



The Simple Life

navigating simplicity and voluntary poverty at Boston's Haley House

words Anna Clark
photos Katie Jumper

Thoreau quotes are slapped onto calendars, date books, bumper stickers, mugs, T-shirts, bags, and Hallmark cards: "I say, let your affairs be two or three....," he proclaims. Or, more to the point, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" Most of us look upon these familiar turns of phrase and think, *Yes*.

After paging through my super-highlighted edition of *Walden*, I might spend an afternoon, an evening, a day, a weekend, and purge my closet. "I still own this?" "I guess I can do without this." After filling a Hefty bag or two, I exhale and reflect on how much better it is to have a simpler life. The books will go to a library, the clothes to Goodwill. And I feel good about my life — liberated, even.

But once the self-congratulation quiets, it comes to simple observations. If I lament my country's over consumption, how do I justify buying a new book when there's a nearby library? Why can I afford to eat out the same day I tell a canvassing environmental group "sorry, I've nothing to spare?"

Ready to raise the stakes of simplicity, I left Michigan for Boston's Haley House, a live-in community of volunteers based on the Catholic Worker Movement's ideals of personalism and social justice. Their mission is to work in the space between privileged and non-privileged, operating the only soup kitchen in Boston without an armed guard, along with a food pantry, organic farm, affordable housing units, a bakery-café that doubles as a job-training program, and hosting the street magazine *What's Up*.

Judy met me at the train station in January. A community member now in her 50s, she sold her home and a life's worth of possessions to permanently commit to Haley House. As we blustered through the South End, she gestured to the pretty brownstones. When Haley

House opened in 1966, she said, the neighborhood was a "war zone." People sleeping on sidewalks — and there were many — were invited inside. Buildings were chipping away. But not long ago came the transformation. Now, when I tell other Boston acquaintances where I live, they say "wow."

"The buildings are worth millions of dollars," Judy informed me. "Millions."

Why, I asked, hadn't Haley House sold its building for an astronomical profit, moved shop to the poorer Roxbury district, and used the money for some noble cause?

Judy said not selling was actually nobler. "I believe we're a prophetic presence," she answered. "We break up economic segregation. People who live here don't forget us."

"Do neighbors volunteer with us?" I asked.

"Some."

People pass through Haley House — volunteers, urban immersions, and high school and college students on spring break. Visitors are interested in the community's how'd-you-end-up-here stories. I'm consistently fascinated by Adam Campbell's; his experiences highlight my simultaneous frustration and fondness for the community's ideal of "voluntary poverty" in a particularly dramatic way. Though I'd heard the tale in person, I later discovered he'd kept a journal during his first visit to Haley House:

I came... to give the live-in community a try for a couple weeks, he writes in one of the earlier entries. Which went famously, save one issue.... working in the soup kitchen, I felt this nagging reality that there was a palpable barrier between myself and the "guests." And no matter how many times I ate with them or they beat me in chess, we lived on two totally different sides of the counter.... I still had no idea why they were there, what they did during the day, what the other shelters and service providers were like, if/how they could make it out...

Haley House live-ins rely on the same food bank we use in the soup kitchen. Nobody gets paid, and we're left to our own devices in scrambling for medical insurance, if we feel we need it at all. Despite offers, we've never accepted a dishwasher. Members are urged to leave most possessions behind upon moving in.

At a typical breakfast, one guest starts up the coffee, another proffers a CD to play, still others make toast to tide their stomachs until the meal is served. William and I hash out the latest *Harry Potter*. I read headlines with Don and salsa dance with a man who calls himself, with a smirk, Batman. There're the dishes, the sleepiness, the MIA volunteer, the occasional clogged toilet, but truthfully, it's fun. The meals are not the point, after all. The point is the formation of real community among individuals who, in this society, are typically isolated from each other.

But there's the other part.

One afternoon I went to CVS and there's Tony holding a cup for customers to toss him change. Most pretend he's invisible. And I, too, wish I'd ducked away before he'd seen me. I'm embarrassed to see him begging. I say hi. Tony's irritated because earlier someone stole his cup and its 30 dollars. It's

a casual conversation. I commiserate. I like Tony. But then, there's that cup hanging heavy between us. I soon head inside to spend my money to develop photos, dropping nothing into Tony's cup.

Wary of this "other part," Adam's response was to push further in attempt to erase the divide:

Seeing mystery as invitation and seeking understanding through experience, my response was to go homeless for a week in Boston. Ya, ya: "Campbell, don't be ridiculous. Just by the nature of your privilege, the fact that you can back out at any time, and by only going for a week totally preempts you from having any sort of genuine 'homeless' experience." Well, better than nothing...

The plan: to leave Haley House Wed. morning and "be homeless" for a week, whatever that meant. To survive the streets of Boston with relatively nothing, to be part of the invisible subculture, to experience life from the other side of the counter. No keys, no money, no I.D., no info...

