

The simple life

Sustain Dane's classes support a less-is-more outlook

By Maureen A. Gerarden

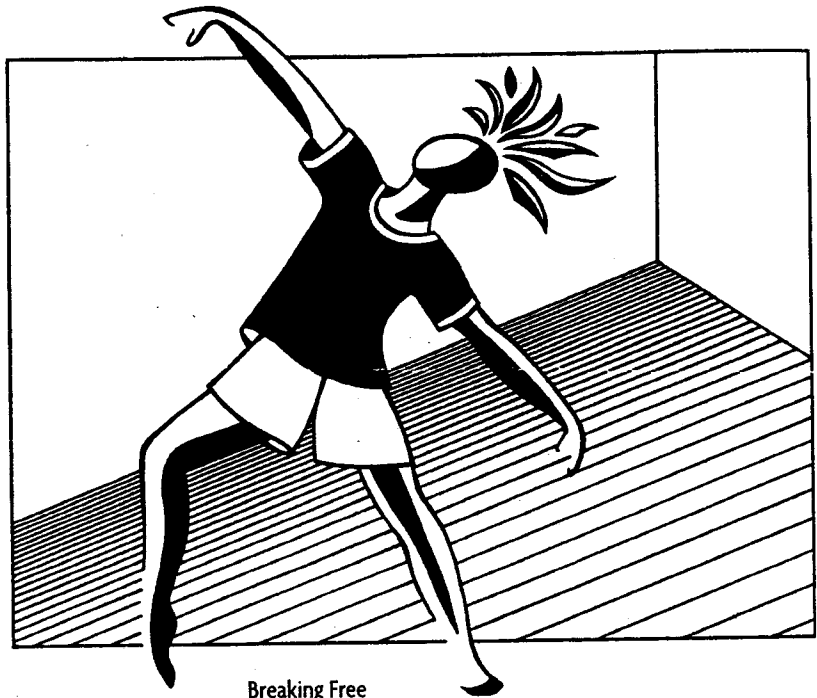
I'm sitting in a west-side living room, waiting for the course in voluntary simplicity sponsored by Sustain Dane to start. I sneak a look around the well-appointed surroundings, hoping that I don't stick out too much in my well-worn denim. But I needn't worry — everyone else here is pretty much like me, female, middle-aged and dressed down. The six of us are going to spend Sunday evenings together for the next seven weeks, discussing how to lead more authentic, less complicated lives.

As you could probably tell from my wardrobe, this topic isn't new to me. Voluntary simplicity — the belief that people can choose to own less, enjoy more, and reduce stress on themselves and the earth — has been important to me for about 10 years (although, thanks to recent economic upheavals, simplicity has sometimes been involuntary).

But I need a refresher. I've been edgy and irritable lately, feeling cut off and out of step. I want to get some support from my peers, because even in progressive Madison, it's tough to resist materialism on your own. Above all, I need to create more peace in my life and outlook.

Luckily, I don't have to move to a commune or a monastery to find it. Contrary to its popular image, simplicity isn't about escapism; it's about engagement. Sure, there were tales during the '90s of overachievers who made vast sums of money on Wall Street, but found their lives joyless. They cashed their substantial holdings and opted out, moving to a) a farm in New England b) a farm in the Midwest c) a farm in Provence d) a farm in Tuscany. There they found the simple life, got in touch with the earth, connected to a community, and wrote a book about it. But they were the exception, not the rule.

This isn't an option for most people, and we probably don't need anything that drastic. We just want to slow down, conserve our inner as well as our natural resources, spend more time with our loved ones, and turn down the static in the back of our brains. And Sustain Dane is here to help.



Breaking Free

There came a command to clear the clutter.
My space expanded, a dance demanded.

This course is one of a series created by the Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI) in Portland, Ore., and it has been taught nationwide in hundreds of faith and community centers, job sites and private homes since 1994. It works on the assumption that you can start from wherever you are and find a way to a happier, saner life by setting your own priorities and refusing to accept the demands of the mainstream culture. And if you still want to move out to that farm in the end, you'll have a good idea of where and why you're going.

The director of Sustain Dane, Bryant Moroder, is getting ready to start the session. He'll come to the first couple of gatherings to provide guidance and background information before letting us continue on our own. He outlines the structure of the meetings: a personal opening reading or statement on that week's topic by one of the participants, a "circle question" that each one answers to get the discussion going, plus a series of optional questions and tips on putting the insights into practice. Someone will volunteer to facilitate the discussion every week, so we don't go off

topic or leave anyone out.

