



Notes from a Blue Bike: The Art of Living Intentionally in a Chaotic World

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Life is chaotic. But we can choose to live it differently.

It doesn't always feel like it, but we do have the freedom to creatively change the everyday little things in our lives so that our path better aligns with our values and passions.

The popular blogger and founder of the internationally recognized Simple Mom online community tells the story of her family's ongoing quest to live more simply, fully, and intentionally.

Part memoir, part travelogue, part practical guide, *Notes from a Blue Bike* takes you from a hillside in Kosovo to a Turkish high-rise to the congested city of Austin to a small town in Oregon. It chronicles schooling quandaries and dinnertime dilemmas, as well as entrepreneurial adventures and family excursions via plane, train, automobile, and blue cruiser bike.

Entertaining and compelling?but never shrill or dogmatic?Notes from a Blue Bike invites you to climb on your own bike, pay attention to who you are and what your family needs, and make some important choices.

It's a risky ride, but it's worth it?living your life according to who you really are simply takes a little intention. It's never too late.

Notes from a Blue Bike: The Art of Living Intentionally in a Chaotic World Details

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Cal says

I listened to the audio book and I could not wait for it to be over. It really does sound quite pretentious, and is coming from the perspective of someone who is trying really hard but still doesn't seem to quite "get it"... living simply isn't something you can make as a conscious choice or it will always be a struggle to maintain it. Living simply is a result of certain convictions that are independent. For example, if one becomes convicted of fighting for environment or for animal rights, one becomes vegan, being vegan leads to this "slow food" philosophy naturally due to the limited availability of restaurants and processed foods. Doing ones own cooking becomes the norm. And being vegan and environmentally conscious also slashes out a lot of other behaviors she is trying to remove from her life. But you must be convicted of something in your heart, something outside of yourself, not just "I want to be happier, i want to live simply". More like "Animals deserve not to suffer for my taste" and "The earth deserves to be cared for". When you are convicted about something, something with a clear morality, changing your life is easy and it doesn't feel like an act. And it certainly does not matter what the rest of "normal people" are doing, because you are doing something which matters a good deal to you. And I know she talks in the book about having convictions about the environment and human rights, but it seems like a bit of lip service. It feels more like these "convictions" are a result of the desire to live simply, not the other way around as it should be. Like these "convictions" are fashionable accessories.

Also the chapter on eggs made me want to puke, especially when she talked about mail ordering chicks (what land of milk and honey does she think mail order chicks come from? And beyond that, who thinks its a good idea to put live animals in the mail?). This sort of obliviousness and self sabotage is exactly why her approach feels fakey to me.

I'm really glad it's over ugh. Also as someone else said, where was the blue bike. The title seems kind of gimmicky.

Gina says

Each of the forty eight chapters in this book read a bit like a mini version of itself, if that's even possible. It's almost as though each chapter was a summary of the book's intention, albeit from a slightly different angle each time. There is a lot of repetition, and it's hard to find the thread that ties each chapter together. It seems more like the book is intended as a collection of similar essays, and less like each chapter is meant to be a sequential part of a chronological whole.

"Notes From a Blue Bike" begins with a "part memoir, part how-to" vibe, but the memoirs never quite get off the ground. She mentions (many times, in many chapters) the many countries she and her expat family has lived, and the various roles and jobs they've taken on -- but she speaks of these experiences in a very general, big picture way before changing the subject again.

Ironically, as this is a book about living simply amidst chaos, the book often feels rushed, like she didn't have time to expound on any one situation. Because of this, the personal aspects of the book are lacking; it never delves deep enough for it to feel like an actual memoir. This is frustrating because over and over Tsh brings

the reader so close to her personal life -- right to the edge where you can almost see in -- but each time she pulls the focus away from herself and, without warning, changes the voice into a more reserved, almost third-party direction (this is where the how-to aspect of the book comes in). Sadly, because of the abrupt change of voice, the how-to segments feel almost like a recital or a research paper.

The topics -- and even the content -- have so much potential. Tsh is clearly a fascinating person with many unique life and travel experiences to share. I just wish some of the repetition had been edited out, and the book had taken a more chronological and personal approach.

Bethany says

I just finished this book and I feel motivated to think through my life and discover where and how my family can live more intentionally. This is why I read the book, after all, and that goal was accomplished. Well done, Tsh.

