When Simple Living Is No Simple Proposition

In a world where we're constantly connected, there are emerging counterculture movements, trends, and communities aiming to regain control over the chaos of modern living by returning back to basics. This piece is inspired by National Geographic Channel's Live Free or Die, a show that follows new pioneers on their journeys to reclaim simplicity.

With the world at our fingertips and only a click, tap, and push notification away, there still seems to be one thing that eludes our grasp: simplification. A new wave of wearable tech aims to minimize smartphone use and silence the clamoring of a thousand keyboards in cyberspace. Simultaneously, life hacks are springing up left and right, promising to help de-clutter everything from closets to spare time. Hundreds if not thousands of apps are designed to organize, sort, and streamline the barrage of everyday minutiae and tasks. Simple living, it seems, is no simple proposition.

To escape the deluge, there's a movement with alternative communities springing up to regain some measure of control over the hectic details of modern life. Some such movements, like the tiny house movement, involve a drastic change in lifestyle with the end goal of living life on one's own terms.

Ryan Mitchell, who runs the tiny house resource site TheTinyLife.com, sums up the movement, saying: "I want a life where I can optimize happiness in a context that is right for me." Others echo the sentiment, whether they're describing a passion for foraging for their own food or making a move from a cramped apartment to an idyllic homestead. This bid to declare independence from societal confines is inspired by everything from a calculated strategy for financial independence to a deep desire to discover what life is like beyond concrete and steel. Not all of these communities surrender all their ties to technology or their modern lifestyles, but they all have one thing in common: a need to get back to basics.

It's a small house after all

The tiny house movement is just what it sounds like: eschewing the breakfast nook and the guestroom and living in a smaller, simpler space. It goes beyond just tidying up: it's an all-out war against clutter and perceived excess.

Also called the small house movement, the motives for tiny living often include financial freedom, environmental sustainability, and self-sufficiency. Most tiny houses range from 120 to 500 square feet and frequently exchange the large foyer for an element of mobility; many are mounted on wheels so they can be towed to various locations. Sarah Susanka, an architect who is often credited as the originator of the movement, sums up the basic philosophy in her 1998 book *The Not So Big House*: "In fact, Not So Big is the very first step in sustainability. When the place where we live—both our house and our life—is right-sized for the way we really live and for the things that really matter to us, we are ourselves in balance."

Mitchell adds that, though tiny living will likely not become the norm, it's a good alternative for people looking to explore a lifestyle that's a better fit for what they want out of life.

"Over half of the world's population lives in cities, that is the trend," says Mitchell. "Tiny house's largest contribution will be to inform others of alternatives, to options, and hopefully spur critical thinking in their own lives for whatever is best for them."

Mitchell frames the movement as a sort of personal solution that can help people achieve certain goals, be it financial or otherwise.
“A tiny house is a tool to achieve what you most want in life, nothing more,” he says, adding, “It literally wins the financial rat race by not playing by the rules and making its own. When you move into a [tiny] house, your life's trajectory changes so drastically.”
Across the board, tiny living seems to be a personalized way of living. Many tiny house believers also tend toward the “do-it-yourself” ethos, often building their own custom small houses.

Making a house a homestead
Self-sufficiency seems to be a recurring motto for people who subscribe to life-simplification movements. Modern homesteading, for instance, also encourages do-it-yourself projects and getting in touch with the basics by learning essential skills that, in cities, are often outsourced.
Known by many names from micro-farming to insourcing, modern homesteading isn’t necessarily a movement. It’s more of a general philosophy of trying to take most if not all daily needs into your own hands, such as home improvement, raising livestock, and gardening.

Jill Winger, an author and blogger, runs The Prairie Homestead from her home in Cheyenne, Wyoming, providing tutorials for making homemade mulch, pickling vegetables, and raising livestock.
Winger writes, “In my opinion, homesteading is a mentality. A set of values. A skill set that includes the ability to sweat, work hard, get dirt under your fingernails, and appreciate the simpler things in life.”
People can opt in to this free-range lifestyle in urban as well as rural environments, with some city dwellers choosing to adopt a “lite” version of homesteading by growing their own vegetables and herbs. It all loops back to the fact that people are interested in independence and discovering—or rediscovering—all the things the natural world has to offer.

