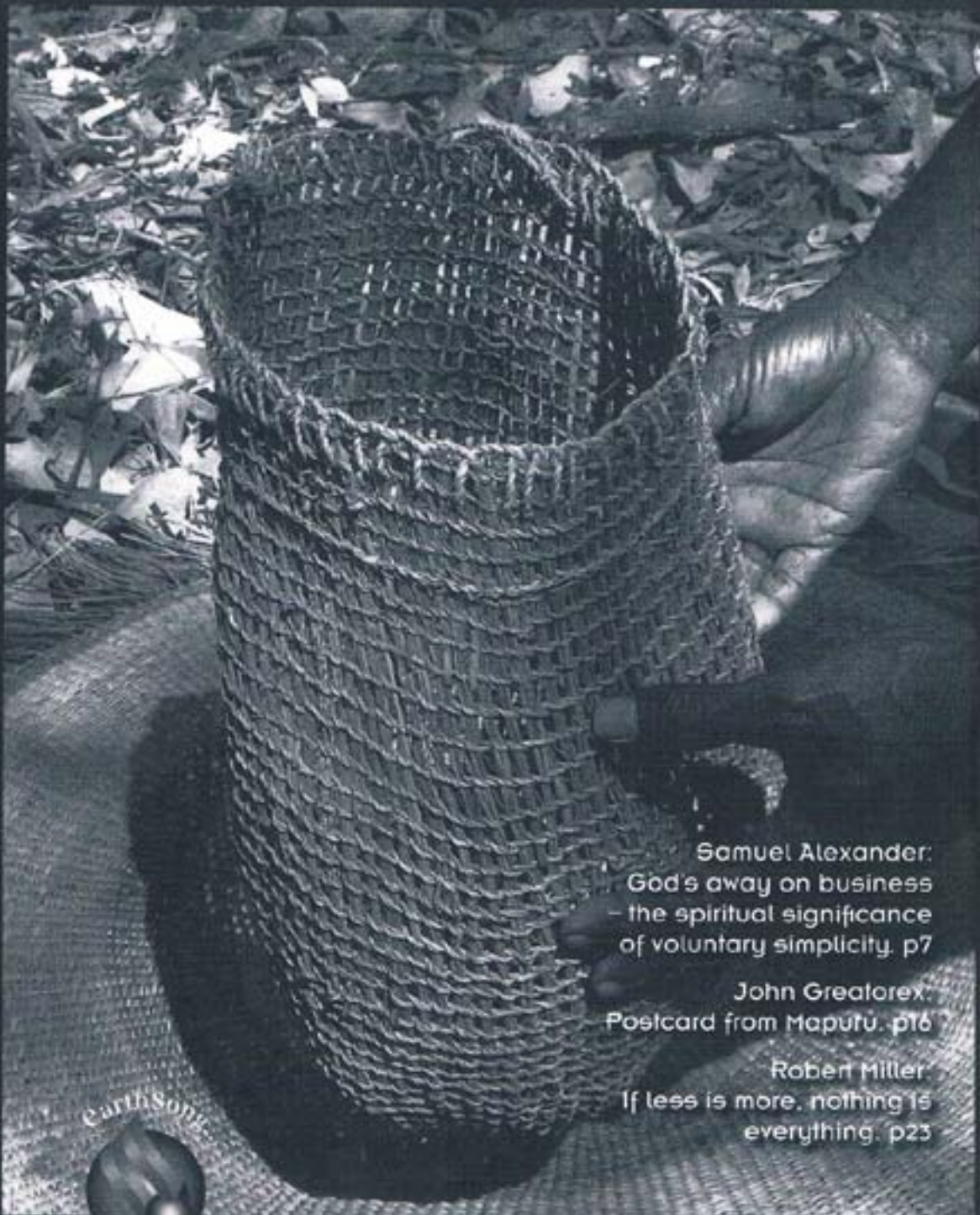


EarthSong

ECOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 2, SPRING 2011



Samuel Alexander:
God's away on business
– the spiritual significance
of voluntary simplicity. p7

