

Simplicity simpleton

Desperately trying to find the time to live with less and enjoy life more

by Rich Warren

I made a horrible discovery about myself at Christmastime—I'm too simpleminded to live simply.

Perhaps you've heard of voluntary simplicity, the movement of folks across the country who take seriously Henry David Thoreau's edict to "simplify, simplify." They consciously try to live with less in ways that are earth-friendly and give them time to stop and smell the roses. Here in Columbus, a group called Simply Living, some 250 voluntary simplicity devotees strong, offers a number of programs, including a bookstore and resource center at the Clintonville Community Market.

My first exposure to the group was a couple years ago when I signed up for one of their weekly discussion groups at a time when I was mega-stressed and massively over-extended, rushing around town from one appointment to another, careening around corners on two wheels and shaking my fist at people who had the nerve to drive the speed

limit. I figured Simply Living would help me weed out the complexities of my existence, leaving me as serene as the Dalai Lama on Prozac.

But alas, it didn't take me long to discover I was a simplicity simpleton. An earnest young woman from the group told us how she only had four glasses in her cupboard and exhorted us to devise innovative ways to make things stretch. I just sat there silently thinking thoughts like: "My God! If I only had four glasses, I'd need to wash dishes more often than every two weeks" and "If I turn my pants inside out, no one will know I wore them yesterday."

The end came one day when I found myself at a Burger King drive-through late for my voluntary simplicity class and fuming with Type A impatience at the line of SUVs in front of me, each making banquet-size orders. Suddenly it dawned on me—I was wasting gasoline, waiting to order red meat for which the Amazon rain forest is being destroyed for

grazing ground, and about to receive a meal wrapped in multiple layers of packaging that would take millennia to disintegrate in the landfill. Obviously, I hadn't learned a thing. Realizing that tranquility can't be force-fed, I became one of the few dropouts from Simply Living's discussion groups.

It's not that I'm unsympathetic toward voluntary simplicity's principles. Philosophically I'm appalled by the wretched excesses of American society. I drive past the barn-size mansions in New Albany and snidely sneer at the empty, sterile lives of their inhabitants—people who drive in their Lexus with comfy leather seats from comfy jobs to the comfy country club. Far from acquisitive myself, I drive a battered junkmobile and dine off chipped plates from Pier One. My college days—not too far removed from the hippie era—remain influential, a period when the height of fashion was to wear sweat pants rolled up to the knees. My favorite book then was *Walden*. I read and re-read it, although I never nursed a yen to move into a shack in the woods and grow beans.

This past Christmas, I called a number of our local Simply Living friends to find out how they were celebrating the annual rampant orgy of commercialism. Not surprisingly, many of them had scaled back on gift-giving, frequently making them by hand.

The rest of the year, some of them take moderate steps at simplicity, like hanging laundry instead of using the dryer. Others take more drastic measures—giving up cars or keeping their thermostats at a bonechilling 55 degrees.

Simply Living members' goal is to put their energies into things that really matter, like spending more time with the people in their lives or doing work that nourishes their souls. Last year, one took long hikes at Highbanks with her family, another organized a "supper club" with his neighbors, taking turns cooking and socializing. One even gave up his job to follow his dream of establishing an organic farm outside the city.

In all my conversations, I was struck with how reasonable all these people are. They're not radical kooks who are rejecting the comforts of society. Most of them still drive cars and live in comfortable homes, although they've taken moderate, sensible steps to cut

back in what they consume. They have deliberately—mindfully—chosen to live with less, partly to be earth-friendly, partly to put their energies not into acquiring, but into simply being. OK, it sounds like a bumper sticker—"live simply so others can simply live"—but it's as spiritual an approach to existence as I've found anywhere. These people have really embraced the maxim that less can be more.

On the night of the winter solstice, I decided to attend a celebration Simply Living was holding to mark the earth's turning toward the light. It was rather primeval. By candlelight we sat in a circle, a number of people poised to start beating drums and everyone else threatening to break into rhythmic chanting. Primordial rituals like these make me uneasy. I fear at any moment I'll be asked to strip and roll in the mud to better commune with Mother Earth.

Some flaming, fragrant vegetative matter (I think it was sage) was being passed from person to person. I haven't sat in a circle and passed smoking plant material since college. It was being wafted around people's heads in some kind of blessing. But before it got to me, I had to be rude and run for the door. In yet another escapade of overscheduling, I'd overlapped commitments and had to race across town just to be late for the next event on my action-packed agenda. I can't help it. I'm an adrenaline junkie.

And yet, hope is not lost for my transformation into a simple liver, because fate has intervened. Right after New Year's, a time when we're all thinking of new beginnings and self-improvement, I got a call from a gentleman telling me that Simply Living is starting some new discussion groups. He'd heard I'd expressed some interest, and would I like to join? This is a message from the spirit world, I decided. The universe is trying to tell me through an ordinary phone call that it's time to slow down. And what have I got to lose? It's been two decades since I've walked into a movie theater before the lights went down.

So yes, I'm signed up for simplicity training later this month, and I'm actually looking forward to it. Whether it will help me simmer down remains to be seen, but I'll report back to you later. If I can find the time. **ca**

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