



Sample file

RADICAL simplicity

small footprints on a
finite Earth

JIM MERKEL

Advance Praise for
RADICAL SIMPLICITY

Jim Merkel offers a special mix of practicality and idealism: a workable mix.

I defy you to read this book and not come away thinking of ways
your life might change for the better.

— Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*

The delight of this book is that it is written so clearly from the author's
heart. Merkel's passion for creating a more humane world shines
through on every page. A real inspiration!

— Janet Luhrs, author of *The Simple Living Guide*, and *Simple Loving*, and
editor of *Simple Living* newsletter

Jim Merkel has written the most persuasive argument I have yet seen for all
of us to radically change the way we live day-to-day. As a former engineer
working on weapons who went through a dramatic change in consciousness,
his words have a special power. *Radical Simplicity* joins the evidence of
science to a fertile imagination. At a certain point in his life, Merkel became,
as he puts it, "free and clear" and he conveys that excitement to his readers,
in an engaging style. Furthermore, he has carried out his ideas in his
personal life and as a social activist, illustrating the practicality of
his proposals. This is a profoundly important book.

— Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*

Square two simplicity at its best! Jim Merkel takes us beyond extended
vacations and cleaning closets to hardcore simplicity that aims to save the
planet. *Radical Simplicity* gets to the root of our sustainability dilemma and
proposes practical ideas for boosting our quality of life, caring for Mother
Earth, and practising right livelihood based on justice and love. A wonderful
contribution to the voluntary simplicity literature.

— Mark A. Burch, author of *Simplicity: Notes, Stories and Exercises for Developing
Unimaginable Wealth*, and *Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet*

Jim Merkel wants to do nothing less than save our planet and our very lives.

Radical Simplicity is an impassioned blueprint for the practice of sustainable, accountable living that can't fail to give joy to old hands.

As for newcomers — watch out! Jim has started a revolution, and this book just might change your life.

— Laura Waterman, author of *Wilderness Ethics*

Radical Simplicity is the best thing since sliced bread — but with a much smaller Ecological Footprint! It gives you the tools you need to make this planet the world of your dreams; a world that provides vitality to all people and all species. And, even better, you can start living this dream today!

This book shows you how.

— Mathis Wackernagel, Ecological Footprint Network and Redefining Progress

The wisdom of experience that Jim Merkel brings to this book allows him to speak with authority, concrete practicality, humility, and inspiration, inviting us into a world of serious simplicity achieved joyfully. *Radical Simplicity* is about the discovery of abundant choices, the adventure of reclaiming a meaningful life, and the fulfilment of connecting social values to life practises. This is a powerful and convincing case for living consciously and lightly on the Earth, for beyond gentle persuasion it provides the tools for both assessing the impact of life choices and asserting the real possibility for change. We need this book now more than ever.

— John Saltmarsh, author of *Scott Nearing: The Making of a Homesteader*.

In the tradition of the Nearings and Donella Meadows, Jim Merkel's *Radical Simplicity* is a compassionate, hands-on, compelling argument for ecological and spiritual living. Merkel provides brilliantly conceived ethical arguments for the necessity of simple, but deep living. The book is filled with wonderful anecdotal examples, superb workbook-like assessment tools, and just plain common sense. This is must reading for anyone who is concerned with environmental quality, global equity, and social justice.

I would like to see this book in every high school and/or college classroom in North America. There is no better hands-on, learn-by-doing curriculum guide for ecological citizenship.

— Mitchell Thomashow, Chair, Department of Environmental Studies, Antioch New England Graduate School, and author of *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*

In our work, we have the unusual opportunity to meet people who have both extraordinary wealth and a heartfelt concern about sustainable consumption. We are excited to be able to show them this book. Never before have we seen the ecological footprinting model framed so concretely and within a motivating, long-term map for achieving sustainability. Beyond the solid thinking of his book, Jim's warmth, positive outlook, and the integrity he models in his way of life all inspire us into greater awareness and action.

