

# Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For

Samuel Alexander

“How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.” (*Walden* 107). Over the last two years, as I have lain down to sleep in my small, self-constructed, inner-city shed, this passage from Henry Thoreau’s *Walden* was never far from my mind. Whether Thoreau hoped that *Walden* itself would mark a new era in the lives of its readers, no one can be sure. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine Thoreau penning the quoted passage above on the shores of Walden Pond, tantalizingly aware that he was in the process of drafting a manifesto that would indeed spark personal revolutions in the lives of generations of readers. My life, for one, has certainly changed drastically since my pre-*Walden* days, which are seemingly of another lifetime and yet not so long ago, when I would march off to work in my charcoal suit and long black coat to begin my day as a freshly graduated lawyer. The shift in consciousness – an earthquake of the soul – which shook me away from the law firm and into the shed is attributable, almost exclusively, to my engagement with *Walden*. Putting my own story into words has crystallized what I had previously understood only at the level of raw experience. To paraphrase Soren Kierkegaard, life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards.

## I. Crisis of Vocation

After completing my Master of Laws at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, I found myself confronted by those great economic questions everyone must face when trying to establish financial independence in a world of scarce resources: *How best to earn a living? How much time should I spend at it? How much do I need to live well and to be free?* Although I had just graduated from a respectable university, I came to realize that throughout my formal education, the deepest questions concerning *how to live* had been strangely passed over. Furthermore, when I looked at the world around me, I gained little insight into how I should live *my* life. I saw the potential for freedom, but not freedom itself. And so, unable to ignite my imagination, I spiralled quietly into a deep, vocational crisis. Completely lost and

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lacking any direction, I wallowed around what I now suspect were the margins of a depressive episode.

One day, in an act of desperation, I took a train to a small, rural community called Featherston, an hour or so out of Wellington, and with what little money I had I rented an old, rustic cottage, at a very reasonable price. In retrospect, I feel this temporary exit from society is one of the wisest things I have ever done, if only because it gave me the time and solitude needed to search my soul. I lived in the cottage for three months – alone, at peace, tremendously happy, and absolutely free. Isolated from the worries and expectations of the world, it was a privileged time of uninhibited creativity and committed intellectual inquiry. I would begin each day ritualistically by soaking in a deep, iron-cast tub, while one of Beethoven’s symphonies roared in the background, setting the mood for the day. Bathing in this manner was a meditative, even spiritual, exercise for me, similar, perhaps, to Thoreau’s daily plunge into the icy waters of Walden Pond, except more pleasurable, I would imagine. Subsisting predominantly on bread and cheap red wine, I spent my days and nights in the cottage before an open fire, composing music, writing abundantly, and reading the great philosophers, especially Rousseau and Nietzsche. I would work creatively till exhaustion then sleep till I was refreshed, wholly unconcerned about the hour of the day.

As the weeks passed, moments began to blur into one, until time itself seemed to stand still. I would often find myself gazing into the fire in a trace-like state, rapt in a timeless reverie, as if lost in the richness of ordinary experience. To borrow the apt words of Thoreau, “I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been” (111). Whenever the inclination took me, whether day or night, I would take long walks in the nearby woods or meadows, to absorb the pink and purple hues of the sky at sunrise, or enjoy the silverly blue tints of a moonlit landscape. I recall going out for walk one evening during a fiercely wet and windy storm, just for the experience. As I marched alone in the dark, confronting the tempestuous elements, Tom Waits’ song, “God’s Away on Business,” thundered through my headphones. All my senses were alight, which was typical of this phase in my life.

Be sure, I am not romanticising my experience at the cottage in any way. It was genuinely romantic, for all that word connotes, and I felt intensely alive. I tasted a poeticized existence and its sweetness was intoxicating and unforgettable. For three months I persisted in this state of passionate tranquillity. It was terrifyingly meaningful.

But then the money ran out. My repressed crisis of vocation suddenly returned to the surface in an intensified form, shattering my

artificial utopia like a stone through glass. During my time in the cottage I had experienced an idealized freedom, but foolishly and regrettably I had taken no steps toward securing it. Now, with just a few dollars to my name, I had no option but to return to society to begin my search for a livelihood. The unromantic but important lesson I took away from the cottage was that a poeticized existence depends, at least to some degree, on money and resources. As Marx perceived long ago, life is fundamentally economic.

