

## Simplicity's Sweet Spot

Delivered to Olympic UU Fellowship by Joseph Bednarik on February 28, 2021

This Sunday's message is entitled "Simplicity's Sweet Spot," and as we begin, I bring to your attention an image from this past month: In preparation for this talk, I read an article on the philosophical history of simplicity—while lying in bed—using my smart phone to connect via wifi to the internet and praying that the battery would hold a charge until I was through.

I think that scenario captures, in a nutshell, the modern condition: We research the history of simplicity by leveraging one of the most complicated and powerful tools ever invented:

- A tool that has more computing power than the entirety of NASA had when they landed human beings on the moon.
- A tool that required engineering genius to design,
- intense amounts of energy and resources to manufacture,
- and an umbilical-cord connection to the power grid to maintain.

And for those of us who use smart phones, they've become a tool we would be loath to sacrifice in any effort to quote-unquote "simplify."

Because why?

Because if you have grown accustomed to living your life with a smart phone, *not* having a smart phone at the ready would make it less possible to manage the inter-twined world that our usage of smart phones helps co-create on a daily, hourly, minutely basis.

Welcome to the *grip* of modern life.

Along with smartphones, you are welcome to add refrigerators, cars, laptops, water heaters, coffee grinders, motorboats, vacuum cleaners, electric drills, clothes dryers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera...

Each and all represent a decision, an investment of time and money, and a force in the creation of that wonderful phrase "the life to which I've grown accustomed."

Regarding that opening image of researching simplicity on a smart phone: In my defense, on the floor next to the bed was an *actual* book—a hardback volume with black ink on white paper, a tool that has been in use for centuries.

This particular book had the word "Walden" on the front cover. *Walden*, of course, is an American classic written by Henry David Thoreau, about his experiment with simplifying life—getting to life's essentials—while living near a humble little pond outside the village of Concord, Massachusetts, in the mid-1800s.

Concord, by the way, at that time was a hotbed for Unitarianism, and a long time before smart phones and wifi.

Some might say a *simpler* time.

I was reading the book looking for a famous passage on simplicity and found it in the chapter entitled “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.”

Here is the passage, slightly edited:

“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!”

It is important to note that Thoreau ends that three-word statement with an exclamation point. Or, as my younger sister used to say, “explanation” point.

Thoreau continues: “I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for... Simplify, simplify.”

I love that phrase from the 1850s: “chopping sea of civilized life.”

How much has changed?

So let’s take the two operative words from this passage: “simplify” and “simplicity.”

The verb “simplify” is moving toward “simplicity.”

One a process, the other a state of being.

And it seems that our pandemic lives have ignited and catalyzed the *process*—“simplify, simplify”—and specifically beamed that focus and energy onto the objects and storage areas of our lives. Because I know many friends and colleagues—and likely many of you here in this zoom room this morning—have cleaned out closets and cupboards and garages and garden sheds and bookshelves and junk drawers and storage units, attempting to get rid of stuff.

To gain some clarity by reducing the clutter.

And my guess is that during these cleaning sessions, we have think this thought at least once during that process:

“Why on Earth am I still carrying this thing around?”

And when you think that thought you touched upon some of *the* essential questions of composing a life:

- What is value?
- What do I value?
- How does value change over time?

So yes, there you are, cleaning out the garden shed, finding that broken spade you intended to fix seven years ago, and holding it up to wonder “*Why?*”

You spaded much Earth with this tool, planting garden after garden, then it broke, you put it in the shed, and one, two, five, seven years roll by, with the broken spade as a reminder of your intentions, as a monument to both your past, your present, and your possible future.

This scene may not carry the same metaphysical weight as Hamlet in the graveyard holding up the jester's skull and wondering about life, but a spade also appears in that Shakespearean scene.

That spade *isn't* broken.

That spade is working perfectly as an essential tool for digging graves, while Hamlet talks to a jester's skull, putting a *very* fine point on the fact that life is finite.

So with simplicity in mind, with spades and graveyards, global pandemics and smart phones in mind, with Yorik's skull in Hamlet's hand in mind, let's reflect on that first question: What is value?

What *is* value?

This was one of Thoreau's central questions because he realized that anything and everything he needed and wanted in his life would cost a bit *of* his life to acquire.

A portion of his *finite* life.

Life—his most valued possession—which is constructed entirely of time.

Meaning every physical thing he brought into his life required some *time* to be exchanged. And he wanted to invest most of his time to reading and writing and walking and exploring. He knew *how* he wanted to live his life, so he wanted to figure out exactly how much life he needed to invest elsewhere in order to realize the time he so desired and valued.

Here, I bring forward a wonderful phrase from Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel who said, in his marvelous book *Sabbath*: "Time is the heart of existence."

"Time is the heart of existence."

We cannot manufacture more time.

All we can do—and what we are called to do—is prepare ourselves to be fully alive within the time we have. This is a key point to the state of being we're talking about: Simplicity.

Turning back to Thoreau: He was not cleaning out storage sheds and agonizing about what to keep or not keep. He first performed a profound thought experiment, stripping life down to a zero point, then carefully considering what he had to add back in to make the life he wanted to live possible.

The first part was all about fundamentals. He recognized that there were four essential things that every human being needed: Food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. He knew he had to acquire and maintain these necessities throughout his life in order to maintain his life.

If you value life, then these necessities have a high value.

He decided upon methods that would get these high-value essentials with a minimum amount of cost, and then he made what seems like an obvious discovery: It is the *next* physical object where things get interesting—this is the object you *want* to bring into your life...and how much *more* of your life are you willing to trade to get it?

