

We don't need most of the things our culture tries to push off on us.

The Non-Essentials Of Life INDICATION OF LIFE

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, 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 an 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, 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 own \$500 million worth of neckties."

"But you wear them now, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes, but not for the usual reasons," he

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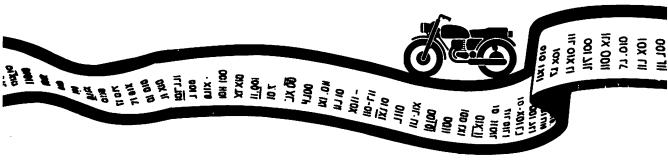
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Roberta Winter

answered. "I wear them to avoid scaring away the natives." He laughed as he motioned to some people sitting nearby.

At the time I didn't fully understand what he was saying. But gradually I realized that our convictions on how God wants us to live must be balanced by their effects on others. Does my lifestyle lead others to Christ, or is it a barrier keeping them from Him? As I came to understand, I was more able to enunciate what, for Ralph and me, has become a basic principle of life:

PRINCIPLE ONE: Our lifestyle must please the Lord. Yet in small matters, it shouldn't be so shockingly different from people around us that it makes our message unintelligible.

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 derived from a close walk with the Lord.

I was fascinated with those dreams. Some were just dreams. Others were becoming realities. Because of his efforts as a seminary student, 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. In his head were the ideas behind the recently-published Word Study Concordance and the Word Study New Testament.

I caught a glimpse that day of the excitement he felt in doing something creative for the Lord, something that would make a difference in spreading the Gospel. Any excitement I might have ever felt for new clothes and a beautiful home paled in com-

parison to his.

Much later, I learned that John Wesley had been caught up in this same kind of excitement. He 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

couldn't be bothered. When he died, he owned only two silver spoons, but he was known and loved in the smallest towns of England because of the light he had brought

brought.

During our first few years of 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 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 Ralph finished his dissertation, our first two children were born. Then I could neither nurse nor do library research. When Ralph returned to seminary, we had to make ends meet on what he earned as a student pastor and 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.)

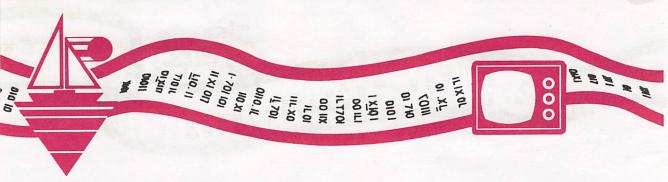
I was embarrassed. The truck carrying our belongings arrived dust-covered from the trip over the narrow dirt road. We collected our barrels and mattresses and gaspowered wringer washer — something we considered a "must" with our three small children. A crowd of curious onlookers surrounded us — and all our stuff!

Why do they stare? I wondered 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 had seen mattresses before, but of a different sort — bags stuffed with



straw that rustled and pricked with every move and soon became infested with vermin. He also kept eyeing the washing machine, obviously wondering what on earth that could be. Never in his life had he seen a machine like that.

What could I tell him? We had brought what seemed to be so little. Yet I knew that

Our geographic isolation doesn't reduce our obligation to people at a distance.

a month's salary for that young man wouldn't begin to buy a mattress. And I felt

I could have sold everything they considered luxurious. Then I could more quickly identify with them. But I knew that without those machines and little "luxuries," I would be tied to housework. These things could allow me to do in a hour what might otherwise take all day. Even hiring outside help would be luxurious in their eyes.

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

Nevertheless, I couldn't close my eyes to the dire poverty of these dear people. I couldn't 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?" (I 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 we did everything possible 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.

In those years I learned a new principle:

PRINCIPLE TWO: A simple lifestyle in the U.S. can still seem extravagant to most people in the world. In God's eyes, our geographic isolation does not reduce our obligation to people at a distance.

Scene 3: Fall 1961

(We had just returned on furlough after our first five years in Guatemala. Ralph and I stepped into an American drugstore to fill a prescription. I waited 20 minutes for the druggist, and came back to find Ralph standing near the cash register rather bemused, looking 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 a thing here I would take home even if they gave it to me.

He motioned toward 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?'

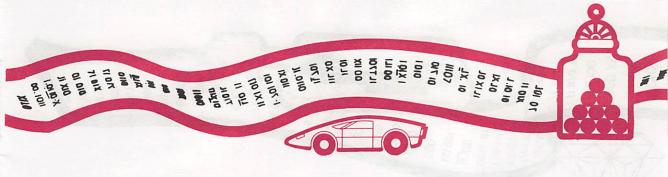
We're still not sure.

