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Simplicity and Success *Creating What Matters Most*

Bruce Elkin

*I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity.
But, I'd give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.*
— Oliver Wendell Holmes

A Naive Beginning

In the spring of 1973, a new outdoor centre hired me to develop an environmental curriculum. A middle class thirty-year old, ex-high school teacher, I'd never heard of simple living, and rarely, if ever, thought about consciously creating what matters. That changed when I met Steve Van Matre, author of *Acclimatization* and *Earth Education*. Van Matre's experiential approach *integrated* learners' feelings for the earth with an understanding of how ecological systems sustain life—in a way that led his learners to responsible action. As I apprenticed under Van Matre and became Senior Trainer for the *Institute for Earth Education*, I entered a new world. I lived simply because it was the most direct way to live my new values. Besides, that's how most eager but low paid environmental education workers lived.

In 1977, *CoEvolution Quarterly* featured three articles on “Voluntary Simplicity” that provided a name and set of principles that validated my new way of life. In one, the authors envisioned simple living as a major social movement. They claimed that up to 90,000,000 Americans would adopt simple lives by 2000 and that “the emergence of voluntary simplicity

could represent a major transformation of traditional American values.” Focused on that possibility, I happily lived in camp trailers and teepees and made do with few possessions. Although one of the Co-Evolution articles questioned whether the other’s had missed the difference between a movement and a fad and over-estimated the numbers of simple livers, I ignored their assertions. I was full of righteous pride about the changes I’d made and helped others make.

Cracks in My Certainty

My first clue that those changes might not last came during a one-year return to high-school teaching. In class, I raised issues such as pollution, population, and over-consumption. The students responded. They became aware; they became concerned. However, they *didn’t* change their behavior. *Why?* When I queried a trio of my better students, one said, “You know, sir, all this environmental stuff is great for sure, but it depresses the hell out of me.” Shocked, I asked, “Why?”

“It’s too much,” he said. “I don’t know what to do. It makes me feel useless.” He shrugged, then continued, “I like your classes and all, but when they’re over, I have to go to my car and smoke a joint just to calm down.”

My god! I’d thought I was helping these kids develop environmental responsibility. Instead, I was driving them to drugs. Awareness alone, I realized, did not translate into value shifts and changes in behavior. I also had my first inkling that focusing on problems does not motivate people. It depresses them.

I left the school and joined the *Action Studies Institute*, a think-tank focused on developing generic, high-order skills for initiating and carrying out action in any setting. There, I combined Earth Education and generic character skill building (initiative, resilience, creativity...) in a summer wilderness program called *Earthways: Experiences in Personal and Environmental Exploration*. It was a huge success. Kids loved it. Parents loved it. Everyone made changes. I was invited to help found the School of the Environment at the prestigious Banff Centre. I felt on top of the world. I lived a simple, yet rich and fulfilling life and, with the generic skills model, thought I had discovered the key to effective environmental education, self-creation, and simple living. Then I moved to Vancouver to teach teachers at a university and my life took an unexpected turn.

Too Much Talk, Not Enough Walk

In the city, I found it difficult to practice what I preached. Instead of teaching, cutbacks left me supervising student teachers. I hated it. I came home tired and frustrated. As joy and meaning in work went down, spending went up. Going to a restaurant or sending for pizza was easier than cooking. Buying a bottle of wine, a record, or a book would ease my bad feelings for a few days or hours. No longer forced to “make do, do without, or do something else” as I did on a low income, I bought pleasures rather than create them. While I *espoused* the value of simple living, the trajectory of my life swung away from *acting* on my values.

Why, I wondered, did I have so little control over my own actions?

Although I knew that insight without action led to little, I didn’t know yet that lasting change requires more than surface changes in behavior. I didn’t know that effective action requires a structure—a framework—that aligns choices and actions in support of key values. I wasn’t aware that my own life structures caused me to oscillate between a desire for simplicity and a desire for success. For, example, I preferred dressing simply and cheaply. However, to impress the power-dressing Director who assigned teaching positions, I bought an expensive new suit and all the accessories. Although I valued conserving energy, I drove up to 100 miles a day as part of my job. Although I could have returned to the Rockies and done more Earthways-like programs, I was obsessed with what I called “making it in the Bigs.”

My lack of integrity frustrated me. Unaware of the structures guiding my behavior, I re-read my simple living books. They sparked my motivation but I couldn’t build momentum. I’d try, make progress, and then slip back. I used willpower, guilt, and positive thinking to *force* myself to practice what I preached but I felt as if I was swimming upstream. *Why, I wondered, could I not consistently walk my talk?*

Then, as a new decade dawned, I noticed changes in others and in society.

Into the Eighties

In the eighties, I watched as former simple livers enrolled in MBA programs and traded VW vans for Volvos. Old friends nattered on about networking and passed out newly minted business cards. Downshiffters upshifted and joined the orgy of competitive consumption that characterized the decade. The School of Environment I’d helped start became a School of

Resource Management. The US Office of Environmental Education shut down. Simple living articles disappeared from periodicals. It looked as if the “movement” *had* been a fad, that the “transformation” was not as close as the pollsters had predicted.

