



**Digital Commons@**  
Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

---

Volume 9 | Issue 4

Article 3

---

6-1-2006

## Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth, by Jim Merkel

Frank W. O'Linn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Linn, F. W. (2006). Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth, by Jim Merkel. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 9 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0904132013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [JCE@nd.edu](mailto:JCE@nd.edu).

Some of the most readable parts of *Breaking Ranks II* are the school profile sections titled, "In Their Own Words." These give an insider's view of schools that have successfully broken ranks by effecting systemic, coherent, student-centered change. Readers are provided with practices to look for, with data to support outcomes, and frank narratives detailing the bumpy road and roadblocks put up by parents, teachers, and others.

In format, this publication is essentially a handbook of information, suggestions in the form of recommendations to be implemented. The data are organized, clear, helpful, and focused. Some readers will feel they are reading lesson plans; others will feel they are reading strategic plans. For those who learn by seeing ideas mapped or webbed, charted or tabled, this publication works effortlessly. Other readers may feel overwhelmed at the volume of ideas presented and be quick to put the book down, preferring it in small doses. The beauty here is that all readers, whether teachers, principals, or parents, can access the information. If education and organization for the successful achievement of every learner can be prescribed in a how-to book, then *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* should soon be appearing in offices of principals across the nation.

*Vicki Kilgarriff is a counselor and teacher at Bourgade Catholic High School in Phoenix, Arizona.*

---

## **RADICAL SIMPLICITY: SMALL FOOTPRINTS ON A FINITE EARTH**

JIM MERKEL  
NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS, 2003  
\$17.95, 288 pages

*Reviewed by Frank W. O'Linn*

What do St. Francis of Assisi, Zen master Ling Chi, and naturalist author Henry David Thoreau have in common with a former military weapons engineer? The answer can be found in Merkel's blueprint for sustainable global living, *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*. Merkel, a former engineer, couples scientific inquiry with a passion for peace and justice and a concern for the environment to create an instruction manual for those

who wish to reduce their impact on the planet's resources. Informative and, indeed, radical, the book provides plausible steps toward achieving balance. The author uses an engineer's tact for problem solving as a framework for the book; Merkel identifies a problem, sets clear parameters, proposes a theory for resolving it, and puts theory into practice.

In defining the problem of over-consumption that Western society places on the global living situation, Merkel uses a simple metaphor:

Imagine you are first in line at a potluck buffet. The spread includes not just food and water, but all the materials needed for shelter, clothing, healthcare and education. How do you know how much to take? How much is enough to leave for your neighbors behind you – not just the six billion people, but the wildlife, and the as-yet-unborn? (back cover)

Merkel furthers the description of the problem with eye-popping statistics. "Currently the world's wealthiest one billion people alone consume the equivalent of the Earth's entire sustainable yield. All six billion people are consuming at a level that is 20 percent over the sustainable yield" (p. 8). Given that those first in line at the banquet are cleaning out the planet's supply and citing the Earth's exponential population growth, Merkel concludes that "economic growth on a finite planet is suicide" (p. 9). The parameters for solving this problem of over-consumption are threefold: first, that there should be no loss of Earth or any species, human or otherwise; second, that steps toward equality can be taken by everyone on the planet; and third, these steps must be indefinitely sustainable.

The solution design phase draws on the author's own experiences with more sustainable forms of living. Merkel describes personal observations from Karala, India, a densely populated anomaly where people live long, healthy, educated lives on par with the first world on a per capita income that is one sixtieth that of North America's. The author also derives insight from encounters with many indigenous peoples of North America and a commune known as the Global Living Project, where researchers collected and computed empirical evidence of their impact on the planet's environment and documented increases in quality of life. Without excessive jargon, Merkel guides the reader through a series of computations to create what is referred to as a "global footprint," a measure of the amount of resources consumed by an individual in terms of productive land. The solution to over-consumption, mathematically speaking, is to calculate the average amount of productive land per person on the planet, then take steps to make sure one's consumption falls below the average. In theory, if everyone followed this practice, the earth should yield enough resources to sustain all of its current human, plant, and animal populations. For the 1 billion or so heavy users of

the planet's resources, however, this is a daunting task that would require radical changes toward living a simpler lifestyle.

