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SUFFICIENCY AND SIMPLE LIVING: The Path to Personal and Global Well-Being

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Abstract

For every beneficial thing there is a point beyond which more is not necessarily better; where what is good for you in moderation gradually becomes harmful. This is not only true for the individual but also true of communities, nations and the planet. Whether we call it moderation, frugality or simple living, there is evidence to suggest restraint is good for health and wellbeing at every scale. The evidence for this article comes from data from a variety of sources that suggest that the relationship between growth in the consumption of resources and improvements in quality of life is subject to a threshold effect. Growth improves quality of life up to a point, until a threshold is reached where improvements in wellbeing begins to taper off (the point of diminishing marginal returns) and then may even decline. This relationship shows up in such areas as the relationship between Gross Domestic Product and national wellbeing, between income and satisfaction, energy consumption and welfare, health expenditures and health outcomes, and between personal consumption and personal health.

Sufficiency and satiety may be the most important paths to health. Despite this, in many measures of consumption there is an increasing amount of scarcity and poverty on one end and growing profligacy and wealth on the other, with a shrinking middle zone of existence in-between. The threshold effect suggests that it is at the middle levels of resource use where basic needs are met and there is enough for a range of personal growth opportunities, so that society gets the most health and well being for its resource use.

The amount of productive land and sea area on the surface of the planet, when divided equally among the present world population, comes to slightly under 5 acres per person to produce what people need, and to absorb the waste products of their life style. The data in this article suggests that this level of resource use may be enough to live well. If so, our prospects for healing the planet rests on bringing the poorest up to that level while reducing the impact of the excesses allotted to the wealthiest. This article, based on the threshold effect, suggests that reducing our level of consumption may be beneficial to the planet as a whole, but also for our nations, our communities and our individual selves.

Healing the individual and the collective

Healing arts are usually practiced at the level of the individual. Yet today it is apparent that our communities, our nation and the planet are also in need of healing. With all the demands for healing and caring, it often seems that we need to choose at which scale to work. But the evidence from all levels suggests that what's required for the wellbeing of individuals, communities, nations and the planet may be very much the same thing - call it moderation, sufficiency or simple living.

Consider what the following have in common:

1) Self-reported levels of happiness among the poor tend to rise with increased income while levels of depression decline. The relationship between happiness/depression and personal income, however, largely disappears beyond moderate levels of income (Lane, 2000). Up to a point, one *can* buy at least a chance at happiness but that point may be well below what is taken for granted in affluent societies.

2) An undernourished person will improve her health considerably by consuming more calories. The average person in the U.S. who presently takes in 3,600 calories a day (world average is 2700 calories) is not well served by adding another pound of steak (about 500 calories) to his daily diet. Consider that producing those 500 calories of beef requires on average about 20,000 calories of fossil fuel (oil, coal or gas) embodied in the agricultural chemicals and machinery to produce the feed crops that fatten the cow. That's 40 times more energy to produce the steak then the energy (calories) it provides. (Lappe 1982)

3) The United Nations Development Program estimates that it requires one Ton of Oil Equivalent (TOE)/per capita to reach a fairly high state of national health and development. Energy consumption beyond that buys little additional health benefit. (UNDP 2004) Other energy experts have estimated that consumption of 1.194 – 1.672 TOE of commercial energy per person is enough to meet essential physical needs plus high quality education and social services. On average, the world's population consumes less than 1.433 TOE/per capita annually. In the United States and Canada annual consumption exceeds 7.165 TOE per capita. (Smil 2003)

