of the following questions on Foster's "The Discipline of Simplicity":

- Foster refers to ten "controlling principles" for outward simplicity. Which is the most helpful to you? Do others seem unreasonable or unrealistic?
- How do inner and outer simplicity relate to each other? Do you need one to have the other?
- How did you like this reading? Did you find it useful in some way?
- What would the concept of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12) look like in a modern society?

Closing Prayer

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. *Amen.*

—*Psalm 23*

Action Step

Calvin DeWitt's article discusses the notion of "Sabbath Rest." Are there ways you personally might try to give yourself such a respite in your week? List them below. Try out some of these ideas in the coming week.



Meeting Six:

Time as Commodity, Time as Sacred

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation and prayer (which includes part of the Group Reading and a time of silence);
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator.

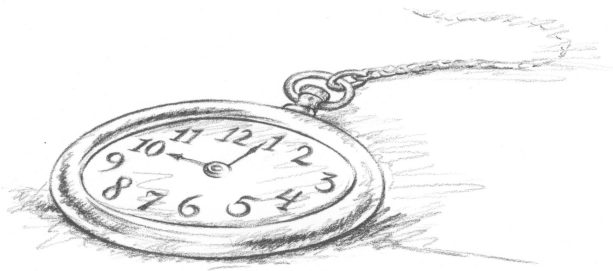
Overview

Many of us feel “too busy” and “don’t have enough time.” As a result we often feel disconnected from God and others. Meeting Six discusses our perceptions of time, silence, and contemplation. It focuses on slowing down our hectic pace—using silence and contemplation to be more in touch with ourselves and more aware of God’s presence. Theme: *Simplicity: opening space in our lives for a greater awareness of God.*

Opening Meditation

Scripture readings:

- Psalm 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God”
- Matthew 14:22-23 (These verses follow the story of the feeding of the five thousand.) “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go



Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To explore how we experience and understand time;

To learn how silence and contemplation can enrich our lives and deepen our relationships with God.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“Spending Money as if Life Really Mattered” —p. 59

“Money” —p. 67

on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.”

Group Reading (The prayer follows this reading.)

An introductory reading by Jim Mulligan:

This session focuses on three related dimensions of our experience of life: how we experience time, silence as a way of experiencing time differently, and contemplation as a particular use of silence.

In our culture the familiar “time is money” equation has been taken on with a singular obsessional devotion. Cecile Andrews speaks about our culture’s tendency to pressure pack as much frenetic activity into our days as we possibly can. For many people having time to enjoy life, or even just to experience it more sanely, is becoming a significant reason to get out of the rat race. Beyond release from the pressure, many seek a less hurried pace of life, and through that, to experience life in greater fullness.

The desire to experience life more fully, more deeply, has long historical roots in many religious traditions. In this search for depth, silence can help. Purposeful times of silence are a feature of various traditions, including our Christian heritage. Silence allows us to escape the press of time, to collect our thoughts, to relax our tensed bodies, to have a break from constant “doing,” and to be more reflective. This space for reflection can help us to put life into perspective, to gain clarity, and to experience our inner world more fully.

Contemplation is a particular way of experiencing silence, using it as a vehicle for greater openness to God. Here we try not to think, nor to reflect about what we are

There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence.

—Meister Eckhart
(c. 1260-1327)

The call to simplicity and freedom is a reminder that our worth comes not from the amount of our involvements, achievements, or possessions, but from the depth and care which we bring to each moment, place, and person in our lives.

—Richard A. Bower

rather one in which we are open to God, listening, receptive, and resting in God. Contemplation can provide space in which God may speak to us (be present to us) through all that is, all that God has created. It treats life as a gift of God, and encourages us to experience God directly through this radical receptiveness to God’s presence in all things.

experiencing. Contemplation seeks solely to *experience fully the present moment* as meaningful in itself, not needing to be understood, or analyzed, just experienced. Contemplation is seen as a form of prayer: not prayer in which we are “speaking to God,” but

Unfortunately, in our day, contemplation is little understood. Seen as an esoteric and antiquated way of life, it has been largely relegated to the monastic life or at least to those who have either the leisure or dedication for it. This attitude reflects our society's entrenched view of God as removed from life, the earth, and the ordinary. It reflects our fixation on productivity, on the Christian life as solely doing good works. God's immediate presence to us seems alien, or merely a romantic ideal. However, it is God's presence to us all, in the daily ordinariness of living, that contemplation offers.

Moving towards voluntary simplicity can be a movement away from drivenness, a reclamation of time—life at an appropriate pace. It can provide for periods of silence, reflection, and contemplation. Such a life is often characterized as richer, fuller, more meaningful, more peaceful, more compassionate, more loving, more joyful. Today we will try to think about this use of the gift of time, and to experience it directly. (See prayer at right.)

Check-In

Last meeting's action step—exploring how you might want to incorporate “Sabbath Rest” into your life—fits in well with today's theme. Do any of you have something you would like to briefly share related to that?

