EPICUREAN SIMPLICITY

STEPHANIE MILLS

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"IN this book, I relate the pleasures, as well as the virtues and difficulties, of a perhaps simpler than average North American life." So begins ecological thinker and writer Stephanie Mills's *Epicurean Simplicity,* a thoughtful paean to living, like Thoreau, a deliberate life.

Mills's beautifully crafted, inspiring account of the simple life reaches deep into classical sources of pleasure—good food, good health, good friends, and particularly the endless delights of the natural world. Her musings about the life she desires—and the life she has created—ultimately led her to the third-century Greek philosopher Epicurus, whose thought was premised on the trustworthiness of the senses, an outlook that Mills wholeheartedly embraces. While later centuries have come to associate Epicurus's name with hedonism, Mills discovered that he extolled simplicity and prudence as the surest means to pleasure, and his thinking offers an important touchstone for the book.

Epicurean Simplicity touches on a broad range of topics—the impacts of a consumerist lifestyle on the natural world, social justice, biological extinctions, friendship, the process of country living, the joys of physical exertion, the challenges of a writer's life, and the natural history and seasonal delights of a life lived close to nature. Mills uses her own experience as an entry point to the discussion with a self-effacing humor and lyrical prose that bring big subjects to a personal level.

Epicurean Simplicity celebrates the pleasures, beauty, and fulfillment of a simple life, a goal being sought by Americans from all walks of life, from harried single parents to corporate CEOs. For fans of natural history

CONTINUED ON BACK FLAP

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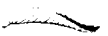
or personal narrative, for those concerned about social justice and the environment, and for those who have come to know and love Stephanie Mills through her speaking and writing, *Epicurean Simplicity* is a rare treasure.



Stephanie Mills has been engaged in the ecology movement for more than thirty years and in 1996 was named by *Utne Reader* as one of the world's leading visionaries. Her books include *In Service of the Wild, Whatever Happened to Ecology?* and *Turning Away from Technology.* A prolific writer and speaker on issues of ecology and social change, Mills lives in the Great Lakes Bioregion in the Upper Midwest.

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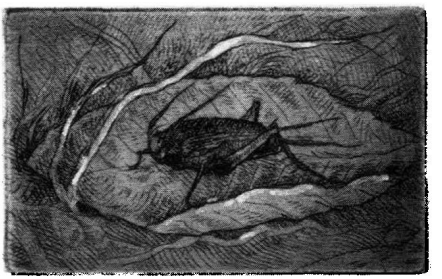
Epicurean Simplicity

To Hunter and Hildegarde Hannum

Prelude



The air seems to be vital tissue this morning, entirely alive with mayflies and countless other insects darting or arising in the sunlight, with airborne cherry petals marking the direction of the breeze and of gravity. The chirping of crickets merges into a soft, ubiquitous jingle. The spring air is their sounding board; the whole county is their guitar. Then there's birdsong, certain presences announcing themselves. Four and twenty blackbirds are chucking and clucking. Jays are dipping low through the pine branches. A mourning dove is cooing. A starling is giving its raffish wolf whistle. Some goldfinches, among them a male with an unusual black eye mask, drop by to investigate the hummingbird feeder. The sky is washed in blue. The breezes are sweet, moist, and cool. What more do I need to know of heaven? Life is the absolute. Today the whole of existence feels like a gift.

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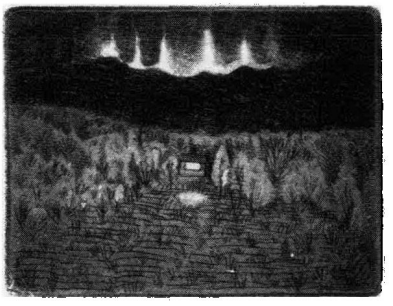
THE JOURNEY AND THE DESTINATION



In this book, I relate the pleasures, as well as the virtues and difficulties, of a perhaps simpler than average North American life.

Like Henry David Thoreau, I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else I knew as well. Also like Thoreau, I believe that a [wo]man is rich in proportion to the number of things [s]he can afford to let alone. Some needs are absolute. Along with every other human being, I need a minimum of 2,000 calories a day, about half a gallon of water fit to drink, a sanitary means for disposing of my bodily wastes, a way to keep reasonably clean, something muscular to do for at least some part of the day, and a warm, dry place to sleep. To that biological minimum I would add intercourse

with more-than-human nature and the means to a life of the mind. Meeting those needs as sparingly as possible makes abundant the kind of riches that can't be owned.

The pleasures and riches of simplicity, it seems to me, arrive mainly through the senses, through savoring the world of a given moment. Hence my invocation of Epicureanism, a Hellenic "be what thou art" philosophy premised on the trustworthiness of the senses. It was a philosophy that extolled simplicity and prudence, and it had its detractors. Because Epicurus, the school's founder, did say, "I am unable to form any conception of the good from which has been eliminated the pleasures of eating and drinking, the pleasures of sexual love, the pleasures of music and eloquence, and the pleasures of shape and pleasant movements," the philosophy scandalized both the church fathers and the rabbinate of the first few centuries C.E. The fact that *epicurean* has become synonymous with *gourmet,* or even *gourmand,* is partly the result of early clerical objections to the principle that pleasure could lead to the good. From the third century C.E. onward, *Epicurean* translated as "loose liver." To refute that canard and reclaim Epicureanism are among the aims of this work.

