

Elegant Simplicity

“Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated.”

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

“Our life is frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify, simplify!”

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Man has always struggled to simplify life. The quotes above start with a 5th century BC Chinese philosopher, Confucius; a quintessential Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci; a 19th century essayist, Henry David Thoreau; and a 20th century scientific genius, Albert Einstein. The common theme in these quotes concerns simplicity, but also reveals the mindsets of these gentlemen.

Simplicity is a mindset. It is an ideal. It's frequently an existential, unattainable goal yet vitally necessary to move forward and live more intentionally and purposefully. It all starts with a mindset.

About the time of Confucius, the great Greek philosophers could be found standing around public squares positing that one first must “know thyself.” This maxim of knowing thyself is about clarifying in our own mind what simplicity means to each one of us eight-billion-plus people on this planet.

Making life simple is defined differently by each of us. **Life gets simpler in two different realms: our physical world and our individual inner world.** We try to define our inner world with feelings: wanting balance in our life, freedom from worry or anxiety, harmonious flow,

happiness, fulfillment, success, and other not easily definable or quantifiable terms.

A great way to achieve quantifiable simplicity in the physical world was revealed to me while reading Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo's best-selling 2011 book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, which offers a simple approach to dealing with all our “stuff.”

Kondo breaks down the culling and organization of all our worldly possessions into one very simple thought: Does this possession I'm touching give me joy? If the answer is no, then discard it. It is that simple!

Two years ago when we sold our home and moved, my wife and I used this simple method to clean up and clear out the majority of our “stuff.”

There are many other ways to declutter and simplify our physical world. Many “Marie Kondos” espouse a variety of methodologies to untie our accumulated Gordian knot of possessions and begin to win the ruthless war on “stuff.”

Technology has arguably been both a blessing and a curse over the past several decades of unparalleled change.

You are probably familiar with Moore's Law that states the number of transistors per square inch on integrated circuits (chips) doubles approximately every two years, and in fact doubled every year in the first decade after their invention in 1965. That means the speed of computing doubles about every 18-to-24 months. Intel Co-Founder Gordon Moore made this initial observation about technology, which has since been applied back to the beginning of the 20th century. One might say that Moore's Law has actually been with us since 1900! If that seems implausible,

consider the introduction of the automobile, airplane, radio, television and space travel, to name but a few.

Let's transport ourselves in time back 110 years to New York City. The streets are packed six across with horse-drawn wagons, coaches and buggies, with the occasional "horseless carriage" mixed in. City horses required feed, and there was big business in supplying oats, barley, hay and straw. But just 10 years later (1917), the same streets were six across with horseless carriages, with the occasional horse and wagon mixed in.

Amazing!

This one disruptive technology – the automobile – had a life-altering impact on a population who previously had relied on horse-drawn vehicles for centuries.

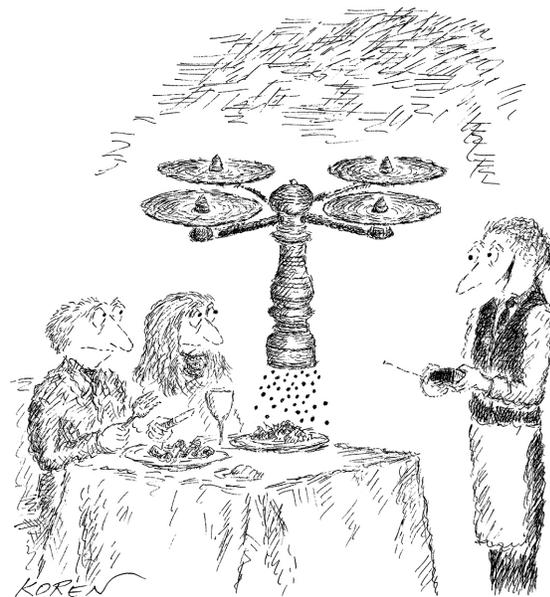
It's hard to imagine how difficult that one change alone must have been for a senior citizen at the time, a nominal 50 year old. Consider the change our modern-day senior citizens have experienced, transitioning from a 1980s rotary phone to a phone that is "smart" and that also provides texting, pictures, video, email, music, games, pedometers, health alerts, security access, star charts, weather, Internet access, and much more.

What was the nightly conversation around the family dinner table in 1917? Surely it was partly about feeding gasoline to an automobile instead of hay to a horse, and dealing with mechanical breakdowns rather than veterinarian visits.

Did we simplify things or just make them more complex?

Rapid technological change has been with us for over a century. We are not the first to experience it. If our great-grandparents were alive today, they would regale us with poignant stories about difficult adjustments due to technological change.

That is my point. **Every age yearns for simpler times, if not "the good old days."** But were bygone times really so simple and so good? In reality, to simplify one's life, one must start



"Fresh pepper?"

examining one's inside today – not daydreaming about outside yearnings of yesteryear.

It's very simple. If my inside mindset shouts "No more change!" then I surely will never benefit from reading Marie Kondo's decluttering and purging book. I will remain forever burdened with mountains of unnecessary stuff.

At this juncture we also need to address the opposite side of the technological adaptation coin: **FOMO. The fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) can increase complexity in our life.** When we live in a FOMO state we must have the latest smart phone, the newest visual reality (VR) headset, the latest voice recognition program, an autonomous car, an autonomous drone, an autonomous home, and on and on.

It becomes an addiction!