Though Thoreau has become the poster boy of American simple living, the idea has much older roots. Jesus invited disciples to be spiritually "like children," and famously said that it's easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter heaven. Buddhism asks us to simply take what is for what is, without burdening it with cravings, narrations, expectations, or disappointment. In Hinduism, the third life stage, *vanaprastha*, is marked by increased detachment, implying that simplicity is a natural state.

Each tradition holds that things and things-to-do distract us from a more authentic reality. But despite the affirmations we might apply to the worth of a simple life, the fact is that, for most of us, not doing anything in particular is reserved for vacations and retreats. Material simplicity translates into closet purges.

A taxi driver pointed me the right way to the Pine Street Inn, a homeless shelter ... and eventually I found it, but had missed breakfast. So they gave me directions to St. Francis, another service provider 15 minutes away. But by the time I found it, they had also stopped serving ...

St. Francis... held us outside 45 minutes longer than the posted 11:30 lunch start. [It] smelled like the high school cafeteria on Thursdays, with its too sugary tomato sauce pizza. Once I cleared the bag check and metal detector, I entered the rather non-descript chow room: packed out capacity of around eighty, dominated by middle-aged African-American men. A tense space, loaded with transience and testosterone. Bags stashed around the room, minimal eye contact, hurried eating void of enjoyment."

In Haley House, it's true, some things are simple. It's also true that we have a DVD player, stereo, and computer (all donated). Most of us have cell phones. We can leave this "poverty" whenever we choose. I miss books and paychecks. I worry about student loans. I hate rummaging through half-rotten food, and I



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supplement my meals with eat-out fare I can’t afford. And who said simplicity is just about doing away with material goods? As utopian as they sound, neither community life nor working with the poor automatically equate to “living the simple life.” Between our daily shifts and endless essential tasks, we’re as crazed as we’d be working traditional jobs.

But then, are the guests who time days to soup kitchen schedules and shelter bed lotteries, who worry where to store their few possessions and struggle with illness and addiction: are they living a simple life?

On the hill, by the statue, overlooking the active open area in a spot of practical invisibility lies a dirty bomb ground zero marked by the blanket/cardboard/trash shrapnel. The bodies responsible, who call themselves ‘the family’, number around twenty...

The family is amazingly kind, and loyal to each other to the end. They are protective, yet welcoming, and have Boston dialed. They inform me how to get free rides on the subway and the silver line (bus), free clothes/food/shelter, where and where not to sleep ... At one point during my day with them, ‘Jack’ tried to give me a nickname to make me an ‘official’ member of the family. Luckily he was drunk enough to easily distract. Getting in too deep with a fiercely loyal and subtly paranoid group, and then suddenly disappearing, and then reemerging for the rest of the year in a homeless service provider... well, let’s just say this isn’t a group you want thinking you crossed/abandoned. Better to befriend for a day on a wandering path...

On Wednesdays I operate the food pantry. It’s like playing grocery store without money and great fun. But it’s odd: as I give people food, I receive gifts. Divina gave me an embroidered skirt. Aleya gave me handmade jewelry that, she promises, grants the protection of saints. Last week a bracelet came wrapped in a prescription pill bottle and tissue. And Konstantine tucks poems into my hand that, he says, are also being sent to the Pope.

In his journal, Adam speaks of how the homeless he knew seemed to share “an amplified concern for survival, spit up from the surrounding sea of abundance”:

A friend I met in the soup kitchen who had made it out called it the ‘dark consciousness,’ and when enveloped by it, when forced to think only of survival day in and out, it is impossible to think beyond food/clothes/shelter to job/joy/peace, and anyone shouting or thinking ‘get a job’ only exposes the ignorance to such a state. This particular guy, by the way, was now choosing to remain on the streets though he had money for a house. His reasoning? Having survived the streets and made it out, he has chosen to dedicate his life to helping the homeless. But he spoke of seeing others succumb to the drastic allure of money, of surrounding themselves with house and opulence (relatively speaking), and forgetting about the people in need. They began to choose things over people and safety over life, and soon they spent all their time protecting what they had, without realizing that now, forgoing experience, they had nothing to give.

I won’t pretend I understand what it’s like to live in a tunnel, as one fellow I know does, any more than I understand what it’s like for a friend to lose her mother. But despairing the ultimate limitations of empathy or of living simply is too often an excuse to not move in that direction at all. The gap between rich and poor is so deeply entrenched in this world that it seems insurmountable. While the problem is big, it shouldn’t be mistaken for complex. The solution is, in fact, simple.

We can share our surplus with those who don’t have enough. It sounds too easy to be revolutionary, but, as can see from our own lives, we have the ability to make sharing the default rather than the exception. And while many fight for this on a macro level, it deserves to be built into everyday life and actions as well. In fact, it’s necessary.

At Haley House, it’s not our “voluntary poverty” that builds solidarity with our guests. We connect with people when we’re unafraid to take our friendships out of the soup kitchen and into the streets. Then we’re making the connections that make this world toward the place we know it can be. *This is a liberated life in process.* ☆

Anna once got in six car accidents in five months. Talk about excessive. She can be reached at annaleighclark@yahoo.com.