Plain living: The search for simplicity

by Trudy Bush in the June 30, 1999 issue

The Joneses are surrendering!" a TV news reporter proclaims. "The family with whom we've tried to keep up is throwing in the towel!" The camera pans to four desperate looking people standing in front of a large house. "We've had it," the wife says. "We're exhausted. We never see each other. And we have so much debt that we can't keep up anymore. It's just not worth it."

So begins *Beyond Affluenza*, a recent public television special made in Seattle. The one-hour program and its prequel, *Affluenza*, document the current expression of an ideal that recurs throughout American history—simplicity. The Puritans and Quakers emigrated here to live out an austere and simple ethic. The founding fathers believed that civic virtue is accompanied by material restraint. In the 1840s, Henry Thoreau sought to live deliberately at Walden Pond, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott experimented in simple rural living. That experiment was repeated in the back-to-nature communes of the 1960s and '70s, which were inspired in part by people like Scott and Helen Nearing who had pioneered the simple life of rural homesteading decades earlier.

Many people today are again willing to trade relentless consumption for a more intellectually and spiritually rich life. For most of these people, the pursuit of simplicity means gaining control of their money and their time so that both can be used more intentionally. By downsizing their expectations of material affluence, people are able to discover and invest in what really matters to them, whether that is family, relationships, community involvement, environmental responsibility or a new, more satisfying kind of work.

Who is pursuing the simple life? Among those trying to live more deliberately is a young man who leaves a lucrative position at Microsoft in order to do what he has always wanted—be an actor and help others by volunteering, especially as a Big Brother. A family opts to live on less money after the husband refuses to accept a job transfer that would have him designing weapons and the wife decides she wants to stay at home with their children; to act on these values, the family renovates an

old house, relies on bicycles instead of a car, and grows some of its own food. A 50-year-old corporate attorney retires from his practice in order to run an environmental organization; he and his wife recycle and compost so effectively that they fill only one garbage can a month. And a couple who keeps a large home in the suburbs decides to rent out part of it to graduate students from other countries. The rental income frees them to devote fewer hours to paid employment, and they are enriched by their friendship with their tenants.

The idea of living more simply has spawned hundreds of books, videos and seminars. While some of the recent books can be classified with pseudotherapeutic self-help literature, many are both useful and philosophically serious.

What is making this ideal so appealing to people in a time of such conspicuous affluence? The search for a simpler life is usually a response to a crisis like war or economic depression, according to historian David Shi, author of *The Simple Life*. But Shi thinks there is a "psychological malaise" at work in our culture. "We've never before had such high levels of anxiety and depression among affluent people. Though people are materially well off, they're discovering that their lives seem hollow and meaningless. They're searching for meaning and, in many cases, they're also looking for alternatives to the frenetic pace of their lives."

Shi, president of Furman University, points out that during the '90s the work week actually increased for the first time in more than a century. "Even our leisure time has become scheduled, has lost its spontaneity. And among all the hoopla about our prosperity is the disturbing fact that the three most commonly prescribed drugs are an ulcer medication, an antidepressant and a pain reliever. Underneath the surface of success and material splendor, many Americans are struggling to cope."

If the voluntary simplicity movement has a geographical center, it is the Pacific Northwest, particularly Seattle. That's the home of three of the most dedicated practitioners and eloquent advocates of the simple life—Vicki Robin, Cecile Andrews and Janet Luhrs. Seattle is also the home of Earth Ministry, "a Christian, ecumenical, environmental, nonprofit organization" which has just published *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*, an anthology of essays and a curriculum intended to be used by churches. The people in Seattle are, Shi says, developing an infrastructure that the simplicity movement has seldom had.

On the day I visited Robin at her home near the university, the scene was bustling with people who were carrying around furniture and setting up a picnic table in the garden. "A team is here working on something called the 'ecological footprint,'" Robin explained. The ecological footprint is a concept developed by Mathis Wackernagel of the University of British Columbia to measure humans' impact on the environment. "He worked out a way to translate objects into the number of acres it would take to produce the material for them," Robin said. "This morning the team weighed the futon on which you're sitting to see how many pounds of cotton it contains. They're now working on a bedroom, and they'll do the kitchen next."

