A woman is shown from the chest down, wearing a black long-sleeved top and a colorful floral apron with a red sash. She is holding a large, round loaf of bread in a dark brown woven basket. Her hands are visible, with red nail polish and a blue ring. The background is a light blue patterned wall.

*almost* amish

*One woman's quest for a slower,  
simpler, more sustainable life*

Nancy  
Sleeth



*Almost Amish* is the perfect read if you're feeling the weight of our fancy American lifestyle and looking to simplify your life and get back to the things that matter—like family, home, and community. Nancy paints a wonderful picture of the gift that comes when we slow down and evaluate what's really important and how we can be better stewards of all that God has given us. Not only that, there are practical tips on almost every page about finding ways to emulate an “almost Amish” lifestyle, but the appeal is that they're written in an engaging, informative manner that doesn't make me feel judged because I may still have a weakness for cute shoes and beauty products. Instead, Nancy makes her lifestyle seem so appealing that I'm actually debating putting up a clothesline in my backyard. This is a great book!

**MELANIE SHANKLE, A.K.A. BIG MAMA**

[www.thebigmamablog.com](http://www.thebigmamablog.com)

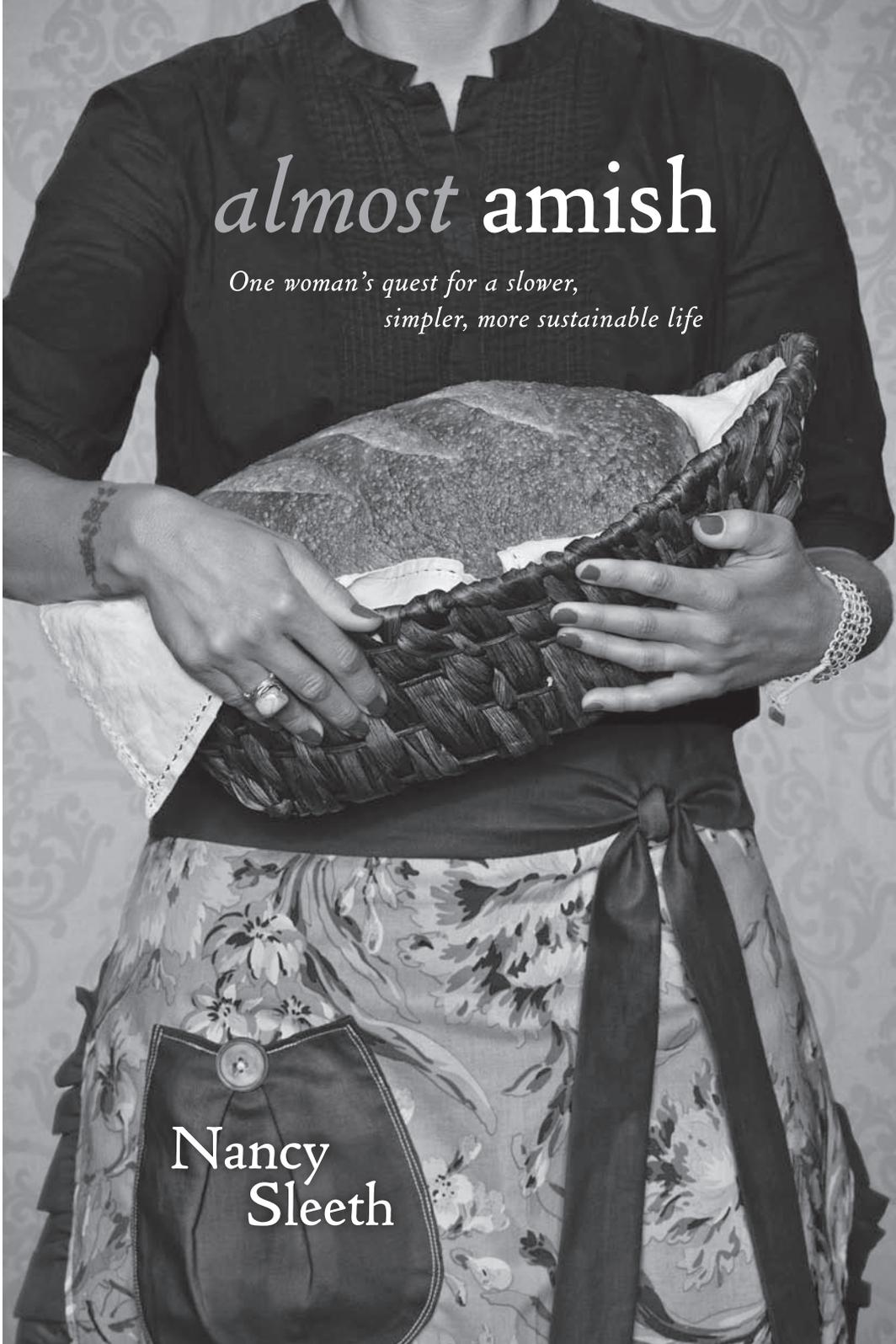
*Almost Amish* offers a reminder of the freedom we can uncover through a sustainable lifestyle. Nancy provides real-life examples of ways we can pare down without ditching all technologies. She demonstrates how to emphasize relationships through decisions for how we use our time, money, and other resources. Her personal choices remind us of the joy we can recapture when we prioritize strategies for simple living.

**SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY**

*Christianity Today*



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*  
*Carol Stream, Illinois*



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*Almost Amish: One Woman's Quest for a Slower, Simpler, More Sustainable Life*

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*To my husband, Matthew.*

*“If ever two were one, then surely we,  
If ever man were lov’d by wife, then thee.”*

*And to my mother, Marian.*

*“Ooh baby, hush-a-bye  
Dream of the angels, way of up high  
Even when you’re a great big girl  
Mama won’t go away.”*

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# Introduction

*Going back can sometimes be the quickest way forward.*

C. S. LEWIS, *Mere Christianity*

“WHAT ARE YOU, Amish or something?” a large man with a booming voice asked from the back of the room. I was not surprised by the question, but the tone rattled me a bit.

*Open your eyes!* I wanted to reply. *Am I wearing a bonnet? We arrived in a Prius, not on a pony.*

The question came at the close of a long day, at the end of a demanding speaking tour. I was tired, but that’s no excuse for my less-than-gracious thoughts. It was not the first time my family had been compared to the Amish, nor would it be the last. So why did this question stay with me, long after the seminar ended?

Over the previous few years my husband, Matthew, and I had gone around the country giving nearly a thousand talks, sermons, workshops, and retreats about the scriptural call to care for God’s creation. We wrote books on the subject. We made films. From Washington state to Washington, DC, we had fielded questions on everything from lightbulbs to the light of Jesus, from water bottles to living waters, from soil

erosion to the four kinds of soils. The Q&A session was usually our favorite part of the seminar.

As a teacher, I often said that there are no bad questions. This one, as it turns out, was especially good because it forced me to examine my life in new ways and increased my appreciation for many of the choices my family has made. Now, a few years later, I feel nothing but gratitude for this man's question, as it marked the beginning of a fulfilling journey. But before I share our Almost Amish story, I have to backtrack a bit.

### **How We Got Here**

Just a decade ago, my husband had been at the peak of his career—director of emergency services and chief of medical staff at a hospital. He loved taking care of patients, and I loved caring for our two children, Clark and Emma. We lived in a postcard-perfect New England town, in a beautiful home filled with beautiful things. Our kids sailed in the summer and skied in the winter, carefully dressed to L. L. Bean perfection. In the spirit of laid-back luxury, dinner parties featured lobster caught a block from our home. “Trustafundians,” as Matthew called our wealthiest neighbors, moored their wooden sailboats at the village yacht club. We were living out the American dream, enjoying the affluence and status of a successful physician's family.

But bad stuff began to happen to us, as it does to everyone. Matthew and I had been raised in different faith traditions,

and when we got married, our families weren't happy about it. So we said, "If that's what religion is about, forget it!" For two decades we drifted along until three crises hit, one after another.

During a family reunion, my brother died in a drowning accident in front of our kids. I was devastated, depressed, disoriented. Not long afterward, a mentally ill patient who had been in the ER began stalking Matthew. The patient's behavior, culminating with his conviction of a vile murder, put a strain on our family. Then, during the course of one week, Matthew admitted three different women to the hospital—all in their thirties, all with breast cancer, all destined to die.

This last experience was more subtle, but no less disturbing. One woman had seizures for about forty-five minutes in the ER, and Matthew could not stabilize her. He had to go out to the waiting room and tell the husband, who had two young kids, that his wife was gone. Matthew then did what any compassionate doctor would do: he hugged the young dad, and they cried together.

That night, Matthew came home upset. His own wife (me!) was just a few years older than the woman who died. "What are the odds?" he asked. So we looked in his textbook from medical school, which said that one in nineteen women had a lifetime chance of getting breast cancer. The updated version of that same textbook said one in nine women, and the odds have gotten even worse since then. Matthew asked if it was time not only to be "running for the cure," as it said on the back of our cereal boxes, but to begin looking for the cause.

Around this time, we went on a family vacation to a barrier

island off the coast of Florida. After playing in the ocean all day, the kids went to bed early, and that night Matthew and I relaxed on the balcony, enjoying a peaceful breeze beneath silent stars. So rarely did we have time to stop and think, to discuss the big questions of life. Our conversation rambled from the kids to work to books to global concerns.

That's when I asked Matthew two questions that would change our lives forever. First question: "What is the biggest problem facing the world today?"

His answer: "The world is dying." And he wasn't just talking about his patients. There are no elms left on Elm Street, no cod at Cape Cod. "If we don't have a stage where we can play out the other issues, things like war and poverty and AIDS won't really matter."

Question number two was more difficult: "If the world is dying, what are we going to do about it?"

Matthew didn't have an immediate answer. But he said he'd get back to me. And after vacation, we both set out to find an answer.

Together we embarked on a faith and environmental journey. We read many of the world's great sacred texts, finding much wisdom but not the answers we were seeking. Then one slow night in the ER, Matthew picked up an orange book. It was a Bible. We didn't have one at home, so he stole it.

No worries: it was a Gideon Bible. And as the Gideons would have hoped, Matthew read the Gospels and ran smack dab into a remarkable figure: Jesus. Suddenly my husband found the Truth he had been seeking.

One by one, our entire family followed. And that changed everything—the books we read, the music we listened to, the people we hung out with, and most of all how we learned to love God and love our neighbors by caring for his creation.

Eventually, Matthew got back to me about my second question. His answer: he would quit his job as a physician and spend the rest of his life trying to serve God and save the planet, even if he never earned another cent.

Hmmm. A job without a description. Or salary. Or benefits.

My response: “Honey, are you sure we need to do that much about it?”

Shock was quickly followed by panic. And fear. We had two preteen kids, and college was just around the corner. How would we put food on the table, let alone pay for those Ivy League educations the kids were both on the fast track toward?

Feelings are a moving target, but the Bible remains steadfast. Tony Campolo once wrote that the words *fear not* are repeated 365 times in the Bible—one reassurance for each day of the year. The devil wants us to worry, but God wants us to trust in him. Philippians 4:6 tells us to cast all our worries upon Jesus and be anxious for nothing.

Easier said than done. I was staggered by the implications of my husband’s answer, but that terror was soon replaced by a desire to learn more. So we began studying what Scripture had to say about living more simply. We read through the entire Bible, underlining everything that had to do with caring for God’s creation.

Matthew 7 seemed to speak directly to our family: “Why

worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? . . . Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.”

We took Jesus' advice and began cleaning up our own act before worrying about cleaning up the rest of the world. The transition—as much emotional and spiritual as physical—took a couple of years. One of the very first things we did was to take an accounting—a measure of our ecological footprint. We had always thought of ourselves as environmentally aware—using cloth diapers, stocking up on reusable shopping bags, and recycling. But when we actually calculated our total use of resources, we found ourselves exactly average for Americans. Not bad for a physician's family—since in general the more income people have, the more resources they consume—but still, we were clearly using more than our fair share on a global scale: about *six times* more energy than our neighbors around the world.

So we began to scale back. At first the steps were small: adjust the thermostat a few degrees. Clean out some closets. Start a vegetable garden. These small changes led to bigger ones: shop for clothes at consignment stores. Plant some fruit trees and berry bushes. Eat local foods in season. The more we did, the more we wanted to do. Before long, we found ourselves ditching the TV and replacing the family sedan with a hybrid car.

Changes in one area of our life led to changes in other areas. At home, we installed water-saving showerheads, got

rid of the clothes dryer, and replaced the refrigerator with a smaller, superefficient model. Outside, we avoided chemicals, planted shade trees, and stopped mowing the backyard.

Transitioning back to classroom teaching, I began biking to work and setting up bins for paper recycling. Based on student energy audits of the buildings, we made recommendations for cutting back on electricity costs—switching to LED bulbs in exit signs and installing automatic light detectors. The school switched to double-sided printing, cutting paper use in the library by 50 percent.

We gave away one of our cars to a church family with no transportation, substituting human power and carpooling to get where we needed to go. Our food intake became less processed and more real, less meat-based and more healthful. The vegetable garden doubled in size, and we began canning and preserving food year round.

With everyone in our family on the same page, we had a new standard against which to measure ourselves—not our next-door neighbors, who produced four bags of trash to our one—but Jesus, who did not have a place to lay his head at night and beseeched the rich man to sell everything and give it to the poor.

Little changes added up. Eventually, we got rid of half our possessions and moved to a house with the same footprint of our old garage. (As Matthew likes to say, “Don’t feel too sorry for us—it was a doctor’s sized garage!”) In the process, we eventually reduced our energy consumption by more than two-thirds and our trash production by nine-tenths.

But it was more than just an ecological movement: the changes toward simplicity that we made on the outside started to change us on the inside. As my grandmother used to say, “Act kind, and then you become kind.” Sabbath, the principle of rest God imparted to the Hebrews, became the high point of our week. Preparation began on Saturday, with the kids finishing their homework and everyone pitching in to clean the house. To our delight, Clark and Emma became the biggest defenders of our weekly day of rest. The Hebrew word for “holy” is *kadosh*, which means “set apart.” Sunday became a holy day, set apart for God, for family, and for renewal. It was what we lived for.

These changes altered the lens through which we viewed not only the “holy day” of Sunday but all the holidays. Instead of cartloads of Christmas presents and garbage bags of wrapping paper, we limited gifts to small stocking treats and gave the rest of the money we would have spent to a family in need. Knocking on a door and anonymously leaving a bundle of babysitting savings became a favorite holiday tradition.

These material changes also affected how we spent our time. With no TV, we read and talked and listened to music together more. Instead of playing computer games, we went for walks outdoors. An hour spent in nature became an hour studying the face of God.

School remained important, but for new reasons. Emma started a morning Bible study group. Baking all the snacks for a by-teens, for-teens student worship service became a central fixture of her week. Clark began talking about a

full-time calling in missionary medicine and looking into Christian colleges. Relationships, rather than résumé building, became both the means and the end.

The changes we were making in ourselves rippled outward in concentric circles—first in our family, then in our church, then throughout our community. We led streambed cleanups, tree-planting efforts, and discussions on faith and the environment. People began to grow curious about this evangelical Christian family who “hugged trees,” and a man-who-bit-the-dog fascination with our story widened.

After we had our own house in order, we felt called to share our journey. Matthew wrote a book called *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action*. Using stories from our family’s life and his experience working in the ER, he explained the theological and medical reasons why our family made these changes, inspiring others to do the same.

People liked the book—a lot. It’s an easy book to read, but hard to ignore. We received letters from readers who felt called to change but didn’t know where to start. So I wrote *Go Green, Save Green*—sharing stories about what worked, what didn’t, and what our family learned in the process. To handle all the speaking and workshop requests, we started a nonprofit organization, Blessed Earth, and thus a ministry was born.

And that’s how a just-about-Jewish girl found herself in a Bible-Belt church being asked by a man with a booming voice if she were Amish. Despite abundant physical evidence to the contrary, I can see where the question came from. We had just answered a series of questions about laundry.