Fortuitously – if that is the right word – two weeks after leaving the cottage I applied for and was offered an associate position in a small law firm in Christchurch, New Zealand, which I accepted out of financial necessity. Within a few days I had packed my few possessions into a hired van and set out, somewhat despondently, to begin my experiment with reality. It was as if I had been caught in a current and swept out to sea.

I practiced law for about eighteen months. Admittedly, this turned out to be quite a stimulating time for me, owing mainly to the brilliance of my employer, and I proved to be a competent advocate. But my heart was never fully in the game. A career in law promised wealth and status, as well as a form of intellectual engagement, but from the outset I knew it was not my calling. Though at this time I had no idea what my calling was, I knew at least that it did not involve seeking wealth and status. Not all rich people are unimaginative, but only unimaginative people need to be rich; and only timid souls seek status. I was seeking something else.

After a year working in the law firm I managed to exchange a scheduled pay rise for an extra day off work. I now recognize that this negotiation was my first significant act of “downshifting,” which can be crudely defined as the exchange of income/consumption for more freedom, although at the time I was unfamiliar with this concept as such. My friends accused me of entering semi-retirement, which was not so far from the truth. During my final six months in the law firm I used my three-day weekends to prepare a proposal for a doctoral thesis. Doctoral study, I surmised, would at least allow me to pursue my burning passion for philosophy and politics, as well as give me a few years to think about my place in the world, about which I was still confused. I moved to Melbourne, Australia, to begin my doctoral study in the middle of 2006. I was 26.

## **II. The Political becomes Personal**

Like most university students, post-graduate or otherwise, I did not have much money, although my scholarship stipend, as well as a

short stint lecturing, meant that I always had enough. Not long after arriving in Melbourne I rented the cheapest room I could find, which turned out to be in a five person share-house not too far from campus, and there I settled down to begin my post-graduate life. Due to the accidents of my personal history, I enrolled for my PhD in the law school, however my proposed topic was interdisciplinary in nature, more suitable, perhaps, for departments of politics, philosophy, or economics than law. The next few years of study were to change my life in ways that I could never have foreseen. For reasons to be explained, I gratefully hold Thoreau responsible.

Without going into unnecessary detail, my doctoral research (which is all but complete) involved evaluating the notion of a private property/market system “beyond growth.” Directed toward the highly-developed nations, my thesis argues that when an economy grows so large that it reaches or exceeds the threshold point beyond which any further growth is “uneconomic” (i.e. socially or ecologically counter-productive), property rights should no longer be defined and defended in order to grow the economy. Instead, property rights should be constructed or reconstructed in order to achieve more specific welfare enhancing objectives – such as eliminating poverty or protecting the environment – and the efficient growth of GDP (or lack thereof) should be treated as a by-product of secondary importance.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, the normative basis of my thesis is the assumption that money and resources are extremely important to human beings *up to a point* – the threshold point – but beyond that point, which evidence suggests is surprisingly moderate,<sup>2</sup> the pursuit of more wealth insidiously detracts from what makes life meaningful and degrades the health and integrity of our living planet. This normative position highlights the importance of having a concept of economic sufficiency and of knowing how much is “enough.”

To cut a long story short, when I began constructing the arguments in support of my “post-growth” theory of property, I quickly realized that my position would be rejected by anyone who subscribed to the dominant view that a nation’s progress depends upon ever-increasing growth in GDP per capita. For my thesis to be persuasive, then – or even given a fair hearing – it became absolutely critical that I present a sound case for why getting richer is not always a trustworthy path to well-being, especially in affluent societies. Indeed, I wanted to argue that, in circumstances of affluence, lowering material “standard of living” (measured by income/consumption) could actually increase “quality of life” (measured by subjective well-being). This required a fundamental rethinking of orthodox views on money and consumption, including a rejection of the consumerist presumption that “more is

always better.” As I began exploring the ethics of consumption and building a normative case for simple living, I found myself naturally drawn to Thoreau’s simple living experiment on the shores of Walden Pond. I studied *Walden* obsessively, almost biblically, and I soon became aware that it was changing my life forever, an impact with which I am sure many readers of this journal can empathize.

Despite my thesis being framed predominantly in terms of political and legal theory, what I was really struggling with was the question of what *personal* acts could be undertaken to oppose consumer capitalism and whether the cumulative impact of such seemingly insignificant acts could amount to any real significance. I did not just want to theorize about alternative political and legal structures, though I felt that was important too; I also wanted to learn how best to live within the existing regime that I was critiquing. Since my thesis was advocating a radically anti-consumerist stance in relation to money and possessions, I felt this aspect of my thesis, especially, had to be *lived* to be truly sincere. And so, step by step, I escalated my personal exploration of the simple life.

