



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Milbrath, Lester W., "Redefining the Good Life in a Sustainable Society." *Environmental Values* 2, no. 3, (1993): 261-269.

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5499>

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Redefining the Good Life in a Sustainable Society

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ABSTRACT: The good life, as practised in modern society, not only is unsustainable but also is frequently not really good. Quality in living is necessarily subjective, it cannot be defined in physical terms, and can be found in many manifestations. The search for quality is conducted within ourselves and not in a shopping mall. Several suggestions for modes of living that provide quality but do not burden or injure ecosystems are presented. The condition of life systems on our planet demand that we cultivate simple lifestyles that are inwardly rich.

KEYWORDS: Quality of life, sustainable society, voluntary simplicity, the good life

Everyone wants a good life. The criminal who steals, the gambler who hopes for a 'killing', the monk who meditates, the scientist who searches, the shopper who buys and buys, the outdoorsman who hunts and fishes, the tycoon who grabs for power and wealth, the religious person who prays for salvation – all are seeking what they believe to be the good life. Obviously a good life can be defined in many ways. Economists, politicians, and advertisers assume that consuming goods leads to quality of life and constantly remind us that we should want prosperity. Does prosperity equate with a good life? Should we let them define for us what a good life is? Why not give some thought to redefining the good life and take charge of our own destiny?

The physical conditions in which we live our lives set some boundaries that must be observed as we proceed with our redefinition. To be sure, we can do a lot to redefine our physical conditions. We might move to another place, assuming that someone does not already occupy the place we want to take. Proffering lots of money may encourage the present occupant to allow us to take possession. Having lots of power can allow us to take over by force in the way that we routinely seize habitat from wildlife. Our cleverness and technology have stretched many boundaries and opened up many possibilities. Some people believe we can proceed indefinitely to manipulate nature and extend its boundaries.

Ironically, our very success as a species has created unforeseen consequences that set new boundaries and force us to redefine what the good life is.

1. We have successfully extended human longevity by improving public health and by appropriating more and more of the biosphere to our purposes. We have unintentionally achieved a human population explosion which is ruining quality of life in many parts of the world. The planet's ecosphere and resource base may not tolerate even two more doublings of world population (to 20 billion). Either we thoughtfully limit our reproduction or nature will limit it for us by starvation and disease.
2. At the very time of our population explosion, we are achieving a drastic increase in throughput of materials in our economy. Not only does accelerating economic activity swiftly draw down our resource stocks (many of them nonrenewable) but it also creates so much waste that it is seriously injuring ecosystems and changing global geosphere/biosphere patterns. We are recklessly perturbing biospheric systems that are so complex that we cannot know the consequences of our actions. Swift and powerful changes in global climate patterns would devastate our economies, destroy many of our resource stocks, and bring death to billions of humans.

Even if some drastic technological breakthrough enabled humans to keep growing in population and economic activity, would we want to live in the world that continuing growth would create? Within a century there would be 20 billion or more people. To prosperously support that many people, most of the biosphere's productivity would have to be turned to human needs. Most of the wilderness would be gone and those species that escaped extinction would be confined to reserves. To prevent feverish economic activity from constantly changing geosphere/biosphere patterns, and to make life somewhat comfortable, our daily existence would be confined to artificial city environments where air, water, and material processing were all carefully controlled. With that many people, life would be made tolerable only by severely restricting personal freedom. Is that the kind of world you want? Would that be a good life? *By continuing to define progress and the good life as growth in material consumption, that is where we are headed.*

A key aspect of my argument, then, is that continuing growth in human population and material consumption is not desirable (we do not want to go there) and very likely not possible.

If growth is a false god, no longer deserving our worship, our society must rethink what living a good life means. One fundamental mistake we must correct is our penchant for trying to define the good life in material quantities and express it in monetary terms. Quality in living is not a thing, it is a feeling; it is necessarily a matter of subjective experience. Recognizing its subjective character does not mean we cannot have a rational discourse about it. To advance that discourse, I offer a definition of quality of life that I worked out with a graduate seminar several years ago. It addresses quality of life as experienced by individuals.

Quality in living is experienced only by individuals and is *necessarily*

subjective. Objective conditions may contribute to or detract from the experience of quality but human reactions to physical conditions are not automatic: the experience occurs only subjectively. Personal reports of experiences of quality are much better indicators of these subjective experiences than physical measures of physical conditions. (We should carefully distinguish environmental conditions that can be measured with objective indicators from the experience of quality that can only be measured with subjective indicators.)

Quality is not a constant state but a variable ranging from high quality to low quality. Persons usually experience some combination of high and low quality; they seldom experience only one extreme or the other.