Most of the pleasures I experience and describe are the pleasures of twenty-first-century country life. This is not farm life, or self-reliant backwoods life, but a writer's life enriched by the kind of mid-range natural history encountered on a patch of "waste" land in the upper Midwest, the region that includes Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

My surroundings aren't pristine, but they're not currently required to produce anything or to be anything but self-willed—that is to say, wild. I get to see, hear, touch, taste, and feel a lot of nature in my days, which is good, because nature is what I care about the most. My attention to the subject of simplicity stems from that primary concern, for materialism,

especially consumerism, the twentieth-century version of that doctrine, is immensely destructive of the health and beauty of what I'm calling nature. One also could call this elemental fact and presence the planetary ecosystem, biodiversity, the earth's ecology, evolution incarnate, or the wild. It's the gorgeous, intricate, staggering, mysterious, inventive, self-sustaining, dynamic, diverse, ever-evolving, entirely interdependent sodality of creatures and habitats that for billions of years now has clothed this planet in a tissue of lives—millions in kinds and billions in numbers. Being situated so as to behold a fractal bit of that is, for me, the source of vast real-world delight.

A source of bad conscience, however, is the knowledge that my way of life, austere though it may appear to the richer folk, is still ruinously exploitive of nature—not in my backyard, where I practice harmlessness toward even the wasps, but in the atmosphere, where my fossil fuel combustion's carbon dioxide is helping change the climate; in all those mountainous places where the metals and minerals that structure and drive my American life are torn from the earth; and in the flesh of fish and birds, mammals, and reptiles, where the chemicals that made the paper and plastic I use bioaccumulate, deforming reproduction.

That guilty knowledge is another argument for material simplicity. The less I consume, the less harm I do to that which I love. In a consumer society, harmless living may be simple, but it is not easy. I make no claim to exemplary harmlessness or simplicity. I wish only to share and reflect on some of my experiences of imperfectly simple living.

For my purposes, it would be handy if Epicurus had been more quotable on the subject of nature. But as a third century B.C.E. Athenian, an urbanite, he had a concept of nature quite different from mine. To Epicurus, nature comprised the universe; to me, it's most wondrous in its minute particulars.

Next to the birds and the bees, I care most about the humane. Consumerism is as destructive of our humanity as it is of nature, and Epicurean simplicity, respectful of the soul, is relevant here. Just as nature enchants me, so do art and literature; history and philosophy engross me, and at a smaller cost to the planet than, say, an inaugural ball. The humanities supply some evidence of intelligent life on the planet, sources of beauty and meaning, of truth and instruction, of inspiration and community.

There was a medieval saying that city air makes one free. In a city, no one's looking. Or they may be looking, but there are so many persons to see that censure is overwhelmed; in cities, tolerance is as necessary as breathing. Some years ago, I made my first trip to New York City since I had become rusticated. On the sidewalks, downtown and in SoHo, each face in the torrent of humanity was definite. Everybody looks like Somebody in New York. Cream rises to the cities, even if it's the cream of the grifters. Painted cakes may not satisfy hunger, but they are appetizing. Ambitious, energetic, tough people go to cities to scale the pinnacles, or to launch a lusher life than they could possibly know back in Bangladesh, Haiti, Hungary, or North Dakota.

Flying homeward from John F. Kennedy International Airport, I disembarked in Detroit to catch a flight on a regional airline. There, the flavor of humanity changed from Manhattan salmagundi to heartland soft-serve. The travelers choking the airport looked pasty, pudgy, and pragmatic. Confronting such committed blandness, I rued, and not for the first time, my decision to dwell in the upper Midwest. This bout of culture shock and invidious comparison passed, however. Before driving home, I stopped at the all-night supermarket in Boardman City to pick up a few things. Warming to the faces of the other shoppers and the store staff, I regained my appreciation for the

people here, remembering that the pleasant girl checking out my groceries, the saucy Latina who had done the same in the low-ceilinged, jam-packed *supermercado* on Amsterdam Avenue, and I are not so very different. We're just trying to make the most of our lives in our own circumstances.

Still, I know I'm not the only North American who loves the continent but not its culture. On several brief visits to Europe and during a few weeks' travel in India, I've observed that my countrymen and I often think and act like babies. Euro-Americans' history is shallow, our culture experimental and profligate. In our refusal to defer gratification or practice austerity, we seem infantile as a people. Yet the seasoned Old World, alas, appears to have been gnawed to the bone and completely domesticated. Coming home to the United States, then, I return to a vast land that still harbors wildness, to a rogue state heedless in its consumption of water, soil, fossil fuel, and fat. I return to the ease of the mother tongue and the intimacy of long-standing friendships. The mental souvenirs I've dragged home from abroad reinforce my alienation. It's partly just the Goldilocks syndrome: One place lacks inland seas, another historical consciousness, and none is just right. Of course, many of us writers are temperamentally at odds with the world. It's not work one can do with a crowd.