John Grealorex:
Postcard from Maputu. p16

Robert Miller:
If less is more, nothing is
everything. p23

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GOD'S AWAY ON BUSINESS

Samuel Alexander (Based on an address made to the Parliament of the World's Religions, December 2009)

THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

THIS SHORT, exploratory essay is an open invitation to consider the relationship, or tension, between spirituality and consumer culture. In particular, it is an invitation to examine how our attitudes toward money and material possessions might affect our capacity for spiritual experience. For present purposes spiritual experience can be defined broadly and simply as 'the thoughtful love of life that arises out of an openness to mystery'. I hope that the deliberate ambiguities in this definition provide enough space for readers to interpret my words creatively, through their own lens of understanding.

By way of introduction allow me to recount a short parable written by the great existential philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, which goes straight to the heart of this essay's subject. The parable, lightly paraphrased, goes like this:

When prosperous people on dark but star-lit nights drive comfortably in their carriages and have the lanterns lighted, aye, then they are safe, they fear no difficulty, they carry their light with them, and it is not dark close around them. But precisely because they have the lanterns lighted, and have a strong light close to them, precisely for this reason they cannot see the stars, which the humble peasants driving without lights can see gloriously in the dark but starry night. So those deceived ones live in the temporal existence: either, occupied with the necessities of life, they are too busy to avail themselves of the view, or in their prosperity and good days they have, as it were, lanterns lighted,

and close about them everything is so satisfactory, so pleasant, so comfortable – but the view is lacking, the prospect, the view of the stars.

To rephrase slightly, Kierkegaard is warning us here that if we let our material desires burn too brightly, we might find that it is harder for us to see the stars; by which he means, of course, harder for us to have a relationship with God, or, more broadly, harder for us to enjoy the benefits of spiritual experience. Conversely, those people who are less concerned about accumulating material wealth, and who are prepared to live more simply and humbly, may find the spiritual path less cluttered, allowing for a clearer view of the stars. In our dark but star-lit times, Kierkegaard's parable arguably deserves renewed attention, especially since the materialism of consumer culture is burning more brightly than ever, obscuring our view of the stars. The remainder of this essay can best be understood in relation to this parable.

What follows is divided into three short sections. First, I will offer a brief critique of consumer culture and outline ways that it might interfere with spiritual experience. Second, I will say a few words on the counter-cultural living strategy known as 'voluntary simplicity' or 'downshifting.' I will suggest that there may be many benefits, including spiritual benefits, to rejecting the materialistic lifestyles of consumer culture and voluntarily embracing 'a simpler life' of reduced consumption. Thirdly, and finally, I will consider these issues of spirituality and consumption in the context of the environmental movement, arguing that the simple life of voluntary simplicity is a very promising response both to the ecological and the spiritual crises we face. My core thesis is that by reconnecting people with nature as a source of inspiration

and nourishment, the simple life may provide a welcome antidote to the spiritual malaise that seems to be inflicting consumer cultures today.

I. A Spiritual Critique of Consumer Culture

In a mass-produced world, what room is there for an original relation to the universe? Not much it would seem. Although religious and spiritual traditions obviously still exist in 'advanced' societies today, the dominant culture, it cannot be denied, is proudly atheistic. Science, apparently, has solved all the mysteries of human existence, or at least has the method to solve them – making metaphysics unnecessary and wonder seem child-like or naive. For the intellectual, it is a sign of rigour and sophistication to avoid all talk of God. Most politicians just find God awkward. Once the heart of our civilization, religious perspective has become culturally taboo, and is treated only condescendingly by mass media, if at all. Spiritual discourse, by touching on questions of ultimate significance, seems to embarrass many people today, or bore them. God certainly isn't 'cool.' The stars are no longer miraculous and modern technology means that we no longer need their guidance; the comforts of economic prosperity mean that we no longer need their light.

It was the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously declared, "God is dead." I would disagree, and suggest instead that "God's away on business;" or perhaps, that the modern consumer is away on business, and has left God behind. But what business, I ask, is more important than the business of spiritual exploration? Apparently, acquiring the right consumer goods is more important, such as a big house with new carpet and a flat-screen TV, fashionable

clothing, a new car, and the status of a prestigious job. These seem to be the objects of ultimate concern today. God forbid one fall behind the Joneses! Given how much collective energy is dedicated to the pursuit of middle-class luxuries and small bits of colored paper, it should come as no surprise when we hear that the spiritual sensibility of our age is fading.

