

THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIMPLER WAY

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The following notes indicate some of the ways in which The Simpler Way is likely to have spiritual significance. The least obvious yet the greatest benefits of The Simpler Way are to do with its “spiritual” aspects. How often in consumer-capitalist society do people feel inspired, ennobled, at one with nature, of good will to all people, or at peace with the universe? An essential characteristic of consumer-capitalist society is the high level of anxiety, stress and depression. Depression is about the most common ailment now. The triumph of “neo-liberal globalisation” is rapidly increasing the pressure on middle classes and workers even in the richer countries, increasing their insecurity and fears. Many work increasingly long hours while many have no jobs and are condemned to boredom and hopelessness. Meanwhile many complain about not having enough time.

Even more important, the spirit permeating consumer-capitalist society is selfish, mean and narrow. The dominant concern is individualistic struggle to get more money and possessions, in a climate that is competitive and callous. There are other values as well, but the struggle by the individual to get more constitutes the essence of western culture now. This obsession is distressingly impoverished -- it means that a vast range of other and more noble and rewarding pursuits that people could be devoting their lives to are mostly overlooked or crowded out. It is also a undesirable, degrading orientation. It is selfish, grasping, exploitative and predatory. You try to beat others, rather than help them. You take advantage of the other’s misfortune. Most leisure time is spent consuming the trivia the media churns out. For large numbers consumer-capitalism is pretty close to a spiritual desert. So even the richest one billion people on the planet fail to have anything like the spiritual quality of life that is possible.

It is important to begin by stressing that The Simpler Way liberates us from the frantic consumer rat race where we have to spend most of our time producing and consuming. Being content with what is sufficient in our personal lifestyles, along with dramatically restructured supply systems (e.g., local food production, recycling nutrients to nearby gardens enabling elimination of sewer systems) will mean that most of us might live well while working for money only two days a week. This has enormous significance for many aspects of life, especially in a) eliminating the conditions that drive so many people into coping and depression, and b) providing a lot of time for activities that enhance our “spiritual” lives. Most of our week might be spent enjoying arts and crafts, gardening, reading, community, discussion, projects, maintaining/running our systems, learning,

celebrations and rituals, and becoming wiser. It is not that spiritually enriching experience will be another thing we will engage in – in a satisfactory society just about everything we do will have a spiritual significance, a spiritual benefit.

It is important to make clear the meaning that is being given to “spiritual” here. It is to do with the outlooks and feelings which lead us to say things like, “He’s in high spirits today.” “She is dispirited.” “It lifted my spirits.” “That was inspiring.” The core notion is inspiration. Religious belief can be associated with these kinds of effects on the spirit but there is a lot of territory we can explore here without assuming any supernatural or non-scientific realm.

There seem to be three relevant domains. The first is to do with ideas, outlook, consciousness or awareness, the things one thinks about or attends to. The second involves feelings, emotional states, for example elation, depression, appreciation, empathy, humility, and inspiration. The third is to do with impulses, motivation, energy, will, desire to act, e.g., to jump into action, or to relax or contemplate or befriend.

Following are thoughts on some of the ways that The Simpler Way would enable and produce significant spiritual rewards.

Art permeates the village.

A very important goal of The Simpler Way is to enable all to engage in and experience creativity much of the time. All over the place there will be artists, playwrights, sculptors, potters, poets, musicians and gardeners, with about five days a week to devote to their art. They will derive satisfaction from surrounding us all with beautiful works objects and performances and experiences. Their focus will be not just on enjoying their art, but on enriching all our lives with their creations. Think about the abundance of musicians and poets eager to entertain and enchant us at the Saturday night performances in the community workshop.

The main point of art is the feeling of inspiration, the “uplifting of the soul” that sometimes occurs when one contemplates or creates a work of art. We should de-emphasise art as a spectator sport, where the work of the expert is idolised. The focus should not be on the elite artist. It should be on enabling all people to enjoy creating, and on enriching our community by making it a more beautiful place. Some people will do this simply by planting flowers in the beds outside the community workshop, or helping to keep our village square tidy. Even raking the leaves there, or tidying up the pottery, contributes to making the place nice for all to enjoy.

Note the synergism here. If we are surrounded by beautiful things then the better we feel and the better we will treat others, in turn the better they will treat us – and the more likely we will want to engage in creative activities. Conversely an ugly landscape deadens the spirit and inclines people to neglect it and this

reinforces its deterioration. Both feedback loops accelerate themselves. Crucial in the social design of good settlements is making sure the positive feedbacks occur. Socially valuable behaviour, such as coming to working bees, must be enjoyable. The town cannot work well if contributions are motivated only by obligation, necessity or punishment. Eager, voluntary effort is crucial, and it must be and can be self-reinforcing, by being a source of comradeship and sense of making a worthwhile contribution, and of building and running an admirable, beautiful community.

One of the most powerful creative activities is gardening. It's one we can enjoy for a lifetime and it can provide a sense of contributing our town's landscape. Firstly that landscape will be beautiful, crammed with a wild variety of unique little home-made houses set in very different gardens, fussed over and ornamented with seats and statues and fountains. Then there will be all the public space adopted by the manic gardeners living nearby, the bus stops, parks, lanes, ponds and public buildings that people are just itching to plant and green up and look after. One of the most enjoyable leisure activities will be to go for a ramble, to look again at the gardens, cottages, sculptures, tree houses, grottoes, bridges, ponds and vistas we have built.

