

May 21, 2017

Simplicity in Life and Society

I'd like to talk today about Simplicity, and Complexity. Simplicity is one of the core testimonies in Quaker thought. The reading from Thomas Kelly's essay on the simplification of life gets across what I think is the main point: simplicity is a way to seek continual contact with, and inspiration from, the inner light. Another concept that is a part of this Quaker testimony is plainness - avoiding the distractions of ornamentation. There is a story of Emily Howland as a young Quaker girl, here in this community, being admonished not to wear a dress that was thought too fancy. There is also perhaps an element of frugality in this traditional testimony. I remember my grandfather Bill, who grew up in this meeting, telling about how a salesman came to Poplar Ridge when he was a young man. Bill liked the leather belts that the man offered, and decided to buy two of them. Later on, his father quietly advised him that a man only needs to own one belt.

Simplicity is sometimes associated with minimalism, or asceticism; seeking to withdraw as much as possible from the material world. My perception, though, is that for Quakers, the material world has generally remained very important. Jethro Wood, who lived on Poplar Ridge road 200 years ago, was undoubtedly a good Quaker, and he was very enthused about his invention of a better plow. Quakers have never joined in with the practices adopted by some churches of restricting certain technologies. However, I believe that Quakerism generally approaches technology and material possessions in terms of utility, not as means of showing off or competing for social status.

I now want to turn to another sense of Simplicity, on a broad, outward level, as a crucial concept for our contemporary society.

I have here a book by Joseph Tainter called "The Collapse of Complex Societies". It was published in 1988, and is now in its 28th printing.

Tainter was an archaeologist and a historian. He studied the rise and fall of dozens of human societies throughout history – Ancient Rome, the Mayas, the Chacoans of the American Southwest, etc. - with a special focus on what happened when they crumbled. His thesis is that a group of people can get ahead by developing complex social structures, but that the advantage gained through increasing complexity is subject to the law of diminishing returns. Complexity carries costs, while the benefits eventually start to dwindle. When the group of people can no longer afford to sustain the costs of the complex structure they have developed, then the complexity begins to break down, leading to some form of collapse of that society.

This doesn't necessarily mean complete doom. Tainter defines collapse as a major reduction in the society's level of complexity. When the ancient Mayan civilization broke down, many people may have moved away, or reverted to simpler agrarian lives, building no pyramids, with no centralized power structures, but perhaps otherwise doing fine. Perhaps they were better off. Many of the achievements of complex societies are not geared toward the wellbeing of the average individual.

In the reading from Thomas Kelly's "Testament of Devotion", published in 1941, he comments about the radio and the auto introducing vastly more complexity into everyday life. How much more complex is our society today?

I am sure we can all think of examples of complexity that offers mixed blessings. The growing length of the tax code. The financial industry. Our legal system. Modern medicine, and how we pay for it. Military hardware, and what we pay for it. The paperwork surrounding hiring an employee. The difficulty of trying to fix one's own car. The length of training required for so many careers.

Our economy as a whole has become much more complex and globalized within living memory. The food we eat, and the products we buy, come from all over the world. There are many advantages, but it is a highly complex system, with costs and vulnerabilities.

For most of us in this room, the world's population has at least doubled in our lifetimes; for some, it has tripled. It is not as easy to quantify complexity, but I think it is fair to say that the complexity of our global society has also doubled or tripled within a single lifespan.

One of the key burdens involved in increasing levels of complexity is the cost of maintenance. Simple things are easier to maintain. Complex things, and systems, tend to require constant effort just to keep them from deteriorating. In Auburn, there is a major project underway to replace the gas mains under Genesee street. The end result will not make anyone better off than before; it will just serve to stave off the effects of time and corrosion, and reduce the risks of failure. Much of our infrastructure is reaching time for replacement and posing similar costs.

