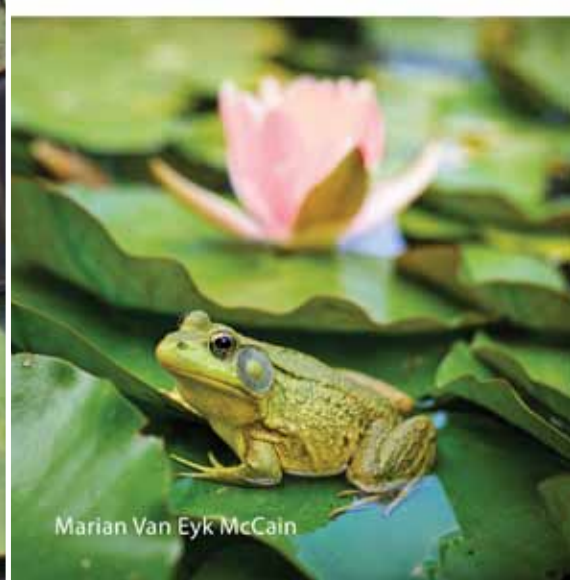


the LILYPAD LIST

Seven Steps to the Simple Life



Marian Van Eyk McCain

BOOK EXTRACT

Extract from

The Lilypad List:

Seven Steps to the Simple Life

Twelfth title in the low-cost GreenSpirit Book Series

By Marian Van Eyk McCain

Sitting Still (chapter extract)

How do they manage to stay so still, these frogs?

As I hold them in my torch beam, they remain motionless, unblinking. From where I stand, I am too far away to discern the telltale movements of their throats as they breathe. So for all I know, they could be small pieces of wood, carved in the shape of frogs' heads, with tiny knots in the place of eyes. Or they could be merely a trick of my own eyes – an optical illusion.

I know, though, that when they do move, it is so lightning fast that my slow eyes cannot even catch it. You have to be quick if your favourite dinner is a fast-flying insect and you have a bare millisecond in which to grab it as it whizzes by.

Evolution has given these frogs specialised cells in the retinas of their eyes, which are designed to pick out movement. A frog, I have heard, can starve to death sitting on top of a pile of dead flies. You would want to shake that frog, wouldn't you? You would want to say "Look there – flies! Eat them! Don't be so *stupid!*"

And here am I, with my clever, convoluted brain, every bit as much a child of evolution as these frogs. Yet I, too, could starve to death in the midst of plenty if I did not recognise what I am sitting on as an alternative source of nourishment. Evolution encouraged me to make tools, to speak, to explore and to create. It has programmed me to search and to seek, to learn and to grow. But if I and all my people, in our search for knowledge and our love of acquiring new things, and our clever use of tools have come to the point where that very tendency is beginning to endanger our lives, we are in big trouble. What if we are so busy watching for the next bit of amazing technology to come whizzing by and rescue us from our predicament that we fail to recognise that we are sitting on a pile of simple treasure? Then we shall perish – and take the poor frogs with us.

These frogs in my pond are so still, so quiet. I envy them their stillness, their quietness, their patience. I want more of that for myself. Since I have come to live here, I notice that I am appreciating silence and stillness more and more. The dark peacefulness of the nights is so soothing and refreshing. And in that night stillness, I can hear wonderful sounds. The wheezy bark of a fox, several fields away, the low calling of an owl, a cricket's chirp. And the sound of the breeze stirring the leaves of the hawthorn tree outside my window.

There is a small toad at the base of that tree tonight, and I just miss stepping on him – or her – as I make my way back to the house after slug patrol. The toad is probably on slug patrol too. I like toads as much as I like their cousins, the frogs. When I dug the pond, I made it as deep as I could and at the bottom I placed some old flower pots on their sides, weighted with stones. I know that toads like such places to hibernate. Maybe this toad will spend next winter in my pond. I would like that. I pick the little creature up and carry it, cool and heavy in my hand, to the safety of a nearby flower bed, speaking my gratitude for all the slugs it has already caught and my hope for much future success in the slug hunt. The toad, dark as night, sidles away under the nasturtiums. The sweet peas nearby fill my nostrils with delight, and I pause in the doorway to take another sniff. For smells, too, are enhanced by the stillness of night. And if I didn't come out after dark, with my torch, to pick the slugs and snails off the vegetables, I would miss an opportunity to thrill my senses with these wondrous night scents.

Once, when I lived in the tropics, there was a small gardenia bush which grew right outside my bedroom window. Its scent was so heavy and so luscious that it almost kept me awake. In its branches lived a bright green tree frog which chirped all night in the same spot, catching night-flying moths and other winged things which flitted around the house, attracted by the dim light on the porch. Looking back, I think frogs have always been around, calling to me to notice them. I am glad I am noticing now – and listening to their small, quiet messages. They have lots to teach me.

Discovery – The Great Paradox of Simplicity

The second discovery I want to share with you is the one I made when I began reflecting on this simplicity thing and analysing what it is all about.

It was the discovery that when you actually stop to think about it, simplicity is far from being a simple subject. In fact, as I set out on my journey to explore exactly what is "the simple life," the first thing I met, sitting like a boulder in the middle of the road, was a huge paradox.

It dawned on me that if you look at the average person in an average house in an average town or village in the Western world, living an average sort of life, you realise that the life he or she lives is quite complex. There are bills to be paid, timelines to be adhered to, obligations to meet, money to earn, taxes to figure out, cars to drive, a household to maintain, a lawn to mow. There are washing machines that break down, kids who get sick, marriages that go on the rocks, tyres that go flat, and fleas on the cat. Dealing with the demands of an ordinary life is no simple matter. Which, I suppose, is why so many people dream of escaping to something simpler, more basic, more peaceful. A little cottage in the country, perhaps. Or even something on a Greek island, far away from traffic and pollution and the relentless nine-to-five slog and the twice daily commute with all the other wage slaves.

But when you look more closely, you find that, in fact, the average life that I just described is, in many ways, the simpler option. Just as you can drive your car through traffic without spending much mental energy on what your hands and feet are doing, so can you live that average sort of life without having to think for yourself a whole lot. At the supermarket you can buy prepared meals to heat up in the microwave. Insurance – for yourself, your house, your health, your pets, your possessions – takes care of the worry about unexpected expenses that may arise from catastrophe. TV provides your entertainment, newspapers keep you informed. The school educates your children and your favourite mechanic looks after your car – which has cruise control for long drives. Your bills go on direct debit, your employer pays your salary straight into your bank, and your money is available at the touch of an ATM. Labour-saving devices do your housework, central heating keeps you warm and double glazing keeps out the noise. And when it is holiday time, a travel agent will find you a package tour that includes everything, so all you have to do is lie on the beach and turn pink.

Holidays, in fact, are a good example of the paradox. Ask people to describe what would be the most simple, basic, no-frills holiday they can think of, and they will probably say a camping trip. Yet if you have ever planned and organised a camping trip you will know that a package tour to Spain – or even Africa – is really a much simpler option – at least for you, if not for the folks who set it up for you.

So "The Simple Life," as most people imagine it, is not necessarily less trouble to live, or less trouble to organise. In fact it will probably take more planning, more thinking about and quite a lot more effort to live than the average, mainstream sort of lifestyle that most people have, in the same way that choosing dinner from the "à la carte" menu takes more energy and forethought than saying "I'll have the set meal, please."

There is really no difference between the package tour and the camping trip, because in each case someone has to organise it all. It is just that with the package tour, that part is hidden. From your point of view, it is a question of pay your money, collect your vouchers, tie on your luggage labels and go.

In the same way, the ready-to-eat meal you buy in the supermarket has been cooked and assembled by someone, somewhere, albeit on factory scale rather than in a home kitchen. What is hidden from you is not only those people's labour but the labour of the people who made the plastic container it comes in, the labour of the people who made the plastic that the container is made of, the lorry that transported both the food and the containers to the factory and then the completed dish from factory to supermarket. And then there is the labour of the people who made the lorry and all its components and the people who dug the oil wells to get the oil that made the petrol for the lorry (and the plastic for the container)... And on and on it goes, like "The house that Jack built." All that complexity is totally hidden from us. The simplicity of being able to buy that meal and heat it up is paid for, if you like, by the huge – but hidden – complexity of that meal's creation. So if we seek that other kind of simplicity – the simplicity of the camping trip, the home made bread and home grown vegetables from the garden – we have to take most of that complexity back on to ourselves.

In the same way that the complexity that goes into creating the supermarket meal is hidden from us, so is the true cost. Hidden away out of sight in a supermarket banana, a bag of coffee beans or a cheap shirt is the cost of the fuel it took to get them all there and the cost in human misery and poverty experienced by growers in far-off lands who get paid a pittance for their produce, and the workers who toil in sweatshops or get sick and die from pesticides in plantations and cotton fields.

So what I have realised (not in one, glorious "aha" moment but over a number of years of exploring all this), is that if I want to live in a way that removes me from the guilt of supporting all that, then my life is destined to become, in certain ways, more complex, rather than more simple. The Way of Least Resistance is the way that feels simple. The Way of Consciousness, followed by most of the people whose lifestyles we admire as "simple," does not always feel as simple on the inside as it looks on the outside. That is the paradox I discovered...