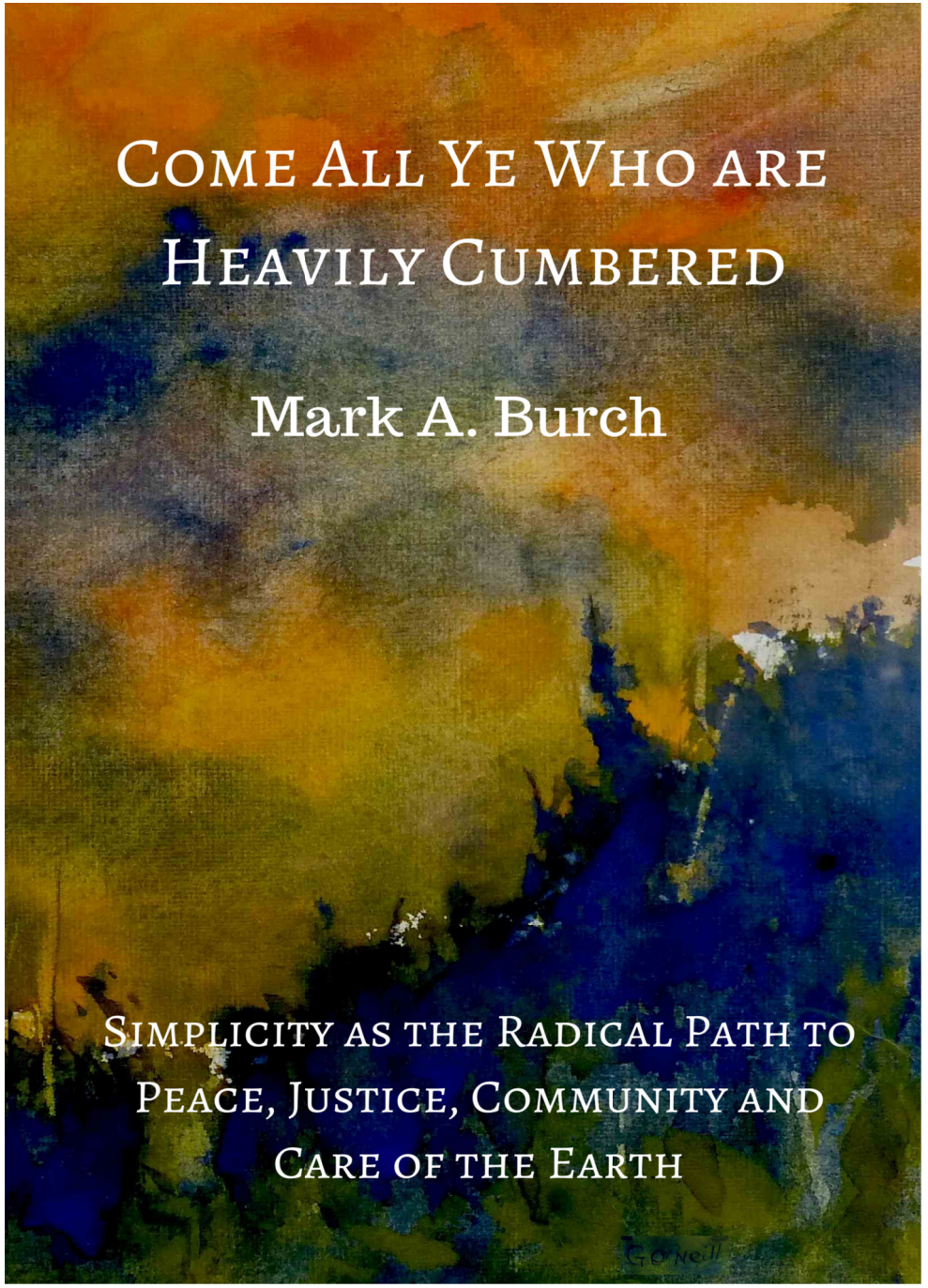
In the Quaker Study Sessions for Canadian Yearly Meeting in August, 2014, Mark Burch listed the impacts of simple living:

- If you would prevent war, live simply.
- If you would live nonviolently, live simply.
- If you want to participate in the democratic life of your community, live simply.
- If you would live sustainably, live simply.
- If you would live in such a way as to promote economic and social justice, live simply.
- Adopt a more active and healthier way of life by living simply.
- If you would free time and energy for relationships with others, live simply.

Since much of the violence in the world is structural in nature and is imposed on our behalf on distant others whose suffering is out of sight and therefore out of mind, Mark urges us to reduce it by cultivating personal and regional self-reliance through simple living. He explores how our lives have become encumbered, the spiritual roots of simplicity, and how we may regain it.



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by Mark A. Burch

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Come All Ye Who are Heavily Cumbered:

Simplicity as the Radical Path to Peace, Justice,Community and Care of the Earth

Mark A. Burch

PDF QuickPrint Edition

Contents

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I — The Testimony to Simplicity

Simplicity is one of the traditional testimonies of Friends. I really like the concept of testimony, partly because it means something similar to praxis. Testimony has a component of belief, but it is not just a belief or intellectual opinion. In fact, the formation of one's belief emerges from the lived experience of the testimony which demonstrates the belief. Testimonies are the ways Friends manifest the Light, or the Divine presence in action. It follows, of course, that we form intellectual opinions about these matters following, or concurrent with, living their truth in our daily round. As such, they resonate with the biblical injunction in the *Letter of James* (1:18-19) that says:

> … You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds—now you show me that you have faith without any good deeds to show. … You see now that it is by doing something good, and not only by believing that a man is justified. … A body dies when it is separated from the spirit, and in the same way faith is dead if it is separated from good deeds. (James 2:18-19; 24; 26)
>
> [All scripture quotations from: Jones, Alexander (Gen. Ed.) 1966. *The Jerusalem Bible.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.]

I imagine early Friends were very familiar with this passage and reflected on it often when they tried to discern which actions were most in alignment with what they perceived the Divine will to be for them.

