

Chapter 3: What's Old Is New Again

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In This Chapter

- Discovering how ideas about simplicity from the past hold lessons for us today
- Revisiting Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to learn about his philosophy of simple living and the details of how he lived
- Learning about a couple who chose simplicity in the midst of the Depression and never went back

Simple living is not a new idea. Ancient civilizations had proponents of keeping "stuff" to a minimum and concentrating on the more lofty and satisfying things in life. From the Greeks and Romans to Eastern cultures and the Judeo-Christian tradition, there were cautions against loving "things" too much and losing sight of the riches of the heart and spirit.

Plato advocated a "Golden Mean" between poverty and wealth. Aristotle told us to live a life of equal balance between the mental, physical, spiritual, and material aspects of existence. Jesus called for a life of voluntary simplicity. The *I Ching* advocates limitation, self-limitation or restraint, as a way to enlightenment and true happiness. More recently, the British poet William Wordsworth called for "plain living and high thinking."

In the United States, there is a strong simple living thread that runs through the entire history of this young nation. It is what author David Shi calls "a rich tradition of enlightened material restraint."

Although some saw only raw opportunity waiting in the New World, others came to escape what they regarded as the corruption of the established order. They hoped to live plainly in what they knew would be a harsh environment and felt that hard work and adversity would help keep them godly. The Puritans and the Quakers, for example, both began their journey with these goals but soon found that through hard work and diligence they prospered, and they continually struggled to maintain their spiritual equilibrium.

Simple Wisdom - "For the prosperity of fools shall destroy them."

—Proverbs 1:32

The founding fathers struggled with these same issues as they forged a revolution from an oppressive and, to some, luxury-loving and corrupt mother country. Men like Samuel Adams hoped the new republic would become an agrarian paradise of simple living and high ideals. Others, like Alexander Hamilton, spoke for the ideals of prosperity and wealth.

Beyond Basics - For a thorough and fascinating history of the simple living movement in America, read *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, by David Shi. It will give you a well-grounded perspective of both the challenges and the rewards of the simple way of life in the midst of changing times.

The main hallmarks of the American simple living philosophy throughout its history, according to Shi, are "a hostility toward luxury and a suspicion of riches, a reverence for nature and a preference for rural over urban ways of life and work, a desire for personal self-reliance through frugality and diligence, a nostalgia for the past

and a skepticism toward the claims of modernity, conscientious rather than conspicuous consumption, and an aesthetic taste for the plain and functional."

For many of the founding fathers, the belief that the pursuit of money and material things shouldn't take precedence over the spirit, mental growth and stimulation, a strong family, or the good of country was a basic principle of freedom and democracy.

It's beyond the scope of this book to cover even a small portion of simplicity's roots in our history, but in this chapter, we'll examine two examples that I think you will enjoy learning about and will find have many lessons still pertinent to us today.

Transcendence and Choice

Perhaps the best known of all the American proponents of simple living is Henry David Thoreau. The story of his experiment in the woods to learn how little he could live on and to discover what was important to his own soul lives on as an example for others to follow. If you haven't read *Walden* or perhaps read it a long time ago, try picking it up again and reading or rereading it.

Of course, not many of us can even entertain the idea of walking off into the woods with a borrowed axe, clearing some land, building a shelter, and living there alone for two years as Thoreau did, but we can take a mental trip along with him and see where it leads us.

From Harvard to a Cabin in the Woods

Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. After graduating from Harvard in 1837, where he studied the classics, science, history, and several foreign languages, he returned to Concord and taught school. But Thoreau favored writing over teaching, and so in 1841, he accepted an offer from neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson to stay with the family and work as a handyman and gardener while he worked on his writing.

Thoreau kept extensive journals, which form the foundation of his writing. But he soon learned that writing wasn't going to earn him a living, so he taught himself various skills that would later sustain him throughout his life. He taught himself surveying and carpentry and worked part-time in the family pencil-making business. He was an inventor and something of a natural engineer.

