

# Reading Guide for *Radical Simplicity*

## First Year Reading Experience at Longwood University

*One purpose of this guide is to prepare you for group discussions during New Lancer Days and Longwood Seminar. Also, these questions will help you make connections to other parts of the reading and to experiences in your life. You are not required to answer all of the questions, instead consider this guide as an opportunity to focus your reading and analysis of this text.*

### Introduction

1. Identify a defining moment for yourself—as Merkel does on p. xviii—that changed your perspective on a previously held belief. What has been the outcome of that moment?
2. Identify the strategies that Merkel uses in the Introduction to gain the attention of his readers and to persuade them to continue reading.
  - a. How does he use language/diction to spark interest?
  - b. What clues do you get about whom he sees as his target audience?

### Chapter 1

1. How effective is Merkel's analogy of the potluck buffet to introduce the idea of global living? Why do you think so?
2. What effect does the list of statistics on p. 8 have on you? Which of the statistics is most compelling to you? Why do you think so?

### Chapter 2

1. Merkel writes about cultural sacred cows in our relationship to global living. Develop a series of “sustainable sacred cow” sayings that point to a revised culture where “More is better” is rejected.
2. Merkel used many metaphors and similes in this chapter. Identify several and indicate how they enhance his argument or not. Which metaphors resonate for you? Which seem particularly apt? Which ones are less effective? Why do you think so?

### Chapter 3

1. Explore the “footprint” metaphor.

### Chapter 4

1. Consider the 4 ways (p. 52) that we can “take less and share more,” which strategies seem feasible? Which ones are challenging?
2. Merkel lives on \$5,000/year. This income places him “amongst the wealthiest 17 percent of humanity” (p.62). How does he discuss the widening gap between the rich and poor in the U.S. and across the globe? What do you think of his arguments?
3. Merkel asks “does your intuition and spirituality influence how you share the Earth”? Why do you think he poses this question? What role do intuition and/or spirituality play in “sharing the Earth”?
4. Merkel believes that we need to consider the ethics of our actions and beliefs in order to live an equitable life with others. Consider his list of ethical questions on pages 53-54. Select one question and respond.

### Chapter 5

1. You are asked to determine what percentage of bioproductive spaces should be used by humans. To do this you have to make some assumptions. What assumptions will you make? Can these assumptions be backed up with facts or are they purely subjective? Are you looking to use as many resources as you can and still have the possibility of future sustainability or are you going to use fewer resources and try to make certain future generations have what they need? To what extent are you willing to give up comfort for such certainty? How does one make such a decision? Are you counting on new technology being developed? What sort of technology? Can you think of an example of an expected technological development that did not occur?

## Chapter 6

1. How accurate do you think the first ecological footprinting method (p.83) is? Do you think this is a useful tool?
2. Design an Excel Spreadsheet to do the quiz results calculation on p. 92. Play with it to try to determine which of the footprints (food, shelter, public transit, car, air travel, or goods) most affect and least affect your total footprint. Does this make intuitive sense?
3. How accurate do you think the second ecological footprinting method (p. 86) is? Do you think this is a useful tool? Compare the results you get here with those you get from the first footprinting method.

## Chapter 7

1. Merkel writes, “How you consume is typically the largest interaction you have with all life” (p. 127). How do you define your relationship with money (p. 123)? What specific words would you use to describe the relationship you have with money? What words do you wish would define your relationship with money?
2. Is it possible to be immune to advertising? What are you aware of with advertising? How does advertising affect and influence you? What types of advertising are more difficult to tune-out? What are three of your favorite ads?

## Chapter 8

1. Merkel suggests that we each “be with nature on her terms”. What is your comfort level with nature? What has your history been with nature? How do you imagine nature will play a role in your future? What gets in the way of you spending more time with nature? How does nature inspire you (p. 139)?
2. Respond to the following statement: “Your life is more endangered in an automobile than in nature (p. 140). What fears/anxieties do you have about being in and with nature?”

## Chapter 9

1. Consider the list of “Good Old Fashioned Principles” on page 158-159. For each principle, brainstorm at least one way that you could reduce your footprint.
2. What does the concept “permaculture” mean? Consider the list of permaculture principles provided. For each principle, research additional options.
3. Merkel encourages us to understand our own motivations and intuitions and “to try not to be afraid to experiment.” In what ways do you feel apprehensive about adopting some of these strategies for living a sustainable life? What barriers “stand” in your way? What can you do about these barriers? What seems possible?

## Chapter 10

1. What is the wiseacre dilemma and challenge?
2. Research how Longwood University is developing and implementing “wiseacre” practices. What else could LU do to achieve sustainability?

## Chapter 11

1. What 2 elements comprise Merkel’s 100 year plan? Review what he means by voluntarily choosing to have a personal footprint not to exceed six acres.
2. He invites us to consider voluntarily choosing to have fewer children. Why are smaller families needed—what is the connection between smaller families and sustainability? What does he say is needed for this plan to succeed? What do you think of this idea?

***Jim Merkel, author of Radical Simplicity, will be on campus during New Lancer Days. As you are reading, think of questions you may want to ask him about his journeys, beliefs, philosophies, and commitment to sustainable living.***