Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider

Episode 183

thesimpleshow.com

Segment One

Tsh: 00:00:02 This is Simple; I’m Tsh Oxenreider.

Hey friends, in this episode I’m chatting with my friend Andrea Debbink, co-host of the show and regular contributor and managing editor for The Art of Simple. As always in this episode, we’re spring boarding off what we wrote about this week. Andrea talks about life lessons she’s learned about writing in the writing process. Even if you’re not a writer or even in a sort of work where you create something, you will glean some wisdom here so don’t think this isn’t for you if you’re not the writing sort, you’ll be surprised. And then because this week I wrote about podcasts I’m currently into, in this chat I’m talking about kind of the opposite, the beauty and necessity of silence, why we all need it more than ever in our information overloaded culture and how the science backs me up on this. And then in the third segment, Stephanie Langford and I answer another one of your travel questions. This one’s a fun one, actually. Let’s get right into it. Here’s Andrea and me talking about life lessons learned from the writing life and why every one of us needs to carve out intentional silence in our lives.

00:01:14 All right, Andrea, I cannot wait to hear from you. Based on your post this week about writing lessons, tell us a little bit about what inspired this thought of yours.

Andrea: Actually what inspired my post this week is the transition that I’ve been making myself right now in my professional work. I’ve recently had a full circle moment in my life because I just left my full time job as an editor at American Girl where I was for about the past nine years. I actually took a similar step about 10 years ago where I had left my corporate job and decided to freelance full-time, freelance writing, specifically. That was pretty disastrous a decade ago when I did it. As I’m doing it now, I’m just realizing how much I’ve learned in the past decade and a lot of the things that I wish I would’ve known at the time.

As I started writing this post, I just realized, wow, I’ve actually learned a lot about writing in the past 10 years as I’ve been working as an editor and as I’ve continued to pursue my own writing on the side. It just made sense to me to start writing down those lessons and they neatly formed themselves into a five
key lessons that I think I’ve learned. That’s what I ended up writing about this week.

Tsh: I think what’s really cool and interesting, just to get a glimpse behind the scenes is that when I first talked to you it was for a Women's Work episode, which I’ll link to in the show notes, about your work as an editor at American Girl. I love that we snagged you in the last few months of work where we got to find out a little bit about that side of your work. Now this episode almost has, I don’t want to say more meaning, but we get a bigger picture, a more well rounded picture of your perspective here. I’m really curious if, like you just said, you’ve learned a lot as an editor, but I wonder also how much of this has to do with both, just naturally aging and the wisdom we have accrue and also the landscape changing a little bit, at least online. Do you feel like either of those play into that as well?

Andrea: Absolutely. 10 years ago, it was actually the Fall of 2008 that I had quit my assistant editor job where I was working at a regional magazine and it was in the Fall of 2008 that I decided I was going to try to do full time freelance writing. 2008 was a really bad time to quit your job. I mean, obviously you had the recession, but there was just so much going on in media at the time. I felt like a lot of traditional print media was changing or dying in some cases, but blogs hadn’t really fully started to reach their potential yet. Digital media just wasn’t even close to where it is today. It was a really challenging time because the landscape was shifting a lot. And of course today it continues to shift, but I just feel like 10 years ago it was this very strange in between time for media.

Tsh: I often think of blogging back then as the wild, wild west. There were no rules and no norms. I mean it’s still is in a lot of ways. You can still make it up. But you know, whenever people ask me how did I start a blog, I want to tell them I know how to start one in 2008 but 2019. Oh my goodness. I am not quite sure. I mean not really, but it’s just so different. I completely get what you mean.

Let’s dive in a little bit to some of these things that you have learned. I want to say, listeners, whether or not you’re interested in writing, I think this can help springboard into broader ideas that go beyond writing. To me this is a lot more about like how we think about life and work than it is specifically about writing, although that is the illustrative point here. That’s my take when I’m gathering wisdom from you here, Andrea.

Andrea: A lot of these things I learned about writing actually applied to creativity in general or whatever form of creativity you decided to pursue and also just any kind of work that you decide to pursue. The first thing that I wrote about in this week’s post was the lesson that writing is a craft, not a lifestyle.
That was a huge myth that led me to quit my job 10 years ago. I was really stuck on this idea that in order to be a real “writer,” it had to be my full-time job. And not only did it have to be my full-time job, but that’s how I had to earn all of my money. I was pretty naive. I had some money in savings, but I just thought I’m going to quit my job and I’m going to start submitting pieces too, at that time magazines. There wasn’t a lot of paid digital content happening at the time, so it was pretty much still traditional, submitting to magazines, submitting to newspapers and I just had this idea that I had to work from home and do this as my full-time job, get business cards. I have to admit that part of this lifestyle that I was pursuing was starting to be fed by what I was seeing online. What I was seeing in the early blogs, what I was seeing on Pinterest, there was this very aspirational picture of the modern writer that was forming online at that time that I think really fed into this myth for me. But the reality was when I actually started pursuing writing full time, I learned some things pretty quickly right away.

One, it’s hard to make a steady income doing that, at least initially when you’re a total beginner with no experience like I was. Also, when you write full time for your job, you’re not always necessarily writing about the things that you want to write about. I was writing about other people’s weddings. I was writing about stereo equipment. I was writing about things that were particularly interesting to me…

Tsh: You had to write about stereo equipment?

Andrea: Right? I'm not passionate about stereo systems, it's hard to believe. I found that I pretty much had to say yes to everything back then because I needed the money. I needed to pay my rent and I was single and living with roommates. I didn't have health insurance, which is also a major mistake. Finally, about a year of trying that and not doing very well at it, is actually when I applied for and got the job at American Girl.