Although I had lived like a poor student for most of my adult life – by this stage I was 28 – I knew that my material standard of living was much higher than it needed to be. Accordingly, I set myself the task of finding ways to live more with less, which, in a sentence, is what I believe simple living is all about. Prompted by the example of Thoreau, the possibility of squatting in the backyard of the house I was renting entered my imagination as a potential means of reducing my outgoings significantly. With barely a moment’s thought, I approached my housemates and tentatively offered to give up my room and live in the backyard, explaining my reasons for wanting to do so. I told them about Thoreau and of my interest in exploring “the simple life” in an urban context. They thought my proposition was humorously insane but unproblematic, and so my plans received their consent, even their positive encouragement. In exchange for living in the backyard it was agreed that I would be responsible for purchasing for the house a number of amenities shared by all, such as dishwashing liquid, washing powder, rubbish bags, toilet paper, mops, etc. This arrangement meant that my “rent” would be extremely low – approximately AU\$15 per week – but the reasoning given was that my presence would be no inconvenience at all. Since I would have access to the kitchen and bathroom inside, the costs of electricity, gas, water, etc. were to be split equally, an arrangement which I happily accepted.

With the essential negotiations complete, it was time to make my madness a reality.

### III. Constructing the Shed

I built the shed over three weekends in the spring of 2008 with my good friend and house-mate, Mathieu. Neither of us had any building experience, and being Ph.D. students in law and meteorology, it would not be unfair to assume that we were among the least practical people on Earth. Perhaps we were lacking in the necessary skills – we didn't really know – however the challenge of building a shelter seemed natural and appealing, so we took to the task with zeal. We had ordered two books online about building basic sheds and cabins, but in our enthusiasm we got to work before they arrived. The books turned up in the letterbox a few days after construction had finished, much to our amusement, and they remain unread to this day. Who knows what wisdom they contain!

We knew, at least, that builders need materials, so that seemed like a good place to start. In the spirit of sustainability and frugality, our goal was to reuse or recycle as much material as possible. We found an old wooden bed frame underneath the stairs, along with a few tarpaulins, two strong hinges, a hammer, and some nails and screws. We also appropriated some wood that was lying forgotten underneath the house, which we felt justified putting to good use. My girlfriend, Helen – who was unconditionally supportive throughout this venture despite having some understandable reservations about it – also informed me that there was a pile of abandoned wood by the railway tracks near her place, which I promptly transported to the construction site. A friend lent us an electric drill (apologies to Thoreau) and a painfully blunt handsaw.

All this provided the bulk of our building materials and tools, but it was not quite sufficient for our project. We needed more wood for the frame and floor of the shed, more tarpaulins for waterproofing, more screws and hinges, as well as some polycarbonate sheeting for the roof. These things we obtained from the hardware store. (When we showed the assistant at the hardware store our building plans, which resembled a two-year-old's drawing of a house, he laughed loudly and firmly recommended that we consider purchasing a ready-made shed or a tent. We thanked him for his sound advice then stubbornly ignored it.) We also picked up some old blankets from a second-hand clothing store to line the inside of the shed. In total, the cost of all these materials was AU\$573.

The building process itself was an absolute delight, not only because the spring days were crisp and clear, but also because I was engaged in meaningful (and often entertaining) work with a true friend. The French gypsy-punk music added another dimension, too. In such

circumstances, long days of physical work are no chore at all. We began by constructing the frame of the shed, which was 1.8m wide, 3.6m long, and 2.4m high. The old bed frame was cut up and used to provide extra framing for the base of the shed, upon which we laid the flooring. Tarpaulin was used to waterproof the walls and roof, and the abandoned wood from near the railway tracks was cut up into weatherboards and nailed horizontally into place for the outside walls. With the remaining wood we crafted a simple door and were pleasantly surprised when it swung into place, although the door was not quite square, creating an unfortunate gap which let through a draft. At the front of the shed we also put in place a wooden shutter in the top left corner, which was hinged at the top to swing up and out to create a window space when desired. A piece of thick bamboo was used to hold the wooden shutter up, in the manner of an old beach hut. Finally, three overlapping sheets of polycarbonate sheeting were laid on the roof and nailed into place. Due to a shortage of wood and a complete lack of common sense, we did not create a slope in the roof, hoping that the minor slope of the ground would suffice to induce any rain water to run off. Our hopes were sadly disappointed. During the first heavy rain, water pooled on the roof and the shed leaked, so later some repairs were needed. The result was a truly bizarre roof design that, although ultimately effective, would have had dear Thoreau turning in his grave. (In our defence, however, one stormy Melbourne evening in March 2010 parts of the Southern Cross railway station collapsed, which was made of steel and concrete, while the shed remained dry and erect. The ultimate vindication!)

