

34

The Non-Essentials of Life

Roberta Winter

Scene 1: Summer 1951

(It was our second date. Ralph and I were sitting on the grass close to the Rose Bowl, getting acquainted. We had first met just two weeks before.)

“I want you to know I’m a rather...uh...radical person,” Ralph told me. “My mother has often despaired of me. At one point I even refused to wear dress clothes to church.”

I waited for his explanation. He seemed to be dressed like everyone else—sport shirt and slacks. Nothing elaborate, but nothing weird.

“Some of my friends and I had been reading about various saints down through history, and we just couldn’t see why God would not expect as much of us as of them. Take neckties, for example. It didn’t seem right to buy neckties when people elsewhere were starving. I figure Americans must own \$500,000,000 worth of neckties.”

“But you wear them now, don’t you?” I asked

“Yes, but not for the usual reasons. I wear them only to keep from scaring away the natives.” And he laughed as he motioned with his hand to some people sitting a little ways away.

I didn’t fully understand what he was saying. Gradually I realized that, as Paul said, we don’t live to ourselves alone (1 Cor. 10). Our conviction of how the Lord wants us to live must be balanced by its effect on others. Does our style of living lead others to Christ or become a barrier to keep them from Him? As I came to understand, I was more able to enunciate what for us both has become a basic principle of life:

Roberta Winter has written *I Will Do a New Thing* (William Carey Library). She and her husband Ralph D. Winter founded the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena California. Reprinted by permission from

Principle One: *Our lifestyle must please the Lord, yet it should not in small matters be so shockingly different from those among whom we walk as to make unintelligible the message we wish to convey.*

That day in the park was certainly not *my* first exposure to a simple lifestyle. Born during the depression, I could remember birthdays celebrated with one lead pencil. Yet we now could have meat every day. If I needed a dress, I could get one. Furthermore, long before I met Ralph, God has touched my lifestyle when I asked myself, “Would I follow what the Lord wanted me to do if no one understood?”

As we talked that day I knew it would be exciting and challenging to marry this man. He told me of little economies here and there, but mostly he talked of his dreams, his ideals, his goals that had derived from his walk with the Lord.

I was fascinated with those dreams. Some were just dreams. Others were becoming realities. Because of his efforts as a student in seminary, a group of Christians were in “closed” Afghanistan teaching English and starting an engineering school.

He was excited about his doctoral studies in linguistics because he wanted to make the biblical languages more useful to the average pastor and missionary. Already he had a card file of the Greek lexicon which he hoped to arrange in order of the biblical text to avoid the endless flipping of pages to look up a word. In his head were the ideas behind the *Word Study Concordance* and the *Word Study New Testament* (jointly published in 1978 by Tyndale and William Carey Library).

I caught a glimpse that day of the excitement Ralph felt in doing something creative for the Lord, something that would make a difference in the spread of the gospel. Any excitement I might have ever felt for new clothes and a beautiful home paled in comparison to his.

Much later I learned that John Wesley had also been caught up in this same kind of excitement and had called it “the expulsive power of a new affection.” Wesley could have become wealthy, but he was so excited accomplishing things for the Lord that he could not be bothered. When he died, he owned only two silver spoons, but was known and loved in the smallest towns of England because of the light he had brought.

During the first few years after marriage, our problem was not whether we should live simply. Once we chose the dreams, we had no alternative. Ralph was in graduate school. And though I could have earned a good salary as a registered nurse, I preferred to become a part of those dreams by working with him in his graduate studies.

I would nurse for a while to build up a reserve, then do research for him until the reserve was gone. We repeated the cycle as often as necessary. After he finished his dissertation, our first two children were born. Then I could neither nurse nor do library research.

By now Ralph had returned to seminary, and we had to make ends meet on what he earned as a student pastor and as a part time engineer. Our income was so meager that when we became missionaries, it tripled.

Scene 2: June 1957

(We had just arrived at our post in the mountains of Guatemala. Our assignment was to work with a dozen congregations among the Mam Indians, one of the poorest groups of people in this hemisphere.)

I was embarrassed. The truck with all our belongings arrived dust-covered from the trip over the narrow dirt road which led through the mountain pass into our valley. We collected all our barrels and mattresses and our gas-powered wringer washer—something we considered a “must” with our three small children. A crowd of curious onlookers surrounded us—and all that stuff!

“Why do they stare?” I thought with a twinge of irritation. And then, sure enough, a young man asked the question I had been dreading:

“How much did that cost?”

Barefoot, wearing clothes on which even the patches were patched, he pointed to a mattress. He also kept eyeing the washing machine, obviously wondering what on earth that could be. Never in all his life had he seen a machine like that! Mattresses he had seen, to be sure—bags stuffed with straw that rustled and pricked with every move and all too soon became infested with vermin.

What could I tell him? We had bought what seemed to us to be so little. Yet I knew that a month’s salary for that young man would not begin to buy a mattress. And I felt defensive.

I could have sold all that was luxurious in the eyes of these people. I could more quickly identify with them if I did.

