

# Voluntary Simplicity Discussion Activity

Active, personally relevant learning is at the heart of an effective education. This salon series takes participants through a process of exploring sustainability through shared discovery and personal reflection designed to help shape the way we think and act. For more articles and excerpts, please review Northwest Earth Institute's series of discussion based course books: [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).

## Work: The Benefits of Working Less Hard

By Carl Honoré

Benjamin Franklin was among the first to envision a world devoted to rest and relaxation. Inspired by the technological breakthroughs of the latter 1700s, he predicted that man would soon work no more than four hours a week. The nineteenth century made that prophecy

look foolishly naïve. In the dark mills of the Industrial Revolution, men, women and even children toiled for fifteen hours a day. Yet at the end of the nineteenth century, the Age of Leisure popped up once again on the cultural radar. George Bernard Shaw predicted that we would work two hours a day by 2000.

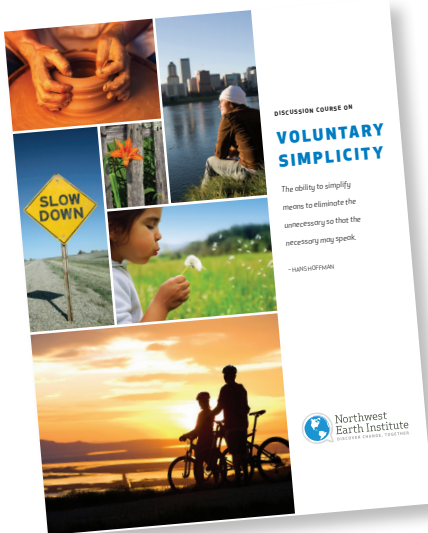
The dream of limitless leisure persisted through the twentieth century. Dazzled by the magical promise of technology, the man in the street dreamed of a life spent lounging by the pool, waited on by robots that not only mixed a mean martini but also kept the economy ticking over nicely. In 1956, Richard Nixon told Americans to prepare for a four-day workweek in the "not too distant future." A decade later, a U.S. Senate subcommittee heard that by 2000 Americans would be working as little as fourteen hours per week. Even in the 1980s, some predicted that robotics and computers would give us all more free time than we would know what to do with.

## A FEW POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS

- To get to know one another through small group dialogue.
- As an interactive way to engage in a conversation around intentionality, well-being and sustainability.
- As a way to enhance systems thinking skills.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

1. Gather together a group of your coworkers, classmates, friends, or family — over a healthy potluck lunch, classroom activity, or as the discussion opener for a movie screening.
2. Print off copies of this discussion guide for all members of your group.
3. Individually, take 10-12 minutes to read the excerpts in this discussion guide.
4. In small groups of 3-5, spend approximately 15-20 minutes with the discussion questions. Start with the Circle Question. Have each person briefly answer the Circle Question, with no comments, questions, or interruptions from others. Make sure each person has a chance to answer the Circle Question. Then, move on to the other questions, with participants responding voluntarily. Have group members share their opinions, experiences, feelings and suggestions.
5. During discussion, keep in mind that listening is as important as speaking. Avoid judgment of others. Agreement isn't necessary for effective dialogue.



Read more in  
*Voluntary Simplicity*

*continued*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Purchase the complete *Hungry for Change* discussion course book and other NW Earth Institute discussion courses from NWEI's online store: [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org)

Participate in NWEI's Annual EcoChallenge: [www.ecochallenge.org](http://www.ecochallenge.org)

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Could they have been more wrong? If we can be sure about anything in the twenty-first century, it is that reports of the death of work have been greatly exaggerated. Today, most of us are more likely to put in a fourteen-hour day than a fourteen-hour week. Work devours the bulk of our waking hours. Everything else in life — family and friends, sex and sleep, hobbies and holidays — is forced to be around the almighty work schedule.

By some estimates, the average American now puts in 350 hours more on the job per year than his European counterpart. In 1997, the United States supplanted Japan as the industrialized country with the longest working hours. Behind the statistical averages, the grim truth is that millions of people are actually working longer and harder than they want to, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. One in four Canadians now racks up more than fifty hours a week on the job, compared to one in ten in 1991. And that is before one adds in the long hours we spend commuting.

Whatever happened to the Age of Leisure? Why are so many of us still working so hard? One reason is money. Everyone needs to earn a living, but the endless hunger for consumer goods means that we need more and more cash. So instead of taking productivity gains in the form of extra time off, we take them in higher incomes.

Technology, meanwhile, has allowed work to seep into every corner of life. In the age of the information superhighway, there is nowhere to hide from email, faxes and phone calls. Once you can tap into the company database from home, access the Internet from an airplane, or take a call from the boss at the beach, everyone is potentially on duty all the time. I know from experience that working from home can easily slide into working all the time. In an interview, Marilyn Machlowitz, the author of *Workaholics* (1980), claimed that in the twenty-first century the pressure to be “always-on” is universal: “Workaholics used to be the people who would work



anytime, anywhere. What has changed is that it has become the norm to be on call 24/7.”