As the finishing touch, the shed was given a title. The words, "Ceci n'est pas une cabane," were painted above the door, which translate as, "This is not a shed."

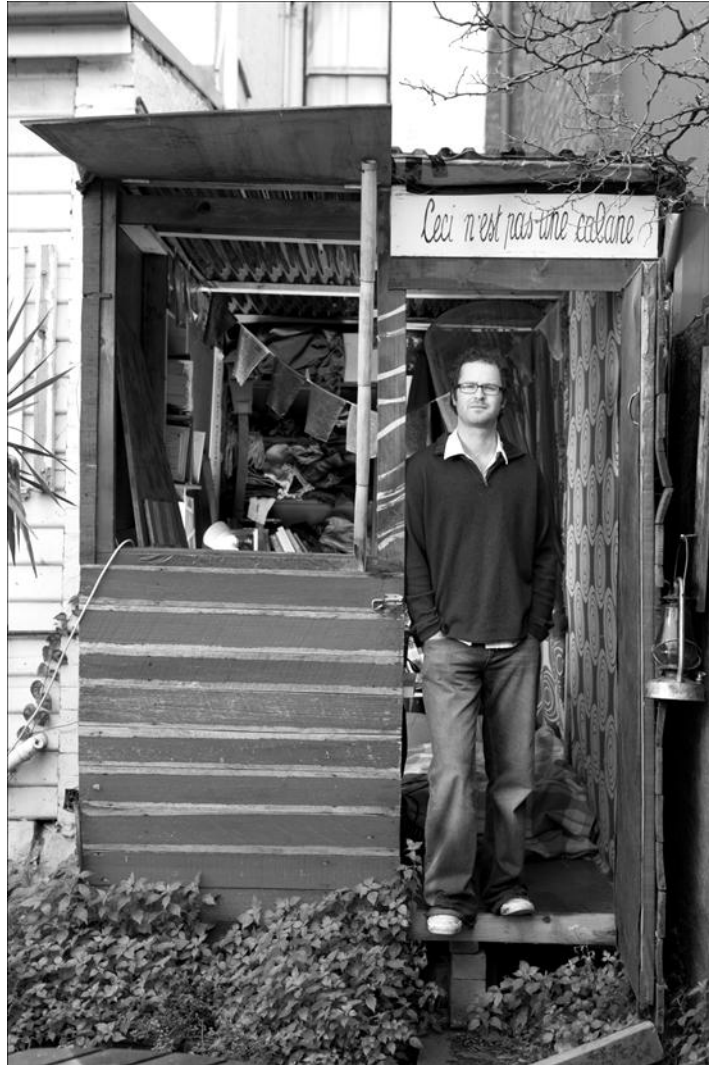


Photo © Daniel Mahon

#### **IV. Practicing Simplicity**

Since living in the backyard is a violation of the tenancy agreement, the landlord has not been told of my living experiment. He rarely makes his presence known, anyway (especially when he is needed to fix something). When the yearly house inspection is due, I simply pack the shed full of bikes, crates, chairs, blankets, tools, boxes, bags, etc., and hide any evidence that it is inhabited. That is, I disguise it as a shed.



Photo © Daniel Mahon

When the landlord first saw the shed he understandably looked a bit confused and stated firmly that any further building projects must be approved by him first. Much to my relief, however, he was otherwise unbothered by its presence and to this day he seems entirely oblivious to the fact that it is my home. Perhaps one day I'll send him a copy of this essay.

At the time of writing these words, I have lived in the shed for a little under two years. In all honestly I can report that they have been

the richest and most fulfilling years of my life. Exactly how much longer I will live in the shed, I cannot say, but since I am squatting illegally on someone else's land, it is hard to conceive of it as a permanent residence. Furthermore, I am in a committed relationship with Helen, who has a magical young child. Someday I would like to live under the same roof with them, and I can hardly invite them to live with me in the shed. It would seem that my days in the shed are numbered.