Group Reading—continued

Below find a number of perspectives related to contemplation and silence. (Various people can read the quotes.)

Prayer

For our prayer today we will begin with 10-15 minutes of silence. Do whatever you need to do to make yourself fully comfortable. Some of you might wish to close your eyes. Let your muscles relax, letting go of the tensions of the day. Envision yourself in another pleasing setting: in the mountains, by the ocean, in the forest, somewhere where you are alone, peaceful, calm. Or, instead, be fully present to being here in this room with these people. Give yourself permission to do whatever you need to do to create a space of quietness. We will keep the silence for 10 to 15 minutes.

After the silence...

Creator God, you come to us in the stillness of this hour. Speak to us the word our lives need to hear. Grant us stillness, turn us from frantic striving, calm our drivenness. Help us to discern your presence through all of life and in all that you have made. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to know your grace. *Amen.*



our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention and adoration... *a conversion of our entire self to God.*"

Where shall the word be found, where will the word Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.

—T.S. Eliot

Contemplation is...spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life... it is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith.

—Thomas Merton,

New Seeds of Contemplation

Contemplative prayer "... is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of

—John J. Higgins,

Thomas Merton On Prayer

Group Discussion

Discuss the following questions:

1. What most struck you about this week's readings by Cecile Andrews and Juliet Schor?

2. What struck you most about the readings we just read in this session?

3. What most characterizes the experience of time in your own life?

4. Gerald May says, “A... probing of spiritual growth shows that as people deepen in their love for God and others, they become ever more open: not only more appreciative of the beauty and joys of life, but also more vulnerable to its pain and brokenness.” Do you see connections between this process of spiritual growth and developing a simplicity of compassion?

5. Can you recall a contemplative experience of your own? Would you share it with the group?

6. If you could shape your life in some new way (with respect to time, silence, and contemplation), what would that be?

Closing Prayer

Share a brief time of silence. Perhaps someone would also like to pray out loud to close the meeting.

Action Step

Between now and our next meeting, try one small step to put into practice your response to question 6 above. You may want to share your thoughts on this experience with the group next time.



Meeting Seven:

Your Money or Your Life: The Place of Money in Modern Life

Tools Everyone

Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life

pen or pencil

Optional:

journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider our relationships with money;

To consider how our use of money reflects our core values.

Read Before Next

Gathering:

“The Big Economy,
The Great Economy” —p. 73

“Christian Faith and
the Degradation of
Creation” —p. 80

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator.
5. See the “Important Note” at the end of this meeting and make sure someone is responsible for getting the video.

Overview

The pursuit of wealth is an extremely powerful idol in our culture as is the growth of the economic system which supplies that wealth. This cultural idol is probably most obviously expressed in our personal lives in the ways we relate to money.

Opening Meditation/Prayer

You may want to begin with a time of centering silence and then pray together:

Two things I ask of you, O Lord;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say “Who is the Lord?”
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.
Amen.

—*Proverbs 30:7-9*

Check-In

At the end of Meeting Six, you were asked to try one small step to shape your life differently with respect to time and silence. *Briefly* go around the group, giving everyone the opportunity to share what they tried.

Group Reading

An introductory reading by Michael Schut:

Ah, money. What a sensitive topic! In Meeting Six we discussed how even the gift of time is so often thought about in terms of a monetary transaction. Both of today's readings, as well as my introductory essay "The Good Life and The Abundant Life," recognize money as a most conspicuous idol in our culture. It's an idol we rarely talk about openly and so are most often left alone to deal with the place money has in our lives. There is little room for a community of people to support the individual in their desire to have, use and give away money so as to reflect their sense of values.

After college I participated in the community life of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. I remember a particularly helpful exercise in a class I took there. We were asked to write our "money autobiography." We were given the chance to write openly on, and then talk with others about, the story of our lives as it related to our relationship with money. For me that was a very liberating experience. Today's meeting will hopefully be liberating in providing a setting and place to begin to uncover this fairly taboo subject. Think of it, like Evy McDonald does, as listening to a certain part of your life's story.

In truth, all human beings are called to be saints, but that just means called to be fully human... The saints are simply those men and women who relish the event of life as a gift and realize that the only way to honor such a gift is to give it away.

—William Stringfellow

Group Discussion

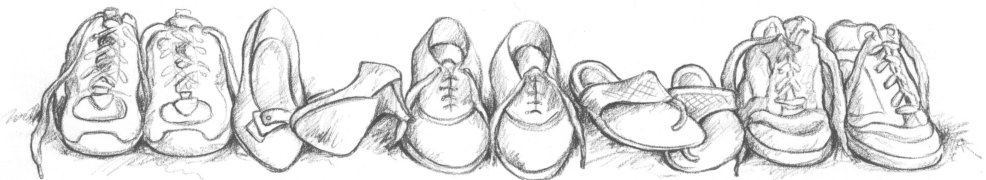
1. "Freedom from idolatry of money, for a Christian, means that money becomes useful only as a sacrament—as a sign of the restoration of life wrought in this world by Christ." (Stringfellow) What do you think of this idea of money as sacrament? Tell about an experience or time in your life when money was a sacrament to you.

2. Do you know people or families whose use of money you respect? Tell about them.

3. McDonald wrote about her “inherited and learned notions about money and consuming,” which revealed to her a pattern of purchasing things when she felt sad or insecure or had had a bad week. What are your inherited and learned notions about money?

4. *Your Money or Your Life*, written by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, is a very useful book for examining your relationship with money. They define money as something “for which you trade your life energy—your time.” Is that helpful to you? How have you tended to define money?

5. How much is enough? It’s a difficult question, but necessary in a world where “human beings live at each other’s expense, and the affluence of the few is proximately related to, and supported by, the poverty of the many.” (Stringfellow) What are some of the ways you have found helpful in defining how much is enough?



Action Step

Evvy McDonald had been told she would die soon. Often it is only in such times that we ask ourselves important questions. In this case, McDonald asked herself, “who do I want to be when I die?” Take a little time to consider your own answer to that question. Then you could ask what parts of your current life are, or are not, helping form you into that person.

Another “action step” idea you might want to consider is writing your “money autobiography.” Doing so can be a fun, thought-provoking and revealing exercise. If you do, it’s helpful to share your story with someone else who has also written theirs. If your whole group would like to do so, you might add a session to this course using the next time you gather to talk about your money autobiographies.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, life itself is such a beautiful gift. We pause again to thank you. May we be filled with wisdom and grace because it is not easy to trust you more than the security we place in money. Help us down the road of “sainthood” where we might more and more resemble those who honor all your gifts of life both in their receiving and in their giving. In your name, *Amen*.

Important Note: Meeting Nine involves watching a video. In addition to ensuring a TV and VCR are available, contact one of the resource centers listed below and ask for the “Chee Yoke Ling” video. There may be a nominal charge for postage. Each resource center can give you information on their policies regarding the loan of videos.

Attn: Tovi Harris
Diocesan House
P. O. Box 12126
1551—10th Avenue East
Seattle, WA 98102
(206) 325-4200

Attn: Jackie Fielding
Education Coordinator
Diocese of California
1055 Taylor
San Francisco, CA 94108
(415) 673-5015

Attn: Linda Scott
Resource Center, Atlanta Diocese
27444 Peachtree Road NW
Atlanta, GA 30363
(800) 537-6743
email: lscott@mindspring.com



Meeting Eight:

The Big Economy, The Great Economy

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider certain characteristics of our economic system in light of the Christian faith and its call to compassion and justice.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“How Much Is
Enough?” —p. 90

“Word and Flesh”
—p. 99

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator;
5. Make sure someone is responsible for the VCR/TV and video for next meeting; see “Important Note” below.

Overview

This meeting's readings attempt to uncover some of our economic system's fundamental problems. These problems have daily, practical ramifications in all of our lives.

Opening Meditation

Gather with a moment of silence.

Frederick Buechner defines compassion as “that sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside another's skin, knowing that there can never really be peace and joy for any until there is peace and joy finally for all.”

Pause for silent reflection.

Compassion seems to be the greatest power.

—*The Dalai Lama*

Pause for silent reflection.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

—*Mark 12:31*

Check-In

Last week you were asked to first consider who you want to be when you die and then which parts of your life are forming you to be that person and which are not. If you wish, briefly share with the group *one* thing that stuck out to you as you considered that question.

Prayer

Loving God, “in whom we live and move and have our being,” help us see you in each other and all around us. May we become people able to treat ourselves with compassion and offer that to all our neighbors. *Amen.*

Pair Discussion

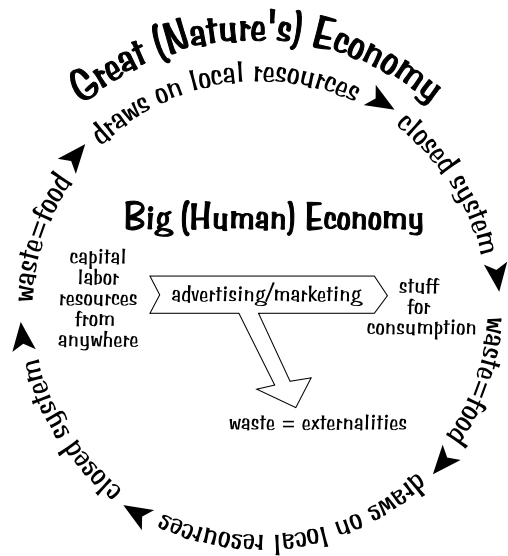
“The Great Economy, The Big Economy,” began with a story. It’s a story of how being in relationship with others makes it possible to grow in compassion for them. Those with whom we previously had no perceived relationship become our neighbor.

