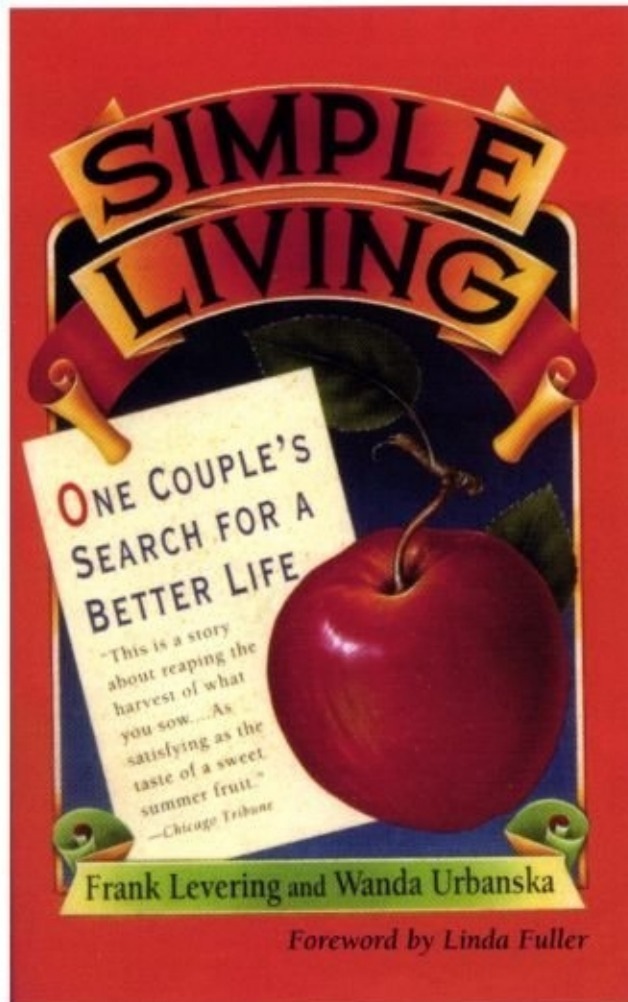




The Virtues of SIMPLICITY

Two books and a PBS series later, this Virginia couple has not abandoned their commitment to simple living

By Kevin Madigan



“Simplicity is nothing new in American culture,” stated Wanda Urbanska emphatically. “It’s been waxing and waning since the very beginning.”

She should know. The author of the 1992 best seller *Simple Living* has made a career of espousing the doctrines of Thoreau and the other transcendentalists to an expanding audience.

During a telephone interview, Urbanska related the initial resistance to the book: “Back in 1988, when I went to my agent in New York and proposed a book on simplicity, she said, ‘Who in the world would have an interest in this?! Give me a break!’”

Subtitled *One Couple's Search for a Better Life*, the book is now in its ninth edition and, naturally, has now spawned a sequel, *Nothing's Too Small to Make a Difference*, again co-written with Urbanska's husband, former Hollywood scribe Frank Levering. The two have started a cottage industry, literally, with their clever how-to books on how to remove the clutter from your life, focus on the basics and be kind to your surroundings. Urbanska explained the gist of it all: “It’s reducing one’s environmental footprint and becoming better environmental stewards, more thoughtful consumers, more involved with your community, more financially responsible. Four primary values that are interlinked.”

All well and good, except that living the simple life turns out to be quite complicated. How can it possibly square with having an assistant, a thriving business (a large cherry orchard in Virginia, no less) and a PBS television show (based on their books)? “You have caught us at one of our least simple moments, but we’re advocates for simple living,” she confessed. “Whenever you’re advocating for a cause or point of view, it can make your life rather complicated.” Urbanska stressed that the two of them are not motivated by money, but rather by the desire to show

others how to improve life in fundamental ways, thereby making this messed-up world a nicer place to be. “It’s something that we believe in and we’re making a positive contribution,” she insisted. “It’s not like we’re running around being crazy to make a million dollars. It’s a positive thing.”