By translating everything into acres, Wackernagel (who, with William Rees, published *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* in 1995) has measured the ecological footprints of people in different countries. The average American has a more than ten-square-acre footprint, while the global average is under three. "If you divide all the arable land on the planet by the world's population, you find that we're already overpopulated and overconsuming. We're going into debt globally," Robin says.

The ecological footprint project meshes nicely with Robin's own work—to provide a method for mastering personal finances, as the first step in finding new road maps for living. With the late Joe Dominguez, she coauthored *Your Money or Your Life*, one of the bibles of the voluntary simplicity movement. Still selling briskly, the book (first published in 1992) spent more than a year on *Business Week*'s best-seller list. It details nine rigorous steps for gaining financial independence.

Robin, a thoughtful, reserved woman in her 50s, lives frugally, co-owning her house with three other women, driving a well-maintained old car, and buying many of her clothes in thrift stores. She plows the income from her book into the charitable foundation she established with Dominguez. The New Road Map Foundation, staffed by volunteers, provides grants to other nonprofit organizations.

"One of my favorites is the Northwest Earth Institute," Robin says. "It was created by a man who had been a partner in a major law firm in Portland, Oregon. He and his wife were concerned about environmental degradation and set out to teach people the basic principles of living in a way that cares for the earth. They and their small staff developed four courses that people take at their workplace during their lunch hours. More than 250 businesses have offered these study groups in ecology and voluntary simplicity."

When I asked her if environmental concerns were the main impetus for her work, she said, "That's a very strong motivator for me—that we're taking God's creation and treating it as though it were ours to use up. But I've always had many layers of passion motivating my decision to live more simply. To me, this movement is spiritual, ecological, social and cultural. Though many of the people I know are deeply engaged in a spiritual quest of one kind or another, it's getting less and less fashionable for Americans to frame their lives around their values and beliefs.

"We need to be more deeply rooted in our values, and more devoted to loving and caring for one another. We need to live in a way that fosters community and that doesn't destroy other cultures. We're losing cultures—that whole web of intelligence that tells us how to survive and live well in a particular environment. It's not just the environmental wall that we'll soon hit; there are many walls. We're relinquishing species after species, habitat after habitat, social structure after social structure. We have no idea how essential the things we're destroying may be to our own well-being."

These crises give the present interest in simplicity a new urgency, Robin believes. She cites studies that indicate a large cohort of Americans hold values inconsistent with those of the dominant culture, even though many of them are still living as part of that culture. She wonders if the voluntary simplicity movement is like "a change in the geography of the ocean floor that's creating a swell on the surface but won't impact the shore. Or are we seeing such an intense and rapid shift in people's thinking that, like a huge wave hitting the shore, it will really bring about changes?"

Robin wonders if there might be some way to speed up the process, to increase people's awareness of their feelings of discomfort and dissonance so that they become willing to endorse social policies—consumption and energy taxes, for instance—that will change the direction of our culture. Given what we're up against, she asks, "Can we afford to be evolutionary, or do we need to be revolutionary? What form would such a revolution take? And how big is the constituency that would back major changes in our public policies? How much of their lives are people willing to put on the line for their ideals?" She has no answers for these questions, but, she says, "I keep my nose pressed against them."

Cecile Andrews, author of the widely used book *The Circle of Simplicity*, radiates energy and enthusiasm for her ideas and for her region. "People really care about the environment here. The Pacific Northwest is a kind of frontier. Lots of people

move here seeking a better life."

As the home of Microsoft, Seattle also is full of people familiar with high-tech industry and the hi-tech lifestyle. But, says Andrews, "People still remember when their lives were more relaxed. Simplicity is kind of a double response—both to the environmental crisis and to the feeling that life has become chaotic and out of control. We're all working so hard that we've almost lost the ability to enjoy ourselves. The high point of people's lives seems to be crossing something off of their to-do list. That's as good as it gets!"