I left that whole freelance life behind for a time and a couple of years after I had started at American Girl, I actually read this novel called Under the Wide & Starry Sky, which is a fictional retelling of Robert Lewis Stevenson’s life from the perspective of his wife. There’s this really poignant section in the book that just really hit me when I read it, where at this point in this story, Robert Louis Stevenson has an adult stepson who is also pursuing being a writer. But unlike Robert Louis Stevenson, his stepson really gets caught up in the idea of being a writer and that whole literary culture and the celebrity of it and that sort of thing. And he makes this observation where he says that his stepson wanted the life of the writer more than the art. When I read that line, I thought he was describing me in my mid-twenties.
Tsh: 00:08:41    Sure. I mean, that's reflective of me too when I started out, I get that.

Andrea: Yeah, where you just have this aspirational image in your head of what it means to be a writer. That's what I was focusing on rather than actually getting better at my craft or figuring out what it was I actually wanted to write about. It's like a part two to writing as a craft, not a lifestyle. I think the lesson I got from that was there's more than one way to be a writer.

Tsh: 00:09:09    Right. That whole lifestyle more than the art, I think so many times it's easy for us to want to have written than to want the daily work of writing because we picture the final result. You can hold a book in your hands that you have published and you're not thinking about what is it like daily to be a writer. It's like butt in chair, pretty monotonous, just typing away, looking at a screen. That's what this is reflective of in so many ways to me. I think sometimes we think of who I want to be and not really the steps it takes to get to just that work. This also reminds me, do you know who Shawn Smucker is?

Andrea: No.

Tsh: 00:09:54    He's a friend of mine and he writes fiction and mostly a middle grade fiction or a young adult. I forget which genre, one of those two. But he's a fantastic guy and he writes about writing a lot on Twitter and on his blog. The thing he's really transparent about is just what it's like to make a living as a writer. He has six kids. By day or by night, I don't know how he slices it, is an Uber driver and this is what he does to make sure he has a steady income while he's working on books and he talks all the time about this. Both like what the experiences as being an Uber driver, but also just that this is the reality that the vast majority of us, we don't make our living just from writing books. And he also talks about the side benefit being, he gets to meet all sorts of interesting people, many of whom ended up becoming characters in his book, which I think is really cool.

Andrea: 00:10:44    That's awesome. So he just uses it all as thought for his writing.

Tsh: 00:10:47    Exactly. But that kind of thing, that to me is also illustrative of this whole point. That the reality of being a modern writer isn't the 1920s in Paris with Fitzgerald and Hemingway sitting around drinking and talking about their works of art.

Andrea: 00:11:00    Right? Yeah. I think that's, looking back on that now, where I'm at today. The irony and all of this is, that I just recently quit my job again and I'm doing freelance. But this time it was very strategic in making sure that writing is not the main piece of what I'm doing. I am doing writing. I'm actually writing a
nonfiction middle grade book right now and working on a pitch for another book. I would say that's a smaller piece of my overall workload. A lot of what I'm doing these days is just other editorial tasks. I'm a fact checker for a magazine. I'm a virtual assistant for another author. It's cobbled together all these other publishing related tasks, but it's not putting all of the pressure and the weight on writing.

Tsh: 00:11:51 And I will add because I don't know if going to say this, but you're also the Managing Editor of The Art of Simple.

Andrea: That's a good point, yes.

Tsh: You wear more hats than just being a regular on the podcast.

Andrea: 00:12:03 It's a diverse mix of things. Moving on to number two, the second lesson that I learned is just the importance of word count goals. They keep me writing unlike anything else. Back when I was working nine to five job outside of my home, I would pretty much only be able to write before work in the morning. I would get up really early, like 5:30 and write for an hour a few days a week. Initially, I set the goal of writing for five hours a week. But a time goal actually wasn’t all that great for me in the end because as an editor I love revising my work sometimes more than I like generating new work. When I set an hourly goal for five hours a week of writing, I’d actually spend a lot of that time just reworking the stuff I’d already written.

An easy fix for that for me was actually setting a monthly word count goal. That made me realize the important thing was to churn out the new stuff, not just continually go back and revise the old stuff. Also, it broke me of my perfectionism when it came to writing. I feel like when I set a time goal, I was constantly looking for one perfect hour at a time where I could sit down at my computer in our den and write. Whereas, when I had a word count goal, I started writing anywhere and everywhere. I’d be in the line at the grocery store with my phone and I just tap out 50 words in my notes app as I was waiting or I’d email myself something, a hundred words or write some paragraphs in my notebooks. Writing became much more infused in my life when it was a word count, goal versus time.

Tsh: 00:13:48 Now I’m curious when it comes to goals, some of us do better with short goals, long goals, rewarding ourselves if we reach it, “punishing” ourselves if we don’t. Do you have some system that you have found that works for you? If you meet your word count goal, what happens for you?

Andrea: 00:14:07 Basically, I just feel good about it.
Tsh: 00:14:09 And that’s the reward for you?

Andrea: 00:14:12 It is. I’m definitely a person who loves checklists, so if I can get to the end of a month and realize, okay, I hit that goal, circle it at off. Usually, that’s good enough for me.

Tsh: 00:14:23 I can’t remember if I talked about this. I think I did talk about this in a podcast episode. I’ll look it up and link to it, but not too long ago, I mentioned this on Instagram stories, that idea of breaking the chain. Do you know what I mean by that? The Seinfeld method of writing? Some of us have that calendar where you just mark an x over the day. You met your daily goal, for example, a word count or for his sake, I think it was writing one joke and then before too long you don’t want to break the chain any more and that almost becomes the goal. The word count is the goal, but it’s for that feeling of, I don’t want to break the chain. I get that.

Andrea: 00:14:52 That totally works for me too. I haven’t done that with my word count goal since it’s a monthly thing. But I’ve definitely done it for other things in my life and it’s hard to get started in the chain for me, but once I’m three in, then I really feel the pressure, I don’t want to break this.

Tsh: Yes, exactly. So, you have a monthly goal.

Andrea: I do because then that gives me more freedom throughout the month when life happens.