This enterprising couple inherited the orchard in the 1980s, along with its attendant debt, and went about making drastic changes in their lives. Having both been writers in Los Angeles with mediocre results—he co-wrote Demi Moore’s first movie and she worked for the now defunct *LA Herald Examiner*—this could not have been more fortuitous.

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With section headings like “Needs Versus Wants,” “Less is More,” and other catchy bon mots, the authors lay out a credible plan for better living that sounds, well, simple. But even though much of the book may feel like an exercise in stating the obvious, the prevalent common sense in the couple’s beliefs comes through quite adequately. Heart is in the right place, you could say, in spite of the clichés.

Even the word ‘simple’ doesn’t appear to have the pejorative connotations it once did, according to Urbanska. “I’ve noticed in my lifetime the evolution of the word ‘simple,’” she said. “When we started with the simple living idea back

in 1988, some people were saying, ‘well, it sounds like simpleminded, like feeble-minded.’ We’re not hearing that much anymore. Now it’s sort of a compliment. You know, ‘they have their life together,’ that sort of thing.”

Another word she likes is ‘Afluenza,’ which she coined and describes as “a clever play on the disease of Americans’ affluence.” In fact, Urbanska fears for the soul of her countrymen in many areas:

“The whole simplicity movement is related to the fact that Americans are in financial trouble,” she argued. “There are record numbers of bankruptcies, people are over their heads in credit card debt, and things didn’t used to be that way. We have one of the lowest rates of savings of any first-world country. We’re taking a page out of the federal government book, spending money we don’t have.”

Suggesting that we would be wise perhaps to emulate the actions of our European brethren, she stated: “I think that we Americans can learn a great deal from the Europeans, and, of course, the Scandinavians have done a great job of being environmental stewards in conserving water and energy and all those important assets. We’re advocating what we call the Europeanization of American life. In general, they’re not quite as time-crunched, not as workaholic. They enjoy the pleasures of the table, they seem to enjoy life more. If you go into the average home in France, the furniture is often old. Americans tend to constantly want to replace everything and remodel.”

This is where the Urbanska/Levering principle of thoughtful consumerism comes in. The author cites academic studies which show that impulse purchases are inherently not as satisfying in the long term. “When you’re a thoughtful consumer you really give consideration to what you purchase, if you really need it, what value it adds to your life, if you’re making a long-term commitment to it. Whether it be a vehicle or an appliance or an article of clothing or home furnishings, look at them to see if they really are long-term commitments. Study what the origin of the product is, what the produc-

er’s value is, prior to the purchase. It will bring enhanced satisfaction at the other end,” she said.

Urbanska deplors “all the land fills that are filling up with things that we buy on a whim,” adding that, instead of buying something right there and then, shoppers should think about it for a week. “You’re more likely to enjoy (it) for years to come . . . you’re better grounded in life if you get a firm hold of your pocket book.”

Urbanska would like to see savings stressed over consumption. “I’m not an economist, and consumption is the engine that’s driving our economy, no question about that,” she admitted. “But the price tags are not taking into account environmental damage and destruction from all the things we’re buying. Things that we don’t use and throw away.”

This author and activist seems undaunted by the challenge, saying: “We are fighting an uphill battle, but I think Americans are ready for it. I’ve been involved in this movement for nearly 16 years now. Instinctively Americans feel that something is out of whack. I know that they’re very much drawn to simplicity as a solution, or at least a movement towards there. We’re not doctrinaire. We don’t give a ten-point plan. We urge people to take a look at their own lives and think about the principles of simplicity and see how they can apply them.”

It’s hard to argue with the book’s logic: Be creative, take naps, donate to worthy causes, set clear priorities, show kindness, don’t be greedy—if you think there’s a spiritual bent here, you’re on the right track. In fact, the best writing comes towards the end of the book, wherein the boundaries of different faiths are explored and, in some cases, broken down. The Dalai Lama is quoted here as saying: “The purpose of life is to increase the warm heart. Think of other people. Serve other people. No cheating.”

Nothing's Too Small to Make A Difference by Wanda Urbanska and Frank Levering, (John F. Blair, \$21.95)
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