I recently attended a conference that explored changes that likely may take place over the next year, three years, five years, ten years, and further into the future. My sampling of these technologies starts with **artificial intelligence:**

Amazon Echo's "Alexa" smart speaker listens and understands, while IBM's Watson is advancing the field in machine learning.

Rapid advances in productivity may happen as autonomous **drones** map buildings and improve agriculture – pinpointing the application of fertilizer, common pesticides and water. Other drones are beginning to deliver packages.

As for untethered **virtual reality** (VR) headsets that interact with others in an animated world – well, “Great Jumpin’ Jehosaphat!” this is great fun, fascinating, riveting and spellbinding all at the same time.

Then there’s **augmented reality** (Microsoft HoloLens) and quantum computing that absolutely shift your perception about the future in dramatic ways. And, **robots** and **3D printing** are making fast work out of previously tedious jobs.

While we as individuals may not implement all of these, we can still be aware and not fall prey to FOMO. Boiling it down: Artificial intelligence, in particular machine learning and augmented reality, are here and changing the landscape rapidly.

The physical world can quickly overwhelm us. We can go from a mindset of certain needs and certain wants to overwhelming our wants with a needs (FOMO) mindset. Then the level of complexity becomes a petri dish of fast-replicating technological devices.

Whoa! That does not sound pleasant.

I don’t know about you, but there is just so much that I, a living and breathing homo sapiens, can physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually deal with in terms of fast-paced technological change.

When the physical realm becomes too frenetic, I retreat to the world of simplicity, and re-discover again and again that this is where I can survive and thrive with a calm state of being.

It all comes back to knowing thyself and being true to thyself.

Here is where money enters the picture. If I don’t have the money, I can’t afford the new technology. I am limited to a short list of fulfilling my wants.

Moreover, if I don’t have the time, I can’t even begin to take on new technology, even if on my wants side of the ledger. **Our world is tied very closely to money and time.** If you’ve accumulated a nice estate, then money becomes much less of an issue.

That leaves time.

Every caring parent knows intuitively that their young child really only wants their time. They need and want our time to develop socially, intellectually and behaviorally into the very best future version of themselves.

Our money may buy them the best of everything, but that is not and never has been the driving force behind the deepest, intrinsic needs of mankind. When we’re focused on time, then more options open up. New choices can be considered, spurring a synthesis of our needs and wants.

When we’ve got both the money and the time, having a simplicity mindset becomes ever more important. Otherwise, we can get mired in a world of over-choice, or take on an addictive FOMO mindset, or just continue competing with the Joneses.

Shouldn’t our focus be on simplifying both our business and our personal lives?

Shouldn’t our focus be on where we intentionally spend our time and our money?

The art of simplicity is a puzzle of complexity.

- DOUGLAS HORTON

Today’s new technology that continuously appears on our visual, auditory and motion radar screens begs a few simple questions. Will this new technology provide a greater benefit in a simpler way to reduce my complexity? Will it do it for my clients? For my team? For my family?

Guess what! **When looked at this way, from both a business and personal front, few new or enhanced technologies make the cut.**

I have to remind myself to think like a Greek philosopher standing in an ancient agora musing about man's ability to be whatever he or she wants to be. The freedom to choose is a double-edged sword. It cuts deeply both ways, at least when it comes to technology: Simple (speaking to "Alexa") or complex (developing flying cars).

If I'm not careful here, I may start to sound like I'm entering mad scientist territory. You might recall watching Gene Wilder perform as Dr. Frankenstein, Peter Boyle as The Monster, and Marty Feldman as Igor in Mel Brooks' hilarious take on technologically advanced creation in the film comedy, "Young Frankenstein."

Circling back to time and money: How can we best apply both, and intentionally and thoughtfully "keep it simple stupid" – the KISS principle?

We continually search and strive for that elusive simplicity. Sometimes it's the visceral feeling of joy in a comfortable sweater, a pair of shoes, or piece of furniture – or the cerebral joy of a good book. At other times it is as simple as snapping a selfie and sending it to a friend.

We bring simplicity into our life, first by knowing thyself, then adopting a simplicity mindset that discards all irrelevant, irritating "stuff" that bombards us on a daily basis.

Our ability to simplify helps us avoid the unnecessary so the necessary can flourish. Simplicity is a powerful propellant — it speeds us to our desired destination. It cuts through

complexity in a world that seems at times to be reeling out of control. It finds sound solutions, and is itself a sound state of mind.

French fashion designer and businesswoman Coco Chanel said, "Simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance."

In sum, our viewpoint does make a difference. Consider the following piece plucked from the Internet:

A clerk, coming out of his office, glanced at the Emperor's palace with its shining domes and thought: "What a shame that I wasn't born in the royal family. Life would have been so easy then." The clerk went in the direction of the town center, where the rhythmical banging of hammers and loud shouts was heard.

The workers were building a new building in the middle of the square. One of them saw the clerk with his papers and thought: "Why didn't I go to study, like my father told me. Now I would be doing easy jobs, writing texts the whole day, and life would be so easy then."

At that time the Emperor came to the giant window in his palace and glanced into the square. He saw the workers, clerks, salesmen, buyers, children and adults, and thought how it must be good to be in the fresh air all day, doing physical work, or working for someone, or just being a street vagrant, not thinking at all about politics and other difficult questions. "What a simple life these simple people must have," he concluded.



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