Persons have high quality of life when they experience the following:

1. A sense of happiness but not simply a momentary happiness; rather a long-run sense of joy in living.
2. A sense of physical well-being; usually this means good health but the sense of physical well-being can be realized by persons having lost certain capacities.
3. A sense of completeness or fullness of life; a sense that one is on the way to achieving, or has achieved, what one aspires to become as a person.
4. A sense of zestful anticipation of life's unfolding drama, greeting each day with hope and confidence that living it will be good.

Persons have a low quality of life when they experience the following:

1. A sense of hopelessness and despair; mornings are greeted with fear and dread. A sense that one is buffeted by fate and has lost control of one's life.
2. A sense of having failed to live up to one's image of oneself: that one's life has been a failure.
3. A sense of poor physical well-being; illness, injury, hunger, discomfort.
4. A pervading sense of unhappiness.

We should carefully distinguish quality of life judgements that are individual (personal) and subjective, from prescriptions for a good society. Individual experiences with the quality of this or that aspect of life do not translate directly into policy even though they are important informational inputs for policy makers. Ecosystem and social system values must be served in policy making as well as quality of life values.

We want a society and an environment that will allow people, as individuals, to work out their own quality of life. But there is a heavy responsibility on individuals to make the best of their situation and to take personal actions to achieve quality in living. We should be cautious about making the inference that a person living in what most people would assess as favourable conditions will

experience high quality; or, conversely, that a person living in what most would assess as poor conditions will experience low quality. Yet, policy makers frequently make such inferences (when they report that per capita income has risen, or fallen, for example).

It is easy to recognize that a decent life requires minimal provision of food, shelter, and clothing, and that society bears an obligation to provide at least that minimum. In most developed countries those minima have been achieved for nearly everyone. But how do we decide what society should do to enhance quality of life beyond providing the minima? For example, we often hear the outcry of someone, or group, whose economic situation may be diminished in order to preserve some aspect of the ecosystem: they complain that they will starve if they cannot keep their job (and continue to injure the ecosystem). We need some clear thinking about values and what it means to live a good life in order to arrive at appropriate policies.

Is it true, for example, that loggers in the Pacific Northwest of the USA will starve if they cannot continue to log old-growth forests on national forest lands (owned by all the people)? The central question is not whether people or spotted owls are more important; they are both important. No one is suggesting that people must die for spotted owls to live. The question, rather, is what values should have the greatest priority as such policies are made? I use this syllogism to clarify value priorities:

I can imagine a biocommunity thriving well without any human members but I cannot imagine human society thriving without a well-functioning biocommunity. Similarly, I can imagine human society functioning well without a given individual but I cannot imagine an individual thriving without a well-functioning biocommunity and a well-functioning human community. Therefore, individuals desiring quality of life must give top priority to protection and preservation of their biocommunity (their ecosystem). Second priority must go to preservation and protection of the good functioning of their social community. Only when people are careful to protect the viability of their two communities is it acceptable for individuals to pursue quality of life according to their own personal desires.

Being allowed to cut logs on national forests is a privilege granted by society and not a basic right that society is obliged to fulfil. As society decides whether or not to grant that privilege, it should give highest priority to protecting the integrity of the ecosphere. Societies that fail to keep that top priority firmly in mind will undercut their long-run sustainability. Leaders of contemporary societies constantly make this same basic error when they persistently press for economic growth.

It is clear we must find the good life in some other way than continuing to grow in material consumption. Finding a good life is more a search of our own minds than it is a search of a shopping mall.

NEW BUT OLD WAYS TO ENJOY LIFE WITH FEWER MATERIAL GOODS

The toy industry is now very big business. The inventiveness of designers using advanced technology has produced some fantastic creations. Children with a closet full of such toys can have stimulating and happy days (though a poor kid could envy a rich kid). But what did children do to enjoy life before they had the largess of affluent parents and the cleverness of the modern toy industry? While travelling recently in a developing country I watched some boys rolling an old auto tyre, guiding it with a stick; they seemed every bit as happy with their 'toy' as the modern American child with a closet full of expensive toys.

The same question applies to adults. Thousands of generations of people enjoyed life with only a small fraction of or material goods. Were they less happy than we? We all have inner resources for meditation, conversation, loving, communion with nature, reading, writing, playing music, dancing, and engaging in sports. These talents may need to be developed further because our present society lures us to buy and consume, buy and be entertained, buy and be pampered. People who have given in to those inducements have become more bystanders than participants in life's unfolding drama.

Goods that are not Zero Sum

Economists characterize most goods exchanged in the market as 'zero sum'. Because I have it, you cannot have it – that is zero sum. Our conditioning toward material consumption inclines us to think of all enjoyment as zero sum. Actually, many of the most satisfying and fulfilling things in life are enhanced when shared.

