



J. Brent Bill

I've always struggled with what it means to live simply. That's just one area in which I'm bad at being a good Quaker. Which is one reason I'm writing a book titled *The Humble Stumble: Lessons on Stillness, Simplicity, Fashion and Faith from a Bad Quaker* which will be out next fall. The chapters are all lessons I need!

I serve Quakers as the coordinator of Friends General Conference's "New Meetings Project," helping Friends start new meetings in the United States and Canada. When I'm not doing that, I'm usually writing (*Finding God in the Verbs: Crafting a New Language of Prayer* will be out this spring), blogging (holyordinary.blogspot.com), or working out in our prairie and trees.

Nancy continues to be busy working in her flower beds and entertaining children and grandchildren. We attend West Newton Friends Meeting in southwest Indianapolis, where I serve on Ministry and Counsel, occasionally lead worship, and sometimes teach Sunday school. Our very normal, boring life is a blessed one.

The photo is of me teaching adult Sunday school at West Newton Friends.

BIBLE READING: Luke 12:13-21

I'm not completely certain that I'm gaining on simplicity. Sometimes it seems closer. Sometimes it seems further away. I collect books. And music. And then there are all the vehicles. My car. Nancy's car. The farm pickup. My antique MG. All this for two people. Then there's all the farm equipment—too much to list. People hear I live on a farm and say, "Man, I'd love to live the simple life." Lemme tell you, it ain't so simple—otherwise I wouldn't need all the equipment above.

I have learned that there's no one way to live simply. Yes, I could go all Walden and live in a tiny cabin in the woods. But I doubt that our big family would appreciate that and besides, Henry David Thoreau could only stand it for a couple of years.

True simplicity, as we Quakers understand it, is not about how *little* you have (though some Friends do live very, very modestly) or how *much* you have—it's about *why* you have what you have.

So if living simply for me consists of a Walden-like existence, subsisting on the bare minimum, I've got a long way to go and much to learn. And I probably am not going to make it. What's a fella (or woman or family or faith community) to do if we want to "come round right"?

SONG: Simple Gifts

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me to live a life that is uncluttered by things and activities. Amen.

—J. Brent Bill

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BIBLE READING: Luke 12:22-34

Some people find out that I'm a Quaker and begin looking around for my horse and buggy. Why people think we're Amish is beyond me. Well, not really, if all they know about us is the guy on the oats box. If you look at him you see he's not dressed anything like the Amish—way too stylin' for them.

Now two hundred years ago, the Quakers did sorta dress like the Amish. And they did use horses and buggies. They also didn't use electricity. But that's because those things didn't exist. Unlike the Amish living totally off the grid as a testimony to God and a spiritual discipline of simplicity, we Quakers have moved into the twentieth century. Some of us have even moved into the twenty-first. And we've brought our testimony of simplicity with us.

One of the gifts that even a bad Quaker like me appreciates about the Friendly way is that it is always evolving and asking current questions about what it means to be a person of faith. The issue of simplicity in a modern, consumerist society is one of the things that keeps us growing. One thing we've discovered is that we have to continually wrestle with what it means to live simply.

What it means for me is not necessarily what it will mean for you. Our faith is not a one-size-fits-all faith. At least in how we live it out. We are each unique—and created by God to be so.

SONG: Here I Am, Lord

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Christ, our Eternal Teacher, show us how to center our lives each day in you so that all things take their rightful place. Amen.

—J. Brent Bill

BIBLE READING: Philippians 2:1-12

When Paul says we have to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, I think he should have added something such as, “and likewise about living it out in daily life!” We need to work out what it means to live simply. Despite all the land and stuff I have, even at my worst I’m doing better at that than I used to.

One reason I say that is that it’s in no small part a matter of attitude. Why do we have stuff? I admit that I have often acquired things because I could and I wanted to. I didn’t grow up the richest kid on the block—or even the third richest. So when I had my first allowances and then summer jobs, I bought stuff I wanted (much to the dismay of my dad who wanted me to buy stuff I *needed*, like shoes, jeans, etc). I acquired because I could.

While that still occasionally occurs, usually I’m buying now because it’s either something I need or it makes a statement about my values. The first is the easiest to understand, I suppose. It takes a lot of stuff to live simply on fifty acres. That expanse of land does not take care of itself.

The second is perhaps harder to understand. After all, rarely do we think about how what we own says something about what we believe. And yet, our lives—and our possessions—should reflect what we believe, what we value. That’s what the Quaker way of urging us to live simply in Jesus’ name prompts us to do. Our possessions can point to God—or mammon. Whom (or what) do we love?

SONG: Take My Life and Let It Be

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Loving God, help me to see my possessions as a light to point to you and your great love. Amen.

—J. Brent Bill

BIBLE READING: Psalm 16

I am shocked to be living on a fifty-acre farm in Indiana. I planned on living in a condominium downtown in a big city. But for ten years I've been living in a house nestled back against the woods overlooking the west branch of White Lick Creek. My wife, Nancy, is a farm girl and this land was part of her family's farm. It came to us as part of her inheritance, albeit a bit before her father's passing. It has taught me more than a few lessons in simplicity.