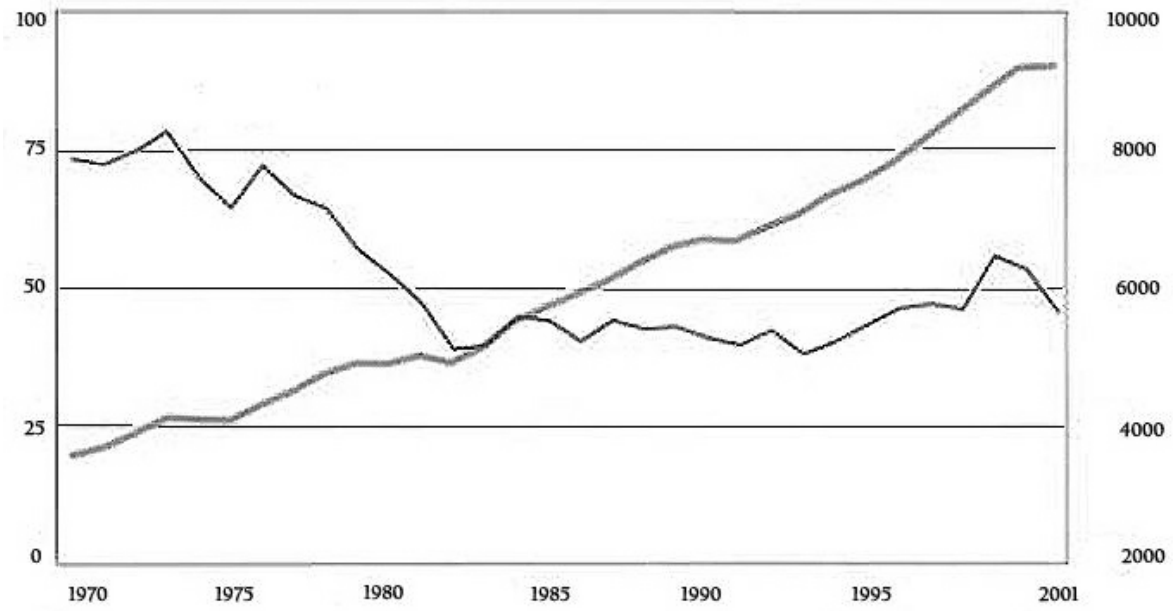
   Among the poorest countries the relationship between per capita health expenditures and measures of health outcomes is very strong. For example, the African country of Gambia spends only $26 more for health care per person than Zambia but a baby born in Gambia can expect to live 21.7 years longer than her counterpart in Zambia. However, at health care expenditures above $600 per capita the relationship begins to disappear. At the top of health care spending comes the United States, at an astounding $1967 per capita more than Norway for health care. This is eight times greater than the difference that added 21.7 years in Africa, and the result – life expectancy in the U.S. is 1.8 years lower than in Norway. Infant mortality data shows similar trends toward dramatically diminishing marginal gains for health care expenditures, eventually reversing altogether (UN Development Report, 2004).

4) Analyses of cross-national surveys on reported states of happiness conclude that the greatest source of happiness is family, friends and high regard of others. The greatest source of unhappiness is loneliness (Lane, 2000). Since 1970 the average number of individuals per living space has declined by 25% while the number of people living alone

   has increased markedly, with a corresponding increase in per capita energy and material consumption as sharing declines. The WorldWatch Institute in its State of the World report (2004) points out how our isolated, lonely lives expand our energy consumption: "A one person household in the United States uses 17% more energy per person than a two person household."

In every society yet studied, it appears that economic growth generally improves quality of life up to a point, beyond which continued growth adds little if anything to measures of wellbeing, which may in fact decline (Max-Neef, 1995, p. 117). Beyond the threshold of beneficial allocation of resources, economic growth as measured in increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a poor measure of a nation's wellbeing. Consider what is counted. If crime increases in a neighborhood, then people spend more money – on locks and security, on replacing stolen goods. GDP rises. When you are well, you add little to the health care sector, but when you get sick and buy drugs and pay for treatments, the economy grows. When a hurricane blasts South Florida, the rebuilding and recovery cause a temporary rise in GDP. An oil spill does the same. The cleanup of hazardous waste pumps billions into the GDP on top of the productive activities that produced the waste in the first place. Much of this negative GDP, which former World Bank economist Herman Daly calls "illth" (as distinguished from wealth), should be counted instead as social and personal depreciation resulting from economic activities (Daly and Farley, 2004). Sadly, unlike standard accounting that subtracts for the wearing down of factories and equipment, the wearing down of people's lives goes uncounted. This helps to explain the threshold effect. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Index of Social Health and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per Capita, U.S. 1970-2001

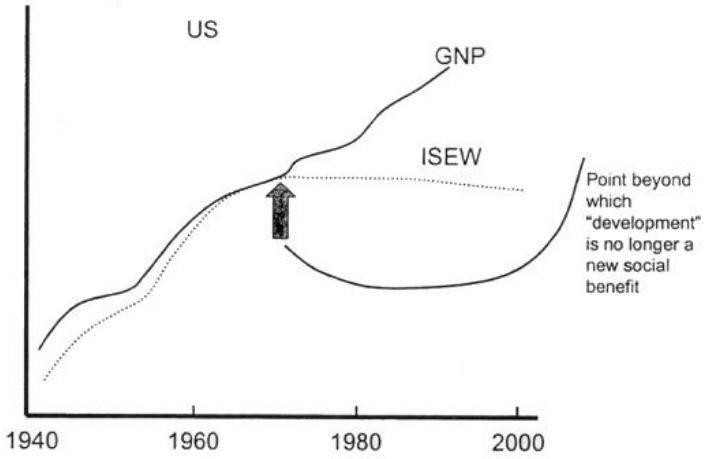


Source: Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy

The Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW), by Daly and Cobb (1989), also known as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), is a measurement tool that combines social factors, income

inequalities and environmental deterioration for measuring economic status, much like the GNP. (See Figure 2, from Costanza and Gunderson)