Hence your garden will be about one kilometer across; i.e., the whole town, and one thousand people will be working on it, so it will be a fabulous source of leisure and inspiration, full of grand views, hidden dells, secret dens and shrines and magic places. Among other spiritual effects this landscape will be a constant reminder of the power of the collective; you could not have made all this on your own, but here it is, vast, complex, inexhaustible beautiful and all yours to enjoy, and free.

Also beautiful and inspiring creations will be our ecological systems, the social systems, the economy, the cohesion and solidarity and friendliness and effectiveness with which our town works. It will be a source of great satisfaction and pride to think that we have created this admirable town and that we run it well.

The village will have many "sacred sites", little places where people can come to sit or feed the ducks, or meditate or soak up the view, and have their spirits lifted. At some of these there will be sculptures, sayings, poems, or shrines. Contrast this with the often barren parks found in consumer-capitalist society, not cared for by locals, unloved, and often ugly, rubbish-strewn and even dangerous...and maintained by the council, not us.

Also of great spiritual significance will be our many rituals, festivals, dramatic performances and celebrations. These reinforce communal ideas and values. Some of them will connect with the local bio-region, such as celebrating the start of the growing season, or the end of the harvest, or the first appearance of a migratory bird. Some will celebrate historical events, such as the day we

completed the community workshop. The town's cultural committees will work on making these events and performances powerful reinforcers of solidarity and spirit. The drama clubs and the musicians will make them into stunningly impressive events, recreating and celebrating town myths and legends in unforgettable ways.

One powerful consequence will be "earth bonding", something that is not understood in consumer capitalist society. We will feel very strong attachments to our place, not our "property" but the place where we belong. We will know it well, its seasons, moods, gifts, quirks, problems. We will derive much of our life satisfaction from it, the perfect food, the sunsets, the new colour when the old tree bark strips off, the community and gardens we have built there. It will not be possible to say "I end here and the environment I live in begins there." You will be part of the place and the place will merge with you. What would be left of me if you took away those parts that are my involvement in the pottery club, the orchestra, the working bees, my enjoyment of the gardens and the social relations here? Those things are party of my identity, parts of me. These bonds, ties and relationships break down the separation between individual and surroundings. These things become incorporated into us, expanding and enriching our nature. We identify with place, community and traditions.

The ultimate work of art is one's own character. "She is a beautiful person." Again we will have the time to work on this canvas, in a stimulating and helpful environment. We will be conscious of how much benefit we get from people around us who are nice, thoughtful, helpful, graceful, tolerant, good facilitators skilful and caring. In a highly cooperative and self-sufficient town we will have to work with and get on with others. We will not be individually rich enough to be very independent. Therefore we will be very aware of other personalities, and very dependent on their virtues, and conscious of the importance of interpersonal skills and of putting effort into personal development. Thus to gradually become a nicer, more friendly and helpful and more at peace person is not just to benefit oneself -- the community benefits too and that in turn benefits you.

Artistic experience somehow seems to have a tendency to make us "better" people, something like more compassionate, humane and socially responsible. The sense of wellbeing that can come with the contemplation of an inspiring work, or situation, or person, or scene or dramatic performance, sometimes seems to spill over into a desire to spread goodness and beauty through the world. Art can make us wish to extend the feeling of well-being to others, wish we could enable all to live in conditions which also give them this sense of peace or calm or well-being.

If nothing else, these rambling thoughts illustrate the abundant, complex and important kinds of ideas and experiences that life in The Simpler Way would help us to explore. Different people find their inspiration in different ways, see different virtues in different things, find different things inspiring and uplifting, have

different techniques for lifting their own spirits, have different sacred rituals and places. In our new villages, with all that time to devote to discussing and thinking, we will be surrounded by people involved in their own spiritual journeys and we will be able to explore these many realms and benefit from each other's thinking and experience.

Busy-ness, pressure, no time...vs a relaxed pace.

Again, highly characteristic of consumer society is obsession with work, achievement, driving, grind, getting more wealth and power, climbing the company ladder, in a context of scarcity, insecurity, stress, pace and competition that all cannot win. From the perspective of The Simpler Way people in consumer-capitalist society work three times too hard! Large numbers struggle and fail to run small businesses, trying to sell something many others are already selling. If we lived simply, in a radically reorganised cooperative society, with many free goods coming from the local commons, the amount of producing that was necessary would be far less than at present. Many entire industries would be phased out.

This means in consumer society we are driven by deficiency motivation. Much of the time we are pushing ourselves to overcome some obstacle or solve some problem or get something we do not have. The motivation is negative. The focus is on means, working, getting, achieving. We have to acquire money in order to then consume and enjoy later. We suffer work in order to be able to buy things to then have fun. We do boring work at school in order to get the credentials that give access to a "good" job. The work and the schooling are usually merely means, without intrinsic value, not done for their own sake or for the enjoyment they yield. We are always doing, rather than being. Occasionally we just sit in the sun and relax, just "be" ... for a few moments, but then we get back to work. We don't seem to realise that some people, including Buddhist monks, Aborigines and other tribal people do a lot of just "being". There is now a vast meditation industry helping over-wound workaholics to learn how to stop striving and just "be" for a little while.