The first was about what kind of house to build. What could we build that expressed our Quaker faith? Like I said earlier, the Quaker understandings of peace, simplicity, care for the earth, and all the others are part of the gospel as we understand it and are interrelated. We lived into that in new ways as we were faced with how and what to build.

We ended up building a post and beam home that used timbers reclaimed from old factories and the like. We designed a place that is open for hosting groups, with guest rooms for travelers, that uses geo-thermal heating and cooling, and which can accommodate us as we age—wide doorways through which a wheelchair will fit, one level for us, and other levels for grandkids, guests, care-givers, etc. We call it Ploughshares Farm because we want it to be a place of peace. Adding peace to the spiritual values of simplicity and care for the earth, I began pondering what kind of inheritance I'll be passing on to my descendants—not just in property, but in values.

SONG: Make Me a Blessing

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Gracious Creator, thank you for the spiritual inheritance you've granted me. Show me how to pass that inheritance on in tangible ways of love and simplicity in this complex and often hate-filled world. Amen.

—J. Brent Bill

BIBLE READING: Luke 18:18-25

Eighteenth-century Quaker, John Woolman, says the business of our lives is to “Turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love.” I guess the rich man in the scripture lesson didn’t get Woolman’s memo.

Woolman, unlike me, was a good Quaker. He worked valiantly and humbly against slave holding. He lived his faith and his actions matched his words. Even if he was considered a bit of an odd duck in the Friendly pond at the time.

But how can that be practical? To turn all that we own into a channel of universal love? I can turn some things that I own into specific love—I give books to my friends not expecting their return. I loan my pick-up truck to people who need to haul things. We open our house to visiting travelers. We hold loosely the things we have, realizing that they are things—not possessions.

I’m getting there, but it’s not always easy. It helps when I focus on a particular love. Would I give a book to Laura? Music to Eric? A place to stay to Rick and Jo? Sure thing. Would I give money to a panhandler in Philly? Hmmmm. Would I give my wallet—willingly—to someone robbing me? Universal love—God’s love—is harder, especially toward one whom I don’t love, don’t know, or appears to be an enemy.

I need to learn to unclench my hands and let my things fly into the world and do good. Before it’s too late, unlike the poor rich man in the Bible story.

SONG: Give of Your Best to the Master

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Oh God who gives all good things, help me learn to be free from the burden of unnecessary possessions, learn to hold those I do need lightly, and to share them freely with all who might benefit from their use. Amen.

—J. Brent Bill

BIBLE READING: James 4:1-3

“May we look upon our treasures, and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions, or not.”

That’s another thing that John Woolman said. I mean, gimme a break, John. Between him and Jesus I get a lot of challenges to my bad behavior. Woolman, really, how could the seeds of war find food in the things I own—my clothes, my furniture, my cell phone? My cell phone?! You’re kiddin’ me!

Nope. Turns out the seeds of war are in there, indeed. There’s something in my phone (and your phone and every other electronic device you use). It’s called coltan.

Coltan is mined in primitive, often slave-like, conditions, which is bad enough for those mining it. What’s worse is that some of the places where it’s mined are beset by murder, rape, violence, and abuse on an unimaginable scale in civil wars conducted in no small part by warlords who want to corner the market and make tons of money.

Hmmm, I wonder what other seeds I’m unknowingly nourishing?

Now I’ve got to go—my iPhone’s ringing. I hope it’s not my desires coveting something containing the seeds of war.

SONG: Let There Be Peace on Earth

*PRA YER SUGGESTION: Peaceful Jesus, show me how to sow seeds of peace, instead of war, through what I buy.
Amen*

—J. Brent Bill

BIBLE READING: Psalm 37:3-5

Another form of simplicity is less about possession than it is about scheduling. Sometimes we get so busy, even doing God's work, that the center of our lives is cluttered. What difference does it make if we live in a plain house with few possessions and drive plain, black Priuses if we do not have simplicity in our soul? Committee chairmanships, community activities, and so on, all appear altruistic to others and we wear these as a badge of pride. We must be important—look how busy we are. But, if we are to begin to live the testimony of simplicity, we must first simplify our own inner and outer lives. We must take time to live in that holy center. We must calm our lives and learn to breathe.

I am not saying it is easy. It isn't. It is much easier to run, run, run than it is to sit and listen. When I run, run, run I feel my life coming unbalanced—family time, work productivity, emotions, physical health. It is when I take time to pray and wait that I find my rhythms, inner and outer, begin to slow and become more soothing than rock-and-roll-ragged.

So that's where we must begin—inside. Take time to be holy, and a holy simplicity will follow. With that simplicity comes a joy that is most remarkable. We know, in our innermost lives, that things do not bring happiness. But we are a bit slower to learn the lesson that activity, even religious activity, does not bring happiness either. What brings joy into our life is when we give up, abandon ourselves to God, and allow the Spirit to simplify our lives and direct our actions.

SONG: Take Time to Be Holy

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Oh Eternal One of the still, small voice, teach me to be still so that I might hear your voice leading me to the still waters of the soul. Show me how to simplify my life, my possessions, and my soul. Amen.

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