After Guatemala, American society seemed gorged and glutted with trivialities.

But our four young daughters were dazzled.
"Daddy, do we have enough money to buy...?" they would ask.
And Ralph would inevitably reply, "Of course we do. But do we want it?" A long discussion would follow, setting "things" in their proper perspective without making the their proper perspective without making the girls feel deprived and poor.

Furloughs were always a problem. From being the wealthiest people in our Guatemalan community, we became poor missionaries in the eyes of others. Yet our missionary salary, adjusted every year to our cost of living, had always seemed adequate.

On furloughs, it wasn't hard for us to live on our missionary salary, because we knew



we were home only temporarily. We weren't tempted to keep up with friends in the States. Back on the field, we would neither want nor need a stereo, television, or the

latest fad in kitchen appliances.

We never hesitated to buy something which would simplify our lives, giving us more time to spend on important things. But we determined what we wanted. We, not television ads or 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 need most of the things our culture tries to push off on us. Once we learn to resist social pressure, it is far easier to determine what we really want and need.

Scene 4: Winter 1968

(After our second furlough, we remained in the States because of pressing circumstances. Ralph became a professor in the recently-established School of World Mission, and we suddenly found ourselves in a different world. Ralph had to attend important functions and entertain visiting dignitaries.

Because they no longer needed a large home, my parents-in-law moved into an 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," she began. "Why don't you buy some new furniture? This heavy Spanish look is really out-of-date."

It caught me off-guard. The furniture looked much better than any we had ever owned. True, the sofa needed 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 we no longer notice

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

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not *force* us to buy it. Why can't we continue living as if we were still missionaries on furlough?"

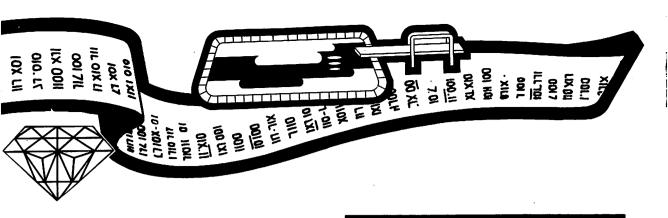
Let me state this idea a different way:

PRINCIPLE FOUR: There shouldn't 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 publishing house specializing in missions books, we were able to do it. That in turn encouraged us in a much greater venture — the U.S. Center for World Mission.

For years, a group of 120 people in Minneapolis have lived on only a portion of their group income, using the rest to support dozens of their members as missionaries. What would happen to this world if more evangelical Christians realized that God blessed them with money 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 didn't ask us to be "successes," but servants (Mark 10:44).



Scene 5: March 16, 1979

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

"Can we do it again?" That was the un-

spoken question on every heart.

In 1807, four students praying for the world said, "We can do it if we will!" Back then, there were no mission societies in America and only a couple in England. Almost all Protestant mission work lay ahead of them.

"Today we have more than 600 mission agencies in America alone," Ralph said. "We also have perhaps millions of evangelical young people. Not all will catch the vision of unreached frontiers, but many will. Singapore alone has 600 Chinese young

people ready to go."
"But look," Brad insisted, "both in 1807 and 1892 the students had a goal. We also need something that will challenge the

hearts of our generation."
"How about, 'A church for every people by the year 2000?" someone said.

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 20 years, missionary work would have to be the responsibility of these young people and thousands like them.

Many persons their age were absorbed in getting better-paying jobs and furnishing homes. Not these! They had caught a higher vision. Their hearts were caught up in the awe of feeling God's hand on their shoulders. In earlier times, others their age 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 at-

I've often wondered what **Christ could have** accomplished through the rich young ruler. Could he have become a Paul, Luther, or Wesley?

traction.

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

William Carey, a poor village cobbler, became history's foremost missionary statesman, meddling in everything from education to commerce to law to Bible translation.

Wilberforce poured his riches into legisla-

tion for the slaves.

And the list goes on. I've wondered what Christ could have accomplished through the rich young ruler the only one about whom it is written, "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21, NIV). Could he have become a Paul, a Luther, a Wesley? But the attractions of this world crowded out God's message. He ended up a rich unknown.

PRINCIPLE FIVE: The foundation of the simple lifestyle is "the expulsive power of a new affection."

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

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

It is this which 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 which makes the

simplest lifestyle truly glorious!

Ralph and Roberta Winter helped found the U.S. Center for World Mission, based in Pasadena, Calif.