There is also a lot more to do in most jobs. After years of re-engineering and downsizing, companies expect employees to shoulder the workload left behind by their laid-off colleagues. With the fear of unemployment hanging over offices and factories, many people regard putting in long hours as the best way to prove their worth. Millions go to work even when too tired or ill to be effective. Millions more never take their full vacation entitlement.

This is madness. Working too hard is bad for us and for the economy. A 2002 study carried out at Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan, found that men who work sixty hours a week are twice as likely to have a heart attack as men who put in forty hours. That risk is tripled for those who sleep less than four hours a night at least twice a week.

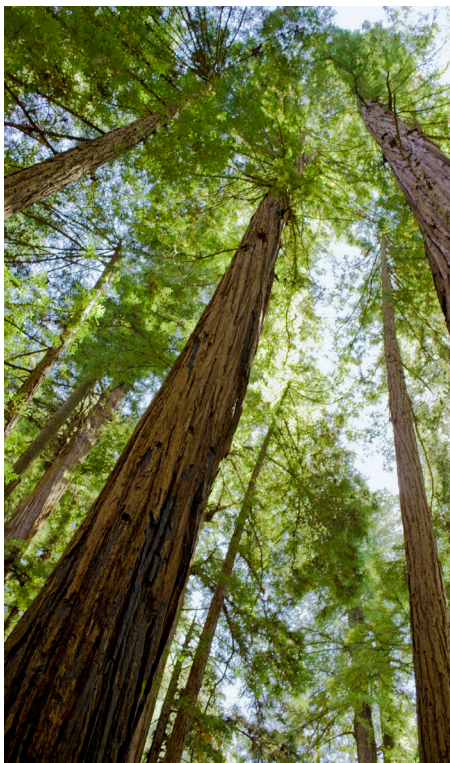
Companies also pay a heavy price for imposing a longhours culture. Productivity is notoriously hard to measure, but academics agree that overwork eventually hits the bottom line. It is common sense: we are less productive when we are tired, stressed, unhappy or unhealthy. According to the International Labour Organization, workers in Belgium, France and Norway

are more productive per hour than are Americans. The British clock up more time on the job than do most Europeans, and have one of the continent’s poorest rates of hourly productivity to show for it. Working less often means working better.

Beyond the great productivity debate lies what may be the most important question of all: What is life for? Most people would agree that work is good for us. It can be fun, even ennobling. Many of us enjoy our jobs — the intellectual challenge, the physical exertion, the socializing, the status. But to let work take over our lives is folly. There are too many important things that need time, such as friends, family, hobbies, and rest.

Everywhere, and especially in the long-hours economies, polls show a yearning to spend less time on the job. In a recent international survey by economists at Warwick University and Dartmouth College, 70% of people in twenty seven countries said they wanted a better work-life balance. In the United States, the backlash against workaholism is gathering steam. More and more blue-chip firms, from Starbucks to Wal-Mart, face lawsuits from staff allegedly forced to put in unpaid overtime. Americans are snapping up books that show how a more leisurely approach to work, and to life in general, can bring happiness and success. In 2003, U.S. campaigners for shorter working hours held the first national Take Back Your Time Day on October 24, the date when, according to some estimates, Americans have worked as much as Europeans do in a year.

All over the industrial world, recruitment managers report that younger applicants have started asking questions that would have been unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago: Can I leave the office at a reasonable hour in the evening? Is it possible to trade income for more vacation time? Will I have control over my working hours? In interview after interview, the message is coming through loud and clear: we want to work, but we want to have a life, too.



## Living Deeply

By Janet Luhrs

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow of life...*

— Henry David Thoreau

When I first got involved with voluntary simplicity, I heard this quote from Thoreau over and over. It was supposed to symbolize the movement, somehow. I listened and thought it sounded right, but I didn't really and truly get it. First I thought it meant that anyone who wanted to honestly simplify had to go live in the woods. My little dream was that my family would go off and live in a log cabin in the woods, simply ever after. Everything would take care of itself from there on.

Six years later I'm still living in the same house in the same city. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what it all meant. Now, finally, I really, deeply understand the quote. The key word is not woods, it is deliberately. What the heck does

that really mean? This one word, in my opinion, is the hallmark of a simple life.

People and reporters often ask me what I think simple living is all about. They want to know how low an income they can live on. They want to know if they should keep their condo in the city. Does simple living mean giving up their car? Does it mean never traveling? Does it mean living in poverty? Do you have to go meditate on top of a mountain in Tibet to be really simple? Do you have to live in an austere house? Must you live an austere existence? Can you never go to restaurants or movies?