Break up into pairs and briefly share about a time or experience in your life when you feel your own “circle of compassion” expanded. A time when you realized your connectedness to this newly discovered neighbor—a person or a place or an animal. Or you could talk about a time when you were in need and received neighborly compassion from someone else.

Suggested In-Class Activity

If there is interest and time, consider the following activity:

The line of the big (human) economy and the circle of the great (nature’s) economy (as discussed in Schut’s article) can provide a helpful framework for understanding how our choices impact human and non-human communities. Actually *seeing* that framework can be even more helpful. Consider the diagram to the right (or use it for future reference). Does it make sense? Any questions about it? Discuss as you see fit.



Group Discussion

1. What most struck you about today's readings?
2. With what do you disagree or agree?
3. John Cobb lists three "positives" the current global economic system has brought us (such as bringing wealth to a high percentage of people in the "First World"). Do you agree with these? Can you think of other positives?
4. Discuss ways our economic system could change to express greater compassion. Does it seem that those changes would also reflect the view of human nature as "persons-in-community" rather than "individuals-in-a-market", (as John Cobb describes them)?

Closing Prayer

Loving God, our economic system is so vast and "making a difference" seems nearly impossible. Help us to see and act on the ways we might respond to your call in our lives. We place our hope in you. *Amen.*

Action Step

"The Big Economy, The Great Economy" discussed externalities (such as toxic waste, soil erosion, species extinction). Take a moment to consider your daily or weekly routine.

Either individually or as a group find one externality to which you contribute. We encourage you to consider one of Turn the Tide's (www.newdream.org/turnthetide) action steps. For example, as a group you might all choose to take one less car trip this next week, or install efficient showerheads and faucet aerators. Using Turn the Tide's web-based calculator you could then actually quantify how much less you contributed to a certain externality (such as carbon dioxide emissions when driving a car).

Important Note: Next meeting involves watching a video. In addition to ensuring a TV and VCR are available, contact one of the resource centers noted on p. 261 to obtain a copy of the "Chee Yoke Ling" video.



Meeting Nine:

How Much Is Enough?: Lifestyles, Global Economics and Justice

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity;
3. Lead the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Read aloud the group reading;
5. Set up VCR/TV;
6. Designate next meeting's Facilitator;
7. Arrange to return video.

Overview

Today's global economy has far-reaching and often negative effects on people (particularly the poor) and our earth-home. Our lives most closely intersect with the global economy when we consume its products. This meeting presents a video of Chee Yoke Ling, a lawyer and formerly Director of Friends of the Earth, Malaysia, who passionately and articulately describes the effects of the global economy, and our overconsumption, on "developing" countries. Theme: *Simplicity: justice and compassion.*

Opening Meditation

What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

—Micah 6:8

In one sentence, what does this verse bring to mind for you?

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
VCR and TV
monitor
Chee Yoke Ling
video
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider our consumption habits as they relate to the effects of the global economy on people and the environment.

Read Before Next Gathering:

"The Pleasures of Eating" —p. 105

"The Great Hunter-Gatherer Continuum" —p. 110

Check-In

Briefly give those who would like to the opportunity to report on their experience of reducing “their” externality since the last gathering.

Group Reading

An introductory reading by Michael Schut:

Today’s session (and this course) is not meant to induce guilt or to hold up one “form” of simplicity as better than another. However, it is meant to look openly at certain realities of our world today. Doing so, particularly when considering some-

thing as pervasive as the global economy, is overwhelming. Feeling rather powerless to effect any sort of positive change is a common and understandable response. Today’s meeting, however, sets the stage for Meeting Ten, which offers hopeful, practical ideas for possible responses (related specifically to food and agriculture). Our hope is that we all might look openly at particular realities of today’s world, and at the same time find small, practical steps that allow us to respond in positive ways.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you again for this chance to be together. We trust you are here with us. Open our eyes that we might see, open our ears that we might hear; open our minds and loosen that which binds us to injustice that we might act justly; open our hearts that we might love mercy; and set our feet free from paths of idolatry, that we might walk humbly with you. In your name, *Amen*.

As we have learned from ecology, all things are interconnected, and in today’s global economy, the same is true of our consumer choices. They have wide ranging, often global implications. To remind ourselves of these implications, read the following statistics slowly.

In the last two hundred years the United States has lost:

- 50% of its wetlands,
- 90% of its Northwestern old growth forests, and
- 99% of its tall grass prairie.

Average time spent shopping per week: 6 hours;

Average time spent playing with children per week: 40 minutes.

The amount of energy used by one American is equivalent to that used by 3 Japanese, 14 Chinese, or 168 Bangladeshi people.

(Statistics taken from *All Consuming Passion: Waking Up From the American Dream*, New Road Map Foundation, Seattle, Washington, 1993.)

Group Discussion: Chee Yoke Ling Video

View the video together (about 35 minutes).