Tsh: 00:15:19 For sure. I like that too. That makes a lot of sense. That’s a really good piece of advice there.

Moving on, what was your next thing?

Andrea: The next was just everyone’s rough drafts are rough.

Tsh: Amen.

Andrea: I don’t think I knew this 10 years ago. I was in this place where I thought people that are amazing writers, like that’s their finished book, is their first draft. And it’s definitely not true. I know that now from working in book publishing. The time that I realized this most significantly was when I was a part of a week long children’s writing workshop. There’s a great literary center in the Twin Cities called The Loft. I took a week long course there and as a part of the course, we went on a field trip to a library at the University of Minnesota. And at this particular library they have what’s called the Kerlan Collection.
It’s a collection of children’s literature, but not just the finish books. They have tons of rough drafts and galleys and the paper trail for these books in addition to the finish books. When we were there on this field trip to the library, it’s actually got out some of this paper trail. They had rough drafts and galleys from some of these books. I remember in particular picking up one of the rough drafts for Kate DiCamillo’s, Because of Winn-Dixie. I love her books. To pick up this, I don’t think it was handwritten, but there were definitely tons of handwritten comments all over it from her, from her editor. Just to see that rough draft of a writer I really respected and realize, oh, this is where she starts too. It was just really powerful for me as a writer to see that. It’s a good reminder for all of us.

Tsh: 00:17:06 I think of that one quote from Anne Lamott, which I’m not going to say verbatim here because I like having the little clean logo in our podcast, but she talks about everybody having, I’m going to just say the word terrible first drafts. When I first read that and she talks about you actually need to give yourself permission to write that terrible first draft, you got to get it out. That was really freeing for me to hear this accomplished writer, who’s writing I loved, say something like that. When I think back to my latest book At Home in the World, my first draft was terrible. I cringe thinking about it and I went ahead and turned it in because I needed to meet deadline. Looking back now I can see, oh my gosh, I hope that never sees the light of day by anybody because it was so bad. I ended up rewriting most of it, but at least I had that framework now. I’m like you, sometimes I like to revise and edit more than I like to create. At least there are times. But having gotten all that down helped me then create the work I ended up being proud of. I think we’re all in this together. I don’t think there’s anybody out there who can just like brilliantly spit out a perfect draft that needs no revising. What’s next?

Andrea: 00:18:19 The next one is writers need readers. And this was an important lesson for me because I am very private about my writing, to a fault. This probably reflects poorly on me, but I’m so private about my writing that my husband can walk into the room while I’m working on something on the computer and I will throw myself in front of the screen and tell him that he can’t read it because he’ll try to read over my shoulder sometimes. My writing really started to change when I started to let people in to my writing process, not just reading the finished drafts that I was coming up with, but to actually share with other friends, many who are writers themselves, that the process, the rough draft that we were just talking about. Sometimes these people that read my work, they don’t necessarily need to be writers themselves, but it definitely helps because then sometimes there’s an exchange that happens. I’ll give my writing into a friend and then she’ll give her writing to me and we’ll have this little mini workshop between the two of us. I’ve just realized as hard as it can be exposing
yourself to other people’s critique, it’s so important to grow as a writer and to develop your own writing.

Tsh: One of the reasons I feel like I became so proud of *At Home in the World*, that last book, was because I ended up having three editors on it that was a happy accident. A long story, I won’t get into this time, but one of the writers was a dear friend of mine who was also a writer and I really trusted him and he would say things that initially would sting a little. But he was so right in every single bit of critique he said that he made me a better writer and to this day I now say, I’ll never write another book without him being an editor. I pay for, on my own without the publishers being involved in it because I want that perspective. Yes and amen to absolutely every bit you just said. Your last point, what was it?

Andrea: My last point is editors are your friend and can be your best collaborators.

Tsh: Okay. There you go.

Andrea: You just illustrated perfectly. It was interesting in the first job I had as an assistant editor back at that regional magazine I mentioned, we did have a lot of freelancers who would write for us and some of them were new to freelancing and to writing. One thing that I noticed is really common, particularly among new writers, was their resistance to being edited. And that’s where actually a lot of our problems came up in working with freelancers back then was just people not being willing to collaborate with the editor to make their piece stronger. It actually surprised me at the time. But one thing that I’ve realized since then is just what an awesome collaborative relationship you can have between an editor and a writer.

Because I think it’s important for writers to know that, most of the time a good editor has the same goal that you do. They want your writing to be strong and it’s their job to bring out the best in it. I think my experience as an editor has made me much more open as a writer and actually really eager to develop that relationship with the editors I work with. Right now, actually, I’m working on a manuscript for a middle grade nonfiction book and I’m working with an editor on the book and it’s so far we’ve actually just got started a couple of weeks ago, but so far I’ve just loved the back and forth that we’ve had. And like you said, it’s not always easy to hear critique of your work or to get that feedback, but it’s already making this book better just to have that back and forth.

Tsh: I definitely believe that behind that every great writer is a fantastic editor. I don’t know if you’re like this, do you read the acknowledgements in a book when you’re done?
Andrea: I always do.

Tsh: I do too. I feel like it's like staying for the credits of a movie. I want to give credit to that foley artist and the key grip. And so to me it's the same thing. I read all these names I don't know, because I feel like these are all the people that made this book what it is, including the editor. There's no way anything gets published without good editing.

The beauty of this topic of yours is, like we said at the top, you could insert any sort of creative adjective here. If it's not writing, it's something else, or maybe even not creative, but it's creating something. All of these things can apply, collaboration, having good feedback, letting yourself do bad work at first. All these things I think can apply to so many parts of life. I think it should be hopefully really encouraging and inspiring to listeners regardless of whether they want to write or not.

Andrea: Yes, absolutely.

