



Marian Van Eyk McCain

BEGINNING

by Marian Van Eyk McCain

The Frog Pond

I shine my torch on the garden pond.

A carpet of duckweed covers almost the entire surface of the water, still and smooth and green as a golf course, broken here and there by the pinnate leaf of a water parsnip.

Around the edges, the honey-coloured rocks are almost hidden now, in a tangle of wild plants.

I am searching for snails and slugs. For although they are welcome to feast at will here, in this wild corner of the garden, I cannot risk that some time later tonight they will make the two metre journey to the place where wildness ends and the cabbage patch begins.

There seem to be neither snails nor slugs abroad here tonight. But the arc of my torch beam catches something else. A pair of eyes, just above the water level. And another, and another... Small faces, still and solemn, under rakish little hats of duckweed.

My pond has frogs again.

I never think to peel back the mat of water parsnip roots and duckweed to look for spawn or tadpoles in the Spring. So every year the fully-formed frogs seem to appear from nowhere, as though they had parachuted in from somewhere else. Yet I know they were born here. Deep within the brown-green water of this tiny pond, they hatched and swam and slowly turned themselves from wriggling tadpoles into miniature frogs. Right here, beneath the duckweed and beneath my awareness, their miracle of transformation happened and their amphibian lives began. This is their taken-for-granted world and this, to them, is all the world there is. Beyond the rocks, beyond the nettles, lies the far edge of the Universe.

I swing my torch again and count them. Six pairs of eyes – or is it seven? Ah, there is another, almost hidden in the water parsnips. It feels like one of those “can you find it?” puzzles we loved as children. You stare and stare at the page and suddenly there is a tiger in the undergrowth. Or a frog in the water parsnips. And you wonder how you could have missed it earlier.

They blend in well, their brownish-green colours melding with the natural colours of the vegetation. In fact, had it been daylight, I doubt I would have seen them at all. For these frogs are made to fit their surroundings. Only Nature's clever use of camouflage has kept them and their ancestors from the greedy beaks of herons.

Are there herons who would eat us alive, too, if we failed to fit in as well with our surroundings as these frogs fit with theirs?

I think there are. And I think they are already here and hungry. For as far as I am aware, there has never, in the history of our world, been a creature which could survive for very long if it failed to fit in properly with its surroundings. We are the first, foolish animals to try it. And our arrogance may be our undoing.

So the herons of global warming and climate change, the herons of water shortage and of desertification, they and all the other herons will fly in from the outer edges of the Universe and catch and eat us, and the big experiment will be over.

But what if we changed our ways now? Will it be too late?

I don't know. No-one knows. But we can surely try.

This book is to share the discoveries I have made about how living properly in one's own, small pond, blending in with the rest of Nature, living simply and being happy.

I am not sure if these frogs are happy. Their eyes are unblinking and their tiny faces are inscrutable. But they are still and quiet and living patiently, peacefully and – as far as I can tell – totally in the here and now. I have noticed that on the odd occasions when I can manage do that, it seems to bring me a certain kind of happiness which I should like to feel more often – all the time, if possible.

As I walk back down the path, searching for slugs and snails in my torch beam, I am aware of a memory that keeps trying to surface. It seems to be important, but I cannot quite grasp it. Like a dream, forgotten on waking, it has slipped too far over the rim of my consciousness and I cannot haul it back. Never mind. If it is important, I expect it will return.

Why I Wrote this Book

This book about simplicity is written for two reasons. Firstly, I am now much nearer to the end of my life than to the beginning So before I die, I want to share my most important insights about simple living, on the offchance that people might find them interesting and/or useful.

I have explored simplicity in many different settings: in a downtown city apartment, in suburbia, in a country cottage, in a caravan in the middle of an empty field, in an intentional community and “on the road” with a car and a tent. I have lived alone, with friends, with family – both nuclear and extended – with community members and as part of a couple. My life has seen war and peace, drought, flood, fire and earthquake. In every one of those settings, I have been both hungry and full, sick and well, happy and miserable, depressed and lively, well-off and short of cash.

