

FINDING FULFILLMENT IN A 12 X 12 HOUSE¹

William Powers©

Three years ago, I returned to America after a decade of aid and conservation work in Africa and Latin America. Abroad, I'd seen, starkly, the grave impact the global economic system was having on our environment—Amazon rainforests clear-cut for fast-food cattle, African rivers poisoned by multinational mining—and began asking myself a daunting question: How could humanity transition to gentler, more responsible ways of living by replacing attachment to things with deeper relationships with people, nature, and self?

Fortunately, I stumbled upon someone with some clues: Dr. Jackie Benton (a pseudonym, per her request). When I met this slight, sixty-year-old physician, she was stroking a honey bee's wings in front of her twelve-foot by twelve-foot, off-the-grid home in North Carolina. While she was traveling, she invited me to housesit. Unexpectedly, I changed plans and moved into the 12×12 for a season. Perhaps, there's a "cure" in the practice of curiosity. With no electricity, piped water, or any of the conveniences we are so accustomed to, I was forced to see everything anew. The first puzzle: How to bathe?

Jackie didn't leave an instruction manual, an "Idiot's Guide" to living in a 12 x 12. There was no shower, of course, and the creek was still too darn cold. But so was the rainwater Jackie harvested from the two gutters running off the 12 x 12's roof. I took one bucket shower, cursing as I cupped freezing rainwater over my head, before I discovered a five-gallon rubber diaphragm on her back porch labeled "Sun Shower." Midday or evening, I strung it up in a tree beside the 12 x 12 and felt the positively hot water stream over my body, which became a sensuous daily pleasure. And its energy came directly from that day's sun, producing no dangerous greenhouse gasses.

Water, instead of being invisibly piped into my home from some deep aquifer or distant reservoir, fell from the sky into the pair of fifty-five-gallon tanks beside the house. When I arrived they were full; when I left, ditto. All of my dishwashing, laundry (I followed Jackie's lead and used only biodegradable soaps), bathing, and cooking water simply came out of the sky, passed through my hands, and then went directly back into the earth to water the food I ate.

Less appealing was the dilemma of the toilet. Instead of a flush toilet, I discovered that Jackie used a five-gallon composting toilet under the porch out back. It featured a regular toilet seat, but there was no chemical-filled cesspool below ground — just a standard white bucket. Throw some fresh-smelling cedar chips in after every use, and there was absolutely no foul odor. The conundrum occurred when the bucket started to fill. And fill. How to dispose of it? I fingered along the spines of Jackie's scientific books, until I came to one with a rather nonthreatening title: *The Humanure Handbook*. For twenty-first-century homesteaders like Jackie, it's the bible of composting toilets. Jackie had chosen the simplest model, the concealed five-gallon bucket, the contents of which, *The Humanure Handbook* informed me, I was to simply compost. Yes, in fourteen weeks human feces are soil just like any other soil and can be ploughed back into your garden. So I carried the bucket over to the compost pile, intending to follow the *Handbook* and dump it right over my egg shells and carrot peels. But at the last minute I couldn't go through

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with it. The science notwithstanding, I felt queasy over the aesthetics; I grabbed a shovel and buried the contents deep in the woods.

Surprisingly, I enjoyed life without electricity. No humming refrigerator, no ringing phones, and none of the ubiquitous “stand-by” lights on appliances — those false promises of life inside the machines. Instead: the whippoorwill’s nocturnal call, branches scraping quiet rhythms in the breeze, and groggy No Name Creek. Looking east from the 12 x 12 toward the creek into the ink black night, without the slightest glimmer of industrial society, I thought, *Could I really be inside the borders of a high-tech superpower?*

Fire replaced electric light. Sparks from outdoor fires would briefly escape gravity and reflect off the creek, before disappearing into the massive dark sky and the flaming white points of the stars above. Most luxurious of all, each night was blessed with the glow of candles. One night, I lit the candles without even thinking about it. I simply came in after a hike, struck a match, lit them, and began cooking, candle-lighting having become as automatic as switch-flipping. Sometimes I’d step outside and look in through the windows, a dozen or so candles inside, as cheery as a birthday cake — the 12 x 12 point lit with primordial fire amid dark woods.

But you don’t have to live in a 12×12 house to discover more inner joy and contribute to global healing. Each of us, no matter where we live, can ask ourselves, “What’s my 12 x 12?” Even in large cities—I now live in New York— it is possible to scale back from overdevelopment to enough. By planting a windowsill or community garden; doing yoga or meditation; walking and biking; and carrying out at least one positive action for others every day.

Here’s my list of the Top 5 Actions you can do NOW:

DAILY METACOGNITION: Watch yourself thinking for at least 10 minutes every day, to begin. Ideally, it’s a morning or evening silent meditation. It could also be simply snatching 5 minutes while on a bench or walking between classes. Become the watcher of your own mind. What is it doing?

BE AN ANTHROPOLOGIST: Look at any aspect of U.S. culture as if you were from Papua New Guinea, sent here to study this culture. What do you notice?

WATCH ‘THE STORY OF STUFF,’ and help spread the word (www.storyofstuff.com)

TAKE A YEAR OFF COLLEGE or a gap year and give service to the Earth through adventure philanthropy, working on an organic farm, learning about another culture, or supporting and learning from indigenous communities. For more ideas, click on www.williampowersbooks.com (Resources).

CONSIDER CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. If it is a passion and you are inspired, go beyond words and physically jam the system. If not, check out how some people have made real statements with this tactic recently, such as coal protesters from the UK to southern Illinois and Washington DC.

Remember, we decide what gets globalized — consumption or compassion; selfishness or solidarity — by how we cultivate the most valuable space of all: our inner acre.