Simplify Your Life - Presentation Notes

Intro:

Tonight: informal discussion - popular topic all relate to. How to simplify our complicated lives

There's a growing trend in society towards simplification. Some people call it "downshifting" others use the terms "new frugality" or "voluntary simplicity." Whatever you call it, people clearly feel a need to reconsider the way they live their lives and spend their time.

And before we get rolling I just want to encourage you that…

- anyone’s view on anything we discuss tonight is welcome.
- feel free to make a point at any time.

Webster defines simplicity as (1) freedom from intricacy or complexity (2) absence of elegance, embellishment, luxury, or the like; (3) plainness.

However you define it, "simplicity" is not a term that most of us would use to describe our lives. Have hectic schedules, juggle competing responsibilities, even own devices demand our attention - oven timer beeps, pager vibrates, our palm pilot, planners and organizers are all telling us the same thing: our lives are increasingly (and in some cases alarmingly) complex.

What are you are seeing/feeling in your own life? Are you where you want to be or is your life a little too chaotic?

What warning signs would indicate that your life is becoming too hectic or complex?

After discussion dies down, read the three quotes below. Which one can you relate to and why?

1. Breathless... "Breakfast, if there's time. Grab commuter mug and briefcase (or lunch box) and hop in the car for the daily punishment called rush hour. On the job from 9 to 5. Deal with the boss. Deal with coworkers suppliers clients customers patients. Act busy. Hide mistakes. Smile when handed impossible deadlines...Shoulder the added workload. Watch the clock... Five o'clock. Back in the car and on the freeway for the evening commute. Home. Act human with mates, kids or roommates. Eat. Watch TV. Bed. Eight hours of blessed oblivion." - Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, Your Money or Your Life, p. 4

2. Buried under my to-do list... "Several years ago I was sitting at my desk, idly glancing at my daily schedule, which was laid out in a time-management system roughly the size of Nebraska. This binder was bursting with "to-do" lists, phone logs, time-organizers, meeting maximizers, goal-stabilizers, high-tech efficiency charts, and five- and ten-year life planners. Suddenly, I realized I no longer wanted a life that complicated." - Elaine St. James, Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things that Really Matter, p. 3.

3. Broken relationships... "We looked around us and saw too many broken marriages and suffering children. We saw too many purchases piled up in the garage and too few hours of loving communication within the home. Such a life had no appeal for us." Tyra Arraj with James Arraj, The Treasures of Simple Living: A Family's Search for a Simpler and More Meaningful Life in the Middle of the Forest, p. 17

Another possible symptom… losing our sense of focus. "I spend too much time on irrelevant things and not enough time on the essentials."

Possible follow-up questions:

Is business always bad?

What about the single parent who is busy holding a job, putting dinner on the table, taking their kids to soccer practice? Is their business bad? Is it OK to be busy when it's sacrificial - when it's for someone else's benefit?

Are there some causes bigger than my own comfort that are worth being busy for?
What would a simpler life look like today?

Let's look at the way two couples and two individuals attempted to simplify their lives...

4. Maximizing comfort and minimizing complexity...

“For us, living simply meant reducing the scale, maintaining the comfort, eliminating the complexity, and minimizing the time demands of life as we had known it...” Elaine St. James, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things that Really Matter*, p. 6.

5. Less stuff, more depth...

“...there have been, and still are, many forms of simple living representing a wide spectrum of motives and methods. Their common denominator has been the core assumption that the making of money and the accumulation of things should not be allowed to smother the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of (society)... therefore, the simple life represents an approach to living that self-consciously subordinates the material to the ideal.” - David Shi (Associate Professor of History at Davidson College), *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, p. 3,4.

6. Cultivating your spiritual life

Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote during the chaos of Nazi rule in Germany. Faced with moral collapse in his country, he wrote...

“To be simple is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside down.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 68.

7. Retreat to the woods

Tyra and James Arraj, authors of *The Treasures of Simple Living* quit their jobs, took their children out of school, loaded up a van with all their possessions, and moved to Oregon. They purchased some land in a remote, wooded area and built a simple pole house to live in.

In the 1840's, Henry David Thoreau sought to learn more about life and it's meaning in the woods around Walden pond...

"I went into 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.” - Henry David Thoreau, "Walden," in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 2:44'

Which version of the simple life appeals to you? Which is unappealing? Why?

- Maximizing comfort and minimizing complexity?
- Less stuff, more depth?
- Devotion to God?
- Retreat to the woods

Or do you have a different version?

Transition: A simple life appeals to me because it might give me more control over my life - so that I can be more deliberate about what I'm doing instead of reacting all the time...