The idea of testimony also resonates strongly with my particular perspective of voluntary simplicity as first of all a way of life and not an intellectual system, and certainly not merely a critique of consumer culture. The idea that we start walking, and we walk before we talk, and only after walking for a while do we concern ourselves with how our talk matches up with our walk, appeals to me.

Friends being the peculiar people we are, there are many perspectives on what the testimony to simplicity might mean:

- For Robert Barclay and others, over-involvement in "the world", which included too strong an attachment to material things, especially

luxuries, was a distraction from spiritual practice which consisted of prayer, discerning the will of God and acting on it, etc. Therefore, simplicity was urged as a way of minimizing distractions. (Freiday 1991)Theologically, there is both a positive and negative motivation behind the testimony to simplicity. The positive one is that simplicity was an outward expression of an inner transformation wrought by God that we do well to desire and to cultivate. The negative one is that simplicity was a protest against the worldly spirit of luxury, lust and pride. Early Friends thus described the simplicity testimony as both a hedge and a light. (Burdick 2007) It was a hedge against the negative influence that the world can have on our inner life, and also a light shining from an inwardly transformed soul.

- For John Woolman, over-consumption, especially of luxuries, required oppressive social and economic institutions that caused over-work of both people and animals, institutions like slavery, prejudicial behaviour toward First Nations, and ultimately were the cause of war (Moulton 1989). Preoccupation with luxury consumption or providing luxuries for others to consume also motivated extreme and dangerous ventures which placed the people engaged in them at risk (e.g., sailors, miners, plantation workers).

- Mildred Binns Young insisted that over-consumption depletes scarce resources which might otherwise be used to alleviate poverty, injustice, and reduce war and the preparation for war (Young 1938).

- Richard Gregg, an American Friend who worked with Gandhi to end the British Raj in India, saw simplicity as “the deliberate organization of life for a purpose”, the purpose being to liberate time and energy for higher pursuits than indulging in more accumulation of material things (Gregg 1936).

- Plain living, in contrast to the fashions of the world—-and this was part of the motivation behind traditional Quaker plain dress and plain speaking—-was intended as a visible public witness to spiritual values, or even evidence of conversion.

- More recently, the link between over-consumption and environmental damage has gained prominence among those concerned with Earth care and environmental stewardship (Spinks 2000). Simple living is a

intentions. What we need to do is simply stand in the Light, consent to the intentions arising within us, and then give expression to those intentions through our actions. Both outer and inner simplicity arise together and *gradually* as the Light brightens in our consciousness, thus transforming our motivations and our perspective of what is a Godly life. We change as whole people or not at all.

As Elaine Prevallet emphasized, this process of the transformation of consciousness is not under much conscious control, and yet we can trust the Light itself to bring us to the awareness we need and the sort of material lifestyle most conducive to it.

conditioning to eventually discover a natural, connected, spontaneous consciousness that offered a fresh, unmediated experience of her relationships with other beings—humans and others. This she described as resembling, though not exactly identical to, the spontaneous consciousness that children bring to their relationships. Most children react with spontaneous revulsion when they first understand what they are doing when they eat meat. Children display great empathy toward animals or other people who are in pain. They are aware, before they are taught otherwise, that there is already present in them an ethical sensibility that can guide their choices and actions. This is not a law imposed by an external authority, nor is it something arising from fear or self-protection. Rather, it is an organic spontaneous awareness of what constitutes right action in right relationship with other beings. In Huber's experience, this arises as a change in the orientation of consciousness resulting from spiritual practice.

There are many similarities between Quaker worship and the spiritual practice Huber describes. I want to propose a direct parallel between Huber's meditation on violence, and our meditation on consumer culture and its alternative in the testimony to simplicity. As another Friend, Catherine Whitmire, has noted:

> … I have come to understand plain living as a matter of spiritual intent, or an aim of the heart. It consists of aligning our lives with what we hear when we listen to our Guide. It is learning to live our lives in "constant communication with that Centre which is the source of life itself." It is both a gift and a discipline. Early Quakers called this "staying close to the root." (Whitmire, 2001:15)

I would propose that as we consider what meaning we will give to the testimony of simplicity, that we include this within our practice of worship. We can set aside arguments about whether outer or inner simplicity is more important, or which should come first, or which should inform and lead the other, because the polarity is a false one. We might focus instead on a transformational vision of simple living that enfolds both inner and outer aspects. There is no opposition involved, no conflict, no dialectic, no need to choose one path over the other. There is just a unitary process of opening to the Light, arising from mysterious sources, and oriented not to commandments or inflicted fears but toward a transformation of our

direct, positive action on this issue.

- At a time when many people are stressed in nearly every way, but especially by excessive indebtedness and time famine, simplicity offers a lifestyle that promotes personal well-being (Spinks 2000).

These ideas congregate around a common centre in the value Friends assign to the practice of referring every aspect of life (work, time, integrity, use of money, relationships with others, etc.) to an inner reference point, the Light, the Spirit, or whatever you wish to call it. I will explore this more below.

Of course not all Friends agree on these matters.

From the very beginning, no less a figure than Margaret Fell, George Fox's wife, was less than enthused by George's sometimes joyless asceticism. She observed dryly:

> We must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them nor wear them. But we must all be in one dress, and one colour. This is a silly poor Gospel. (Fell 1700)

Margaret anticipated Emma Goldman's classic declaration, "I won't be part of your revolution unless I can dance." I can readily imagine that Margaret Fell found some sympathetic ears for her lament, especially from the distaff side of the Society.

This observation highlights a critical distinction as we explore simple living: the distinction between a negative and a positive asceticism. *Positive* asceticism involves foregoing things we might otherwise enjoy, or taking up practices we might otherwise avoid, in order to cultivate something we value more. This shouldn't seem strange even in our self-indulgent age. Athletes practice positive asceticism when they avoid foods that undermine their physical fitness or when they engage in strenuous exercises for the sake of preparing themselves for competitions. I think simple living, and the testimony to simplicity, is an example of positive asceticism.