— Christopher Mogil and Anne Slepian, Co-founders of
More Than Money journal

The average American creates an ecological footprint several times larger than what the Earth can sustain, but this book shows us how we can all do much better. Even those of us who've been involved with the Voluntary Simplicity movement for a long time have been awed by how lightly Jim Merkel has learned to live on the earth. *Radical Simplicity* explains in concrete and engaging language exactly why and how he does it. Read it and don't weep — simplify your life, save the planet and have more fun besides.

— John de Graaf, co-producer of the *Affluenza* television series
and co-author of *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*

Most Americans want the life that Jim Merkel knows is possible: one that expresses what we really love, what inspires us, what matters most. *Radical Simplicity* offers a clear vision for what we can restore to our lives and how we might imagine our lives differently. It asks questions of mythic proportions: How do we want to be? Do we surrender to a culture defined by self-interest and apathy toward community, or do we choose, instead, to be defined by our self-restraint and a sense of service? To embrace this vision is to accept another story for ourselves: that humans are not the only measure of things, that humans can be defined more by our fairness and compassion and our desire to belong.

Jim Merkel is an important teacher and practitioner. In helping us to bring radical simplicity into our lives, he is helping each of us to renew our sense of service, tolerance, humility, and joy. He is helping all of us to re-define what it means to be human in this century.

— Peter Forbes, a leader in the American conservation movement,
and author of *The Great Remembering*

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JIM MERKEL

FOREWORD BY
VICKI ROBIN



NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

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FOREWORD

BY VICKI ROBIN

Open to page 136 of *Material World* (the book of photos by Peter Menzel showing people and their possessions from around the world). Don't have a copy? No problem — I'll tell you what the picture is. It's the Skeen Family from Pearland, Texas, selected because they are "deep in the heart" of the American experience. Their income approximates the average US level. They have two children — Michael, age 7 and Julie, age 10. Like all of the 30 families representing 30 countries that were selected for this coffee table book, they stand in front of their home with all their furniture and appliances arranged in the cul de sac behind them. It's a nice but modest array, nothing compared to the stage set of many sitcoms. Every family from around the world was asked what their most valued possession was — for the Skeens, as for many Americans, it's the family Bible.

Now turn to page 14. Mali, in Africa. The Natoma family of eleven (two wives, eight children, one father) sits on the roof of their mud and straw adobe home, surrounded by cooking pots, baskets and various kitchen and farming implements. Perhaps half of these everyday items were made by the family themselves. In the background is a bicycle,

which is Papa's most prized possession. The clothes on their bodies and on a makeshift drying rack (a pole balanced between the house and the mud wall) are colorful. Their faces sport big smiles. They have a radio but no TV, no telephone, no VCRs and no automobiles.

These two families are separated by many thousands of miles, many years of development and many layers of creature comforts. If you are like me, you can appreciate the simplicity of the Mali household and even wonder at their apparent delight in circumstances that would send most any American into helplessness and despair. Almost everything arrayed behind the Skeens would have to be plucked out of the picture to put them on a par with the Natomas. Best to close the book.

But we can't close the book. You, I, the Natomas and the Skeens, along with perhaps 6.5 billion other humans and hundreds of billions of other creatures, live together on one planet. The "have-nots" can be out of sight and even out of mind, but they breathe the same air, drink from the same scant supply of fresh water, and birth children who will grow up to work with our children to finish the job we've barely started; they will have to find a way for all of us to live well within the Earth's means.

Jim Merkel, a former weapons engineer, accepted this challenge 14 years ago. He whittled away at his stock of possessions and reduced the sheer volume, complexity and toxicity of the stuff that flowed through his life. He did it with gusto and good spirit, guided by passion and curiosity. His engineering background gave him the mentality and the tools to assess which of the changes he was making actually lowered his impact on the Earth. He lobbied his city council for bike paths so everyone who wanted to could choose to do without a car. He organized Earth Day celebrations that attracted hundreds of volunteers and thousands of people. His high spirits, humble integrity and winning ways were dished up along with his facts and figures about the devastating impact on the Earth of the American lifestyle.