For Andrews, the simple life is the examined life. In its present manifestation, voluntary simplicity is a middle-class movement of well-educated people "who like to think and read, who look thoughtfully at every aspect of their lives and consider the consequences of their decisions." It doesn't necessarily entail a log cabin or pinched frugality. "I hate people to think of simplicity as only frugality," Andrews said. "Rather than frugality, I prefer the term 'morally responsible consumerism.' Paring back is part of simplicity, but an even bigger part is dealing with the inner emptiness that makes people so obsessed with consumerism—the lack of spiritual concerns, of community, of a sense of meaning. Simplicity means being inwardly rich, being joyful, and feeling a sense of connectedness."

Like Robin, Andrews believes that our economy has become so environmentally destructive that we will eventually be forced to change our way of life. But she doesn't see that change coming soon. Though voluntary simplicity is growing, so is consumerism. At this point, the movement is still about individual, not social, change. But eventually the individual movement will affect corporate structures and public policy. Simplicity, she says, is a Trojan horse. "We look so benign that nobody's afraid of us. Then we pop out and change society."

Andrews's favored tool for helping people to examine their lives and to resist consumer culture is the study circle. A former community college administrator, she wants to find a noncompetitive way to bring people together and help them think for themselves. "Simplicity circles are built around people's personal stories," she explained. These small groups usually meet in people's homes once a week for a ten-week period, discussing such topics as how to change consumption habits, build community and transform work.

"During the session on community, we begin by talking about times during our lives when each of us has experienced community. There's no leader—we just go around the circle, and people tell wonderful stories. After we've examined what's happened in our own lives, we go on to critique society. The third step is to brainstorm ways in which we can take action. We plan small, specific things each of us will do that week. If people focus only on what they can do to change the larger society, they begin to feel helpless. But each of us can do something in our own neighborhood, our own community. The following week we report back and compare our experiences. I wanted these study circles to be something people could do without needing training, without relying on experts, without paying any dues. It's something a group can do on its own." Simplicity circles are now meeting throughout the English-speaking world, she said.

Janet Luhrs is a single mother raising an 11-year-old son and a 13-year-old daughter. She said her parents taught her to live below her means and to choose her work according to what she loved to do. Luhrs spent her 20s living frugally so that she could devote herself to writing.

"Then, when I was 30, I thought I was missing out on something, and I went to law school. That's when my life became complicated. I graduated, got my first credit cards and bought expensive, corporate kinds of clothes. We had our first child and decided we would hire a nanny to raise her, while I went out to work as a lawyer. But that lasted only a few weeks, before I asked myself, 'Why am I doing this?' I fired the nanny, stayed home and had another child."

Luhrs's concerns became focused when she took a class on simplicity taught by Andrews. "It was like finding home," she says. Seven years ago she began publishing a quarterly newsletter, *Simple Living: The Journal of Voluntary Simplicity*. "I really started it to teach myself," she explains. "I had known how to live simply as a single woman in my 20s. But I didn't know how to do it, with kids and a mortgage and credit cards."

Four years later, Bantam Doubleday Dell asked her to do a book on simplicity. *The Simple Living Guide: A Sourcebook for Less Stressful, More Joyful Living* (1997) is an encyclopedia of information about everything from the pleasures of simple dating and romance to creative real-estate financing.

Luhrs sees herself as the practical generalist of the simplicity movement, the person who tells people how to do it. All three women think of their work as interrelated and complementary. "Vicki began by focusing more on people's concerns about money, while I was interested in time," Andrews noted. "Janet attracted a lot of people who were fascinated with the ingenuity part—50 ways to have a good time without spending money, or isn't it fun to plant your own garden and cook your own food. My group is probably more the cafe society, who like to talk about the philosophical aspects and the policy implications."

All three bear out Shi's assertion that "the people who have succeeded in maintaining a commitment to simplicity over time are disproportionately people with a powerful spiritual foundation—that is, some sort of transcendent element in their outlook that gives them the fortitude and the tenacity to maintain this mode of living in the face of all of the conflicting tendencies and temptations around us." Robin talks a great deal about God and about the relationship between simpler living and spiritual development. Evy McDonald, who runs the New Road Map Foundation with Robin, has written a "Group Study Guide for Contemporary Christians" to be used with *Your Money or Your Life*. The curriculum has been tested by church groups in a variety of denominations. McDonald is now studying to become a United Methodist pastor. Indeed, Robin and McDonald's work reminds one of the dictum that summarizes John Wesley's economic advice: "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can."