Negative asceticism may be present when we deprive ourselves of something because we think that deprivation itself is good for us, or virtuous, or that the material world or physical pleasure are tainted by evil in

some way. In negative asceticism, enduring some discomfort as the price of excellence gets translated into neurotic masochism, and wholesome self-discipline becomes sadism. As Friends stand within the Christian spiritual tradition, one that sees the crucifixion (an act of torture) as a redeeming event, and the example of Christ as one calling for imitation (cf Thomas à Kempis' The Imitation of Christ), we constantly run the risk of slipping into negative asceticism. Against this possibility, I stand squarely with Margaret Fell: a gospel with no light or colour or laughter makes no spiritual sense to me and I don't believe that's what we're called to live.

Robert Burdick (2007) has written that the testimony to simplicity is not really a testimony in its own right because simplicity is an aspect of the testimony to integrity. Seeking God first is what constitutes integrity before Christ, and the pursuit of material things is subordinate to our concern to seek God first with an undivided heart. I would agree with this, but the practice of simplicity still matters and shouldn't get lost in the glare of some other testimony or be subordinate to it without closer consideration.

I think many Friends are puzzled by the testimony to simplicity in the modern context. Because we correctly intuit that it calls for something fairly demanding, we can see a great deal of bobbing and weaving in efforts to redefine it, or explain it away, or associate it with some quaint, more innocent time long, long ago, when people could wear funny hats and braces and not worry about what their colleagues thought at the office. Radical testimony to simplicity is especially disquieting for anyone who strongly identifies with the values, denials, and erstwhile rewards of consumer culture. Concealed under those funny hats and long, grey dresses lurks a radical critique of our present way of life.

Today, even among Friends who can identify with the testimony to simplicity, the traditional way of living this testimony through plain dress, plain speech, sobriety, humble house-holding and the like has been superseded by concern for peace, social equity and the environment. Accordingly, I think there is a tendency to conflate the testimony to simplicity with the testimonies to justice and equality, i.e., that no conversation about reducing material consumption is acceptable until everyone on earth is affluent. Stated differently, we should all upscale before we downscale, or even have a conversation about scale at all. Since it is

reinterprets, or in a multitude of other ways shields us from the reality of what we do to maintain a high consumption lifestyle, how we treat each other in the process, and how we treat the Earth. This obfuscation is achieved by moving the violence of consumer culture out of sight, hiding it underground, under water, far away in other countries, or in special facilities like slaughter houses, whaling ships at sea, and factory farms. The violence of consumer culture is suppressed through denial, projection, rationalization, displacement or willful ignorance, all of which drain emotional energy. Maybe this is one reason that anti-depressants are among the best selling drugs in the developed world.

The second connection I want to make is how we respond to the violence of consumer culture and how we might respond differently, in light of the testimony to simplicity. Just as Cheri Huber discovered, if we let ourselves be aware, even for a moment, of the cost of consumer culture, not just its benefits, then we're very tempted to lay a guilt trip on ourselves or others. We think, again mistakenly, that feeling guilt is evidence of a tender conscience, and if we just feel enough of it, we expiate our faults thereby (negative asceticism). Failing that, we become terrified of what will happen to us as the debts incurred by our way of life eventually come due.

If we opt for guilt, we look for somewhere to fix blame rather than fixing the problem. Guilt is just as self-indulgent as consumer culture. We enjoy guilty pleasures even more than legitimate ones. Guilt is all about the ego and its failings. It's actually an impediment to shifting our attention from self to others.

If we indulge fear, then we run and hide, which again takes us out of the real action as we spend our time and treasure building bunkers against the end of the world. An alternative to hiding is to attack what we fear—which today usually amounts to attacking the messengers like scientists and social workers who bring us warnings of how our way of life affects the Earth and other people who are not counted among the elites.

Is there an alternative?

Cheri Huber found that bringing these experiences and dilemmas back into her spiritual practice helped her gradually move through layers of social

When she looked deeply into this question, she discerned that often we respond to this violence by inflicting more violence on ourselves, particularly the violence of guilt and fear. We blame ourselves for having failed to meet some external ethical standard, or else our own internal standard. So we think, mistakenly, that the remedy for violence is to inflict guilt on ourselves and guilt will motivate us to amend our behaviour. Alternatively, we frighten ourselves with visions of violence that are paralyzing and disempowering. Then we think we should change our behaviour because the consequences of not doing so are even more frightening. Might there be a different way of resolving this dilemma that avoids using violence as a remedy for violence?

But what does this have to do with simplicity? I see two connections:

First, consumer culture isn't merely external and complicated in its own right, as Elaine Prevallet would probably say, nor is it merely a distraction from the holy work of spiritual growth as Barclay, Penn and Richard Foster might claim. Consumerism and all its invitations to accumulate cumber is a profoundly violent and deluded way of life which now threatens to extinguish humanity and many other species besides. Consumerism makes us crazy. It causes us to lose touch with reality. As Jesus taught, even from his cross—*we don't know what we're doing*.

Consumer culture is violent because everything we make or use is purchased at the cost of the suffering and death of other beings, many of which are sentient. The more we indulge in luxury consumption, the more death and suffering we inflict. John Woolman recognized this clearly in the 18th century:

> … This is like a chain where the end of one link encloses the end of another. The rising up of a desire to attain wealth is the beginning. This desire being cherished moves into action, and riches thus gotten please self, and while self hath a life in them it desires to have them defended.
>
> Wealth is attended with power … and as this spirit which wanders from the pure habitation prevails, so the seed of war swells and sprouts and grows and becomes strong, till much fruits are ripened. Thus cometh the harvest spoken of by the prophet, which is 'a heap in the day of grief, and of desperate sorrow' (*Isaiah* 17:11). (Moulton 1989:255)

Consumer culture is deluded because it systematically hides, denies,

extremely unlikely that the time will come when everyone is affluent, taking this perspective pretty much ensures we never have to consider how simply, or consumptively, we live.