My journey to simplicity has been in some ways a journey back. For my life started out in a very simple setting compared to that of my own children and grandchildren. As a child in World War Two, I found myself in a family that owned very few of the consumer goods and labour-saving devices we take for granted today. We had no refrigerator, no washing machine, no car and of course no computer or TV. Just a radio and an old, wind-up gramophone. We did not even have a telephone in the house until I was nine – the same year the war ended. There was little outside entertainment, as all lighting was blacked out and on many nights, soon after dark, the bombs would begin falling.

The images from those war years are vivid still; the tin hats, the gas masks, the thankful prayers when morning dawned and our house still stood intact, or one of the rare letters, blue-scrawled and scissored by the army censor, came from my faraway father. Yet strangely, despite the ration books, the powdered eggs, the utterly disgusting margarine and the absence of so many things the grownups missed, my child's world seemed full of treats. There were sandwiches made of parsnips with artificial banana flavouring, (yes, really!) and squishy mint balls rolled in dried milk powder. We had home made Cornish pasties, deftly shaped by Grandma's expert fingers, delicious, wonderful potato cake on Sunday afternoons, saffron buns, and glasses of full-flavoured cider that came in re-usable glass bottles with pop-off stoppers that squeaked and clattered against their necks. There were flowers and home grown vegetables in the garden, and loganberries ripened on the fence. In the nearby park was a pond, and in Spring I brought home frog spawn in a jar and raised tadpoles in a shady corner by the air-raid shelter.

My grandparents, my mother, and my aunts cherished and nourished me throughout those years, soothed my fears, shaped my world. And, despite the war, it was for me an amazingly good world, crammed with simple joys – Sunday dinners, country picnics, blackberry picking expeditions, gardening, listening to the radio – where the severe scarcities of things served only to heighten our enjoyment of what we had.

I have tried, for years, to find a word that completely expresses the sweet, joyful fullness of that kind of simple, close-boundaried life, but nothing captures it. However it is that feeling, never fully named nor expressed, which has informed and shaped so many of my adult choices in later years. It is like a treasure I rediscovered and now hold close to my heart.

When I look around me now at our glutted, bored, wasteful, consumer culture, I find myself tracking back along the years, searching for the point at which the excited release from wartime privation and the welcoming back of exotic items like oranges and bananas, real silk and coloured china turned into an insatiability, a greedy grasping for more and more and more until there seemed no boundary any longer – and nothing left to savour. (If strawberries are available year-round, where's the excitement of tasting the first one in June?). It is impossible to discern the moment when it all changed because there wasn't one. It was just a gradual, creeping change. And with that sort of change, it can take a long time before you wake up and notice what is happening.

It is said that if you try to place a frog in boiling water, it will immediately leap out, but if you place it in cold water and bring it very, very slowly to the boil it won't notice the danger until too late. And it will die. I don't know if anyone has ever literally tried this experiment – I certainly hope they have not – but you get the picture. We are all a bit like boiling frogs in this huge, consumerist, materialist, polluted pot, and we need to make our move now, before it is too late – the move to a simple, sustainable lifestyle. But how do you convince everyone of that without making it sound as though there is a lot of “giving up” involved? People usually don't like giving things up.

However, if you pick up any one of the books on simple living – and there are quite a few of them – you will find the same theme running through all of them. It is the re-discovery of delight.

Simple living is delight-filled living. Not because we have more material things to enjoy, but because our enjoyment of the things we have increases by at least a factor of ten. Think of it this way: if you could choose between eating a huge banquet but scarcely being able to taste anything, or slowly eating one bowl of strawberries and cream with your ability to taste heightened to ten times what it is now, which would you choose?

So yes, there is some giving-up to do. But it is the giving up of stressful lifestyles, of hyperstimulation, of addictions, of boredom, of clutter and of despair. And exchanging it for more delight. Have you heard the saying “Less is more?” Well in this case, it is. And I hope to help you prove it.

I believe that deep within many people like me, those of us over the age of forty who managed to live out most of our childhoods before the modern era of excess, of pre-packaged “infotainment,” McDonalds on every corner, bubble-wrapped plastic toys and total Disneyfication of the minds of children, there are intact memories of simple, home-made pleasures and the enjoyment of sufficiency. And I believe that it is up to us to mine those memories and use them to construct a better world. So in a way, I felt I had no choice but to write this book.