Andrews has been a Quaker and is now a Unitarian. She was raised as a Methodist. "My church taught me both to think things through and to be concerned with social justice," she said. "I see simplicity as a core social-justice issue. People worry about how our way of life, our consumption patterns, are affecting people around the world. They're taking seriously that quote from Gandhi, 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'"

"For years now I've gone back and forth between the Quakers and the Unitarians," Andrews said. "I love the Quaker philosophy, and the silence. But Quakers are quiet people, and I'm not. Unitarians are loud and talkative, like I am. My church voted that morally responsible consumerism should be the main issue Unitarians study and discuss this year. Because they provide both spiritual nurture and community, churches are going to have a central role in the simplicity movement—and the movement may help to revitalize the church."

Luhrs was raised as a Catholic but doesn't belong to a church. "I'm still probably a Catholic at heart," she said. "But I've opened up to a much more eclectic spirituality. I've done a lot of meditation and exploring of different kinds of spiritual traditions. I consider simplicity as a spiritual way of life—if you stop working around the clock or worrying about being in debt or shopping compulsively, then you have time to try to be a better person rather than just an accumulator. Spending time cultivating your virtues rather than your closet is a wonderful way to live."

Robin, Andrews and Luhrs each have projects under way that build on their previous work. Robin is gathering material for a book about how people define and use the freedom that *Your Money or Your Life* is designed to help them find. "Though the book is extremely effective, taking all nine of the steps it advocates is quite challenging because we tend to be uneasy with that degree of freedom. People wonder, 'What will I do with myself if my teacher, my boss, my society aren't telling me what to do? How do I give of myself? What is myself?' We've handed people a solution, but we're also handing them another problem. I've been interviewing people from all kinds of backgrounds and cultures. The variability in the way people define freedom is fascinating. God gave us free will. It's what distinguishes us from other creatures. So not to know how to use our freedom well is misusing our greatest gift."

Andrews is addressing the social-justice implications of simplicity. "I'm trying to figure out how we can talk about this with poor people," she said. "I would never use the word 'simplicity' with people who are struggling to meet their basic needs. Our emphasis on consumption, and the growing gap between the rich and poor, presents a self-esteem issue for poor people and a threat to our democracy. The expense of political campaigns gives the poor less and less of a voice in government and society. A lot of us grew up in families that wouldn't seem at all affluent now. But people felt OK about themselves. Now poor people are learning to judge themselves as losers. They see luxuries on TV and think, 'I should have that. I'd be happy if I had that.' But very few will ever have those luxuries.

"I'm trying out a new idea for how I can talk about values with poor people without coming across as Lady Bountiful. I'm working with a newspaper for the homeless on movie reviews from a poor person's perspective. It's also a way of educating the middle class about the viewpoints of the poor, since middle-class folks buy these newspapers and like to read reviews. And I'm facilitating a writing project for poor people."

Luhrs is working on a book on the effect of simple living on intimate relationships. "I find that the people interested in simplicity live together more consciously, with more awareness," she said. "They really put a lot of time, effort and thought into their relationships. Simple living means a lot of different things for them. Some think of it as a sort of inner simplicity that consists of being more honest about who they are. For some, it's simplifying their outer lives so they're not spending their time fighting about money or worrying about debt. Working together on these lifestyle issues makes people feel closer to each other."

It is significant that these three leaders of the simplicity movement are women, and that women are disproportionately represented throughout the current movement. In holding full time jobs and fighting their way up the corporate ladder while raising children and trying to maintain homes and families, women have perhaps been more conscious of the frenetic demands of life and more inclined to change priorities. (In the past, men like Alcott and Emerson were the public spokesmen for the simplicity ideal, but of course women did much of the work that made simple living possible.)

Though Shi contends that simplicity movements go through cycles and rarely manage to build a longlasting structure, Robin, Andrews and Luhrs think that the movement has become so mainstream that it won't go away. Their own opportunities to speak are increasing, and they see their audiences growing. The call for a simpler and more intentional, sustainable and meaningful way of life continues to find a deep resonance.