



P E R I L A N D P R O M I S E

Duane Elgin On Simplicity And Humanity's Future

an interview by ARNIE COOPER

"Simplify, simplify." When Henry David Thoreau made this plea 150 years ago, he was reacting to the increasing complexity of life around him. Today we find ourselves in a far more complex world, one in which increasing numbers of us are beginning to see the wisdom in Thoreau's appeal. Duane Elgin helped define this trend back in 1981 with his first book, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich (Morrow)*. In that now-classic text, updated and reprinted in 1993, Elgin encouraged us not just to cut back on consumption and ease our busy schedules, but to live a life with purpose, in which every action is the result of a conscious choice.

Since bringing voluntary simplicity to the attention of the larger culture, Elgin has focused on how humanity can survive on a planet whose natural resources are stretched to their limits. The ultimate

test, he believes, will be in how we respond to the challenges of the coming years, when he predicts that environmental problems will reach a breaking point. His latest book, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future (Morrow)*, paints a chilling picture of the cultural and ecological dangers we will face, yet offers an optimistic view of the possibility for humankind's survival and evolution into a more mature species.

Elgin was born near a small town in Idaho in 1943 and worked on the family farm until he was twenty-three. Growing up in a small farming community, he witnessed a strategy for living that relied on a mixture of independence and mutual support. In college he took pre-med courses, but the social turmoil of the sixties led him to drop out of school and eventually move to Paris to attend the Sorbonne. While in France, Elgin met Jesuit priest

Photo: Peggy Sue Amison

Daniel Berrigan, who was a seminal influence on his thinking. “Many an evening,” Elgin says, “Father Berrigan would slip a scarf around his clerical collar, and we’d sit at a local bistro, drinking a glass or two of cheap wine and talking about politics, justice, and love.” Berrigan would later become internationally recognized for his nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam War and the nuclear-arms race.

After returning to the States, Elgin completed his education with an MBA from the Wharton School and an MA in economic history. His first job out of graduate school was on a presidential commission exploring population growth and its impact over the next thirty years. It was his introduction to “futures research.”

In 1972, Elgin became a senior social scientist at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) in California. His first major project was coauthoring a book titled *Changing Images of Man* with Joseph Campbell and others. At the same time, Elgin began an intensive practice in Buddhist meditation.

At SRI, Elgin investigated the long-range future for government agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency. He saw enormous problems on the horizon, not just for the U.S., but for the whole planet. Yet as his understanding of the world grew, so too did his disillusionment with the political establishment; the reports he wrote did little more than gather dust. He left SRI in 1977 to spend six months in a self-directed meditation retreat. An awakening experience at the conclusion of this retreat led directly to his book on simplicity, and later to his 1993 book *Awakening Earth (Morrow)*, a sweeping study of the evolution of human culture and consciousness. In it, Elgin proposes that human civilization is approaching a moment of awakening similar to that experienced by some individuals (www.awakeningearth.com).

Because he believes that the process of “civilizational awakening” will involve the mass media, Elgin has cofounded a national campaign for media accountability (www.ourmediavoice.com). He lives and works with his partner, Coleen LeDrew, in a comfortable and, yes, simple two-bedroom apartment in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. Though divorced, Elgin remains close to his former spouse and three sons. In person, he is soft-spoken and displays a serenity one would not expect from someone so in tune with the impending crises facing the planet.

Cooper: How has your upbringing influenced the work you’ve done on simplicity and human evolution?

Elgin: Because I grew up on a farm in Idaho with very few distractions, it became clear to me early on that the universe is alive. I could see it and feel it around me. That sensibility has guided my life, including my work on simplicity. Simplicity is central to engaging the aliveness of the universe, because it helps to clear away the distractions that separate us from direct connection with life.

Growing up on the land also gave me a clearer sense of humanity’s place in the universe: I saw that people were small creatures compared to the vastness of the sky and the land. I was constantly reminded of our vulnerability to nature’s forces — wind, rain, frost, insects.

Of necessity, people in our farming community were

self-reliant and had to be their own plumbers, carpenters, accountants, weather forecasters, mechanics, and so on. At the same time, I saw constant support among neighbors — for example, exchanging different food crops: several bushels of apples one week for corn or potatoes the next. I grew up in a community of self-reliant individuals who were continually pulling together for the well-being of all.



DUANE ELGIN

My experience of farming changed as my father became more successful. He began with a small farm and a few horses, which left plenty of free time during the winter months for the woodworking he loved. He built everything from furniture to boats. Over the years, he acquired additional farms, tractors, a crew of laborers, and more. When he finally retired, he was busy year-round overseeing the operation and maintenance of a half dozen farms. There was no time left for woodworking. He was no longer living in the cyclical world of the seasons, but in the linear world of industrialization and material progress.

Cooper: You’re probably best known for your book on voluntary simplicity. What were the origins of that book?

