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Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity

Catherine Whitmire
Sorin Books (July 2001)
Unknown $14.95 (192pp)
978-1-893732-28-5

“Plain Living is a spiritual journey of discovery, a path to be followed, not a goal to be achieved.” So begins this gentle guide to living life from the spiritual center. The author, a practicing Quaker, focuses on what seems to escape many who attempt to change their spiritual life: the firm commitment to the choice.

Whitmire, a Harvard Divinity School graduate and former executive director of family planning programs in Washington state, uses conscious choice as a starting point and follows a logical progression, based on her own personal experience, towards an authentic and simple lifestyle. She meditates upon the mundane practicalities in life-work, time, money, and resources-from the Quaker perspective of simplicity. Then she moves on to consider those aspects of life that no one wishes to encounter, but, inevitably does: fear, suffering, despair, death, and grief.

Keeping both the self and community in focus, Whitmire consistently iterates the simple Quaker truth that one’s conscious choice of simple living can effect a peaceful and harmonious change within oneself, which results in positive effects that ripple out into the community. Within each chapter are quotes from Quakers both famous and unfamiliar, past and present; the excerpts are relevant and thought-provoking, including many that exemplify the unique Quaker perspective on simplicity and an unfettered lifestyle. This pearl from George Fox, in 1663, founder of the Religious Society of Friends, advises, “Keep in all modesty and plainness - For they that follow those things, that the world’s spirit invents daily cannot be solid.”

Further, Whitmire has formulated what she calls “Queries” to be used as meditations, examinations of self, or prompts for spiritual journal keeping. The tone of this book is blessedly true to its subject matter: it is without frills, or trendy attempts towards quick-fix spirituality. Plain Living will aid readers in what is a path to be continuously followed, rather than an objective to be attained. In this way the book is a true user’s guide and a companion for the road for those who are commencing the journey to the simple life, or, as the author so aptly puts it, “the aim of the heart.”
(August 16, 2001)

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