Segment Two

Tsh: With this new format of how we're doing the podcast, we will either dive deeper into what we wrote about or we'll just use that topic as a springboard to talk about something else. And the latter is the case for me today because this week I wrote about eight current podcast I'm really into these days. I listen to all sorts and I don't know if you do this Andrea, I ebb and flow. There are times when I listen to a show more and I'll deep dive and binge on it and then I won't listen to it for six months back and forth. My podcast repertoire changes a lot.

Andrea: I go into these seasons of, I think we talked about this before but just really be deep into audio books and then I'll run out of audio books so I'll switch back to podcasts. I feel like I'm constantly going back and forth between podcasts and audio books.

Tsh: I do too. I'm still into audio books right now. In fact, I will right now prioritize audio books over podcasts just because I'm really into long form these days. But that doesn't mean I won't, okay, I've got 30 minutes before I need to be somewhere, I'm just going to listen to a podcast or something like that. That post I wrote was eight great podcasts and a good episode to just try out if you've never tried out that show before. It was a really pretty straightforward, simple piece I wrote. I was craving that I, because I feel like the past few posts I've written have been deep and a bit vulnerable. It was nice and practical, but I figured I'm not going to just talk more about these shows.
Instead. I wanted to talk about almost the flip side. I wanted to talk a little bit
about silence and why silence has been really essential to my life lately and also
why it’s hard for me and I think hard for a lot of us. There’s couple of moments
that I can look back on with a bit of accuracy about this whole thing. Back when
we were traveling around the world, I met with a spiritual director and she
couraged me to take a day of silence. This was in Chiang Mai, Thailand,
during my time there. She recommended this one particular monastery, a
Catholic monastery in town, and they just allow day visitors. And so I did. And
the funny thing is, this is a monastery but in the heart of the city. While it’s
beautiful and has natural surroundings, basically behind the fence is traffic and
stores and airplanes going overhead. There was a lot of that cacophony of city
life in the background. I found myself so easily distracted that day. That to me
was almost the most insightful part of my day of silence was how hard it was to
have a day of silence. It was just interesting to me that I just felt so fidgety at
first. I was constantly aware of the traffic and the airplanes going overhead. It
was like I had something shiny syndrome, as soon as a plane would fly overhead,
I would stop and look at that. It took me several hours to calm down. I think of
you, Andrea, when you were talking about meditation in our last episode
together, I would try to meditate by use of an app and I just could not settle
down, so I spent a lot of that day writing and reading and that ended up
ultimately being good for me, but it was a real challenge.

Last year I did a silent weekend, mostly silent. There are a few times when it
wasn’t by going to a place called The Quiet House here in central Texas. It’s a
part of Laity Lodge and you can rent a house and it’s at most two people. It’s up
on a hill. It is so remote that you can’t even drive all the way to you park at the
welcome check in place of the camp and then they drive you up the rest of the
way because you have to have special tires to get up this hill that’s full of rocks
and you even have to cross a river. Once you’re up there you have no cell
reception, no anything. You have CB radio in case of emergencies and they say
if you go anywhere, because there’s a hiking trail up there that’s private just for
this house. They say if you go on that, make sure you bring your walkie talkie just
in case. It was a little bit disorienting. I want to say it was a little bit scared the
first night because it is totally quiet and it’s a little bit weird how much you don’t
have that in life. But it ended up being a fantastic experience to have a silent
weekend completely to myself. It was really just the thing I needed to be out in
nature and just to kind of hear my own thoughts I guess. I only say that to point
out like the difference with a few years span between that day of silence versus a
silent weekend, I felt like I had grown a bit in being able to welcome silence into
my life.

Andrea: 00:32:13 That sounds amazing. That’s been on my list for a while of what I
would like to do at some point is to take like a silent retreat overnight. I just
realized that there's actually a place, there's a monastery in my city that offers something similar. It's almost like a really cheap hotel. It's a nice monastery, it's not a hotel. You spend the night, you get a little room, there's nature trails. That sounds amazing.

Tsh: 00:32:36 I would totally do that. The thing I was surprised about when I signed for The Quiet House was at the time when I signed up, I thought I'm going to go in maybe a month or two. I had to sign up almost a year in advance because it was so booked. Okay, well I guess I'll go at this time. And of course whenever the time showed up, having signed up for so long ago, I go through these thoughts of like, I don't really want to go. This is a bad time. Things are busy, which of course is a sign that that is exactly when you do need to go. I'm so glad I followed through and went with it and it's basically making me want to go and sign up for another weekend because I know it'll be another year from when we talk right now.

I'm not saying I'm good at silence. It's still a challenge for me. But I have learned I need to temper all this information consumption in my life with silence. I've found three distinct benefits that I want to talk about why silence has been really good for me. And part of it really has to do with this foundational idea that I am not what I consume. I think that's really important for us to remember whenever we live in a culture where literally we can basically find out anything we want from the thing in our pockets. No more, do we have this I'm going to just sit with this question because I can't find the answer. We don't live in that world anymore. It's good to remember from not gathering information, that that's not my identity. I am not what I read, what I listen to. What I even care about in terms a type of thing that I am so much more than that, that that's just a part of me. Consuming is not my identity. That's really surprisingly harder than you would think. With that in mind, the first of the three reasons that silence is important...I mean it sounds obvious, but it's so I can think. I mentioned with the consumption, I find there is a tipping point to collecting information. I don't know if you find this, but at some point I cannot take in any more information I need to stop and process it. If I'm just constantly listening to an audio book and a podcast and reading and talking and blah, blah, blah, at some point, none of this will be helpful anymore or I'm not going to remember any of this anymore, I actually need to think.

My default is to play an audio book or a podcast in the car because it keeps me relatively calm in traffic, it's good for me, But if I'm going to need to listen to something in the car to make me be okay with being in the car, then I personally have found a real benefit and taking two walks a day. They don't have to be major hikes or anything, walking through my neighborhood and I like to have at least one of them earbuds free, in fact phone free. I don't bring anything that'll
even tempt me. Just go on a walk. It is surprising how weird that is. Who am I just to go on a walk? It feels weird. Like you almost need to have a purpose. Like I'm going to listen to something or I need to catch up on something. I need to make a call to a friend or something. No, no, no. Just going on a walk. It's really helpful for me to think, to slowly let my brain just process whatever it is without an agenda. I think this is especially important as a creative, it's important for anybody, but if somebody who creates things for work, we need that quiet to discover the ideas that are percolating and to find that inspiration we need. Thinking is the first reason for being quiet. Andrea, do you have similar experience?

Andrea: Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting that you mentioned that you like to take two walks a day because from what I've read about other writers, that's such a writer thing. I don't know if you're familiar with the book Daily Rituals by Mason Currey.

Tsh: I am not. It sounds like something I would like.

Andrea: It is a great book. It's a book full of many biographies on different creatives, writers, thinkers and it talks about their daily schedule. I was just surprised when I read it, the number of writers from the past, throughout history where walking outside each day was actually a part of their creative process, especially Charles Dickens. Apparently he was famous for just the number of miles he would put on walking around the city of London.

Tsh: Oh, that is cool.

Andrea: That is where he got so much of his inspiration, was just out in the world. Of course, he didn't have the distractions that we do like earbuds or whatever. I totally agree with that. I think there's something special about having that silence and especially just walking like you said.

Tsh: Yeah, that's very cool. I had no idea of that connection. There you go. Well, the second thing, it's funny that you mentioned in a city, because for me personally, the second reason I need silence so that I can hear the world around me and in particular in nature, for me anyway. I think for most of us actually, that the reality is most of us do not live out in the country. I think the bulk of us live in either cities or some kind of suburbs situation. We have to intentionally seek out going for a walk in the woods. We can't just open our back doors. Some of you might and that's, consider yourself blessed in that way. But I was reminded of this actually last week. I got to our kids' school a few minutes early. Our school sits on five acres of basically wooded property.
The kids have free rein within those boundaries to, during their outside time to just run and build forts, play in the creek. That's one of the reasons we really love this school. I know. I decided I'm just going to go on a little like on one of these trails, I had our dog with us. So Ginny and I just went on a little walk and I was reminded because I purposely left my phone in the car and no earbuds and I could hear the little animals doing their thing. The snap of the twigs as we walked the breeze, the creek in the distance and it's not like I went far, it wasn't some kind of day trip. It was literally 15 minutes before my kids got out of school. I was reminded of how those sounds are so necessary in my life and that they really are still around us, believe it or not, we just need to stop enough to pay attention to them.

Even if you're in the suburbs you can find little creeks or ponds or there are trees and the wind blows through. You can hear those things. The birds chirping, especially as we get into Spring. It reminds me of this one quote, from the poet Mary Oliver, whom I love. She says we need beauty because it makes us ache to be worthy of it.

Andrea: Oh, that's beautiful.

Tsh: Yeah. To me this is what that's like. In her other famous quote to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work. I think if we want and need to pay attention, I think we also just by default, need beauty because we need to be reminded of what this world can be and could be and should be. For me in particular, I'm a highly sensitive person, which I've talked about on the podcast and blog before. I'll put a link in the show notes, if you're curious what that means. For me, as an HSP, sounds from nature are restorative for me because I am acutely aware of my stimulation and surroundings, otherwise. I can hear every little noise, when my kids get loud, too much artificial light, clutter in the house. All those things are very jarring to me. At some point I'm filled and so sounds of nature are literally a restorative for me and I need that regularly. To me, a really good takeaway personally and maybe for someone else's, it can really be 15 minutes. You don't need a Saturday with nothing on the agenda to go on a hike, although that's fantastic and yes, do that. But even if you can't do that, find your partial solution and just go sit underneath the tree for 15 minutes sometime this week and you'll be surprised at how much better you feel.

Andrea: 00:40:17 Yes, that's absolutely true. There's so much recent research that suggests that's true for everyone. I don't know if you've heard of the book The Nature Fix?

Tsh: No. Tell me more. You are a wealth of books today.
Andrea: I've read a lot of books lately apparently. I feel like every one of these things, here's a book you can read about this. *The Nature Fix* is by Florence Williams. In the book, she's exploring all the different ways that nature is beneficial to us. She's following these researchers that are actually all over the world. She reports and some researchers in Korea and some researchers in the US and in Britain. Going back to what you were saying about the sounds of nature, that's actually something that some scientists are studying right now and they've actually found in particular birdsong, has positive effects on our brain. These scientists who are studying this actually recommend that you purposely listen to bird song for a few minutes every day. This book, I think you'd love it because it's totally hits on a lot of these things you're talking about and it's amazing to see that a lot of these things are universally true for people, but we just got away from having that regular nature in our lives.

Th: 00:41:31 I'll go look into that for sure when we're done. That takes me back to over 10 years ago now when we were living in Turkey in this urban high rise apartment, and this was right when I was diagnosed with depression. We flew suddenly to Thailand so that I can meet with a therapist and do the whole bit. The first full morning, I remember waking up and hearing birdsong and it made me realize how long it had been since I had heard that. And it was, oh my gosh, this is life. This is exactly what I needed and I didn't know at the time. That's interesting you say that. To prep for the show, I did do a little bit of research and you're totally right, the science does back some of this up.

There's a thing called attention restoration theory where it talks about how our prefrontal cortex, which is where we take in information like where we think logically, it can become overloaded and we need to restore our resources through, I should say environments with lower levels of sensory input. And so that's why things like silence can help and probably why nature can help as well because it's a lower sensory input than like our screens and the traffic and the city noise and that kind of thing. Another interesting bit of science is that noise pollution has been found to lead to things like high blood pressure and elevated cortisol levels. Whenever that happens, it activates our brains and amygdala, which you know, releases the stress hormone, the cortisol. And so we enter into this fight or flights system, this way of being more than we even realize it just on a day to day basis. It's very interesting to me.