1 Sustaining yourself in the wilderness is not that simple or easy! "He (Thoreau) rarely encountered any rustics whose vision was elevated beyond mere survival.” Thoreau concluded, "Plain living didn't necessarily lead to high thinking...(Simple living) entailed far more than living in the woods. Ideally, the simple life could be lived best not in the wilds or in the city, but in 'partially cultivated country' like Concord.” - David E. Shi, *In Search of the Simple Life*, p. 173.)
What about you? What benefits would you hope to gain by pursuing a simpler lifestyle?

Answers might include the ones listed below. Ask responders to explain why they think simplifying their life will achieve a given benefit.

- Stronger relationships.
- Less stress and anxiety.
- At least a feeling of having more control over our lives.
- Concern for environment. Over consumption is tapping our natural resources and placing undue stress on earth.
  - "...we as individuals, and our economy, have moved dangerously close to the limit of Mother Nature's capacity to handle our demands on her....Continued growth, either in population or in consumption, could spell disaster - and our human numbers and our expectations for a higher standard of living are still heading up." - Dominguez and Robin, Your Money or Your Life, p. 14.
- Desire to cultivate our inner spiritual life
- More time for what matters. Explore it further...
  - Think of these categories:
    - What tasks/commitments/interactions demand your attention, but are ultimately not very important? e.g. telemarketer
    - What is important in your life, but doesn't seem urgent (not screaming out for our attention). e.g. time with our children
  - How do we rescue what's important from the clutches of the irrelevant?

Social trends, values, and beliefs that are often said to complicate our lives.

8. Technology

I think we've all been here: the phone rings right as the oven buzzes to tell us dinner is ready. On our way to the phone our palm pilot beeps to remind us to pick up our clothes at the drycleaners, meanwhile the battery is draining on our laptop, and if we don't plug it in right away, we're going to lose the paper we've been working on all day...

As early as the 1840's, men like Henry David Thoreau were becoming skeptical that technology would improve our lives:

"Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor." - Henry David Thoreau, "Walden," in The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 2:44.

If you've been keeping up with the media lately, Thoreau's words seem prophetic:


Why aren't consumers buying the latest gadgets this past holiday season?

"Most folks are trying to figure out the devices that they already have. Americans have poured billions into electronic equipment. That orgy of spending has brought...paroxysms of befuddlement, self doubt, and anger." - U.S. News and World Report, Jan 15, 2001, Overwhelmed by Tech, by James Lardner, David LaGesse, and Janet Rae-Dupree, p. 31.
Increasingly, people are beginning to wonder if technology is making our lives too complicated. 

What do you think?

Not everyone agrees that technology is the culprit. Elaine St. James, author of several best-selling books on simplicity, argues just the opposite. She says,


Does technology help us to simplify our life, or does it make things needlessly complex?

Is technology to really blame for complicating our lives? Or does it make our lives more manageable?

e.g. Doesn't communication technology save time? I don't have to get on my horse and ride three miles to talk to my friends. I can just phone them or send them an email! What could be more simple and efficient?

9. "More is Better"

This credo, widely accepted in our culture, asserts that our quality of life will improve in direct proportion to the number of possessions we accumulate.

But if you've ever resolved to clean out your garage or combed through your junk drawer looking for the batteries you bought six months ago, you realize there's also a dark side to "more is better"...

Show Dominguez and Robin's fulfillment curve (see Dominguez and Robin, Your Money or Your Life, p. 24).

You need a minimal level of food and possessions to survive. As you accumulate more you move into the comfortable zone and then in the realm of luxury. Past the peak, labeled "enough," further accumulation of possessions, they claim, actually reduces the quality of your life. Unchecked, extreme over consumption can even lead to death! To avoid a diminishing quality of life, Dominguez and Robin prefer to stop at "enough":

"Enough is a fearless place. A trusting place. An honest and self-observant place. It's appreciating and fully enjoying what money brings into your life and yet never purchasing anything that isn't needed or wanted... Enough is a wide and stable plateau. It is a place of alertness, creativity, and freedom....being suffocated under a mountain of clutter that must be stored, cleaned, gotten rid of and paid for on time is a fate worse than death.” - Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*, p. 25-26.

What do you think about this model?

What drives people past the peak and on to over consumption?

Everyone seems to think the peak is just out of reach. Is it possible to be satisfied with enough?

**Practical, realistic ways to simplify your life.**

Most people yearn for something akin to this:

"We wanted to understand the fit between our lives and the rest of the natural world. We valued having the time for a rich inner life as well as being of service to others. We wanted life to have meaning, depth and purpose - and not so much clutter.” - Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*, p. 16.