Yoke Ling is a passionate and articulate voice bringing a perspective from another country. Discuss the following as a group:

1. **What did you agree or disagree with?**

2. **How are her views on trade different from or similar to your own?**

3. **How might her perspective affect your own?**

Group Reading—continued

John Cobb, an eminent theologian, has spent the last 25 years looking closely at our economic system through theologically trained eyes. In his recent book, *Sustaining the Common Good*, Cobb discusses free trade. He uses the analogy of our economic system (and society in general) as a train speeding out of control:

If one finds oneself on a train speeding down a hill toward a bridge that has been destroyed, what is the realistic thing to do? Let us suppose that most of the people on the train do not know that the bridge is out and that there are powerful interests committed to maintaining their ignorance. The passengers are eager to reach their destinations on the other side of the gorge that the bridge crosses. They favor moving on as rapidly as possible and resent any

When you organize the global society primarily for the purpose of increasing production and consumption, you systematically destroy community (human and nonhuman).

—John Cobb

suggestion that the train should be slowed, much less stopped. Many of those who have reason to suspect that the bridge is out prefer not to think about it. To stop the train and take the long detour to the destination would require actions that would jolt the passengers and be quite disruptive of their plans.

Perhaps realism dictates that one should be silent and do what one can to make the remainder of the time pass pleasantly. After all, the chances of stopping the

train in time are quite small given the lack of interest of those on board. But realism may not make a lot of sense in this context. It may be better to try to stop the train before it reaches the gorge, however unlikely one is to succeed. If so, the first step will be to persuade the realists on board to share in the effort.

Simplicity of living, if deliberately chosen, implies a compassionate approach to life. It means that we are choosing to live our daily lives with some degree of conscious appreciation of the condition of the rest of the world...As our actions have reverberations of global dimension, the capacity for conscious action has become a social necessity.

—Duane Elgin

My analogy is, of course, an alarmist one, and it is not fash-

ionable to be an alarmist. Even those who see that our movement toward a global economy causes some problems are likely to find my cataclysmic analogy misleading. And, indeed, it is. In the analogy there is a single catastrophe awaiting the train. In the real world a continuing, single-minded emphasis on increasing production will lead to many smaller catastrophes, most of which will be explained in terms of particular local circumstances rather than attributed to global policies. Most of the suffering will be borne by the invisible poor, whereas we who make public opinion and shape policy will be largely unscathed for some time to come. Where we, the rich, will obviously share in the suffering, as with the destruction of the ozone layer, actions will be taken to contain the damage. (See Cobb, "Against Free Trade," in *Sustaining the Common Good*, pp. 108-109.)

Cobb is essentially writing about waking up, about awareness, about a change in perception. When we read or hear of the many catastrophes (whether environmental, economic or political) happening throughout different parts of the world, how do we perceive them? Do we see connections between our daily choices, resulting government policy and various crises facing peoples and places throughout the world? For example, is there a connection between our consumption habits and choices and how our country pursues international trade agreements?

Cobb and Chee Yoke Ling do perceive connections between such seemingly disparate acts as our consumer choices and unemployment in Mexico or Cameroon.

They suggest that “a continuing single-minded emphasis on increasing production will lead to many smaller catastrophes.” These will be attributed to local circumstances rather than global or national policies.

1. What do you think about this perspective?

2. What struck you personally about the Wendell Berry and Alan Durning articles?

3. What do you see as the larger effects of your own patterns of consumption?

Action Step

Is there a first step you might think of that would change your own consumption patterns in a helpful direction? What would help you take such a step? Share this with the group.

Another way to tackle the question “how much is enough?” is to expose yourself to less advertising by declaring your independence from junk mail! See Turn the Tide’s (www.newdream.org) fourth action step to do so. (See page 230 for an introduction to Turn the Tide.)

Closing Prayer (*Read in unison.*)

Loving God, our many interconnections draw us close to others and to the whole created order; and thus we may both care for or unwittingly oppress our neighbors and our world. Help us to be mindful of these potentials; encourage our acts of compassion; grant us the grace of loving community. *Amen.*



Meeting Ten:

Broader Impacts of Our Everyday Food Choices

Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To reflect on and remember the joys of good food;

To consider our food choices as they relate to personal and environmental health.

Read Before Next Gathering:

“Christian Existence in a World of Limits” —p. 117

“Structural Changes” —p. 123

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity;
3. Lead (or ask someone to lead) the opening meditation;
4. Designate next meeting’s Facilitator.

Overview

Agri-culture is increasingly agri-business. This change has many economic, cultural, and environmental implications. Today’s meeting considers these implications and discusses hopeful alternatives based on local food economies. Theme: *Simplicity as expressing elemental connection to the Earth: eating food that is healthy for us, the land, and its people.*

Food for Thought

Food reveals our connection to the earth. Each bite contains the life of the sun and the earth. We can see and taste the whole universe in a piece of bread! Contemplating our food for a few seconds before eating, in mindfulness, can bring us much happiness. Mindful eating can cultivate seeds of compassion and understanding.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

Opening Meditation

Berry describes “industrial eaters” as essentially ignorant of the history of the food they consume. Think of your lives, your parents’ lives, your grandparents’ lives. How far back in your family’s history do you need to go to find people who knew where most of their food came from? Tell some of these family stories.