The avalanche of blossoms on the abandoned apple trees that welcomes me back on a springtime drive home from the airport, and the ability to look out across open land, to smell the green freshness of the breeze, and to enjoy the taste of my own well water again, all make me feel a lot less crazy for having leapt, nearly twenty years ago, from the liberated climes of the city of San Francisco into the heartland insularity of the upper Midwest.

Those fields are open thanks to the people who stayed put, the keepers of the heartland. Those settlers and their descen-

dants put in a century and a half of hard work, living rural lives, yoked with the land. A handful are still farming today, still trying to fulfill an earthbound ambition.

I spent my only childhood in a displaced place, Phoenix, Arizona, a city plopped on the Sonoran Desert like a Monopoly board game whose thirsty players keep sending out for more water. My family lived in one of the first suburbs in northeast Phoenix, in a $9,800 house bought in 1949, a few years after my Arizona dad and Mississippi mom got out of the service and married.

Thus, I was born into what Alan Thein Durning, in *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth,* identifies as the consumer class, in which annual household income per family member is above $7,500 and which constitutes about one-fifth of the world's people. The consumer life, Durning says, "is among the world's premiere environmental problems."

As a member of this class, I have never wanted for any *thing.* There have been times when I've wanted for love and consolation, for some hint of meaning, or for surcease from physical or emotional pain. I've been broke often enough, but I've never known poverty, never performed without a net. I have wanted for greater energy, courage, compassion, and clarity, but so far I've never lacked anything material to a comfortable and healthy life.

It's an extraordinary position to be in on a planet that is home to a billion people living on less than $700 per annum, drinking unclean water, getting insufficient food, and living in shanties. Between the consumers and the destitute are 3.3 billion people—the world's middle-income class, earning between $700 and $7,500 per capita. Their lives of decent sufficiency don't compare well with the *Dallas* and *Dynasty* lifestyles per-

vading the world's airwaves but are a possible standard for both consumers and the poor.

While growing up in Phoenix, I had my fill of endless summer. People who see a bright side to global warming are sadly mistaken in imagining that perpetual heat would be nice. In 1965, I seized my first opportunity to escape the Sun Belt by going away to a small liberal arts college for women in Oakland, California. It was a heady time to be in college, even an out-of-the-way women's college. Being averse to crowds, not to say mobs, I mostly watched the Bay Area's revolutionary doings from afar, sitting out the marches and be-ins. Even so, I got radicalized.

During my senior year, through newspaper reading and a little organizing, I learned about ecology, specifically human overpopulation. Shocked by the magnitude and centrality of that problem, I wrote a speech on the subject and was elected class speaker. At the commencement exercises in June 1969, I declared that in light of overpopulation and impending ecological catastrophe, "the most humane thing for me to do would be to have no children at all."

At the time, it was shocking for a young woman to be so unilaterally drastic about motherhood, but the choice has served me well. As a feminist, I assumed that I should determine the purposes my body would serve, and I must have intuited that for me, the writer's life would be incompatible with parenthood. My renunciation was, in fact, epicurean, and it has abetted my simplicity.

Along with numerous other youthful hothead graduation speakers that June, I made national news. The resulting swirl of notoriety launched my career as an ecological wordsmith.

Many years ago, a colleague told me that I lead a charmed life. At the risk of jinxing my luck, I have to agree. It may be

that the charm of my life is as simple as "Them that's got shall get." I got generous, intelligent parents who read and wrote and spoke interestingly. I got a calling. I took a principled stand a bit precociously and quite propitiously. For the next fifteen years, I remained in the San Francisco Bay Area, lecturing, writing and editing, and organizing conferences for several ecology-minded organizations and periodicals.

In 1984, I relocated from a snug but ever-pricier Telegraph Hill apartment with an East Bay view to a haphazardly renovated octogenarian farmhouse near Tamarack City. The proximate cause of my move to this lovely surround was a guy named Phil whom I'd met that spring at the First North American Bioregional Congress. Phil was a bioregional organizer, co-op activist, and hippie carpenter. Like a lot of North Woods counterculturalists, he still upheld the values of material simplicity, respect for ecology, and community despite the fact that it was the 1980s. What's more, he had a very attractive body politic. Like the fruit on the maverick apple trees around this countryside, Phil was ruddy, tangy, and free. He lived with his good friend Rob in the aforementioned farmhouse, known locally as the Hovel, as had a kaleidoscopic array of interesting hippie bachelors over the previous few years. Not long after Phil and I met and fell madly in love, I visited him for a long Fourth of July weekend. Smitten by both the man and his home, when the hint was dropped that I might come and abide awhile, I could hardly wait to move in.

That I was, on the basis of a brief encounter, two months' correspondence, and a casual invitation, going to an obscure part of the United States known mainly for cold, in a belated move back to the land, struck my friends and family as an appalling piece of impulsiveness. It would entail some heavy dues.