Answering a request from a Harvard classmate to describe his employment, Thoreau said, "I am a Schoolmaster—a private Tutor, a Surveyor—a Gardener, a Farmer—a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster." With this variety of skills, Thoreau made enough money to take care of his needs and still allow time for study and writing.

Simple Wisdom - "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Thoreau was not a joiner, and although he had an eminent circle of friends in Concord, the center of the transcendental movement, he was considered something of a rebel and an individualist. Thoreau believed in the right to dissent and exercised that right regularly in his own life. He felt strongly that each person should think for himself and pursue his own way, "not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead."

Thoreau had an insatiable curiosity and was a keen observer. He was a naturalist and one of the early environmentalists, forever exploring the world around him as well as surveying the world within him and taking notes on what he observed.

On Walden Pond

Thoreau moved to the woods a mile from the town of Concord on July 4, 1845. He considered the two years he spent in the small house he built by hand near Walden Pond to be an experiment. He did not intend to live in the woods permanently but to find out how little he needed to survive and then live simply from then on. He decided, "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," he said, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

While at Walden Pond, Thoreau grew some of his own food, foraged in the woods, fished, and on one occasion killed a woodchuck that had been destroying his garden. He managed his time so he had to work very little to maintain himself and used the rest of the time for his nature studies, contemplation, reading, writing (he kept extensive journals and wrote the book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*), and just thinking.

While he enjoyed his solitude, Thoreau wasn't a hermit. He had frequent visitors and made regular visits to town. And he began to spark a great deal of curiosity. To answer the questions of the inquisitive, he wrote lectures, which he delivered in town while still living in the woods. These lectures, plus his journal entries, became the notes for *Walden*. He left Walden on September 6, 1847.

After Walden

Thoreau never married and died in 1862. *Walden* was moderately successful in Thoreau's lifetime but became even more so after he died. Perhaps as a symbol of the issues we face today of shrinking wilderness and less opportunity for solitude and contemplation, the site of Thoreau's small cabin on Walden Pond has been one of controversy and conflicting interests. Some wanted to preserve it as a memorial in its natural state. Others wanted to open it to the public for recreation. Still others wanted to develop it. Over time, a compromise has been reached, but it took a tremendous amount of organizing and publicity to raise the funds to save Walden Pond from development.

Simple Wisdom - "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Lessons from Walden

Thoreau speaks to us now, perhaps as much or even more than he did to his contemporaries. What can we learn from his two-year stay in Walden woods? Here are some points that have stuck with me:

- We tend to interpret the phrase "freedom from want" as having everything we want. To Thoreau, real freedom meant wanting little: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."

- Solitude is an important part of everyday life. According to Thoreau, "The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready."
- Simple living is not an end in itself but a means to knowing oneself and living a happy life through the pursuit of deeper and more spiritual things. People can live simply and be base and spiritless as well. It's the vision and purpose behind our living choices that count most.
- Technology, though exciting, distracts us from the important questions in life and isn't worth the price if it destroys nature. Thoreau argued, "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at ..."
- Nature is one of our most important teachers. We need to learn about it—the names of the plants, the constellations, the habits of animals—if we are to understand the universe, both without and within. We need to become careful observers to understand Nature's secrets, as well.
- If we reduce our wants to our true needs, we'll be able to work less and spend more time doing the things we enjoy most and find most fulfilling.

These are just a few of the simple living principles I have gleaned from reading *Walden*. You'll surely find your own and can incorporate them into your own personal philosophy of simplicity.

Quick Starts - If you'd like to get a flavor for what Thoreau was like, his writings, and his experiment at Walden Pond, point your browser to [//miso.wwa.com/~jej/1thorea.html](http://miso.wwa.com/~jej/1thorea.html) for a quick overview and introduction with lots of links.

Maple Sugaring in Vermont

A second example of simple living in practice is that of Helen and Scott Nearing, who left New York City in the 1930s to take up maple sugaring and the simple life in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Unlike Thoreau, the Nearings left city life and never returned, preferring a rural lifestyle as their pathway to simple living.