However, life in the shed is not just about the shed. The building itself is but the most conspicuous (and arguably confused) manifestation of my ongoing struggle with the question of how to live simply in an urban context. The importance of the shed, for me, lies in the fact that housing is typically life's greatest expense, and potentially, therefore, a category where the most savings can be made. With rent over the last two years at approximately AU\$15 per week, significant savings were indeed possible. When the day comes that I must leave the shed, my aim will still be to keep the cost of housing to a minimum by embracing the most modest accommodation possible. For when I remember that the shed took six days to build, and functioned well enough as a shelter, I am deeply bothered that many people spend twenty, thirty, even forty years laboring to pay for their homes. Truthfully, I would sooner live in a tub my whole life, like Diogenes, than exchange forty years of my life for house. Posterity will surely look back on our times and be astounded at how inefficiently we housed ourselves! My time in the shed has taught me the great Thoreauvian lesson that a person can be "richer than the richest now are" while living in very humble circumstances (*Walden* 40). This has given me "a calm trust in the future" (160), since I now know that a fancy house is not a necessary part of living a happy and meaningful life.

In recent years I have also grown as much of my own food as possible. On top of the financial savings, the very process of gardening is strangely therapeutic – an ancient truth which escaped me far too long. The garden space I have available is approximately 1.5 metres wide and 10 metres long, in which I grow organically all manner of fruit, vegetables, and herbs. Since there are water restrictions in Melbourne, a friend and I installed a water tank behind the shed to secure rainwater. I also keep four chickens in the backyard, which provide two or three eggs a day as well as an abundance of fine manure. The chicken coop also functions well as a compost heap. Some of my happiest memories are of letting the chickens roam freely in the community park behind the house, while I would drink tea in the shade and enjoy the bemused looks of my neighbors.

The garden does not provide all my food, however, so I have come to supplement my vegetarian diet with locally and organically

grown produce, sourced conveniently and surprisingly cheaply by the Melbourne University Food Co-Op. My reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet are, I confess, rather vague and uncertain. Strange as it may sound, there is something of “the ascetic” in me, and perhaps a large part of my motivation for giving up meat and fish was the rather enjoyable challenge of self-discipline. A moment’s research also reveals the troubling environmental impacts of excessive meat and fish consumption, additional motivation to rethink my eating practices. At risk of sounding too sentimental, I am also a bit unsure about whether I, personally, could shoot a cow in the head every time I wanted a steak, a reality of meat consumption that never used to cross my mind, pushed out of sight as it is by the obscuring distances of a money economy. Since I am undecided about this point, I thought it was easy enough to do without the steak and avoid being implicated in the violence. Whatever the case, I have never felt as healthy as I have since eating a vegetarian diet, which perhaps is justification enough.

Staying on the subject of food for a moment longer, I also do my best to avoid supermarkets, and find that it can sometimes be months between visits. I resent supermarkets for using their financial power to promote the toxic practices of agri-business, and thus I do everything I can to avoid giving them any of my money. Their convenience is seductive, however, and avoiding them entirely remains a challenge.

Another feature of my journey toward the simple life has been my purchase of 100% renewable power. Since I did not have the lump sum to purchase solar panels or wind turbines, nor the desire to fix such devices to a rental property, I called my electricity provider and inquired about the possibility of purchasing renewable energy. A few minutes later I was, as they say, burning “green fuel.” This came at a price, of course, but the increased rates soon became a part of life and were forgotten. In any case, I effectively offset the costs of the increased rates by taking many small steps to reduce my energy consumption. My greatest energy savings have come through never using a heater, even on those winter nights which sink to zero degrees. It is always the same temperature inside the shed as it is outside, regrettably, making those winter nights rather character-building. But with the right attitude it is really not so bad. I suspect we are all hardier than we think we are. When it gets cold I put on the wool jersey my Grandma knitted me when I was a teenager or wrap myself in an extra blanket. When necessary – and often it has been necessary – I sleep in my ski-jacket, gloves, and a wool hat. The days and nights may be cold, but I never am.

With respect to clothing, I find that purchasing what is necessary at second-hand stores comes at a minimal cost, given some creativity

and a little discipline. This does not mean puritanically denying self-expression through what I wear, or giving up “style” (although others are entitled to disagree about that). But it does involve rejecting high fashion and all it stands for in favor of an “alternative” aesthetic. According to my calculations, high-fashion clothing is comically expensive, and I would sooner pay \$200 for an old turnip than I would for a nice shirt. I have higher aspirations in life than to have my place in the world defined by a nice shirt. As for the cheap, mass-produced clothing found in many department stores, a little research reveals that it is almost always the product of wage-slaves in the factories of the Third World. Accordingly, my policy is to do what I can to avoid being implicated in the fashion industry at all.

