

Simple Living In A Complex World: A Guide To Balancing Life's Achievements

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We all live lives that are sometimes driven by necessity. Whether a corporate executive attempting to meet the expectations of shareholders and customers, a parent trying to do what is right for their children, an entrepreneur building a business, an employee in a large organization with a hollow feeling from having sold out to the demands of others, or an exhausted helping professional whose helping is getting heavy, we can become so busy putting out the fires around us that we lack time to kindle the fires of our own inner lives. All too often we react to the stresses of daily life, rather than respond to our deeper desires. We begin to see, when we stop and pay attention to these deeper yearnings, that we are no longer living our own lives, but rather in our harried and frantic world, our commitments end up controlling us. Life becomes a little too much like being on a boat where the oarsmen are all pulling with great enthusiasm in different directions, and in the frenzy, we stop listening to ourselves, to a deeper voice from within us that calls us to live life differently.

I believe that life can be different. The key to living simply is to connect with ourselves and with others, and integrate those connections with our achievements in the world. The integration of connection and achievement creates a sense of fulfillment and I have found that we can add another component on the path of simplicity – finding contentment.

Contentment lies below the surface of our achievements or our failures, our connections or our losses. Contentment does not mean to be in a place free of problems, challenges, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of these and still be calm within. Contentment is not the same as the allure and fleeting emotion of happiness. Contentment is a lasting inner center that gives you freedom and serenity amidst the demands of daily living.

To inspire you and guide you to listen more intentionally and courageously to that deeper part of yourself, to uncover that place in your soul where hidden possibilities reside, a place of simple living, I offer the following suggestions:

- 1. Get clear** – about what matters most. Simple living is ultimately about living your life in accord with your deepest values. Remember that the most important things in life are not things.
- 2. Make room** – for that which is most vital to your life. Living simply requires that you ask yourself daily, “What can you take out of your day to make room for what is most important?” Above all, make room every day for solitude, silence, and attending to the voice within.
- 3. Be connected** – and dependent – on that which strengthens and sustains you. The two vital connections you must make on the path to simplicity are to the desires of your soul and to a community of people that support, strengthen, and sustain you on the journey.
- 4. Manage your hungers.** “Everybody has a hungry heart,” wrote Bruce Springsteen. There is, within every one of us, a desire that is always stronger than satisfaction. Unbridled appetite is the antithesis of simple living.
- 5. Break free of unhealthy dependencies.** Dependency is a part of life, but to live simply, you must realize that some kinds of dependency further your growth, while others stifle your development. Accepting accountability is one of the highest forms of human maturity – a willingness to be accountable is one of the defining characteristics and capacities of adulthood – and a cornerstone to simple living.

Becoming free of addictions, substances you are attached to, or destructive relationships that are hurting you, opens the door to simpler living.

6. **Embark on a spiritual journey.** The ultimate purpose of life is to grow and to evolve your soul. Everything – our experiences, our learning, our contributions – serves that end. Spirituality –the inner peace that lies at the core of simplicity - is, ultimately, what you do with that desire, that hungry heart. Find your center in who you *are*, not what you do.
7. **Be present.** In the present, regrets of the past and worries of the future are cast aside. In the present you find ultimate simplicity. Being present teaches you that beauty is always there if you are receptive to it. Being present allows you to open to the magnificence just behind the thin curtain of the ordinary. There is no stress in the present moment.
8. **Find your answers from within.** Everyone is unique, as are your needs for simplicity. Simplicity means something very different for my sixty-eight year old friend who is battling prostate cancer, than it does for my twenty-five year old daughter. Simple living starts with respecting and trusting yourself, wherever you are. When you are true to yourself, you cannot be false to others.
9. **Adhere to a practice.** Your life will change when you change something you do daily. The secret of simple living is found in your daily habits. A few elements common to most practices include:
 - (a) contemplation
 - (b) self-examination
 - (c) physical and mental discipline
 - (d) a community of support, mentoring, and accountability
 - (e) a commitment to service that moves you beyond self-centeredness

Find a practice that works for you, and stick with it.

10. **See everything that happens to you as a potential teacher.** Your greatest blessings are potentially your greatest curses, and your greatest curses are potentially your greatest blessings. Depression, for example, can be transformed into a gift, just as winning the lottery can eventually turn out to be a disaster. Instead of labeling your experiences as either fortunate or unfortunate, Try embracing life for what it is and how it is unfolding.

11. **Change what you can, and let go of the rest.** You may be familiar with the serenity prayer, a great tool that many have found useful for finding simplicity amidst the complexity: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This simple prayer can be translated into three simple rules for living:

- (a) Change the changeable,
- (b) Accept the unchangeable
- (c) Remove yourself from the unacceptable.

12. **Be patient – particularly with yourself.** We are all, in our own unique way, fighting a hard battle. Simple living is not a pretense of perfection. Rather, it is acceptance of ourselves on this human journey. It is allowing ourselves to be more fully human, and to be a little gentler with ourselves in the process.

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