

# EarthMatters

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## NWEI News

### 100,000 Course Participants

This fall we achieved a major milestone: we've reached over 100,000 people with our courses! In the past two years a greater number of people were drawn to our courses because we prioritized two critical issues: climate change and food. In that vein, we revised *Global Warming: Changing Course* and introduced a new and wildly popular course, *Menu for the Future*. We also adjusted our outreach strategy to place more focus on businesses, organizations, and higher education.

### Sustain-A-Thon

We are happy to report that the first ever Sustain-a-Thon was a success! During the two-week environmental challenge volunteers illustrated that individuals can reduce consumption of electricity, water, car trips and conventional food, and demonstrated the cumulative power of making one small change. Participants demonstrated over a two-week period how three

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## Living Simply by Necessity and Choice

By Zoe Weil

We often hear that green living is for the rich; organic food is pricier than pesticide-sprayed conventional food; local, fresh produce is more expensive than processed junk food; solar panels and solar hot water systems are costly; and hybrid cars are significantly more money than their non-hybrid counterparts. All this is true.

But the greenest person I know, my friend and colleague at the Institute for Humane Education, Khalif Williams, isn't rich. Khalif built his 580 square foot home himself using local wood and salvaged windows. He and his family recently installed solar panels (after THREE years in an electricity-less home). They carry their water from their outdoor well and fill a container in their loft that provides it gravity-fed to their sink. They produce humanure in their composting toilet and heat their home with wood, much of which is cut from their property. They grow vegetables in their newly raised beds. Khalif's family has very little material stuff, but

a wealth of non-material possessions including an incredible community that works, trades, and plays together.

Khalif made these lifestyle choices by necessity *and* choice. His family couldn't afford a big mortgage or expensive purchases, but it was also extremely important to him to live in alignment with his values. He and his wife believed that living simply, in community, and with attention to the effects of their choices on others would be deeply gratifying. And it has been. If we all lived more like Khalif, imagine how rich our lives would be: rich in relationships, sustainability, and the joy that comes from living deeply connected to our family, friends, neighbors, and values.

In these challenging economic times, more and more people are perceiving their lives as downwardly mobile, diminished, and uncertain. Many are losing their jobs and watching their retirement income and the value of their homes plummet. They are simplifying not because they want to, but because they have to. As more people scale down

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and buy less, more businesses struggle because few are buying their products. This is why economists and politicians tell us to shop. When we fail to shop even more people lose their jobs, and the recession cycle spirals downward even faster.

The irony is that it is the very excesses of our lives that have contributed to so many problems we see today — global warming, toxic pollution, resource depletion, desertification, deforestation, massive loss of biodiversity, even our current recession which was ignited by the excess of buying houses we couldn't afford on credit we couldn't pay back — and “downsizing” appears to be just what the earth needs. But that's little comfort to someone who has lost her job and wonders how she'll afford her mortgage.

We don't have to choose between the earth and a healthy economy. I believe that we can have a thriving economy, a joyful citizenry, and a restored environment. But we need some paradigm shifts in order to achieve this. We must turn away from an economy based on the production of disposable, toxic, unsustainable stuff toward the production of durable, sustainable products that serve real needs. Since this will still leave many people who produce excess stuff out of work, we must also shift from an economy based

primarily on the sales of material goods to an economy based more on services and experiences. And the final shift must include a dramatic commitment to a green economy in which our energy sources, our vehicles, our homes, our clothes, our cleaning products, and our food are produced in a restorative, just, sustainable manner. Thankfully, such a shift will employ millions of people — a win-win for humanity and the environment.

There is great joy to be found in living simply, sustainably, and with awareness. As people find themselves forced to live with less, it's understandable they will be afraid. We need clothes, food, and homes, and it is terrifying to be uncertain about these basics of life. But if we are relatively secure that we can meet these basics, then the task becomes embracing a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle rather than feeling deprived. This can be a difficult perceptual hurdle, but Khalif's family shows just how positive such a life can be.

Picture this: Khalif and his wife, Amy, pulling their toddler in a sturdy cart up the road to bring their neighbor warm, homemade cookies. Or this: a gathering of ten families at their neighbor's house in which they clear some land for a garden, the children helping as they are able, and then all feasting at the ensuing potluck. Or this: a weekly open mic night in a barn down the road, the crowd

spilling out into the starry evening, each person contributing a small donation for the fresh soup and bread (which funds the effort), each reveling in the talent of the community, some singing, some reciting poetry, one child juggling, all to the delight of the audience. This is a snapshot of Khalif's life, but it is a life each of us can claim for ourselves. And when we do, we feel anything but deprived.

A slowing economy may force us to simplify, but as long as we are able to afford the necessities of life we may find that we've never lived as joyfully. As financial systems recover, through the establishment of a truly green economy,

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## **A Very Big THANK YOU! To Our Sustain-A-Thon Volunteers**

Demonstrating the cumulative power of making one small change, the following people enabled our first ever Sustain-A-Thon to be a hands-down success!

<b>Bala Cadambi</b>	<b>Kim Smith</b>
<b>Betty Shelley</b>	<b>Maggie Maggio</b>
<b>Denise Dailey</b>	<b>Narada Golden</b>
<b>Elise Lind</b>	<b>Pam Vik</b>
<b>Jane Turville</b>	<b>Rick North</b>
<b>Jill Sughrue</b>	<b>Scott Richman</b>
<b>Kim Hauze</b>	<b>Wendy Usher</b>

## **Coming Soon: Curriculum for the Workplace**

The Curriculum Team at NWEI is currently working on a four-week discussion course to be used in the workplace. The goal of this course is to engage employees in shifting their organization toward

a more sustainable operation and work culture. Now more than ever, businesses and organizations are recognizing the need to integrate sustainable practices in the workplace. This course will provide organizations with an effective tool for inspiring employees to be an active part of that effort.

A volunteer committee comprised of members of higher education, businesses, municipalities and others

in the sustainability field are working to shape the course. It will be tested by several pilot groups this winter and will be available by summer of '09.

This new discussion course meets an increasing need in the broader community and gives NWEI an opportunity to expand its reach. In doing so, we hope to inspire individuals to affect much needed change at the organizational level. ■

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we may realize that we have enough stuff. What we may then want is to cultivate with all our energy this richer, more satisfying life.

Some of us may look at Khalif's example as unattainable or undesirable. Yet Khalif didn't grow up living the way he lives now. He grew up with as many material possessions as the average kid in the U.S. He watched lots of TV, and no one in his family paid attention to the impact of the food they ate or the products they used. But during his twenties, Khalif discovered that living simply, sustainably, and humanely was deeply rewarding and satisfying — not to mention more affordable. Although many may consider Khalif's lifestyle unusual or even extreme, it demonstrates that we don't need an excess of money to lead a green, joyful life. His is just one example that allows us to see the extent to which conscious, simple living can be lived.

How can you take your own steps to reframe your life, embrace simplicity and community, and thrive with less? I've included many suggestions in my book, *Most Good, Least Harm: A Simple Principle for a Better World and Meaningful Life*, and here are just a few:

- **Write down and then live your epitaph.** When you die, what would you like to have achieved? What will matter most to you? If you can live your life with your desired epitaph in mind, you will likely find your life deeply enriched right now.
- **Find and create community.** There are many ways to become involved in your community and build meaningful relationships while also solving economic challenges. Visit [meetup.com](http://meetup.com) and [conversationcafe.org](http://conversationcafe.org) for finding like-minded friends and neighbors; then visit [neighborrow.com](http://neighborrow.com) and [timebanks.org](http://timebanks.org) to find people in your community with whom to share and trade.
- **Pursue joy through service.** Chances are that if you're reading this, even if you're facing serious economic challenges, you have something to give. Giving is the quickest route to joy. Visit [volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org), get engaged with a local non-profit that's working to create positive, systemic change, or join a service club like Rotary International or Lions Club. Often, our volunteer efforts also lead to new connections and even rewarding paid work.
- **Make gifts to express your gratitude.** It's enlivening to create, and delightful for both receiver and giver when you make and give gifts. Whether food, crafts, flowers you've grown in your garden or window box, songs or drawings — such creations are often more deeply appreciated and cherished than anything store bought.
- **Revel in nature, sing, dance, and love.** It really is true that the best things in life are free. Find a tree to admire and a sunset to soothe your soul. Sing a song of praise, dance your heart out, and love with all your might. ■

Zoe Weil is president of the Institute for Humane Education (IHE) which trains people to be humane educators and promotes humane living through an M.Ed. degree affiliated with Cambridge College, a certificate program, workshops and online courses. She is author of *Most Good, Least Harm, Above All, Be Kind*, and the Moonbeam gold medal award winner for juvenile fiction, *Claude and Medea*. [www.ZoeWeil.com](http://www.ZoeWeil.com), [www.HumaneEducation.org](http://www.HumaneEducation.org).

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people can reduce water consumption by 300 gallons, how one individual can route 21 pounds of waste to a worm composting bin rather than a trash can, and how one individual can reduce electricity usage by 42 percent. These are just a few examples of the difference we can make as individuals! If participants continued to reduce their consumption for an entire year the results would be staggering! For example, our three water conservationists would save 7,800 gallons of water in a year — enough

water to fill a small swimming pool. The volunteers collected pledges while "sustaining" in the area of their choice. Together we raised almost \$5,000! We look forward to future challenges and will keep you posted on how you can be involved!

### Welcome to Our New Staff

This fall was a time of change for NWEI. Our outreach team has two new members, Kate Rinder and Dani Dennenberg, who were both interns at NWEI this summer. Prior to joining us, Kate fulfilled two long held dreams by working as a naturalist on a ranch in Colorado,

and backpacking around Europe for several months. Dani brings 10 years of teaching and non-profit work, primarily with young people, student leaders, adults and educators. Kerry Brown has taken over as Development Director. Kerry comes to us with 8 years of nonprofit experience, including working for the United Way of Santa Cruz County, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and the National Environmental Trust. All of our new staff members look forward to working with our network of members and volunteers; please join us in welcoming them to the NWEI community! ■