The third reason, I've mentioned the first one is so I can think and the second one is so I can hear the world around me, especially nature. The third reason for me is that, so I can hear from God. I'm a Christian. I know Andrea you are too. But I know not everyone listening is and no matter where you stand, I'm just glad you're here. This is not meant to make you feel weird or anything. I am just sharing my own perspective. For me personally, of course I can hear from God.
through all sorts of things; music, other people, wisdom from some of these
books I love to read, all sorts of ways. Even in the midst of the loud, crazy chaos
of life, I absolutely can hear from God as I’m making dinner and taking kids to
school, but there really is something special for me personally about hearing the
voice of God in the quiet.

I was reminded of this on that very walk with Ginny at the school campus
because I gathered some answers to prayers I had had and I didn’t even know
that they were right there. I felt like I could hear them because I was in the quiet
of nature. Similar to the first point about so I can think, I feel like at some point I
have to stop consuming and in this case even stop thinking about these things
in my life and just let the wisdom of God and life do its work in me. Being out in
silence is what basically that translates into. I think about that quiet retreat I
took, I felt like I got a number of things answered in my life when I had been
questioning some things to God for a while.

It was because I was in silence that I could actually hear that. It reminds me a
little bit, I’m going to talk about this in an upcoming episode soon here on the
pod about this idea of collecting gurus. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of
that?

Andrea: I have heard of that.

Tsh: Our friend Emily P. Freeman talks about this some where at some point you got
to stop collecting gurus because you’re just going to get overloaded. I had
found myself just doing that too much and I needed to stop looking for wisdom,
if that makes sense. We can just hear from God the author of all wisdom and
silence helps me do that. Especially sometimes when things just feel, I don’t
want to say angsty but just full and it’s just a gift to do that I find for myself.

Andrea: 00:45:25 It’s funny that you even mentioned that cause I feel like for me
from a spiritual standpoint, that’s something I’ve been learning over the past few
years too, is just how important having silence from a spiritual perspective is. A
couple of years ago, I think it was one of my pastors gave a sermon on silence,
on sabbath, the idea of taking a day off and unplugging each week. I actually
wrote down a quote that he said because it stuck with me since then. He said
blank space is at the heart of good design. He was comparing our lives to music
or writing and about how it’s the pauses between the notes that makes noise
music and it’s the space between words on a page that actually makes meaning,
separates letters into words. I love that picture because it’s such a good
reminder for me that the same is true of our lives. We need that space and that
silence to make sense of all the information and all the input that we’re getting
all the time.
That’s really a great way to put it. What a great way to wrap this up, this idea of how do I turn this noise into music in my life, therefore… I don’t think anybody listening to this can’t relate to the idea of information overload. We have to be proactive in combating this. If Charles Dickens needed to back in Victorian England, we for sure need to in 2019. We have to be intentional here.

A few things that I have found that work for me, maybe one or two of these will stick to anybody listening to actually put on the calendar time to get out in nature. Even if that’s 15 or 20 minutes. Make a date with yourself. Don’t just hope it’ll happen one day. Although take advantage of those surprising moments like I did waiting for my kids, whenever you have a chance. But otherwise make a date with yourself. Go on a walk or a drive or whatever you need to and leave devices at home. It’s surprising how much we’ll come up with a reason to need to check something quickly if we have it on us. Don’t trust your own ability to just ignore the thing in your pocket. Leave it at home. Perhaps start a habit of no noise 30 minutes before bed. I might try this. I’m not great at this so far, especially you know with kids and you can’t control that, please stop talking. Perhaps that looks like reading or journaling. I know we just talked about not consuming things, but if there’s some kind of book that can calm me like a book of poetry or some kind of reflective piece perhaps that can help quiet the noise in your head.

I think this idea of front porch dates, I’ve talked about this before on the pod, Kyle and I, whenever the weather is nice, we’ll take advantage of 10 or 15 minutes out on our front porch in our rocking chairs, whatever that looks like for you. Whether that’s your back porch or a little chair in your house or some kind of spot, your bathtub, whatever. You know or a little nook in your home that just feels restorative, make sure you take some time in that place so it doesn’t have to be going somewhere or it costs any money, take advantage of where you are. Then the flip side of that is perhaps when you are out and about and you’re just craving silence, there’s some good places in our culture. Yeah, we’ve got the coffee shops and the loud restaurants, but there’s also perhaps a church nearby where the sanctuary is open during the week. That’s always quiet. Museums are almost always quiet. You can find a place that, especially if it’s free, you can just walk around and look at art or some kind of other interesting exhibit. Libraries obviously are quiet sometimes. My local library actually is not. There’s got to be a spot where it’s quiet and you could just find a chair and bring your journal and just kind of sit and enjoy. There are pockets of quiet to be found even in our busy, crazy, loud world.

I think this combo of silence and writing is really spot on and serendipitous.

Andrea: Yeah, it’s awesome how they fit together so well.
I am here again with Stephanie Langford, travel friend extraordinaire and we are here to answer your travel questions again. This is from Kerri Annielise and Kerri asks us what are the best international places to travel for complete newbies. This is a really fun one. Kerri, I'm going to assume you are American or North American of some sorts. So when you say international, you mean outside North America. That's just my guess here. So Steph, what are your initial thoughts for Kerri?

Stephanie: I thought of three criteria that I would look for initially. First, I would probably choose somewhere with less of a time zone difference because if you don't have to worry about getting over lag or very extreme jet lag, I think that just makes for a smoother introduction into international travel. That's number one. Number two, I think I would choose a place where English is maybe one of the languages spoken in that area, even if it's not the only language or it's not the primary language, but where English is going to be a little bit more common to reduce that language barrier. You still get some exposure to new languages, but it's not quite as hard to get around. That's my number two and number three would be to pick somewhere that's more established on the tourist trail that has a better tourism infrastructure. I think that that could also help to make your first trip a little bit easier than somewhere where you have to really do the independent thing and you have to figure a lot of it out yourself. If you go somewhere that's got that more firmly entrenched tourism, you're gonna find it easier to figure out all of the sites and the transportation and all of that stuff for your first time.

