



Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider

Episode 214

thesimpleshow.com

Segment One

Tsh: [00:04](#) This is Simple; I'm Tsh Oxenreider.

: [00:16](#) Hey friends, in this episode I'm chatting with my friend and co-host Katherine Willis Pershey and like always we're talking about what we wrote about this week. Katherine added to our favorite I Love This Place series where we share the ins and outs of places we love, often off the beaten track places we would otherwise not know about and her writing is about her beloved college town of Kent, Ohio. Katherine talks about nostalgia, why we have it about certain places, how to embrace it, and how to use it to be more at home wherever we are in the present. I wrote about why I love living in a smaller house so in this chat I get into why I also love that we're doing our own fixer upper renovations ourselves. Sometimes it's easy for me to forget that while I'm staring at all the work we still need to do but when I step back and make a deliberate effort to notice the why behind us being DIYers, I remember, oh yeah, I do like this so in this chat I share the reasons why.

We'll get right into it, but first a quick reminder to make sure you're signed up for my weekly email called Five Quick Things because it's the best way to make sure you never miss an episode of this show or any of our weekly essays. Basically, you'll get links to five things from the week, either created or loved plus occasional news you'd otherwise miss because I don't share it anywhere else. The emails can be read in under a minute because I hate inbox clutter too. Go to five quick things dot email to sign up for the free weekly email or just click on the links in the show notes of this episode. Let's get right into it. Here's Katherine starting us off with nostalgia and why it's a good thing.

[01:55](#) Okay, Katherine, you wrote this week about one of my favorite series that we do on The Art of Simple, which is *I Love This Place*, where you take us a little bit on a deep dive about a particular place that means a lot to you and a lot of times it's places that we would have never otherwise known about. You told us about Kent, Ohio. I'm curious what drew you to writing about Kent and why it's special to you?

Katherine: Yeah, I suppose Kent probably isn't on anybody's top 10 places to go for a family vacation but Kent, it's my college hometown. It's actually adjacent to the town where I grew up, but it's my college town. Even if people don't have a specific connection or reason to ever think about going to Kent, we all have connections to places we've been before. It's a place where I only lived for a few years, but it's so deep in my bones. I'm always trying to come up with excuses to get back and I genuinely love this place. I love that topic, I love hearing about the different places that people really love, it is at the top of my list.

Tsh: One of the reasons I even started the series several years ago was because of that same reason. I like hearing about all these places I would never otherwise know about. To me it's good insight into the people that are writing them, why they matter to us., these particular, sometimes quirky off the beaten path places. You hinted that this was your college town. I've actually read somewhere before that places in our, not even just childhood, but our late teens and twenties, our formative years into adulthood, along with things like music and fashion and pop culture references and technology, those things ended up shaping us the rest of our lives, which is why a lot of times we can identify certain generations with certain styles or music types. I think just superimposing that idea about places, I think there's really something to that when it comes to our college towns.

Katherine: That makes so much sense. When I think about it, I haven't lived in Ohio since I was 22 years old, but I still cover my house in Ohio art and I think of myself as in Ohioian and my favorite band is from Ohio. It's not only because I still have family there. It is the place that most shaped me even though now, before too long, I will have not lived in Ohio for as long as I lived in Ohio.

Tsh: That's always a weird realization that these places sometimes that means so much to us are not because we've lived there most of our lives. It's because of what they, the impact on our lives, perhaps. I think about for us, Turkey, we only lived there three years and yet I don't think a day goes by where some connection to Turkey shows up in our life, even if it's in a little way. I think it has to do with those particular formative years. My son, my middle son was born in Turkey. That will never not be true. Even if we never set foot in Turkey again, that place will always be important for that reason. I think perhaps that's true for you when it comes to this particular town that that will always be the place where you went to college and nothing will change that.

Katherine: Yeah. There's something though, I've wanted to not only have a pure nostalgia for Kent, in my case, it's been really meaningful for me to actually stay involved in a way that moves beyond just the memory of when I was there before. I've never been active in the alumni association necessarily, but that I know is a great way for a lot of people or to be a mentor if you want to have a meaningful

connection to an institution or a place, to have to create a meaningful connection. For me, in the post I wrote about the Wick Poetry program and it's such a vibrant part of my own experience in Kent, but it continues to grow and just be this incredible source for good in the world. It's not only a place where people can go, they have a house on campus, and people can go and read and look through this incredible poetry library, but they also go out from that place. It's a big outreach center. They teach poetry in schools and they teach poetry in prisons and to nurses and to the vet. I've had the opportunity to go back and teach a spiritual writing workshop a couple of times, a one week summer workshop and that has been so cool because I get to be part of it and I really love being part of things. It keeps a really deep now connection to Kent.