The author provides personal advice, while referencing many global living studies and works, to step the reader through implementing a plan to reduce his or her own consumption. Replete with worksheets and charts, this last section is a handbook for guiding readers in the methodology of global footprint reduction. In the end, Merkel concludes that implementing plans to radically simplify consumption is the key to sustaining life on this planet. These measures include a severe reduction or elimination of many modern conveniences, such as powered transportation, fossil fuels, and processed or animal-based foods. He also advocates a plan to manage population by means of a voluntary reduction in reproduction rates worldwide.

As a source of information, the early chapters, in which the author outlines the problem of over-consumption and presents research of humanity's global impact, are very informative. The solution design and implementation phases of Merkel's plan, however, are rather repetitive. Those interested in collecting information on the problem of global living but not yet wanting to implement the plan for radically simple living would do well to study just the first few chapters. Indeed, those that go on to read the entire work may still have some fundamental issues with the author's plan, detailed as it may be.

This reviewer believes that the author's radical plan falls short of one of the stated parameters, namely, that the steps could be taken by everyone on the planet. While it is possible, in theory, for the earth to sustain life if 6 billion people were to follow the steps he has laid out, there is no practical plan to transition the planet from its current state to a vision of a planet covered with what would be revived agrarian societies. Populations would need to be redistributed and industrial infrastructures modified or even forsaken. Such a global paradigm shift would require international regulation of trade, emigration, and development. Such radical changes in consumption could only follow equally radical political and economic changes the world over.

Also suspect in the author's analysis is the frequent argument that reducing one's global footprint subsequently increases one's quality of life. Merkel argues that decreased dependence on material forms of recreation, travel, and entertainment make way for an increase in non-material, personal, and interpersonal wealth and well-being – ideas with which this reviewer does not wholly disagree. However, the author makes little allowance for the subjectivity of the definition of quality of life and the fact that most of the industrialized world might find this notion a bit hard to swallow.

Still, it is the treatment of non-material wealth, equality, and justice that make Merkel's work a spiritual one. Indeed, a thread of spirituality is woven throughout, though it is a general, inclusive appeal to personal and interper-

sonal peace more than a subscription to any organized belief system. In speaking of the hypothetical banquet, the author cites the “golden rule,” found in most major religions, saying “it seems unlikely that with...us around a friendly table, we could go too far off course” (p. 59). References to spiritualists of myriad traditions abound, including St. Francis of Assisi’s love and respect for nature, Zen master Ling Chi’s plea for equality, and an appeal from Don Juan to proceed with a radical calling in the face of hopelessness. Without preaching a particular creed or religion, Merkel maintains that “science, ethics, intuition, and spirituality all help guide your answer” (p. 68) to the question of how to live globally sustainable lives.

Though not exclusively Catholic, the book is a wealth of information for those who wish to answer the call to be stewards of creation. Merkel’s rationale is grounded in scientific facts but supported by the spiritual notions of justice and equality for all. In the author’s secular language, Merkel invites the reader to appreciate and protect nature and show respect for all forms of life, sentiments echoed by the Christian call to stewardship. As such, this book is a good read for all Catholics, whether new to the problem of global living or a veteran environmentalist.

Overall, Merkel’s work is informative if not inspiring. Though this reviewer questions the practicality of worldwide adoption of the author’s practices, that may not truly be the author’s point. Given the radical nature of the changes suggested, it can be assumed that only a minority of people will undergo such extreme belt tightening. However, when viewed from the activist’s cliché of thinking globally and acting locally, Merkel’s work provides a fine instruction manual for reducing one’s impact on the natural environment. Indeed, this reviewer has yet to see a competing plan of action that is more clear and attainable.

*Frank W. O’Linn teaches English at St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio.*