To me it is important that people my age should have their say about what is happening to our world, and should put forward their ideas about what we can and should do to fix it. That is why so many the things I have to say about the simple life are woven in with stories of my own experience. For I have lived through many decades of enormous change.

By the time my own children were born, the steady creep of consumerism was well under way. By then, I was living in a large, suburban house, surrounded by many of the modern conveniences my own childhood home had lacked. I made regular trips to the mall, and bought – within reason – whatever took my fancy. I was well and truly in the frog pot, coming slowly to the boil and not noticing it. But eventually, like many other people, I began to feel burdened by the sheer weight of my collected “stuff” and the increasing speed of my life. And around that same time, I began to realise the awful truth to which I – like most of us – had been blind for so long. Which was that for everyone in the world to live as I did, we would need at three worlds the size of this one to sustain us all. It was a shocking realisation. That was when my search for the simple life began in earnest.

I care so passionately about our beautiful Earth that I cannot bear to see it being destroyed. I evolved over billions of years, are doomed to perish if we folk in the rich countries continue to live the way we are living at present, for the planet's resources cannot sustain us at this level.

So this is the second reason for writing this book. It is my way of helping to spread the word about the urgent need for cultural change and what each of us might do towards bringing that change about.

I know from my own warm memories that simple living can bring joy and contentment. But I know, also, that we cannot go back. I could not re-create, for my own children, all the details of my childhood life, even though I did incorporate as many as would fit. And neither would I want to deprive them of living fully in their own times. Life moves forward. Too often, we romanticize the past. We forget the downside of life in the old days, the fleas in the horsehair mattresses, the unhealthy cholesterol load in the “bread and dripping” the cruelty of bear baiting, the inhumanity of slavery, the evils of workhouse and asylum. So rather than attempting to turn back the clock, or to create some kind of anachronistic, Amish-like bubble to live in, we need to move forward, using every ounce of knowledge, wisdom, creativity and skill at our disposal to help construct a world which incorporates the best of the past with the achievements of the present and the vast potential of the future. This can be – if we do it right – a world which is based, for the first time in history, on the perfect balance and integration of the yin and the yang, the masculine and the feminine, the body, the mind, the heart, the soul and the spirit.

But each of us can only achieve this in our own lives. We cannot change the culture in which we live except – as Gandhi once suggested – by being the change we want to see happen. So the only sure way to go forward is to look at ourselves, at our needs, at what it is to be a human being; to work out, for ourselves, the optimum way to live, to live long, in health, harmony, and accord with other creatures in the web of life. Each of us has to be an inventor, a creator, a discoverer of the right way for humans to live. Thus each of our lives becomes a laboratory for a new experiment. Once you begin to see it this way, you realize just what an exciting project it is. And you, the reader, have already embarked on it, I know. For if you had not, you would not have picked up this book. We are pioneers together, you and I – and many, many others who are travelling in the same direction.

My search has taken me a long time. It has led me down many blind alleys. And even now, though I live a simpler style of life than many people I know, there are still things about it that I need to change. But there are some key discoveries I have made on the journey so far which I want to share with as many people as I can. Hence this little book.

Discovery – Simplicity Starts from the Inside

The first thing I have discovered about simplicity is that it grows from within, like a tree.

When I was a child, learning in Nature Study about the growth rings on a tree, I got the idea that the rings somehow got slapped on from the outside, like another layer of paint on a wall. Either I wasn't listening to the teacher (which is totally possible, as I often didn't) or no-one actually explained the process. After all, it is utterly obvious that tree growth must occur on the inside, since no-one has ever seen trees coating themselves with a new layer of bark every year, so why would anyone even need to explain it?

So of course I felt silly when I realized my error.

But that didn't stop me from making similar errors about other things, and simplicity was one of them. I really did think that simplicity came from the outside.