Frustrated, but determined to be true to my own vision and values, I left the university. I spent the winter on an island, writing. I did handyman work in exchange for a cabin and lived on \$500 a month to show myself that I *could* live simply. I felt better for the experience but wasn't very handy. So, I dragged myself back across the Rockies. There I found friends and associates more interested in speculating on housing than exploring simplicity. Although I resisted most of the excesses of the eighties, my conscience regularly reminded me that I wasn't practicing what I preached. A dark haze of hopelessness settled over me.

From Problem-Solving to *Creating*

To counteract my despair I rejoined the Action Studies Group as a part-time associate and began to explore self-creation strategies. *How, I wondered, can we consistently act on our best intentions and deepest values? How can we walk our talk even when things get challenging?* Mostly, I focused on the question, *How can we reconcile competing values?*

While I lived these questions, I experimented on myself by directing the start up of a new Mountaineering and Leadership school. I noticed that I produced better results if I focused on creating, i.e. *bringing into being* what I wanted, rather than solving problems, i.e., getting rid of (or relief from) what I did *not* want. This led me to explore the creative process. *What, I wanted to know, were the basic processes underlying the ability to create?*

Many experts described “creativity” as an inborn attribute, a gift from God to a special few. Others believed it was a breakthrough to higher states. Some associated it with mental illness. None of these explanations satisfied me. My understanding of generic skills convinced me that there must be basic *skills* and *principles* that could be applied to any situation. When I discovered *The Path of Least Resistance* by Robert Fritz, the title put me off. However, the subtitle, *Principles for Creating What You Most Want to Create*, intrigued me enough to part with twenty dollars. I was delighted to find that it was *not* about taking the easy way out. Nor was it about “creative thinking,” “brainstorming,” or “creative problem solving.” It was about the *act of creating*. It showed how, by using a common form—an

organizing framework and generic skills—creators consistently bring into being real and lasting results—in spite of problems and circumstances.

Structure: The Key to Real and Lasting Change

Just as water follows a path laid down by the shape and structure of a streambed, our own energy and action follow a “path of least resistance” laid down by the *structures* underlying our lives. Some structures lead to results; others don’t. Some oscillate; others advance toward desired results. Life structures result from the way we arrange the relationships between our ideas, values, beliefs, desires, fears, and external reality itself. If we’re not aware of these relationships, it’s easy to get stuck in structures that don’t support our most important values and desires. *Either/or* structures, for example, give rise to oscillating patterns of behavior. Most problem solving structures, because they focus on the intensity of a problem, result only in temporary relief from the intense feelings associated with the problem. Taking aspirin, for example, gives us relief from a headache but does not lead to real changes. In fact, relief allows us to keep doing what caused the pain. However, by mastering the basics of *creating*, Fritz said, we can create structures in which energy and action naturally and consistently flow toward what we want to create.

It was this notion of structure that had been missing from my approach to simple living and self-creation. I saw that the problem-focused structure I’d unconsciously adopted led to a seesaw pattern of better, then worse, then.... No matter how hard I tried to will or guilt myself to change, the underlying structure eventually reasserted itself and my behavior reverted to old patterns. With Fritz's approach, I wondered, *would it be possible to create a simple, yet rich, engaging, and successful life—and sustain it?*

Over the next nine years, I studied and worked with Robert Fritz. I taught his approach to thousands of participants and hundreds of organizations. I based my coaching strategy on it. Using the principles of creating, I found it easier to *transcend* the either/or, problem-driven strategies that underlie so many quick-fix self-help and simple living approaches.* I was able

* Fritz’s principles are not trendy, here-today-gone-tomorrow ideas. He has taught these principles for twenty-five years. They are applicable to all areas of life and living. Peter Senge, director of Organizational Learning and Systems Thinking at MIT’s Sloan School of Business, and author of the best-selling business book, *The Fifth Discipline*, says, “The principles and approach presented in *The Path of Least Resistance* have become a cornerstone in my work to help leaders and managers deal productively with complexity and change.” (Quoted in *TFC, Inc.*’s promotional material.)

to do things I had been unable to think or force myself into doing. I finished a manuscript. I invented an executive challenge program. I started a coaching and consulting practice. I began to write the articles and booklets that form the basis of my forthcoming book, *Simplicity and Success: Creating What Most Matters*.

As the eighties gave way to the nineties, I noticed that people were showing a renewed interest in simple living. Paul Ray published a report saying that 24 percent of US adults—44 million people—are already “Cultural Creatives,” strong advocates of self creation, spirituality, ecology, and simpler lifestyles. “The transformation,” he claimed, “is happening right in front of our eyes.” I hoped he was right. I remembered the enthusiastic but faulty predictions of earlier pollsters. Would the growing interest in simple living be sustained? Or would it again ebb away on a changing tide of public interest? *What could we do to ensure that a rich yet successful kind of simplicity became an enduring way of life?*

Embracing Complexity; Creating What Matters

As my understanding of structure grew, I saw see why I’d oscillated.

I wanted a clean, green, healthy planet supported by a sustainable local community.

I also wanted a good life, complete with challenging work, financial security, comfort, convenience, and respect.

