The Evolution of Simplicity

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David Brooks, New York Times

In this country we’re raised to go for the gusto, to try new things and savor the smorgasbord of life’s possibilities. As Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, “The chief work of civilization is just that it makes the means of living more complex. Because more complex and intense intellectual efforts mean a fuller and richer life. That means more life. Life is an end to itself and the only question as to whether it is worth living is whether you have enough of it.”

This striving for fullness and variety has always sparked a counter-impulse toward simplicity and naturalness. Benjamin Franklin wore an old fur cap in Paris to exemplify a natural unaffected virtue.

Henry David Thoreau made a fervent protest out of simplicity. Most Americans lead lives of quiet desperation, he argued. The things they call good, like riches, are really bad. On the other hand, “as you simplify your life the laws of the universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude; poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness weakness.”

Puritans, Quakers, Orthodox Jews and many other groups have always favored ascetic living and high thinking as a way to clear out those material things that might distract them from humility and grace, compassion and prayer, the spirit and the Lord.

Today’s simplicity movements are different from what they were in the past. Today’s most obvious simplicity impulse is the movement to declutter the home. Marie Kondo’s book “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up” now ranks at No. 2 on Amazon among the best-selling books of 2015. There are thousands of members of the National Association of Professional Organizers. Magazines and websites are stuffed with tips on how to declutter your living areas. (Everything that can be folded should be folded! Open the mail while standing over the recycling bin!)

Cleaning out the closets and paring down the wardrobe has become a religious ritual for many — a search for serenity, a blow against stress, and a longing for a beauty that is found by pruning away what is not.

The second big tendency in today’s simplicity movement involves mental hygiene: techniques to clean out the email folder and reduce the incoming flow. For example, Mailwise is a mobile email product that cleans out repetitive phrases so you can read your emails more quickly. (Woe to the day they invent a version for newspaper columns.)

As my Times colleague April Lawson points out, many of us are on a wireless hamster wheel, running furiously to keep the inbox in the same place. Something special like a dinner party or a
museum visit is hollowed out when your mind is on your screen or at five places at once. After a while there’s an ache from all the scattered shallowness.

So of course there’s a mass movement to combat mental harriedness, the epidemic of A.D.D. all around. Of course there’s a struggle to regain control of your own attention, to set priorities about what you will think about, to see fewer things but to see them more deeply.

One of the troublesome things about today’s simplicity movements is that they are often just alternate forms of consumption. Magazines like Real Simple are sometimes asking you to strip away your stuff so you can buy new, simpler stuff. There’s a whiff of the haute bourgeoisie ethos here — that simplification is not really spiritual or antimaterialism; just a more refined, organic, locally grown and morally status-building form of materialism.

Today’s simplicity movements are also not as philosophically explicit as older ones. The Puritans were stripping away the material for a closer contact with God. Thoreau was stripping away on behalf of a radical philosophy. It’s easy to see what today’s simplifiers are throwing away; it’s not always clear what they are for. It’s not always explicit what rightly directed life they envision.

Still, there’s clearly some process of discovery here. Early in life you choose your identity by getting things. But later in an affluent life you discover or update your identity by throwing away what is no longer useful, true and beautiful. One simplicity expert advised people to take all their books off their shelves and throw them on the floor. Only put back the books that you truly value.

That’s an exercise in identity discovery, an exercise in realizing and then prioritizing your current tastes and beliefs. People who do that may instinctively be seeking higher forms of pruning: being impeccable with your words, parsimonious but strong with your commitments, disciplined about your time, selective about your friendships, moving generally from fragmentation toward unity of purpose. There’s an enviable emotional tranquillity at the end of that road.

In a world of rampant materialism and manifold opportunities, many people these days are apparently learning who they are by choosing what they can do without.