Another scholar, Robert Gordon, author of "The Rise and Fall of American Growth", argues that most of the highest-impact inventions, such as antibiotics, electricity, and indoor plumbing, happened decades ago, and our innovations today are having only a marginal impact on economic productivity. Official figures show U.S. labor productivity stagnating, and actually turning negative in the first quarter of 2017. Median household incomes in the U.S., adjusted for inflation, are the same now as they were in 1998. GDP growth remains very slow by historical standards, even while aggregate debt levels, which are supposed to stimulate the economy, are going up rapidly.

Economists have struggled to explain why our economy is so sluggish. I think there is a general awareness that something is amiss.

The last time I gave a message here, I focused on the problem posed by diminishing returns in supplies of non-renewable resources, especially energy. It continues to seem to me that we have a big problem there.

The problem posed by the costs of ever-increasing complexity is not unrelated to our resource predicament. Those costs of complexity fundamentally need to be paid from some source of wealth; some subsidy. For the last 150 years, we have exploited ever-increasing quantities of natural wealth, especially fossil fuels. We've seen population, GDP, and societal complexity rise in tandem with our extraction of those resources.

I suspect that we are seeing that whole trend start to stall, causing social and economic stresses. The costs of complexity are not necessarily being borne evenly by all. Many of those who are bearing the impact and not seeing benefits are becoming increasingly frustrated. Political conflicts become more bitter. People get in fights at

airports; encounters between citizen and law enforcement are more tense. Many people seem to be turning to various forms of escape. We are seeing an epidemic of drug overdoses.

To my mind, it is important to consider the possibility that we may be reaching the end of the road for ever-growing societal complexity. This is a hard concept to grasp, when we have been on that road for several generations. Progress seems to us to be inexorable. But a longer historical perspective shows complexity waxing and waning. And if one sees our situation as part of a broad historical trend, there should be less reason to get angry and try to find someone to blame.

If one subscribes to Tainter's view, that increasing complexity often eventually becomes unsustainable, and if one concludes that we are at or near that point, then a whole set of responses, and revised expectations, can come into view. No easy answers, and not the sorts of ideas generally offered by any of our competing political and economic leaders. The primary guidepost for these responses would have to be Simplicity. Smaller scale; local action, plain living. It may be that our complex society will undergo a transition to a simpler state.

Perhaps the traditional Quaker testimony of Simplicity may offer a path for society at large, in addition to serving as a guide for individual lives.

“For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world.”

Readings:

2 Corinthians 1-12: “For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world.”

From *A Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas Kelly, 1941, essay titled “The Simplification of Life”

“The problem we face today needs very little time for its statement. Our lives in a modern city grow too complex and overcrowded. Even the necessary obligations which we feel we must meet grow overnight, like Jack's beanstalk, and before we know it we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. . . .

Let me first suggest that we are giving a false explanation of the complexity of our lives. We blame it upon the complex environment. Our complex living, we say, is due to the complex world we live in, with its radios and autos, which give us more stimulation per square hour than used to be given per square day to our grandmothers.

. . . .
If the Society of Friends has anything to say, it lies in this region primarily. Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center. Each one of us can live such a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence and simplified multiplicity, on one condition -- that is, *if we really want to*. There is a divine Abyss within us all, a holy Infinite Center, a Heart, a Life who speaks in us and through us to the world. . . .

Now out from such a holy Center come the commissions of life. Our fellowship with God issues in world-concern. We cannot keep the love of God to ourselves. It spills over. It quickens us. It makes us see the world's needs anew. . . .

Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well."

Prayer:

[-As we go about our lives, where restless crowds are thronging, within the maddening maze of things, God, let us lift up our hearts to thee, and praise thee most for things unseen.

Order of Service –May 21, 2017

Musical Prelude

Greeting

1st Hymn:Red: Pg.193 "Where Restless Crowds are Thronging"

Reading

2nd Hymn:Red: Pg. 67 "Not Alone for Mighty Empire"

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer

3rd Hymn : Red Pg.242 "Within the Maddening Maze of Things" (a children's hymn and then the little ones leave) Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th HymnRed: Pg.49 "The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, is Ended"

Closing

Thank yous/ Introductions / Remembrances/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude