

## Seeking Internal Simplicity in the Digital Age

Leann Williams for Spokane Friends, March 1, 2026

I have been thinking about the Quaker value of simplicity in ways I've never considered before. Generally, I think we consider simplicity as it relates to our material world in our choices as consumers and in how we structure our lives. These are appropriate practices of simplicity. Our values will show in outer actions, or they are not truly our values. I have been wondering about practices of internal simplicity.

To begin, I'd like to think about the opposite of simplicity which is complexity. We live in a complex world. Political and economic alliances are shifting regularly. Our understanding of moral and ethical standards shifts with cultural changes. Advancements in technology change not just how we live, but who we are as people.

Max Roser of Oxford University produced a timeline in 2023 of significant technological advances through human history. The transition from hunter-gatherer societies to developing agriculture occurred around 10,000 BCE. Following in roughly 2,000-year increments were the earliest forms of writing, the invention of the wheel and irrigation, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. These technological innovations enabled the development of civilizations. In the first 1,000 years of the Common Era paper, windmills, gunpowder, and the compass were developed centuries apart. The pace of technological development increased following the printing press around 1450 CE followed by the microscope, steam engines, a smallpox vaccine, and steam locomotives. These new technologies brought us the scientific revolution leading to the industrial revolution. At that point, the pace of technological innovation moved from decades between developments to years bringing us photography, the telegraph, telephones, electric lights, automobiles, the radio, airplanes, television, antibiotics, the nuclear bomb, personal computers, the discovery of DNA, and the moon landing. We now find ourselves in the information age with the rate of major technological advances transitioning from years to months or sometimes even days.

Another way to look at the pace of technological development is to consider how long it took for a new thing to be adopted by the public. Some researchers use 50 million people adopting a technology as a standard for comparison. Different sources report different lengths of time, but their conclusion is the same. Things are changing more rapidly than they ever have before. In roughly chronological order, it took airplanes 68 years to go mainstream. The telephone 50 years, radio 38 years, television 22 years, personal computers 14 years, the internet 7 years, iPod and iPhone under 3 years, Facebook 2 years, Twitter 9 months, the video game Angry Birds 35 days, and Pokémon Go reached 50 million users in less than 19 days. If you are unfamiliar with that last one, ask your phone about it.

My point is that due to rapid change our lives are significantly more complicated than in previous generations. My grandparents grew up on farms in Illinois and Washington. They saw the transition from horses and buggies to automobiles, radio to television, and communication from written letters to phone calls. But much of their daily work did not change significantly. My grandfather kept the records for his gas station, a sales job, and management of a variety store all by hand on paper with no

calculators. My grandmother transcribed handwritten doctor's notes with a typewriter printing in triplicate with carbon paper.

My parents saw changes in transportation from riding trains to driving across states on highways. But most of their work or business was done in person with paperwork for records. Most of us in my generation also have conducted most of our business or purchases in person or on paper. We grew up in an era when videotape was new. Seeing events on the news within a day of the recordings was astonishing. Most of the news was still in print with thoughtful commentary. There was time to process information. Phone communication involved two parties physically attached to a wall in a home or a business. The world has changed significantly in the last 30 years. I often need my grandchildren to interpret today's world. With the changes in technology come changes in who we are and how we behave as people.

On the website World Economic Forum, in an article entitled "How technology changed and changed Us in the last 20 years" I found the following information. Daily digital media intake for people over 18 years old in the US averages over 6 hours a day. According to a survey carried out by Stanford University of heterosexual couples between 1995 and 2017, couples that met through friends, at work, in college, or through family (in other words in person) fell from 88% to 27%. In that same period, the percentage of couples that met online grew from 2% to 40%. Current estimates are that 50 percent of couples meet online today. This indicates to me that how we make meaningful relationships has changed significantly. How we navigate from place to place has fundamentally changed. Most young adults have never had to read a printed map to figure out where they are or where they want to go. Knowledge is readily available on almost any subject at any time in most places.

Digital anthropologist Giles Crouch notes that writing took 1,000 years to become a part of most cultures. Clocks took 200 years to fully penetrate societies that previously operated around seasons and the rhythms of nature. Social media took a decade. One of his concerns is that our "habitus" which means the unconscious behaviors, assumptions, preferences, and instincts that make us unique, are being altered by social media and the digital world that we must interact with to live in this place and time. What he calls our "digital habitus" has its own value system. It values information, the ability to process quickly, interconnection across digital networks, and cultural fluency across domains or professions. It devalues sustained attention, embodied presence, local community ties, and face-to-face emotional depth.