Elgin: The idea of voluntary simplicity came from my mentor on the subject, Richard Gregg. He was a student of Gandhi’s and wrote about voluntary simplicity in 1936, describing it as “a partial restraint in some direction in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions.” In other words, once we know what our life’s purpose is, then we can organize our material circumstances to support it. Simplicity begins inside ourselves as we decide what really matters to each of us. *Voluntary* simplicity means choosing our path through life consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. It’s not so much about living with less as it is about living with purpose and balance.

Cooper: Yet many people equate “simplicity” with a frugal lifestyle.

Elgin: Perhaps the biggest misconception about voluntary simplicity is that it’s about frugal living and nothing more. The

media portray it as a life of material sacrifice, which makes it easy to caricature and dismiss as irrelevant to mainstream Americans. This portrayal also misses much of the joy and purpose of simple living. The simple life becomes equated with a plain and dull life, when it's anything but dull. A long daily commute to a job that has little meaning: that's dull. The simple life is about freeing up time for what matters most to us.

Another misconception is that simplicity is about moving back to the land. Simpler living is certainly about getting back in touch with nature, but rather than moving to the country, most people who choose a simple life are trying to make the most of where they are — planting urban gardens or working to restore polluted and damaged suburban ecologies. Thoreau's cabin by Walden Pond is the classic example of simple living, but few people realize that Thoreau was no isolated hermit. His famous cabin was roughly a mile from the town of Concord, and every day or two he would walk into town. In fact, his cabin was so close to a nearby highway that he could smell the pipe smoke of passing travelers. He

If the universe is dead at its foundations, then it is rational to turn to material pleasures to protect us from life's pains. On the other hand, if the universe is a living system, then it makes sense to get rid of undue complexity, live more simply.

also had more visitors while living in the woods than at any other period of his life.

People who choose simpler ways of living are often incorrectly portrayed as being opposed to technology. In truth, these are some of the most tech-savvy people I've run across. Whether it's the Internet or solar power or new gardening tools, they are supportive of any technologies appropriate to sustaining a simpler way of life.

Cooper: The simplicity movement has grown quite a bit since your book first came out in 1981.

Elgin: Back then, simple living was hardly a blip on the cultural radar screen. Now glossy magazines tout the simple life from the newsstands, and it's become a popular theme on television talk shows. Most people attracted to the simple life are not looking for a life of sacrifice; rather, they are seeking deeper sources of satisfaction than are offered by our high-

stress consumer society. Surveys show a distinct subpopulation — conservatively estimated at 10 percent of the U.S. adult population, or 20 million people — is pioneering a way of life that is outwardly more sustainable and inwardly more spiritual.

While U.S. incomes have gone up in the past thirty years, the percentage of people reporting that they are “very happy” has remained unchanged. Meanwhile, divorce rates have doubled, and teen-suicide rates have tripled. A whole generation has tasted the fruits of an affluent society and discovered that money does not buy happiness. In the search for true satisfaction, millions of people are not only “downshifting,” or pulling back from the rat race, but also “upshifting,” or moving ahead into a life that, though materially more modest, is rich with family, friends, community, creative work, and connection with the universe.

Besides being drawn to what the simple life offers, many people adopt it to help counter such powerful negative trends as global climate change, the rapid extinction of species, the depletion of key resources, a burgeoning population, and a growing gap between the rich and the poor. These trends are converging into a whole-systems crisis, creating the possibility of a crash within a generation if we do not find new ways of living.

Cooper: Doesn't rejecting affluence mean performing more time-consuming tasks ourselves: cooking, cleaning, home repairs? What if these are not the things that really matter to us?

Elgin: Simplicity doesn't mean eliminating the basic tasks of living, but it does mean taking charge of a life that is too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. Simplicity means cutting back on trivial distractions, both material and non-material, and focusing on the essentials — whatever those may be for each of us. As Thoreau said, “Our life is frittered away by detail.” Or, as Plato wrote, “In order to seek one's own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life.”

Cooper: You mentioned “nonmaterial” distractions. Does that include involvement with other people? How do relationships and community fit into a simple life?

Elgin: Relationships and community are at the heart of a simple life. For many, happiness is not measured in dollars earned but in the rewards of authentic relationships. Not surprisingly, many who choose a simpler life tend to prefer smaller-scale living and working environments that foster face-to-face contact and mutual caring. They also tend to participate in new forms of community, such as cohousing.

Cooper: What does the ideal simple life look like?

Elgin: Because simplicity has as much to do with each person's unique purpose in life as it does with their standard of living, it follows that there is no single, “right” way to live more simply. Different people in different life circumstances find varying paths to integrity and wholeness. Richard Gregg wrote, “Simplicity is a relative matter depending on climate, customs, culture, and the character of the individual.” Thoreau said: “I would not have anyone adopt my mode of

living on my account. . . . I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way.”