Check-In

Tell each other, briefly, about your ideas for reducing consumption. For those who had the opportunity to actually try something, how did that go?

Group Reading

Modern agriculture, addicted to oil and to poisons, strips the landscape of farmers, wild-life, biotic integrity, community, moral value and spiritual vitality; all in an unsustainable effort to feed restless urban populations. To sustain the world we must rebuild rural communities, dense with complex systems of life—human and natural—and rich with culture, ethics, and spiritual significance. Urban communities and choices play an indispensable role in this re-building.

—Dr. Richard Cartwright Austin

The air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink are our most direct connections to the natural world. In today's global market, what we eat has wide political, economic, community, and environmental health implications.

Find the shortest, simplest way between the earth, the hands and the mouth.

—Lanza del Vasto

Few of us are aware that the act of eating can be a powerful statement of commitment to our own well being, and at the same time to the creation of a healthier habitat. Your health, happiness, and the future of life on earth are rarely so much in your own hands as when you sit down to eat.

—John Robbins

Opening Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the gift of life; for the everyday miracle of sun, air, water and soil becoming green, living things; for your care and sustenance. For seed and soil, green stem and air, fruit on vine, fallen fruit rotting on moist ground, new seed again, we give you thanks. Be with us here, may our hearts be open to you and one another. May the seeds of your truth take root in our hearts. *Amen.*

Group Discussion

Reflect on the following questions related to Berry's article and the food continuum: (we recommend starting with those questions in bold if you have limited time.)

1. Share your thoughts about the readings.
How has the "joy of good food" been experienced in your life?

2. Are there features of agribusiness that you see as unjust to people, animals and the land?

Berry describes the industrial food economy as a trap. He suggests escape comes via “restoring one’s consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one’s part in the food economy.”

3. What from your own experience speaks to “the responsibilities of eating”?
4. What did you think of Berry’s seven suggestions for reclaiming this responsibility?
5. Which of the seven do you already participate in? Which do you find more difficult to participate in?

Reflect on the Food Gathering Continuum:

6. Where do you see yourself on this continuum?
7. Where would you like to eventually be?

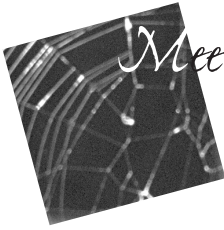
Closing Prayer (*Read in unison.*)

Loving God, you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing, giving them their food in due season. We thank you for sustaining such a rich and bountiful earth. Encourage in us our assumption of appropriate responsibility. Grant us gratitude at the richness you provide. *Amen.*

Action Step

Can you think of a first, small step in moving along the food continuum toward your eventual goal? What movement can you make in that direction in the coming week? Share this with the group.

Or, try Turn the Tide’s two food-related actions: “Eat one less beef meal each week,” or “Shift your shrimp consumption.” See www.newdream.org/turnthetide.



Meeting Eleven:

The Politics of Simplicity

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity;
3. Lead the opening meditation;
4. Designate next meeting's Facilitator;
5. If the group wishes to have a potluck or dessert-delight at the next meeting, discuss plans during this meeting.

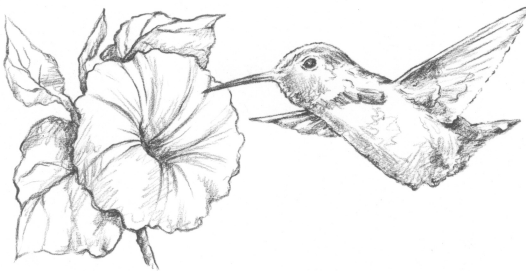
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6. Arrange for a flip chart and markers for the next meeting.

Overview

Jerome Segal's quote nicely summarizes today's theme:

"If the simple living idea remains largely individualistic, it will not only be irrelevant to most Americans—in the end it will disappear under the influence of the dominant forces in American life. It is as a form of politics, a politics that is both personal and social, that simple living has enormous potential for deeply and lastingly transforming life in America." (*Tikkun*, volume 11, no. 4, page 20.)



Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To consider practical, political ideas that would help our society reflect and encourage simple living;

To remind ourselves that individual change and political action are both crucial elements to long-lasting, far-reaching societal change;

To consider Cobb's "appropriate Christian responses" to today's world.

Read Before Next Gathering:

"Building Community" —p. 207

"Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough" —p. 213

Opening Meditation

Begin with a brief silence and then read aloud, in unison:

Oh Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living things too many to number, creatures both small and great. There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan which you have made for the sport of it. All of them look to you to give them their food in due season. You give it to them; they gather it: you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.

—*Psalm 104:24-28*

Opening Prayer

Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, we ask for your presence here, and for your love and grace in our lives. Thank you again for the gift of each day. *Amen.*

Check-In

For those of you who had a chance since your last meeting, share briefly about your experimenting with movement along the “food continuum.”