Tsh: I think that you hit on something there at the end. You want to be part of something and I think all of us want to be part of a community and that's what draws us back to these places that on paper don't really look that exciting or look that interesting. Sometimes Kyle and I will look at each other, especially right now when it's supposed to be Fall and it's still in the upper nineties here in central Texas and say, why on earth do we live here? It's hard to remember that sometimes, but then when you zoom back out you realize so often it has to do with the community and the small little quirky places and people that we get intertwined with that make a place what it is. I'm curious because you say you don't really go there much anymore. What are ways that you have incorporated this place that matters to you into your life in another state now? Besides just the art on the wall, is there some way you feel connected to it or you pay homage to it in your regular life?

Katherine: That's an interesting question. I still feel very shaped by the relationships that I made in that time. I keep in touch with dear friends from Kent and I was a weird college student. I certainly have a handful of actual friends from college who were also college students at the same time. But I really connected with my professors and so I became very close to the poetry teacher, my husband and I met in his class and he read a poem at our wedding. He just passed away a few years ago but he was a huge part of our lives and always keeping in touch with him. There's others certainly that I have kept in touch with through the years and reading their work. I still wear my Kent State sweatshirt even though it's pretty ratty. It's my home in a way and it's not my home because, even though I grew up close, it's a different county, very different feel, so different than Kent, Ohio. But it is very much home to me and it's home in a way that, California. I lived in California for eight years and never fully felt at home.

Tsh: You hit on something that I talk about some in my book *At Home in the World*. This weird idea of what makes a place home that sometimes it's not what you would expect in terms of the list of what makes those top places to live posts

that we see every year when it comes to affordable living or quality of life or weather. A lot of times when it comes to reality, the things that matter to us as humans, it's not really about those things. I think it could take away for our listeners who will probably maybe never go to Kent, Ohio. I think we all have those Kent, Ohio's in our life, right? It's about embracing those places and also, going ahead and embracing nostalgia, saying this place mattered to me. Instead of shoving it away saying, well, this is now, that was then, I'm going to just move on to, to go ahead and embrace some nostalgia in your life and be okay with that. At the same time, if your tendency is to live in nostalgia, to perhaps take that feeling and see what you can do in the here and now to make where you live now, the home you want it to be, instead of just wishing things were the way they were in place X, that matters so much to you. You know what I mean?

Katherine: Absolutely. The other only other thing I would say is sometimes it's really hard when these places we love change. One thing about Kent, it is so radically different than it was when I was there. If I had fought that and been overly mournful of what isn't anymore, I mean, I remember a very different Kent. I don't think anybody remembers the bar Screwy Lewey's with fondness, but it [inaudible] in my memory. I think this thing about embracing what places become, even though they are different. It's that balance of nostalgia and openness.

Tsh: That is a good word for me because I struggle with that a lot being from Austin and now living just outside of Austin, it is a completely different city from the one I grew up in. So much so that when Kyle and I moved back here, I told him I have to mentally just think of this as a whole new city where it just so happens to be that my high school is here and we know a number of people, more than if we had moved to a brand new city. Otherwise, it's so different and it can be hard sometimes when you're attempted to become this grumpy grumbling, back in my day it was like this and you have no idea how great it was. To embrace that places change and that's okay and that's because people change and communities change.

Segment Two

Tsh: [15:02](#) You wrote about a place that you loved and in a way I wrote about a place that I loved too, which happens to be my house. We live in a fixer-upper that I have talked about here and there on the podcasts and on the blog. We are a year three until living here, which is sort of a milestone actually because we have only ever lived in one place for three years in our married life so far, in our 17 years of marriage, that is the longest we've ever lived anywhere. I want to say in maybe another month or two, this will become our longest lived in place. That's a big deal for our rather nomadic family.

Katherine: Wow, that's a big deal.

Tsh: It is a big deal. What's funny is, we're still very much in a fixer-upper and sometimes that can be disheartening because we want to say what on earth is taking us so long, this is getting ridiculous. Especially because the house is small. That's when I wrote about this week actually, why I actually love living in a small space. Katherine, you live in a small house too, in fact, I think your house is even smaller than ours for your family of four, right?

Katherine: Yes. Is yours 1400?

Tsh: Yes.

Katherine: Ours is 1100, but we do have one entire less human. Although last year when we had our foreign exchange student, we were on par at level of humans.

Tsh: I have heard from other listeners and readers that this is the case. I'm wondering if we tend to attract people who embrace small space living or out of necessity embrace it. That's what I wrote about. You can read about it, but I thought I would piggyback onto that and talk a little bit about our renovation. Like I was saying, sometimes it can feel really frustrating that it is taking so long, especially for what a small space this is. But when I think about it, at the end of the day when the house is quiet and it's just Kyle and I dreaming and brainstorming about what's next, I remember, oh, I actually really do like how we're doing it. The reason it is taking so long is because we're doing it ourselves. I say we in a royal "we" way because it's really Kyle who's doing 99% of it. I help make creative decisions and by that I mean, no, no, not that color, this color or oh, can you move that up an inch or down an inch? That's the extent of what I do along with maybe helping hold things while he drills them in or whatever, it's him doing the work is what I'm trying to say.

