

What Is Simplicity?

by Ann Kriebel

A late San Luis afternoon, clouds billowing over the mountain-top from Peñas Blancas. I sit on a straight-back, rough wooden chair in the center room of Doña Tina's house, surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and so many friends; all gathered for worship and in expression of love. It is her 78th birthday.

After prayers and personal testimonies of appreciation felt for her, eyes turn to me. Time to celebrate. The "dulce amor"? "A mamá le gusta tanto la música." "Toque algo, Ana . . ."

The dulcimer slips out of its fraying cloth cover. I caress its silver strings. What can I play?

"Simple Gifts." It's a song in English, but I don't know many dulcimer songs in Spanish.

"But tell them what the words mean," suggests Katy, a U.S. friend.

Translation has never come easily to me. I struggle to find words to convey the meaning of this old Shaker hymn.

"Quakers have a testimony about simplicity," I begin in Spanish. "To put material cares aside, and other more important things first . . ."

But somehow, my words ring empty to my own ears. I look at the

snatches of faded colored wrapping paper pasted on the walls, and the sparse but functional furnishings in the dim room. My thoughts then fly to the world atop the cliff above us and the Quaker homes there—their large glass windows and washing machines, dishes that match, record players, and waffle irons.

I wonder what my words can mean to the man across the room, aging rapidly from years stooped over a machete, who still returns every day to a house with a dirt floor in the kitchen and gaping cracks between the uneven wooden siding where rain enters in a downpour. His life appears immensely more "simple" than my own. His eyes betray fatigue and a hint of sadness. There is no delight in his life's material simplicity.

"Pero los cuáqueros son ricos, no?"—Quakers are rich, aren't they?—I can almost imagine him thinking. I quickly change to a different dulcimer melody.

It is a challenge to define simplicity in a complex world of harsh material contrasts, of an inequitable distribution of goods that can't be overlooked. What does it really mean to "live simply"? Will we arrive once we sell our blender and stereo? Does it mean giving up electricity and building an outhouse? Does simplicity come with making our own bread

and granola? Is it really a matter of our material possessions or, rather, a state of mind, heart, and spirit? One of the lines of the song "Simple Gifts" got stuck in my mind: "When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shall not be ashamed."

To bow and to bend. Perhaps here we may discover a key: the simplicity that comes of humbling ourselves before others and before God. To bring ourselves down to the root level that connects us all, transcending cultural, educational, or economic differences that so often separate us. To allow love of life and of humanity to shine through us. And with this love, to work toward eliminating the huge material disparities which create human suffering, which shape lives so "simple" that there is no joy within them.

True simplicity should connote not poverty but, rather, a richness of spirit, a joy in living, the nurturing of creativity, sensitivity to the natural world, and love for all its creatures. As an expression of this love, this true simplicity, we must then, too, commit ourselves to building a more equitable world—a world in which this simplicity may thrive and be enjoyed by everyone: "And when we find ourselves in the place just right it will be in the valley of love and delight." □