Group Discussion

1. Any general comments or questions about today’s readings?

2. John Cobb’s essay presents five “images of appropriate Christian response”: Christian Realism; The Eschatological Attitude; The Discernment of Christ; The Way of the Cross; Prophetic Vision. Do you feel drawn to any of them? How might church life be different if these areas of Christian response were incorporated?

3. Cecile Andrews says, “We need structural changes that allow people to behave in a caring way.” What did you think of her concrete proposals (for example, limiting wealth accumulation, developing new standards of economic health, developing new kinds of taxation, and so on) for implementing such change?

4. Are there other structural changes—ones that would also encourage a simplicity of compassion—you could get excited about and support?

Small Group Discussion

Form groups of three members each to discuss the following:

1. Cecile Andrews briefly addresses regulating corporations. What are some of the better ways you know of to move corporations toward greater concern for people and the planet?

John Cobb says: “The rhetoric of identification with the poor and the oppressed has been around for some time. We have to ask what it means, and here diversity is legitimate. For some, it means functioning as advocates for the cause of the poor; for a few, joining revolutionary movements; for others, embracing poverty as a way of life. I believe this third meaning needs to be taken by Christians with increasing seriousness. The one who actually becomes poor will be a better advocate for the cause of the poor and freer to respond to other opportunities for identification.”

2. What does this say to you?

Later in that same section (called “The Way of the Cross”) Cobb says that these various ways of identifying need to be “supported by the churches.” **Brainstorm together about ways the Church and/or other Christian communities could support such identification.** Be creative! Share examples you know exist and come up with your own! (Here’s one example: a church has one or a number of couples who would like to purchase a home or create a co-housing project. They do not want to have a large mortgage and then both work full time for 30 years to pay it off. They would like to be able to volunteer their time in a variety of ways, providing service back to the community. A group of people from the church, or the church itself, could provide low-interest loans which the couples would pay back over time.)

Small Group Reports

Report back to the whole group some of the themes and hot ideas from your discussions.

Note: See Jerome Segal’s new book *Graceful Simplicity: Towards a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living*, published by Henry Holt, for further reflection on creating a society that encourages the richness of simple living.

Action Step

Perhaps, during your brainstorming, a specific action came to mind that some of you might want to actually implement!

Closing Prayer

Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, thank you for this group of people; thank you for those communities which support us. Thank you especially for your great gift of grace and for laughter and joy in the midst of what is often a confusing and difficult world. May we be open to transformation through Christ’s love and power. *Amen.*

...we are called to celebrate all life, including our own, not to repress it. But the celebration of life does not involve participation in the luxury and waste of a throwaway society that exists in the midst of world poverty.

—John Cobb



Meeting Twehre:

Widening Our Circle of Community: Journey to Abundant Life

Facilitator Overview

As facilitator today:

1. Serve as timekeeper;
2. Facilitate discussions, making sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak;
3. Lead the opening meditation and prayer;
4. Read the group reading together.

Overview

A time to celebrate and reflect on the course as a whole, generally, and on community specifically. Would the group like to continue meeting? How has the course affected lives and lifestyles? Have a potluck dinner or dessert-fest!

Opening Meditation

Begin with a moment of silence.

If I choose not to become attached to nouns—a person, place or thing—then when I refuse an intimate's love or hoard my spirit, when a known landscape is bought, sold, and developed, chained or grazed to a stubble, or a hawk is shot and hung by its feet on a barbed-wire fence, my heart cannot be broken because I never risked giving it away.



Tools Everyone Needs:

Simpler Living,
Compassionate Life
pen or pencil
flip chart and
markers
Optional:
journal or notebook

Purpose:

To listen to our lives in order to hear “the voice of our own gladness”;

To reflect on how this voice may connect to simplicity and to specific course content;

To express that voice creatively and share this with the group.

But what kind of impoverishment is this to withhold emotion, to restrain our passionate nature in the face of a generous life just to appease our fears? A man or woman whose mind reins in the heart when the body sings desperately for connection can only expect more isolation and greater ecological disease. Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild.

—Terry Tempest Williams

Opening Prayer

Loving Creator, thank you for our time together, for the gift of life, for your on-going work of creation in our world, for your presence in each of our lives. Help us to hear your still, small voice. May your Spirit be here and with us when we leave. In your name, *Amen*.

Group Reading

An introductory reading by Michael Schut:

Over the last weeks/months you have gathered as a small community around the topic of simplicity. Much more could have been covered, but we hope that this course has provided some perspectives on how your faith specifically, and the Christian faith generally, might inform and possibly lead to greater simplicity.

Some or all of you may wish to continue meeting together as a way of supporting further exploration. Many of us need places in our lives where we can openly ask the kinds of questions raised in this course. We need to feel safe and supported when considering how the way we live our lives reflects our core values. For those interested, find listed on page 284 further resources ideal for small group use.