Most Westerners today are working longer hours than in decades past; and aside from working and sleeping, Westerners generally spend more time watching television than doing anything else. Today's extreme division of labor, though it may be very efficient in maximizing economic growth, has meant that people have become highly dependent on the market and consequently are locked onto a consumerist treadmill that has no end and attains no lasting satisfaction. Urban sprawl has led to highly artificial living environments that have disconnected many people from a community of neighbors and from any real engagement with nature. This is the culture that transnational corporations celebrate as the ultimate fulfillment of human destiny, the peak of civilization. But something very important seems amiss.

Although Western society is considerably richer in material terms than it was in the 1950s, at the beginning of the 21st century we are confronted by what one social critic has called an 'awful fact.' Despite the unprecedented levels of material wealth, there is a growing body of social research that indicates that people today are no more satisfied with their lives than people were in the 1970s. In other words, it seems that vast increases in personal and social wealth have stopped increasing our well-being. It is troubling.

Therefore, to see that our whole society is geared towards maximizing wealth, maximizing GDP. As Henry David Thoreau would say, we 'labor under a mistake.'

Let me draw on the economist's notion of 'externality' to make my critical point with respect to contemporary culture. In economics, an 'externality' is a cost that is not taken into account when determining the market price of something. For example, pollution from a factory may be an 'externality' if the costs of cleaning it up fall on society as a whole, rather than on the factory owner who caused it. In such circumstances, the price of the commodities produced would not reflect their true cost, because the costs of pollution would be 'external' to the price. I find this idea illuminating when thinking about the hidden costs of consumer culture; in particular, the cost of spiritual malaise, which I would argue is a market 'externality.' In dollar terms, most Westerners today are fabulously wealthy when considered in the context of all known history. But how rich would our society be if the costs of spiritual malaise were factored into the price of economic growth? How does one put a price on the absence of God? How would one internalize that externality? Needless to say, spiritual experience defies economic valuation, but this does not mean, of course, that it is of no value. On the contrary, it may just mean that spiritual experience is *priceless* and therefore of our highest concern.

If it is true that consumer culture is diminishing our capacity for spiritual experience then we must ask ourselves whether anything can be done about this. One promising response, I wish to suggest, lies in the quietly emerging way of life known as 'voluntary simplicity.'

II. The Spiritual Significance of Voluntary Simplicity

Before I define voluntary simplicity, let me try to bring the central issue into focus by briefly discussing a small but powerful book written by Erich Fromm in 1976, entitled *To Have or To Be?*. In this book Fromm draws an important distinction between two 'modes of existence' – namely 'having' and 'being.' In the 'having' mode, the meaning of one's identity is defined by and dependent upon materialistic factors external to oneself, such as wealth, possessions, image, and status. In the 'being' mode, the meaning of one's identity is defined by and dependent upon existential factors internal to oneself, such as self-respect, peace of mind, health, and the mastery over one's desires and negative emotions. Fromm argues convincingly that the advanced capitalist societies are heavily characterized by the 'having' mode, and the question he provokes is what individual or collective life would be like if the 'being' mode were privileged over the 'having' mode. This line of reasoning leads to the living strategy of voluntary simplicity.

Voluntary simplicity is a way of life that opposes the high consumption lifestyles of consumer culture and affirms what is often just called 'the simple life,' or 'downshifting.' The rejection of consumerism arises out of the belief that the meaning of life does not and cannot consist in the consumption and accumulation of material things. The affirmation of simplicity arises out of the recognition that very little is needed to live well – that abundance is a state of mind, not a quantity of consumer products or attainable through them. Sometimes called 'the quiet revolution', this approach to life involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimizing expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively more time and energy towards pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. This generally means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in exchange for more time and freedom to pursue other life goals. Ancient but ever-new, the message is that those who know they have enough are rich.