For several hundred years Western culture has been obsessed with a syndrome to do with expansion, with building bigger systems, more elaborate and powerful things, with "progress", extending the frontiers, conquering nature, building empires, and "development". Quinn, author of Ishmael, calls this "Taker" mentality. It is eternally restless, driven, questing, unable to relax and accept and appreciate, and leave things alone, ..including the natural environment and the lands of other people. (Quinn sees "civilisation" as having been a 10,000 year mistake.)

Essential to The Simpler Way is a very relaxed pace. Firstly there is far less that needs doing, and the huge amount of senseless unnecessary production carried out in consumer-capitalist society is avoided, so there is a lot of time for other

things. Secondly what does need doing can be carried out at an easy pace, and the “work” can be enjoyed. When maximising output ceases to be the only consideration that matters it becomes possible to organise much production in craft ways. All the pottery we need can be made by hand, by people who love making pottery, and they can take their time to enjoy it. “Work” then has a chance to deliver spiritual benefits, such as enjoying producing beautiful items, enjoying exercising skills and giving products to others. And there is time to think, to appreciate the materials and the connections with other themes, and to imagine new designs and ways.

Because the pressure and the insecurity has gone, there’s also the possibility of stopping and doing something else whenever you wish and coming back to the pottery later. This means that in general “work” would only be done when we wanted to do it. The work/leisure distinction might disappear entirely.

So the Simpler Way facilitates transition from deficiency motivation to growth motivation. We will be more able to do things because we want to and because they help us learn, develop, improve, grow and become wiser and better people, rather than mostly do things that have to be done.

“But won’t we become lazy?”

This common response is quite revealing. It assumes that humans only do things if they are driven by fear and punishment. “Who’d work if they didn’t have to?”

Reflect on the fact that no one works harder than a footballer. Why does he work so hard? Obviously because he loves doing what he’s doing! That’s the motivation we should design our societies to enable as much as possible. You would probably not choose to sit around all day and do nothing when there are so many interesting, creative, pleasant and worthwhile things to do all around you. Indeed a common problem that the Simpler Way brings is fretting about not having the time to do all the things you want to do.

Also keep in mind here that it will be very easy to learn those things and get help with them and join others doing them, because all around you there will be a bewildering range of artists, potters, writers, crafts people, gardeners, musicians, et al., with the time to explain, and eager to help you enjoy their thing too. Synergism again. The more they teach you about their art and craft the more people there are to chat to about its finer points.

Again in the Simpler Way creating, making, building, designing, growing will be major preoccupations. Although there is an important place for just doing nothing (as Bertrand Russel argued in his essay In Praise of Idleness, there should be much more “laziness” than there is in this work-obsessed society), but most of us would probably be very active most of the time, anything but lazy.

How about maintaining the high-tech skills and systems society would still need, such as those of doctors? Would enough people knuckle down to learn all that stuff if they were not driven by fear of low income, or desire for high status? This is not a problem. Firstly, we would not need so many highly skilled people, because at present most of them do things that are unnecessary. (Half of our scientists are making weapons. And what proportion of lawyers would we need in a good society?) The motivation for becoming a doctor should be a) wanting to do that kind of work because you like it, and b) wanting to make that kind of contribution to your community. (A fundamental principle of The Simpler Way is that one should never work for money. It is alright to receive money for work, but that should be incidental and not the main reason you do it.) We'd get enough doctors and engineers.

The limits to "reason."

Let's think about kinds of thinking. In consumer-capitalist society the overwhelming emphasis is on means to ends thinking, on "instrumental" rationality, on finding the way to a set goal, i.e., problem solving. We easily overlook the fact that there are many other kinds of thinking our minds are capable of and that if we give too much attention to merely coping and problem solving thinking then we will not only neglect the other kinds, we will stunt them.

I see it in terms of focusing on means to goals, at the expense of being able to appreciate the goal when you have reached it. Hence the consumer-capitalist personality is never satisfied and always has to push on to higher goals, seek promotion, or trade in for a more expensive model. We are not very good at appreciating what we have or what we have done, or what's around us and given to us freely by nature. So counting our blessings, or thinking how beautiful that sunset is, or how incredible that a bug's microscopic knee joints work, is a form of thinking that has nothing to do with instrumental, problem-solving reasoning ...and could be much more important. It is about attending, seeing what's there, marvelling, being awe-inspired, recognising the gifts.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with instrumental reasoning. Some "Post-modernists" argue that there is, indeed that it is what has got the world into its terrible state. On the contrary, I think our situation is primarily due to too little rationality (and too little of other important things such as compassion.) A little more clear, critical means-ends thinking would show how irrational our practices and systems are as means to goals like peace, justice and sustainability. However it is important to recognise reasoning about means to ends as only one form of thinking, and one that tends to be narrow, focused and limited. Yes problem solving sometimes involves creativity, when we try to go outside the square or think laterally to come up with a previously un-thought-of strategy, but the concern is still with getting to that given goal. It pushes aside all considerations other than solving the set problem; it does not invite the mind to

open itself to ideas, reflecting, allowing connections and significance to reveal themselves.