Perhaps “dressing down,” as it is sometimes called, should even be understood as an outward statement of simplicity, an effort, however small, to express aesthetically one’s opposition to consumer culture. Politics aside, however, I have never had the desire to look brand new. Moreover, I enjoy being able to lie on the grass without giving a moment’s thought to whether my clothes will get dirty. Over the last year I have spent a total of AU\$38 on clothing (roughly the average over the last four years). I did receive a pair of shoes recently as a birthday gift, however, after my parents saw large holes in the pair I had been wearing. I have also been the grateful recipient of a few castaway items from my brother and from friends, which I saved from being thrown away. As Thoreau would say, “if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do; will they not?” (23). It is an interesting question to consider, if not necessarily in relation to the worship of God, then more generally in relation to the living of a passionate life. Old clothes will do, will they not? Thoreau proposed that they will do just fine, and I have come to think that he was quite right.

When I speak publicly about simple living at festivals, conferences, meetings, etc., one of the issues I am almost always asked about is the *practice* of simplicity. Most people seem to accept the dangers of greed and acquisitiveness, as well as the social, ecological, and humanitarian benefits of living simply. But there is much doubt over what simple living actually consists of and whether it is even feasible to live simply in the consumer cultures of advanced capitalist societies. My response to these important, practical questions usually begins by acknowledging that there is not one and only one way to live simply. I ask people not to expect a 12-point plan that can be formulaically applied, for the reality is that there is no Method or Equation of Simplicity into which we can plug the facts of our lives and be told how to live. The simple life, I say, is as much about questions as answers, in the sense that practicing simplicity calls for creative

interpretation and personalized application. It is not for “experts,” therefore, or for anyone, to prescribe universal rules on how to live simply. We each live unique lives and we each find ourselves in different situations, with different capabilities and different responsibilities. Accordingly, I continue, the practice of simplicity by one person, in one situation, may very well involve different things than for a different person, in a different situation. Furthermore, simple living is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing, creative process. With this non-universalist disclaimer noted, I then make a few general remarks about what a simple life might look like in practice and how one might begin to live it. I might offer something like the following thumbnail sketch.

Simplicity, as I have come to understand it, is first and foremost a set of attitudes, a recognition that abundance is a state of mind, not a quantity of consumer products. In the words of Richard Gregg:

Voluntary simplicity involves both an inner and an outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. (111-12)

That last sentence gets to the heart of the matter. If we are to know how much material wealth is *enough*, and thereby avoid laboring without end or purpose, we first need to confront the question, “Enough for *what?*” Put otherwise, we need to ask ourselves, “What should we want material wealth *for?*” Anyone who neglects this question is at risk of spending life pursuing material superfluities in a state of “quiet desperation” (*Walden* 8). There is no single right answer to the question of life’s purpose, of course – we must each find our “*own way*,” as Thoreau properly advised (71) – but to live simply means always being awake to the question. “To be awake is to be alive” (90).

Having determined a sense of life’s purpose, the practice of simplicity then involves securing the material conditions of life, starting with food, shelter, and clothing. Eating locally, purchasing “green,” eating out in moderation, eating less meat, eating simply and creatively – I know by experience that this can be done very cheaply. Given some thought and a little discipline, a good diet can be obtained at a surprisingly low cost, especially if you are able to cultivate a vegetable garden. Given that sheltering oneself and one’s family is typically life’s greatest expense, rethinking the meaning and purpose of a house is one of the most important aspects to living simply. This is also likely to be

the hardest part of transitioning to a simple life, and may take a lifetime to figure out. Indeed, current political, economic, and social structures can make living in “simple” housing very difficult – perhaps even impossible or illegal – which is one of the main reasons the transition to a sustainable society will depend upon a politics of simplicity (a complex issue which I cannot not explore here, though it is of the utmost importance).<sup>3</sup> In terms of clothing and furniture, buying secondhand is the way to go. Whenever possible, make your own.