There are many reasons why a cultural movement toward voluntary simplicity would be beneficial. Most obviously, perhaps, is that lifestyles





of reduced consumption would lessen our impact on the fragile ecosystems of Earth, which we all know are trembling under the strain of over-consumption. Furthermore, in a world where extreme poverty exists amidst such plenty, there are powerful humanitarian arguments for taking less so that others can have more. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'Live simply so that others may simply live'. But a life of voluntary simplicity need not give rise to any sense of deprivation, and I would now like to consider the potential spiritual rewards of embracing a life of simplicity.

I acknowledge that I am now touching on a very private matter – 'private,' not because spiritual exploration must be done alone, but because nobody can do it for us. And I suspect, furthermore, that the spiritual rewards of voluntary simplicity are something that can only be experienced, not explained – at least, not explained by me. Nevertheless, rather than passing over in silence that which I cannot explain, let me at least try to use words to do a task for which words are probably inadequate.

By shifting attention from the material to the non-material side of life, I wish to suggest that voluntary simplicity can facilitate a deeper awareness of the spiritual dimension of being. This, of course, has been a theme in most, if not all, spiritual and religious traditions, including the teachings of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, the Stoics, Jesus, Mohammad, St Francis, the New England Transcendentalists, and many of the indigenous peoples around the world. But in an age such as our own that glorifies consumption and admires luxury as never before, I believe this teaching acquires a special significance.

Spiritual experience, it may be fair to say, generally requires a tranquil consciousness of some form, but in the often frantic, agitated, and alienated lifestyles of consumer culture, moments of tranquility do not come easy. When Theodore Roszak gazed into the eyes of modern

consumers he saw only faces 'twisted with despair' – hardly the basis for spiritual experience, which was defined earlier as 'the thoughtful love of life arising out of an openness to mystery'. However, if we take time to isolate ourselves from consumer culture for long enough to unlearn it, for long enough to rouse ourselves from the daze of unexamined habit and reopen the doors of perception, we just might provoke a surprisingly fresh interpretation of life, as well as develop a new appreciation of a 'higher' mode of existence. For when we let ourselves be enchanted by ordinary experience, it quickly becomes apparent that the simple life is a profoundly beautiful life, one that is exciting and worth living. For simplicity is nothing if it is not an affirmative state of mind, an authentic celebration of life – and it is a state of mind that often seems to reflect a mystical attitude to life, and a deep reverence for nature, even if one does not subscribe to any traditional religion or any crude pantheism.

Earlier generations confronted spiritual questions face to face, we through their eyes. But why, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would insist, should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?

III. Spirituality, Nature, and the Environmental Movement

I would like to conclude this essay by trying to situate these issues of spirituality and material simplicity in the context of the environmental movement. I will make two brief points only. The first point is that simpler lifestyles of reduced consumption will be a necessary part of any sustainable future for human civilization. I think we know this in our heads and in our hearts, so it needs no elaboration. The second point may not be so obvious, however, for it concerns the complex relationship between spirituality and nature. Throughout history, human beings have gained spiritual nourishment from a direct relationship with nature, but modern urban life has largely disconnected us from this source of nourishment. This has

had negative repercussions, both ecological and spiritual. Accordingly, I feel that spiritual traditions would be wise to dedicate a good deal of their energies to the environmental movement – not only for the obvious reason that nature is the one and only life support-system we have; but also, by reconnecting humanity with nature as a source of inspiration, I believe there are good reasons to think that the spiritual sensibility of our age could be reignited.

A final word in summary: It seems to me that any proposed solutions to the problems of spiritual malaise, environmental degradation, social alienation, and poverty, are destined to fail unless we first address the role that materialistic values play in creating these problems. These problems are connected, and I have argued that voluntary simplicity might provide a graceful solution to many of them. Nature has begun to place limits on the growth of human economies, so consumer cultures must immediately find a way to turn to the realm of the spirit to satisfy their hunger for infinity. Since the ethos of voluntary simplicity provides common ground, not only between all major religions and wisdom traditions, but also between traditional political oppositions, I propose that in the name of human solidarity we should gather around this idea and look to it for guidance and enlightenment in these dark but star-lit times ■

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