I think it is important to note that the title of the book is the "art" of living simply, not the science. Just as Picasso is not better or worse than Monet or Michaelangelo, only different; there are also many ways a family can live intentionally and each one will look very different to the other. At times, Tsh is fantastic at making this point, other times she is not.

This is where I struggled with this book. She almost lost me at the beginning on the subject of food. The tone was preachy and far from just a memoir. I have had the same issue with her podcast and her blog regarding the topic of food, however, so I know our passions just don't align in this regard.

As the work section progressed, she came across more open minded about different options and lifestyles and by the time she admitted defeat in homeschooling she had me hooked. Not because I would want anyone to feel defeated, but because she was honest about how ideals and reality don't always line up.

The book improves as it progresses and by the end I was enlightened, motivated, and moved to action.

My only other caveat is that this is not, in my opinion, a book that preaches simplicity, but rather, suggests how to better orchestrate one's own chaos. If one is looking for a prescriptive book on living more simply, I do not believe this would be the right choice.

Amy says

Meh. It was ok. I like the author's writing style, albeit condescending at times. It was an easy read while watching the Olympics. I enjoyed her personal stories, but they are just that - personal stories. The quick sum of goal for "living intentionally in a chaotic world" is to move away from what she deems the "chaotic world" of the USA. She speaks glowingly of living overseas - as if the main difficulties are language and making new friends. I know people who live overseas, and it is most definitely not full of rainbows and unicorns as the author depicts. Her advice is not "for the masses." She managed to create a blog that supports her family. That is not an easy feat, and I give her credit for that. However, it is unattainable for most families. Most families rely on employment in the 9-5 corporate world for support and can't just quit and start a home business allowing world travel. She gives four or five examples of families that did this and then

jumps to the conclusion that it is possible for everyone. She demands that every family travel overseas at least once. While this is a great dream, it is really just not possible for everyone.

She really just glosses over the topics she addresses such as schooling and food, spending most of her time talking about travel which is clearly her "thing." To me, she did not give much thought, for example, to schooling other than what her family had time and patience for. The homeschooling v. public schooling issue goes far beyond disagreements with her 5 year old...and it's really not good advice to homeschool one year and public the next and back and forth. One statement that was quite bothersome was that women (mothers in particular) should put their own needs above the needs of her children and family. I get that women need to set aside time to take care of themselves, but it is quite ridiculous and selfish to state that a women needs to prioritize her needs over the needs of her family.

I gave the book 3 stars because I did enjoy her writing style and personal stories. I still do not understand the title because the "blue bike" was only mentioned at the beginning and in the epilogue. It is catchy, I guess, and I do have a blue bike so the title made me want to ride it more often.

Courtney says

Beautiful, real, and inspiring

I loved that Tsh was humble and real, while still inspiring to live their best life. She used her own life experiences, but didn't make me feel like I needed to have the same life experiences to have an intentional and simpler, slower, more meaningful life.

Julia says

I got this as a 99 cent Kindle daily deal because some of my favorite bloggers recommended it and I enjoy The Art of Simple well enough. I like the idea of living with intention. My crunchy predilections aspire to slow food cooking and homeschooling and debt-free living. But I only wish I could be this earnest. I say this as a deracinated millennial, but It was the intentional deracination that rubbed me the wrong way and struck me as actually increasing chaos. I know Tsh's family discovered intentional living as expats but her recommendation to cultivate limitless flexibility seems to undermine her desire to live intentionally in community. I'm also glad she addressed the money question and she addressed it well. Living intentionally also means budgeting intentionally to allow her family to take these far-flung trips which gave a little more credence to the "anyone can travel" attitude of the book.

Anyway, I probably had too many thoughts on this since I read most of it during middle of the night nursing.

Elizabeth Moore says

LOVED it. And I wasn't expecting to. Normally I read slowly through creative essays but I couldn't put this book down. The short chapters and beautiful writing made it an easy & delightful read!

Sunflower says

Sharing her personal experiences from living in Turkey to moving back to the states, "Notes from a Blue Bike" is a personal journey of Tsh Oxenreider, in living an intentional life while living on a minimalist lifestyle that the author attempts to create in a way that does not interfere with the actual experience of life itself.

