

# 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 back-track 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 re-

newal. 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 clean-ups, 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 counter-cultural 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.