Cooper: You’ve obviously read a lot of Thoreau. Are there any other writers who’ve been an influence on you?

Elgin: This is where the simple life breaks down for me — books. [Laughter.] I can’t get enough. I have been a voracious reader throughout my life, consuming anthropology, metaphysics, history, physics, economics, philosophy, and spirituality. Existentialist writers were important early in my awakening, as were Zen Buddhists and Quakers.

Cooper: How important is spirituality to the simple life?

Elgin: I view the simplicity movement as more than just a lifestyle change. It’s not just about moderating our consumption, recycling, and eating lower on the food chain. It’s about integrating our inner and outer worlds. Simplicity lies at the intersection of spirituality and sustainability. If you put spirituality, or the inner life, together with sustainability, or the outer life of maintaining things, what you come up with is the simple life.

For the first time in human history, thanks to various information technologies, all the world’s great religions are available for our inspection and practice. We are discovering the deep, common truths at the core of all spiritual traditions: the golden rule, the power of compassion, the importance of looking beyond materialism. One essential truth is to use this world as a place for learning, not as a place for distraction. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t enjoy ourselves, but rather that the universe has put us here for higher purposes than watching television reruns.

We also have an opportunity to bring the different aspects of East and West together. Eastern spirituality says this world is a place of suffering, so let’s get off the wheel of worldly existence. Contemporary Western culture says this is a place to seek gratification, so let’s dive into worldly existence. If we honor both realms, the result is a paradigm of learning. Together, East and West form a mind-set that goes far beyond either one in isolation — creating a new paradigm that values the coevolution of culture and consciousness.

Cooper: I have the feeling that the West is getting the better side of that bargain. Look at Japan, for example, where the younger generation seems more interested in collecting vintage American sneakers than in any spiritual vision.

Elgin: Well, it’s a good idea for them to buy used sneakers. [Laughter.] But I am not at all suggesting that the East adopt a materialistic lifestyle. I am suggesting that putting the two wisdom traditions together gives us more of a systems view of the universe as a living and learning system. In systems terms, we’re coming to “self-referencing awareness” as a human family. In Eastern terms, we’re at the point of “awakening,” a preliminary form of enlightenment. We are awakening to the reality that we are nested within larger living systems, including the earth and the universe as a whole.

One of the great virtues of the West is that we have looked deeply into material reality, and what we have discovered there is truly extraordinary. As Niels Bohr, one of the found-

ers of quantum physics, said, “Anyone who is not shocked by quantum physics does not understand it.” The universe is again being considered as Plato once described it: “A single living creature that embraces all living creatures within it.” At the frontiers of science, we are rediscovering the universe as a living system, and this is changing our relationship with the universe, with the earth, and with one another.

Consumerism makes sense only in a dead universe. If the universe is dead at its foundations, then it is rational to turn to material pleasures to protect us from life’s pains. On the other hand, if the universe is a living system, then it makes sense to get rid of undue complexity, live more simply, and focus on coming into a conscious relationship with the world around us.

Cooper: What do you think about the self-help movement’s version of simplifying: for example, a book like Elaine St. James’s *Simplify Your Life*, which offers a collection of quick fixes, such as how to reduce clutter around your house?

Elgin: I’m all for it. [Laughter.] I try to do that on a regular basis. One aspect of simplicity is reducing clutter. It helps bring clarity and lets me focus on what matters most in my life. More power to any author who can inspire us to reduce needless complexity and thereby get down to what matters most.

Cooper: One advantage to material wealth is the ability to surround oneself with beautiful objects. How does aesthetics fit into the life of voluntary simplicity?

Elgin: There is a simplicity aesthetic, one aspect of which is an appreciation for older things. The Japanese have a wonderful phrase for this: *wabi-sabi*, a feeling of appreciation for things whose wear and aging reveal life’s impermanence. For example, if you have had a cup, table, or chair in your family for several generations, each chip or scratch is not an imperfection, but a memory, inviting you to reflect on all the others before you who held that cup or touched that table. So, in my home, if I happen to scratch the dining-room table, I say I’ve just “wabi’d” the table — meaning I gave it a little more patina and age, a little more value.

Cooper: How does the notion of voluntary simplicity connect with those who are poor by Western standards?

Elgin: If you live a life of involuntary simplicity, then the concept of voluntary simplicity doesn’t mean much to you, because you have not yet achieved enough material well-being for there to be a meaningful degree of choice.

Cooper: But is it important for the world’s poor to understand these concepts, or is it just we in the West who need to think about these things?

Elgin: Rich or poor, the whole world needs to be thinking about and exploring new ways of living. We need something akin to the Marshall Plan — which restored Europe after World War II — only global in scale. We need to create a future of mutually assured development, where progress leaves no one behind and doesn’t destroy the ecosystems on which our lives depend.

(end of excerpt)