Forest to table
The natural world certainly has a lot to offer, especially for people who enjoy experimenting with food. Foraging is a way to explore the environment and cook with hyper-local ingredients. It’s one of those things that people have been doing for hundreds of years that recently became trendy in the restaurant world, in part due to the popularity of René Redzepi’s restaurant Noma. The two Michelin-starred restaurant is often cited as a fount of culinary creativity and innovation, all inspired by the forests and shores of its native Copenhagen, Denmark.
However, foraging is by no means a trend powered only by name brand appeal; many people are simply fascinated by the treasure trove of hidden and unknown plant life that surround us every day.
“I didn’t even know what the term ‘foraging’ was, I didn’t know what Noma was; all I knew was that I liked to find things that I could discover myself and be in touch with the place that I was living and the seasons and seeing how things change,” says Alan Bergo, the executive chef of the Salt Cellar in St. Paul, Minnesota. “Always, every year, I find different things that I’d never seen before."
Bergo also runs Forager Chef, a blog, recipe compendium, and collection of foraging how-to, where he encourages home cooks to try their hand at foraging. However, he also cautions amateur foragers to “do their homework” and learn how to prevent over-harvesting and how to identify what’s edible and what isn’t.

“Once you teach yourself how to identify something, you build a skill,” Bergo says, “and it becomes easier and it’s a greater reward than just having someone hand you something."

All of these movements contain some element of personal expression, whether it’s the pursuit of passion or a desire for freedom. What fuels the desire to go back to basics can be debated, but it’s clear that people are often exhilarated by the idea of the untouched and, in a way, pure.

Inside outsider art

A prime example of natural self-expression is outsider art, a term used to describe the creations of self-taught and amateur artists. Outsider art can intersect with folk art, which is often a distillation and expression of the rich cultural history of intergenerational communities.

Rebecca Alban Hoffberger, the director and founder of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, curates such work. The AVAM, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary, doesn’t use the term “outsider art” in its name, but nevertheless, features many artists from all walks of life.

"I think we tend to want to have these homey limited labels that we put on human beings,” Hoffberger says, “but the fact is, when you start to really see who some of these wonders are, they are an astonishment that speaks throughout the ages, they will transcend time, and they always have."

The AVAM showcases work by artists such as Hawkins Bolden and Eddy Mumma, as well as Rev. Howard Finster, a preacher turned artist and one of the better-known icons of outsider art. A trait they all share is the fact that they all created for the sake of creating.

“Of my most spiritual friends, the ones that move me the most are the ones that don’t watch themselves be spiritual. They just are,” says Hoffberger.

That seems to be the common goal of all the alternatives to the norm of modern living: returning to a more natural state of things.

There is an undeniable appeal to the idea of escaping the usual 21st century dependencies and finding a way to just exist. Though many people would be hard pressed to give up their everyday conveniences, there has been a steadily growing interest in reconnecting with nature. To see evidence of that, you need not look any further than popularity of buying organic and the trend of creating handcrafted, artisanal products. The paleo diet, which is purportedly modeled off of the diets of early humans, was the most Googled diet fad in 2013.

The desire to live freely can manifest itself in many ways but consistently stems from wanting to shed the unnecessary, extraneous, and unwanted aspects of modern life that people often take as a given. To Mitchell, it’s also a matter of contemplating what roadblocks are keeping people from experiencing their “best lives.”

“People are willing to buy a brand new car for $50,000 for a mid life crisis,” he says, “but they won't spend a day of introspection dissecting every part of their lives, admitting they are influenced by the world around them and being comfortable with disengaging from social constructs if they are barriers to your best life.”

BY STEPHANIE CHAN