Who Were the Nearings?

For the Nearings, life in the big city as economic depression and unemployment spread, the political scene became increasingly unstable, and technology encroached on individual freedom, was simply untenable. They decided that "the good life" in rural Vermont was a permanent solution and one best attempted, they felt, by a couple or a group of like-minded people.

The Nearings were self-described pacifists, vegetarians, and collectivists. They felt they were leaving a "dying social order" and were, like Thoreau, creating an experiment in another, more "workable social system." They also chose to have no children, which meant they were free from the concerns of child rearing or education, although they later concluded that their lifestyle could easily accommodate the raising of a family.

Making a Simple Life in Vermont

Regardless of your political leanings, there is much to learn from the Nearings' experiments in the woods of Vermont and then Maine. They were, in essence, very practical people who questioned the old ways if they didn't seem to work but relied on them when they did.

What they found living in New York and other cities, both in the United States and abroad, was that the obstacles

to their idea of simple living were too great. The obstacles included "complexity, tension, strain, artificiality, and heavy overhead costs. These costs were payable only in cash, which had to be earned under conditions imposed upon one by the city—for its benefit and advantage."

They left for three main reasons: economic (financial independence), health (organic food, less stress, and close contact with nature), and social/ethical (environmental, political). Right from the start, the Nearings knew why they were choosing a new life and what they wanted that new life to represent. Keep this in mind as you read the later chapters in this section because this is exactly what I will be encouraging you to do as you develop your own simple living plan.

Beyond Basics - If you want to learn more about the Nearings' diet and philosophy concerning food, read *Simple Food for the Good Life: Random Acts of Cooking and Pithy Quotations*, by Helen Nearing.

Because the Nearings were so clear as to what they wanted to do with their time and energies, as well as what their beliefs were, they were able to structure their lives in Vermont according to a set of principles, a constant "reality check." For the whole story of their enterprise, I strongly suggest you read their book, *Living the Good Life*, but here I will tell you some of the basics.

First, the Nearings needed a cash crop that they could use to make a living but that would be in line with their environmental concerns and would not require the keeping of animals. They chose maple sugaring and learned everything they could about doing it well. They chose not to keep any domestic animals, partially because it was against their principles but also because, on a purely practical level, it meant less work and expense plus they needed less land. They adjusted their diet accordingly and were vegetarians, at first trading for milk and eggs and then later choosing to eat no animal products at all.

Simple Wisdom - "... each moment, hour, day, week and year should be treated as an occasion—another opportunity to live as well as possible"

—Helen and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life*

Since they ate mostly raw foods that they grew themselves, they were able to control quality and freshness, eat completely free of pesticides or artificial fertilizers, and keep cooking to a minimum. In the wintertime, they had extensive root cellars to store produce.

The Nearings built their own house and out buildings by hand from materials cleared from their own property, using mostly native stone and some wood. They had a 10-year plan based on 12 points, which included not making a profit or hiring employees, paying cash for everything, and carrying no debt. Rather than repair buildings that were nearly falling down on the new property, they tore them down and replaced them only when they had an actual need for the space. The first structure was a place to house green lumber while it aged for construction.

As did Thoreau, the Nearings combined the manual labor necessary to sustain themselves with intellectual pursuits. They worked on the land only four hours a day with four hours set aside daily for study, contemplation, and what they called their "avocations" or hobbies. On Sundays, they took the day off completely. Yet their enterprise flourished enough to make them a "good life," which they enjoyed in Vermont for 20 years. One area of the "good life" they had hoped to achieve, but found difficult, was creating a cooperative system with the surrounding community. In some small ways, their efforts at community involvement were successful, but mostly they found they had to rely on themselves. I venture to say that today, perhaps, conditions might be more favorable.

Moving to Maine

The Nearings moved from Vermont to Harborside, Maine, in 1952 and took over another derelict farm. Both Vermont and Maine were dedicated to the same goals: "building and maintaining a solvent family economy amid the wreckage and drift of a society that was disintegrating in accordance with the laws of its own self-destructive being."

