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# SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

· A QUARTERLY, DIGITAL PUBLICATION FOR FAMILIES ·

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# A Letter from the Editor

*Elissa Joy Watts*

“Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

What springs to mind when you hear the words “outside the box”?

If “creativity” and “innovation” stand out first, you’re in good company. These are common and accurate associations. The trouble is, they don’t capture the complete picture.

Since immersing myself in the heartfelt stories you’re about to enjoy, I decided “resilience,” “discomfort,” and “courage” deserve a seat at the table too. You’ll soon see why.

We live in a world fond of metaphorical pre-assembled boxes. They’re convenient and orderly. They stack easily. Boxes are superb for sorting life into predictable finite compartments: educational paths, successful careers, healthy parenting styles, sound lifestyle choices, and so forth.

Unless you are the curious exception, you likely learned from a young age to play life safely, to color inside the lines, to stay securely confined in some sort of box.

For example, my charismatic and doe-eyed eight year old has already discovered it's easier to observe peers and blend in at the playground. To stand alone is to risk getting hurt. I can hear the voice inside her head. *You want down from the climbing wall? Shuffle over and wait your turn for the slide, sweetie. The jump might hurt, and what if you fall? What if the others laugh?*

The world pushes back. Remaining in a box—something safe and predictable—is the wide and accessible path of least resistance. Everyone else is on it, right? Picket Fence Parkway leads to Corner Office Crescent. Surely the destination is a happy one if everyone's killing time in gridlock traffic trying to get there.

Many of us move through our days as if focusing our complete attention on some navigation system barking orders from the dashboard. I often think of that hilarious scene from *The Office* where Michael steers his car directly into a lake. The GPS device can't be wrong, can it?

It's hysterical until we stop and realize how many people live their lives in a similar fashion. Instead of letting our imagination lead, or listening to our hearts and relying on our gut and good judgment, we



just do what we're told, directly or indirectly. "Head south five miles. Turn left in 30 years. Satisfaction is on the right."

This is not the way many of us learned to drive (anyway, those of us whose teenage years predated smartphones).

We learned to locate ourselves first. Next, we pinpointed our destination. We identified the clearest route and hit the gas.

We watched for signs and did our best to get it right. Inevitably, we'd miss a turn or sail past an exit. So what? We slammed on the brakes. We unfolded our trusty tattered maps. We found our own way, circled back, and tried again. We had what we needed to make it: inspiration, intuition, and a map.

If you're feeling a bit lost, or you're up for bucking convention and need a little push in a new direction, this issue is for you. You'll meet a mother raising two children within the freeing confines of a tiny home. You'll explore what it's like to move through life with no fixed address—for 22 years and counting. You'll see Paris through the eyes of an American expat and learn simple ways to take bold steps in redefining routine living. Most of all, you'll be inspired and armed with a map.

Happiness and fulfillment don't fit neatly into 20-inch cardboard cubes. There is no uniform way to get life right. Take courage, buckle

up, and get ready to bust out of the box in which you're taking shelter. You and I are destined for great things, and adventure awaits.

Let's do this. I call shotgun.

Elissa Joy Watts



# Why I Love Paris

*Joy Eggerichs Reed*



It's a funny thing when you're an American in Paris. You realize just *how much* Americans love Paris. And not just Americans, I might add.

For a fun rabbit trail, look up Paris Syndrome, which is a first-world psychological disorder that happens to some visitors who realize Paris isn't what they thought it would be. I won't get into all the details, but "debilitating hallucinations" is one of the symptoms. Call me heartless, but when I first learned about this syndrome, I laughed audibly, imagining someone in line for the Dior store to open and the smell of dog excrement, sirens blaring, and the chants of this week's protestors causing their knees to involuntarily buckle as they behold a mirage of their great-great aunt.

Well, protests, poo, and all, I really *do* love Paris. And as mentioned, so do many Americans.

When my husband, Matt, and I first shared that we were moving to Paris, I heard from people I hadn't talked to in literally 25 years. One person asked if we could host their kid (whom I had never met) for two weeks the following summer. I started feeling the debilitating symptoms of Paris Syndrome, and we hadn't even moved yet!

*Great Auntie Em, is that you?*

Matt and I got married later in life, and when we moved here five years ago, we were in year one of marriage. Since we didn't know how

long this adventure of living abroad would last, this felt like a really special time for building a pre-kid foundation to our relationship. We wanted to protect that, so, without even reading the book *Boundaries*, we knew we needed some ASAP. We created a template email to essentially say to people, “Can you come to Paris? Yes, of course! Here are some hotels that we’ve never actually stayed in but found by Googling.”

And then we rented a one-bedroom apartment.

Here’s the thing: people totally understood. And of course we wrote more than just hotel recommendations. We explained about being old-newlyweds and this being a really important time for our marriage as well as the fact that we wanted to immerse ourselves and become friends with the Frenchies. People not only told us they admired what we were doing but were affirming of our “year one” boundaries, and we all seemed reminded that there are seasons of prioritizing different relationships...and gentle ways of pointing people to Google.

So, why do I love Paris, besides the fact that I’ve learned how to avoid being a free Airbnb for your friend’s cousin’s dogsitter’s niece who is coming to Paris to “find herself” but oddly enough still needs a full-time chaperone?

## **Parisian Simplicity**

For a while, I didn't realize the depth of why I loved Paris, besides the obvious beautiful architecture, museums, trains to anywhere, and (despite global and scientific consensus that it is really bad for you) the way Parisians can effortlessly make smoking on a cafe terrace look so, so cool. Then one day my mother, who for a myriad of reasons has known me longer than anyone else, said, "You know why you love Paris, right?"

"Umm, croissants on the cheap?"

"No, you love Paris because it simplifies your life."

I flashed back to the two times I tried grabbing a package out of a postal worker's hands and yelling to a line of very quiet French people, "This country makes me crazy!" and then calmly said to my mother, "Go on."

"You don't have a car, you don't book a ton of social commitments, you work uninterrupted when most of your American clients are asleep, and your life is primarily your little family. It's simple."

She was right. Obviously there have been lots of cultural obstacles (aforementioned post office), the language that I have learned enough of to apologetically say in French how *terrible* my French is before busting out my incredible miming skills, and the new obstacles of navigating life with two toddlers and learning the cultural consensus for how to get your child in public day care.

If you're curious, getting your child into day care in France involves many things, and one is starting to solicit the town hall (in person, I might add, because somehow they've designed a system where you score more points for being relentlessly annoying) when you are still pregnant. After 16 times of solicitation, your child might get accepted. It took us from in vitro to our daughter's first birthday before we got in. She is now three and speaks flawless toddler French.

Our 19-month-old son has still not gotten accepted into day care, and we are debating whether I should pull out the big guns: chocolate chip cookies. French people *love* American cookies, and if I have to stoop to bribery so my son can partake in the chef-designed cuisine for toddlers, then so be it. You can have my Toll House secrets; just give my boy your foie gras and Béarnaise sauce.

This “simplicity” I'm grateful for doesn't mean we don't have plates spinning and feel crazy from time to time, but that was mostly in the early days of living here.

## **The Right to Rest**

We moved to Paris in 2017. I was confused in those early months because I was having the best time with my new husband, going to the Louvre like it was the grocery store, drinking jaw-dropping wine that cost the same as a Venti Starbucks Latte, and yet I was having insane daydreams about hypothetical situations (often me doing Jack

Bauer-esque barrel rolls) that had a .000648 percent chance of happening. I contacted my therapist from America, who could no longer see me since I was an ocean away, and she recommended I check out a book called *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. Or as it's better known, *Read in Public When You Want an Entire Park Bench to Yourself*.

I realized through that book that even good things in our life can be conscious or unconscious stressors. We can be happy about our new company, marriage, and home but still have too much stimuli and commitments to navigate that take a toll.

A quiz in the book had numbers associated with the level of stress a situation might cause. Death of a spouse being extremely high, moving homes somewhere in the middle, and going on vacation small but still something that can inadvertently cause stress.

The book said if you score under 150, then you are A-OK (not the technical term). If you score between 150 and 300, you may be suffering from chronic stress. And if you score over 300, it is “likely you are experiencing some detrimental effects of cumulative stress.” AKA, you are not A-OK.

My husband and I both took the test and got the following results:

Matt: 543



Joy: 752

Seeing that number—SEVEN-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY-TWO!—was a pivotal moment for me. For one thing, I realized that so many people move, change jobs, get married, or have kids because they hope it will bring them happiness, and often, many of those things do bring levels of temporary delight, but they also bring new stressors that feel debilitating. (Maybe I was too hard on the whole Paris Syndrome thing.)