**HOW?** Here are a few suggestions that the "experts" offer. Let's consider the merits of each one.

10. **Reduce clutter**

"A giant step on the road to simplicity is to eliminate the odds and ends that clutter up your home, your car, your office, and your life...Start with your clothes closets and branch out from there. Clean out every closet, every drawer, every shelf, in every room of your house, including the kitchen..." - Elaine St. James, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things that Really Matter*, p. 10.

Our house - kitchen cabinet, medicine cabinet, basement, etc.

Did you know that the average American spends 16 hours a year looking for his car keys?

I don't think anyone would argue with this suggestion. Just one tip on this for those of you who are married - don't throw out your spouse's stuff!
11. Clean up your relationships.

"I'm referring to an impossible marriage or a relationship that isn't going anywhere, and that is causing you stress or pain. If you're in such a relationship, and you've tried to fix it and you can't, get out...Perhaps it's time to think about moving on from a relationship that no longer works for you..." - Elaine St. James, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things that Really Matter*, p. 182,183.

"Give up relationships that don't support you. Let go of those people who are critical or over demanding and who do not enhance your life." - One Step Each Month Can Help Streamline Your Life, Elaine St. James, St. Louis Post-Di Dispatch, Dec 12, 2000, p. 6.

What do you think of St. James advice?

What other values is she ignoring in her pursuit of simplicity?

This raises a larger question - for whom should we simplify our lives? Is this something we do for ourselves or for other people? What's the balance?

12. Slow down.

Most "simplify your life" experts warn against rushing around.

"Give yourself whole weekend days of sanctuary -- no phone, no television, no Internet -- then take that walk, write that poem, or sit in the tub." - Jeff Davidson, *Eight Ways to Simplify Your Life*, Public Management, Feb 2000, vol. 82, issue 2, p27.

"Stop doing two things at once!" - my mom.

But some disagree:

"At some point we began to realize that the world was not going to accommodate us by making fewer demands. We each learned that our inner experience of stress resulted not from the circumstances of our harried lives, but from our habitual way of perceiving life. We learned that we could change our inner worlds - our feelings, our stress levels, even the speed of our lives - by tapping into a way of thinking that makes life easier, simpler, and much more enjoyable." - Richard Carlson and Joseph Bailey, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life: How to Create a More Peaceful, Simpler Life from the Inside Out*, p. xxv. Italics mine.

Does simplifying your life involve slowing down, or is it a state of mind? Why? If it revolves around your mind, what needs to change about the way you think?

Don't active, thoughtful people always find something to fill their lives with?

13. Evaluate your center.

Authors of books on simplicity often use the term "center."

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* defines our center as "...the lens through which we see the world...the source of our security, wisdom, guidance, and power."

Examples include:

E.g. Captain Kirk's drive "To boldly go where no man has gone before."

E.g. Deitrich Bonhoeffer's obsession with "the truth of God."

E.g. Homer Simpson's appetite for doughnuts "...mmm...sprinkles."

E.g. In Gladiator, Russel Crowe (General Maximus) lives for "strength and honor."

E.g. Hatred for the US exhibited by WTC/Pentagon attacks.

A center is made up of powerful ideas and values that shape our outlook and inform our actions. Covey goes on to say...
“Each of us has a center, although most of us don’t recognize it as such. Neither do we realize the all-encompassing effects of that center on every aspect of our life.” - Stephen Covey, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, p. 111.

Do you agree with Covey that most people are unaware of what their center is?

Sample centers: Spouse centered, family centered, money centered, work centered, possessions centered, pleasure centered, friend centered, enemy centered, God centered, self centered

How does the concept of a center affect how simple or complex our lives are?

Check this out:

"Is there a chance that efficiency is not the answer? Is getting more things done in less time going to make a difference - or will it just increase the pace at which I react to the people and circumstances that seem to control my life? Could there be something I need to see in a deeper, more fundamental way - some paradigm within myself that affects the way I see time, my life, and my own nature?" - Stephen Covey, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, p. 41

Any initial reaction to this?

Is simplifying our life a matter of efficiency, or do we need something more?

Can we simplify our lives without having a belief/ value/ center that ties everything we do together?

How would we change our center? Often takes a paradigm shift (covey p. 30-31)

- Must admit we might be off! (humility)
- Must be willing to admit that there might be a center which is a principle that supersedes all other centers. READ ILLUS ON P. 33
“Principles are like lighthouses. They are natural laws that cannot be broken.”

“Change has to be motivated by a higher purpose, by the willingness to subordinate what you want now for what you want later.” p. 48

- Recognize we are responsible for our choices → our boss, spouse, children, parent are not responsible for what we do. ex pp 78-79 – tennis or class

Our values come from our principles. If the center of my life is my career – my source of guidance, power, wisdom and security – then my values reflect that. I will value my position in the company more than perhaps my position in my home, or community., etc.

