

The Green triangle

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We've all seen the bumper sticker that reads "Live simply so that others may simply live" -- a ringing call to a sustainable life. Such a life involves, in the words of Mennonite author Doris Janzen Longacre, "cultivating a gentle way of handling the earth, versatility in the face of shortage, inner provision for contentment and, more than all that, commitment to live justly in our world."

A sufficient and sustainable life means being a bright, creative part of the solution rather than one more tired cog in the dreadful turning wheels of the problem.

Sufficiency involves the old virtues of thrift and frugality. Sustainability comes from innovation and creativity. It looks something like this: A friend reuses her bath and dishwater, hauling it out to the garden for her vegetables. It's a lot of bother, she says, but she doesn't mind. She gets exercise and cuts down on her water bill, while at the same time deriving a rich satisfaction from this way of doing things.

Once she drew the Green triangle for me on a napkin. It's a simple equilateral triangle with "Money," "Health," and "Environment" at the three points. Ecologist Ernest Callenbach devised this diagram to illustrate a practice of simple living. Anytime you do something beneficial at one point of the triangle, you will also inevitably do good for the other two points.

For example, suppose you decide to do something helpful for the environment: bicycling rather than driving your car on short trips. You thereby cut down on greenhouse gas emissions from the car's tailpipe, you reduce smog. But you'll also benefit your health in the bargain because you get more regular exercise, and you'll also save money on gas, expenses and car depreciation.

I would go further and add a fourth point to Callenbach's triangle, squaring it by labeling the extra point "Community." In addition to benefits to our health, budget and the immediate environment, living lightly necessarily connects us directly and solidly with others. Simple living becomes an energetic step toward rebuilding community and, conversely, community can support us in our efforts at simple living. We connect ourselves with strong cords to the people around us, because we need them.

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