Simple living is about living deliberately. That's all. You choose your existence rather than sailing through life on automatic pilot. Your existence can be in the woods, in the city, as a carpet cleaner, a doctor, an office manager, a retired person, a single person, a parent of six, a person in his 20s, a person in her 80s. You could have any level of income, but you hang on to a good chunk of your income, whatever it is. Simple living is about having money in the bank and a zero balance on your credit card statement. If you want to travel, you are conscious enough about your choice that you are willing to give up something else. I've chosen to have kids' science projects, newspapers, and my sister's slippers cluttering the living room rather than living an austere existence. Someone else might like austerity because it brings a sense of peace and order. Either way, we've chosen these things consciously ... they didn't just "happen." Simple living is about making deliberate, thoughtful choices. The difference is that you are fully aware of why you are living your particular life, and that life is one you have chosen thoughtfully.

Living deeply means living consciously ... being fully present, fully aware. If you buy a big house, you are fully aware of the yin and yang trade-offs involved. The yin of a big house is that it is pleasant and comfortable, maybe even impressive. The yang is that you need to work many, many more hours at

your job in order to pay for it, and that means giving up other parts of your life. When you live deliberately, you are totally aware of this balance before ever signing a paper. When you live on automatic pilot, you skim the surface of life and see only the immediate gratification of this house. Then you wonder, months or years later, why you are on the treadmill of work and spend, work and spend.

Living deeply means living intimately ... closely tied to the people, places, and things in your life. When you simplify, you'll have space and time to know and love people in a deeper way. You'll present your authentic self to the world and will create a life that is authentic for you. You'll surround yourself with people who like and love you for who you are deep inside, rather than the professional or other kind of persona you project to the world. Simplicity and living deeply means shedding all of those outward layers of image and busyness that keep us from being close to ourselves and other people. It is a more authentic life. Simplicity is living from your essence ... your core. You can discover this essence only when you slow down and begin to live deliberately, consciously.

Thoreau says: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn. ... The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive."

When I first learned about simplicity, I didn't know what awake meant. Surely I was awake or I wouldn't be able to drive my car, talk on the phone, take out the garbage. Now I know that being asleep means at least two things: you can really be asleep, like at night when you are in bed. But you can also be asleep during the day by not paying attention.

I can drive my car but be thinking of a discussion I had yesterday with my neighbor. I will notice almost nothing



on the way to the store because I am on automatic pilot and am thinking of the discussion. I miss all of life that I have just whizzed past. I don't even feel my hands on the steering wheel. I can talk on the phone while I am stirring my dinner on the stove, thinking about what to put into the pot next and only half aware of what my friend is saying. I miss the intimacy of her voice, of what she is really saying, really needing. I can stay on the surface of that relationship. I can wonder why I don't feel deeply intimate with the people around me. I can get tired of living a perfunctory life. I can take out the garbage on automatic pilot and not even be aware that I just walked out to the sidewalk holding a heavy can. I can be asleep this way.

How did we get this way? When did we decide that more and bigger stuff would give us a better life? When was the last time a busy calendar gave anyone more serenity? Do we really get more joy from worrying about, rearranging, and dusting our things than we do from visiting with a friend in an intimate way? Do our soulful, intimate friends really care whether our houses are decorated in the latest style and whether we spent an extra five minutes worrying about a certain vase? Do we like ourselves more if we move up from a medium-size to a big-screen television set? Will that make zoning out every night a little more pleasant? Is zoning out what we always dreamed was the meaning of life?

When simplicity friend and colleague Joe Dominguez, author of *Your Money or Your Life*, died, our mutual friend Duane Elgin, author of *Voluntary Simplicity*, delivered the most profound yet simple remembrance at Joe's service. The few lines he read summed up the essence of a deliberate, intimate life: "Joe did not care if you made a bunch of money. He wanted to know if you had enough money to share your life freely with others. Joe did not care 'who you knew.' He cared if you knew yourself and if you could be true to your soul's integrity. Joe did not care how many college degrees you had. He cared whether you were willing to show up, each day, in the school of life and learn your soul's lessons. Joe did not care how old you were. He cared if you were old enough to be wise about life and to meet its challenge with humor, inventiveness, and truth. Joe did not care about your guru or astrological sign. He wanted to know if you were in touch with your soul's fire and whether you were willing to take a stand for what you love and believe."

When you live deeply, consciously, sucking the marrow out of life, you will live a full, robust, honest, and intimate life. When you skim over the surface, never stopping to really, deeply feel or think about what you are doing, or when you simply react to one event after another, you will discover, as Thoreau laments, that you have not lived. This is the essence of simplicity ... to live with full awareness and with passion.

## CIRCLE QUESTION

Time is an issue for most of us. Do you feel that you have sufficient time for relationships or activities that you would like to pursue?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The industrial and technology revolutions promised to give us greater wealth and more leisure time. Is this true in your life? Has the increasing amount of technologies increased your leisure time, or made you work longer?
2. The time you spend on or for work includes more than the hours you are paid for. It may include commuting, purchasing and maintaining clothing, eating out, and recovering from work (entertainment, vacations). How much time out of office per week do you devote to work?
3. In "Living Deeply," Luhrs discusses the concept of living deliberately. Are there areas of your life in which you now live very deliberately? If so, what are they?
4. What do you do to remind yourself of the basics of your life, the things that are most important to you?

Learn more about Northwest Earth Institute's discussion-based resources at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).