You would think that everyone would know that love is good for people, that it is easy to give and to share, that fulfilment from loving is enhanced, not diminished by sharing. Leo Buscaglia is a well known professor, author and lecturer who colourfully and effectively conveys the message that love is good for people and society. Buscaglia's message is so popular because many people sense that our modern affluent society has somehow lost its understanding of the meaning of love. Ironically, Buscaglia reports numerous instances where persons reject his claims for the virtue of love. If some day our society turns away from trying to find fulfilment in material goods, we may, indeed, much greater fulfilment in love. We should be actively learning from each other how best to love.

Some years ago I conducted a study of quality of life in the Niagara Frontier and discovered that the ways people sought fulfilment in life clustered into lifestyle patterns. As might be expected, some persons emphasized a consumer lifestyle; their greatest enjoyment came from buying and consuming. They were a minority, however.

Another lifestyle, favoured by many, emphasized fulfilment in interpersonal relations. These people loved to socialize with friends and relatives. Rewarding companionships with friends is not difficult to find and most of these people felt quite fulfilled. Most importantly, this lifestyle is not zero-sum, is not highly consuming of goods, does not waste scarce resources, and does not injure the environment. If we slowed down our frantic production pace, demanded less and consumed less, we would have more time for enjoying companionship; chances are, we also would enhance our quality of life.

Enjoyment of nature emerged as another lifestyle in our study; it is not consumed in the same way as restaurant meals, autos, or tickets to seats in a football stadium, and thus is not zero-sum. Normally, my enjoyment of nature does not detract from your enjoyment, but, nature can be overrun and destroyed by too many people. Having to contend with a crowded beach, or bumper-to-bumper traffic heading for a national park, or elbow-to-elbow fishing in a trout pool is not a fulfilling experience. Many US National Parks have had to ration nature experiences by advance reservations, quotas, and admission tickets. They are so crowded in China that they have had to assign people to take holidays in nature on different days. The obvious demand for nature experiences makes it all the more important that nature be protected and, where necessary, restored to beauty. Nature protection and beautification is a fulfilling activity that many people can join in, derive satisfaction from, and strengthen rather than diminish by their sharing. Urgent joint action also is needed to obtain and maintain such vital natural elements as clean air, water, and soils. Cutting back on consumption would help a lot, but collective political action to assure environmental protection also is imperative.

Learning is another pleasurable and fulfilling activity that is developed rather than diminished by sharing. Philosophical understanding, especially, is deepened by interpersonal discourse. Cultivation of the mind has been emphasized in many cultural traditions and surely would be an important activity to emphasize in a sustainable society. Deepening one's understanding requires time and periods of quiet contemplation; ironically, these are scarce goods that many frantically busy people today fervently wish they could have. If we slowed down, produced less, and consumed less, perhaps we could find more quiet times for learning and for deepening our understanding.

Enjoyment in creating and appreciating literature, music, and art, similarly are not diminished if shared and should be emphasized in a sustainable society. Instead of life being bleak and cold when we are forced to slow down, it could be a flourishing period of creativity and learning.

If we can understand how our possessions have failed us, we can more readily decrease our thralldom. Turning instead to a focus on the quality of our relations with others; on the clarity and intensity of our experiences; on intimacy, sensuality, aesthetic sensibility, and emotional freedom, we can see how a more ecologically sound society can be a more exciting and enjoyable one as well. (Wachtel 1983: 143)

Play is another pleasurable and fulfilling activity that typically consumes few resources and need not damage nature. I do not speak of energy consuming and nature destroying thrill contests such as off-road vehicle racing; they are incompatible with a good society. Nor do I speak of sporting events with large crowds of spectators; they should be seen as a branch of the entertainment industry. Rather, the sustainable society should emphasize widespread participation by nearly everyone in games that bring pleasure and are not wasteful or destructive; there certainly is sufficient variety to serve almost any taste. Games requiring vigorous activity not only pass the time pleurably but also nurture good health.

Self governance also is non-zero-sum in the sense that everyone benefits when better laws are passed or when better community programs are undertaken. (Many elections are zero-sum when the winner takes all.) Self governance does require interest, concern and time from people. Persons caught up in the rat race for money often claim that they are too busy to participate. However, if life were restructured to give less emphasis to getting rich and consuming, people could more likely see the relevance of their participation for a better life; furthermore, schedules would be more flexible, allowing people to take the time for political affairs – it could become a natural and expected aspect of everyday life.

Leisure?

So far I have not given specific attention to leisure, although I have strongly urged people to take time for personally fulfilling activities. Entrepreneurs in modern affluent society try to sell expensive goods and services to help people use their leisure ‘to the fullest’; that approach to leisure appropriately could be called an industry: it fits with our delusion that happiness must be bought. Most of the activities discussed above that people do to fulfil themselves might also be thought of as leisure but they do not make up an industry. People engage in such activities to enjoy their leisure but they consume few leisure goods. The sustainable society would have little need for a ‘leisure industry’.