Reasoning is quite different from appreciating, being more sensitive and open to ideas, being more empathic, reflecting. What we are getting into here is “opening the mind” to the possibility of new ideas, interpretations, visions, imaginings, consciousness. There can be vast and rich realms which we block access to when we set out minds to merely achieving or solving problems.

Consider what sometimes happens when you are going to sleep. I start off still working furiously on problems, thinking about how this or that task is going and what to do next. At this stage I am running my mind, setting it to work on problems, but as I get more drowsy my mind starts to make the decisions and brings into consciousness all sorts of stuff I hadn't ordered, and that's fine. I'm content to let it take me on a trip of its own creation, and finally I stop doing and begin to just be, and cease fretting about tasks and the passage of time. Before long I calm down and am content to just sit and watch, and enjoy the parade my mind presents, without any urge to process any of it.

Karl Popper saw science in terms of “conjectures and refutations”. The refuting is a pretty straight forward and mechanical process of designing tests and collecting evidence to see if a hypothesis can be falsified. But coming up with the hypotheses to test is a creative act and at times a scientist's mind seems to do this best when he steps aside and stop trying. The best strategy with a problem can be to mull it over, go over all the considerations, then get off it and let the best option come up at its leisure.

Another illustration of this idea of trying to get the conscious mind out of the way and let something else work for us is evident when the painter makes his eyes go out of focus to gaze at his painting. It is as if you have to stop trying to look so that you can see. Letting your eyes go out of focus blurs everything and you might think that's the last thing to do if you are trying to work out what's wrong with your painting. But it sometimes makes the faults immediately jump out at you. Behind your conscious every-day, rational, analytic “picky” mind there is another one that sees things differently, grasps the whole, the gestalt, and can sometimes present you with insights which that busy, fretting, fussing, focusing, problem solving, nit-picking thing can miss.

The painter sees different things, and sees more than others. He sees, is struck by, the colours, the contrasts, the hues in the shades, the surfaces and textures, the atmosphere, where the light is coming from, what it might be like there late in the day. He thinks about how best to frame that scene, what he would put on his palette, what he'd get easily and what he'd have problems with. These things can be discussed in terms of increasing awareness or openness or consciousness or mind expanding. It seems that the human mind is capable of far more than most of us get it to do, and that the routinising forces within familiar everyday existence

block these functions and confine our thinking to coping and rational means-ends thinking.

Consider the things your mind does without your permission when it creates and forces you to endure dreams. Mine even makes up and puts me through jokes and plots with surprising endings which are totally novel to me – “I” didn’t think of them. What else is going on down there? What other plots, designs, jokes could it come up with if I knew how to release these hidden and unused powers? Freud was interested in the way psychological problems get stuck down there in the unconscious levels of the mind and can cause trouble for a lifetime, but even more exciting would seem to be the creative potential that’s there if only we could get access to it.

So the mind has an astounding capacity to come up with ideas and visions and experiences, when we cease trying to boss it around and setting it to merely solving problems. When we control it we are not only forcing it to focus narrowly on a set task, we are making it function within the very limited preoccupations we have learned from our culture. We are thereby gating it down enormously, like getting Rembrandt to write the labels on the Christmas presents. We tend not to see that if we could at times just get out of its way it might come up with ideas and take us to places and states of experience and being that would astound us. So we are dealing here with the possibility of opening the doors of perception, increasing awareness and sensitivity. Drugs can do this of course but I am more interested in the social conditions that would enable it and the argument here is that The Simpler Way provides these.

The “familiarity” phenomenon.

Struggling to cope in the rat race of consumer capitalist society not only keeps us out of these realms, it stunts our capacity to think in these ways. Along with the “busy-ness” and coping preoccupations goes a rut-running, routinised, normalising, everyday mentality. I think of this as the “familiarity problem.” We plod along, taking for granted the “normality” of things. Nothing is very remarkable. Things are predictable, ordinary, as expected, familiar. Indeed we are often bored; often reality is not very interesting, let alone inspiring, enchanting, puzzling intriguing or mysterious.

Yet some people are blessed by a very different orientation to existence. I once knew a little old lady who continually found everyday things fascinating, delightful, inspiring. She occupied a quite different world to most of us. She lived in a world full of interesting things. This connects with the theme of Education as enabling one to see/make more meaning, to see more connections and questions. (See [Education; how might we conceive it?](#).) This is a matter of the vision, the world view, the outlook it is possible to go about with. It is again to do with “awareness”, openness, sensitivity, and the capacity to find reality inspiring.

This is something that various religious and spiritual traditions focus on, i.e., getting to a state of mind which transcends, escapes from the mind-closing forces of normal everyday life and enables one to “see” far more. There need not be anything supernatural about this. It can be thought of simply as a matter of the outlook a person develops. That little old lady was habitually tuned to look for and see things that were beautiful, puzzling, inspiring and meaningful.

The difference between this orientation and the rut-bound familiar world can be described in terms of awe and wonder. She found the world to be “wonder-full”, as “awe-full”. She didn’t need a volcano or a whale to evoke this response. She could get it from the very simple and common things she would come across. What a precious gift. How I wish I was better at that. Einstein said, “The most vital element in the human mind is the need to know for the sake of knowing, the impulse to wonder.” We all get there from time to time, maybe when you accidentally look up at the night sky and reflect on all those sparking lights. I got there once when I stepped off a road into a rainforest, and was suddenly confronted by a Flooded Gum 2.6 metres through the butt.