At that time I decided on social media to unfollow many of my friends who owned their own businesses and were “hustling,” because I realized that if I compared myself, I’d end up staying inside, working all day, and not taking advantage of this really special opportunity of living abroad. I also realized that naming and seeing the different spinning plates on a piece of paper can help me breathe and either tackle the necessary or cut out the unnecessary. (Which ultimately proves to be a beneficial business move.)

France has been a helpful friend to this desire for work-life balance and simplicity that I see so many of us Americans longing to have.

I am a literary agent, and I often say that I don’t think French people are writing and reading books about rest, work rhythms, and self-care in the same way I see Americans devouring these types of books. They just live it and don’t associate guilt with taking time to enjoy life’s pleasures. If they were to make a health-related New Year’s

resolution, it might mean going to the gym a few times a week and reducing their baguette intake (sacrilegious in my opinion), but they do not function in extremes of crash diets, seven days a week at the gym, or dry January. And when they hear a colleague took a two-week vacation, it isn't met with "Must be nice!" It's expected and encouraged.

*But aren't the French lazy?* you might say.

Some are. But so are some Americans.

The French work, but they also know and value the living and enjoyment of one's life. In America we talk about desired company culture, whereas the much older French culture and *joie de vivre* is simply ingrained in companies.

One French friend, who had more paid time off than she could use, explained to me why having multiple vacations planned was so important, and I've never forgotten what she said. "When we know we are going on vacation, we work really hard to get all of our work done before we leave. When we come back, it's important that we have another vacation on the calendar so we have something to look forward to."

Sounds like a luxury only a Kardashian family member could afford, but here, it's not. I rarely see French people with the latest iPhone or having more than one TV in their home. While they might have a

Cartier watch passed down from their grandma, they appear to invest in experiences more than stuff.

The consensus in France is that people have the right to rest, and while the “you can do anything” American mentality fosters an entrepreneurial spirit that I love, it also means many of us are burned out because work-life balance doesn’t feel attainable or supported. A company might say we don’t have to work on the weekend, but in actuality, if we don’t, we know in the back of our heads we might not get the promotion.

Because of this *American* consensus, I see so many peers burned out and their marriage and families suffering. Add a pandemic on top of all that, and *fuggedaboutit*.

## **The Expat Dilemma**

*Wow, Joy. If you love France so much, why don't you marry it?*

Look, I love the life we have in France, but one thing that we are dealing with right now is the expat dilemma. Where is home? Where do we belong? Even if we live in France our whole life, identify with the culture, rhythms, and inability to stop talking about food, we will never be French. America is where we were born and is in our DNA. In addition to cheap Mexican food, it’s also where our loved ones reside. There are so many things we love about the home of the brave.

Americans will often contact us and say they want to live abroad and ask us what we think. We say, “Look, if you aren’t happy in Michigan, you won’t be happy in France.”

I am reminding myself of that sentiment as we contemplate the expat dilemma and wonder where we should raise our kids, geographically. The decision is starting to feel less simple than I like, so I’ve been trying to come back to the last line of the vows I said to Matt six years ago. “Until Heaven, you are my home.”

Whatever location we make home, we will always do our best to live out the values we found from moving to a culture that helped us simplify our life and so beautifully supported our vision for getting as much quality time on the books together as humanly possible in our first years of marriage.

*Je t’aime Paris.* (Except your post offices.)

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**Joy Eggerichs Reed** is the founder of Punchline Agency, a literary and speaking agency for people good on the page and stage. She has authored two books, *Get to the Publishing Punchline: A Fun (and Slightly Aggressive) 30 Day Guide to Get Your Book Ready for the World* and *Writing with Bernard the Baguette: A Kids Fun (and Silly) Guide to Discover the Joys of Writing*.

Joy resides as an expat in Paris, France, with her husband, Matt, and two petite bébés, Millie and Emerson. Collectively, their family consumes 34 percent of the country's croissant production.

# It's Not About the Tiny House

*Macy Miller*



I moved into my self-designed, self-built, 232-square-foot house 10 years ago. I had only a two-year plan to live in the tiny house...and yet I'm still there. And I'm not alone. Today my family of four calls it home. Happily. At least for now.

My tiny home is what I'm most known for. For me, though, it's never been about the house. From the beginning, the house was just a tool to give me the time to clarify and achieve a life I wanted to live. At that, I think I have been wildly successful!

### **A “Short-Term Plan”**

When I turned 22, I had sailed over every hurdle I was pointed at in order to have a “fulfilled life.” I earned a master's degree in architecture, then found a job working alongside people I loved on fun projects. I had a promising love life, a shiny new car, and a brand-new 2,700-square-foot house in an idyllic neighborhood, complete with granite counters and a literal picket fence.

It was a life designed to show others how successful I had been.

But I was unhappy, and life felt far from fulfilled. Days had become a series of motions to go through. I was spending money faster than I could make it to heat and cool rooms that held no purpose. I worked so much that I sacrificed my social life. I ate all my meals on a drive from this place to that one. My life was driven by other people's ideals.

As luck would have it, in 2008, I was presented with an opportunity to grow. All those accomplishments I had accrued crumbled dramatically in the recession. I lost my job, my husband, my house. Along with those painful truths went my self-esteem and my pride.

It was a big, dramatic moment to pause. It was torture. It was uncomfortable and embarrassing. Yet it was also liberating. From there, I got to choose how to go forward.

After sulking the appropriate amount of time, I pledged to grow on my own terms and blaze my own path. The problem was, I wasn't sure what I wanted. But I knew what I didn't want: financial pressure and showy picket fences. That was a start!

Housing was my biggest stressor. The market had changed dramatically in the time it took to buy and lose my home. The options once available to me just weren't anymore. Financing betrayed me and rent had doubled.

There had to be a better solution than working crazy hours to pay for a place I barely lived in because I was working so much to pay for it.

One night I had a dream that I lived in this little place that had everything I needed and nothing I didn't. It was such a compelling dream that I woke up and drew it on paper.



The thought consumed me for a week. It felt like a meaningful project, one that could offer me more solutions than problems. I thought it would be a challenge to live in such a small space, but it could at least save me money and buy me time to figure out what might be a more long-term plan. I said it out loud and brought it to fruition.

The plan was to take one year's worth of rent payments (approximately \$1,000 to \$1,200 per month), build this tiny house, and live in it for at least two years. That way there was a net gain in money saved.

I didn't get too complicated with the design. I wanted something simple enough that I, a single lady, could build by myself. That was my goal. My final budget came in under \$12,000.

I started to build—having no idea of how many changes I would go through and still benefit from tiny home living.

## **The Renewable Adventure**

Once I set my mind to it, I was determined that the tiny house was going to work for me, instead of me working all my hours for it. Eight months after moving in, I became debt free. My time was mine again and I could do anything. What a beautiful feeling! *That could have been the end of my tiny house journey, and I would have been happy. But it wasn't.*

About a year after I moved in, so did James. We had met about halfway through construction, and he began to help me. Our first dates were construction dates. You cannot avoid deep and meaningful conversations when literally building a home together.

Our relationship got more serious, and he wanted to find a better place in his life, too. He was able to rent out his house in bustling downtown Boise in order to cover his mortgage. I paid a tow driver \$100 to move my tiny house into the backyard. Not too long after that, our daughter was born. Shortly after her birth, James became debt free also! *That could have been the end of our tiny house journey, and we would have been happy. But it wasn't.*

With our new baby, we were pleasantly surprised that the tiny house was still working for us. Not only were we getting by, but we were thriving and loving all the time we got to spend together. That would not have been possible with a big house and mortgage to keep up. The tiny house allowed us time and space to bond. I look back and have zero regrets about missing precious moments with my kids.

We did take risks, but not the ones that sent us back to the standard path.

James decided to start his own company. We had such low overhead that we figured we could make it work however we needed to, but family would come first. James found much success in his new line of work, doing something that was fun and rewarding for him.

I accidentally found my passion too, helping people navigate the path to the life they are dreaming of.

We have built these passion projects to a level that is actually more lucrative than our office jobs were. The house offered us a safety net to try. *That could have been the end of our tiny house journey, and we would have been very happy. But it wasn't.*

We wanted two kids, and as soon as we thought about it, we seemed to be expecting our second, just 18 months younger than his sister. This, we thought, would be a challenge! Two babies with different nap schedules in a bitty space.