While filled with insightful look at her own personal journeys, "Notes fro a Blue Bike" and comparing the cultural differences she experienced with life in Turkey where the lifestyle is definitely worlds apart from that of the States, the book felt more like a personal journal than a book that the everyday woman, living in a chaotic world would be able to connect.

There are some redeeming qualities throughout the book that with discernment, one can find practical applications to ones life, but at the same time, it was difficult to really find practical tips that for many, may find themselves unable to have the same resources.

Some had to do with the short chapters and the jumping not just geographically, but memory wise that happens through out the book that reads almost in a forced hand that for someone who maybe more familiar with her style, would easily grab on, but for the new reader, it seemed difficult at times to actually find the books focus.

The book does offer some food for thought though there is a definite vast difference in cultural experiences that for the average person may have some difficulty in understanding how to apply to a "regular" life.....The premise is good, but unfortunately this is one of the rare cases where in the attempt to share ways to be more intentionally, that for the target audience....the connection isn't there.

If you're already a fan of the author and familiar with the writing, this is a good personal journal to read, but unfortunately when it comes to insights to living intentionally, although well intention, not practical for many.

Michelle Bourie says

I did ask the seller at the farmer's market where the eggs came from. That's a start.

Kathryn says

Sometimes a book comes along and it just feels good to read starting on the first page. Tsh Oxenreider writes as though she is talking to you over tea or coffee. She explains the hows and whys she and her husband are living their life intentionally. I loved it when I thought "we do that too!". Oh, how I would have loved Tsh and other authors like her when I was a young mother. I am looking forward to her newest book *At Home in the World*.

Erin says

I was really excited to get an advance copy of *Notes From A Blue Bike* to review. I care deeply about these topics on organization and intentional living and from the start I was excited to hear what this writer had to say. Unfortunately, while it's a nice read, I didn't feel like there was a lot of information shared that I didn't already know, apart from the author's personal life experiences. But if I ever had something published I wouldn't want someone to chuck a flame-thrower at my work and walk away, I'd want to know what I got right first.

I'm not familiar with the author, so I'm sure I'm not one of the hundreds of people from her blog who will write a glowing review just because she wrote something. The tone of the book vacillates between thoughtful journaling and being a bit of a snob. Not being a regular reader of Oxenreider's blog I'm sure I'm missing some context for her perspective and experience. In the middle of some of these "notes" I began to wonder if these were just recycled blog posts that were tossed together under thematic banners, but I digress...

We'll start with the positive: It's a readable, accessible book. People who write blogs and then become book-writers don't often lose any of their blogger voice. That can work for the reader when there's a how-to element to the book. If it sounds like a friend sharing, or instructing then it's much more likely you'll stay attached to the text and maybe even adopt some of the recommendations. There were drawbacks to her tone at times, but more about that later, I'm staying positive.

Another positive is that there are actually good recommendations for categorizing your goals (hers were Food, Work, Education, Travel and Entertainment). I think trying to tackle something as large as all of the loose ends of your life would be overly labor-intensive. Big picture first, then nitty gritty details. The big areas of our life would be Finances, Health, Education and Outreach. I think we can pretty much file all of our day to day cares, hopes, goals, and work under those. So, readers can find their own big topics and start brainstorming what they care about and how they want to live. I also appreciated the trial and error honesty in the Education section. Trying something new with conviction is good. Just as good is to know when to stop. The room to fail is an important thing in families and children need to know that even with big decisions there is room to switch gears most of the time. There are also a fair amount of suggestions to consider for your food journey (we'd already explored options, so it wasn't a revelation to me to look at local delivery or farmer's market options, but it might be for someone else just starting this journey).

Finally, I love the idea of topics like this being a conversation, whether with your spouse, children or friends, these things are great to talk through so you're not working in a silo. You're going to find successes and failures in others' experiences and that can be really helpful when you're not trying to waste time re-inventing the wheel. It's also nice, as things fall into place and as you feel more intentional about your life, to be able to help others get there, too. No one has to sign off on what your family is intentional about, except your family, so discussion is great, but commitment is a different thing. Good to keep that in mind if this becomes a round table discussion with friends. I felt myself being judge-y about some of Oxenreider's choices, but since I don't have to make the commitment myself, I shouldn't care. Admittedly, I didn't read every discussion question, but the ones I did read were good.

