

SIMPLICITY – May 2006

— By Richard L. Kiniry

We have had a Voluntary Simplicity Group at the Society for over a year now. The initial motivation for creating the group was environmental. It is no big surprise that human beings are the cause of environmental deterioration, but it is uncomfortable to notice how our personal lifestyles are part of the problem. The acceptance of that fact spurred our desire for the Simplicity Group, but in the process of reading and discussion the group got smaller as our understanding of the environment got larger and more intricate.

Simplicity is an old value that is newly popular, but it is still a fringe value. Actually there is a very active Voluntary Simplicity movement that is peopled by individuals with diverse motives for wanting to live with less. A perusal of the shelves of the local bookstore will convince you that simplicity is a hot issue. Many of the books we read for our discussions would have to be described as spiritually based. While these books offer useful ways of changing your behavior, from budgeting to growing your own food, there is usually an underlying message about making your life fit your values. So, our small group rather quickly went in the direction of personal examination and in the process the idea of the environment grew to include the mind-set by which we live.

Of course, Society members — including the Simplicity Group participants — are not exactly big-time consumers. We tend to live more environmentally correct lives with a limited need for the extravagant doodads that many find necessary these days. So the direction of our Simplicity Group's journey was toward questioning not just consumer mentality but how that mentality shapes human nature and the life expectations of all of us.

The feeling that more stuff will make us happy is basic to human nature. Every human being enjoys the feeling that accompanies a full pantry but in the modern era the need for that feeling has become an addiction. Having more has become the reason for living. Life is cheapened. Meaning isn't found in what you do with life but what you attach to your life. And I'm not just talking about more stuff but also more experience. Even the saints among us think of fulfillment as the accumulation of more evidence of their saintliness. And too often individuality is defined not in terms of personal character but in terms of external additions to a person's life — more approval, or more attitude, more money, more knowledge, more sex, more houses, more cool, more books, or more applause.

The questions that arise from all the thinking and talking in the Simplicity Group are many but the two that come to mind are: is having more so bad and is simplicity an Ethical Humanist value? My immediate answer to the first question is. having more can be accidental to how you live your life and you can live a simple life surrounded by lots of doodads. But I'm hoping you will have your own answer to that question. The question of whether simplicity is an Ethical Humanist value is more complicated. What do our Ethical Humanist commitments to intrinsic

worth, integrity, and faith in people have to do with simplicity? Simplicity speaks to a detachment from things and that may not fit our naturalistic approach.

Our Simplicity Group has run its course and we want to open it up to all of you and make it more personal. The questions above have become the agenda. We invite you to answer them for yourself. We will continue the Simplicity Group in a different form — not as a reading and discussing group but as a self-reflective group. Does simplicity mean living from the inside and not living from our attachments? Simple living will certainly help the earth but what will it do to our lives?