It’s also about imagination. Sometimes an observation, an event, comment or idea fires the imagination. Thoughts take off, and fly to other places and grander things. This is again about the capacity to make connections and meaning and extensions and interpretations. Imagination is a creative process, so living among people practising arts and crafts stimulates the imagination. They are always imagining new things to paint or write or make. And then there are the local community drama clubs. Their ultimate purpose is to move the spirit of their audiences and they spend a lot of time working up the most imaginative, awe-inspiring, thought-provoking performances

Sensitivity

To become more open minded, aware, set to reflect on the meaning of things or tuned to the universe, can also be thought of in terms of sensitivity. Some people seem not to see or be sensitive to much that’s around them. They miss lots of interesting things. They seem like the jet ski riders who race down a river seeing little, compared with the dawdling canoeist looking at everything closely. You could say that the old lady I knew was habitually very sensitive to her surroundings.

Consumer-capitalist society condemns many people to a spiritually desensitised existence. Many live in drab surroundings, preoccupied with survival, without much community, confined to one job for most of the week, deprived of many sources of satisfaction and meaning such as participating in their own government, contributing to working bees, or being respected for one’s helpfulness. There is therefore a desire for escapes from the routine, boredom and worries, mostly by watching a screen but also by grasping for the thrills of the football match, rave party, booze, gladiatorial sport, fast cars, spectacles,

extreme sports, drugs, idolising the lives of celebrities and wishing for fame, and gambling in the hope of a miraculous escape to luxury. Thrills. Sensational experience. Consider Kerry Packer who once bet \$4 million in a casino at one sitting. Anyone who must spend that much to be excited is extremely spiritually disadvantaged, impoverished, not feeble-minded but feeble-hearted, incapable of having the spirits lifted except by the most extreme experience.

Consumer-capitalist society obliterates sensitivity by an overkill of wealth, spectacular thrills, action movies, incredible stunts and special effects. Christmas burries kids in mountains of costly presents. Only the heroic deed, the massive spectacle, the most amazing news footage, exaggerated larger-than-life characters, are able to arouse interest. The world's best acts can be seen at the flick of a TV switch. The nature program presents in seconds shots that have taken months to get. There is no possibility that in the face of this onslaught people will develop a capacity to derive interest, inspiration and meaning from simple everyday things. Far from cultivating sensitivity, post modern culture debauches – it delivers so much stimulation and wealth, such exaggerated examples, such unrepresentative illustrations that anything less becomes uninteresting, boring. The bench mark rises all the time. The next movie must have three chain saw murders and a train wreck if it is to be more interesting than the last one. This obliterates the capacity to find interest, beauty, meaning in simple everyday and ordinary things.

Never mind the extremes, how tragically stultifying that almost everyone spends most of their working life working for money, doing one often boring thing hour after hour, when they could be painting, thinking, working on their capacity to be inspired. Even more depressing is the fact that they don't object.

The connections with care – “Cosmic consciousness”

Some people speak about the foregoing themes in terms of a “cosmic consciousness”, or a “humanitarian consciousness”, whereby an increased awareness and sensitivity leads to or brings with it increased concern for the welfare of other beings. The main causal links seem to be to do with increased sensitivity. If a person is more inclined to think about the meaning of things, the connections and their significance, then there is also likely to be more inclination to see the significance for the welfare of others, including other people, animals and ecosystems.

A person who is in the habit of reflecting on things and appreciating, such as the enjoyment of a cup of tea, or the privilege that is being able to buy excellent water colour brushes, when millions of people can't have such things, is more likely to be concerned about this situation. Awareness does not get far before one becomes acutely aware of one's own good fortune and the situation of the many others who do not enjoy good fortune. “The Budda cannot be happy as long as any being is suffering.”

You have not caused your own good fortune. Maybe you can take credit for some of it, but what about the lightning last week that didn't hit you. You are just lucky, and does not realising this make you feel sorry for those who are not so lucky. If your good fortune was all due to your efforts the situation would be different. You can't earn, bring about all the good fortune you have. My knees work well and if they didn't then I'd have a problem, and the fact that they do work well is not something I can take any credit for. It is a gift I didn't earn and cannot repay but must remain extremely indebted for. In fact my knees were shaped by an evolutionary process in which countless numbers of people who didn't have such good knees were trampled by woolly mammoths thereby eliminating the gene for wonky-knees from the gene pool. And how do I repay the millions who evolution eliminated in the process of shaping my powerful immune system. All you can do is appreciate with profound humility from a position of deep and un-repayable debt. Appreciation in this sense is a fundamentally important capacity, deeply embedded within the concept of wisdom. This seems to involve what religious people speak about under the heading of "grace"; unearned and unrepayable blessings. You can't even say thank you to those who gave them to you.

One might say that to recognise this debt is to be stuck in good old fashioned existentialist "angst". It can be quite disturbing, at least to those of us raised in the Protestant ethic, to be aware that I am so lucky and he is/was not, and there's nothing I can do about it. (Maybe even worse is to be aware that there is!) It is disturbing to realise that I am warm and well fed, and others aren't...what would that be like? The curse of empathy. (Sympathy can't bother you if you don't empathise in the first place.) What on earth happens to empathy when kids play lots of games every day in which they electronically slaughter lots of enemies?

