

Book Review: Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet Reviewed

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Book Review: *Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet*
By Mark A. Burch. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2000.

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Aristotle once asked a simple question — what is the Good Life? In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he concludes that it is not possible without wealth. But what is meant by wealth? In *Stepping Lightly*, Mark Burch, a freelance educator, writer, and a workshop facilitator from Winnipeg, attempts to answer this question. He puts forward the case that our consumer culture is driven by advertising, a “breeder reactor” that encourages us to live beyond our means in an attempt to buy happiness. Although Burch flirts with the idea that our hunger for materialism might be part of a survival imperative — an antidote to death even — he emphasizes that the consumer culture can never really lead to contentment, because it doesn't satisfy our most important needs. Equally pressing, it is not globally sustainable. “Inner wealth,” by contrast, is about a higher level of consciousness that promotes love, meaning, and a sense of connectedness to the world around us by adopting another idea close to the heart of ancient philosophers, the Golden Mean. By implementing a lifestyle of “voluntary simplicity,” Burch argues, we can not only cure ourselves — healing a spiritual wound that misdirects desire — but we can also heal our home, the Earth.

In *Stepping Lightly*, Burch proceeds in three steps. He begins by telling us *what* voluntary simplicity means. It's not just about reducing waste, recycling, and simplifying our lives; it's about seeing ourselves as part of a web of life that interconnects us with family, community, and the Earth. But it's also about developing an ethical attitude to the choices that we make. Part of his definition hinges upon the idea of non-violent insurrection, a concept whose roots he traces back to civil disobedience in the works of Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Gandhi. Next, Burch looks at the reasons *why* we need to adopt voluntary simplicity. In keeping with the metaphorical title of *Stepping Lightly*, Burch points out that

most of us have an ecological footprint bigger than a Sasquatch. Expansion of our bioregions is fuelled by consumerism; such growth is unsustainable on a large scale. But on a more personal level, voluntary simplicity can also teach us “what is important” in our daily lives, leading to a sense of personal enrichment. Finally, *Stepping Lightly* describes *how* voluntary simplicity can be achieved. Here Burch invites the reader to step back from materialism, and take a step forward to heal the Earth. Each one of us is the product of countless acts of love. Healing the world begins by healing ourselves. It begins with “mindfulness,” a self-reflective attitude derived from activities like yoga, art, and dance that enable us to pay attention to one thing at a time. By projecting our mindfulness into the world, reducing waste, “de-junking” and practicing conservation become second nature to us, and as bartering, co-ops, and community shared agriculture thrive, Burch articulates a world in which business “re-engineers” itself by becoming part of society rather than trying to manipulate it.

Stepping Lightly is a lucid, articulate, and well-organized book that addresses crucial issues for our time. The sections on *what*, *why*, and *how* are divided into chapters, and several of these are further divided into subsections, all of which are easy to follow. More visual material might have been included in the book, such as graphs, tables, or even cartoons; however, the boxes in the margins are particularly useful devices for highlighting important points within the text. The bibliography is adequate, although a little short, and pagination errors were evident in the index.

Burch has delved deeply into history. Lock, Descartes, Zen, and the philosophy of civil disobedience figure prominently in his book, but followers of the Deep Ecology movement will be disappointed that he has by-passed a rich collection of work that could have enhanced his thesis. In many ways, the *what* and the *why* of *Stepping Lightly* are the strongest parts of the book; the *how* is by far the longest section, but it is also the most challenging to articulate. At the outset, Burch emphasizes that his vision of the future is not anti-technology, but many of his ideas challenge conventional economic thinking to such an extent that they need to be more thoroughly fleshed out. Burch devotes only nine pages of his text to addressing the impact of voluntary simplicity on the economy, admitting that he is not an economist. Ultimately, it will be up to the readers of *Stepping Lightly* to decide precisely how to implement ideas expressed in this book at the grassroots level. And perhaps that is as it should be.

Aristotle confessed at the end of his life in a letter written on the island of Chalcis to Antipater that “[t]he more I am by myself, and alone, the fonder I have become of myths.” Myths contain eternal truths. Perhaps Aristotle had come to appreciate the true meaning of wealth at the end of his life — the Good Life. Mark Burch too has come to the end of a long journey. There is much soul searching in this book, and it does make a sincere attempt to bridge the gap between individual responsibility and collective action. While many of the ideas will be familiar to practitioners of the Environmental Movement — even

the term “voluntary simplicity” is coined from Richard Gregg’s article in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* in 1936 — *Stepping Lightly* weaves together so many interrelated strands in such a thought-provoking way that it will appeal to a wide range of readers.