With the necessities of life secured, the practice of simplicity can be explored in an infinite variety of ways. I will not try to list them all. Nevertheless, here are a few representative examples. Simple living might involve riding a bike instead of driving a car; choosing a washing line over a dryer; or even something as simple as choosing a book over television. It might involve avoiding air travel, conserving water by taking a bucket into the shower, or taking energy reduction seriously. Or it might simply involve taking a second look at life, for dissatisfaction with our material situations can often be the result of failing to look properly at our lives rather than the result of any genuine “lack.” Simple lovers generally aim to declutter all aspects of life – personal, work, social, economic – and they will probably value self-sufficiency and be able to entertain themselves for free. Many simple lovers happily subscribe to the frugality maxim of the Depression years: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” Many will also avoid unnecessary technology and try to live more slowly and peacefully. Baking bread at home is a symbolic practice. Generally speaking, simple lovers never go shopping without a proper purpose and are wary of credit cards. They tend to lend when asked and borrow when necessary.

Rather than stay at luxurious resorts, simple lovers might spend \$12 per night bush camping in the midst of nature. Rather than work long hours to afford a life dedicated to consumption, simple lovers might step out of the rush and reduce work hours, freeing up more time to be creative, learn a musical instrument, socialize with friends and family, volunteer or join an organization, meditate, relax, etc. Rather than choose competition, simple lovers are likely to choose community. Not money, but meaning. And so on and so forth, until the very elements of life have been transformed. Start with a few small steps, enjoy the adventure, and soon enough your life will have changed.

## V. Money

The overarching issue of what place money has in the simple life deserves a little more attention. Although living simply is much more than just being frugal with money and consuming less – as I have said, it

is also a state of mind – in a market economy spending wisely plays a central role. In their celebrated text, *Your Money or Your Life*, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin provide elaborate financial exercises for readers to undertake which seek to provoke reflection on the real value of money and the true cost of commodities. I found their exercises surprisingly enlightening. To over-simplify greatly, one of their core exercises can be paraphrased as follows: Over a one month period, meticulously record *every* purchase made, and then categorize your expenses (rent/mortgage, bills, food, clothing, coffee, petrol, books, etc.). Multiply each category by twelve to get a rough estimate of the annual cost. Then carefully calculate how much time was spent obtaining the money required to buy everything that was purchased that month (including time travelling to and from work) and multiply by twelve to get yearly working hours (making appropriate adjustments for holiday entitlements). With this information at hand, Dominguez and Robin invite people to critically assess not only the amount of time and money spent on each category, but also the categories themselves. This exercise may sound mundane and a bit pointless – everybody assumes they are careful, rational spenders – but if it is carried out with precision the results may well surprise, or even shock. One might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over an entire year, which may raise new and important questions about whether the money might have been better spent elsewhere, or not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. Once you have worked out the figures for one year, consider how much would be spent on each category over ten years.

The aim of this financial exercise is not to create tightwads, but smart consumers who are conscious of the life/time cost of their purchases. After all, as Thoreau would insist, “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (31). When exploring the simple life with this in mind, I have discovered that some thoughtful reductions and changes to my spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, have instead been life affirming. To provide two mundane but personally significant examples, always taking a packed lunch and limiting myself to one take-out coffee per week has resulted in savings of about \$75 per week. That’s almost \$4000 per year, or \$40,000 over ten years.

When I realized how easy it was to eliminate many costs that I once considered necessities, things started getting quite interesting. In the interests of experimentation, I decided to dedicate a year to seriously reducing my expenses. From 4 July 2009 to 3 July 2010, I kept an exact account of every dollar I spent. The total for that year was AU\$6,792,

which still included a great many comforts and superfluities. During this period I also spent several hundred dollars printing flyers on simple living, although perhaps this expense was more of a necessity than a superfluity. I can truthfully say that the only time during the year when I felt deprived by my simple living experiment was when my brother had his first child, since I had made a commitment not to travel by plane for a year, and this meant that I could not be with him and his family at that special time. This was by far the most difficult challenge of my living experiment and one that raised the most doubts about its justification.

I was able to live as cheaply as I did partly due to my unusually cheap living arrangements in the shed, which some may regard as a distorted reality. But even so, had I rented a room inside the house (which would have cost AU\$530 per month), my living costs would only have risen to a total of AU\$13,152. When it is remembered that the average full-time wage in Australia today is over AU\$67,000,<sup>4</sup> one begins to get some perspective – so easily lost! – on how affluent Western societies really are. Every day in the news we read about how growing the economy is still the number one priority. But is getting even richer really the answer to the problems facing Western societies? Or do we labor under a terrible mistake?

