



Living the Dream: Letter from the Editor

by Anne Newkirk Niven

*It's not having what you want,
It's wanting what you've got.*
— “Soak Up the Sun,” Sheryl Crow

Simplicity is one of those qualities which everyone seems to admire, but nobody actually knows what to do with. There's a seemingly bottomless thirst for simplicity, or at least, for what we imagine we'd have if we possessed it — namely, a blissful state of order, peace, and happiness.

So intense is this desire that there's been a successful magazine created specifically to cater to it. Time Warner's *Real Simple*[™] promises that if you organize your mail, get dinner on the table in under thirty minutes, and know how to use non-sequiturs to change the subject at a cocktail party, life will be “easier” and, needless to say, more “simple.” If words had independent lives, by now “simple” would surely have packed its bags and fled the planet out of sheer embarrassment.

But why is there such an insatiable appetite for the “simple” in what are arguably the richest and most complex societies on earth? Because, when we reach for “the simple” — even if that impulse gets sidetracked, or perverted into its polar opposite — we are groping, albeit inchoately, for a virtue which, if we allow it, can transform our lives.

Our first difficulty in finding simplicity comes in trying to define the word, which attempts to name a concept as slippery and labyrinthine as the plotline in any spy thriller.

Perhaps we can start by defining what simplicity is *not* and work our way backwards one step at a time. First off, “simplicity” is not a synonym for poverty. Nothing gets my “daughter-of-a-union-man” dander up faster than the idea that the poor live more “simply.” Poppycock! I've been poor, and there's nothing “simple” about it — when you don't have what you need to live, even the most straightforward task becomes complex. Simplicity and poverty may share external traits — for instance, living with few possessions — but confusing the two is like thinking that zebras and skunks are the same species because they both have black-and-white stripes.

Simplicity can also be mistaken for ignorance; although it's now out of favor, “simple” was once used as an euphemism for retardation. While inaccurate, this definition leads us towards a much better one — that of “simple” as a synonym for “childlike.” Here, at last, we are beginning to get somewhere.

The simplicity of a child is a quality of naiveté. Too uncoordinated at birth to make more than rudimentary discriminations between stimuli, an infant's brain matures and becomes more complex over time, and, as a result, more sophisticated ideas appear with startling rapidity. Within a few short years, that unconscious simplicity evaporates like a springtime shower in the desert. Does this mean that once we become adults simplicity is forever lost to us?

This is a troubling question, for if to become “simple” we must revert to infantilism, who but the most tormented soul would aspire to it? I found a clue to unraveling this conundrum when I looked further in my dictionary: in the realm of medicinal herbology, a “simple” is a preparation (usually a tincture) with a single active ingredient. As I use medicinal herbs myself, I know that herbal simples often have a subtle soulfulness that more complex preparations lack.

Aha! Now I saw the problem: I was mistakenly defining simplicity solely within the realm of the intellect, when I ought to have been pursuing it through the realms of the senses and the soul. This discovery was unexpectedly confirmed by an experience I had a week ago.

I am writing this a few days before Winter Solstice, possibly the last one our family will celebrate at our home here in Point Arena. We have applied to immigrate to British Columbia, Canada, and our application could be approved (or denied) anytime in the next 10-48 months.* So we are in a state of suspended animation: preparing to move but with no ability whatsoever to control what happens next, or when. This state of affairs has ratcheted up my (internal) pressure to ensure that this Solstice be “extra special.”

*Never fear, dear readers; *SageWoman* will continue without interruption in our new home, wherever that turns out to be.

It also assured that, with my husband rummaging around and attempting to pre-pack his decades worth of accumulated treasures, the entire house was (and remains) pretty much in a state of chaos.

I don't care for clutter (though you'd never know it by looking at my desk) and my coping mechanisms at home veer — sometimes wildly — between denial and feverish bouts of extreme tidying. I soon realized to my horror that this year there wasn't going to be room in our living room for our heirloom aluminum Christmas tree. There was just too much "stuff" in the way.

This realization put me into an almost hysterical state of mind: that big silver tree has been in my family since 1962 and every year as I grew up there was a huge battle between my parents over whether there was room in our increasingly overcrowded house to put it up or not. (To give you some idea of how overstuffed our house was, let me simply say that the day my mother died, the paramedics had to break a front room window to get her out on a stretcher. The door wouldn't open wide enough.)

Realizing that our house was "too cluttered for the tree" set off all my most vivid evil holiday memories. "It can't be Christmas without the tree!" I shouted in a shrill (and rapidly climbing) tone of voice. But fortunately, my husband lacks any "holiday tree" phobias, so he made the startling suggestion of buying a live tree this year. I was floored, then, if memory serves, fell into his arms and wept out of sheer relief.

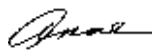
We got our tree (a diminutive but majestic noble fir) the following weekend, and I watched our three sons decorate it a couple of nights ago. It is small, and has only blue lights on it, and there's not enough room for all our decorations.

But it is our most beautiful tree ever — four feet tall, garlanded about with gold and silver, and sprinkled with a few favorite ornaments. At night it twinkles gently with a pale blue glow that resembles nothing so much as the comforting magic of a child's night light.

And that's where my understanding of simplicity is today: a small green tree trimmed with blue lights. I have come to realize that finding simplicity is not a matter of what objects you have, or even of whether your house is cluttered or not, but a matter of what — or who — you give your heart to. Welcoming simplicity is about asking yourself: "what is it I want to remember about my life? What do I want to be remembered for?" Or, most poignant of all, perhaps, "whom do I wish to be remembered by?"

Simplicity, after all is said and done, is a virtue deeply tied to the discipline of time. Simplicity is in the moment right before a child unwraps a gift, not the moment when she opens it. It is the timeless instant when we look into our beloved's face, and see smile lines forming around his eyes, and love the lines because they belong to him. It is a candle, just at the moment you light it; an outstretched hand, as your fingers touch; a warm hug or a hot cup of tea. Time gives us only so many opportunities to love and when we slow down and quiet ourselves enough to listen, we know that this simple thing, this moment, is what makes life so precious.

May the gifts of simplicity be yours in this time of darkness giving way to light.



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Editorial Notes

We encourage all Goddess-friendly women to submit to us. You do *not* need to be a published author to write for *SageWoman*. Most of our stories comes from our readers!

SageWoman accepts non-fiction submissions from women only, while *PanGaia*, *The Blessed Bee*, and *newWitch* accept both fiction and non-fiction from all genders.

Please submit *SageWoman* articles directly to our new Managing Editor Cristina Eisenberg; via email (preferred) to: meditor@sagewoman.com, please cc Anne Newkirk Niven at editor@sagewoman.com. By postal mail, you may continue to send submissions to our main address: SageWoman, P. O. Box 641, Point Arena, CA 95468.

#72, "Visions of Goddess: Warrior" Deadline Aug. 1, '06

This, the first aspect of the Goddess, is often called "Maiden" and embodies raw, unbridled energy. In this issue, we name her "warrior" and salute both her power and her gifts of energy and new life in women of all ages. Please share your stories, poems and rituals about this aspect of the Goddess and yourself.

#73, "Visions of Goddess: Mother" Deadline Nov. 1, '06

Motherhood is a state of mind and spirit whether we give birth to physical offspring through our bodies or not. This issue is intended to explore and celebrate the many ways we all experience the relationship between "Mother" and "Child." Please tell us about your experience of yourself — or the Goddess, or both — as Mother.

Coming in 2007

#74: *Visions of Goddess* — Queen
#73: *Visions of Goddess* — Priestess