

Leading the complex life

Learn how to have it all and have it now

By Nancy Thalia Reynolds

To trend-spotters it will come as no surprise that, once again, Seattle is at the vanguard of an intriguing new social movement. Known to its growing number of adherents as "Voluntary Complexity," it marks a shift away from the cultural downsizing of the early 1990s.

At its center are two dynamic individuals who courageously put their beliefs into action, creating the fledgling Gridlock Foundation. Headquartered in an eight-bedroom mansion in Redmond, the foundation is home to co-founders Rainbow Schwartz and Dwight Johnson.

"We're DINKs and proud of it," laughs Rainbow, pointing out the four-car garage, hot tub, in-ground pool, and tennis court.

Many paths, one goal

Schwartz and Johnson didn't always live this way. Schwartz was born in 1968 to parents who renounced their affluent life in Scarsdale, New York and moved their young family to rural California.

"It was horrible," recalls Rainbow. "We had no running water or electricity; my mother not only made our clothes — she spun them from goat hair. The only things to read were the Foxfire books and the Whole Earth Catalog." When Rainbow went to college she discovered a new world,



filled with shopping malls, junk food and — best of all — television.

Rainbow's husband, Dwight, took a different route to complexity. "I was raised in Kansas," he explains. "My parents grew up during the Depression and dealt with life by never throwing anything away. They saved string, used wrapping paper, rubber bands, and twist ties." For entertainment, his mother would sort out the kitchen drawers. "My childhood was a lot like Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*, Johnson reflects, "with the trip to Oz removed."

Johnson's enlightenment occurred on a business trip to Thailand. "I got caught in an unbelievable traffic jam in Bangkok. People were abandoning their cars right and left. So did I. Then I ran into Rainbow. If I hadn't been caught in total gridlock, we'd never have found one another."

Johnson and Schwartz recount this para-

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ble of how gridlock, chaos, and a society out of control can contribute to a positive and creative life experience in their best-seller *Living the Complicated Life*.

Complexity is the key, they say. "Yes, we're all juggling like mad, trying to keep too many balls in the air," says Schwartz. "So what? Do you think society is going to get any less complicated? Get real! What we have to do is find a way to make complexity pay off. That's the American way."

"Yeah," notes Johnson. "The voluntary simplicity people have given us a bad name. If simplicity were so terrific, nematodes would be at the top of the food chain."

Refuting complexity stereotypes

With their lecture tours, weekly radio program, pamphlets, community college courses, and CD-ROM titles, Schwartz and Johnson have been working hard to get the message out and crusading to erase the stigma attached to complexity.

"We met one woman who recently sold the modest cottage and Geo Metro she had acquired after reading about voluntary simplicity," says Johnson. "Sick of trying to get by with 800 square feet, she upscaled to a large suburban home and bought a Dodge Caravan. But the poor woman was afraid to tell her friends; they all looked up to her as a poster girl for simplicity."

Schwartz and Johnson recognize that

upshifting presents a challenge to those accustomed to the simple life. Take things one step at a time, they advise. Look around your kitchen. Were you one of the holdouts who wouldn't buy a microwave oven because you'd only use it to heat coffee and warm leftovers? Well, those are two good reasons to buy one.

Check out call waiting, voice messaging, a TV/VCR combo. Would you rather spend your time sorting coupons and choosing the cheapest long distance carrier so you can live within your downscaled budget, they ask, or sit in your hot tub and order takeout on your cell phone?

They do feel it is important to stress that complexity isn't just for the middle and upper classes, however. Schwartz observes that the poor are often skilled at dealing with complication.

"Complexity belongs to everyone," she asserts. "Have you ever seen the paperwork you have to deal with to get food stamps? Or Medicare?"

Johnson adds that we need to be careful to avoid Western cultural chauvinism. "Some people act like we discovered complexity," he says. "Take a trip to India and look around. Try doing business in Albania. We're rank amateurs, compared to them."

Amateurs? Maybe. But with the help of the Gridlock Foundation, look out third world! We can hardly wait.