He learned everything he could and experimented with every method he could find. In the process he met Mathis Wackernagel and Bill Rees who taught Jim about the Ecological Footprint, a relatively accurate way to actually measure how much of the planet's resources

it takes to support us in the style to which we have become accustomed. He also sought out Joe Dominguez and me after reading *Your Money or Your Life*. Our method for lowering consumption while increasing quality of life was another key piece in the puzzle he was pondering: how do we get people to live within the means of nature and not feel deprived? Jim also jumped at the chance to go on a study trip to Kerala, India, to learn from the people in that state who have a quality of life almost as high as ours in North America — but do it on just over \$300 a year per person.

From these building blocks he dreamed a big dream — starting a research and education center to teach people the skills of living lightly and the ways to know how much of everything it takes to support their lives. But from here on, how about I let Jim tell you his own story? What I really want you to know is that Jim makes living on less seem like so much fun that you'll want to try it yourself. He shares compelling facts through telling vivid stories about his own successive awakenings to both the peril and the promise of living on this Earth.

People, animals, plants, soil and the all the rest of the critters together make up this precious mantle of life on our exquisite planet. We *all* live here together — now, and now, and now. So now what? Jim has some answers. Listen to him and you'll see how plausible sustainability is — and how necessary. You'll want to do your part, because by then, Jim will be your friend and his plans will seem like the greatest adventure on Earth.

Vicki Robin is coauthor, with Joe Dominguez, of
Your Money or Your Life.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I arrived at mom and dad's house after 17 years out west, a room awaited me with a desk, bookshelves and a door with an "office" sign on it. The nearby Pleasant River of downeast Maine with its oysters, salmon, moose, bears and porcupines kept me focused, while my nation waged war.

Until about the first two months of writing *Radical Simplicity*, I was under the illusion that I would simply sit down and write this book ... Wrong. Community radio, WERU and Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! kept me inspired with news of a worldwide peace movement. Had it not been for the support from friends, activists and family, I'd have given up.

First thanks go to my sister Marie Merkel who got me through the first few drafts. Janel Sterbentz and the folks at Redefining Progress; Chad Monfreda, Diana Deumling, and Mathis Wackernagel, and my partner Rowan Sherwood offered generous research assistance. Hank Colletto, Lily Fessenden, Monica Wood, Mathis Wackernagel, and Matt Chingos reviewed early drafts. When a manuscript was assembled, Ivan Ussach, Rowan, and my sister Michele Sorensen skillfully edited it.

When seclusion was necessary, a home was offered by Hawk and Lisa Henries, and then by Colleen O'Connell at Ravenwood, where organic vegetables nourished my body and soul. Throughout the entire

project, Chris and Judith Plant and Ingrid Witvoet at New Society Publishers were there to encourage.

Most of all, I thank Rowan, who worked on this project from beginning to end, and whose steady love and support makes life more wonderful. I couldn't have done it without her.

Jim Merkel
June 2003

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INTRODUCTION

Amongst the five-star shuffle of executives at the Royal Viking Hotel in Stockholm, Sweden, I nursed a dark Belgian beer. It was March of 1989. Plunged at the broad, varnished bar, it felt good to catch my breath. I had just helped design a military computer that could work under water or on the deck of a battle ship. It was ruggedized to withstand a drop kick. It contained cryptographic algorithms, fit in the palm of your hand, could be held to the mouthpiece of any public telephone to transmit secrets, and could survive a nuclear blast. Casually, I surveyed the room. Confident I was not being watched, I opened a small notebook and refreshed my memory on foreign military sales procedures.