When it comes to spending money in accordance with the ethos of simple living, it is also important to bear in mind Vicki Robin's profound democratic insight: That how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. Simple living, therefore, involves shopping as conscientiously as possible, directing one's monetary "votes" into socially and ecologically responsible avenues and avoiding irresponsible avenues. A tension can arise here, of course, because shopping conscientiously or ethically tends to be (but is not always) more expensive. If it is true, however, that market expenditure is a vote on what exists in the world, then it would seem that the global consumer class has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, simply by changing its spending habits. *Simplicity is the new spectre haunting capitalism.* Never before have so many people had the option of casting off the chains of consumer culture, stepping out of the rat race, and living in opposition to the existing order of things. Money is power, and with this power comes responsibility.

Consumers of the world unite!

## VI. Deconstructing the Shed

I am under no illusions about what my time in the shed means. I certainly have not provided, nor did I ever aim to provide, a template for simple living. The reality is that I am squatting illegally on land owned by another, and if I am ever caught living in the shed – which is in breach of the tenancy agreement as well as building regulations – it is almost certain that my experiment will be extinguished at once. There could well be consequences, perhaps in the form of a fine. (Given that my doctoral thesis is exploring ways that property laws could be restructured to promote simple living, it seems only fitting that the current property laws have been hanging threateningly over my head throughout my candidature). Furthermore, my living experiment in the shed only got off the ground due to the good grace of my dear house-mates, and this fact alone means that my experiment may not be easily repeated by others. Should my house-mates ever have a change of heart, to which they would be quite entitled, this would also mark the end of my time in the shed, again exposing the delicate contingency of my way of life.

Such insecurity of accommodation has not bothered me much, I should add, since my unmarried, post-graduate life without dependents has left me unconcerned about the possibility of being summarily evicted at any moment. But I recognize that others, in different circumstances, would understandably find such insecurity a cause of considerable anxiety and worry. Generally speaking, human beings – myself included – wish to lay down roots, and this means that squatting is at most a temporary solution to the problem of how to live. The time is nigh, perhaps, to deconstruct the shed.

If *Walden* has done one thing to me, it has etched into my being the desire to live simply and deliberately. Reading Thoreau's poetic descriptions of nature opened my eyes like never before to the miracle of Earth's living processes, and with my eyes now open I crave the nourishment of close contact with nature, even though my urban context cannot provide for the intimacy I truly desire. Having fallen deeply in love with nature, I now see more clearly my duty to protect her from unnecessary violence, and my ongoing journey to live more simply is an attempt to meet that duty as best I can. Thoreau's words also serve as a fiery reminder that we each owe a duty to ourselves as well, a duty to take our own lives, our own dreams, seriously. In *Walden* Thoreau warned people against wasting their lives in the pursuit of material superfluities, a lesson predicated upon the assumption that every lived moment is of immeasurable importance. When I feel that I am losing sight of this insight, dipping into the pages of *Walden* usually

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shakes me awake at once. Any book capable of doing that is worth infinitely more than its own weight in gold.

*P.S. A short time after completing this essay the landlord gave notice that he was ending the lease of the rental property where the shed was built (for reasons wholly unrelated to the existence of the shed or my presence, I should add). This meant – by force of property law! – that I was required to deconstruct the shed physically and move out. I have since moved in with Helen, which (as implied in the essay) was already in the cards, and the exploration of the simple life now continues, albeit in different circumstances. I intend to write about this new phase of the journey in the near future, as it raises new and important issues about living simply in an urban context. For now, however, I must tend to the garden.*

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a preliminary sketch of my thesis, see Samuel Alexander, “Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity,” in *Property Rights and Sustainability: The Evolution of Property Rights to Meet Ecological Challenges*, ed. David Grinlinton and Prue Taylor (Leiden: Nijhoff/Brill, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> There is now a considerable body of research examining the correlation between income and well-being. A good place to begin is Ed Diener et al, *Well-Being for Public Policy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009). See also Ed Diener and Martin Seligman, “Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5.1 (2004), 1; Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005); and Ed Diener et al, *International Differences in Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For some discussions of the politics of simplicity, see Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (Cambridge (UK): Polity, 2009); Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of the Alternative American Dream* (1st ed, New York: Holt, 1999); Charles Siegal, *The Politics of Simple Living* (Berkeley, CA: Preservation Institute, 2008) (online publication: <http://www.preservenet.com/simpleliving/PoliticsOfSimpleLiving.pdf>); and Samuel Alexander, “Property beyond Growth,” above n 1. My completed doctoral thesis is now available at the following web address: [www.simplicityinstitute.org/publications](http://www.simplicityinstitute.org/publications).

<sup>4</sup> In February 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the average full-time adult weekly earnings was AU\$1,290.70

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<<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/6302.0>> (accessed 5 August 2010).

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