

STUDY CIRCLES

Education for Our Times

by Cecile Andrews

IN 1893, a man from Sweden named Oscar Olsson visited America. Oscar Olsson was searching for a form of education that would transform his society—a country of great poverty and extreme gaps between the rich and the poor. Olsson wanted a method that would help create a democracy concerned about justice and liberty by allowing people to educate themselves.

He found what he was looking for in the United States—a form of education that would one day be referred to as “education by the people, for the people, and of the people.” It was a form of education called the study circle, a concept that went on to transform Sweden but was forgotten about in the United States. Today, though, it returns to America—once again to transform a society.

Olsson found what he was looking for in an unlikely place—the study circles sponsored by the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. What had begun in Chautauqua, New York in the 1870s as a training program for Sunday school teachers expanded into a broad middle class program of nonformal education. By 1915 the Chautauqua movement was sponsoring fifteen thousand study circles in their program called “colleges for one’s home.”

Study circles became even more important in Sweden. Study circles have been credited with helping create a country that is more committed to the well-being of people and the planet than almost any other country in the world. Today, two-thirds of Swedish adults have been in study circles at some time in their lives, with a third of the adult population involved in any given year. Study circles in Sweden are

used to explore every possible issue, with the government using them to help create an informed citizenry. Indeed, Sweden has been called a “study circle democracy.”

And now, study circles are coming home. Many, many groups in the United States have seen the wisdom of a form of education based on democracy, participation, and equality—a way of educating that allows people to educate themselves, free themselves from the rules and regulations of institutionalized education, free themselves to express and discover their own truths.

Study Circles and Voluntary Simplicity

The idea of study circles had always intrigued me, and in my position as a community college administrator in charge of continuing education courses, I had often tried to get study circle projects going. But they just didn’t catch on. And then, one day I read a story about study circles, which listed the phone number of an organization called the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut. I called them immediately.

Cecile Andrews is the author of *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* (HarperCollins, 1997). A former community college administrator, she now works with the non-profit Seeds of Simplicity teaching classes and workshops on the subjects of simplicity and community education for social change. At present she is a visiting scholar at Stanford University.

For me, this was the beginning of a transformational experience. In 1989 a man had come to me wanting to offer a workshop based on Duane Elgin's book, *Voluntary Simplicity*. It was a book (and a subject) I had been fascinated with for years, so I said yes immediately. But in the end, only 4 people signed up and the workshop had to be cancelled.

But then, after contacting the Study Circles Resource Center, I decided to offer the workshop again. This time—with the same amount of publicity—175 people showed up! Why? I think it was, at least in part, because I gave them a chance to get involved in study circles, a setting where they could talk about what is important to them, what matters, how they could create a society based on concern for the well-being of people and the planet.

Why did study circles catch on with the subject of *Simplicity*? I believe that study circles are a natural expression of the concept of *Voluntary Simplicity*. To me, *Simplicity* is "the examined life" richly lived. It's asking ourselves questions about what's important and what matters. As our lives have become increasingly frenetic and our environment teeters on the brink of collapse, people are drawn to the age-old concept of *Simplicity* because it calls for a reexamination of our values and behaviors. Study circles give people a way to reexamine their lives.

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In *Simplicity* study circles we examine our behaviors, asking about the consequences of our behavior for the quality of our own lives, for the greater community, and for the planet. We are discovering that our extreme preoccupation with increasing wealth, consumerism, and status is not only destroying people's lives but also destroying the environment. Our out-of-control consumer society is using up resources and polluting all of life.

Since 1992, *Simplicity* study circles have spread around the country and have developed in countries around the world, including England, Canada, Australia, India, and Sweden.

Folk Education

But it wasn't only the Swedish study circle that influenced me. It was also an approach to adult learning called folk education that was developed in Denmark—another country committed to the welfare of the Earth and her people. Again, Danish historians give credit for their progressive policies to a system of educating adults in which the adults were not treated as empty vessels to be filled with information. Folk education was, and continues to be, a form of education focused on learning from the people what they need, a form of education that views the common person as a source of wisdom.

In fact, my favorite story about Folk Education involves Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander Center, the educational center located in Tennessee, that has been a dynamic force for social change since its founding in the thirties. Not many people know that a few months before Rosa Parks performed her history-changing act, she had been at Highlander. Rosa Parks herself credited Highlander with catapulting her into history.

Myles Horton, who died only a few years ago, had grown up in the Appalachian hills and for many years searched for a way to help his people out of their poverty. He searched in many places, but in the thirties he went to Denmark to study their folk schools and had an epiphany: As he wrote in his journal on Christmas night in 1931: "I can't sleep, but there are dreams. What you must do is go back, get a simple place, move in and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own form. You can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation" (p. 55, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* by Myles Horton).

Horton went home and started Highlander. In the thirties he worked with the unions, and gradually began to work in Civil Rights. Rosa Parks was one of the people who came to Highlander along with others like Martin Luther King and Eleanor Roosevelt.

I tell this story because I want people to realize the potential of this approach to education. We are not only trying to change individual lives, but trying to change society as well. I believe that the

Editor's Note

In Paths 8 (Spring 2001), we published an interview with Cecile Andrews, author of the widely influential book The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life and an experienced "leaderless leader" of study circles. This article elaborates upon some of the crucial concepts that she had discussed in the interview. As we were preparing for this issue's publication, the awful tragedy of September 11 occurred. My e-mail exchanges with Cecile subsequent to the terror of that day included the following post of hers, which I think speaks directly and poignantly to the important immediacy of the work in which she has been engaged—and which has engaged her—in recent years:

"To me, the idea of study circles seems even more important today—we simply have to find a way to get people to talk with each other and learn to reflect. We can try to teach it to the kids but I don't think they'll learn it unless the adults learn it first. Besides, we might not have time. A group of us are meeting at my house tomorrow night to see if we can start conversations in cafés where people just listen to each other talk about such basic questions as "What are your fears?" "What are your hopes?" A variation on the study circle. Anyway, all this is really scary, isn't it?"

Indeed, it is. Perhaps, though, with the help of persons such as Cecile, we can begin to learn how to have the sorts of conversations and dialogues that will help us to build caring, loving communities.

two changes must happen together. As people change their individual lives, they become involved and inspired and ultimately commit to the larger issue of social change. They realize that it is a basic human need to want to make a difference, and that you cannot experience the joys of community unless you try to work for the common good.

Others have come to this concept of adult learning for social change through the work of Paulo Friere, and certainly he has influenced me as well—in particular, Friere said that you cannot import ideas from another culture. You must rediscover the concepts yourself and find how they are expressed in your own culture.

My particular challenge was how to use—with the middle-class—methods designed for the poor and the oppressed. I realized that I had to help people see that oppression takes many forms—certainly our commercial society is oppress-

working with a middle-class group than in working with a poor group. Whereas poor people have been made to feel that they don't know much, middle-class people often feel that they have all the answers and nothing to learn from anyone else.

And so, when I first started with people in the circles, I discovered that their tendency was to recreate the atmosphere of the college classroom, with people becoming competitive and argumentative. Instead of thinking together in a collegial fashion, people were competing to prove they were right and others wrong. Instead of listening to each other, people spent their time trying to perfect their argument so that they could use it as a hammer to bash others.

I wasn't surprised, because I had often experienced this tendency—particularly when my husband and I, in search of community, joined a book discussion group. We quickly discovered that it seemed to be a dysfunctional discussion group!

had to change the actual structure of the group experience if I wanted people to create community, to feel that they were recognized and accepted for themselves.

Small and Leaderless

The first thing I did was to make the group small and leaderless. Too often the leader of a group becomes a police officer, trying to get the talkers to shut up and the quiet ones to speak up. (With neither group appreciating those efforts!) I wanted the group to operate without a leader, to have everyone responsible and involved. So the group had to be small; I found that 6-8 members worked best. If the group is any bigger, people don't get a chance to be listened to. Small and leaderless makes the experience intimate and real.

To further eliminate the need for a leader, I created a detailed format so that the people could lead themselves. There is always a "coordinator" to get things started, but I tried to create a format that would easily allow people to run the discussions themselves.

The Personal Story

To reduce the competitiveness of the "classroom-like environment," I decided that instead of discussing an article or an idea, we would focus on the personal story. People would tell their own story in response to a basic question—a question everyone could answer from her or his own experience. For instance, in the session on community, instead of asking how the experts define community, I asked people this question: "When in your life have you experienced community?" Everyone has a story. No one competes when she's telling her story. In fact, you end up hearing your own story over and over and those thoughts that you were unable to admit—even to yourself—come flowing to the surface. Others' stories affirm your experience. You aren't crazy. Others feel as you do.

I realized of course, that when people tell their own story and learn to listen to others' stories, they are learning to discover their own truths, to trust their own judgment—the only way people can resist the manipulation of the consumer society. People unlearn their blind acceptance of the ideas of the experts and authorities, and they learn to think for themselves, finding their values in their own experiences. People begin to shed the second-hand ideas they've been exposed to from the

Live simply so that others can simply live.
—Gandhi

ing people by trying to turn citizens into consumers. While our consumer culture doubly oppresses the poor, I knew that it was not my role to advocate that poor people simplify their lives. My role is to help middle-class people understand that their unhappiness is linked to the social injustice in the greater society, to see the roots of social justice within the concept of Simplicity—as Gandhi said, "Live simply so that others can simply live." My role, as I see it, is to help people become critical thinkers about our American preoccupation with affluence, helping them see that the god of greed destroys their own lives as well as harming the greater good—that no one is or can be aloof from the common good.

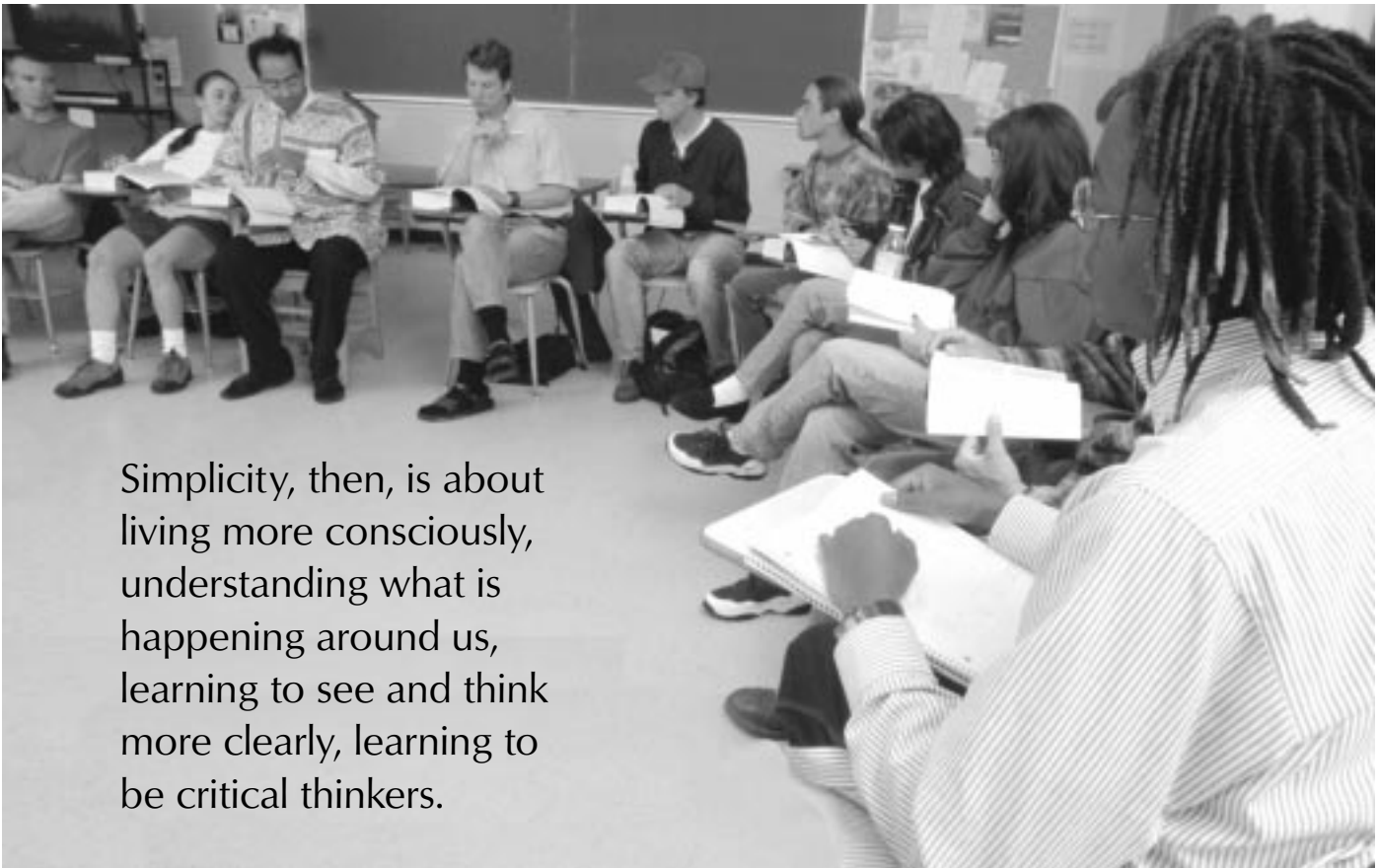
Developing Simplicity Study Circles

So, as I worked on my book, *The Circle of Simplicity*, I led dozens of simplicity study circles. I knew my theories, but I also knew I had to see what would work—what would keep people involved and excited. I found that there were different issues in

People were so competitive that we would go home each evening feeling drained and dejected. In the adversarial atmosphere we felt stupid and thought that everyone else was stupid.

That's not the way to create community! When you leave a discussion group you should feel excited and renewed, on top of the world, loving every single intelligent wonderful person in the group! But that's not what we had experienced.

But I realized that this was something endemic to our middle-class American culture. We had been taught only to debate and argue and try to win. So I set about trying to figure out how to create a group in which people experienced joy instead of resentment, community instead of competition and alienation. I knew I had to change the structure and not just give some ground rules. Too often I had seen lists of rules on how to conduct a group—rules telling people not to argue, to listen, to speak openly. But we don't tell little children to be careful: "Don't touch that vase! You might break it!" We remove the vase. We change the environment. So I knew I



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dominant society and develop their own personal philosophy; they learn to understand that their true best interests lie in harmony with community and with nature, and they learn to resist manipulation by the corporate society.

The Personal Is Political

But the purpose of the Simplicity study circle is not only to change people's lives, but to change society. We can learn from the early women's movement that the personal is political. We need to link what is happening in our own lives to what is happening in society. Too often we blame ourselves for problems, not realizing the forces of the larger culture. Simplicity, then, is about living more consciously, understanding what is happening around us, learning to see and think more clearly, learning to be critical thinkers.

We do this best with other people. Alone, we can get trapped in our own minds and often don't see what is happening. But in Simplicity circles, everyone brings a piece of the puzzle. People share what they have read and thought about. Thinking becomes a cooperative instead of a competitive activity, and everyone

becomes more enlivened and enlightened. So, if the topic that evening is about community, first you talk about your own experiences of community and then you talk about the forces in society that undermine community. Here's where the ideas and energies really start to flow. Everyone has examples from his own life and from his reading.

People begin by discussing the specific problem, then begin to discuss the causes of the problem, and then begin to think about how the problem can be solved. For instance, take the example of community and cars. People know from first-hand experience that cars undermine community. They talk about their hours on the road, sitting alone in their car. Then someone else remembers an article he or she had read about how car manufacturers undermined mass transit. Then, maybe a couple decides to get active in a new idea they've heard about—car sharing. Or another person might decide to get active in political efforts for mass transit.

And so, when people start to connect the personal and political, they begin to learn to look for connections between problems and to find more effective solutions. This kind of "connected" thinking is very exciting. Not only are you connecting

with each other, but also you are connecting ideas together. But this can be a danger point in the circle, too. People can get so excited that they start competing for airtime. Once again, I knew I needed a structural change.

The "Circle" Method Of Conversation

So we developed the "circle" method of talking—passing a timer around and giving each person 3 minutes—and people began to sit back and relax and listen to each other because they knew their turn would come. Somehow, taking turns undermines competitiveness. (You can use a watch, but an egg timer seems to work best because it's so visible. After a while, the three-minute limit just becomes automatic.)

Taking Small, Concrete Actions and Engaging in Group Reflection

And finally, the last part of the format involves action. When people act, they change! So people go around the circle and announce what action they will take that week. In the discussion on community, people will tend to come up with vague

ideas: "I'm going to start being more friendly," "I'm going to start talking with my neighbors," etc. That usually doesn't work. It has to be something small and concrete and doable. For instance, one man announced that, as a way to get to know his neighbors, he would borrow some sugar from one of them.

Such action makes for real, concrete, personal change. Let's say that your circle meets on Wednesday night and on Tuesday night you remember that you haven't borrowed the sugar. Normally, you might try to find a way to wiggle out of your commitment, telling yourself, perhaps, that your idea was really stupid and that you don't really want to get to know that weird looking person next door anyway. But because you know that people will be waiting to hear how your action turned out, you go next door and knock.

Well, maybe your plan goes well and maybe it doesn't. Maybe the neighbor welcomes you, or maybe he looks at you as if you were crazy. But you know that when you report to your study circle, someone will commiserate. You know someone will

say, "That happened to me, too!" And you won't feel so bad. Maybe you'll try again. Or, someone will say, "Why don't you try...?" In this kind of setting, people share their positive experiences and suggestions as well as commiserating with each other.

Maybe all of this will lead to a discussion of why it's so hard to approach our neighbors, or of why, in general, people are so suspicious. And perhaps this discussion in turn will lead to a conversation about how we have come to value money more than people and how our attachment to materialism pervades our whole society. And then maybe people will talk about how we can change this value structure, how we can build a society that encourages community. Action leads to reflection, which leads to further action.

These strategies—using the personal story, linking the personal to the political, and engaging in concrete action/reflection—can lead to broad change. First there is primarily personal change. But research in Sweden has found that no matter what subject people study in a circle, even if it's just art history or learning to speak a lan-

guage, they all come out more concerned about and involved in civil society. The process of talking with people in an open and relaxed way, thinking together about the community, experiencing the camaraderie of kindred spirits, changes us and makes us more concerned about the common good.

So, here are two age-old approaches to social change melded into one—Voluntary Simplicity and the study circle. People have always known that a society committed only to the selfish pursuit of personal gain is on a suicide course. And at the heart of any revolution has always been the small group, where people catch fire and become involved in that great human venture of individual and social change.

Appropriately, I end, then, with the words of Margaret Mead, words that more and more people are beginning to know: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

See page 47 for information on Learning Circles.

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