“Is it true that you hang your clothes on a clothesline?”  
*Yes, we do—outside in summer and in the basement in winter.*

“Does hanging your clothes really make a difference?”  
*Each load saves five pounds of harmful gases from being emitted, so this is a tangible way I can show my love for our global neighbors and my respect for God’s creation.*

“Will doing that save me money?” *Nearly a hundred bucks a year: the clothes dryer consumes more electricity than any appliance in your home except the refrigerator. Plus your clothes will smell fresher and last longer—that lint in the dryer is made up of cloth fibers.*

“Doesn’t it take more time?” *Yes, and that’s what I love about it. It gives me a break from working at the computer, and I get to pray or listen to birds or talk with my husband and kids as they work beside me. Best of all, hanging up clothes gives me a chance to hang out with God.*

So the question about whether I was Amish seemed glib to me—until I realized its significance. Most people equate drying clothes on a line with poverty—it’s what people do in poorer countries or in the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the United States. To air dry clothes by choice is countercultural. And who, more than any other group in twenty-first-century America, is both countercultural and committed to air drying clothes? Has intact families? Healthy communities? Gardens, home-cooked meals, and uncluttered homes? Restrained use of technology, strong local economies, and almost nonexistent debt?

Most of all, what group has kept simplicity, service, and

faith at the center of all they say and do? The Amish! All of which led to my epiphany: *few of us can become Amish, but all of us can become almost Amish.*

Of course I wasn't Amish, but I guess I had become something approaching it. Could other people do the same? It was time for me to start exploring what an Almost Amish life would really look like.

### **A Brief History of the Amish**

The Amish are a Christian denomination that began in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe. Their religious ancestors were called *Anabaptists* (rebaptizers) because the first converts were adults who already had been baptized as babies.

A group of Swiss Anabaptists began to study the Gospels earnestly. They were especially moved by Christ's teachings on love and nonresistance and felt called to imitate his life and character. Christ was present not only in the sacraments but in the body of believers who practiced his teachings. While this may seem like mainstream teaching to us now, it was considered dangerous theology at the time.

The Swiss Anabaptists proposed a set of reforms. The state-run church responded by burning, drowning, starving, or decapitating about twenty-five hundred Anabaptist leaders. Understandably, the remaining Anabaptists went underground or fled to rural enclaves.

In the late 1600s, Jakob Ammann emerged as an Anabaptist

leader. Ammann's followers, eventually known as the Amish, became a separate group within the Anabaptists. To an outsider, Ammann's differences with the parent church seem little more than a family quarrel over foot washing, grooming styles, and the extent of "shunning"—social avoidance of those who had been excommunicated.

In the early 1700s, the Amish began to seek fertile farmland in the New World and eventually established communities in Pennsylvania, the Midwest, and several Canadian provinces. The Amish and their Anabaptist cousins, the Mennonites, often settled in neighboring communities.

Starting in the twentieth century, the Amish population has doubled every twenty years—due to birthrates, not evangelism—with the total population in 2010 standing at around a quarter million.

### Principles to Live By

The Amish are by no means a perfect people. Their example, however, does have much to teach us. How can we incorporate the best of Amish principles into our modern lives? To answer this, I did some reading. And some visiting. And some listening. I in no way pretend to be an expert on the Amish, but the more I read and visited and listened, the more I found to admire. The Amish are islands of sanity in a whirlpool of change.

Along the way, I discovered some Amish principles that we can *all* try to emulate. These principles (similar to the

list that Wendell Berry laid out more than two decades ago in *Home Economics*) provide guidelines for a simpler, slower, more sustainable life. They offer me hope.

1. Homes are simple, uncluttered, and clean; the outside reflects the inside.
2. Technology serves as a tool and does not rule as a master.
3. Saving more and spending less bring financial peace.
4. Time spent in God's creation reveals the face of God.
5. Small and local leads to saner lives.
6. Service to others reduces loneliness and isolation.
7. The only true security comes from God.
8. Knowing neighbors and supporting local businesses build community.
9. Family ties are lifelong; they change but never cease.
10. Faith life and way of life are inseparable.

Throughout the following pages, I will be sharing stories from the wide range of Anabaptist traditions, including Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite, and Brethren. Just as there are widely divergent practices among those who call themselves "Methodist" or "Baptist," these Anabaptist communities differ one from another. Even within the Amish, there are subdivisions ranging from those who worship in homes and would shun any member who drove a car (Old Order Amish) to those who meet in churches and allow ownership

of motorized vehicles (Beachy Amish, the followers of Moses Beachy). What they all share are a respect for tradition, a desire to make conscious decisions about “progress,” and a belief that Scripture should guide every action—not just for a few hours on Sunday, but in our homes and throughout the week.

The home is the threshold of the Almost Amish life; come join me on the front porch, and together we will begin our journey.

CHAPTER I

# HOMES

*Homes are simple, uncluttered, and clean;  
the outside reflects the inside.*

LAST SUMMER, our daughter interned with a publishing company. Emma's mentor assigned her a wide range of challenging projects, and she learned a lot from them all. But the assignment where she felt as though she had the most editing input was an Amish romance novel.

Dubbed “bonnet books” or Amish love stories (my husband jokingly calls them “bonnet rippers”), these G-rated romances usually center on an Amish person who falls for an outsider. Most of the authors are women, such as Beverly Lewis, who has sold fourteen million copies of her novels, set among the Amish in Pennsylvania. In recent years, the genre has expanded to include Amish thrillers and murder mysteries.