Again, we do not have to share the same pessimistic view of our current society, but if we're choosing to simplify our lives, we need to determine why and what we hope to create, just as the Nearings provided their own answers.

By the time the Nearings moved to Maine, they were no longer novices and had developed chosen professions: music for Helen, social science for Scott. They traveled, wrote, and lectured where opportunities arose and when time permitted, but their rural lifestyle with no domestic animals to tie them down afforded them a fair amount of freedom.

Visitors would wonder what they did with their "spare time." The answer was that they had none; they were constantly busy. The next question was "What do you do for pleasure?" The answer was "Anything and everything we do yields satisfaction. If we didn't enjoy it, we would do something else or approach our jobs in a way that made more sense."

In Maine, as in Vermont, the Nearings started every day with a plan, an agreed-upon list of activities for the day. They worked with the weather and the seasons. When a job was completed to the best of their abilities, they moved on to the next. Their philosophy on work was clear: "There is a tendency nowadays to elbow a way through the mazes of a complicated life. Wisely and slowly is good advice. If you are running a relay race, it is not decided in the first few laps. Take your time. Ration your energies. Plan your operation carefully. Take one step at a time. Then prepare carefully for the next step. It pays in the long run."

Final Years

Scott Nearing died at the age of 100 in 1982, when Helen was in her 80s. She continued on without Scott until the age of 92, all the while living the life they had held so dear. She said, "I keep open house at our Forest Farm on the coast of Maine to help others see that a good life can still be maintained by a woman alone in her eighties."

Simple Wisdom - "A market economy seeks by ballyhoo to bamboozle consumers into buying things they neither need nor want, thus compelling them to sell their labor power as a means of paying for their purchases."

—Helen and Scott Nearing

Her own idea of her legacy lives on: "When we are long gone, may the search for the good life go on in the lives of our fellow countrymen and country women and may our efforts in buildings and books remain for a while to help others along the way."

The Nearings' Simple Living Lessons

There is so much practical information in the Nearings' books, both for those seeking a real change to a rural lifestyle or those simply looking for a new way of doing things right where they're planted. Here are some of the basic principles I drew from my readings. You will undoubtedly find a great many more:

- Know what you believe and set up your living plan according to those beliefs. Write down your beliefs and plans. Refer to them daily. Revise as the need arises.
- Have a clear plan every day as to what you want to accomplish. Spend time each morning mapping out the day and adjust for circumstances.

- Prepare yourself for each major project or change. Do your homework, decide on a method, take your time, and evaluate as you go along.
- Decide on what your essentials are and get rid of the rest. Simplify the basic areas of existence: food, clothing, and shelter. Do you really need to cook every meal? How would a partially raw diet affect the time it takes to prepare meals?
- Choose work that is a pleasure. Downsize so that you can support your lifestyle with work you enjoy.
- Wherever possible, work cooperatively with neighbors and friends. Trade, share, borrow, and lend. Learn from each other.

The Nearings' "experiment" lasted for some 60 years. Theirs was an economic, political, and spiritual decision. But it was also a love story. If you have never read *Living the Good Life* and its follow-up volume *Continuing the Good Life* (available in a single volume entitled *The Good Life: Helen and Scott Nearing's Sixty Years of Self-Sufficient Living*), please do, even if you have no intention of moving to the country and living off the land. You'll be rewarded for it. And if you want to read a poignant story about love and dignity in dying, read *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*, by Helen Nearing. You'll be better for it, I promise!

The Least You Need to Know

- There are many lessons to be learned from history, not the least of which are from our own nation's past.
- Like Thoreau, we can create our own experiments to get in touch with the aspects of simple living that most speak to us.
- Although we may not want to relocate to the country and live off the land, we can learn from people like the Nearings who have.
- Through study of past examples, we can develop our own simple living plan and gather inspiration as well.

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