In this last meeting, we would like to discuss community. Cecile Andrews' essay acknowledges the loss of community many people feel today and identifies very practical ways to encourage the strengthening of communities. And Terry Tempest Williams' piece reminds us the circle of our community encompasses relationships with the rest of the natural world. We are impoverished, she says, when we think and act otherwise.

Why do we raise the place of community in our lives as the last topic in a course on simplicity? Because growth or inviting change into our lives rarely happens in isolation. Because M. Scott Peck may just be right when he writes, "in and through community lies the salvation of the world" (*The Different Drum*). And, because our hectic, individualistic culture contributes to the breakdown of community, living more simply may require us to re-discover, nourish and rely more and more on those around us.

In my own experience, community has often been the vehicle for ushering the love and grace of God into my life. Community, awareness of connection and relationship, has provided me with those moments where I sense sunshine breaking into my own darkness and where I relax into the love that I believe is at the center of the universe and holds it together.

So whether this recently formed community continues in a similar form or not, you hopefully have those places and people in your lives that offer support. Besides support, community can also help you to hear and respond to the stirrings of your own heart which, in today's noisy and wordy world, are hard enough to hear amongst all the voices clamoring for attention.

This course began with an emphasis on listening to your own voice, your own story, with an ear to hear "whatever of meaning, of holiness, of God there may be in it to hear" (Buechner). At its conclusion, once again do the same: listen to your lives to hear, as Buechner suggests, the voice of your own gladness:

To Isaiah, the voice said, "Go," and for each of us there are many voices that say it, but the question is which one will we obey with our lives, which of the voices that call is to be the one that we answer. No one can say, of course, except each for himself, but I believe that it is possible to say at least this in general to all of us: we should go with our lives where we most need to go and where we are most needed.

Where we most need to go. Maybe that means that the voice we should listen to most as we choose a vocation is the voice that we might think we should listen to least, and that is the voice of our own gladness. What can we do that makes us gladdest, what can we do that leaves us with the strongest sense of sailing true north and of peace, which is much of what gladness is? I believe that if it is a thing that makes us truly glad, then it is a good thing and it is our thing and it is the calling voice that we were made to answer with our lives.

And also, where we are most needed. In a world where there is so much drudgery, so much grief, so much emptiness and fear and pain, our gladness in our work is as much needed as we ourselves need to be glad. If we keep our eyes and ears open, our hearts open, we will find the place surely.

Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," and in the end every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is the same word, and the word is Christ himself. And in the end that is the vocation, the calling of all of us, the calling to be Christs. To be Christs in whatever way we are able to be. To be Christs with whatever gladness we have in whatever place, among whatever brothers we are called to.

—Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, "The Calling of Voices," pp. 31-32

Listen to the “voice of your own gladness.” When was the last time someone encouraged you to do that? It’s actually a very counter-cultural piece of advice, contrary to many of the voices beckoning us to the “good life.” My sense is that the gladness Buechner refers to is closer to the joy that can come from the “abundant life” than the happiness promised by the good life. In this excerpt, Buechner discusses gladness in the context of discerning your call or your vocation. He does so primarily within the context of discovering one’s “life-work.” For today, though, we can set the word “vocation” in a broader context: from feeling called to a major life-change (including career) to simply one new direction or idea we may want to explore.

Group Discussion

With today’s reading as a backdrop, explore the questions below:

1. **Are there points of intersection between the “voice of your own gladness” and things you’ve learned or been reminded of in this course?**

2. What has been the most meaningful part of this course for you personally?

3. What actions/new directions might you take as a result of this time together?

4. If this new direction/action is taken, what might be the outcome? How would your life be different? (Suggested Activity: Express these ideas or directions by writing a story, drawing an image, writing a song, or performing a skit for the rest of the group. Use a flip chart if helpful.)

In closing, consider your answer to question 4. As a way to reflect on this course as a whole, consider your answer in relationship to the following constellation of questions:

- How would this new direction be seen from the perspective of simplicity as compassion—compassion as empathy and justice?
- How does it achieve freedom from consumerism?
- How does it experience time, silence and contemplation?
- How does it experience the joys of food, community, and nature?
- How does it embody your theology of creation?
- What communities are you a part of and how might you express this action(s)/new direction(s) in those communities?

Celebration

Enjoy your potluck dinner or dessert-fest!

Future Action Step

If you are part of a faith community, a group of you could work with your congregation to gradually “green” your life together: from the music, worship and education, to lawn care and heating and lighting practices. *The Greening Congregations Handbook* is an excellent resource to guide that process. For information, call Earth Ministry at (206)632-2426, or visit www.earthministry.org.

Closing Prayer (*Read in unison.*)

Loving God, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Help us as we search to combine our gladness with our compassion. Grant us a sense of perspective on our shortcomings, and open our lives to your encompassing joy.

We give you thanks for these times of sharing and learning; for your presence in our world and in our lives. Nourish our hearts that we may increasingly make room for love and thereby for your transformative presence. *Amen.*