Unconsciously, I’d arranged my desires into an, “either/or” structure: a *simple*, ecologically responsible life *or* a rich, engaging, and *successful* one. In this *simplicity vs. success* framework, my values competed. Satisfying one increased the pull of the other. Attending to that value increased the pull of the first. Back and forth I swung, caught in an oscillating pattern generated by my unseen structure. Eventually, most of my energy and actions had been focused on getting rid of the frustration associated with that oscillation. In that reactive stance, I lost sight of the results I most wanted.

I finally realized there are two kinds of simplicity and that each dealt with complexity differently. Driven by unwanted problems, involuntary complexity leads to distracted effort and stress. Merely getting rid of (or relief from) what you don’t like and don’t want wastes precious life energy. It results in the reactive, temporary simplicity on *this* side of complexity. Clearing out clutter, for example, is currently in vogue. Clutter is a kind of unwanted complexity. However, if you merely focus on getting rid of it, you are problem

solving. Your actions will be driven by the intensity of the problem. If those actions lessen the intensity, you will be less motivated to take further action. Less action leads to the problem remaining and reoccurring. The clutter comes back. The same pattern unfolds when you try to get rid of stress or other types of unwanted complexity.

The alternative is to embrace and transcend complexity as part of *creating* what matters.

Voluntary complexity is freely chosen and focused. A potter throwing a thin-sided pot, a writer crafting a poem, an entrepreneur growing a socially responsible business, and a mother embracing a “good enough” parenting strategy all experience complexity. However, because they freely choose that complexity, it brings a focused simplicity to their tasks and to their lives. Similarly, simplicity seekers who choose to create a simple yet successful life bring the power of the creative process into play on their behalf. By embracing life’s complexity as the raw material of creating, they are better positioned to *create* the deep, lasting, and satisfying simplicity on the *other* side of complexity.

If cluttering-clearing is driven by a vision of a well-designed, well-organized space—just because you’d *love* to have that in your life, or because it supports something that you do want—the space you create will be clutter free and stay that way. Although creating is more complex than merely clearing out clutter, it is also more engaging. A clear, compelling vision motivates you to take action, to keep taking action, and to build the momentum needed to follow through to completion. Moreover, you avoid the stress that comes with fighting against what you *don’t* want. When you’re creating what matters, you work *with* the path of least resistance. Your actions more naturally and easily flow toward what you *do* want.

Life as A Creator

Twelve years ago, finally able to consistently walk my talk, I moved back to the island where I’d spent my winter sabbatical. I run my business out of my home. I host *Simplicity and Success* and *Creating What Matters* workshops. Living simply gives me the freedom to work at my own pace and at the things I care about most. I can walk to town or the beach. It’s a rare month that I put 100 miles on my car. I still enjoy luxuries, although not as many as I used to. However, those I indulge in—hot baths, wine, books—give me much more pleasure and fulfillment than I got when I mindlessly tried to purchase enjoyment.

My purpose, values, and actions are aligned in support of what most matters to me. Problems no longer *drive* my actions. My driving force is the desire to *create* what matters to me, in harmony with the systems that sustain all life. As I shifted my focus to creating what matters, something remarkable happened. Problems just faded away. Carl Jung explained this phenomena when he said, “All the greatest and important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble.... They can never be solved, but only outgrown.” Real change, he saw, resulted from a shift to a new level of consciousness. When his patients embraced a higher or wider interest, he said, “the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.”* By shifting to creating, simplicity seekers can shift to a higher and more powerful level of consciousness.

Creating, said jazz great Charlie Mingus, makes the complicated simple.

The creative process, freely chosen, is so powerful because it is senior to problem solving. Creating includes and transcends problem solving as part of a simpler yet more sophisticated structure. Therefore, creating is a more reliable and effective structure in which to create results that matter. Indeed, the enduring results on which civilization rests (art, music, literature, architecture, science, etc...) were *not* solutions to problems. They were *creations* that someone loved enough to bring into being.

“All the great things,” said Robert Frost, “are done for their own sake.”

Many excellent simplicity approaches have helped numerous people simplify. However, history shows that interest in simplicity oscillates, individually and collectively. This is because even many of the best approaches see simplicity as a *solution* to complexity, not as a something to create “for its own sake.” Such approaches can only take us so far. To go to the next level, we need to shift our focus from solving problems to creating what matters. By doing so, simplicity seekers will be better able to integrate diverse values and actions. They will be able to move through complexity to the simplicity on the other side. They will be able to create both simplicity *and* success. Moreover, if enough of us do so—and if we help each other—we may even prove the pollsters right. Powered by creating, simple living is more likely to appeal to the mainstream. Focused on creating what matters, simplicity seekers may be able to spark or a widespread transformation in values and behavior. I hope so.

* Quoted in Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance* (Fawcett Columbine) New York, 1989

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Bruce Elkin is a writer, speaker, coach, and workshop leader who helps people “discover what works and create what matters most.” A long-time simple liver himself, he has a special interest in helping people to embrace life’s complexity and move through it to the simplicity on the other side of complexity. To contact him, visit www.BruceElkin.com