[17:20](#) I thought I would just run down a quick list of why I like that we're doing our renovation ourselves and perhaps this could be an encouragement for someone listening who either wants to renovate but feel like they can't because of the cost of labor involved or like us, in the midst of it, they're very tempted to say, you know what? Forget it. We're just going to outsource this so that it can be done faster. This is just as much for me as it is for you listening so that I can remember.

The first reason, and this is the most obvious reason is the cost of savings. Kyle is a former contractor. He earned his contractors license many moons ago and has renovated countless houses. He has built them from scratch. The reason we even met in Kosovo all those years ago is because he was over there rebuilding houses after the war. This is just what he knows and does. It's in his blood. It

comes naturally to him. It would almost not make any sense for us to hire a contractor. In the state of Texas, you don't need to have an updated contractors license to do your own contract work. For us it was just a no brainer. We realized in doing the math that if we were to outsource with the labor, it would probably cost us upwards of \$60,000. In a way, this is a good year salary that he is bringing in on top of what he already does because he now works outside the home again. We calculate that mentally whenever we're tempted to just outsource it that oh my goodness, labor costs so much money. Katherine, are you and your husband handy at all? I can't remember.

Katherine: [18:52](#) That's going to be a big fat no.

Tsh: Okay. Is your house older?

Katherine: It is, 1929. Do you ever send Kyle for weekends?

Tsh: He has been told that before because when people do the math, the cost of a plane ticket plus the friend rate of renovation, it actually ends up a lot cheaper. I'm just really grateful living in a 1935 house where as you know, these old houses have a lot of quirks and a lot of, charm is the right way to put that. We save a ton of money by doing it ourselves.

The second reason I really like us doing it ourselves is because it really can be fully customizable. We could possibly make it as customizable as we want if we were to hire it out and just say what we want done. That's for sure a reality whenever you don't have the skills, yet you want to hire one off jobs like a fence or a bathroom tile redo or whatever it is, you can say I want it done this way. But the nice thing about Kyle doing it is that we can even take that customizing to the nth degree. An easy example for me is whenever, he's working on the bathroom right now, the light switches have to go in this really odd spot in order for it to fit yet also be on the side of the door that makes sense to me. This is hard without the visual, but when you open the door, the lights used to be on the other side, which is typical small house, you just put it wherever you have the most room. It's not a big deal, but you would open the door and then in the dark, if you were a guest you would feel around for the lights because it's not where you think it should be, it's on the other side. In order to put it on the side that makes sense, you have to really squeeze it in this weird spot to where it actually is embedded into the doorframe because of the layout of the bathroom. We can do that. No problem at no extra cost because it's just us doing it. Kyle knows how to do all these things so I can say, so can you move the light switch two inches this way and one inch down? He's like, sure, we can do that. We just do it ourselves. That's what I mean, it's really nice just to be able to do it the way we want it.

Katherine: [21:07](#) Yeah, that is great. So much different than the out of the box, you get what you get because this is a prefab.

Tsh: That's right. And there's nothing wrong with that. For people that maybe just want a more livable place but aren't into wanting it the way they want it, it's fine. But for us where we like things to be how we want it, it works out well.

The third reason I really like that we're doing our renovation ourselves is because Kyle officially now knows the house really, really well. I didn't think of this being that big of a selling point until I did a podcast a couple of years ago with Esther Emery, who is currently living in a yurt in rural Idaho and they are building a log cabin themselves. She took a year off the internet and she wrote a book about it. They're living in a yurt. They might already be done with that part now, I haven't checked whether they're living in their log cabin, but she was saying it's taking time because they're building the cabin themselves. She was saying how much they loved it because they know the ins and outs of the house. That means whenever something is broken or not working, it's not a mystery. They don't have to say, what is that noise or why is this light switch not working or why is the outlet suddenly off? I knew exactly what she meant when she said that. That gave me renewed perspective on a side benefit to doing it ourselves. Kyle really knows inside and out, literally inside the walls and underneath the house and into the attic, all the weird quirks of the house. So when I'll ask him, can you do it like this? He'll say, well you can, but that means this pipe has to be rerouted this way and I put it over here a couple of years ago so that we could do it this way so if it's okay with you... I would have never known that and we might have had to hire somebody to go and then tell us, well by the way, that's going to cost you extra money because your pipe is like this and not like this. It's just nice that he has that running command of our house. Since we plan to be here awhile and own this house, that'll just pay in dividends in the future. Whenever we need to renovate again or need to fix something. He just knows it and it's not a mystery to us.

