

A Rich Simplicity: Lessons from Wendell Berry
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I have found three corners of simplicity, like angles of a triangle, all connected.

The first angle: stuff.

I was raised by a mother who grew up dirt poor on a Nebraska farm during the depression for whom, “waste not, want not” wasn’t just a clever phrase, it was survival. She and my father lived lean, re-using, re-cycling, honoring the land, and doing with less so that others could have some. Presenting this possibility for shaping a life, was one of their greatest gifts to me.

The Irish pub where I waited tables in college hired a dishwasher from Ethiopia who had been lucky enough to come to the US during the famine. Firm in my memory is how confounded this young man was when he was instructed to dump all the leftover food from the plates down the garbage disposal before he washed them. That single moment was also a lifetime of instruction.

As many of you know, Ian’s dad and I spent a year, years before Ian was born, hitch-hiking around Madagascar and parts of Africa. We sold everything we owned, including a beloved old Volvo named Bob. I slept in a tent with an old Timberland jacket rolled up as my pillow. Every possession I owned, stuffed in my backpack. The freedom *that* simplicity allowed created one of the happiest times in my life. When we returned home, I remember being overwhelmed by having to make so many choices: in grocery stores, in what clothes to wear, in roads to follow. There were too many options.

“All goes back to the earth,
And so I do not desire
Pride of excess or power,
But the contentments made
By men who have had little:
The fisherman’s silence
Receiving the river’s grace,
The gardner’s musing on his rows.”

That life-altering journey in Africa and the ways of my childhood have made it is easy for me to live simply in regard to possessions. I don’t care for gadgetry much—I’m a big fan of about 10th century technology, I am not a collector of many things, except maybe for books and handmade cloth. I do not live a Spartan life by any means, but I might have a bit of disdain for this cleaving to things, this holding on to things, I say.

Which brings me to the second angle of that triangle. While I don’t struggle with an attachment to stuff, what I have had a much harder time letting go of is the junk in my mind. I have been a ridiculous hoarder, cleaving to old moments—from last night or ten years ago and anticipated future moments. I stack high past magic and luck, or loss and worry and fear. The stuff that sometimes crowds my mind is possibly harder to manage than the multiple bags of sale items from, say, a shopping spree at Kohls. I want to cleave in the other way, the splitting myself open,

I want to carve away the busyness of my mind. I want to do what Vicki talked about—making space. I want blank walls, like I have in my home, for my mind. A simplicity of the mind.

Mark Burch from the Simplicity Institute writes, “In the lives of those inclined to drill deep and suck out all of simplicity’s sweetness, a transformation of consciousness has also been involved. The physical changes that come into our lives are often preceded and organized by some prior psychological, and sometimes spiritual, change of perspective.” Or, as the French writer Charles Wagner wrote, “Simplicity is a state of mind.”

“I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.”

Richard Gregg, the originator of the term “Voluntary Simplicity,” wrote “The way to master the increasing complexity of life is not through more complexity, the way is to turn inward to that which unifies all—not the intellect, but the spirit.”

While not a Buddhist, I have, like I know many of you have, found great wealth and great peace in the teachings of Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh. He is my guide in the second corner of the triangle when my busy mind gets out of control. Hanh advocates mindfulness, that state of active, open attention on the present. In his book *Peace in Every Step*, he instructs us to smile, to breathe, to be still, to think less. He says, “of course thinking is important, but quite a lot of our thinking is useless.” Indeed. Living mindfully, being fully present and awakening to the experience of the moment is something that has transformed my life. I have lapses where the worry and busyness of my mind take over, but when I am able to smile and breathe and pay attention to where I am in that moment, really pay attention, I find a stillness, and a peace that helps me carry on.

“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Related to busyness of the mind is the busyness of day-to-day life, and that’s the third corner of simplicity in my triangle. I told the members of my small group ministry the other night that I feel like a bit of a fraud, standing up here talking about simplicity, when the last month or so my life has been terribly complicated, because of a long and messy to-do list. For me, this is the

most challenging aspect of simplifying my life. Each of us has responsibilities to family, to friends, to church, to community, in the desire to make a difference, to be valued—and a whole host of other complicated reasons. The abundance of these chores can be as overwhelming and complicated as the useless thoughts that fill our minds. Perhaps we could all take a step back and agree to do less, recognizing the need to find rest, to find more space in our lives.

This is good; we need to honor our infinite inwardness, we must take time to renew, to go into the peace of the wild things as I know so many of us do, but we must remember to come back! The desire to escape, to be free of society and its responsibilities can be great, just like in the song *Society*, that began our service. Simplicity then, becomes an exercise in balance. Society, self, work, rest. I would posit that one way we can simplify, can find solace and peace in the busyness of our days is in community, is in relying on each other.

Wendell Berry is a writer, poet, teacher, farmer. He's been described as an "outspoken citizen of an endangered world." It is his poetry that Vicki has been reading so beautifully throughout this homily. Berry celebrates a life lived in close communion with neighbors and with the earth. He's a big advocate of balance between what he terms "wilderness" and "culture."

I want to focus on Berry because while he's sending us out into the stillness of trees, he is also reminding us of our connection to each other. His prose is rife with references to neighborliness and to an order of things. He writes, "It is not from ourselves that we learn to be better than we are." And "People have tried to simplify themselves by severing the connections. That doesn't work." We need each other even in the act of simplification.

In a wonderful *Harper's* article several years ago Berry wrote this: "we have tried to define "freedom," as an escape from all restraint. But, as my friend Bert Hornback has explained in his book *The Wisdom in Words*, "free" is etymologically related to "friend." We set our friends free by our love for them, with the implied restraints of faithfulness or loyalty. And this suggests that our "identity" is located not in the impulse of selfhood but in deliberately maintained connections."

Clearly, I'm a huge fan of Wendell Berry. He's in his 80s now, but I have a huge crush on him. How could you not love a man who refers to himself as "merely a fragment of the earth"? In his essays and stories and poems, I find a reverence for life and the natural world, and also a call to action. Berry seems to live along a continuum that recognizes the need for quiet self-renewal, but even while engaging in that renewal, he honors where he fits within the world, where he is in the order of things, wanting to fulfill his responsibilities to the earth and to his neighbors.

He says, ". . . awareness of the creational rhythms of work and rest, of control and letting be, nurtures within us a kind of sensitivity toward wholeness and connection."

"By keeping intact
the world's gift of self-renewal, not
as our belonging, but asking how
we might belong to it,
what we might use of it
for ourselves, leaving it whole,

we may come to live in its
time, in which our lives will pass
as pass the lives of birds
within the lives of trees.”

I will close with an example of simplification and community. Almost 40 of you showed up at Dona Ammons house last Sunday to tackle the weedfest that had become her back yard. Dona’s mind is busy, worried about the myriad tasks on her increasingly urgent to-do list. She turned to the love of her neighbors, us, for help, and just as Wendell Berry says, we set her free. Could we not do that for each other all the time? Could we not simplify our lives by being brave enough to ask for help when the list has grown too long? When the weeds threaten to take over?

In one of Wendell Berry’s Sabbath poems, he writes, “Where we arrive by work, we stay by grace.” I write: grace is our balance; grace is the rich simplicity we find in through each other.