Those are good points I hadn't even thought of. I hadn't thought of the time zone one, so I really like that. That's not going to be relevant in my suggestions, but I want to hear what you have to say. I 100% agree with the infrastructure and the language. Not that you can't absolutely go somewhere where English is not the primary language and in fact I really think everybody should at least once in your life. But those are really good points. I mean, here's the thing, the benefit of being a native English speaker is that there are so many options for us. We are not short on ideas because so many places around the world understand English as a widely spoken second language. There's so many options, so, Steph, I agree.

And I would say those aren't by any means hard and fast rules because like for example, Europe is probably on your list, Tsh and in Europe, you're going to experience the time zone. So it's not to say that these are all necessary things, it's just that I know these are some of the things that can make somebody a little bit more apprehensive or wondering how hard is this aspect of the trip going to be? It can help to reduce some of the things that you think
might be more challenging on your first time, so that you can get a feel for it without worrying about that stuff. We’ll talk specific places.

Tsh: 00:52:46 Yeah, that sounds good. And in fact, why don’t you start us off? What’s a suggestion you have?

Stephanie: 00:52:51 Going with some of those things that I said, my first suggestion would be somewhere in Central America or Mexico, I think is a really great start. And when I say Mexico, I don’t mean resort Mexico. I mean more authentic. Mexico gets overlooked because it’s right below the United States and everybody goes there to the resort. I don’t know about everybody, I’ve never been there, but a lot of other people apparently go there. I have been to places in Mexico that are a lot less touristy and yet there’s English everywhere. You don’t have to speak Spanish. Of course, it helps to understand a little bit more to communicate better, but it’s absolutely not necessary. The food is amazing there. There’s practically no time zone difference at all. The flights are really affordable and not even very long either.

I just feel like there’s so much to see and do there and it really is a different experience without going really far away from home. I like that as a first option. That’s one of mine. But then other places in Central America, Costa Rica is really, really fantastic. It is extremely safe. The tourism infrastructure there is really strong, they’ve had great tourism for a long time and yet you have such varied things that you can do there and the people are just so friendly and welcoming and you’ve got the beaches and you’ve got the cloud forest and just jungle everything. It’s really, it’s really great. That would be another one. And I would also add Belize and Guatemala into that list in that region. Those are also some easier places to start out with, especially if you go to the areas that more of the tourists go to.

In Guatemala you might want to go to Antigua, you could fly up to and visit the ruins at Tikal, you could go to Lake Atitlan. They’re just some places that are more on the tourist trail and there’s a lot of things that you can do, but a lot of infrastructure that makes the journey easy and, but it’s an extremely different experience from anything in North America.

Tsh: Where in Mexico would you suggest since that’s such a huge country?

Stephanie: Yeah, it is. We only have experience in a couple of different regions, so I can’t really tell you for the whole country, but the two places that we have been are the Yucatan Peninsula. That is where Cancun is, but we didn’t go to Cancun. So we went to the city of Merida. We also went to Valladolid, which is very authentic feeling and has less tourism but still super easy to travel there. And then we also went down along the coast, we stayed in a little fishing town called
Cartu Morelos (sp?) and it's by all of the amazing beaches, but it's not nearly as touristy as a lot of those places. It's not resort town. And so for us that was a very authentic experience, but we found that Yucatan region just packed full of things to do. It was so family friendly and it was cheap. It was amazing. Then the other region we just finished in October, we were in San Miguel de Allende, which is closer to Mexico City in central Mexico. I would also highly recommend that. There are more expats living in that city. You have a lot of really amazing restaurants and cafes and there's a lot of accommodation for tourists, but there's such a strong local population and the expats in the locals work together so well and we found people incredibly friendly there. It was just a really different experience than being on the coast. So we love that as well.

Tsh: **00:56:28** Very cool. Okay, I'm glad to hear the suggestions. I will give my first suggestion and then we can go back and forth a little bit. This one is vanilla, especially if you've heard me on the podcast at all. I'm just going to briefly hit on this, and that's London and that's one of the reasons actually that that's sort of my first flagship trip guiding that I'm doing. That's because it is so easy a city. It sounds a little bit not exotic if you are wanting something of a complete cultural difference, but since we're talking about travel newbies, I think it's a great intro for a North American to experience a culture that is very similar to ours but just with enough differences to where you feel it. The reason I would suggest London is because it's got great public transportation that is so easy for beginners to use. It is a non thing really. You just buy an Oyster card and off you go and they work on the tube stations and the buses and everything. So easy. Great with kids because there's plenty to do. I mean there's so, so much to do. You can just stay in the city the entire time and not run out of things to do. The other reason is flights tend to be quite inexpensive and direct from North America. I'm an Austin and I can fly direct to London inexpensively. The downside of that is once you're inland and it can be expensive, but like Steph and I have said before on the show, if you stay in a guest house and you just eat out once a day, you can save money that way. There are a number of free or low cost things you can do in London to make it worth it. That's just an easy example of a place if you want to try a major city but aren't sure where to start that London could be your first choice.

Stephanie: **00:58:14** I think London's a great recommendation and I don't think it's vanilla. It's such a fascinating place and it really does feel very different than North America. I would add onto that that Ireland and Scotland are really great as well because you've still got English but then you get a little bit of cultural variation from visiting England and we found it extremely family friendly. It's really easy to rent a car and drive around once you get over the side of the wrong side of the road thing. We enjoyed both of those countries a lot. The flights are pretty cheap and easy to get there.
Well I'm glad you said that cause I was going to be one of my next suggestion so now I don't have to say it and I can move another one up. Yes to countryside UK, especially Ireland, and Scotland too, they're all great. There's so much great little villages you can pop in and out of and see via car. A great road trip place. Steph, what other suggestions do you have for newbies?