I saw other people shipping out their junk to charity shops and jumble sales, giving things away to friends, de-cluttering their attics and basements, and beaming with delight about how free and clear and wonderful they felt. I wanted to be like them and have that free, clear and wonderful feeling. Except that I couldn't bear to part with my junk. I wished I could give up hoarding things that “might come in useful one day.” I wished I, too, could take truckloads of stuff to the tip instead of hanging on to every last button, washer, rubber band, moth-eaten jumper, birthday card, love letter, theatre programme and white elephant gift – not to mention every single one of those little black containers we used to get 35mm films in. And not to mention collecting even more junk because I couldn't resist wandering into every charity shop on the High Street and poring over any pile of other people's discarded junk that I happened to see, just in case, it, too, might contain something which “might come in useful one day.”

I saw pictures of house interiors which were sparse and elegant, like Ikebana flower arrangements, and I looked around my own cluttered house, with its photographs and calendars and books and piles of yet-to-be-filed paper and I envied those people who lived in the sparse, elegant spaces. I tried telling myself that nobody really lived like that except in magazines – until I met some people who did.

I saw and read about people cutting back their work hours, managing on less money so as to have a better family life, less stress and better health (a trend now officially called “downshifting”). And I envied them. I wished I did not have a full-time job, several part-time jobs and a hundred projects and involvements which combined to eat up every second of my time and which often plunged me into agitated states of overwhelm. I thought that if I watched and studied those people I would learn how to scale down too, and my life would be more relaxed.

(You will never believe this, I'm sure, but one of the things I was doing, in amongst all my other activities at the peak of those high-stress, busy years was teaching seminars on stress-management!)

For some reason that I never bothered to examine, I was always fascinated – right from my teenage years – by stories and books about people who went out into the depths of the countryside somewhere and bought rambling old derelict farmhouses and renovated them. I loved reading (from the comfort of my armchair, of course) about how miserable they were when they first encountered the cold, the mud, the mice galumphing up and down the insides of the walls, the weird neighbours and the sheer enormity of the task they had set themselves, and about their feeling that it had all been a terrible mistake. And how they gradually – through lots of fascinating and usually very funny (in retrospect) adventures – turned their dream into reality and lived happily ever after surrounded by quacking ducks and honking geese, new-laid eggs, sunshine and a wonderful sense of community. It always turned out that way, of course. I guess the people for whom it didn't turn out that way – and they are probably legion – are far too embarrassed to write books about how it all went wrong.

Some time around my middle thirties, I also became fascinated by the stories of people who went out (also into the depths of the countryside, usually), plonked themselves down in the middle of an empty field – or a clearing in a forest – and started creating a house out of natural materials, like mud that they sieved through an old bed spring (old bed springs seemed to be de rigeur with mud brick builders), mixed with their hands or feet – either alone or with jolly groups of their friends who came out from the city to help and who all (of course – don't we all?) adored the idea of frolicking around making mud pies and having pasta and red wine afterwards, sitting on a straw bale.

And speaking of straw bales – there were those who had discovered you could put up an amazing and wonderful and totally eco-friendly house in a matter of days if you used straw bales – especially if you had the requisite number of those same friends who come out from the city to do this convivial stuff with the physical waste and the pasta and the red wine.

Then there were the ones (these were usually the ones who chose the clearing-in-the-middle-of-a-forest option) with chainsaws, who cut down some carefully selected trees (taking care to say thank-you) and made the most incredibly beautiful structures, usually on stilts. They were houses to die for, these. And the descriptions came complete with instructions as to how to prevent termites eating the whole thing.

The mud ones were equally beautiful, and I slavered over those.

Simplicity, I thought, came from wanting what I saw and read in those books and magazines. It came from the outside of me, like the tree slapping on its new bark.

I went to an astrologer, once. He was also a psychic, though in those days he didn't admit it. His name was Aurelio and he had a broad, beaming face, some missing teeth and a thick, Italian accent. He knew everything about me, even though he had never set eyes on me before. It was astounding. He knew about my cluttered, un-simple life. And he told me that one day I would simplify it.

I told Aurelio that I had been trying to let go of my clutter and my hoarding habits for years but that it was something I found too difficult, no matter how hard I struggled. He smiled his lovely, gappy smile and said that I should not worry about it but that one day these things would begin to fall away, all by themselves.

As he spoke, I had the image of leaves on a tree. If you try to pull them off, they resist. But when the autumn comes, one day they just let go of their own accord and flutter gently to the ground. Simplicity would be like that.

Bringing back into my life the sweet simplicity that I remembered from my childhood – a simplicity born of wartime austerity but sweetened for me by the care of a loving family who wanted all that is best for their beloved child – would be not a matter of struggling but of waiting for the signals from within. My leaves would begin to drop when my insides had changed enough to allow it. Then, and only then, would the season be right. That sounded really good.

Even so, I continued to struggle and to yearn. I, too, wanted a mud brick house.

Getting Started

Let's start by asking the obvious question: What is a simple life?

Does the phrase immediately make you think of free-range eggs, home-grown vegetables and woodstoves? Or does it sound more like a gypsy caravan, a hippie bus or a bender in the woods?

Maybe, when you hear the phrase, you start to imagine yourself throwing out half the clutter in your attic, getting rid of one of your cars, resigning from all the committees you are on, saying “no” more often and trying to get your head – and your diary – a bit clearer. Or perhaps it conjures up dreams of selling up and buying a little, inexpensive place somewhere in Provence, or Spain, or Crete. Or is your dream to own your own island, or to restore a croft in the Highlands of Scotland?

For many people, it has connotations – perhaps slightly disturbing ones – of lowered income, since so many of the things which make our lives feel stressed and complicated have to do with the struggle to earn more money.

But for most people, it simply means to have a life in which there would be more time there is now to spend with significant others, more time to think, dream and ponder, and more time to smell the roses. It would be a life of fewer demands, less stress and no feelings of overwhelm.

This last definition is closest to the one I had in mind when I decided to write this book. However, my definition of the simple life has four more elements to it.

The first is green-ness. By which I mean a sense that one is taking on one's share of responsibility for the future of the Earth, as a living planet.

To me, this is an essential element because it gives meaning and purpose to all our efforts to simplify; a meaning and purpose which transcend our personal, individual desires to make ourselves a bit more comfortable.

The second is aliveness. By which I mean an ever-deepening awareness of ourselves as living, pulsing, sensing, experiencing creatures of exquisite sensitivity to the world around us, and a willingness to engage fully with every experience that comes along.

I believe that engaging our senses more fully enables us to move from valuing quantity to valuing quality. When our senses are fully awake and we have developed our sensitivity to stimulus in this way, we can now derive the same amount of pleasure from one perfect rose in a vase as it would once have taken the entire Chelsea Flower Show to evoke. This is the key element which makes the simple life more pleasurable than any other kind of life. It is this element which brings back that delight I was talking about earlier – as in the joy of tasting the season's first strawberry.

The third element I have added is relationship. By which I mean an understanding of ourselves as parts of a whole and a sense of connection with all other humans and all other living creatures on our planet. Which includes a readiness to share with them, in mutual respect, co-operation and caring.

We have all been brought up in the old, nineteenth-century worldview which saw competition between organisms – including humans – as the basic, natural law which drove evolution. Which is why our economics, our politics and so much of our lives are still based so firmly on competitive models. It is only in very recent times that new discoveries in biology have revealed co-operation and symbiosis (organisms working together to mutual benefit) to be far more significant than competition.

The fourth element is spirituality. By which I don't mean religion. I mean something which is fully compatible with all religions – a sense of wonder, a sense of the sacred in all things, a humility, a reverence for the mysterious workings of a universe far too vast and immense for our finite minds to grasp. Without this spiritual element, Spring is just a series of dates on the calendar, a new-born baby is just a small, damp, floppy object rather than an utter miracle, and a sunset is just a pretty picture in the sky.

My hope for this book is that it will assist you in understanding, defining, creating – and maintaining thereafter – exactly the sort of simple life you want for yourself. That's a big ambition, I know. But hey – why not aim high?

I hope that you will read the book slowly, try the exercises, experiment. So here we go. First, let's return to the frog pond for a few moments. Then I'll tell you about my next, big discovery. And then I'll ask you some important questions. For this book is not just about me. It is also – and most importantly – about you.