So, here are my reservations about this particular book: If you're a Tsh devotee you may just want to skip to the last paragraph to avoid getting royally ticked off over any criticism of this work at all.

Tone: When you're trying to share your experiences and what you've learned there's a fine line between sharing and snobbery, between recommendations and accusation. Overlooking how many times she mentioned she was an "expat", I was completely with her in the Food section, our family having asked and answered many of the same questions of food source, quality and cooking ourselves. But I had to bristle at remarking about the "insipid grocery store eggs". Grocery stores all over the US sell organic, free-range eggs from chickens that are treated well, live locally and are not injected with hormones. I didn't want to over-react, but man, she sounded like a jerk there. Yep, not everyone can raise chickens or hit the farmer's market, but responsible eggs can be found at the grocery store, too. There were several other examples of where she slipped over into being way too opinionated about what was "right", since I don't think she meant "just for her family". It's just a rude way to deliver a message. The complication of the memoir-ish tone is that it wasn't just "here's what we did", she instructs as well, which means you have to be more thoughtful about who is receiving that instruction. Maybe she assumes everyone who picks up her book is just like her, but I would have been more cautious about my adjectives.

Celebrity and Autonomy: In my favorite section on Education she felt the need to mention her readership in her decision-making, and place herself in a position of notoriety or celebrity: being on the fence of the homeschoolers and traditional education folks. I think it's a ridiculous thing to call out even if it felt like a true part of her life. It's not relatable, so I think it should have been omitted for the sake of all of us who were in that car with her, crying as moms over the things we want, but cannot make happen... then she has to squawk about her readership? You lost me.

Finally, where the heck is the bike? I think it's a little strange to use a bike as your banner to readers: eco-friendly, healthy, local and then spend 99% of the book on planes, in cars and not on the bike. As far as I could tell the bike was bookending the whole thing, but not much else. For all of the analyzing Oxenreider does, she doesn't document one minute of scrutinizing whether the money spent on travel to visit her "Compassion" child in another country would have been better off given directly to the family whose circumstances were so dire. Was it worth the pollution and gas too? Such is the position of people who love to travel: I love the earth, I'm eco-friendly, I care about where I buy my eggs, but don't think about the gazillion gallons of gas I consume going to the Philippines or to Australia for a week.

Anyway, if you can get past the issues on tone, you're half-way there. There is good stuff here to consider and talk about. Even starting the conversation is intentional, so you'd be on the right track. I'd read this book lightly and then dig in with folks you know and trust and look at changes that you want to make. It's worth the time too, if you're a Christian, to go through scripture with other Christians to consider whether they way you want to live aligns with serving others the way Jesus calls us to.

Mary says

A solid 3.5. I've been spoiled by reading Tsh's latest book first (At Home In The World, it's brilliant, go read it.) last year, and this one doesn't quiiite compare. I love her notes and thoughts on living simply (this has been heavy on my mind lately, and at the forefront of some big life changes that have been occurring since the start of 2018), but what I really wanted was even more travel stories. Which! Good news! Exist in ATITW. Which I think I'll go reread... right now. ?

Angelyn Vaughan says

Two stars is generous.

First, the good:

I enjoyed Tsh's style of writing. It's warm and personal without being dumbed down. The chapters felt like blog posts, but I kind of liked that.

I liked the way she enumerated and categorized the things that were really important to her and her family. I think most of us have a person or culture that we'd like to emulate at least a little, but few of us actually evaluate what we would need to change to accomplish that and whether it's worth the cost.

While I wouldn't place them all on the same plane, I share all of Tsh's values to some degree. I liked her initial desire to examine if we place too much of an emphasis on productivity vs. experience.

Now, the bad:

Snobbery and shame. Tsh says that her choices are just for her family, but proceeds to diss food bought in a normal grocery store, the public school system, and basically anyone who enjoys the typical American lifestyle without feeling guilty about it. The undertone of guilt was what bothered me the most. Apparently I don't have to give up my whole lifestyle, but I should at least feel guilty about it sometimes?

Many of her ideas are impractical, or even irresponsible. Taking your children out of school any time the mood strikes? Sorry, but that's a terrible precedent to set for someone who might have to actually work at a desk job (gasp!) some day. Speaking of which, who says that everyone who has a job in a cubicle or with a rigid schedule is unhappy? Somehow she wants to teach her children that they're responsible for where their food comes from and whether people in other countries have good living conditions, but they're not responsible to be present for a math test, work meeting, or church service. I don't get it.