Here is a factoid I can cite to support my assertion that the testimony to simplicity has been marginalized in Friends' discourses about other issues, or entirely forgotten: of the over four hundred pamphlets offered by Pendle Hill publications only five deal directly with simple living. Five pamphlets, over eighty-five years!

This not so subtle avoidance of simplicity, or how it might change our lives, is also evident in the way that the writing of some Friends is subtly dismissive of it. When it is portrayed as an eccentric throw-back to an earlier time it has little relevance to modern life except maybe among those inclined to masochistic self-denial.

One reason contemporary Friends might take a gingerly approach to simplicity is the tendency to *over-generalize* it, i.e. the idea that simplification applies to every aspect of life, including forms of complexity that enrich our lives, such as intellectual or aesthetic complexity. This may have been what happened in the 19th century when some Friends eschewed the arts and literature as too worldly. But my aim will not be to reduce every department of life to a bare minimum, but rather keep both the material and nonmaterial dimensions of life in proper perspective and proportion.

I'm glad that Friends have a testimony to simplicity, even if we have to wrestle with it a bit. Long before I became a Friend, I was convinced that simple living is the single most powerful, most internally consistent, and most effective way we have of actualizing all the other testimonies around which we gather. The testimony to simplicity is capable of making a significant contribution to resolving most of what ails humanity.

II — Cumber

It's natural to think that the opposite of simplicity is complexity, but I would beg to differ. The opposite of simplicity is cumber. Cumber has an honoured place in traditional Quaker-speak of the 17th and 18th centuries.

"Cumber" derives from the Latin *cumbrus*, which was an obstructive barrier of trees felled into the path of a pursuing army to slow down its progress. But it has a wonderful array of associated meanings: cumber is a "hindrance, burden or obstruction; trouble or distress; the pressure of business, especially affairs that occupy or trouble one; incommode; benumb; overwhelm; perplex, puzzle; occupy obstructively or inconveniently; burden or load; distress, embarrassment or inconvenience." Is this not a wonderful description of life in consumer culture?

The definition of cumber implies that there is someone who wants to move toward a goal, to which cumber blocks the way. I think what early Friends had in mind was their spiritual progress, or creating in their daily lives greater peace, justice, equality, and integrity. There's a long history in Christianity of the Parousia or "end time" when God's reign is finally established on Earth and our lives become mile markers along this historic journey. I imagine early Friends at least implicitly subscribed to this view. Cumber prevented that journey, or at least made it more difficult. Cultivating the opposite of cumber—a simple life—became a spiritual priority for them.

Sometimes cumber is the material possessions that fill my time and living space. Sometimes cumber is my psychological hangups or the social conditions of my existence that drain away my emotional and mental energy. Sometimes cumber is so much debt that I have no time to enjoy what I went into debt to acquire. And sometimes cumber is overcommitting my time to groups and activities that leave me feeling exhausted and drained, even when they are good things to be doing. Sometimes cumber is attending to what is urgent in someone else's estimation rather than what is important to my own calling.

We live in a consumer culture which multiplies cumber in every form in pursuit of power, profit, comfort and convenience. It even sells us more cumber to organize and store the cumber we already have. The more cumber

V — Transformational Simplicity

In this section I want to offer an integrated perspective of the testimony to simplicity that resolves the false dichotomy between spirit and matter, between our inner and outer experience of life. To assist us, I want to draw on a story from Zen roshi Cheri Huber (1990).

Cheri Huber was jogging one morning along a route that took her past a petting farm that kept animals for citified children to visit and handle on school field trips. As she passed the farm gate, Huber heard screaming coming from the farm. She turned and ran toward the barn, thinking there must be someone in distress. One of the farm hands emerged from the barn to intercept her, but not before she saw a sheep hanging from a tree branch by its hind legs getting its throat slit. Hearing the terrified cries of the slaughter victim, the other sheep were panicking as well, all screaming and running about to escape their own turn beneath the knife. It was slaughter day on the farm—not the sort of day when children, or anyone else, would want to pet the animals. Huber was asked to leave the property, which she did.

Understandably, Huber found this experience disturbing. And what Zen roshis do when things disturb them is bring the experience back into their meditative practice to cultivate insight both into the source of the disturbance and what might be right action in the circumstances. What she witnessed at first triggered horror and revulsion. Then she started questioning how it is that we humans use language and selective attention to shield ourselves, and especially our children, from the reality of our relationship with animals, and by only slight extension, our relationships with other people. We transmute the Lambkin of our childhood fairytales, into a generic 'sheep' without personal identity, thence into mutton, a type of meat with no sentience or individual identity at all. We use the same process to sort and distinguish people we love from the threatening alien or terrorist against whom we then find it easy to go to war. The violence we inflict on others, Huber realized, is prepared by violence we inflict on ourselves and our children when we distort, deny or explain away the reality of how we treat each other. How do we enlighten these very dark places, Huber wondered?

even if inadvertently. I think both Foster and Prevallet somewhat fall victim to this when they highlight the obvious importance of the inner evolution that is outwardly symbolized by living a simpler, calmer, more other-centred life. But I hope that healing the fragmentation in the inner/outer dualistic perspective might be possible by articulating a more integrated understanding of simplicity.

we have, the happier we're supposed to be. Cumber is another word for affluence—consumption beyond necessity. Consumer culture is all about promoting affluence, economic growth, and waste, without limit. As a Friend, I have to ask myself, since when did the impediment to a good life become its main goal? This is a non-trivial question, as competition for cumber is an ancient plague on humanity as well as an ever-ready occasion for war. In the *Letter of James* I find this query:

> Where do these wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn't it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven't got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don't have what you want is because you don't pray for it; when you do pray and don't get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires. (*James* 4:1-3)

One of the things that most appeals to me about simple living, and about Friends' testimony to simplicity, is the lightness of being with which it invites me to live. Instead of urging me to amass piles of material insulation between myself and my life, I'm invited instead toward a more trusting, open, and less burdened way of living. I think it's also a more real way of life for several reasons:

First, making the accumulation of cumber the chief goal in life reinforces the delusions of possession and private property. Consumer culture wants me to believe that I can actually own things which are really only on loan to me for my temporary use. But this stuff actually belongs to the far deeper mystery of being itself. What I think I own in fact belongs to the Universe and to God. It's just passing through my hands for a short time, no matter how tightly I may try to cling to it. The American farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry expresses this thought beautifully:

> The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It is also a Creation, a holy mystery, made for, and to some extent by, creatures, some but by no means all of whom are human. This world, this Creation, belongs in a limited sense to us, for we may rightfully require certain things of it—the things necessary to keep us fully alive as the kind of

> creature we are; but we also belong to it and it makes certain rightful claims upon us: that we leave it undiminished, not just to our children, but to all the creatures who will live in it after us. (Berry 1981)

The Hebrews got this right, but only involuntarily and only while they wandered in the desert. You may remember the story from *Exodus* 16:9-31 when the Hebrews were afraid they were going to starve—an archetype for all our material anxieties—only to have God provide manna every morning and quails every night to feed the people. But the story says quite explicitly that none of this food could be kept for the next day. God's people were to live day by day, on trust that sufficient provision would be made. Gandhi captures this spirit just as well as *Exodus*:

> Possession implies provision for the future. A seeker after Truth, a follower of the Law of Love, cannot hold anything against tomorrow. God never stores for the morrow; He never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment…. Our ignorance or negligence of the Divine Law, which gives to man from day to day his daily bread and no more, has given rise to inequities with all the miseries attendant upon them. (Gandhi 1996)

This message must be important because it's repeated in *Matthew* 6:25-34 where Jesus of Nazareth preaches about how the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are amply provisioned by God and it is only people who have no trust who are cumbered with anxiety for these things. Our life goals should be simple: seek God first and everything else will follow.

John Woolman, the 18th century tailor and Quaker preacher likewise observed:

> … I saw that a humble man with the blessing of the Lord might live on a little, and that where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving, but that in common with an increase in wealth the desire of wealth increased. … (Moulton 1989:35)

Second, simple living helps us focus attention on the material aspects of our lives where it belongs—on procuring *sufficient* of what is needed rather than as much as we can get. Consumer culture urges us to pursue affluence, the definition of which is "abundance of worldly possessions beyond need; wealth." But if we make the aim of our lives to acquire more than we need, it means that whatever that "more" is, is waste, since we don't need it and therefore can't possibly consume it to any benefit. It also means that

ego and of God), non-clinging (especially to our own desires, opinions and agendas) and trust in the Light are all features of simplicity. The challenges of this path include the risk of becoming spiritually passive if inner stillness becomes a mere bromide that conceals laziness or denial. On the other hand, we also run the risk of the temptation to over-commit to doing all good things for all good people. Our pathway to simplicity involves toddling toward congruence between these twin challenges.

Central to Prevallet's message is again Jesus's teaching that we cannot serve two masters. Our hearts are wherever our treasure is. Most of the time we try to serve multiple masters and our treasure is all over the place. Hence we are fragmented, living double lives. We suffer from duplicity. We seek security in outer things, thus identifying ourselves with them, at the same time as we know they are transient and perishable. We could choose instead to simply receive what we need as a gift, trust the source, and relax. But doing that requires choosing the right master and waiting with single minded attention upon the master's guidance. The trick, it would seem, to loosening the grip that possessions (both material and non-material) have on us is, again according to Jesus, to let them go—give them away (cf. *Matthew* 19: 16-22 — Parable of the Rich Young Man). Outer simplicity is essential, but not sufficient. We have to go all the way to the bottom of the rabbit hole and release all attachment of whatever kind which is not attachment to God.

Most profoundly, the process of becoming simple is letting go of the desire for the power to control our own lives. The means of becoming single-minded is a continuing process of confronting our own duplicity. The objects we seek to control, interior and exterior, are the masters we serve. Simplicity is the healing or resolution of our duplicity.

I think both Richard Foster and Elaine Prevallet help us appreciate that simplicity has a deep inner dimension as well as its more visible and material manifestations. We've all grown up and live day to day in a consumer culture the influence of which is subtle, prolonged, pervasive and deep. We're thoroughly enmeshed in it. This enmeshment is just as much spiritual and psychological as it is material and physical.

A dualistic perspective of simplicity that contrasts its inner aspects with its outer practice runs the risk of promoting one at the expense of the other,

all manner of conflicting feelings and motivations to which the ego tries to bring its management and executive functions. The source of all our difficulties, according to Prevallet, is within ourselves, not the world, even though the world is chaotic and complicated in its own right.

The alternative to this state of affairs is to become God-centred rather than ego-centred, as we seek to do during worship and as we develop a more worshipful approach to daily life. The cumber of our inner lives gets sorted out, clarified and integrated through a double movement in which we focus attention inwardly at the same time as we surrender control of this process to God's deep working. We don't simplify and integrate our fragmented inner world; God does this gradually, organically, and mostly unconsciously, provided we want it. So for Prevallet, simplicity isn't some condition of livelihood we achieve as an ego project simply by taking things to the Sally Anne's. Rather, it's a divine work that inwardly integrates the personality, a process occurring gradually over time and almost completely under Divine guidance and requiring from us our consent and cooperation. Little by little, we experience this process drawing our "centre" away from the ego and its concerns and over onto the divine presence and action within. Simplicity is thus something that is inner and processional; God grows us simple.

For Prevallet, our inner fragmentation largely results from our inability to say no. We become over-committed and inwardly fragmented in the process. But if we refer every claim being made on our time and attention to the Light, we can discern when to say yes and when to say no, according to our unique calling and how we stand in the Light. Not every good work is necessarily our calling. It is the presence or absence of an "inner rising" that answers to that of God that helps us discern when to act and when to refrain from acting. Our role, then, is to listen for decisions, not to make them.