It is important to remember that even Thoreau wanted things.

Again, we hear from him in *Walden*: “I find by my own experience, a few implements, a knife, an axe, a spade, a wheelbarrow, &c., and for the studious, lamplight, stationery, and access to a few books, rank next to necessities, and can all be obtained at a trifling cost.”

Did you catch that? Did you catch that Thoreau considered a spade *next* to a necessity?

Now we have:

- that broken spade in our garden shed,
- Hamlet’s spade in the graveyard,
- and Thoreau’s spade at his cabin near Walden.

We are *truly* digging in.

And there was yet another category of physical objects that Thoreau brought into his shelter. Here is his list: “a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a lamp.”

Regarding the actual work required to maintain all this he writes: “For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.”

I love that phrase “free and clear,” which is the dividend of his investment: Abundant time to live the life he actually wants to live.

And to be sure, he knows and understands that other people make different decisions, they have different values.

Again, Henry writes: “As I preferred some things to others, and especially valued my freedom, as I could fare hard and yet succeed well, I did not wish to spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet. If there are any to whom it is no interruption to acquire these things, and who know how to use them when acquired, I relinquish to them the pursuit.”

And just to be clear, in that list of things he said he *didn’t* want, he slyly slipped in the phrase “just yet.”

Maybe, someday, he will value differently. He is leaving a bit of egress, and I respect him for that.

So for Thoreau, who started from a zero point, he found his sweet spot of simplicity that allowed him to trade six weeks of life a year to get what he needed to survive, leaving forty-six weeks a year for him to do as he pleased—in essence, to thrive inside his time, his “heart of existence.”

And looking at the row of books with “Thoreau” printed on the spine, there is abundant evidence that he lived his short life as he intended.

Because writing takes time.

And yet here we are, with smart phones in our pockets and purses and a broken spade in our garden shed. A global pandemic on our hands, with our skull currently covered by warm skin and protecting our glorious brains! We are free to ask: Being here, attentive inside *this* moment, does the call “simplify, simplify” have any resonance whatsoever?

If so, what are the next steps?

If “simplify, simplify” is something you feel called to do, one book that comes highly recommended is Marie Kondo’s *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Her basic premise is to literally touch everything you own and ask “Does this object spark joy?” And one of her key points is to flip the narrative of “getting rid of stuff” to curating the things you want to keep in your life and that *actually* sparks joy in your life.

And as you curate and keep those items that bring joy to your life, you can ask the larger more soulful question: Am I moving toward “simplicity,” and what would I do with my life if I realized that state of being?

Since we are at a religious service, let us close with a definition of simplicity from the massive three-volume set of books entitled *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*.

Because this service is for a Unitarian-Universalist congregation, fair warning is required: this definition uses the word “God.” As a practicing UU, you are welcome to replace “God” with:

“Nature,”	“Higher Power,”	“Divine Love,”
“Enlightenment,”	“Earth,”	“Life,”
“Justice,”	“Freedom,”	“Soul”

or whatever word that allows you to receive the wisdom and music of the definition without sluicing your rational mind off into a heated argument about the existence of God.

Here goes the definition:

“Simplicity... is the centering of one’s life and intent upon the one thing necessary, the love of God above all. Simplicity is the objective of those seeking spiritual progress by the reduction of desires and attachments that could scatter spiritual energies, and distract them from the search for union with God.”

Actually, let’s do the exercise and consider that again, replacing the word “God” with Justice: “Simplicity... is the centering of one’s life and intent upon the one thing necessary, the love of

Justice above all. Simplicity is the objective of those seeking spiritual progress by the reduction of desires and attachments that could scatter spiritual energies, and distract them from the search for Justice.”

That was so much fun, one more time, replacing “God” with Nature:

“Simplicity... is the centering of one’s life and intent upon the one thing necessary, the love of Nature above all. Simplicity is the objective of those seeking spiritual progress by the reduction of desires and attachments that could scatter spiritual energies, and distract them from the search for union with Nature.”

The definition for “simplicity” works beautifully for God, beautifully for Justice, beautifully for Nature, and the key point is to reduce those things that “scatter spiritual energies.”

Implying that the *focus* of spiritual energy is the great promise within that state of being called “simplicity.”

And so to revisit that broken spade in your garden shed: I suggest it is worth a bit of life to fix that spade and make it whole again. Because that simple and ancient tool connects you to gardens and graveyards, Shakespeare and Thoreau... And mostly because your smart phone can’t dig a hole to plant a tree to save its life.

Simply, Amen

#### **NOTE:**

At coffee hour after the sermon, a congregant reminded everyone present that during his time at Walden, Thoreau was supported in a variety of ways by women who go unmentioned in his writings. It is true that Thoreau’s mother occasionally did his laundry and that Thoreau would regularly stroll into town to enjoy a meal at the Emerson home. A meal, it shall be noted, that was not prepared by Thoreau. (The historical record does not show whether he helped with the dishes.) For those wishing to explore the various critiques of Thoreau, here are a few places you can begin:

“Everybody Hates Henry,” by Donovan Hone. *The New Republic*, October 21, 2015.  
<https://newrepublic.com/article/123162/everybody-hates-henry-david-thoreau>

“The Moral Judgements of Henry David Thoreau,” by Kathryn Schulz. *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/pond-scum>

## **SOURCES**

*Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (Corpus Publications, 1979).

*Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau.

*The Sabbath*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel (FSG, 1951).