We were at a crossroad: do we uproot our happiness to make sure naps can happen, or can we get ahead of this issue and modify this situation? We modified the situation. We enclosed our back patio to make a kids' bedroom for another nap space. Problem solved: the kids had their own bedroom, and we would get to enjoy the first years of our son's life at the same level we were able to enjoy our daughter's. *We were so grateful for our tiny house!*

As time went on, we realized that the town we were in was growing. Things that used to be important to us about the city just weren't anymore. It was the same familiar feeling that started visiting me. *Is this where I need to be? Is this where I want to be?*

After some discussions, James and I came to the same conclusion: We don't know. Boise, Idaho, had been our hometown for our whole lives, but maybe there was somewhere more fitting for the people we had become. We let ourselves be curious. Without knowing the answers, we decided it was okay to explore those questions.

We bought an old travel trailer on Craigslist, rebuilt it (more fun date nights!), moved the tiny house to a storage yard for safekeeping, and then set off on a national park road trip for 13 months. Our secret mission: see if we felt more at home somewhere else. *We could have left the tiny behind then. It would have served several very good purposes, and we would have been happy. I did think about doing that, but we didn't.*

Our road trip adventure was amazing. We had to rely on each other and work together. We had to keep close eyes on the kids while working remotely and practicing clear communication. We found our parenting strengths and weaknesses together and supported each other with them. We simplified our daily experience to be about each other and beautiful places. We came to love and appreciate each other much more deeply. In total we visited 53 national parks (so far!) and we've traveled to 49 states. (We'll see you soon, Alaska!)

Our conclusion has been that "home" isn't a place. It has a lot more to do with a feeling. It's the people you love and contentment you feel. That can happen anywhere, or everywhere!

Perhaps *that* is the most important lesson our tiny home gave us. It gave us space from our debt, time to follow our passion, and room to be curious. It gives us strong family bonds and continually keeps us in tune with nature in the most comfortable of ways.

No joke, the *last* city we stopped in just called to us. After 40,000 miles, we drove into our new hometown. It was as beautiful as all the national parks. We literally looked at each other and said, “Wow, this is it.” Our clear path forward was to hitch up our rolling home, and put down roots. Here we sit, three years later, building our foundation for generations in that little house I dreamed up, many years ago.

Life has never felt so fulfilled!

### **Two More Years...**

For me, there was only ever a two-year plan to live in the tiny house. To this day, if you ask me how much longer we’re going to live tiny, the answer is “maybe two more years or so.” In reality, I have no idea. It still serves us well and we love it. It makes good financial and functional sense for us.

We’re tinkerers at heart, and I think we’ll always be playing with ideas about the space we call home. We’ll never get back into a standard-sized home, though. The juice isn’t worth the squeeze to us.

I'd like my kids to have their own bedrooms by teenage years. I want them to be old enough to help us design their space, swing some hammers, and experience the build as an engaging and educational process. But our eventual next house plans won't exceed 800 square feet.

Living tiny has been an easy choice we continue to make every day. While tiny homes are for anyone, they aren't for everyone, and that's okay. But, whatever your goals, a tiny house can spur a radical overhaul and make lasting changes in a life. We're proof of that.

We do have plans to build a small ground-bound house on our land, eventually. What's in store for the tiny house then? We're not sure. It's a part of our family story, though. Maybe it will become a source of rental income. Maybe the kids will want to live in it. My daughter seems convinced she's going to float it over to Hawaii when she's a grown-up to make her life.

Whatever happens, we'll be enthusiastic supporters of all the tiny journeys!

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**Macy Miller**—mother, teacher, and stubborn advocate of living little—designed and built her family's tiny home in 2011. Her now iconic tiny house has been featured in *Time* and *Dwell Magazine*. She's influenced countless tiny house enthusiasts around the world,

while lobbying for change in International Residential Code to allow for tiny living. Her family recently embraced life off grid, nestling their tiny house into the landscape of North Idaho, where they are thriving on a mountain aptly called Paradise.

# Flip the Switch

*Derek Baron*





Recently, I received an email from someone who had found my travel blog. In that email, and in blunt terms without any sort of greeting, he asked, “How will you survive when you retire since you’ve now spent 22 years as a bum?”

I smiled.

Ever since I started traveling, I’ve been called a bum, a vagabond, a loser, and homeless, among other fun terms. I’ve determined that such name-calling comes from those who don’t want to understand, or believe, that a life of travel is possible.

More specifically, they don’t want to believe that a person can travel the world nonstop for over two decades while still achieving the measures of success typically associated with a more stable life.

Why don’t they want to believe it? Maybe because doing so would be proof that our craziest goals in life—those goals that we tend to put aside and never chase—are actually possible.

## **My Expectation**

To be honest, when I made a promise to myself that I would “travel forever,” I also thought that such a life would involve major sacrifice.

I made that promise to myself back on December 31, 1999. At that time, there was no way to go online and learn how to be a digital

nomad or to learn about opportunities to travel and work around the world. So I assumed that if I was going to stick with my promise to live a life of travel, I would indeed need to embrace at least a half-vagabond existence. Scraping by with whatever odd jobs I could find in the countries I visited seemed quite likely. Living out of the cheapest dorm rooms in the cheapest hostels seemed like a guarantee.

I was headed toward a simple life, with the idea that the rewards I sought would arise from the unique experiences and interactions I would have every single day in unfamiliar lands around the globe.

This is why I didn't think I would actually travel forever. At the time, my 22-year-old self probably looked at "forever" as two, or perhaps three, years at the most. Again, I had almost no resources, no plan, and almost no money. If I were to live the life of a vagabond, I knew that probably wasn't the kind of life I would want to live for very long.

So, about my promise...

## **Switching to a Life of Travel**

Despite taking place 22 years ago, everything about that night remains as vivid as it did the following morning. It was one week into my first major solo international trip, and I found myself sitting on an ancient stone wall in the jungle of Cambodia. Before me stood the massive and mysterious Angkor Wat temple complex.

It was the Millennium celebration, and the sky was full of stars, the moat around the temple appeared to have an infinite depth, and the shadows of trees slowly swayed around me. Buddhist monks chanted in the distance while releasing hundreds of fiery peace lanterns into the air. Local families gathered, generously sharing food and drink, even with me, one of the few foreigners around. It was very dark, with only dim lights bouncing off the front of the temple, and it all made me feel as if there was nowhere else as remote as this spot.

I could not have been more excited. As I sipped from a plastic cup of homemade whiskey that a man next to me insisted I drink, I knew that I was in the midst of the most magical experience of my life.

Suddenly, it happened. And it wasn't the whiskey or the trance-like chanting that took control of me. In fact, it was with the clearest of minds that I was forced to face an intense moment of truth.

The best way I can describe this moment is that a switch appeared deep within me.

Without having to think, I knew its meaning. That switch, if flipped, would turn off my path toward a normal life back in the US—the path that led to a career as a sports agent, long days in an office, staying put in one place, and little personal travel. And that switch, if flipped, would turn me onto a new path.

My thinking was simple. If I had already enjoyed such life-changing moments in my first week of travel, imagine—just *imagine*—the endless stream of mind-blowing experiences I would have if I traveled forever.

I flipped the switch right then and there. I promised myself that I was forever going to live a life of travel.

## **Not a Bum**

Now 22 years have passed, and I have indeed traveled nonstop since that day in Cambodia. I've never spent more than a few months in the same location. I've been to 126 countries, with adventures and memories that proved far more brilliant than even I imagined back when I flipped that switch.

India, Peru, Romania, East Timor...Yemen, Taiwan, Kenya, Brazil...the Seychelles, Kiribati, Cyprus, Mauritius...Ireland, El Salvador, Albania, Malaysia... On and on I traveled.

Not only was I collecting what seemed like a lifetime of memories in every destination I visited, but I managed to do so without having to scrape by.

From teaching English in Thailand in those early days to working on cruise ships as a tour manager, I managed to begin earning a living and begin saving. From experimenting with affiliate marketing, to

making it as a travel blogger, to eventually starting my own tour company, life worked out, and it worked out well.

Not only did I manage to live outside the box as I crisscrossed the globe each year, but I managed to do so while earning money, building a business, saving for my future, taking care of my health, forming a community of friends, and staying close with my family at home.

It turns out that living outside the box does not translate to living life as a “bum” at all.

## **Nothing Extraordinary**

After all these years on the road, I’ve learned that achieving even our craziest goals is nothing extraordinary by any means. If we’re determined enough, we can achieve them. If we take advantage of the situations that come our way, we can achieve them.

As an example, when I was down to my last \$200, having just arrived in Chiang Mai, Thailand, back in February 2000, I had a decision to make. Option one was to simply give up, ask my parents to buy me a flight ticket home, laugh about my insane idea to travel forever, and get on with real life. Option two was to grind it out and find a way to succeed.

Naturally, I chose the second.

I spent some of my last money at a stationery shop, buying blank white paper, a black marker, and a roll of tape. Using those materials, I created posters advertising my services as a conversational English tutor for university students, and I hung those posters all around the local campus.

The phone started ringing soon after, and before long I was holding informal classes inside a local cafe almost every day. I didn't make a fortune, by any means, but I made progress, and that kept my dream alive.

As for taking advantage of what life presents us, every situation can prove to be beneficial. It's simply a matter of how we approach it.

When I worked on board cruise ships as a tour manager, I could have looked at my job as an opportunity to do the bare minimum amount of work, travel the world even more, and party hard in the crew bars as we sailed from port to port. Instead, I took the job seriously, gained valuable management, public speaking, and interpersonal skills, networked with passengers and fellow crew members, and had a blast in the process.

Eventually, when I decided that my time on the high seas was over, I left that stage of life in a far better position than when I began. The skills I learned and the people I connected with would eventually play a major role in making my future business endeavors, especially my current tour company, possible and successful.

Again, this is nothing extraordinary. I think you'll agree.

### **See Your Switch?**

Once we find the switch that will turn us off a path that does not fully appeal to our heart and turn us onto a path that exhilarates us to the core, there's only one thing left to do. Flip it.

When you do, don't let anything stop you.

You'll be astonished about where it leads.

...

**Derek Baron** has 22 years of non-stop global travel under his belt. He's been featured by publications such as Time Magazine and The New York Times and is frequently invited to speak at travel industry events and on podcasts. Aside from his successful travel blog, Wandering Earl, Derek also runs his popular small-group tour company, Wandering Earl Tours, which takes travelers on unique, locally focused trips to some of his favorite countries.

# Flirt with Failure

*Jessica Malone*





Ask me whether what I have done is my life.

—Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

The year is 2017. It's 7:00 am and my alarm is going off. I hear it, but I'm not conscious yet. As I wake, I find myself beginning to think about work, and as I gain consciousness, I start muttering, "No, no, no." It gets louder until I'm awake.

I wish that I could tell you this happened only once or twice. Before I decided to intentionally design my life, I would start my day this way about 85% of the time. My life felt like it was on repeat: work, TV, eat, work, sleep, work, TV, eat, work, sleep.

On the surface, I was "living the dream"—high-paying job, luxury living, latest and greatest gadgets, and growing retirement fund. And yet it didn't feel like success. I was living out someone else's dreams, and as a result, I was overwhelmed by the life I chose to create.

## **The Pull of the Corporate Life**

There was never a time in my corporate career when I felt like I was in the right place. Did I find better places? Yes. The right place? No. Nothing really felt right. Most of my corporate experience was a series of alarm bells spread between comforting successes as I climbed the corporate ladder.

My journey in corporate America started as a trainee for a global telecommunication company. When I started, I'd just completed my big chop—I'd cut off all my chemically straightened hair to grow out an afro. I had concerns about how I would be perceived, but I was hopeful that my natural state would be accepted.

Unfortunately, I worked under a supervisor who'd already succumbed to the silent pressure for women of color to show up as everything but. She stressed the importance of presenting a “proper package,” first impressions, and making others feel comfortable.

One day, she shouted from the end of the hallway, “So when are you gonna do something with your hair?”

After graduating from the training program, I would go on to my first sales role. There, I would cry on the way to work, in the bathroom at work, and on the way home. I was constantly calling my parents to tell them how badly I wanted to leave and how I hated working around the clock. I'd start work before 8:00 am, leave the office at 6:00, cry, eat, watch TV, go back to work at 8:00 pm, work till midnight, get up and do it again.

At the end of my first year on the job, I brought home more than \$55,000—more money than I'd ever seen or had at 22 years old. It felt like the kind of money that could distract from the red flags just a little bit longer.

I went on to be a top performer, and by 24, I was earning more than \$70,000. The success was as persistent as the anxiety.

While I was rising in the ranks, I was also carrying the emotional weight of every customer I supported who was pissed about how my company ran their business. I thought about leaving, but then I got the “opportunity” to be promoted.

In my next role, my new supervisor, who didn’t think I was prepared to be promoted, offered me a higher quota and larger customers without a raise in pay so I could “prove myself”—even though I’d just won an award for being a top seller in the company. Three months after “proving myself,” I received a promotion and she shared that I was “lucky” to be getting a raise at my age. I would go on to make nearly six figures and become a top performer again within just two years.

Sadly, in spite of my success, I was unhappy. I thought success was equivalent to persevering in spite of the attacks on my self-esteem and worth. I was wrong. My desire was to become an entrepreneur, but I told myself to ride it out in corporate. Despite the loudly ringing alarm bells, I stayed because I had bills to pay, I made good money, I thought it might get better, I feared I didn’t have the skills to do anything else, and I thought my parents would be disappointed. I thought living by default would be the easier choice, but it was the hardest path of all.

A lot of questions came up whenever I thought about leaving my job: What if I left and never regained my salary? What if I took the leap, only to end up back where I started? What if after crushing all my parents' hopes and dreams I never found success? I was so afraid of my perception of failure that I never considered those experiences could create my greatest success.

## **Exit Strategy**

It would be three more years before I made the leap and left my job. In that time, I explored minimalism, which encouraged me to find value in things other than my job title, income, and belongings.

Letting go of these external measures of success cleared a path for me to think deeply about the kind of life I desired to create. I wanted to be an entrepreneur, build multiple streams of income, work from anywhere, travel without asking for permission, and have the time and freedom to explore my hobbies. With that understanding, the dream was re-fueled and the exit strategy began.

Before leaving my job, I had to identify what it would take to feel comfortable enough to leave. I needed to:

1. Pay off all debt.
2. Identify a low-cost living solution.

3. Save at least two years' worth of living expenses.
4. Create a business model to sustain my income.

Through my journey, I paid off my car note, medical debt, and credit cards. Then I secured a low-cost living solution—moving in with my dad. While still working at a corporate job, I started launching ideas to transform my food blog into a business. For the first time in years, I felt like I had a purpose. During those three years, I funneled nearly all my attention and most of my finances into the pursuit of my vision.

The week I planned to put in my two weeks' notice, I got an offer for a sales trainer position that I hadn't even applied for. Accepting this position gave me the opportunity to work in a role that didn't link my worth to my ability to perform. It also allowed me to explore a strength I'd developed in my previous role—training. Coupled with the existing plan to move in with my father, this job allowed me to save even more cash and give more energy to the development of my business.

With less stress, more free time, and more money, I began to play. I created a new blog about minimalism and pursued my entrepreneurial desires by launching a live weekly video series on Instagram, a conference, and even digital guides to help others declutter their spaces. I also discovered a love for coaching as I supported trainees attempting to navigate corporate America. These

efforts would ultimately culminate into the basis for my brand: Nacho Average Fro.

## **A Successful Failure**

A year later, life was much better. I felt like I'd come close to true success—peace of mind, rest, and resources to pursue passion projects—but I still aspired to work purposefully and live independently. I called my boyfriend, who also had entrepreneurial desires and who shared my desire. Without hesitation, he agreed to join me.

So together we searched for low-cost/minimal living solutions. We watched videos and Netflix specials about living in a boat, on government land, in container homes, and in RV.

In the end, we discovered van life. It was a solution that wouldn't keep us strapped for cash and would keep our monthly expenses low. Not only that, but the maintenance, build, and driving would be simpler than our other choices.

In January 2020, with money, a business, a partner in crime, and passion all in tow, it was time to jump. The goal of our van life excursion was to reconnect with friends and family across the nation, build work-from-anywhere businesses, and do some adventuring along the way.

In our time on the road, we:

- Camped out in locations that looked like something out of a postcard.
- Exchanged home-cooked meals for showers and Wi-Fi.
- Watched race cars as they sped down mountains 14,000 feet high.
- Pulled in to drive-in movies and became the main attraction with our house on wheels.
- Explored caves and fearlessly floated through mountain gorges.
- Played endless amounts of Mario Kart with our friends.
- Set a table on fire while learning how to use a camping stove.
- Camped out in the forest and woke to the sounds of cows mooing as they passed by.

It was the experience of a lifetime that ended way too soon.