Trip Fuller, a theologian and podcaster on a recent episode entitled "The Cloud and the Kingdom" shared these thoughts. "We are experiencing spiritual and social exhaustion...The language we inherited for understanding how the world works has grown inadequate to describe what we're really actually experiencing...It's the disorientation of people who realize they've crossed into unfamiliar territory without noticing...Something fundamental has gone wrong - not just in our politics, but in the very fabric of how we live, work, and relate to one another.

In another of Fuller's podcasts entitled "The Exhausted Soul and the Crisis of Speed" he lamented, "I was losing. The gap between what I needed to do and what I could do just kept widening. I went to bed each night as a subject of guilt, unable to work off my ever-expanding to-do list." He goes on to ask "What if it isn't a personal failure? What if it's something much larger - something structural, something spiritual, something that goes to the very heart of what it means to live in the modern world?"

It was those questions that brought my mind to the idea of internal simplicity. It seems that the glut of information available to us creates a sense of overwhelming insufficiency. It seems to me that we need to apply the value of simplicity in the complexity of life in a digital age.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, writer, and social activist in the 1960's civil rights movement, made note of the complexity of modern life well before the digital age that we currently live in. He said: "There is a passive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work...It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke chapter 10 comes to mind. Jesus and his disciples enter the home of Mary and Martha. Mary sits at Jesus' feet listening to Jesus. Martha is preparing a meal for the guests and goes to Jesus complaining that she needs help from Mary. I never liked this story as it is translated. It makes Jesus' response to Martha sound like a rebuke. Looking at the Greek words, I translated Jesus' response in this way: "Martha, you are troubled and disturbed because of many large issues. But one thing is necessary. Out of the many opportunities, choose for yourself that one piece assigned to you that is useful, pleasant, and joyful." Quakers often ask, "What is mine to do?" In the quest for inner simplicity I can ask, "What is the one thing that is mine to do today?"

Our shared value of simplicity calls me to reconsider the cultural values I have absorbed in this digital age. The fact that mass communication is possible and that information is readily accessible does not mean that it is all valuable. The overload of information also leads me to believe that I am never doing enough. I feel drawn to exchanging the values of productivity and efficiency for the practices of mindfulness and discernment.

I wondered if other Quakers talked about inward simplicity. Some do!

Eileen Kinch on the Anabaptist World website offers these thoughts:

Simplicity begins on the inside. As followers of Christ, we have been commanded to seek first the Kingdom of God. Simplicity is setting aside anything that gets in the way of seeking the Kingdom. The [Book of Discipline of Ohio Yearly Meeting](#) states: "The call ... is to abandon those things that clutter [our lives] and to press toward the goal (of God's kingdom) unhampered. This is true simplicity."

Quakers on the Big Island of Hawaii state on their website, "Simplicity is a witness to the world that the inward state is more important than the outward.

Reno Friends Meeting website offers these insights: For the Quakers, living simply is about seeking to live more meaningfully. Quakers have long referred to the unnecessary accumulation of material items as "cumber," and they believed it obscured their vision of both God's will and reality... But "cumber" can mean more than material possessions – it can represent unnecessary mental or spiritual cumber or living beyond our emotional means. Do we worry about some things more than necessary?... What hinders and what promotes our search for inward simplicity?

In answering that query, my mind has also been focusing on the scripture in Philippians 4:8 as a tool to promote inward simplicity.

**The Voice:** Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with *beauty and truth*. Meditate on whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy.

**The Message:** Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your mind and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

In my version of John chapter 16 Jesus tells his disciples, "I have so much more to say, but you cannot handle it or absorb it right now. The Spirit of truth will come and guide you in all truth." It's on the basis of this scripture that I offer this prayer for us today:

Loving God, Counselor, Guide, Friend, life feels so complex right now. Some days it feels like just too much. We need your help.

Come, comfort, guide, and teach us.

Come to each heart in the way that speaks to our unique needs.

Comfort the places where fear, anger, confusion, and anxiety reside.

Guide us in paths that bear witness to our shared values of peace, justice, and equality.

Teach us how to live in simplicity not just in our outer material world, but in the depths of our beings to clear away all that clutters our hearts and minds.

Teach each one of us what is ours to do and what is not.

Teach us as a community what is ours to do and what is not.

In the teaching, bring us understanding that will bear the fruit of transformation.

Make us like Jesus, please. Amen