It is not that awareness, sensitivity, and "enlightenment" bring unblemished happiness. They can bring sadness and worse, the angst the existentialists identify when the blinkers of "bad faith" are demolished. There can be, in other words, a serious down side to spirituality. It is about discovering, releasing delight, but it is also about coming to recognise and coming to terms with difficult and unpleasant questions about our situation. Spiritual maturity can't be approached without at least the understanding that the difficulties are there. It would seem to involve, among other things, a coming to terms with the unsolvable mysteries and problems – how for instance am I going to exist with the fact that I eat well and about 850 million people don't? Nor is it necessarily the case that a satisfactory position can be reached. Sometimes it's about recognising that there is no escape from your problem, and about coming to terms with that "no exit" which Sartre identified.

This suggests that there is an important distinction between mere intelligence or cleverness, and wisdom. Perhaps we should think of intelligence as only to do with finding the most effective means to a given end. Western culture is almost solely concerned with this. It is about planning, working, thinking as means to get

the bridge built, the battle won, the mortgage paid, the takeover through. But wisdom is about far more, and far more indefinable, things, to do with how one sees it all, what one sees as important, and the consequences this has for judgment, world view, feeling and action.

Zest

Most of the foregoing ideas have been about ideas, but what about affective and volitional aspects of spirituality? After all these are the things that the term “spirit” points to.

A great painting or dramatic scene can energise. Spiritual experiences can recharge your batteries, stimulating you to go out and do things. Bertrand Russell listed zest as an important goal of education. In my view schooling crushes it.

Zest seems to connect with spontaneity and frivolity, playfulness, delight. It can bust out unpredictably in this direction or that, like the gambolling of a lamb. That makes it delightful; you don't know where it will take you. Contrast this with the typical and required attitude of a solid bureaucrat or mortgage payer in consumer-capitalist society – thoroughly disciplined and routinised, predictable, stolid and so very serious. He can be relied on to pay off that mortgage even though it might keep him at that desk for thirty years.

Spontaneity is death to all that. “Didn't feel like coming to work today; went fishing instead.” What is the appropriate response to the inevitable judgment, “But if people behaved like that we couldn't have built modern society.”? Perhaps it is, “Good thinking!”

This seems to be the volitional aspect of “re-enchanting the world”. Consumer-capitalist society has deadened the spirit as well as stunted perception, and the task here is to free the will, somehow. Nietzsche saw this problem, as did the sexual liberationists, but their prescription for the disease, completely liberating the pent up will in order to get rid of the stultifying repression, would seem to risk careering into the mud on the other side of the road. Or is it that we would be alright in a civilization that didn't repress impulse so much in the first place. (Marcuse identified the “surplus repression” required to make this society function.) Or was Freud right in thinking that the more civilized we become the more repression that is required. Or was he wrong in seeing the two as necessarily in conflict; could not humans develop societies in which impulses and order do not clash? Or is Quinn right in seeing “civilization” as the problem, and recommending a more “tribal” way? Out my depth here.

The supreme importance of purpose.

But if there is one thing that is not in doubt it is the great importance of enthusiasm, of purpose. Nothing is worse than to lose purpose, hope, things you

want to do work for. Yet consumer-capitalist society dumps large numbers of people into purposelessness and hopelessness. Even in the richest societies many millions are prevented from having anything worthwhile to do. Consider the unemployed, homeless, invalids, mentally ill, the aged, prisoners, indigenous people, often condemned to no role and nothing to do. Add the many who have reasonable or high incomes but who are depressed, alcoholic or drug dependent. As Illich saw, governments, corporations and bureaucracies have taken all the functions. The individual's role is to work, earn and then buy, letting others produce and decide. "Be quiet, consume, die."

The Simpler Way restores the responsibility and the opportunity to be deeply involved in running one's community, it eliminates the things that destroy purpose and enthusiasm, and it provides abundant important purpose, from creating to governing and caring, and it gives the time to do these things, and it surrounds one with people eager to create, help, teach etc.

Enthusiasm is one of the crucial factors economists can't even talk about but which make a huge difference to economic affairs. Our community working bees can get jobs done far more efficiently, cheaply and enjoyably than any corporation. A little shop run by someone who just loves to make jams or pastries will be far more effective and pleasant and valuable than one run by a bored shop assistant. A factory of co-operative craftspeople will run it far more efficiently in every way than any transnational could.

The interpersonal realm

The comments so far have focussed within the mind and heart of an individual, but spirituality also involves connections between the individual and others, and places and traditions, and there is a lot to explore here.

The spiritual significance of dependence.

In consume-capitalist society you have to survive more or less as an isolated individual in competition with all others. You have to become as independent as possible. You must acquire a lot of money and property, e.g., so you can pay insurance premiums to be secure. If you are rich, or at least comfortable economically, you can afford to do what you want without having to ask favours of others or become morally indebted to others. Independence is associated with "freedom" from, e.g., from obligation and responsibility.

