

The Simplicity Cycle: Returning to Paring Down to Find Your True Needs

Simplifying your life isn't a single project that you can finish and be done with — it's actually a cycle.

At least, that's what I've found in my decade plus of simple living ... I've downsized numerous times, in all areas of my life, and I keep finding myself coming back to the process of simplifying.

The Simplicity Cycle goes something like this (it's a little different each time):

1. **Inspiration phase:** You find something that sparks an interest, and you start exploring it (reading about a new topic, diving into learning a new subject, exploring a new activity or hobby, creating a new project or venture, etc.). This is the inspiration phase.
2. **Addition phase:** This leads you to more complexity, as you explore, buy things, read more and more, find new inspirations and ideas. This is the addition phase.
3. **Contemplation phase:** At some point, you might pause to consider the bigger picture of what you're doing. Is this the best way? Is this really important? If it is, what's the most essential part of it? Can you pare down? Many people skip this phase (and the next) and just keep doing the first two phases.
4. **Paring Down phase:** If you decided that you want to pare down, this is where you start to let go of things. You figure out what's essential to what you have been doing and learning, and if you don't scrap the entire thing completely (which can happen), you might just keep a few key things. For example, if you start learning about chess, you might buy a set (or two) and a bunch of books and apps and go on a bunch of websites. But in the paring down phase, you might decide that chess isn't important enough to keep in your life, or if it is, you only need one chess set, two really key books, and one website or app. The rest you let go of. Again, many people skip this step.

If you're into simplifying and figuring out what's essential, you'll do the last two steps. If you're like most people, you'll just keep doing one and two, which leads to a growing amount of clutter and complexity.

What I've Learned from the Cycle

As you might guess, I find the last two phases really important. But I also think the first two are important, because they're about continual learning, curiosity, growth, exploration, creativity and more. I haven't been able to stop myself from doing the first two phases, at least a few times each year. So I continue to repeat this Simplicity Cycle, several times a year.

The first two phases are where you get excited about something, where you get motivated and you're moved to find out as much as you can. This is an essential human drive, and I would never want to suppress it.

But here's what I've learned:

- I have to hold myself back from acquiring in the Addition phase. I do this by reminding myself of how much I wasted in the last few Addition phases, when I bought too many things. It's really hard to hold back when you're excited. But it's important to remember that following your every urge isn't necessarily a helpful thing.
- The Inspiration phase can be a wonderful thing, but sometimes it's just a fantasy that grips hold of us (like wanting to become a black belt at something) when we see a photo or read an inspiring story of someone doing something cool. There's nothing wrong with these photos or inspiring stories. There's nothing wrong with the fantasy that forms in our heads. But when it grips us, and brings us to the Addition phase, then it can lead us to spend too much time or money or effort on something that's not really that important — it's just a fantasy that's taken hold. The reality will be quite different once we dive into it — becoming a black belt will take years of hard work, and the payoff won't be exactly what you dream it will be. That's not to say we shouldn't go after it, but we should realize it will be very different than how we picture, and probably not as exciting.
- Often the Inspiration phase is started when we think we really want something, even need it. But it's not a true need. We rarely explore how to get our true needs met without the Addition phase, and it's something worth considering as we think about the big picture of our lives. What are true needs? More on that in the next section.
- The Contemplation phase can come at any time — maybe even before you start the Addition phase! Maybe right after you start it and you pause to think about whether this is something you should be doing. Basically, you take a step back and look at the big picture — why are you bothering to do this? Is it just a fantasy or is it meaningful to you? Is the reality going to be anywhere close to the fantasy? Is there a more purposeful way you might be living? What are your true needs here? What can you get rid of, and what's truly essential?
- The Paring Down phase can be very liberating! Once you've had a realization that you want to simplify, it can be a huge burden to let go of things that you've been holding onto. At the same time, it can be difficult to let go if you're still holding on to hope. And there's the regret of buying too much or acquiring too much, the regret of being wasteful. But it's not wasteful if you got something out of it, if you learned something from it. So give thanks to whatever gave you something, learn from the experience, and let go.

In this whole process, I find the real learning is about true needs. It's hard to understand

true needs until you've gone through this process a few times. Let's take a look.

Finding Your True Needs

Going through this cycle helps you see that you can let go of things you don't really need. They might actually be giving you a burden you don't want, and letting go is liberating. You free yourself of it, and you're even happier — you didn't need it in the first place!

Going through the cycle a second time, and then a third, is just more learning about figuring out what you don't need. And learning to let go of what you don't really need.

If you go through the cycle a bunch of times, with consciousness, you can start to figure out the kinds of things you crave for and that excite you that *aren't really true needs*. They seem cool, they're shiny, but they don't really satisfy anything deep within you.

I'll give you a few examples of things that didn't satisfy a real need for me:

- Chess: I really enjoyed learning about chess, but the competitive aspect of chess, and the hundreds and thousands of hours you need to spend on practice to get anywhere near good were not anything I really cared about. And honestly, getting really good at chess didn't hold real meaning to me. The *true need* was learning, and I can do that for free in many areas of life.
- Gourmet food: When I moved to San Francisco, I discovered some amazing restaurants, from neighborhood gems to Michelin-starred world-class gourmet spots. I went crazy for about a year, going to as many as I could afford. It caused me to gain weight, lose a lot of money, and get tired of that kind of rich food. I did the same kind of deep dive with pizza, coffee, wine and beer at different times. To be honest, it was all a waste, and I'm glad I'm over it! The true need was exploration, and I can do that without needing to get broke or overweight.
- Lots of books: At different points in the last 10-15 years, I've gone overboard in buying books. I love books, to be honest. I love the hope that each one contains, but I can go overboard with that optimism, and buy more than I can possibly read. The true need was, again, learning. I am not against books, but I am now more honest with myself (not always) about how much I can actually read.
- Survival gear, travel gear, tech gear, hiking gear: Every now and then, I really get into a topic and decide I want the best gear in that area. I bought cool survival and travel gear, and too much ultralight backpacking gear. I don't go overboard with tech gear, but sometimes I get a craving and cave in to that craving. None of it has really mattered to me in the long term — it's all short-term lusts. The true need is really to get outdoors and explore.

None of those areas met my true needs — they were all extraneous, even though I thought

they were important at the time.

In the end, going through the process helped me to realize what I really needed. And to let go of the things I *thought* were needs.

Some things I now think are true needs:

1. Food, water, clothing, heat, shelter, and basic safety, of course.
2. Love and connection.
3. Learning, exploration.
4. Play, inspiration & creative outlets.
5. Getting outdoors, being active, being present with nature.
6. Stillness & peace.

There might be more. Beyond the basic needs of the items at the top of the list, the others are about *love and nourishment* in some way.

And when I remember these needs, I can remember that these needs can be met in a variety of ways. Not only in the way I'm fantasizing about. I can meet my needs by simply going outside and going for a walk. Talking with a loved one or an interesting stranger. Reading something online. Meditating and finding stillness.

Simple things, that cost nothing. Simple things, that nourish me, and require no additions to what I already have. Simple things, that allow me to let go of the rest.

Simple things, that are available all around us in beautiful abundance.

New Book: Soulful Simplicity

I'd like to recommend a book by a good friend, Courtney Carver of Be More with Less ... her book *Soulful Simplicity* comes out next week, and you will love it.

It's about the power of simplicity to improve our health, build more meaningful relationships, and relieve stress in our professional and personal lives.

Check out the first chapter [here](#), and pre-order the book now to get a bonus.