We're invited to set goals for ourselves and track our progress. Some of mine: keep up my writing projects, scale down Christmas, get out of debt, eat organics, walk more, rely less on media and more on people for a sense of connection. Others want to protect their solitude, draw, have more down time, or offer different models to their kids from those they find on television.

As the weeks pass, we dutifully read the course manual, which provides several selections on the theme to discuss at each meeting ("Living More With Less," "Swimming Against the Tide," "How Much Is Enough?"). It includes contributions from various commentators, from Henry David Thoreau and Anne Morrow Lindbergh to modern gurus like Wendell Berry. Most of the pieces were written during the '90s boom, before the angst and uncertainty of the last five years (the dot-com bust, 9/11, the war in Iraq) changed our world. But the principles they illustrate don't really change; in fact, they seem more relevant now than ever. If life is precious, precarious and fleeting, we want to make the most

Myself
cosmos I know,
getting roots grow.

of it on our own terms.

There are no prescriptions in the guide, only suggestions about how we could transform our habits, challenge our assumptions and examine our life choices, none of which is easy. Is it possible to go car-free? (Answer: Not always.) Does e-mail bring people closer together, or distance them? Do religious communities like the Amish offer valuable alternative realities, or are they too repressive to emulate?

As we continue to talk, it becomes clear that we're all searching — for a new definition of the good life, time to use our creativity, or ways to honor our spirituality. The parents are trying to raise responsible, happy children while reducing the tension in their overpacked family lives. Some of us are outgoing; others are shy, but everyone has fascinating things to say and support to offer the others.

That support is crucial to successful follow-through. You wouldn't think the simple life would be hard to lead around here, where there is still a counterculture (well, on Madison's near east side, anyway). But there are plenty of people who think that if you avoid ads and "reality" TV, don't want a big car and a cell phone, or question the need for more technology, you're a hopeless Luddite or an insufferable snob. It helps to have companions in the effort to disregard these attitudes. As one participant, Sue Rosa, noted, "As a result of the readings and our discussions, I have come to feel at ease with a part of me that increasingly has felt at odds with so much of our society."

By the time we've reached the end of the course, the feeling in the group is intimate, personal. We've shared memories,



Quiet Kitchen

Primitive way to preserve peace, grinding, grating, contemplating.

experiences and beliefs in the kind of deep conversations we might have had as college students, if we'd known each other then. Now we're at the final get-together, a farewell potluck that celebrates and closes our circle. But as we sit around the table eating delicious vegetable stew, crunchy

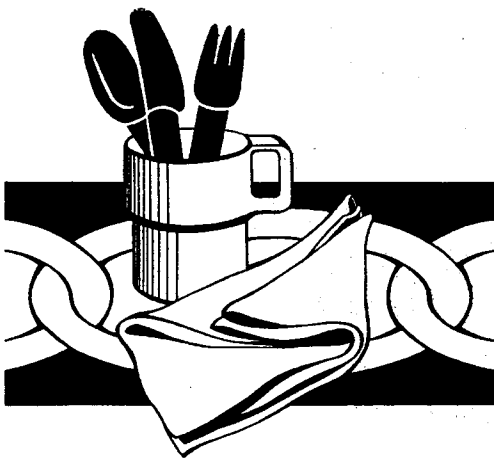
green salad and some not-very-simple desserts, we decide that we will meet again. This experience, and the genuine connection we've made, are too valuable to give up.

The class suggests lots of things you can do to make life healthier for yourself and the world: walk or bike; reduce, reuse and recycle; learn to enjoy silence; and refuse to take on more activities than you can handle. We all make our own decisions about the details. But it's really the big picture that's most important. Consciously choosing to shape your life is one the best ways I can think of to create a greater sense of well-being. I don't know if this movement will really help the planet, or if I'll reach all the goals I set myself. All I know is that since taking this course I feel stronger, more purposeful, more at home in my world. And I didn't even have to buy a farm. ♦

Class acts

The courses themselves are free; the course book costs \$20. For info, contact Bryant Moroder, bryant@sustaindane.org; 819-0689.

- ♦ Orchard Ridge Church of Christ
Tuesday, Feb. 1, 7 pm
- ♦ Atwood Community Center
Tuesday, Feb. 8, 7 pm



Communal Meal

Laid with stories, dreams, and laughter, our table links all who gather.

About the art: Elizabeth Ragsdale was a participant in the Sustain Dane voluntary simplicity class. These images and poems are part of her Celebrating Simplicity series, which can be viewed on her Web site, www.elizabethragsdale.com.



Organic bedding provides a restful sleep. Sheets, comforters, pillows, and more, all made in pure wool and organic cotton.



HOM
ENVIRONMENT



Meriter WomanCare Clinic

Women You Can Count On