



As we race from one activity to another,
always rushed, often late, and never
really satisfied, maybe it's time to stop,
take stock – and smell the roses.

Simplify
Your Life



Story by Sarah Scott
Photograph by Horst Herget

Nearly three years ago, Vicky Stikeman astonished her friends and family by quitting her high-flying advertising job. Her plan was to do nothing. Her friends were confused: Stikeman had no husband, no kids, no obvious reason for dropping out. At cocktail parties in Toronto, people would ask, What are you doing? Nothing, she'd reply. Looking for a job? No. Planning a trip? No. I don't understand! I know, she'd say.

"It was a difficult but interesting time in my life," says Stikeman, 40. "I'd go home and not know what to do." After all, she'd been brought up to be busy and, until she quit, she was. As vice-president of a prominent advertising firm, Stikeman rushed from meeting to meeting, too busy to pause for even a moment. It was fun, but exhilarating and draining. She'd go to bed exhausted.

So she quit, and decided to give herself time to think about what kind of life she really wanted. "It was like jumping into a rowboat with no oars," she recalls. "Space and emptiness make most people feel uncomfortable."

After travelling for six months, Stikeman realized that what she treasured the most were her friends and family, adventure and fun, and independence and control. So she rebuffed job offers and instead chose to be self-employed as a consultant. The independence allowed her to take lots of time off to visit a friend in Colombia, kayak in the Arctic, paint her house, cook and knit, and take a yoga class. "I have more time to appreciate what's around me instead of go-go-going all day," she says. "And I never imagined I could do as well financially in my own business as I did in my crazy job [working for someone else]."

While reinventing yourself as a consultant doesn't suit everyone, Stikeman's experience is a classic example of simplifying life. You decide what you value the most, and build your life around those core values. Then get rid of all the clutter that doesn't contribute to your goals – the extraneous stuff, which drags you down.

But first, of course, you have to consider what counts. "Before you can simplify your life you have to figure out what qualifies as a high-quality life," says Carmel, California-based Linda Breen Pierce, author of *Choosing Simplicity*. No time to think? "Go to bed 30 minutes earlier and wake up 30 minutes earlier," Linda advises. "Use that time for quiet reflection, sitting in solitude."

The idea of simplifying your life seems to contradict our consumer way of life. We accumulate more and more stuff to put in bigger and bigger houses. Per capita consumption in the U.S. has climbed 62 per cent since 1970 ▷

according to the Simple Living Network, a Washington-based Web site that aims to help people live simpler lives through resources and free community services. Canadians are consuming more, too. Two examples: the percentage of Canadian households with two cars was 34 per cent in 1999 as compared to 20 per cent in 1976. And the percentage of Canadian households with two or more colour TVs has shot up to 60 per cent today from less than one per cent 25 years ago. "The story of our consumer society tells us that the purpose of human existence is to find meaning, pleasure and identity through consumption," writes Manitoba psychotherapist Mark Burch in his book, *Stepping Lightly*. "In this story, the world exists for the sole purpose of satisfying human desires for things to consume."

It's not just a question of physical stuff, either. "People accumulate activities," says Toronto-based time management consultant Harold Taylor. We're becoming "activity pack rats; we feel guilty saying no. We can't say no. So we say yes and worry later." So in Busytown, whatever town we live in, we race from one activity to the next, always rushed, often late. It makes us feel needed, important, even wanted – but not necessarily satisfied.

Out of this sea of stuff and busyness has emerged a simplicity movement. Gurus of simplicity range from house-

wives, dishing out ordinary household tips, to students of Gandhi. "It means a singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within," wrote Richard Gregg, a student of Gandhi's teaching, in a 1936 edition of *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. It's an "avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose in life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions."

Consider the story of Victoria's Carolyn Thomas, 52. In 1995, she was working six days a week as the B.C. Lottery Corp. spokesperson, travelling around the province handing out seven-figure cheques to lucky winners who invariably thought the money would make them happy. She had an expensive house with an outstanding garden, where she loved to entertain. Yet the cost of her household expenses ate up most of her salary, and the pace of work gave her little time at home, where, as a single mother, Thomas lived with her teenage daughter and son in his early 20s. "I was like a hamster on a wheel, always working," she says.

Then she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and, while in treatment, she had an epiphany: she decided to sell her upscale house and use the money to pay outright for a modest townhouse, so she could live mortgage-free. She and the Lottery Corp. parted ways, and she took a ▷

four-day-a-week public relations job at the Salvation Army for less than half her former salary. It was quite a change: she replaced an expense account with free lunch at a soup kitchen. Her friends thought she was nuts. Yet the Salvation Army job was a real eye-opener: “I met people who had nothing [but] who were so happy,” she says. Three years later she took a job at a hospice in Victoria; now she works three days a week.

“Everyday I’m reminded how short life is, and that very few things are worth getting worked up about,” she says. On her days off she loves to garden at her little townhouse overlooking the sea: “I have cut flowers in the house 12 months a year. Isn’t that a nice goal to have?”

Simplicity can be a design principle, too. Karim Rashid, the celebrated Canadian designer based in New York, incorporates simplicity in his work. When he designs a chair or a garbage can, for example, he sets a single priority for the project, such as comfort or ease of production. Every other goal is secondary. “This creates something that tends to be minimal,” he says, such as his famous stackable Garbo garbage can. “There’s nothing superfluous, nothing you can take out without destroying the object.” His brand of simplicity also extends to the way he lives his life – he calls it addition through subtraction. “I have 30 pairs

of black socks and 30 pairs of white socks, so they can never get mixed. I’ve removed one thing to worry about in my life.” Or consider his serene apartment, an oasis of sensual minimalism. If someone gives him a vase, he gives one away. “Do a cri-

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tique on things in your life. Do they have meaning for you, have value for you, or bring heightened experience to your life? You can probably remove a lot from your environment,” he says. “You can have more by having less.”

Professional organizers will tell you the same thinking can be applied to spaces at home. Take Brenda Borenstein, who runs Organized Zone Inc., in Toronto. She helps people sort their stuff, put everything in its place and get rid of things that aren’t needed. She recently visited a family renovating their house, which included an pricey kitchen expansion. Borenstein carted extra furniture plus five bags of garbage out of the kitchen; now it’s roomy, the family can find everything, and they’ve ditched the kitchen reno plans.

All this sorting and purging is quite addictive, even fulfilling. But it’s only ▷

the housekeeping side of simplifying your life. You can also apply the same principles to what you do in a day. Taylor urges his clients to avoid over-scheduling themselves. "Schedule 25 to 30 per cent of the day," he says. "Otherwise you won't have time for [new] opportunities," like a delightful midday walk in the park or an unexpected but exciting assignment. "Time management is doing fewer things of greater importance, rather than doing more in less time."

Borenstein, for instance, has to think hard about her time because she's a 34-year-old single mother with two boys, aged five and six. "Sometimes you have to spend money to save money and make things work," she says. She spends \$50 every two weeks to farm out the family laundry, but saves on electricity and enjoys the precious time with her sons. And she got the dog the kids wanted. "He needs two walks a day, and it's a fun family activity," she says.

On the other hand, a dog can detract from family activities. Peggy Webber, a mental health therapist who's raising three daughters just outside of Toronto, got a golden Lab puppy three years ago because it "was the picture-book thing to do." Webber's husband is often away at work, so she's in charge of driving the girls to their after-school activities. "Then I'd be trying to get dinner and do homework, and here's the puppy-dog," she recalls. The dog needed more exercise and com-

panionship than what Webber had time to provide. "Finally I said, I can't do everything." So the family made the hard decision to give up the dog for adoption to open up more family time. Webber's bottom line is clear: "My children come before my dog!"

Ultimately, living simply is a philosophy of life. As Duane Elgin elegantly says in his book *Voluntary Simplicity*, "To live more simply is to unburden ourselves – to live more lightly, cleanly, aerodynamically. It is to establish a more direct, unpretentious, and unencumbered relationship with all aspects of our lives: the things we consume, the work we do, our relationships with others, our connections with nature and the cosmos." It is, he says, "a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich."

For some people that means growing your own food, recycling, working less and spending the extra time on spiritual development. It's a deliberate reduction of material possessions, a way of living that promotes what Mark Burch calls a "mindful, unhurried, intentional and appreciative approach to living;" the opposite of leaving one's mark on the world through the conventional goals of accumulating wealth and power.

You'll need time to think and play and reflect, but it's worth it. It could change your life!

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