About six months into the journey, our van began to have mechanical issues that led to us put the adventure on pause. The trip that was supposed to last at least 12 months ended after just 6.

When we first got out of the van, I thought I had failed. I'd had a plan, but it didn't work out exactly as I'd hoped.

A year later, my perspective has changed. Taking the leap to leave my job and live out of a van in spite of the fear of disappointing others has been the greatest success of my life.

Van life taught me to differentiate between the lifestyle and the experience. To have a work-from-anywhere lifestyle, I don't need to live out of my vehicle. There are plenty of experiences that support that lifestyle. I could live in a container home or apartment and prioritize travel. I could bounce between Airbnb's. I could also rent another Sprinter van. Any one of these could be a viable option, and the only way to know is to try.

With this experience under my belt, I have some greater insights.

I used to be afraid to "fail." I used to think that taking the leap and falling flat on my face was the worst thing that could happen.

I was wrong.

The worst thing that could happen is to look up at the end of my life and realize the life I have lived was someone else's. To realize that the life I have lived was based on the expectations of others and my belief that I was obliged to uphold them. Knowing this doesn't make it easy to leap, but it does encourage me to make a different choice. After



taking a leap that hasn't gone according to plan, I recognize that the power of living by design is not the "craziness" of the lifestyle you choose but rather the comfort it creates with experimental thinking.

## The Answers to Your Questions

As the plans for a different life come together, questions will arise. Here are the answers to your most pressing questions: Yes, you will "fail." Yes, people are going to think what you're doing is weird. Yes, your idea sounds a little bit crazy. Yes, this will likely be the best decision you'll make with your life.

The only way you can truly fail is to not explore what you know you're capable of creating. You'll never gather the insights if you don't take the leap.

Take the leap, flirt with failure, and build something amazing.

...

**Jessica Malone** is the creator of Nacho Average Fro, a lifestyle design company that teaches current and aspiring business owners how to align their actions, commitments, and finances with the life they desire to lead. Using her FROmula methodology, her clients launch new business ventures, save 22.6% of their income, and recover an average of six hours per week within six months. While Jessica is a bit

of a nomad, when she's not traveling, you can find her at home in Dallas, Texas.

# The Buy-Nothing-for-a-Year Challenge

*Derek Bates*



When you think of a personal challenge to buy nothing for an entire year, the first thought that probably comes to your mind is “Wow, that’s extreme. I don’t think I could do it.”

That’s what I thought too. At least initially. I thought it was going to be too hard.

But the beauty in challenging yourself to do hard things is that you get out of your comfort zone, which usually results in personal growth. That is exactly what happened to us as my wife and I challenged ourselves to buy nothing for an entire year. Turns out, it was much easier than I thought, and it led to an even more positive life transformation than I could ever have imagined!

## **Inspiration for the Buy-Nothing Challenge**

Before discussing the details of our buy-nothing challenge, I first want to tell the story of how my wife and I were introduced to the concept of minimalism.

Our shift toward a more minimalist lifestyle was an intentional journey ever since we started dating. But it really got kickstarted into high gear shortly after we married. Having just moved to a brand-new home, we had the intention and desire to create a life together filled with purpose and joy, and void of distracting clutter and “stuff.”

We were fully immersed in the world of minimalism. One of our date nights was watching the *Minimalism* documentary on Netflix. My wife read Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and detailed to me everything she learned. We listened to podcasts. I read blogs like *Becoming Minimalist* and *Zen Habits*. I even created my own blog, with minimalism being one of its core tenets.

But the true inspiration for this specific challenge was a fellow physician blogger named The Happy Philosopher. In early 2018, he had written a blog post announcing his experiment to buy nothing for one year. It seemed like a fun challenge. Right after reading the article, I told my wife about the challenge, and she thought it was a terrific idea. Being even more minimalist at heart than I, she was totally on board.

## **The Parameters of the Buy-Nothing Challenge**

Realizing that it would be impossible to buy absolutely nothing for one year, we adapted some rules and parameters to follow:

- The first rule is to buy no “stuff,” which is loosely defined as permanent durable goods that are not necessary to life.
- Anything consumable or related to hygiene or household products is okay. Items in this category would include things like food (absolutely necessary of course!), toilet paper, toothpaste, soap, and so on.

- Maintain or repair what we already own.
- Replacements for necessary items are fine. This would include things like a refrigerator that is beyond repair.
- Purchases involving “experiences” are allowed. Examples include travel, shows, and other forms of non-material entertainment that bring happiness and value.
- Virtual stuff can be okay if it adds value. Think audiobooks, online courses, and related items.
- Gifting is okay, but limited to only “experience” gifts, like a cooking class, vacation, and so forth.
- Borrowing is allowed. We can ask friends, family, or local communities, such as the Buy Nothing Project Facebook group, to borrow things that we temporarily need.
- Renting is also allowed. This would include things like renting a dress from Rent the Runway if there is a special occasion to dress up for.

## **What We Hoped to Achieve**

Buying nothing for the entire year is an incredible undertaking. Therefore, we needed a greater purpose behind the challenge and a powerful “why” to keep us motivated.

Sure, we wanted to save more money and not accumulate more “stuff.” However, our primary motivation was to consume more consciously and enrich our lives by living more deliberately, intentionally, and with purpose.

Additionally, we hoped to better the world and the environment by inspiring others to be more mindful, live more simply, contribute to a more circular economy, realize the benefits of minimalism, be less wasteful, and consume more consciously.

## **Overcoming our Biggest Challenges**

2018 was a huge year for us.

Not only did we decide to participate in the buy-nothing challenge, but we were also bringing a new baby to the world. This led to a whole slew of challenges. Do we buy baby “stuff”? Does my wife buy maternity clothes? Fortunately for us, we were able to borrow a lot of baby-related and maternity-related items from friends, family, and the share economy.

A few of my coworkers were more than willing to offload some of their old baby clothes. My wife’s co-worker and friends let her borrow

some maternity dresses. And utilizing the share economy through the Buy Nothing Project's Facebook group, Nextdoor, and other local online communities was extremely helpful in allowing us to borrow necessary items without buying them.

Invariably, there are some things that you just need to buy. Like a new bed, for instance.

Some things we needed to buy ended up breaking the rules and parameters of the challenge. Therefore, we developed a mental framework to justify buying the things we needed or absolutely wanted.

### **Our Framework for Buying Things**

To justify a purchase, the item must be a “yes” in all the following questions:

1. Can we afford it?
2. Do we need it?
3. Will it add sustained value, happiness, and positivity in our life?
4. Does it positively impact our health?
5. Will it subtract any negativity in our life?



6. Do we have space for it (both physically and mentally) in our life?
7. Can we see ourselves using it for an extended period?
8. Is it made well and of good quality?
9. Do I feel comfortable supporting the company that produces it?
10. Is it fair trade and environmentally friendly?

Ever since this challenge, we have implemented this framework for every purchase, and it has allowed us to be more conscious consumers.

## **The Results of the Challenge**

Overall, I consider our buy-nothing challenge a great success.

While we didn't truly buy nothing, every purchase we made was done so mindfully. As a result, everything we bought that year (and from then on) is now cherished and serves a purpose in our life. A few items that come to mind are our bed, mattress, and bedding, which not only checked all the boxes in our framework for buying things, but also fulfilled our priority of purchasing items that are organic, environmentally friendly, and free of toxic chemicals such as flame retardants, stains, and other chemicals that emit hazardous volatile

organic compounds. My wife and I sleep so well in our bed, and I consider it one of our best investments ever!

After completing the challenge, we felt a great sense of accomplishment and growth. We achieved our goal of becoming more conscious with our consumption and we live more mindfully with intention and purpose.

But there were a few other benefits that we didn't necessarily expect.

### **Building Momentum with Other Good Habits**

Taking on the challenge to buy nothing requires discipline. Exercising our self-discipline muscles through this challenge has spilled over to other aspects of our life and has helped us build momentum with other good habits.

That same year, I decided to challenge myself to run every morning, be more disciplined with my diet, and save even more money.

Armed with the discipline and power to buy nothing, every other goal, task, and habit didn't seem quite as hard or daunting. Simply put, having the ability to buy nothing makes other aspects of life easier.

### *Cultivating a Sense of Gratitude*

Making an intentional effort to be mindful about every purchase, and conscious about every item you bring into your life, cultivates a tremendous sense of gratitude. Having less clutter allows a greater appreciation for the things we already have.

Not only does buying nothing free our physical space from clutter, but also it frees our mental space. This gives us more mental energy to feel even more grateful for *everything*, not just the material things.