And yet I also knew that without those machines and little “luxuries” I would be tied to housework. These things could allow me to do in an hour what might otherwise take all day. Even hiring outside help would be luxurious in their eyes.

And I didn’t want all my missionary experience to be housework. Surely God had called me to more than that! Thus I had to choose between simplicity in how my *money* was spent and simplicity in how my *time* was spent.

Nevertheless, I could not close my eyes to the dire poverty of these dear people. I could not forget that John said: “If someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well, and sees a brother in need, and won’t help him—how can God’s love be within him?” (1 John 3:17, LB).

It took us some months to adjust to the uncomfortable idea that we would always have more “things” than these people. I doubt if we could have survived on their economic level, but in the long run we did everything we could to live in a way to which they could at least aspire.

We bought only the kinds of equipment which they as a group could afford. We even avoided small luxuries like soda pop, a useless temptation they could ill afford.

I learned in those years a new principle:

Principle Two: A simple lifestyle in the U.S. can still seem extravagant to most of the people in the world. Yet our geographic isolation does not reduce our obligation in God’s eye to people at a distance.

Scene Three: Fall 1961

(We had just returned on furlough after our first five years in Guatemala. Ralph and I stepped into an American drug store to fill a prescription. I waited twenty minutes for the druggist and came back to find Ralph standing near the cash register rather bemused, looking back at a long counter filled with pink, fluffy giraffes, purple elephants, and green monkeys.)

“Roberta, I’ve walked around this entire store, and there’s not one thing here I would take home even if they gave it to me.” He motioned toward the counters filled with bric-a-brac, poorly made furniture, discount jewelry, and endless toys. “Do they really think they can unload this stuff on thinking people?”

We’re still not sure.

After Guatemala, the U.S. society seemed gorged and glutted with trivialities—things that soon would be more junk at garage sales. But our four young daughters were dazzled by all that.

“Daddy, do we have enough money to buy...?” they would ask.

And he would inevitably reply, “Of course we can! But do we want it?” A long discussion would follow, setting “things” in their proper perspective without making the girls feel deprived and poor.

Furloughs were always a problem. From being the wealthiest people in our Guatemala community, we became poor missionaries in the eyes of others. Yet our missionary salary had always seemed adequate. It was adjusted year by year to our cost of living. We were provided with money to cover most of our medical and dental expenses. We even had the unheard-of benefit of a fund set aside to help with the college education of our children. Because we worked overseas, we paid no income tax. And our home was provided.

Even in the States it was not hard for us to live on our missionary salary because we knew we were here temporarily. Thus we were not tempted to keep up our with friends at home. Moreover, we knew that back on the field we would neither need nor want a stereo, a television, or the latest fad in kitchen appliances.

Yet while here, we never hesitated to buy something which would simplify our lives, giving us more time to spend on more important things. But we determined what we wanted. We, not television ads nor social pressure, decided what would help us. And we tried to teach our daughters what to us had become a principle of life:

Principle Three: *We don’t really need most of the things our culture would push off on us. Once we learn to resist social pressure, it is far easier to determine what we really want or need.*

Scene 4: Winter 1968

(After our second furlough, due to several pressing circumstances, we remained in the States. Ralph became a professor in the recently established School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, and we suddenly found ourselves in a different world. From time to time Ralph had to attend important functions and entertain visiting dignitaries. Because they no longer needed a three bedroom home, my parents-in-law moved

into a small apartment, giving us their home and all its furniture. One day my sister came to see me.)

“Roberta, you’re probably going to be in the States for a while. Why don’t you buy some new furniture? This heavy Spanish-look is really out of date.”

I was caught off guard. The furniture was much better than any we had ever owned. True, the sofa needed to be recovered and the table refinished. But I liked the style. Why spend money on something my sister would choose?

Ralph and I discussed her suggestion that night.

“Does the furniture look that bad?” I asked. “Or do you think that we have become unconscious of what looks good?”

“Don’t worry, Roberta,” he said. “We decided a long time ago not to let others dictate our lifestyle. We have enough money to buy new furniture if we want, but that does not *force* us to buy it. Why can’t we continue to live as if we were still missionaries on furlough, buying only what we need? If we let others know that we *choose* to live that way, maybe they’ll quit worrying about us.”

Let me state this idea a different way:

Principle Four: *There ought not be any connection between what is earned and what needs to be spent. You don’t buy things just because you have the money.*

With this principle, money inevitably accumulates. We followed this principle while missionaries; so when it seemed necessary to start a new publishing house specializing in books on missions, we were able to do it. That in turn encouraged us in a much greater venture, the U.S. Center for World Mission.

Not quite the same, a group of 120 people in Minneapolis have lived for years on only a portion of their group income and used the rest to support dozens of their members as missionaries. What would happen to this world if more evangelical Christians were to realize that God blessed them with money in order to make them a blessing, not to pamper them.

What an immense amount of money would be released for highly strategic causes! How much easier it would be to understand that Christ did not ask us to be “successes” but servants (Mark 10:44).