To live this way, Prevallet says, presupposes some measure of inner quiet, a developed prayer life, the faith that God is present and will guide us, the capacity to act from a different centre than mere thought, and the capacity to submit decisions to the Light "on the fly" as we are living our daily round. Needless to say, these are all things that would be very challenging to nurture if we live a complicated materialistic lifestyle. But as Christians we're called to stand still and wait on God until way opens.

So for Prevallet, alignment of the inner and outer voices (the voice of the

whatever we possess that we don't need is in fact depriving someone else who could make good use of our surplus. As Basil of Caesarea observed in the 4th century:

> When someone steals a man's clothes we call him a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not?
>
> The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor. (Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, AD 365)

Third, while MasterCard® assures us that some things are priceless, but for everything else there's MasterCard®, most advertising aims to convince us that there is a material product or service to meet every human need, and even products that can serve as proxies for non-material needs. This, of course, is a lie; but it comes with some really good tunes.

Human beings must consume to live, so there will always be some cumber to deal with. My studies of simple living have taught me, however, that we have both material and non-material needs. The material things necessary for a good life are relatively easily provisioned. Since they are inherently scarce, special attention is required in using them to assure justice and ecological sustainability.

The non-material things needed for a good life can only be fully satisfied by non-material goods. They are inherently abundant and actually multiply through being shared. So if we share a candy bar—a material good—we have less left for ourselves. But if we share respect, or humour, or esteem or love with someone else, it grows in the process, without limit.

We get into difficulty when we listen to the siren song of consumer culture that conflates satisfying non-material needs with material goods. If we try to fulfill a need for love by eating, or a need for equanimity by drinking, or a need for novelty by continually travelling to other parts of the world, all these have generally destructive consequences for us, for others, and for the Earth. A way of life that is more in contact with reality requires distinguishing what is sufficient from what is extraneous, and also which needs can be met through material consumption and how much is necessary to do so, and which needs can only be met from non-material sources. To help with this, we are well advised to submit all decisions about acquiring things to the inner

Light—a kind of personal clearness exercise—and especially to remind ourselves that whatever we acquire can never really belong to us. It's on loan, a trust we've borrowed from others to use for a time and then return to them. As an old friend of mine once taught me, it's always best to return the tools you borrowed cleaner and sharper than when you borrowed them.

Finally, I think this idea of cumber, and its alternative, simple living, helps draw our attention to an important fact of life: how many material possessions we have and how we use them has consequences.

It has consequences, insofar as cumber can be a distraction from more important values such as cultivating our inner life.

What we consume also has consequences for the justice and equity manifested in our relationships with others, and the effects our decisions will have on future generations.

Our consumption decisions also have grave consequences for the environment and for other species. We must recognize that the material and energy flows moving through our household economies jeopardize all life on the planet. In addition, a pursuit of affluence and luxury that cannot be shared by all or sustained by the ecosphere jeopardizes peace and justice. I think a wonderful attitude toward our use of the material world is expressed by Wendell Berry when he says:

> We must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. (Berry 1981:281)

It would be unfortunate if we viewed the traditional concern that Friends had for cumber as quaint, or simple minded, or irrelevant to our contemporary challenges. The Quaker traditions of plain dress and plain speech, especially the peculiarities of speech in 18th century English, need not be a hollow form we resurrect today to serve identity politics. Such practices have relevance *in principle*, in that they speak to a commitment to communicate our values and our perspective of consumer culture to the world of others who don't yet attend our Meetings. Maybe we should all ask ourselves: if someone saw me walking down a street, what would tell them that I value a simple life, centred in the Light? Early Friends made their

Foster identifies a number of themes in scripture that elucidate and nuance the testimony to simplicity. We are radically dependent on God for everything. Our existence is entirely derived from God and therefore our attitude cannot be one of arrogant self-possession. All that we have we receive as gift and we are called to radical trust in providence. Simplicity also calls for radical obedience to God and giving God our supreme allegiance with special attention to sharing with the poor and needy. God can be trusted to provide abundantly both the spiritual and material goods we need. God's generosity to us models a generosity we now feel secure to extend to others. Thus simplicity also implies the practice of justice and compassion. Compassion and material support are extended to everyone whether they deserve it or not. Graciousness and common courtesy should permeate all relationships including business dealings; wages are paid at the end of the day; no interest is charged on loans; land, animals and people are not to be over-worked. The gift of simplicity is also a call to wholeness, for shalom, which embodies peace, balance, and well-being.

I'm not doing Richard Foster justice here as his discussion of these themes is richly studded with historical and biblical references. But I think the central feature of his perspective of simplicity is the radical inner centring of the heart on God—itself something that comes about as a divine grace and which in turn spins outward to change the shape of our lives, simplifying them without dumbing them down, and making them more plainly visible examples of God's presence and action in the world.

Another perspective on the inner meaning of simplicity comes from the Benedictine nun, Elaine Prevallet (1982). Prevallet agrees with Foster that simplicity is primarily an inner gift but how we conduct our outer affairs can dispose us to receive this gift and also manifest evidence of its presence in us. Simplicity quickly transmutes into other virtues such as poverty of spirit, humility, dependency, abandonment, single-mindedness, integrity, purity of heart.

For Prevallet, the central issue is where we find our centre—or where is our treasure? "Finding our centre" involves giving attention to what we think is most important. Normally, our centre is our ego. From the egoistic perspective our inner world is fragmented, chaotic, riven with insecurity and

other things, in simplicity. So the "testimony" to simplicity in this view is a consequence or outer sign of an inner transformation of values. We shouldn't take this as a purely material happening, but also allow that the word "simplicity" is shorthand for other associated virtues such as purity of intention, humility, gentleness, courage in the face of adversity, faithfulness and so on.