The Simpler Way involves a quite different outlook. Central to it is intensive mutual dependence, and this is not only a source of great security, it is also a source of satisfaction, not a resented burden. In highly self-sufficient and co-operative village economies our quality of life will be almost entirely due to our local social arrangements, institutions, infrastructures, and our local ecosystems, and each other — and this will be good for us in a number of ways. Our water,

food, energy and leisure will mostly come from the locality, so we will care about these sources and systems. Our security, company, assistance, entertainment will come from our local social networks and arrangements. We will depend on those working bees and committees to keep our windmills and garbage gas systems in good shape. We will depend on the drama club and the festivals committee for our celebrations and theatre nights. Our town will not work well unless we maintain the good will and enjoyment people get from contributing. Our welfare will depend on a high level of solidarity and cohesion. In consumer society you can purchase your energy and food through an impersonal contract, with no sense of dependence on others. The interaction establishes no bond, no feeling of gratitude or need to reciprocate someday. In The Simpler Way we will be very conscious of our dependence on many others and many arrangements close by, such as our technical dependence on the water committee and the good will and generosity of the people who gave to make the drama club's performance so good. Our welfare will depend on how well our complex locality functions. All this will make us grateful and make us recognise our responsibility to contribute to those systems, and we will get satisfaction from contributing the things others depend on us for. The quality of a society is essentially a function of its social bonds, the feelings of appreciation, responsibility, dependence, gratitude, indebtedness and desire to reciprocate.

Ecosystems are about complete inter-dependence. No part, no animal or plant can exist without the contribution all the others make to maintaining the system. A plant needs the bat to eat its fruit to spread its seeds. It needs the fungi to break down logs on the forest floor to release soil nutrients. The fungi need the shade the plant provides. The Buddhists are acutely aware of all this. Their symbol of the sun cradled in the crescent of the moon is saying that even those two things so far apart are connected.

Dependence will therefore generate and maintain solidarity, and comradeship, and therefore greater security than any insurance premium can buy. No one is more secure than the poorest tribesman, who knows that others will come to his aid no matter what happens.

In other words our mutual dependence will require and produce collectivism. This much-abused term (along with "comrade") represents the fundamentally important orientation for human societies. These terms are readily denigrated by construing them to mean mindless acceptance of the ideology of totalitarian governments. Obviously their meaning in the context of The Simpler Way just centres on the importance of concern for the good of all, and a satisfaction from helping others to thrive.

Remember that there will be few if any state bureaucracies or councils to do things for you, build your windmill, fix your water recycling. In an age of serious scarcity states will not have the resources to do all these things, so you will be acutely aware that if you are to have safe water you will be dependent on

whether the people around you have in place the systems to deal with the needs all share. Murray Bookchin explains how the strong sense of community in Medieval towns was largely due to the fact that they had only themselves to depend on.

The worst thing about the ascendancy of neo-liberalism is its reinforcement of the opposite values. It embraces and celebrates rampant self-interest and winner-take-all. It seeks to eliminate the public interest as a reference point or value (or it makes the absurd assumption that such things will be provided for if all pursue self interest.) Again the landscape of The Simpler way, where your sources of food, energy, leisure, purpose etc. will be all around you and where your quality of life will be a direct function of how well those sources are maintained, where your wealth/welfare will come mostly from public assets and arrangements, such as the workshops and commons and concerts, will ensure that our outlook will be primarily collectivist.

It should be obvious that this need not clash in any way with desirable private interests and freedoms. We can all still have our very different religions, cultures, aesthetic preferences, and we can all devote most of our lives to very different purposes, just as long as our top priority is the public good. Because our own direct and immediate dependence on the public good will be so obvious to all, there will not be a problem of maintaining concern for the public good. Again the incentives are positive and the synergism is powerful. If I go to the working bees I am benefiting the town, but I am also directly benefiting myself, and I will have a nice afternoon and come home feeling good about having made a worthwhile, appreciated contribution.

Governing, citizenship.

Another realm in which The Simpler Way is totally different to consumer-capitalist society is to do with “government”. Most governing will be carried out by small, local, voluntary and consensual procedures. These elements are crucial and unavoidable. There is no choice about this. If they are not central then satisfactory communities cannot be. And they will bring out the best in us. Why?

The first reason why we will do these things is because as has been noted above there will not be the resources required to run big centralised governments and bureaucracies. Most governing will have to be carried out within towns, neighbourhoods and suburbs and small regions. There will still be functions for state and national governments, but not that many. Most of the important decisions and procedures in your life will take place at the level of the small local economy. That’s where your food and work and furniture and entertainment will come from, so most of the important development and maintenance issues will only concern that small locality. If your neighbourhood is going to dig up another parking lot then the people who live around there are the ones who should have most say in what to do with that space, because you are the ones who know

what you need and how best you can organise to get the job done. You are going to do it, not some state bureaucracy.

What is most important here is that only the people who live around you can make the decisions. A bureaucracy many kilometres away cannot make the best decisions. Only we who live there know what we need, what will grow well here, what the history and traditions around here are, what local people are like, what decisions will be acceptable and what will not, and therefore how to proceed.

The decisions have to be “owned” by the community. Most if not all people must agree that a proposal is the best for the town and be keen to implement it, or it will not work. It will not work if there are many who didn’t want it but were out-voted. Therefore voting will not be important and might not take place at all. The core political process will be the lengthy period of informal discussions during which people bounce ideas off each other and grope towards a recognition of what will be the best option for the town. Ideally then a vote is just the rubber stamping of the agreement that has emerged.