### *Making Better Decisions*

A year of buying nothing also has helped us make better decisions.

What happens in our life is often a direct consequence of the decisions we make. Our decision-making power is important, and there are scientific studies that show it is a depletable resource. Decision fatigue is a real thing.

Since buying “stuff” simply isn’t an option, choosing to buy nothing significantly reduces the number of decisions we make. For the items that we absolutely needed to buy, our framework for buying things helps us make better, more conscious decisions.

Reducing decision fatigue allows more mental focus to make better decisions.

### *Creating an Abundance Mindset*

While a buy-nothing year would seem like a miserable year of deprivation, it really is not.

In fact, my wife and I both agree that it has created more of an abundance mindset. Choosing not to buy anything makes you better appreciate the things that you have and gives you a sense that you already have everything that you need and that you have “enough.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the scarcity mindset, in which you feel like you never have enough.

Creating an abundance mindset can lead to endless possibilities and boundless growth!

## **Helpful Tips**

If you are thinking about participating in a buy-nothing-for-a-year challenge, here are some helpful tips:

- Make it fun! Get excited about it and turn it into a fun challenge.
- Know your “why.” For example, we wanted to better our life and the world around us. Having a deeper sense of purpose gives you more motivation to succeed.

- Have an accountability partner. I was fortunate to have a spouse who was totally onboard right from the start.
- Find a like-minded community. Join a Buy Nothing Project group. I also followed and interacted with fellow minimalist bloggers who helped me along my journey.
- Have a helpful framework and track your progress. Whether it is a blog or a simple written journal, reflecting on your progress will show how far you've come.
- Don't be too hard on yourself and don't feel guilty if you end up buying a few things that may not have been necessary. Enjoy the challenge, cherish the purchases that you do make, and always remember to practice self-compassion.
- Reward yourself! For example, maybe use some of the money you saved at the end of the year to go on a nice trip. Having something to look forward at the end will make the journey even more enjoyable.

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**Derek Bates** is a physician, husband, and father. He resides in San Diego, California, and is passionate about physical, mental,

emotional, and financial health. You can find him on his blog, Dr. McFrugal, and as @DrMcFrugal on both Twitter and Instagram.

# How Reducing Your Waste Can Bring Joy to Your Life

*Tara McKenna*



Quite a few years ago, before the issue of plastic in our oceans became a hot topic in mainstream media, I was in Bali, Indonesia, for a family vacation. Bali had been on my bucket list for *so long*. I envisioned snorkeling among the colorful corals and exotic fishes, basking in the sunshine with sand between my toes, and lounging underneath palm trees. I was ready to experience pure bliss.

After months of planning, I was finally there! Bali was just as stunning as I had imagined, and even more breathtaking than the photos I saw online. During the drive to our resort, we went by rows of rice paddies, volcanoes in the distance, and endless sandy beaches. It was absolute perfection.

Until it wasn't.

While litter wasn't a new issue to me, I was ill prepared for the amount of trash that I stumbled upon in Bali. As soon as I popped on my mask and snorkel and jumped into the Indian Ocean, I was devastated. Garbage swayed with the current back and forth among the corals and fish. It felt like time froze in that moment; I felt lifeless as I floated and stared down into the water, witnessing how humans had betrayed the natural world. It didn't seem fair. In that same moment, I decided that something needed to change.

## **Going Zero Waste**



A few years later, I discovered the zero-waste lifestyle movement. It seemed like the ideal solution to combat issues such as plastic in our ocean. If we don't create trash in the first place, then it won't make its way into our oceans. How perfect! I eagerly jumped on board, taking my husband with me on this wild ride to reduce our trash as close to zero waste as possible. We were about to save the world!

While it wasn't an overnight process, I went all in on this shiny new lifestyle. I had my zero-waste kit ready, equipped with everything I thought I might need to refuse single-use plastics. No trash would come my way with this amount of preparation!

About half a year into zero-waste living, I started to discover hidden bags of chips and packages of cookies, either in kitchen cupboards that didn't store food or behind the passenger seat of my husband's car (obviously intended to be out of my eyesight). At that point we bought most of our groceries package-free and had stopped buying some packaged foods altogether. The thing is, I never told my hubby that he couldn't have chips or cookies! He must have been feeling deprived of his favorite snacks. My husband hid the evidence because he knew how passionate I was about our new journey, and he didn't want to let me down.

Clearly, I had reached a tipping point where the sustainable lifestyle I was trying to achieve wasn't maintainable. Not for my household, anyway.

I've since come to terms with the fact that reducing my waste doesn't have to be perfect. I don't have to aim to minimize a year's worth of household trash to fit into a mason jar—as seen on social media—and neither do you. Instead, zero- or low-waste living is about reducing your waste in the context of your preferences, circumstances, and budget. For me, having a more relaxed approach toward this lifestyle has resulted in a more enjoyable experience.

The lifestyle isn't simply a matter of refusing plastic straws, though. Going zero waste is about so much more! I love it because it has motivated me to curate a more sustainable and ethical closet with fewer pieces, support eco-friendly businesses, eat local when possible, detoxify my home, repair broken possessions, participate in the sharing economy (ranging from Buy Nothing groups to Airbnb), choose quality over quantity, and so forth.

As an outcome of this lifestyle, I enjoy benefits like these:

- Saving money (I shop less and buy better).
- Eating healthier (package-free food is typically unprocessed, whole food).
- Making new friends with similar interests (online and in real life).

- Having a tidier home (I removed the excess, and continue to reduce the inflow).
- Living in the moment (because I'm free to focus).
- Defining the life I want to live (no longer trying to keep up with the Joneses).
- Funding environmental causes that are important to me (because I'm saving money).
- Inspiring others to join in. (I wrote a book—*Don't Be Trashy!*)
- Knowing that I did *something* (for future generations on this planet).

How would you like to get in on these benefits too? Living with less waste is an opportunity to live lighter on this planet, while bringing joy to your life at the same time.

## **Tips for Your Low-Waste Journey**

Zero-waste living goes against the grain. We live in a convenience-based and disposable society where we are told that we should want more and want it *now* (hello, credit card debt!). In contrast, zero-waste living is about slowing down and living with less. Less packaging. Less consumption. Less waste. Less haste.

What we find when we start living with less waste is an intentional and simplified life filled with more joy. We can choose to get off the hedonic treadmill of excess and define the future that we want for ourselves.

Reducing your waste, one step at a time, may just be what you need to live your best life. I know that has been the case for me. Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Conduct a trash audit.

A trash audit can provide a detailed snapshot of your personal consumption. This assessment is a way to track and analyze your trash (garbage, recycling, compost) over a specific period of time to determine what type of waste you're creating and how much. The point of this activity is to create goals to reduce your waste based on the information you collect.

Here's the lowdown:

- Commit to a specific period of time (I recommend one month).
- Learn your waste management system. It may surprise you that some items you toss into your recycling bin probably can't be recycled.

- If you weren't sorting your waste properly before this audit, now is the time to start.
- Develop a tracking system (a spreadsheet works well) and label applicable waste streams at the top of each column (e.g., garbage, recycling, compost, hazardous waste, and so on).
- Start tracking! List each item into your tracking system as you toss it.
- At the end of your trash audit, assess your waste by reviewing the trends you find in your spreadsheet and create goals to reduce it.
- If you don't have access to municipal composting, find other ways you can compost at home or in your community. It will significantly reduce the waste you send to landfill.

You may notice, based on your trash audit, that you throw out a lot of plastic produce bags from your grocery shopping trips. Perhaps you already knew that, but now you have numerical evidence that you toss *a lot* of these bags out each week. A simple goal would be to use lightweight reusable produce bags instead.

Similarly, you might discover that you have a significant online shopping habit, by tallying the number of cardboard boxes and shipping bags you toss each week. This will give you the opportunity

to set a goal to limit your online shopping. You may even become inspired to give up shopping for unnecessary items completely for a certain length of time (known as a no-buy month or year).

Your trash can be revealing. Let it inform your less wasteful path forward!

## 2. Create a zero-waste kit.

A zero-waste kit is probably the most iconic part of the lifestyle, with items like stainless steel straws, bamboo cutlery, and an organic cotton tote bag. These flashy items are helpful to reduce your waste on the go, but they don't have to be fancy. Using what you already have at home will save money and waste.