Scene 5: Summer 1978

(We were seated around a long table at the newly established U.S. Center for World Mission. There were twenty of us with notebooks of accounting sheets and a copy of our support-raising manual at each elbow.)

“One of the first things you’ll have to learn in raising your support is how to live within your income,” Ralph told them. “Our support level is basically the same as Campus Crusade’s. To those of you who have worked at well-paying jobs, this will seem very meager.

“To some of you who are just out of college, it may seem like too much. We want all of you to have enough for your needs, and a little besides for you to use as the Lord directs. I believe it is an important exercise to give money to someone else.

“Parkinson enunciated a law which says the ‘expenses rise to meet income.’ I

believe there should be another which says ‘when income falls, expenses also fall.’

“Most people have no idea where their money goes. Consequently, the thought of living on less scares them. In order to know exactly how we were coming out, our family has used a basic family accounting system.

“Month by month we can tell how our net worth is changing. This helps us decide if we are spending more than we should. We end up each month with both a profit and loss statement and a balance sheet just like a commercial enterprise.”

I could tell my husband was beyond most of them. But little by little he explained a simplified process of double entry bookkeeping.

The lessons were important, even for those who never really mastered them. For months many of our staff were living on far less than their full support, and they were amazed at how well they got by. God supplied in unusual ways, and they learned how to buy more efficiently.

Very basic, however, was the fact that we were all in this together. Beyond the suggestions and clues we could give each other, we developed a certain sense of comradeship best stated in another principle:

Principle Five: *It is much easier to adopt a simple lifestyle if you join a support group which covenants together to live on less.*

Among other equally valuable lessons, we learned that God really *does* take care of us if we make His concerns our highest priority (Luke 12:31, LB).

We learned that simplicity of life means far more than how we spend our money. It also means being willing to live to the Lord, unworried about making a good impression (Col. 3:12b, LB).

It means being willing to be God’s servants in the jobs where He has placed us, recognizing that even Christ was under authority to serve rather than to be served. We learned that our money, like our lives, was ours only because He gave it to us to use; consequently it was at His beck and call whenever He saw fit.

As a group learning how to live in this new way, we came to value what Jesus meant when He said, “Only those who throw away their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Good News will ever know what it means to really live” (Mark 8:35, LB).

Scene 6: March 16, 1979

(Three generations gathered around a book, reading one paragraph at a time: Dr. and Mrs. McGavran in their eighties and highly revered as missionary statesmen, Ralph and myself now in the middle years, and eight young people. The book was John R. Mott’s account of the early days of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, written in 1892.)

“Can we do it again?” This was the unspoken question on every heart.

“In 1807 four other students, praying for the world, said, ‘*We can do it if we will!*’ When they said that, there were no mission societies in America and only one or two in England. Almost all of Protestant mission work was still ahead of them.

“Today we have more than 600 mission agencies in America alone,” Ralph said. “We also have thousands, perhaps millions, of evangelical young people. Not all will catch the vision of the unreached frontiers, but Singapore alone has 600 Chinese young people now ready to go.”

“But look,” Brad insisted, “both in 1807 and in 1892 the students had a watchword. We’ve also got to have something that will challenge the hearts of our generation.”

“How about ‘*A Church for Every People by the Year 2000*’?” someone asked.

The air was electric. Never have I felt such a holy awe as I sensed that night.

Could we do it? Could *they* do it? Dr. McGavran’s life was mainly spent, ours perhaps well over. During the next twenty years the job of missions would have to be the responsibility of these young people and thousands more like them.

Others their age were absorbed with getting better paying jobs or with furnishing homes. Not these! They had caught a higher vision. Their hearts were caught up in the awe of knowing God’s hand on their shoulders.

Others their age in earlier times had also experienced this awe, this “expulsive power of a new affection” which dwarfed all lesser pursuits.

For Peter, fishing for mere fish lost its attraction.

The very proper young Wesley abandoned his high church connections for the field and mining camps because God’s hand was on him.

Carey, just a poor village cobbler, became history’s foremost missionary statesman, meddling in everything from education to commerce to law to Bible translation, all for the sake of the gospel.

Wilberforce poured his riches into legislation for the slaves. And the list goes on and on.

I’ve often wondered, given the chance, what Christ would have done with the rich young ruler—the only one about whom it is written, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21, NIV). But he ended up a rich unknown. Could he have become a Paul, a Luther, a Wesley?

But he was rich, and “the attractions of this world and the delights of wealth, and the search for success and lure of nice things came in and crowded out God’s message from his heart, so that no crop was produced” (Mark 4:19).

Principle Six: *The foundation of the simple lifestyle is “the expulsive power of a new affection.”*

It is this which dims worldly goals and makes money itself seem unimportant.

It is this love of Christ and His cause which makes life become real living.

It is this Henry Varley spoke of when he said, “The world has yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly committed to Him.”

It is this new affection that makes the simplest lifestyle really glorious!