



# How Much Is Enough?

Questions to Live by for Simplicity and Sustainability

By Lisa Marshall

**I**n 2008, my husband and I spent a month in an apartment in Perugia, Italy. While the apartment was comfortably furnished, it made me deeply aware how much less stuff I need than I tend to think. Fewer clothes, fewer cooking utensils and appliances, less space and fewer forms of technology. That experience started me thinking.....

Forbes just had yet another article<sup>1</sup> about how the next generation doesn't want the "stuff" their parents are leaving them, noting that for the first time in history, we have two generations downsizing simultaneously – Boomers and their parents. In a world inundated by "stuff", material goods in a vast array of forms and sizes, I and many of my clients and colleagues often find ourselves wondering how to keep from

being smothered under its avalanche – a vast set of choices we're offered about what to eat, wear, drive, listen to, read, put in our houses or use to mediate the world technologically. Most of which is designed to be disposable rather than sustainable.

Additionally, the digital world offers constant choices about a new kind of stuff – an invisible kind. What news/information or messages to put in our brains, view on YouTube or allow into our mailboxes and onto our phones? That's on top of technology allowing us to look at and order all the traditional stuff online, delivered direct to our door. And meanwhile, the prices keep falling, so why not get more of it, whatever "it" is?

Living systems are inherently complex, and human beings are good examples of that. (Put

them in organizations and you magnify that reality.) One of the insights that the science of complexity has brought us is that useful behavior in systems is generated most effectively by the fewest and simplest rules. One such rule is that of "carrying capacity." Living systems are inherently self-regulating. One of the key characteristics of such systems is that they have a built-in "absorption or carrying capacity"<sup>2</sup> – the level of input and output they can handle and still stay in balance.

Go beyond that capacity and the system starts to sicken. Fail to provide enough to fuel that capacity and it begins to starve. I've found this concept very useful as I work to simplify my life. It brought me to the reality that, compared to the world of all possibilities, my personal carrying capacity is shrinking (never

mind that it is far greater than at any time in human history.) It's shrinking partly as a function of aging, but also because we as a culture are systematically exceeding it – we have far more than we need. Like people in a flooded town, we find ourselves restricted to an ever-smaller space as the waters rise. The shrinking carrying capacity in our lives reflects the shrinking carrying capacity of the planet. In both cases, we're moving towards flooding the system with more than it can handle while starving it of many key nutrients. And we're sickening our lives and the planet in the process.

What are we flooding and what are we starving? The human species may be the one living system that will choose to override its own carrying capacity. We don't always self-regulate. As technology gets smarter, it increasingly subtly and elegantly colludes with our neurology to help override our carrying capacity, to disengage us from our bodies and distract us from our emotional lives – the mechanisms that would keep us healthy and self-regulating. We simultaneously over-stimulate and under-nourish. We may be the richest (and fattest) nation on earth, but it feels to me like we're starving – emotionally and perhaps even physically.

In my sixties, I experienced the results of a lifetime of overriding carrying capacity. Having powered along on sheer will-power for quite a long time, my body announced it would no longer play that game. It became urgently clear to me that

there are important links between my personal carrying capacity, my neurology and physiology, and that of the planet as whole. Adding the concept of sustainability into my framework caused me to muse on the intricate lace that is woven when we try to address both simplicity and sustainability in how our lives play out. The underlying pattern is critical!

In the Amish communities where I live, each new technology is examined by the community as a whole. If the elders decide that it contributes to the health and well-being of the community as a whole, then one purchase is made, to be shared by the whole community. In the absence of a similar community dialogue to help me make decisions as I continue to work to simplify my life, I've been searching for a framework that helps me ask the right questions and take the right actions so that I don't collude in overwhelming my carrying capacity.

I've decided, for example, that for every new thing I bring into my home, something else has to leave (or even two things!): a good way of ensuring that I don't drown in a sea of unneeded things. It forces some interesting thinking – do I really want this enough to replace something else? Does it simplify my life, or increase the ease or beauty in my life enough that I'll get rid of something else? What would be the process for that?