This perspective, we should note, is thoroughly biblical:

> … It is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a man unclean. (*Mark* 7: 21-23)

Biblically then, intentions arise from within, and our intentions can manifest in action. This is not to say that the outer circumstances of our lives, the company we keep, or the influences we're exposed to are of no importance. But there is certainly an interior aspect to the meaning of the testimony to simplicity

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I want to further explore this idea from two perspectives.

The first is from Richard Foster (1981) who speaks from the evangelical / fundamentalist sensibility within Quakerism. For Foster, simplicity is a grace from God, divinely implanted in us and appearing subtly as a sense of wonder, concentration and profundity. The gift of simplicity includes the ability and the will power to live it. Simplicity is also a discipline that involves doing things that help dispose us to receive this gift as well as desisting from doing things that would undermine it. This involves struggle as we try to shape the outer circumstances of our lives according to the inward vision that is slowly being revealed to us. The gift of simplicity affirms both the goodness of material things and also recognizes their limitations. We do not live by bread alone. Simplicity includes the ability to be "single-hearted" without becoming a simpleton. Our hearts are centred in Christ but also sensitive to the tough, complex issues of life. We experience focus without dogmatism, obedience without over-simplification, profundity without self-consciousness. We are aware of many issues but have only one issue at our core—that of holy obedience.

answer. What answer do we offer?

Finally, there can be a temptation to over-spiritualize simplicity, making it something too abstract, or wholly interior and subjective. This relegates simplicity to a nonmaterial realm where we can keep it safely out of sight without it making any actual claims on us to change how we live at the material level of things.

Another version of this is the idea that we must be changed inwardly *before* we can change outwardly, or that simplicity is a wholly spiritual gift that we may or may not receive depending on God's choice. But is there nothing we can do to demonstrate to God that we want this gift or that disposes us to receive it?

III — Simplicity Outside-In

I want to open out our conversation about cumber in a way that I hope will lay the ground work for a different way of thinking about the testimony to simplicity.

We humans are prone to think in terms of dualisms. This is also true of conversations about simplicity, including those among Friends. Specifically, I mean the conversation about whether simplicity is a matter of the outer, material circumstances of how we live, or whether simplicity results from some deeper, more inward spiritual or psychological change which later manifests in the lifestyle choices we make. Framing the topic this way starts from the very beginning by opposing things that needn't be in opposition, and it assumes that between them there must be a winner and loser in the discussion. I don't believe this to be true.

Simplicity is portrayed in popular culture, to which we are all exposed to some extent, as a rural subsistence lifestyle. Pop culture is obsessed with externals. Image is everything. Image is reality. Millennials can be induced to live simply only if they're sure they'll look good on television doing it. But concern with the external aspects of how we live goes deeper than this and has a longer history.

For centuries monastic orders across cultures have generally required renunciation of material possessions both as a sign of commitment to the spiritual path and also as an effective aid in walking it. Vows of evangelical poverty are nearly universal in Christian monastic orders, in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islamic sufism, and in some varieties of Taoism. Jesus of Nazareth himself made this observation specifically in the context of a discussion about money:

> No one can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or treat the first with respect and the second with scorn. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money." (*Matthew* 6:24)

Note how categorical Jesus is in this teaching. He doesn't say you *may* not serve both God and money, he says simply you *cannot*. Just a fact. While the testimony to simplicity obviously has an important inner aspect, the outer

IV — Simplicity, Inside-Out

So far, we have framed the testimony to simplicity in terms of an inner-outer dualism. We did this because that's how the subject is being framed both among Friends and others as well. We started with simplicity as manifested in the visible, physical, outer shape that our lifestyles take in our daily round. Now we will explore the other term of this dualism.

There is no shortage of voices telling us that simplicity is primarily, if not exclusively, an inner, spiritual affair.

Friend Richard Gregg observed:

> …the way to master the increasing complexity of life is not through more complexity. The way is to turn inward to that which unifies all—not the intellect but the spirit, and then to devise and put into operation new forms and modes of economic and social life that will truly and vigorously express that spirit. As an aid to that and as a corrective to our feverish over-mechanization, simplicity is not outmoded but greatly needed. (Gregg 1936)

Attending to the subjective aspect of simplicity is important, both because it is the source of our outward actions in the world, and because it has intrinsic value all its own. An inner change of some sort is often proposed as prerequisite to taking up and sustaining the outward practice of simple living.

Robert Barclay wrote that the whole purpose of religion is to liberate people from both the "worldly spirit" and the vain pursuits it motivates. Today we would recognize the worldly spirit thriving in all the advertising that promotes consumer culture. Therefore, Barclay counsels, sincere spiritual seekers should reject empty habits and vain pursuits. Timothy Burdick, a Friend writing in 2007, takes Barclay to mean that an inner, supernatural change must occur first, before we are empowered to abandon vain pursuits. Until we receive that divine gift, we remain in the grip of our addictions.

For William Penn, evil begins from within, not without, and a life of excess was evidence of a life not yet transformed by Christ. The exit from a life of excess was to come to the saving knowledge of religion and a personal experience of the divine work of God in the soul. For Penn, the inner evolution of the person under the power of grace manifests outwardly, among

not a commandment of God that we be affluent or that we over-work ourselves and others. This frees us to pursue more precious things than piling up more pillows, having larger and warmer bubbling spas, or that vacation house we live in for two weeks a year and the rest of the time sits empty while the homeless shiver and die in the streets. We can be the change we hope to see in the world. And we can, by our own efforts, set out to fashion a way of life the outer form of which reflects what we aspire to inwardly. One very clear expression of this comes to us from Friend Mildred Binns-Young:

> My thesis is that some of the means for freeing our lives lie in drastic limiting of material possessions and processes, in a discipline which paradoxically has its reward in extension of our strength and insight to use them to the full. But we cannot grasp these means for freeing our lives until the necessity is made plain in our hearts and we want it completely.
>
> When the necessity becomes plain, when the longing to set ourselves free is past denying, we begin to open into a realization of personal responsibility, of the oneness of human life, or what has been called unlimited liability. We feel the obligation and the privilege to live as if we each had many lives to live and could afford to hold loosely our little footholds in this one. This opening out is the great release...
>
> Now, frankly, most of us have our hands so full of baubles that we haven't even a finger free with which to reach out and satisfy the claim of *unlimited liability*. Poverty, or some approximation to it, willingly assumed, would set us free both for finding our responsibility and for fulfilling it when found. That is why I have called it *functional* poverty. It is to be embraced not as an ideal of beauty, our Lady Poverty of the Middle Ages, though it may wear her features. It is to be embraced not as a penance for the benefit we have long had from a society that starves our brothers, though it may be partly that. It is to be taken up not as a shirking of the responsibility of wealth or privilege, but as acceptance of wider responsibility. It is to be taken up as a way to freedom, and as a practical method for finding the time and strength to answer one's deepest need to be serviceable for a new world. (Young 1938:5ff)

aspect also matters. This is the one we sometimes want to avoid because it makes visible claims on us. Recall again Jesus's "lilies of the field" speech from the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew*—literally the core of Christian teaching. I can scarcely count the number of times I've heard this scripture preached, but always with the opening caveat, "Now, friends, we shouldn't think that Jesus meant us to take this literally." And from there various homilists spiritualize the message in various ways so the congregation can later go out and get in their SUVs and drive home to their five thousand square foot houses and swimming pools and not really have to make a personal response to what they just heard.

Our outward living of the testimony to simplicity matters because we cannot preserve the Earth or make peace with others simply by thinking about it. Flows of matter and energy through our household economies matter because they affect the ecosphere. Some of us probably have household budgets that closely track the money we spend. But how many of us, I wonder, track the kilowatt hours we use, or the kilograms of trash we send to landfill, or the litres water we consume?

The material pattern we give to our lives also creates the context within which an expansion of sacred consciousness, such as that we cultivate during worship, is either focused or scattered. This in turn has effects on our spiritual and personal well-being. Speaking of the role played by outer simplicity in spiritual work, Rabbi David Cooper observes:

> … Keep [your spiritual practice] as simple as possible—clean, light, uncomplicated, spacious, empty—and use this pristine external form as a vehicle for and reflection of what we want for our inner being. (Cooper 1992:106)

Some, including the very influential Quaker writer Richard Foster, assert that simplicity is first and foremost a supernatural gift which comes from God, at the pleasure of God. I wouldn't disagree with this other than to say that it gives somewhat short shrift to the choices we can make in our outer lives that signal our openness to receive such a gift inwardly, and our desire for it. If we really believe that God wants everything good for all of us, that God has no favourites, and that simplicity is good, then God must desire that we all receive the gift of simplicity. We begin to signal our desire for what God desires by configuring our lives according to our understanding of God's

desire for us, no matter how halting or imperfect our efforts might be, and of course with a continuous openness to divine guidance. Isn't this the very meaning of testimony? Human intention matters, and so do our actions. So there is nothing secondary or superfluous about our efforts to fashion an outwardly simple life, even on our own strength, as a sign of what we are desiring to receive inwardly.

But important here is not just the "sign value" of how we visibly live out the testimony to simplicity, or its role in helping us to develop inwardly our consciousness of the Light, but also its real world effects.

Please consider:

- If we profess to care about what is happening to the Earth, then reducing our material consumption leaves resources in the ground, avoids pollution by never creating it in the first place, and reduces waste by replacing the value of affluence with that of sufficiency.

- If we profess to care about the health of our families and communities, then living simply frees up time we would have spent working to amass more material possessions and apply it instead to nurture relationships among family and neighbours. It also frees up energy for us to exercise meaningful citizenship in our communities and not limit this involvement just to voting every five years.

- If we profess to care about eliminating the causes of all wars, then we need to live so simply that we create no envy in others, that we take only that share of resources sufficient for our own livelihood and leave aside the share that would feed luxury, self-indulgence and public display.

- If we profess to care about human rights and equity, we need to realize that many human rights imply entitlements to some fair share of the Earth's resources and energy to provide a minimally dignified existence for everyone. If we live simply, then we make a real contribution to the goal of preserving and enhancing human rights by preserving the material and ecological basis for those rights.

- If we say we care about alleviating poverty, living simply is an immediate, concrete way that we can contribute to a world in which people

everywhere can produce goods to meet their own needs and hence alleviate their own poverty. I think this beats coercing them into the grip of a global economy that forces them to produce luxury goods for the global consumer class while forcing them to lay aside their own local knowledge and skills for self-reliance.

Finally, all of these steps consist of a single step—our individual decisions to live simply and modestly and to devote our emotional, personal and spiritual resources to the service of others. It takes no great global campaigns or demonstrations or letter writing exercises to governments or corporations to achieve this. We don't have to strike a single new committee or form any new coalitions that require travelling around to all sorts of meetings issuing solemn pronouncements. We don't have to wait for a structural change in the global economy that requires sudden enlightenment among the global economic and military elites. Living simply is the structural change capable of bringing about what we desire for ourselves and those we cherish.

Among early Friends, I think plain dress, plain speech, and a humble lifestyle were their first attempts to deal with cumber that distracts from the spiritual life, but also to make a positive statement about what way of living might contribute to peace, justice, and the divine intention that we all be well. Today we can recognize a strongly positive contribution to environmental sustainability in such practices, even though early Friends were almost certainly not aware of this as a concern at the time.

But these early commitments to plain living were gradually eroded under pressure from the burgeoning affluence of the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and by the 20th century, the psychological totalitarianism of consumer culture. For Friends, the power of the testimony to simplicity became increasingly internalized and dematerialized during the Quietist period of the 19th century. Today we scarcely know what to make of it other than dismissing it as a quaint historical throw-back. This is a tragedy of the first order. Friends keep treasures the world desperately needs right now. The most precious of our treasures is the practice we cultivate during worship of bringing all the affairs of our lives before the inner witness of the Light. But another treasure is the lived experience of Friends that a good life can be had from a very modest investment of time, labour, and material resources. It is