Figure 2. Genuine Progress Indicator



Less is better

These observations, taken together, merely illustrate on a larger scale what people in the field of healing and caring understand from broad experience: for every beneficial element there is a point – a threshold – beyond which more is not necessarily better, and beyond which it can readily become harmful excess. Eat enough good food and you have good health. Eat too much and the benefits are lost. Economists call this the point of diminishing marginal utility. Perhaps we can more meaningfully call it the point of "enoughness" or sufficiency. Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef (1995) posits what he calls the *threshold hypothesis*: "For every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in the quality of life, but only up to a point — the threshold point — beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate."

Deterioration at the planetary scale occurs when the byproducts of production and consumption begin to disrupt the Earth's life support systems, upon which our prosperity and our health and wellbeing ultimately depend. At the community level it happens when people's resources of time, attention and wealth are channeled predominantly into the commercial economy, while those noncommercial values that tie humans to each other and the land are increasingly marginalized. At the personal level it happens when one loses track of what really matters: connection with friends, family and the broader world of human connection with the natural world. Robert E. Lane (2000), in an exhaustive survey of the literature on reported states of happiness, concludes that statistically the most important variables determining happiness are related to companionship (friendship and family ties). Eco-psychologist Robert Greenway (1995) reports that 90% of those audited following a wilderness outing reported increased feelings of well-being, while 77% described the experience as life-changing. Our sense of connection to others and to the Earth is quintessentially a non-commercial good. Once it is separated from its "owner" it has no value. Building and sustaining relationships with people and the natural world does not add to measures of economic growth. In fact it is just the opposite – with our time and attention directed to our relationships we are less pulled to look to the commercial marketplace for sources of solace.

The threshold hypothesis suggests that the greatest threats to health at all scales are scarcity and profligacy. Sufficiency and satiety may be the most important paths to health. So then what do we make of the fact that in 1960 the worldwide disparity in income between the richest 20% and the poorest was approximately 20 to 1. Today this disparity exceeds 100 to 1, a profligate opposite direction to that we would recommend for a healthy planet.

The US in particular has been making very poor choices. According to simple-living advocate Cecile Andrews (1997), comparing the U.S. to other industrial nations, we are:

- Number 1 in billionaires and number 1 in children and elderly living in poverty.
- Number 1 in real wealth and number 1 in unequal wealth distribution.
- Number 1 in big homes and number 1 in homelessness.
- Number 1 in private consumption and last in savings.
- Number 1 in executive salaries and number 1 in inequality of pay.

The resources used up over a lifetime by the average baby born in the US in 1990 would create 24.2 million pounds of solid and liquid waste. To have the average American standard of living he or she needed to consume 1.5 million lbs of minerals, energy equivalent to 4,000

barrels of oil, 25,000 kg of plant foods, and 55,000 lbs. of animal products, representing the slaughter of 4,000 animals (Hall, et. al., 1994). These numbers would be significantly greater today, in 2005. If every baby in the world were to live the life of that US baby, the environmental repercussions of these numbers would be astonishing.

Lester Brown (2001) calculated the impact of these trends, looking only at China. In recent years China has been the world's fastest growing economy, with a GDP that has quadrupled since 1980. To meet Chinese demand for beef, if they should consume at US levels, would require the entire US production of grain to feed the additional cattle. If China ate seafood like the Japanese, it would take the entire world's current fish catch – and current consumers have already seriously depleted much of the world's available fish stocks. If the Chinese consumed oil at US rates, China alone would need more oil than the world presently produces. What is true for China is true for India and the 2 billion other people living in low-consuming societies at present. But if it is unwise for the rest of the world to adopt the US lifestyle in an interdependent world, it is unwise and cruel for the economically developed countries to strive to continue it.

When we consider that multiple air and water pollutants and the release of greenhouse gases accompany each step in the production and consumption of fossil fuel. It's easy to understand why consuming too much (energy, food, minerals) is unhealthy for the individual consumer, for society and for the earth's ecosystem as a whole. The good news is that this works in the other direction as well: reducing our level of consumption by living more simply and more mindfully is not only good for us individually, it's also what's necessary to secure the health of the planet. The logic of this relationship creates a powerful synergy among those choosing to live more simply with those working to protect the natural environment and also with those concerned about health and wellbeing.