Another example: Exploring my personal carrying capacity – designing a life which I could

sustain for the long haul – included looking at how many hours a year I spend on planes, or reflexively answering emails or rushing to appointments. It included looking at my addiction to computer games (which enable me to distract myself from these issues on a regular basis) or time on the phone with friends. In my “need” to stay connected to folks in far away places, I often took my cell phone when I walked the dogs in the mountains. Net net: I never fully saw those woods, heard the birds, smelled the ferns or mountain laurel, felt the breezes.

Part of simplifying my life was learning to **just do one thing** at a time, hard for a committed multi-tasker. Yet doing so clearly increased my carrying capacity by lowering my stress levels and relieving my neurobiology of yet another round of adrenalin/ cortisol poisoning. It also improved my ability to perceive changes around me and learn from them. I stopped drifting along on autopilot.

When I started to think about how to sustain myself, my family and my community through the lens of sustaining my carrying capacity, interesting things happened. This exploration led to examining the sense of responsibility I carry for others' well-being – my family's, my friends', my clients'. It included my awareness of utilizing resources such as electricity, propane, water, petroleum. It included being intentional about the quality and origin of the food I eat, the quality of my

health and taking time for staying connected to what nourishes me spiritually.

In looking for a definition of sustainability that could provide some guidance, I ran across the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Ah, but what *are* the needs of the present? In our never-ending search for more and better "stuff," we've lost connection to genuine need – what we want becomes what we "need."

While it may well be, as my colleague Marsha Shenk says, that we're biologically predisposed to the value exchanges of the marketplace, in its current form we've exceeded carrying capacity big time. Indeed, the marketplace has driven a truly pernicious commoditization process, wherein much of what human beings require to survive (let alone thrive) physiologically and psychologically, has been or is becoming a predefined product or service – from water in bottles to online "communities." In a great many ways, we've unconsciously substituted the marketplace for personal growth and for human connection – relationship and community.

Wiki describes sustainability as "a characteristic of a process or state that can be maintained at a certain level indefinitely; or, as the complex process of self-maintenance through a variety

of mechanisms, including mitigation of environmental threats, adaptation to environmental changes, or transformation of the complex system including both entity and environment to achieve co-evolution." In other words, a carrying capacity is a system that is in balance *through its ability to mitigate, adapt and transform.*

This is an important point – systems always evolve to greater states of complexity. Evolution – innovation, adaptation, transformation – is the growth driver the market needs. Not the cancer model of "ever more and ever larger" that many seem to assume. "Bigger" is not in fact the highest and best driver of growth – remember the dinosaurs? We do need the marketplace, but it must be part of a larger ecosystem, and subject to the needs of that ecosystem.

As a species, we're designed to live in troops and tribes. All primates are. We're also designed (both physically and mentally) to live in close proximity to others, to have physical contact with others, and to have the rhythm of our days and the nature of our work dictated by the season and the length of the days. We've invented (through our technology) a world that profoundly disturbs human beings' "complex process of self maintenance." By using technology to seemingly extend our carrying capacity in two critical areas – time and stuff – we have fundamentally redefined both health and wealth in forms that guarantee we will continue to exceed our planetary carrying

capacity going forward. Thus, while we deprive future generations of access to raw materials and healthy ecosystems, storage becomes a national obsession and one of our fastest growing industries.

I'm also fascinated by that Wiki definition because it sounds like a maturity process. Isn't that the hero's journey – the complex process of self-maintenance in the face of threats or changes through a metamorphosis that allows mitigation, adaptation and ultimately transformation of both entity and environment to achieve co-evolution? For the human species to mature, sustainability is critical. For us as individuals, it may be equally critical.

