

## Wrestling with the shoulds

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Less than three years ago I was very excited to move out to the country. But less than a year ago we moved back into town. Honestly, it's a little embarrassing. Moving back to town was a good decision on many levels—the right decision for many reasons. Yet this time of year I do miss my three acres. I've been thinking lately about what I could call our “failed experiment” but instead choose to name our “country living adventure.”

Part of the impetus for that adventure was a desire to live more faithfully and simply. And in seeking a more simple, faithful lifestyle, it is easy to be seduced by someone else's version of the “simple life.” The chickens and organic gardens and goat-powered electric generators look so good in the glossy pages of *Mother Earth News*. And Pinterest will show you how to hand-make anything you could possibly need for a lovely home.

For some people, this homesteading lifestyle is the life God has called them to. I think they would tell you that there are many aspects of their lives not fit for *Mother Earth News*—let alone Pinterest—but still, they have found a way of living that uses their gifts and aligns with their values.

During our brief stint of country living, I had to be honest with myself about what my gifts are and are not; what life God is actually calling me to versus the life I somehow *think* God should be calling me to.

I had to admit that homesteading is not my calling.

I am called to write and pastor and parent and it turns out that homesteading doesn't leave a lot of time and energy for other callings. (I am honestly somewhat baffled by all the people who *write* about homesteading. I imagine they are either lying or not sleeping or have some voice-to-text contraption hooked up that they talk into while they dig potatoes or—and this is probably the most likely scenario—they are simply much more focused and disciplined than I am.)

One of my friends who grew up in the Mennonite church talks about the Mennonite tendency to “should ourselves.” (No wonder I fit in so well in my adopted church home!) Granted, there are some pretty big shoulds that apply to all of us: We *should* love God. We *should* love our neighbors. We *should not* kick puppies.

But we have a tendency to pile all kinds of specific shoulds onto these basics; this particularly happens in the realm of simple living. We should get rid of our car. We should compost. We should put solar panels on our house. We should turn down our thermostat. We should downsize our house. We should eat organic food. We should shop at thrift stores. We should reuse our baggies. . . . The list is endless and overwhelming.

The reality is that most of our simple living shoulds are contextual. We have to do the best we can within the life that God has called us to. If that life is a rural pastor, we probably need our car. If that life is to care for an aging parent, we may want to set our thermostat at a comfortably warm temperature. If that life is as a foster parent, we may not be able to afford organic produce—or have time to grow it. If we run a restaurant, I imagine the health board would not appreciate us reusing our baggies—even if we do rinse them out between uses.

It can be dangerous to live someone else’s version of a faithful, simple life. It might make us turn our backs on the real work God is calling us to do; to ignore our unique spiritual gifts as we try to conform our lives to someone else’s blog posts or Pinterest board.

It might make us buy a house in the country and a riding lawn mower and chickens and lots of seed potatoes only to discover that we are **not** cut out for country living and need to move back into town and are on a first-name basis with the home loan guy at the credit union which, nice as he is, is not a good sign.

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