Note how very different the politics of consumer-capitalist society are. There politics is about desperate zero-sum struggles to get something for yourself from centralised government. A group wants the parking lot to be rezoned for a block of units and another wants it to become a child-minding centre. Two parties are in a conflict of self-interest, the public interest is usually not central, the local community might not be involved, a powerful authoritarian government will give the prize to one group or the other, probably the one that makes the most noise i.e., that poses the biggest threat to the self-interest of the government that wants to be re-elected. The process is complicated and at best zero-sum, and often worse leaving costs and division and resentment.

In The Simpler Way the focal question is not what is best for me. It is what is best for the town. Everyone is acutely aware of this. All realise that we have to get the best systems and arrangements or the town water supply and food and energy and social systems will not work well. This situation of intense dependence on our bioregion and our social systems will force us to think collectively, i.e., to think primarily about what is in the public interest. You will come to meetings to argue for what you think is best for the town, rather than what is best for you. It is not that we will do this because we are saints. We will do it because we realise we must think this way because if we do not work out what is technically best for then town the viability of the town will suffer, because our welfare can’t be ensured unless that of the town is.

We will be greatly assisted by the fact that it will not be a growth economy so there will not be constant fierce struggle by developers to get land and capital and to bulldoze and build. In any case the market will not be allowed to determine what land and capital is put into, enabling the few to outbid the townspeople and

rule out development of what they want. Local people will decide what is going to be developed.

This new political situation will have a miraculously beneficial effect on our thinking, habits and values ... on our spiritual perspective. Collectivist thinking will be required, but it will also be rewarded. The situation will be highly participatory. We can't get the decisions that will be best for the town unless all become involved and express their views and help each other to grope to the best strategies. The situation will therefore encourage and reward responsibility and citizenship. People will know that it is important to become involved because we are deciding how to develop our town and it is great to be able to influence that, to feel I am helping to build and run a productive and nice place for all of us. In consumer capitalist society people experience none of these conditions so it is not surprising that they do not get involved in politics.

Bookchin explained how “educative” these conditions were in many previous societies, how important for the individual’s personal development. In Ancient Greece, Medieval towns and New England US, citizens made the decisions via informal discussion and town meetings. All knew that their participation was important and enjoyable. All took responsibility and knew that they were needed and trusted by their society to make the decisions. In consumer-capitalist society people are not trusted and not allowed to make the decisions. These are made by a few professional politicians who function as dictators. In The Simpler Way there are no professional governors. We will all govern ourselves through voluntary committees, town meetings and informal discussions. (There might be a small number of executives, bureaucrats and experts, including at the “state” level, but their function will be advisory and managerial, with no power to make any policy decisions.) The smallness of scale will make this possible; big things can't be run in this participatory way. In other words we will have scrapped representative democracy and replaced it with participatory democracy.

So the situation will require and reward the very thing that is most crucial for a satisfactory society, and almost totally lacking in the present consumer society — social responsibility. The Simpler Way cannot work without good citizenship. Children will grow up among adults who spend much of their time thinking about, discussing and making the decisions that will determine their own welfare and that of others, and this will have a powerful educative effect.

Citizenship in The Simpler Way involves some very important skills and to develop these is to grow spiritually. Survival in consumer-capitalist society requires and rewards development of competitive, selfish and aggressive ways. But these are anti-social ways. You have to strive as an individual to beat others to scarce prizes, e.g., jobs and wealth. It is an adversarial society. Public decision making is about one side fighting against another and winning. This brings out the worst in us, the readiness to misinterpret, to denigrate, ridicule and smear and destroy others. Within The Simpler Way the situation, the political problem,

and the incentives are totally different. The need is for skills such as being able to work with others, to clarify what we all want and what would be best for the town, to proceed without being abrasive or dogmatic or jumping to conclusions, to criticise without offending. It is important to be able to help others to express what they would really be comfortable with, because if they don't make this clear and we have then made a decision they don't like it won't work so well.

The economy of The Simpler Way is based not on getting (...income, goods) but on giving. We will give our time and energy to the working bees and the concerts. We will give away our surplus vegetables and fruit. We will give advice, help, ideas. It follows that we will also be given these things from others. The main reasons for giving will be to enjoy the giving. This atmosphere of mutual generosity will have powerfully synergistic effects. The more you are given the more grateful you are and the more inclined you are to give to others, and the greater the bonds of solidarity will become.

The situation provides strong incentives for goodness, being considerate and helpful and nurturing others and ecosystems. It's nice too see others thrive. We will have this orientation not just because it is important to make the town work. It is also enjoyable; it's nice to help and be appreciated and respected as a caring, thoughtful contributor. It is nice to live in a situation that you know is nurturing, in which you know people want to see you thrive. We will need skill in making our meetings go well, in resolving conflicts, in facilitating, thinking clearly, imagining possible ways forward, letting others have their say. Again, the conditions we experience in The Simpler Way will bring out the best in us; just living within it will be, as Bookchin saw, Educative. And they will inspire feelings of empowerment, citizenship, responsibility and pride in the admirable town we have created. These are spiritual benefits.