What, then, is the subtle (or not-so-subtle) undertow that prevents us from recognizing and acting on the obvious here? It's easy to be cynical about greedy Americans who fill the holes in their hearts with stuff. Liz Galst, in an article entitled "Monkeying with the Message,"<sup>3</sup> noted that because we're primates, we're also hierarchical beings. Being able to express higher status through our "stuff" is pivotal to our mental health, because we're taught to see it as a fundamental way of feeling good about ourselves. She further notes:

*"Besides this primal urge, we're driven to consume for other reasons: to impress potential mates, to express love and affection, to communicate our individuality. No matter how bad it is for the planet,*

*[Halina S.] Brown [Prof. of Environmental Sciences, Clark University] says, "We consume a lot because, in our society, that's what people do."*

This is, of course, a rationalization. For millennia, humans achieved status by what they gave away, not what they kept. Our modern capitalism is based on deliberately encouraging people to exceed their carrying capacity, to continue to hope that the next product or service will be the one that finally locks down the status, fills the emotional hole and makes our laundry whiter than white. (The advertising community certainly figured this out several decades ago.) Many commentators have noted that the period of adolescence – the period in which we most desperately search for an identity – in American life has extended longer than any period in human history.

Interesting research indicates that one consequence of this sociological phenomenon's intersection with the market economy's "need" for endless growth is that we've infantilized a whole class of adults – the American consumer.<sup>4</sup> The popular bumper sticker "He who dies with the most toys wins" certainly captures both of these issues in one place. Similarly, "I'm spending my child's inheritance" on the back of an RV is far truer than it knows – that RV's costs to the rest of us and our children go well beyond its sticker price.

So is the issue here one of a nation and culture addicted to

its immaturity by its need for hierarchy and status? How do we pull ourselves out of the undertow? How do we create a culture of sufficiency, rather than neediness, a world where words like community, sustainability and stewardship have sex appeal? A world where maturity is the goal because people understand – and are delighted – that the purpose of life's journey is to grow up, not to stay stuck in perpetual adolescence, constantly seeking our identity through the stuff we own? In such a world, childhood and adolescence would be seen for what they are – stages on the way to adulthood, to wisdom, to generativity – rather than something to be clung to and prolonged forever.

Interestingly, the so-called "Millennial" generation is asking many of these same questions. As the first generation admittedly "not better off" than its parents, these issues are very real. Reading Taha-Nisi Coates or JD Vance or Courtney Martin, each a leader in their own communities, the message from all these young people is the same: the old "American Dream" is dead. This generation is redefining "success" in a very intentional way. Martin quotes Toni Morrison: "There is nothing, believe me, more satisfying, more gratifying than true adulthood....Its achievement is a difficult beauty, an intensely hard won glory, which commercial forces and cultural vapidness should not be permitted to deprive you of."<sup>5</sup>

Can we move beyond the unconscious conspiracy of the

marketplace, the forces of globalism and Wall Street? Are there ways to grow that don't involve the consumption of more stuff? Dare we limit industrial growth in the name of the planet? Dare we not? Can we, in the words of Kate Raworth, Oxford economist, replace "the search for gain [with] the search to maintain value?"<sup>6</sup> The optimists celebrate human ingenuity endlessly, our ability to continuously innovate new technologies that solve (and create) the next generation of problem. The pessimists point to an ecosystem whose carrying capacity is rapidly being breached on multiple fronts simultaneously. As long as retail therapy is a way of life, a reflexive response to stress and despair, they say, we will surely continue to feed the "stuff" system and exceed that system's – and our own – carrying capacity.

Once upon a time, we got as much stimulation in a lifetime as we now get in a day. Each moment of stimulation started a significant learning process that often helped keep us alive, so our brains rewarded us by making it feel good.<sup>7</sup> Our brains, as a result, are stimulation junkies – the more stimulation we get, the more we want. Now we are reaching a new kind of boundary – a place where as a species we have to discover new ways to support our stimulation habit, to discover ways of learning and growing that don't cost our children's children their birthright – a healthy, livable, breathable planet. The good news is that current neuroscience says we're clearly capable

of doing this – that our neuroplasticity, our capacity to change the way we think, feel and behave, is far greater than formerly believed. We **can** “mitigate, adapt and transform”.