One philosopher said it is impossible to know how to live if you don’t know what is going to happen after you die – IE. Our belief of the afterlife would have radical impact on way live life now – HOW?

Jesus Christ advocated having clear priorities.

Matt. 6:19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. "The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear ( ), your whole body will be full of light. "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

JC stresses imp of having a "clear eye." Greek word for clear, haplous, lit. "simple" or "single." Led John Wesley and other commentators >define "clear eye" as "a focus on a single aim in life."

"single aim" Jesus has in mind in this passage is serving God. Jesus is pleading with us here to not let our pursuit of material wealth distract us from our spiritual life. He urges us to make serving God our first priority.

Certainly if God exists, knowing and serving him are the most important things we could do.

In Luke, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who spends his life focused on filling his silos full of grain (accumulating wealth). But he dies without ever 1st knowing God. God's verdict: "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?" Jesus concludes "So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." - Luke 12:20,21.

Christ's tip on simplifying our life: don't let your complex life and pursuit of wealth keep you from what matters most - knowing God.

2 Cor. 4:17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

For Jesus, tending to our spiritual life was a high priority B/C it would cause integration of other areas of our life. – not one more plate to spin – but the one plate that if we spin as we are designed to, we will have values ➔ priorities ➔ practical direction on living rest of life.
Additional Notes

Does simplifying our life involve slowing down, or is it a state of mind?

Don't active, thoughtful people always find something to fill their lives with?

1. Concern for the Environment

"...we as individuals, and our economy, have moved dangerously close to the limit of Mother Nature's capacity to handle our demands on her...Continued growth, either in population or in consumption, could spell disaster - and our human numbers and our expectations for a higher standard of living are still heading up." Your Money or Your Life, p. 14

Problem: Over consumption is damaging to our environment.

Response: Endorses simplifying our lives by reducing what we consume in order to exist.

Goal: Minimize our impact on the biosphere.

What do you think about the environmental motive for simplifying our life? Does it resonate with you?

Commandments in OT show compassion and concern for animals and the land itself:

- A Sabbath rest - "so that your ox and your ass may have rest." - Ex. 23:12
- land needs "a year of solemn rest" (Lev. 25:5). 1/7 years -no planting and harvesting.
- Soil of vineyards not to be overtaxed by planting other crops betw rows (Deut. 22:9).
- Oxen treading grain should be allowed to eat while they worked (Deut. 25:4)
- Baby birds might be taken, but mother bird left to care for remaining eggs and to produce future young (Deut. 22:6,7).

Man's dominion over the earth was intended to be compassionate, a stewardship. The Bible affirms we should be mindful of the way our lifestyle impacts the environment.

(Note: Another, rural/spiritual, twist on the environmental push for simplicity stresses that rampant consumerism, aside from damaging our environment, is also responsible for eroding our sense of community and our spiritual connection to the earth. Many community supported agriculture projects have sprung up as a result where consumers "buy an annual membership, sharing with the producer the bounty and risk of growing organic vegetables." - Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, Your Money or Your Life, p. xvii. Visit http://www.angelfire.com/pa3/HighlandFarmCSA/index.html to see an example of a community supported agriculture project.)

2. Cultivate my inner life ( )

People often find a tension between keeping up with the day-to-day routine and cultivating an inner, spiritual life.

The Puritans and Quakers, for example, came to the US seeking undistracted devotion to their faith. But they soon found that living and working and prospering in a complex, tempting material world often took their eyes off of God. John Cotton, a Puritan leader, lamented, "We are never more aft to forget God than when he prospers us." - John Cotton, A Practical Commentary, or An Exposition with Observations, Reasons and Uses upon the First Epistle General of John, 2nd ed. (London, 1658), p. 132.

To ensure pure devotion to Christ, both groups devised elaborate laws stressing the need for simplicity. An example from the Puritans:

"The court, taking into consideration the great, superfluous, and unnecessary expenses occasioned by reason of some new and immodest fashions, as also the wearing of silver, gold, and silk laces, girdles, hat bands, etc., hath therefore ordered that no person, either man or woman, shall hereafter make or buy any apparel, either woolen, silk, or linen, with any lace on it. silver gold, silk or thread, under the penalty of forfeiture of such clothes." - 1634 Sumptuary Law Nathaniel B.
What is flawed in this approach to simplicity?

In the 1840's, Henry David Thoreau sought to learn more about life and its meaning in the woods around Walden pond:

"I went into 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." - Henry David Thoreau, "Walden," in The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 2:44.

What is appealing about Thoreau's search for spiritual insight in the woods? What is lacking in his approach?

**To Do**

Copy chart on various centers