She also didn't mention until the end of the book that they can only afford to buy Fair Trade food and travel willy nilly after paying off their debt and saving with Dave Ramsey's plan. I totally agree with her about financial responsibility, and it really bothered me that she didn't address this in the chapters about food and travel. Her ideals are only attainable if you have some disposable income, which she seems to think is only a question of making the right priorities, regardless of your circumstances.

I'm a dietitian, so I won't enumerate everything that bothered me about the food section, except that she used Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver (fellow writers, not nutrition professionals) as her oft-quoted sources, and that she used very negative language about foods that almost everyone enjoys. I have a degree in nutrition and I really don't know how she could have a definition for "the food (we) were created to eat."

This book was less overtly Christian than I was expecting, and that's okay. But it bothered me that she's obviously writing to a Christian audience (she references a couple Bible verses and occasionally uses God as a reason to mimic her choices), but serving/obeying/worshiping God is only an occasional byproduct of her "intentional" values. For the Christian, constructing life values is all about bringing glory to Christ. And simplicity is not the gospel. Scripture informs but doesn't clearly dictate our decisions on things like educating our children, entertaining ourselves, and choosing a workplace. We are commanded to travel or at least ensure that the gospel travels for the sake of Jesus' name among all nations - not so that we feel a little bit cooler than our all-American neighbors. Of course we can and should evaluate what would make us happy, but believing that this can give our lives meaning is essentially heresy. Lacking the intent to bring glory to Christ, choosing these "intentional" values is really no more admirable than chasing after beauty, acclaim, or possessions. It's just more counter-cultural.

icarranna says

I would have given this book 2.5 stars if Goodreads allowed halvesies, but I couldn't quite bring myself to give it 3, even though I like Tsh Oxenreider and I have liked other things that she has written (including her two previous books). I have been a fan of her blog for a long time, and definitely appreciated that this was NOT a rehashing of her blog (I hate that about bloggers-turned-authors). Rather it was a memoir and commentary of sorts.

What was unfortunate about this book was the subtitle "The Art of Living Intentionally in a Chaotic World." Because the memoir part was anything BUT that. She describes living overseas and the experiences there and the contrast to American culture. Get that. But then her descriptions of their life are go-go-go as she and her husband juggle the blog as their primary source of income and three small children. It was almost TOO real, as it whisked me away from the "simple living" essence of her blog to a working mom, just like all of us. And maybe that is really their life, but then it makes her blog feel less authentic (whereas before I had ALWAYS read it as very authentic compared to others and thought that she had truly mastered the art of living simply). I was hoping to glean suggestions or insights on living intentionally, because I have always found her writing very inspiring, but instead I found myself reading a book about a woman spinning her wheels like the rest of us - except that she has the freedom and flexibility of self-employment that so many people do not have.

It did remind me that as of late I have found her blog to be more "commercial" - which has happened to many blogs I read. Over the years, as they grow and become real money-makers, some of the blogs I've liked the best have lost that voice and quality which made them unique in the first place. Which is too bad, because I do like Tsh's writing. At one point, she was a person I thought I'd like to sit down and have a cup of coffee with. Now after reading this, I'm not so sure.

Kristyn says

Another part-memoir, part-X type book. While I enjoy this genre, I'm often left feeling like the book was not enough of either. This book was no different; not enough how-to or depth, but also not enough details on the memoir side.

I enjoyed this book overall, but it didn't amount to enough. The chapters were so short that it seemed she hadn't quite gotten to the revelation or the depth before another chapter began. While I liked the glimpse of her life and how her family operates, most of these topics felt old and regurgitated. I think a big chunk of her audience is already familiar with the basics of living simply, eating whole foods, alternative education, etc., and is probably looking for more than a few tidy quotes and memoirish vignettes. Sad to say, there's nothing really new to her ideas as she presents them here.

I happened upon Ms. Oxenreider's first book at the library a few years ago, and only then found her blog. I think those looking for concrete steps at organization and living simply would appreciate that book. This book is more of a relaxed, sipping-coffee-on-the-couch, low expectations kind of book.