My personal experience of this was surprising. After not playing computer games the whole month I was in Italy, I found it easier and easier to continue to not play. Like watching TV, the games had felt irresistible and yet strangely unsatisfying, a mosquito bite that never stopped itching. Sometimes I still play. When I feel the dissatisfaction itch now, though, I ask myself what it is I’m trying to disconnect from. Most often, I have just drifted away from being in the present moment. Asking the question gets me back and the itch goes away. If it doesn’t, I’ll draw for a bit, or write poetry. Those are ways of intently focusing on the present moment that usually do the trick.

The richness and fullness of this moment is pretty stimulating when I let it in. And it grows my carrying capacity. I’m calmer, more centered, less adrenalin-fueled, more able to generate loving attention to those around me. I spend time almost every day with my two-year-old grandson and that quality of attention, when I summon it, clearly both soothes and empowers him. In return, I get the sheer joy of watching language unfold and perception grow, in this small, curly-headed being who will be here long after I leave this planet. It seems a far more potent legacy than a collection of material things my

children have to sort through and dispose of.

I don’t have the answers, but these experiences continue to encourage me to ask different questions than the ones we’re currently living in. What then, might be the profound questions about “stuff” we could be asking of ourselves and one another? Here are five:

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### 1 Where did this come from?

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Do I understand the raw material and labor sources of the things I purchase? What are the true costs? Are they processes I want to be part of?

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### 2 Am I willing to take responsibility?

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Not just for its beginning, but for its end? Where will it go? Not just for the period of time I have it, but afterwards? Is it “cradle to cradle<sup>8</sup>” – when I’m done with it, will it become food for the natural world or a part for the industrial world without requiring expensive and polluting recycling processes? Or, like so much of our high tech stuff, will it end up being dismantled by children in 3rd world countries who are poisoned in the process?

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### 3 What “need” is this fulfilling?

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What hole am I trying to fill? Does this truly enrich my life or merely raise my expectations?

What would I be willing to do without in order to have this? (If the answer is nothing, you probably don’t need it.) What additional responsibilities and burdens will having this place on me or on others in my household? What do my body and my emotions tell me when I ask this question?

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### 4 Do I fully understand my current carrying capacity levels?

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When I sit with this question, what messages do I get? How does this affect those levels, especially with regard to health and wealth? Will having this increase my busy-ness or give me more time and space for doing the things I truly want to be doing with my life? Or is it ultimately one more thing for the storage unit?

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### 5 If I didn’t have this, what could I have instead?

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Would my life be less busy, less frenetic? Would I have more time for friends and community, for conversations, for creating the kinds of powerful dialogues that make meaning in my life and in the world? Would I exercise or meditate more? Would my home be more spacious and uncluttered? Would my sense of life’s possibilities increase or decrease?

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Starting to look hard at this fundamental question of carrying capacity leads to new understanding of the connections between simplicity and sustainability. We have to rewire our brains to a new set of challenges at almost every level – at the level of desire, at the level of resources, at the level of designing and building, at the level of the marketplace, at the level of increasing individual and collective maturity, at the level of finding the personal, political and social will to rewrite the laws to hold us accountable to the planet, and ultimately at the level of values and spirit, accepting the interconnectedness that makes us all stewards of the whole, as well as owners of the parts<sup>9</sup>. It will require leaders with the maturity to ask the hard question “how much is enough?”<sup>10</sup> and then “speak the truth and point to hope.” Will you be one of them?

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1 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2017/02/12/sorry-nobody-wants-your-parents-stuff/#45bb776524ed>

2 - My thanks to my colleague Janet Crawford for introducing this idea to me in our exploration of “stuff.”

3 - Plenty Magazine, February-March, 2008, pp.67-71

4 - [Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole by Benjamin R. Barber

5 - Commencement address at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts May 28, 2004

6 - Raworth, Kate, Doughnut Economics: 7 Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist, 2017. p.233

7 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/world/europe/harnessing-gaming-for-the-classroom.html>

8 - Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things is a 2002 non-fiction book by German chemist Michael Braungart and U.S. architect William McDonough. It is a manifesto detailing how to achieve their Cradle to Cradle Design model. Wikipedia

9 - Joe Dyer, former VADM Naval Aviation, then a VP at iRobot, is the source of this phrase.

10 - Question famously asked by Thoreau in Walden Pond