If we're going to talk about Europe for a minute, I'm going to throw Iceland into there. I think Iceland is really fun because the flight options have become so good in the last few years. So many budget airlines are going. You can either go through Iceland and have up to a seven day stopover on your way to Europe on your way to London or to Paris or even we went there coming from Norway or you could just go to Iceland just as its own trip. But there are so many things to do. Whether you go in the winter, weather you go in the summer, summer's more high tourist season. Winter's the lower tourist season obviously because the weather it's harsher, but it's incredibly beautiful. And of course they speak their own Icelandic language, but everybody speaks English. It's beautiful and it feels like you're in some kind of fairy land or something. The landscapes are just so stunning. I think that's an incredible place to go.

I like that suggestion. Okay, so next on my list is, it sounds a little counterintuitive but I'm going to say Southeast Asia. The reason I'm going to say that is because it's pretty inexpensive if you go to the right spot and it can be very tourist friendly, believe it or not. The place I have in mind that's probably easiest is Thailand. Thailand is really inexpensive for what you get when it comes to food and housing and it's just stunningly beautiful with the beaches and the rain forest in the mountains up north, especially if you go to a city like Chiang Mai, so many expats that you won't have really a language issue at all because English is a widely spoken second language. There's lots to do there. If you just Google things to do in Chiang Mai or family friendly beaches in Thailand, you will find them. You just have to know where to look and it's a really good place to feel like you are somewhere completely different because you are and yet is so kind and generous to foreigners. The Thai people are some of the best people in the world when it comes to hospitality and friendliness, like genuinely friendly people. It's easy to get around. So easy to rent a car that Thailand is one of our favorite places and our kids ask to go back there frequently. So that's another great place for newbies.

Yeah, I actually have that on my list even though I've not been to Thailand. I've been to other countries in Southeast Asia, but just because I think Thailand flights are probably cheaper and Thailand has been on the tourist trail for even longer. I've just heard such rave things about it from other people. But I would throw Cambodia into there because we went there with our kids. In particular, we went to Siem Reap. We have not traveled around the rest of the
country, but we found Siem Reap to be very family friendly. It’s extremely affordable. You can visit the temples at Angkor Wat. There is so much to do. Our kids loved it and a ton of people speak English. We just found it extremely easy to visit, so we loved it and would go back in a heartbeat.

Tsh: 01:02:10 Very cool. Are there any other final suggestions you have?

Stephanie: 01:02:15 I have one more and that is Japan. So you do have the time zone difference there, but English is very common, it’s the language most students learn as a second language in school. It’s not as hard to get around as you think, even though you won’t be able to read Japanese signs. They do use the English writing pretty frequently. But here’s the other reason, Japanese culture just feels so different. It’s worlds away, but it is so pleasant to immerse yourself in. Everything is very clean, very efficient. They are extremely polite, you just can’t help but be enamored and taken in by the wonderful Japanese people and the way that they do things. I think that it would just be a really lovely first travel experience. If you have a little bit more of a budget, it is more expensive.

Tsh: 01:03:07 Yeah, that’s a great idea. I’ve never been there and it is so high on our list. All right, my last quick suggestion. I was thinking of one other place, but I’m gonna save it because it is just expensive, but I’m going to say instead, I’m going to suggest Munich, Germany. This is an area that has a lot of international flights. It’s the southern part of Germany, so Bavaria, which means it’s pretty much central Europe and it’s easy access to places like Austria, Switzerland, all those mountains, like the Alps. This is a great place to visit, especially if you’re into the outdoors as a family or even just by herself. It’s very safe. It’s very clean and friendly. I find it’s a European friendly, that is, they’re just quieter and calmer and everything’s on time. If that floats your boat, if that’s important to you, then I find to be a really great restful place.

We spent quite a bit of time in this area as a family and we’ve found so many great things to do. We could rent a car and just drive all over, take off the beaten path through the mountains, find little villages for great coffee and pastries, find out really cool historical things from World War II all the way to medieval time. There are really great parks for kids. Then of course, just so many great trails for hiking. We hiked a lot in Switzerland and went to Heidi’s house in the village, where that book was inspired by and there’s lots of great little cities nearby too. Munich itself is a fantastic city. I could spend weeks and weeks there. I love it there’s so much. Innsbrook is a great fun little town as well, and going over to Switzerland, you’ve got some fun places, like Basel and other great places. So just that general Bavaria area with Munich as the hub for the airport is what I would suggest is a great first place for newbies.

Stephanie: Those are really good suggestions.
Alright, well Kerri, hopefully that answered your question. If you have a travel question for me and Steph, we would love to hear it. Email us at helloattheheartofsimple.net and send us your question and we will try and get it added to the cue.

You can find Stephanie at WonderlingFamily.com or on Instagram @WonderlingFamily. Definitely give her a follow right now because she’s with her family in central and South America, which is super fun. You can find Andrea at AndreaDebbink.com and on Instagram @Andrea.Debbink and to keep up with me, I’m on Twitter @Tsh and Instagram @TshOxenreider and of course at theartofsimple.net where you can find my writing as well as Andrea's. Don’t forget y’all to get my weekly email at fivequickthings.email. Follow us on Instagram @ArtOfSimple and to be extra awesome, show your support of the show by becoming a patron for just a few dollars per month. As always, because I just gave you 10 places to go, I’ve got all these things linked this episode’s show notes number 183, so just head over there. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely and Jesse Montonya, and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle Andrea Debbink, and my intern Ginny. Go see Ginny at thesimpleshow.com. Thanks so much for listening. I’m Tsh Oxenreider and I’ll catch you back here soon.