And then there is the 1985 movie *Witness*, where millions formed lasting impressions of the Amish. *Witness* is the story

of a young Amish boy who sees someone murdered in a train station. A police officer goes into hiding in Amish country to protect him and is attracted to the boy's beguiling mother. A trifecta of thriller, mystery, and romance, the film grossed sixty-five million dollars and won a dozen awards.

Why the popularity of Amish-themed books and movies? Publishers attribute their success to pastoral settings and forbidden love. No doubt, the Romeo-and-Juliet winning formula is partly responsible. But rogue romance cannot explain why each year eleven thousand motor coaches and more than eleven million tourists visit Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—the epicenter of Amish country.

While our fascination with Amish culture is complex, one facet is clear: people are drawn to the simplicity of the Amish home. The Amish home is a symbol of something missing in our plugged-in, nanosecond-paced lives. It is difficult to see something that has disappeared. Our image of the white Amish farmhouse fills a void that we cannot even describe. It reminds us of what we have lost.

### **Home as Haven**

Jesus says that the inside of us should be as clean as the outside (see Matthew 23:25). Amish families apply this principle to every area of life, including their physical surroundings. The Amish farmhouse, inside and out, is clean, uncluttered, and unpretentious. Their homes reflect their values: careful management, simplicity, and orderliness.

If you drive around Lancaster County in the summer, you will see farm after farm with everything in its place. No rusting cars up on cinder blocks. No falling down barns. No trash heaps. Gardens are filled with orderly rows of vegetables and colorful flowers—all to the glory of God.

Amish homes are beautiful in their simplicity. Families purchase things, but only things they need. They do not call attention to themselves with flashy technology, decorating, or clothes. That would be considered prideful, and Scripture is full of warnings about where pride can lead.

The Amish do not believe that the material world is bad. Rather, they believe that beautiful things that last many generations are part of God's creation and should be treasured. To loosely paraphrase Keats, beautiful craftsmanship is "a joy forever."

Family ties are strengthened by the architecture of their homes. The physical structure of the Amish home is designed to accommodate multiple generations living together. Grandparents live in an apartment within the home or in a *Grossdawdy Haus*, a small adjacent house. The home is a haven for all generations, where wisdom is respected and each person plays an important role. Dependence upon one another is seen not as a weakness but as a strength.

### **Building an Almost Amish Life**

One physical trait my husband shares with Amish men is an oversize right forearm. Those muscles come from

years of swinging a hammer in the days before (noisy!) nail guns.

I met Matthew when I was home studying for my first set of college finals. A really good-looking guy had come to install a bay window in the kitchen. As Matthew likes to say, my parents' worst nightmare began to unfold before their eyes: their eighteen-year-old daughter fell in love with the carpenter.

When we married, I told Matthew that he was the smartest person I had ever met and that maybe he should think about going to college. Three years of undergrad school, four years of medical school, and three years of residency later, Matthew embarked on his ER career and built us a beautiful home on the coast of Maine.

Though fancier than an Amish home, it had the same emphasis on craftsmanship and simplicity. Built in the classic Greek Revival style, it was designed to last for centuries: oak floors, cherry cabinetry, maple butcher-block counters, solid-wood doors, uncompromising structural integrity, and a Rumford fireplace to keep us warm on winter nights.

Had we lived in an Amish community, much of our artwork and furnishings would have seemed ostentatious. And certainly the electric lines that powered our appliances would have been taboo. The house itself would not have seemed too big *if* it had been filled with seven or eight children, several grandchildren, and a couple of grandparents. But with only four inhabitants, our home seemed unjustifiably large. After our spiritual and environmental conversion experience, we

knew we needed to downsize. And with Matthew's leaving medicine for a calling that had no job title and no salary, it made sense to sell the big house and bank the savings.

So we moved, and when Matthew left medicine, his carpentry skills came in very handy. He designed a much smaller home, also based on the Greek Revival farmhouse tradition, only this time more consciously in keeping with passive-solar building design and with many energy-saving features built in. Because of careful positioning, the house essentially warmed itself in winter and shut off the sun's rays in summer. Instead of our previous Rumford fireplace, already more efficient than most, we included a superefficient Russian counterflow woodstove: six thousand pounds of soapstone and heat-sink masonry, which gave off a steady heat throughout the day. If we built one fire in the morning, the stove emitted heat until nightfall.

We lived in that home while the kids were in high school. Both received scholarships to Asbury University in Lexington—Clark first, and Emma a year later. Because Emma was fifteen when she was accepted, we followed our kids to college. Neither had a driver's license yet, so—strange but true—our children asked us to move nearby.

Not long ago, we moved yet again, this time to a town house in Kentucky. Our children have now graduated from college, and we all live in the same neighborhood—Emma with her college roommate and Clark with his bride, Valerie. Our house is only eighteen feet wide, so it's easier to clean and care for. We had to give up some things, such as a yard,

but I found a community garden where I continue to grow vegetables and work the earth. No big house or yard care means more time for family, friends, and God. We are entering a new stage of life, and our house reflects our changing needs and values.

Jesus says we are supposed to be ready to leave everything to follow him. In our family's case, we have, but with a cost. We feel it. Our children feel it. Though our home is peaceful, uncluttered, and calming, we lack the permanence and history of an Amish home. I hope that Lexington will be our last home, for my heart yearns to put down roots and stay.

