

Keep it Simple, (we're) Stupid

By

Timothy Grayson

The mark of a low-grade intellect (ironically, often in those proclaiming the opposite) is the profound ability to climb aboard the smallest kernel of a thought and ride it mercilessly through the shoals of complexity and complication to an unnatural, often perverse end. Cults—Branch Davidians, Scientologists, low car fanatics, market timing investors—thrive on it. Today, the cult of *simplicity* deserves to be exposed.

Don't get me wrong: simple is good. There's much to be said (and so much has been said) about it. The ipod click-wheel is a poignant example of simple design; Hemmingway of simple prose; Keanu Reeves of simple acting. Simple is not the problem; people slavishly following this trend that insists *everything* be simple are.

"Keep it simple, stupid." The KISS principle, like every other pithy statement, seems pure and wise. It is impossible to oppose. What's the alternative: "Complicate it, fool?" On the surface it makes so much sense, and, if a little bit is good, more must be better. The trouble with that thinking is that while a spoonful of sugar may help the medicine go down, a bowlful is going to make your dinner come up.

At its best, "simple" is clean, clear, and as uncomplicated as can be done without losing the essence of the idea. That's what the KISS principle drives toward. It does not, however, recommend eliminating complexity. In fact, the real magic of simple is how it can clarify complex ideas, by reducing them to their essence not by eliminating troublesome elements.

When the understanding of the word *simple* slips toward "easy" or "common" the notion of getting simple loses its value and potency. It slides into the vacuum of dumb. Sadly, that's a common end because embedded in cultish simple is an implied command for extreme *accessibility*.

Insufficient of itself, reduction is a necessary to clarify. Reduction will not necessarily make an idea accessible. But because the cult approaches the Godhead of accessibility as a fundamental right, reduction is perverted. It becomes a force of elimination. Rather than carefully cropping the idea to its essence, tracts of inconvenient detail and nuance are simply removed for unimpeded understanding... of *something*.

That's the problem. Some things demand advanced or deeper knowledge. Sadly, some things require work. Not everything is meant to be known by everyone, even if they sport an Executive MBA. That kind of accessibility is only a happy, utopian delusion of our time.

If that sounds undemocratic or egalitarian, maybe it is. Maybe, I am. But it's reality. The world is broad, complicated, and complex. Complex and complicated things require critical curiosity and thoughtful consideration. The cult, raised on a diet of Coles Notes® and all-news television analysis, want sound bites, bullet points, and an easy prescription for every malady from one-minute managing to parenting for dummies, and ten steps to tighter abs. Never mind online security or international economics.

More than that, the cult doesn't see the self-defeating, culture-diminishing irony. The imperative to make everything broadly accessible reduces the value of the ideas. Because, you see, complexity can be made clear but not necessarily easy. Make no mistake, *simple* in the sense of clear is very hard to achieve. It takes plenty of work and often success comes only after much trial and error. Getting to clarity demands the patience of a bonsai gardener, trimming away absolutely everything that is not essential, but not so much as to remove the essence of the tree.

It is a misguided, romantic notion that somehow complicated and complex things can be made simple in the sense of easy. That it even needs to be said

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reveals either an unmitigated arrogance, believing that the unprepared could presume to truly understand without base knowledge, or the curse of stupidity. (The stupid can't actually know their condition.) Or, perhaps it reveals the glad imprisonment of the masses in ignorance disguised by the illusion of awareness in misguided simplicity.

As with other radiating signals, the original strength of the intent decays as it radiates outward. Within the increasing noise of misunderstanding and reinterpretation, it is eventually corrupted beyond reason. In this case the original well-intentioned and intelligent desire for simple becomes a rush to the simplistic.

Does it have to stop? Are we doomed otherwise? It doesn't have to stop at all—and probably won't. Doom is certain, although we're not talking about extinction. Those who continue to demand a superficial simplicity while convincing themselves that they have sufficient depth or insight on that basis are doomed. Doomed to do the bidding of those who really do know, all the while convincing themselves of their superiority and control. With apologies to George Santayana: "Those who do not understand something that's crap are doomed to repeat it... to everyone who will listen."

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