Voluntary Simplicity

Duane Elgin’s (1981) book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* is a much deeper examination of philosophy, lifestyles, social forces, and revolutionary changes than one might expect from the title. His central thesis is that people voluntarily choose a life of simplicity because it is richer than modern consuming lifestyles. To live *voluntarily* means to live more deliberately, intentionally, purposefully, and to do so consciously. “We cannot be deliberate when we are distracted from our critical life circumstances. We cannot be purposeful when we are not being present. Therefore, crucial to acting in a voluntary manner is being aware of ourselves as we move through life.” (p. 32)

He distinguishes 'embedded consciousness' from 'self-reflective consciousness'. Embedded consciousness is our normal or waking consciousness so embedded within a stream of inner-fantasy dialogue that little attention can be paid to the moment-to-moment experiencing of ourselves. Self-reflective consciousness is a more advanced level of awareness in which we are continuously and consciously 'tasting' our experience of ourselves. It is "marked by the progressive and balanced development of the ability to be simultaneously concentrated (with a precise and delicate attention to the details of life) and mindful (with a panoramic appreciation of the totality of life)" (p. 151).

Living more consciously has several enabling qualities:

1. Being more consciously attentive to our moment-to-moment experiences enhances our capacity to see things as they really are; thus, life will go more smoothly.
2. Living more consciously enables us to respond more quickly to subtle feedback that something is amiss, so that we can move with greater speed towards corrective action.
3. When we are conscious of our habitual patterns of thought and behaviour, we are less bound by them and can have greater choice in how we will respond.
4. Living more consciously promotes an ecological orientation toward all of life; we sense the subtle though profound connectedness of all life more directly.

These four enabling qualities are not trivial enhancements of human capacity; they are essential to our further evolution and to our survival.

Our civilizational crisis has emerged in no small part from the gross disparity that exists between our relatively underdeveloped 'inner faculties' and the extremely powerful external technologies now at our disposal. ... Unless we expand our interior learning to match our technological learning, we are destined, I think, to act to the detriment of both ourselves and the rest of life on this planet. (p.158)

A greater degree of conscious simplicity is of crucial relevance for revitalizing our disintegrating civilizations. (p. 125)

Self-reflective consciousness can open the door to a much larger journey in which our 'self' is gradually but profoundly transformed. The inner and outer person gradually merge into one continuous flow of experience. Simone de Beauvoir said, "Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying."

To live with *simplicity* is not an ascetic but rather an aesthetic simplicity because it is consciously chosen; in doing so we unburden our lives to live more lightly, cleanly, and aerodynamically. Each person chooses a pattern or level of

consumption to fit with grace and integrity into the practical art of daily living on this planet. We must learn the difference between those material circumstances that support our lives and those that constrict our lives. Conscious simplicity is not self-denying but life-affirming.

Simplicity, then, should not be equated with poverty. Poverty is involuntary whereas simplicity is consciously chosen. Poverty is repressive; simplicity is liberating. Poverty generates a sense of helplessness, passivity, and despair; simplicity fosters personal empowerment, creativity, and a sense of ever present opportunity. Poverty is mean and degrading to the human spirit; simplicity has both beauty and functional integrity that elevate our lives. Poverty is debilitating; simplicity is enabling. (Elgin 1981: 34)

Simplicity is not turning away from progress; it is crucial to progress. It should not be equated with isolation and withdrawal from the world; most who choose this way of life build a personal network of people who share a similar intention. It also should not be equated with living in a rural setting; it is a 'make the most of wherever we are' movement. Voluntary simplicity would evolve both the material and the conscious aspects of life in balance with each other – allowing each aspect to infuse and inform the other.

We can get from where we are now to this new, yet old, way of defining the good life by assisting each other in our social learning. When it becomes obvious that material consumption does not lead to the good life, or that growth in material consumption is not possible, it will be somewhat easier for us to make this transformation to a new way of thinking. Life without material growth very likely will be better than the frantic chase after money and goods that now blights our lives and the ecosphere: it surely will be more sustainable.

CONCLUSION

Living a good life in a sustainable society could be a realization of the Greek concept of *Paideia* – the lifelong transformation of our own person as an art form. It is ridiculous to characterize life with fewer material goods as 'freezing in the dark', as some environmental critics have painted it. It would be a *very different* way of life: more contemplative, less frantic; more serene, less thrilling; valuing co-operation and love more, valuing competition and winning less; with more personal involvement, less being a spectator; more tuned to nature, less tuned to machines. Changes this sweeping may take several generations to come about. Many people have already begun the journey and their learning can help others find the way. Necessity may well hasten our relearning.

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