Here are some reusable items you can include your kit:

- Water bottle
- Travel mug
- Tote bags
- Produce bags
- Straw
- Napkin

- Handkerchief
- Utensils
- Food containers

### 3. Declutter and reduce the inflow.

Decluttering your home in the context of reducing your waste gives you the chance to start fresh while providing you with an opportunity to examine your past consumption. It may seem counterintuitive, and perhaps wasteful, to work toward a zero-waste lifestyle *and* declutter your home. However, there's nothing wasteful about removing stuff from your home that's sitting unused, unwanted, and unloved. Passing those items along to other people who need them and will use them is much better!

As you sort and remove items from your home, consider why you made those past purchases and evaluate whether you want to continue making similar purchases. Chances are, you'll realize that you don't need to buy so much makeup, or discover that you have a habit of buying blankets and you don't need to add another one, or decide that you can stop collecting new mugs. No shade if you love pottery! But how many mugs does one household need? (I may be speaking from experience here).

Reduce the inflow of new things into your home and you'll reduce your waste. It's that easy! After all, every single item in your home required the extraction of resources, manufacturing, packaging, and shipping to make it into your home.

## **Define Your Life with Less Waste and More Joy**

I was a teenager when the TV show *Sex and the City* was popular, and I desperately desired to have Carrie Bradshaw's closet. Yet stilettos and runway fashion are far from practical where I live, in a small-ish city outside of Toronto, Canada.

The funny thing is, as I write this, I'm now watching the new chapter of the TV show, *And Just Like That*, and I'm still oohing and aahing over Carrie Bradshaw's style. Just as I start to envision myself *again* with such beautiful clothes, I remember that I don't have a need for extravagant fashion.

The problem with trying to keep up with the Joneses (whether they're your neighbors, social media influencers, or Carrie Bradshaw) is that we are not defining our lives for ourselves.

Zero-waste living implores us to define what we want out of our own lives and to get off the treadmill of consumption and our throw-away culture and step into waste-free(ish) simplicity. This lifestyle is a journey, not a destination. With each new season of life, we get to ask



ourselves what we want. Equipped with this new strategy, we get to keep coming back to a life with less waste and more joy.

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**Tara McKenna** is the author of *Don't Be Trashy: A Practical Guide to Living with Less Waste and More Joy* and created The Zero Waste Collective lifestyle blog and community to inspire people from all walks of life to live with less waste. Tara has a master's degree in urban and regional planning and lives with her family in Guelph, Canada.

# World Schooling Any Parent Can Do

*Erin Austen Abbott*



The earth is what we all have in common.

—Wendell Berry

When I started college, I had no idea what I wanted to major in. I bounced from child psychology to journalism to communications, finally landing on education. It was something that I was passionate about, but not in the traditional sense. I didn't want to have my own classroom but instead wanted the world to be my classroom. My dream at twenty years old was to have a family hire me to homeschool their children as we traveled the world.

I imagined building a curriculum based on our new location at that moment. Such as studying World War II while in Germany, learning art history from touring an artist's home in Mexico City, or simply doing math and reading while joining a kids' cooking class in France. The ideas were endless, and my mind was overwhelmed with the possibilities.

These thoughts were in 1996, and the term *world schooling* had not yet been coined for those in the education field. I was onto something I didn't know would later become a worldwide lifestyle and educational practice.

If you aren't familiar with the term, world schooling (aka *road schooling*, aka *travel schooling*) is an educational movement. It views the world as your classroom to educate your children, taking place

wherever you are, turning your surroundings into your lesson plan for the day.

World schooling can be a fully immersive approach to learning, or it can be a mindset you carry with you daily as you teach your children. As a mindset, it's not just for the rich and not just for those who have the time to pack up and go.

The world is all around us, from home and beyond. It's up to us what we do with that time and how we channel our energy for our children's learning to try to make the most significant impact on our own families.

I don't think there is a right way or a wrong way to world-school your children, as long as you embrace the learning experiences you have around you. Look for simple ways to teach your children. What might feel fundamental to you might just be opening up a door of wonder for your child.

That's what I've found to be true, over and over.

## **My Circuitous Journey into World Schooling**

I got my BS in early childhood education and moved on to graduate school. While attending grad school in Seattle, I studied photography and worked at a Montessori school. I loved teaching the children alternative forms of education, but I didn't feel settled just yet.

Three years later, I got a call to tour with a band, selling their t-shirts, albums, and such. To sell their “merch.” All my dreams of education on the road would take a back seat while I taught myself about life on the road.

For the next eight years, I toured, zigzagging across the United States and Europe for nine months a year. The travel provided many new experiences. Slowly, however, I forgot to take advantage of the adventure I was on.

Finally, I knew I needed to make a change. I stumbled into precisely the change for which I was looking.

After a show one night, I met a band made up of a husband and wife. They had a small daughter and another on the way and were looking for a nanny to take on tour with them. I didn’t know they were interviewing me while we hung out, freely chatting. A friend had told them all about me and suggested that we meet. I was hired soon after and flew out to live with them for a month.

That job led to many other travel nanny jobs that would take me around the world. And it led me to the beautiful life I now try to give to my son with every single adventure that we head out on.

## **How to Make World Schooling Work from Anywhere**

World school is subjective. Everyone's situation is different. You might not be able to pack up and go for months at a time. So, how do you know when packing up and traveling full time is right for your family? You can incorporate learning into family adventures and find new experiences all around you, even from home.

The world-schooling mindset can relate to a long weekend or to years. There's no right or wrong way to incorporate this into your child's education, as long as your child is challenged to think outside of the box while learning about culture, design, food, music, nature, art, and so on.

We as parents are always looking for new, educational experiences to bring to our child's learning. That might sound exhausting, to always be thinking of learning experiences, but once you start, you begin to see that education is literally in everything we do, without even trying. You can turn a visit to the beach, walking in the woods, shopping at the grocery store, or even waiting at a red light into a learning experience.

There is learning in the quiet, the noise, and the new. Don't overthink it, and let these lessons happen naturally. It's learning from where you are in the world, wherever that place is.

If you are a family that plans to take up the world-schooling lifestyle, you need to ask yourself three things before packing up and hitting the road: Is this travel lifestyle my dream for myself or my children?

What experiences do I hope to gain from this new lifestyle? Finally, is my family made to travel all the time, both mentally and physically? Everything else can fall into place after those questions are answered.

Planning is key to a flourishing world-schooling adventure. Before you set out, do your research. Know ahead of time what educational opportunities you might be hoping to find.

A lot of educational experiences come from the conversations you have with your child and the questions you both ask in the moment. Let their interests help guide your journey as well. No matter the location or how long you are there, you can find learning all around you.

In a city...

- Wander through a farmer's market and look for a fruit or vegetable that you or your child have never tried. Talk with your child about what's in season and grown regionally. Talk with the farmers you meet and encourage your child to ask them some questions regarding their farm or garden. Try to spot the new-to-you item on a menu or in recipes once you are back home. Look for city gardens.

- Find public works of art and street murals. Talk about the artist who created each piece, asking your child questions that allow them to jump into a conversation.
- Look for street musicians.
- Take a city bus for a mini sightseeing tour, explaining navigation and maps to your child along the way. Give them a disposable camera to snap images of things they see out of the window. They can then paste the photos into their travel journal.

When in a rural setting...

- Go bird watching.
- Find a creek to play in or a trail to explore.
- Pick wild berries. Make pancakes with the berries.
- Go fishing.
- Watch the sunset. Draw the sky in your journal.

When you are in a small town...

- Rent bikes to get around town.



- Visit a local artist to see their studio.
- Head to the local library for story time.
- Look up the local community theater to catch a show.
- Utilize the tourism bureau in the location you are visiting by gathering maps and information about sites to see when you arrive.

The above ideas merely scratch the surface of what learning can look like from the road.

Wherever you're headed, utilize what many of us generally have at our fingertips—social media. These social apps can be an excellent tool when used efficiently.

For example, on Instagram, I often see a museum or restaurant that I want to visit when I make my way to a location. I click on the site when it is geotagged, and it will ask me to open it in Maps on my smartphone. I allow this and add the place to a stored set of places in my Maps app, broken down by city and state. It's such a handy way to stay organized and never miss a thing when out and about.

## **Grab the Rewards**

The benefits of road schooling that you will see in your children are endless. You are unlocking a part of their brain that traditional school doesn't always allow. Your children will be afforded the luxury of thinking outside the box while also being challenged to dive deeper into subjects they have previously had to skim over. Your child's education becomes custom-tailored to their interests and hands-on in a way that isn't taught from a textbook. Parents are given a chance to integrate learning that their child might not otherwise get, depending on their school, like community service work, nature study, alternative sports, civics, economics, film, foreign language, and more.