Katherine: [23:09](#) It's so funny because this is all really only familiar to me from episodes of HDTV and so I'm picturing Chip and Joanna, discovering that a pipe is not where they thought it was going to be and you guys don't have to deal with that.

Tsh: Right. And what's funny is that's the process in which we are learning these things. Because when we bought the house, when we got the keys, there were all sorts of things we just didn't know about. An inspection can only tell you so much and in a way you're just buying a chance. We've had some fun surprises. I mean, nothing terrible or completely changed our minds about living here. There's no way we would have known had he not done it himself. It's nice.

[23:52](#) The fourth reason I really like that we're doing our renovation ourselves is honestly just the sense of pride of ownership. I think there's something really satisfying whenever we pull into the house at night. It's so easy for me to see all the things we still need to do or the things that aren't perfect. But to know, we put up those cedar planks ourselves, we installed that light fixture, we painted that porch. We refinished these floors ourselves, off course, again, using the royal "we". I do a little bit of help, but it's mostly Kyle. It's just really satisfying at the end of the day to look around and see, wow, this is our handiwork. This is our doing and we made it this way. In fact, sometimes when we're feeling discouraged about the state of things, we'll look at those before photos that we took the day we got the keys and walked in. We made sure we didn't touch a thing and just took a bajillion photos to remember what state it was in when we got it. All we have to do is look at those and then we give ourselves a pat on the back because it's like, wow, this looks so much better, and it helps us flip the script from oh my gosh, we have so much to wow, we've already done a really good job in three years and it's just encouraging to do that.

The sixth reason why I love that we're doing the renovation ourselves is there's just really something very human about doing it on our own. I wrote about this a month ago in my post sabbatical reflections, this idea of doubling down on being human. That was such a big takeaway for me when I took a screen break that I was not expecting this feeling of actually doing it the, I don't want to say harder way, but the more analog way and the less outsourced way of doing things. It's that same feeling you get whenever you leave your phone at home and you have to find your way to a place without the GPS. Oh yeah, I'm a human being. I can do this. I remember. There's just something that feels really satisfying about getting that shovel and digging the hole yourself for the fence posts or unscrewing the door and carrying it out so that you can paint it yourself. I'm not at all saying there's something wrong with outsourcing. It is 100% okay. In fact, I am encouraging Kyle as we get closer and closer to the end of things to feel okay about outsourcing certain tasks just for the sake of time. Totally fine.

But they're at the end of the day, something really nice and it feels good. You're sitting on your porch with your drink after all the hard day's work and just saying, I did that. I did the hardened manual work and it's good to remember. I just imagine those frontiers from yesteryear who literally had to build a house out of nothing, including logging down the trees and turning them into planks that were usable, that kind of feeling. This is a modern day, 21st century version of that, that we haven't completely lost our ability to survive in the wilderness really as humans and this is our way of doing it.

Katherine: I love that. Even though I don't know that feeling of when it comes to the house, certainly from having knitted a handful of garments, and that kind of thing,

whenever you're creating something and you've made the thing that usually all the hats are made by machines, but this hat was made by two hands. Now I only have time to knit because I outsource our house stuff.

Tsh: Actually that's a really good way to end this chat because I think if you're listening and you think I can't do renovations, I'm not handy. There might be something like what you're saying because Katherine, I don't knit. I would love to knit. I wish I knew how to knit. I outsource my hats and my sweaters. I think in a way we all have that handmade version and our outsource version and it's totally, totally fine in our modern era. It's the satisfaction of baking a birthday cake from scratch, or just fill in the blank, whatever it is that feels doable to you. Give it a try, see how it feels. If it's just something that you can add to your day and it's not because it's more effective or a better use of your time because a lot of times it's not. I don't think you knit because it's faster than going to the store and buying one or even cheaper. Because I think the yarn is expensive.

Katherine: It's all about chasing joy and having that experience of making something.

Tsh: Right. I think that's really satisfying and we forget it too often in our world where we want everything conveniently and instantly, that there is some value in taking our time doing it right and doing it ourselves.

: [28:39](#) You can find Katherine at KatherineWillisPershey.com and on Twitter @kwpershey and to keep up with me, I'm on Twitter @tsh and Instagram @tshoxenreider and of course, at theartistsimple.net where you can find my writing as well as Katherine's. Head to the show notes for this episode number 214 at thesimpleshow.com where you can find all sorts of things, links to things we talked about, where you can sign up for my weekly email called Five Quick Things, how you can become a Patron and support the work it takes to create the show for just a few dollars per month as well as how to connect with Katherine and myself. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely, and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle, Andrea Debbink, and my furry intern, Ginny. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Tsh Oxenreider and I'll catch you back here soon.