A home, after all, is more than four walls: it is shelter against the tempests of life, a place to welcome friends, and a nest—after our travels—to which we long to return.

### **The Almost Amish Way: Keep the Home Uncluttered**

So what is the Almost Amish way? While no single action will guarantee that you will have a calm, peaceful, uncluttered home, these suggestions can help you along the journey:

#### *Keep stuff out*

When we moved to the town house, we saw it as another chance to donate things we no longer needed to the local refugee ministry. But getting rid of stuff is a short-term solution; keeping things out of the house in the first place is the cure.

One tactic is to avoid temptations. To this end, Matthew and I receive very few catalogs in the mail. This does not

happen by accident. Every year or so, I visit the Direct Marketing Association website ([www.dmachoice.org](http://www.dmachoice.org)) and Catalog Choice ([www.catalogchoice.org](http://www.catalogchoice.org)) to take our names off any mailing lists that we no longer want to be on. It takes only a few minutes, and it greatly reduces the stream of junk mail we receive. I also save up any catalogs that make it to our mailbox and call the 800 number to ask to be removed from their mailing lists.

But there is an exception: the Lehman's Non-Electric Catalog, with the most retro collection of useful items I've ever seen. We've been on this mailing list for close to three decades. Founded in 1955 to serve the local Amish and others without electricity, this store carries old-fashioned, high-quality merchandise that is difficult to find anywhere else. "My idea was to preserve the past for future generations," says owner Jay Lehman. "I was concerned that some day the Amish would not be able to maintain their simple ways of life because these products would no longer be available." His goal was, and still is, to provide authentic products for those seeking a simpler life.

Does Lehman's carry stuff I don't need? Of course. But it also carries useful tools and home items that last, well, at least a lifetime. It is where we purchased our oil lamps two decades ago and where we have ordered our replacement mantles and wicks. It's where you can find all kinds of products you thought they quit making years ago: apple peelers, potato ricers, and butter churns for the kitchen; straight razors, shaving brushes, and soap-making supplies for the

bath; and heavy-duty suspenders, straw hats, and walking sticks for the Almost Amish fashion statement.

I practically do cartwheels when this catalog arrives. Matthew and I vie for first dibs. He tends to dog-ear the “manly” pages—offering wood-carrying implements, hand tools, and pocketknives—as well as those featuring anything with “LED,” “solar,” or “rechargeable” in its title. For my part, everything in the kitchen section (except the butchering supplies) cries out to me; it requires Amish-like self-control not to order things I can borrow from neighbors or continue to live without. *But those red gingham reusable sandwich pouches look so cute and eco-friendly. . . .*

While the catalog is full of things that make sense and I would like to own, the Amish way is to buy only things that are truly needed. I’m not surprised that Lehman’s now sells more to non-Amish folks than to the Amish. The Amish keep their homes uncluttered by *not* buying things they will use only a few times or Grandpa already owns or the kids will play with once and then lose in their overstuffed closets.

### *Invest in quality*

The things that Matthew and I have in our home are mostly handmade, high quality, and durable—items we can pass along to our children and to their children. Even when we were poor newlyweds, we invested in quality. One example is the hutch we have in our dining room.

When Matthew and I were first married, I worked as a

technical writer; on my lunch break, I sometimes stopped by an antique store. It was there that I saw a chestnut hutch with Amish-like carvings and a warm patina that comes only from generations of use. Matthew, though deeply engrossed in his pre-med studies, also happened to pass by the same antique store where, among hundreds of items, he was most drawn to the chestnut hutch, too.

A month or two passed. Neither of us said anything to the other. But then one Saturday we walked into the store together. The store owner must have been chuckling under his breath: both of us had stopped in many times separately to admire the hutch. Now here we were together. The secret was revealed.

Although Matthew and I are both conservative when it comes to spending, in the glow of youth we did something very uncharacteristic: we decided to trade in much of our furniture—an oak Empire sideboard and three wobbly wooden chairs—plus most of our small cash reserves for the hutch. In an act of charity, the store owner accepted our offer. We carefully transported our purchase to the apartment—a four-hundred-square-foot, second-floor flat—and filled the hutch with the china my grandmother had given us for our wedding present.

It was one of the best investments we ever made. There is no way we could afford that hutch today. It is as stunning as it was thirty years ago—more valuable, more cherished, and more beautiful than the day we purchased it. And I have little

doubt that it will be passed along to our children and to our children's children.

The Amish understand that longevity is a form of sustainability. In the end, things that do not have to be replaced require fewer resources and cause less wear and tear on the bank account and on the earth that God created to sustain us all.

*Make the kitchen the heart of your home*

A kitchen does not have to be fancy to make it the center of family life. Though their kitchens lack granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and twenty-five-cubic-foot electric refrigerators, the Amish spend far more time and produce many times more food in their kitchens than do most other Americans. Not only do they lack electric refrigerators—they lack electric anything. Think about it: no stand mixer, no food processor, no blender, no slow cooker, no popcorn popper, no toaster oven, no microwave.

Remember all the must-have appliances in days gone by? In the 1970s, the electric can opener, the electric knife, and the electric trash compactor were standard-issue equipment. Thumb through a kitchenware catalog and you'll see many other must-have items that will seem equally expendable a decade from now.

The kitchen in our town house is smaller than any I have had since our pre-kid days. Yet I produce more meals from this kitchen than at any time in my life. During a typical

week, we host several gatherings with friends, neighbors, and colleagues—ranging from three people to twenty or more. In addition, Friday night is family night, when our children often also invite their friends to our table.