Tomorrow I would meet with some top brass of the Swedish Military. I would demonstrate for them that clever little top-secret beauty of mine. Perhaps I'd make a sale. More likely they'd peruse my design and remain loyal to our European competitor, a scenario my employer, TRW, and our consultants briefed me on at length. The TV roared out a beer commercial, reminding me to drink up. Suddenly, a special news bulletin flashed on the screen — into the room spilled a massive black oil slick, with an ocean of crude-soaked cormorants and crying seals floundering as they slowly bobbed toward a pristine shore. In the background loomed the wild mountains of Alaska — wolf-haunted forests,

salmon-filled rivers, grizzly bears — Alaska, a place of how many boy-hood dreams!

As the reporters on-screen combed the Exxon Valdez crew for the guilty, I looked across the polished bar into the mirror and knew it was me. I drive. I fly. Four intercontinental and three cross-continental flights in just this last year. How could I plea bargain with a jury of 12 gasping whales? I knew the truth: fossil fuels are part of every item I consume. Of course, the entire industrialized world stood indicted beside me — our “need” for ever-more mobility, ever-more progress, ever-more growth had led us straight to this disaster. But in that moment, all I knew was that I, personally, needed to step forward and own up to the damage.

A day later, mission accomplished, I flew back to California. The bounce of touchdown woke me out of an old dream where my van had disappeared from the airport parking lot and I was walking the sweltering San Luis Obispo streets toward home like an over-burdened burro. No, there it was — dusty, but still very much a part of my life. I drove straight to work, secured the crypto-gear in a top-secret locker, drove home and parked the rig with determination. There was nothing to rush inside for, only bare bachelor-pad cupboards, so I mounted pannier bags on the bike and took off to shop. I felt like I was still in that weird dream world. The supermarket aisles oozed petroleum: from the fertilizer, to the trucking, to the processing, to the packaging, to the little plastic toy prizes in all those cereal boxes. Suddenly, I saw a crude-covered cormorant come flopping out of the Cheerios and into America's cereal bowl.

I left empty-handed and cycled across town to the Cuesta Co-op. The veggies were not oil free, but they were local and 100% organic. I biked home with four full panniers and not a single new package. Next morning, I left for work ten minutes early and pedaled the quiet streets in a wakeful mist, breathing in the rolling green hills.

My evenings began to fill with info-tainment and meetings. A friend asked if I'd throw my name in the hat for the Sierra Club's Executive Committee; soon I was the vice chair of the Santa Lucia chapter. With a group of college students and a radical attorney, we founded the Alternative Transportation Task Force (ATTF) and

drafted a proposal for an interconnected bike lane system — the visionary state-of-the-art transportation plan of our wildest dreams. We boldly called for a twenty-fold increase in bike funds at the annual city budget hearing. With our pinstripes, power-ties and colored pie charts on overheads, we made our case to a packed hearing chamber. That evening, dozens of bike activists crowded the corner bar to celebrate our first victory: a ten-fold expansion of the bike-lane coffers, from \$20K to \$200K per year! *Viva la Velorution!* And this time, the dark beer I enjoyed was from a local microbrewery.

If Lily Tomlin and Steve Martin in *All of Me* thought it was awkward to share one body, there I was: a jet-set military salesman who voted for Reagan by day, and a bleeding-heart pacifist, eco-veggie-head-hooligan by night. In July of 1989, the two minds could no longer share one body. We locked ourselves in the house, closed the blinds and broke open the engineering economic textbooks. Eco-Jim asked, “How much do I need?” while Jet-set Jim asked, “How much can I get?” We ran monthly cash flows for short- and long-range options. The inner engineer buzzed from the design challenge. Mr. Eco wanted a life so lean and free it would fit in the palm of Earth’s hand. Free to fight for bike lanes and old-growth trees. Free to someday cycle to Alaska. Mr. Jet-set wanted a ruggedized personal economic package that could withstand a stock market free-fall and wouldn’t run aground because of born-again, starry-eyed, shortsighted passion.

