

## VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

---

### *Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich*

by Duane Elgin

1993 (First edition 1981), William Morrow, 221 pages

This is another one of those books my mom told me about, then I dawdled and kept putting off reading. But when I finally got around to it, the work turned out to be an eye-opening experience with great relevance, I feel, to moving the bus of the general human condition in a forward direction.

Some of the other books that have come my way via the Mama Knows Best circuit: *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* by Neil Postman, *State of Denial* by Bob Woodward, *The End of Oil* by Paul Roberts, *Mayflower* by Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama, *Peace Not Apartheid* by Jimmy Carter, *Assault on Reason* by Al Gore, and *the Deep Blue Good-By* by John D. MacDonald. All except *The End of Oil*, I've reviewed... and I'll get around to that one before we run out.

But *Voluntary Simplicity* is one I managed to put off for the longest time—until just the right moment, actually—when the message folds in so naturally with other narratives on spiritual enlightenment I'm being exposed to lately. In particular *Simplicity* is the perfect companion to *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, which I read and reviewed last week.

*Voluntary Simplicity*, which was originally written in 1981, even has a chapter dealing with the encouragement of the "Tolleian Way" of tuning into one's Being while putting "the egoic mind" in its place:

"The crucial importance of penetrating behind our continuous stream of thought (as largely unconscious and lightning-fast flows of inner fantasy-dialogue) is stressed by every major consciousness tradition in the world: Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Sufi, Zen, and so on. Western cultures, however, have fostered the understanding that a state of continual mental distraction is in the natural order of things. Consequently, by virtue of a largely unconscious social agreement about the nature of our inner thought processes, we live individually and collectively almost totally embedded within our mentally constructed reality. We are so busy creating ever more appealing images or social facades for others to see, and so distracted from the simplicity of our spontaneously arising self, that we do not truly encounter either ourselves or one another. In the process we lose a large measure of our innate capacity for voluntary, deliberate, intentional action."—Page 127

Now that's some quote!

Look me in the eye and tell me it doesn't capture 99% of most of our daily mental functioning. When people exclaim they have no time, what it means is they're literally swamped by time, trapped in time by a compulsive, reactive mind that has taken over their Beings and denied them the Now. I.e. the message of *The Power of Now*.

Elgin, the author of *Voluntary Simplicity*, however, is bringing up his Now observation to point out that we can't even get to voluntary if we get strangled by a mind all bound up in phantasms of the past or the future. That's an interesting argument, and I wonder how it might apply to the freedom movement as well. Topic for another day.

By identifying the spiritual basis for a different, more elegant way of living, the author couldn't be more on target. Still, most people reading the book are interested in some practical guidelines for how we can decomplexify our lives in the real external world. Elgin, I feel, eventually delivers, in Chapter 5 *Living More Simply*, where he outlines three basic areas that we can address immediately:

- Changing our consumption habits—this section focuses on asking ourselves questions about what we really want, reminding us that everything we acquire carries with it a responsibility for maintenance, if it is to be truly enjoyed.
- Improving interpersonal communications—mainly stressing the importance of efficiency, and especially the vitality of silence; when was the last time you shared a knowing glance, smile, or touch with the person you love... without sex being part of it?
- Finding the right work—my favorite boss in history liked to say, "Brian, you spend half your waking life at work, so either enjoy it, get so you can enjoy it, or find something else to do." Pithy comments to be sure, and the book seconds that emotion: it's all about balance and joy; bring them into your life in what you do for your livelihood.

Probably the most important quality of *Voluntary Simplicity*—I mean aside from that quote from above—is stoking a social movement whose time has come. His comments on the techniques for revitalizing civilization are also dead nuts on.

The areas of discussion for works such as *Voluntary Simplicity* and *The Power of Now* and other books that advocate ecologically sensitive living are broad. Not many of them explicitly advocate what I have articulated as the Sacred Nonaggression Principle (which I will be pushing in book form within the next several months). Or really say much of anything about the concept of individual rights: life, liberty, or property.

I feel a lot more comfortable when thinkers promoting enlightenment are on my same page with respect to explicit acknowledgement, for example, of the Bill of Rights. Yet in neither of these books do the authors advocate government coercion (beyond tax incentives or prudent disposition of government resources). So I'm pretty sure their voluntarism is thoroughgoing.

Finally, on the score of what it takes to generate wealth, the importance of abundance to simple living, and the whole altruistic ideal Elgin lays out for seeing to it the vast masses of humanity are raised from poverty I have a lot of reservations or simply questions. I truly believe political freedom or radical liberty in the context of natural reason forms the foundation of all good things... and should be our highest priority for humankind in general (of course, not at the point of a Bushovik gun).

Good book, many simple insights.

*2007 August 15*

*Copyright © Brian Wright | The Coffee Coaster™*

*Voluntary Simplicity | Duane Elgin | Outer simple, inner peace*