Matthew appreciates good food, and I like to prepare it, but with so many guests, I have learned to keep things simple. Soup, salad, and homemade bread are my standard offerings. I rely on excellent, no-fail recipes for mushroom, creamy potato, and curried lentil soups. (See the appendix for tried-and-true recipes.) As the seasons permit, I branch out into cream of asparagus, broccoli, and vegetable-whatever soup. Whenever we go out to eat on our travels, I check out new soups and try to re-create them at home. Right now, I'm working on a spicy ginger pumpkin recipe.

One of the many exceptions that make my lifestyle *almost* Amish is my technique for bread making. I mix the dough and complete the first rising in a bread maker (forty-five minutes on my quick-rise setting) and then shape the dough, do the second rising, and bake the bread in the traditional manner. You have not tasted heaven until you've had my braided challah—the traditional Jewish egg bread served on Friday nights.

Salads are creative opportunities. In my vegetable garden, I grow a wide range of colorful greens from spring to fall. The garden provides tomatoes in various shapes and colors, along with many other vegetables as equal-opportunity salad enhancers. In winter, I rely on dried cranberries, sharp cheeses, nuts, and homemade croutons to give substance to

the salad. For a simple dinner, I might add grilled chicken or salmon as an optional topping. Always, I make my own vinaigrette.

The Bible is explicit about the importance of hospitality. Think about Abraham entertaining the angels under the oaks of Mamre, Rebekah watering Eliezer's ten camels at the well, Lazarus opening his home to Jesus and his motley crew, Zacchaeus being stunned and humbled to have Jesus over for supper—these are examples of people who shared their table with others. Paul also explicitly states that willingness to offer hospitality is a qualification for becoming a church elder (see 1 Timothy 3:2). As my husband likes to say, no one knows whether the fish that fed five thousand were broiled, baked, or fried; what we do know is that the spirit of generosity and the miracle of faith ensured that there was plenty for all.

Most of us are familiar with the parable of the wedding banquet told in Matthew 22:1-14. A king invites guests to a great feast. But when the time comes, most of the guests who sent in a positive RSVP find themselves too busy with business meetings or piano recitals or the big game on TV to show up. Jesus is making the point that God has prepared a feast for each of us—eternal life—yet many of us get too consumed with the busyness of existence to accept his grace-filled invitation.

It is no accident that Jesus uses a meal to illustrate his point. The parable is not only about eternal life but also about life here on earth. And it is not just about how to be a good guest but how to become a welcoming host. Three

times a day, twenty-one times a week, we are given opportunities to act like the King. We are to invite all to our table, not only family and those who can reciprocate, but especially the single mother, the exchange student, or the disabled person in our pews.

As hymnist Charles Gabriel wrote in 1895,

*“All things are ready,” come to the feast!  
Come, for the table now is spread;  
Ye famishing, ye weary, come,  
And thou shalt be richly fed.*

It is not the number of fancy gadgets or beautiful serving platters that matters; rather it's the hands that prepare the meals and the holy communion that takes place when we share our table with others that make our kitchens the heart of the home.

*Clean out your bedroom closets*

The Amish wear plain clothes—homemade dresses and aprons for women and simple pants and shirts for men. They eschew patterned fabric and even buttons, which could be considered ostentatious, and instead rely upon hook-and-eye closures and suspenders. Women cover their heads and dress modestly. They avoid using appearance as a form of self-expression or to attract attention to their bodies, which can lead to pride.

I do not dress as plainly as the Amish: many of my clothes have buttons, I wear some patterned fabrics, and I cover my head only when it gets cold outside. But my closet, nonetheless, reflects my values, as it does for each of us.

I tend to wear long dresses and gravitate toward looser-fitting clothes, for comfort as much as modesty. Almost all my clothes are secondhand. The reason: I cannot justify the huge amount of water, fossil fuels, and chemicals that go into manufacturing, shipping, displaying, and advertising the clothes that fill our malls. Killing the planet so I can look fashionable just does not seem like a good trade-off.

I wish I could sew. My son's mother-in-law is a math genius but also a fabulous seamstress. She sewed all the dresses for Valerie and Clark's wedding. But if I cannot sew, I can at least mimic some of the values the Amish demonstrate in their closets.

First, keep it simple. Despite what the magazines tell you, only those with darker coloring look good in orange—period.

Second, don't try to keep up with the latest fashions. Designers spend billions to convince us that brown is the new black and the tie width we thought respectable three years ago is now totally out.

Third, avoid malls. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Emma was twelve before she ever went to a mall, and then only went because her adopted big sister/favorite babysitter Kate felt sorry for her and took her on her birthday. When they returned home, Kate said she wasn't sure if Emma had a good time—she seemed a little overwhelmed.

Well, I consider that a sign of good health. I am more than a little overwhelmed myself—every year or two—when I step into a mall. I leave feeling fat, ugly, and decidedly uncool. Of course, that is what department stores are designed to do, so they can sell us on the lie that buying their products will make us as thin, gorgeous, and hip as the ten-foot models in their displays. “Fancy Nancy” is just as oxymoronic as “Fashionable Amish.”