After working in the shadowy dens of military sales, both Jims made non-violence a critical constraint. The acceptable design had to wash our hands of funds to hired guns. More importantly, it had to systematically enhance peace — peace among families, among nations, and in the thick of yipping coyotes.

We stared at these last design constraints. The calculator lay idle upon the mess of additions and subtractions scattered across the bed, and a design grew like an aster from ashes. It seemed too easy. Set income below taxable level. Then not a single cent of mine would rain bombs and bullets onto peasants who live near coveted resources. But, how could I foster peace? I held the Earth up to my ear and listened.

What I heard was, “To foster peace, you must live equitably.” Then I remembered a factoid from my new piles of eco-peace propaganda

books. The average income of all the world's people was US\$4,500. The uncanny coincidence hit home — I could live on a par with the human family and not fund guns. I jumped for the calculator. Like the wife in the film *The Bicycle Thief*, who sold her bed sheets in ravaged post-war Italy, I laid every single asset on the table. Then with a sharpened pencil I slashed away all possible liabilities: Boat — gone. Restaurants — gone. Beer — four a month. Van — off the road. Subscriptions — gone. Housing — rent the three spare rooms and reduce monthly bills from \$1,100 to \$200. Remove perks and privilege, plain and simple waste, come up with a column of numbers ... total these, propose amendments, run a new cash flow series ... total, amend, iterate ... on and on for hours. My brain needed a break. I picked up my bass and ran a steady blues line. A budget of 5,000 clams a year was where I was at. It started to feel alright.

Here was the plan: I'd quit workin' for the man and live off savings for four years while workin' for the mama. Meanwhile, boost the income from my four-plex through refinancing and sell off every bit of excess. Then, in four years, I'd sell the four-plex and my home and play banker. This way, I'd have years of mortgage income to cover my monthly expenses. With the down payments, I'd buy an inexpensive cabin on some land. Free from paid employment at age thirty? This was too good to be true. I ran worst-case and best-case scenarios. Worst case: I'd fritter my life away in fear, while I contributed to hell on Earth. The second to worst case: twenty years down the road, I'd need to get a part-time job. I gave notice on Monday, took the van off the road, rented out three of the four rooms in my house, and planted a garden. I was free, but more importantly, I was on fire.

.

Radical Simplicity is a practical guide and toolkit to help you begin your customized journey to simplicity. Along the way, you might be astounded by how big an impact or footprint you actually leave every day, and even more amazed by how small you truly would like it to be. Being fourteen years along in my search, what I've found to share are three very specific tools. With the tools from the book *Our Ecological*

Footprint, by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, you will find the equivalent of a monthly Earth checkbook balance statement, a method to measure just how much nature was needed to supply all you consume and absorb your effluent. Then, building on the steps from the book *Your Money or Your Life* by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, you can start to design your own personal economics. It will be one that is ruggedized for the hardball of global markets, and yet allows you to save money, get free of debt and align your work with your values. And by holding the Earth to your ear and listening for its secrets, you just may feel inspired to walk the path to a wild Earth shared by all people and all species. The mystery and magic of this world will unfold and reveal your niche in a sustainable backyard ecology.

When these tools are combined, a self-reinforcing cycle takes on a life of its own — suddenly, you have more time and more savings. Who would have thought it? You have more security and more skills, more responsibility, integrity, and a completely new perspective on freedom. The possibilities are limitless, and new dreams can begin. There are infinite dreams to be lived that would restore the earth, infinite dreams that neither heal nor hurt, and infinite that would harm and are best left in the ethereal world of fantasy. We have evolved and socialized into beings that are both complex and Pavlovian, magnificent and ugly, enlightened and dysfunctional, kind and greedy. With all these seeming complications and contradictions, is there a way to cut through it all — now — and create a dream world for all beings?

.

We have everything to lose and nothing to lose — everything to gain and nothing to gain. And we have our life as the greatest expression of our commitment to the ones we love, to the voiceless, to the land, and to unborn generations.