The family time you are afforded on the road is unmatched in its results by the time typically shared with the classroom.

We need to talk about the elephant in the room, though. How can this be done when you can't take off work and road-school, or maybe don't want that for your everyday life?

I struggle with this with my son.

I'm not in a place where I can pull him from school and travel in the way I dream of doing, so I supplement his education with after-school activities. Since my son was a young boy, we have made instruments for him to use to start music appreciation. We borrowed a keyboard to learn piano. We use free apps, like Duolingo, to study French. We cook meals from around the world together, exploring

the culture, music, and films from the country we are studying. We take many nature walks, often following the same trail to learn the changes season by season. We watch for birds in our backyard and talk about migration. We talk about current events in the news to continue the conversation with him. We try not to miss all the learning opportunities handed to us each and every day.

No one's experience will look the same, nor should it. This is your journey with your children. Embrace it however it looks and remember to have fun.

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# 21 Simple Ways to Roll Out of a Rut

*Elissa Joy Watts*



“You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.”

—Mae West

We humans are the stuff of miracles. Over the centuries, we’ve tackled enormous and dazzling feats. We’ve built pyramids and painted frescoes and perfected croissants. We’ve scraped the ocean floor and invented solar panels and have literally been to the moon and back. It’s true we are also responsible for polyester and disco, and these sour mistakes certainly tarnish our track record, but I suppose they prove we are also capable of bouncing back.

Recently, we’ve navigated a global health crisis and created a market for day-to-night loungewear. (I find this latest endeavor both refreshing and worrisome, but maybe it’s just me.) Our capacity to pivot and problem-solve keeps our species on the planet, but the thing we must always remember is this: our capacity to dream keeps us fully human, fully alive. Curiosity and hope keep us on the edge of our seats. We thrive when our personal worlds brim with wonder and what-ifs. If we challenge our limits, we stay sharp.

But there comes a time in everyone’s life when momentum stalls and our vivid days begin to dull. Ruts are inevitable. In some ways, you could argue, humans are built for them. Children thrive on routines, and after all, what is rut if not a routine with a less-than-happy ending? Consistency *is* a good thing. But what happens when our routine lacks inspiration?

Same coffee, same casserole, same conversation. Same date night, same dinner, same 90-minute visit with the latest Disney offering. Short-term predictability is fine—Lord knows we’ve all missed the certainty of gatherings and predictable air travel—but I am one of those outrageous people who is quick to shake my fist at the pursuit of never-ending comfort and routine. Familiarity breeds contempt, right? I do not wish for an insulated autopilot existence, and I’m willing to bet many others feel the same way. Ease is the enemy of the human spirit.

## The Plunge

In her glorious book *Wintering*, Katherine May describes an icy New Year’s swim along the North Sea shoreline with a friend, the sort of activity many people desperately avoid their entire lives.

Emma counted down—three, two, one—and we ran, stumbling over the shingle and into the waves, emitting a battle cry that turned into a squeal as we hit the water. I got in thigh-deep before deciding to launch myself forward to take a few strokes. That’s when the cold hit me: a vast bitter wall that kicked the air out of my lungs. It was so absolute. So viscous. I flickered my arms in a feeble attempt at a breast stroke but it was impossible. The freezing water had drawn me together like a brittle rubber band. It felt something like fear.

After finding her way back to shore, she wraps herself in towels, sips piping-hot tea, and collects her thoughts. While gazing back over the

water, an unexpected desire grips her attention. “I felt the urge to do it all over again, to go back and exist in those crystalline seconds of intense cold. My blood sparkled in my veins.” She lets out a gasp and says to her friend, “That was brilliant.”

Sometimes it takes a revelatory moment—an icy plunge for the soul—before we look around and realize, “Oh, wow. This is my life.”

A few years ago, I had to reinvent my shopping habits in order to spare my bank account from imminent danger. I challenged myself to exclusively shop secondhand for a year. The spending experiment shone light on unchecked habits and thought patterns worthy of gentle and jovial confrontation. Things ran smoothly until our family butted heads with a cross-country move. That was the heart-stopping icy plunge for me.

In the end, I made it back to shore and, like Katherine, I would jump back in and do it again. The benefits outweighed any fleeting sense of lack. I mastered the art of thrift. We saved thousands and alleviated our neighbors’ headaches as they offloaded used goods. The shopping exercise also restored my faith in human kindness and reaffirmed that, no, we do not need that for which we pine and purchase online at 11:42 pm on a Thursday evening.

## **Intentional Shifts**

Is there an aspect of your life that could benefit from some curious reinvention? Do you feel stuck too? If you sense you're tiptoeing into autopilot territory, take heart. You are alive. There is still time to challenge yourself to break out of your box.

It's not necessary to cease shopping altogether or quit your job and sail around the world to feel like a new person. Tiny intentional shifts yield noticeable differences in daily living. Just ask any woman who's boldly sat in her stylist's chair and asked for spur-of-the-moment bangs. Sometimes you just need to look in the mirror and literally see a new you.

If you're looking for little ways to roll out of a rut and expand your world, here's a short list of ideas to serve as inspiration. Consider these suggestions as mini ice baths to clear your head, challenge your tenacity, and refresh your existence. Dangle your toes or dive in. It's your life.

1. *Change up your morning commute.* Charting a different route is good for your neurons, and the new surroundings might surprise and delight you. If you work from home, consider "faking a commute" by implementing a new routine before you get down to business.

2. *Try a recipe with unfamiliar ingredients.* You never forget your first frog leg.



3. *Rearrange some furniture.* While you're at it, clear some clutter. Your fresh space will thank you.
4. *Pull off a no-spending weekend.* Alternative plans? Check out your hometown's best free attractions or simply stay home with a good page-turner.
5. *Switch up your workout.* Novelty exercise demands physical and mental strength. You fast-paced cardio junkies might actually enjoy a low-key adrenaline boost, like Pilates. Your joints will certainly thank you.
6. *Take your remote work to a new location.* Maybe it's the library down the street or the main floor den you've been meaning to reorganize. See if the change in scenery affects your work.
7. *Cancel your Netflix subscription.* Get creative instead.
8. *Order something different than "your usual" drink.* Starting or ending your day with a new kind of beverage—and pausing long enough to savor it—is a form of self-care.
9. *Call dinner an indoor picnic.* Let the kids “set the table” by picking their favorite blankets.
10. *Discover a new album and listen to it start to finish for an entire week.* Consider it a new soundtrack for a new chapter. For better or

worse, streaming services make hunting for your next favorite a whole lot easier. Want extra pizzazz? Try a new genre too.

11. *Cook your eggs in a new way.* Little changes, right? Who knows? Maybe you've been a sunny-side-up person all along.

12. *Borrow an unusual book from the library.* If you've never been one to indulge in sci-fi or the history of exotic birds, now's your chance.

13. *Try thinning your wardrobe.* Need ideas? Courtney Carver's minimalist fashion challenge, Project 333, is a perfect place to start. Believe it or not, you can pare back to 33 items for 3 months and still look and feel amazing.

14. *Volunteer.* Fair warning: doing so might permanently improve your life and the lives of those with whom you intersect. It is better to give than to receive.

15. *Try your hand at learning a language.* Duolingo is a helpful companion, and it's cheaper and more fun than any classroom scenario.

16. *Watch an award-winning film you've never heard of.* Algorithms rarely get it right anyway. Why not fall back on the Criterion Collection?

17. *Try a pantry challenge for a week.* This is a cost-effective exercise in creativity. Can you finally work your way through those chickpeas you swore you'd use before they expired?

18. *Dive into YouTube and tackle a DIY project.* You name it. Someone's made a tutorial. Buy your supplies and surprise yourself.

19. *Modify your diet.* Can you stretch Meatless Monday through an entire month? Or give up refined sugar as an exercise in self-awareness and moderation? There's only one way to find out.

20. *Finally, try experimenting with a new hairstyle.* Maybe this translates to abandoning a ponytail for a week or parting your hair on the opposite side. Maybe it means going bald or lobbing off six inches or walking in blonde and leaving brunette. The choice is yours. (And if you're on the fence about bangs, I vote yes.)

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**Elissa Joy Watts** juggles life as a writer, wife, and mother from the comfort of home in Atlantic Canada. When she isn't baking scones, making friends with strangers, and delivering bad puns, she's preparing the next edition of *Simplify Magazine* and coaching people to compose life-changing emails. (It's a funny story for another time.) Her personal musings reside [here](#).