Fourth, clean out your clothes closets. Matthew is ruthless when it comes to his closet—if he has not worn something in the past year, it gets donated to Goodwill or the Salvation Army. When we go on the road, he wears outfit A (a gray suit) or outfit B (khaki pants, white shirt, and navy sports coat). Pretty much the rest of the time, it’s outfit B minus the sports coat, though occasionally he gets wild and wears the blue oxford shirt instead of the white. The end result is that clothes take up very little room in his closet . . . or his thoughts.

Few of us today have the talent or skill to sew our own clothes. Yet even so, the Amish probably spend considerably fewer total hours on their wardrobes than the average sixteen-year-old in America. Reading fashion magazines, staying up with the dos and don’ts, driving to the mall, returning clothes that don’t fit, and shopping on the Internet sap our time and energy. As one of my favorite poets, William Wordsworth, said more than a century ago, “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

And that’s what the fashion industry is to the Amish—not

only a waste, but a distraction from the family, friends, and faith that really (should) matter.

*Clean out your vanity*

The average American family spends fifty-five to eighty-five dollars per month on toiletries. I would be surprised if our family spent eighty-five dollars a year, even though I try to buy natural and organic products, which tend to cost more per ounce. The reason is that I just don't buy most of the products big business tries to convince me I need to stay clean, beautiful, and young. That means no hair dyes. No special anti-aging creams (okay, almost none). All my makeup fits in one small pencil case. My blow dryer is a vintage 1970s model—the Vidal Sassoon my mom bought back when the Dorothy Hamill bob became the rage. It's large and awkward and shaped like a dangerous weapon, but, hey—if it ain't broke, why replace it?

Of course the Amish would not even own a hair dryer, and they don't wear any makeup at all. But my husband thinks they (and Hasidic Jews, who dress rather similarly) are the prettiest women around. I agree. One of the most charming—and rare—qualities is being beautiful without knowing it.

Think of the most attractive older woman you know. Besides my mom, whom I love above all else, the woman who comes to my mind has gray hair, worn just above her shoulders. The only cosmetic I ever recall seeing her wear is

clear lip balm. Her eyebrows are thick and expressive. She's in great shape, her body strong and her movements spritely. But the traits I notice first are her smile and her prolonged hug. Though blessed with six children and a dozen grandchildren of her own, every time I enter her home she treats me like a daughter she has been waiting to see. The lines around her mouth and eyes deepen when she laughs with me, and she continues to hold my hand while we talk. She is one of the most lovely women I know.

We've seen photos of people in the public eye who, because of a fear of aging and constant scrutiny by the press, end up with distorted bodies and unexpressive faces. Too much attention to their naturally lovely features ultimately makes them less, rather than more, attractive. While most of us are not celebrities, each of us should be wary of focusing too much of our time on appearances. For physical and for spiritual reasons, we should guard against the "vanity of vanities" that Ecclesiastes is pretty explicit to say will waste our lives.

So, what is the Almost Amish way? Because we're all starting at a different point, it will probably look different for each of us. For example, while speaking at a church in Texas, Matthew met a woman who admitted to spending three hours in front of the mirror each morning. Maybe it doesn't take you that long to get out the door, but we could try cutting back our grooming routine by 25 percent. And emptying a drawer or two in our vanities. (There's that word again!)

*Organize your attic, garage, and basement*

One of the positive benefits of moving every so often is that we don't store a mound of little-used stuff in our attic, garage, and basement. Each of the children has one "memory box." In addition, Clark has asked us to keep his college notebooks for a few years, until he is ready to part with them. Emma now has only one craft box, since she gave most of those things away to a first grade teacher the last time we moved. Matthew has his tools—just the bare bones for carpentry and household maintenance—and I have a few gardening supplies—nothing fancy, just a shovel, hoe, rake, gloves, and a couple of spades. The sports equipment fits in one plastic tub, and we have two well-used bikes. We own a few suitcases for travel, the pressure cooker and some canning equipment, and our root cellar/pantry to save trips to the store—that's pretty much it. The attic is for insulation, nothing else.

And while very occasionally I will miss something that Matthew has given away, mostly I am thankful that my husband prevents me from becoming a hoarder. "If someone else can use it now, why should we store it for someday?" is his frequent and much-appreciated refrain.

**Let's Sum It Up**

We might as well face it: what burdens most modern American homes is the accumulation of mass-produced junk, bought on impulse and paid for with credit, which either falls apart or no one uses. Even heirlooms can become clutter if

we are not wise in our stewardship of them. Cluttered homes lead to cluttered lives, and cluttered lives can harm families.

Our homes reflect our values. They reflect who we are inside and what we hold most precious. If our houses are cluttered, our hearts are too. Possessions should work for us; we should not work for them. Too easily, our homes and the stuff that fills them can become false idols, tempting us to break the first of the Ten Commandments. The Amish offer a simpler, less cluttered, more sustainable way of life. We have much to learn from their example.

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## About the Author

NANCY SLEETH and her husband of thirty years, Matthew, are cofounders of Blessed Earth, a faith-based environmental nonprofit. After an environmental and spiritual conversion experience, Nancy and her family radically altered their footprint, giving away half their possessions and reducing their energy use by more than two-thirds. Prior to heeding this environmental calling, Nancy served as communications director for a Fortune 500 company and as an educator and administrator, most recently at Asbury University. She is a graduate of Georgetown University and holds a master's degree in journalism. Nancy and Matthew are the parents of Clark, a medical resident preparing for missionary work, and Emma, the author of *It's Easy Being Green* (Zondervan), which is a call to teens to live sustainable lifestyles. The Sleeths live in Lexington, Kentucky.