

# Simple Living at Pendle Hill

By Erika Koenig-Sheridan

It was a typical gathering at Pendle Hill, the Quaker study centre near Philadelphia: eleven people from all walks of life, seated in a circle in a sunny, book-lined room. We had come to take Frank Levering's week-long course on *Simple Living*. I was a bit apprehensive on that first day. Having no experience with environmental activism, I wondered if I'd made the right choice.

Frank's opening words, "there is no 'one size fits all' path to living simply," put me at ease. Frank believes that we need a radical new relationship with the earth and creation, but he did not prescribe a course of action for us. Instead, he used the good old practice of posing queries for reflection. And then he listened with such whole-hearted attention to our answers that we all felt affirmed and safe.

It was encouraging to hear that every action, no matter how small, can make a difference. This was the message of the video we watched one evening, "Simple Living with Wanda Urbanska." Shown on PBS television some years ago, it was entertaining and engaging. Wanda interviews folks striving to lead more balanced lives and sharing tips

on how to do less damage to the environment by reducing waste and making ethical consumer choices. One segment showed Catherine Whitmire seated in the Cambridge meetinghouse and speaking about the Quaker tradition of plain living. Both aspects of simple living, the activist and the contemplative, were covered.

In one of our sessions on building community, we learned that the number one quality-of-life issue in the U.S. is noise pollution! (The word *noise* is derived from *nausea*.) People are concerned about the effects of noise on our health and on the human spirit. Are there ways in which we Quakers can take our practice of silence into the community and help heal the blows of sound?

Pendle Hill is a paradox, a place that exudes both privilege and plainness. In such a setting it was perhaps not surprising that our talk in the circle often seemed to come from a deep place within ourselves. There are many nooks at Pendle Hill where one may simply sit and gaze inwardly. One day, in the quiet of the library, I was led to ask myself, "Am I spending my time with those

things that are consistent with what I say is important to me?"

My record is pretty good. I live in a modest house in a rural hamlet, shop locally, buy recycled goods, hang my laundry on a line, drive my car infrequently. I fall short in other ways—impulse buying, consuming too much food, wasting time on the internet, not to mention that persistent little problem with procrastination ... These temptations reveal a disconnect between what I say I believe, and what I do. I determined that when I got home I would stop dragging my feet and begin my witness to plain living by cleaning out the dusty corners of my spiritual closet.

That may not speak to everyone. There are many paths to simple living. Experience can only be individual; answers must be found through one's own seeking. What are your core beliefs? What has power for you? When you have discerned the answers, move toward making it happen. ☞

*Erika Koenig-Sheridan, a member of Ottawa Monthly Meeting, is grateful to CYM and HMAC, who provided the scholarship which made experiencing "Simple Living" at Pendle Hill possible.*

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

— *Earth Charter*