Living simply, like living healthfully, is not as simple as it sounds. It requires continuous evaluation and mindful judgments about what one produces and consumes. It counsels a healthy skepticism toward the millions of sales pitches competing for our attention – all insisting that happiness lies on the other side of the next purchase. In an economic system that invests in commercial and individually consumed goods far more than in communal and noncommercial approaches, devoting one's time and attention to the benefit of the common good and caring for the earth can leave one outside the circle of riches and power (Manno, 2004). Buying locally grown, organic foods is one way to be proactive for sustainability.

Research suggests that when materialism is a driving feature of one's life, happiness and healthfulness are undermined. Psychologist Tim Kasser (2002) points out that materialistic values cause deep-rooted feelings of insecurity – engendering a need to prove our competence. Connection to others, essential to psychological health and a determinant of quality of life, is undermined by preoccupation with wealth and status. This is because a person valuing materialistic pursuits does not invest money, time and effort into relationships and communities. This lack of care is characterized by conflict, alienation, apathy, and objectification. Also, pursuing materialistic goals fails to increase one's happiness because while progress in materialistic ambitions may cause a temporary improvement in mood the underlying psychological dynamics that cause the pursuit of materialistic goals (i.e. self-esteem problems and discrepancies) do not change and are not healed with material success. This generates the mistaken idea that more will be better, and a continual striving for yet further material goals, with consequent harm. These goals are often destructive to the individual, community and the environment. On the other hand, if we focus on values of self-acceptance,

good relationships, and contributions to the community, we will improve the quality of life for ourselves, for everyone else and the quality of the environment as well.

The Simplicity Forum is an alliance of individuals in leadership roles (the lead author of this article is one) promoting simple living as a healthy, ethical and green alternative to the treadmill of consumption. It has taken on the challenge of drawing on the energy of the thousands of people who experiment with voluntarily simplifying their lives, and gathering that energy into a social movement, which organizes to change economic and social policies that promote over-consumption and unending, destructive economic growth.

The ecological footprint, developed by ecologists Bill Rees and Mathis Wackernagel, is a method for calculating the environmental impact of any individual or nation. The ecological footprint analysis estimates the amount of productive land and sea required to produce the raw materials and fuels and assimilate the wastes from the production and consumption supporting those products and activities. It creates a single, relatively simple metric, allowing comparisons across many disparate categories of consumptive activities and across people and nations. Since the total amount of land space is finite, as world population increases, the per capita planetary space declines. Presently if we divided all the Earth's productive land and ocean space equally to the nearly six billion people, each would receive 4.7 acres. The ecological footprint of the average person in the United States stands presently at 24 acres. To reduce one's ecological footprint toward the global average is difficult in a society where we have lost so much local self-reliance and have grown dependent on imported fuels, food and commodities.

Many of the ways to reduce individual ecological footprint are also steps we can take to improve individual health. Walk, ride bikes, drive less. Eat more fruits and vegetables, preferably organic and locally grown. The energy that goes into producing, processing, storing, transporting and preparing the average American meat-eating diet emits 8,800 pounds of CO2 per day, just less than the average US car. The WorldWatch Institute in its State of the World report (2004) points out how our isolated, lonely lives expand our energy consumption: "A one person household in the United States uses 17% more energy per person than a two person household." Friendship and sharing meals, tools, conversation, skills, go a long way toward reducing our dependence on buying things to achieve satisfaction and maintain health, while significantly reducing our ecological footprint.

When the environmental scholar Satish Kumar, President of the UK's Schumacher College, came to speak at my college, he surprised our students with his unusual prescription for our planetary woes. He spoke about the need around the world to invent and spread new patterns of development where people's basic needs can be met without destroying the resource base on which they depend. As usually happens after provocative lectures at the college, the students sought direction for their lives. "What can we do?" they asked. After thinking awhile, he said, slowly and carefully, "DO LESS. JUST DO LESS. If North Americans would just slow down, take a breath, perhaps the billions of the rest of us in this world would have a little more room."

In summary

The things each of us can do to reduce his or her ecological footprint also happens to be what we need to do for our own health and wellbeing. Taking a breath, slowing down, savoring the

moment, building a relationship – here lie the happy coincidences between what is good for each individual and what is good for the planet. If we all follow this prescription, there are enough resources on Earth for everyone to live a fulfilling, healthy and happy life while preserving the planet for future generations.

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