

“Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich” by Duane Elgin

A book review by Kathryn Peters

Originally published in 1981, Duane Elgin’s book “Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich” is now considered the manifesto of the simplicity movement. It is a philosophical work, opposing consumer culture and affirming that material simplicity is important to aid one’s pursuit of spiritual growth and to reduce one’s environmental impact. The book does not suggest that one should live in poverty, but that one should find a personal balance between their pursuit of material wealth and pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. The most common critique of “Voluntary Simplicity” seems to be its lack of practical advice on ways to simplify one’s life. I believe, however, that each reader will find ways to simplify his or her own unique life when reading the compelling reasons for and objectives of such a lifestyle.

I especially enjoyed reading a chapter entitled People Living the Simple Life, featuring excerpts of responses from over a hundred people to a 1977 questionnaire. While standards of living in mainstream culture have changed in the last three decades, the things which make one inwardly rich remain consistent:

- a spiritual connection to Earth and/or Earth’s creator
- utilizing time for family and friends
- careers and volunteer work to improve the community
- hobbies promoting self-sufficiency such as gardening, sewing and carpentry
- hobbies promoting personal growth such as art, music and traveling

Elgin confirms what is truly important and what is merely a distraction from life’s true joy.