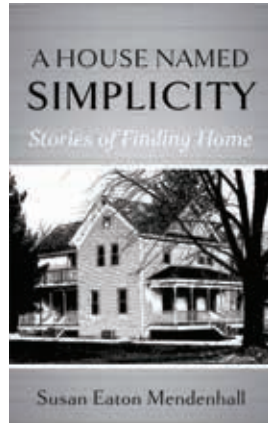


A House Named Simplicity



SUSAN EATON MENDENHALL
ALL DRAWINGS BY THE AUTHOR

Read the opening and closing chapters of Susan Eaton Mendenhall's book, *A House Named Simplicity*. Published by Shanti Arts in 2021, it is available through [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com), [bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org), and other online book retailers.

MEETING NUMBER FIVE

OUR EYES SCANNED THE BLOCK FROM the realtor's slow-moving car. Was our home in this mix of two stories, ranches, older and newer houses seen through the window? A year's worth of looking had not produced a single place we wanted to call home. We had looked at new construction and houses built in every decade. Houses located in rural and urban settings, in a variety of neighborhoods, a host of towns. Nothing yet felt like home, our home.

Five houses were seen on that day in March when the Midwest skies were flat gray and the cold felt heavy. Specifically, five houses built before 1950 in hopes of seeing older homes with character. There was exhaustion with the lingering conclusion of winter, not only in the air, but in our bones. Finding a home had been much more complicated than expected.

I promise to create a home with you, space for us to dream, explore, grow, and love. A safe place for our hearts' passions. These were words Don and I promised each other on our honeymoon in Assisi, Italy. As we walked down each of the steep stone steps found in the middle of town, we took turns speaking our promises and listening to the other. Thirty-six steps, thirty-six intentions for our life together. This was a new marriage, a new start later in life. Both of us had lived decades in previous marriages, raised children, divorced, and then found a soulmate in the other. Having lived apart for two years due to jobs in different states and one year together in a small apartment, this three-year marriage needed a place to call home.

Our current apartment life was adventurous, even playful. Overjoyed at finally being together, the apartment had been our tutorial in living together. Here we learned more about each other's daily habits, preferences, and energies.



Here we dreamed and planned our life forward. Everything about the next chapter of life felt exciting and hopeful, but, I was soon to discover, not easy.

I was surprised to find myself restless. The restlessness revolved around work, or in my case, lack of work. Don was employed and had a network of friends and business connections. I had left a job that energized me, plus I had a support system of friends and family. I was confident the next perfect job would show up. With an updated resume, I stretched into a variety of different vocational avenues, was interviewed but not hired. Both relief and disappointment accompanied this reality. No job fit. For a time, I found random bits of work doing leadership workshops. Fascinated by words such as integrity, communication, and clarity, as well as quotations about leadership, I wondered what these words and phrases would look like using paints and brushstrokes. This was the start of my painting style known as JazzArt, a creative outlet, but not financially sustainable.

Struggling to find a meaningful vocation, I knew deep within that I would be okay. What I did not know or anticipate was how long and difficult this struggle would be. I hoped that finding a place to call home would settle me, end the restlessness, both external and internal.

The first house seen on this cold winter's day was a rambling Victorian. Begging for us to notice its charming potential, what we saw was a sloping porch and countless repairs. House number one had us calculating the dollars to make it livable to our needs and standards. We easily said no and moved onto house number two, a dark-red brick bungalow built in the 1930s. The pleasing exterior of house number two was quickly forgotten when we opened the door and stepped inside. What were considered upgrades had been slapped together in haphazard, make-shift ways. Quality by any definition was missing. Woods didn't match. Doors were of varying styles. Walls looked dismal with worn wallpaper and chipped paint. One of the bedrooms was painted black. While the house was



empty of its former owners, their lives lingered in their lack of care for the house. Such a relief to close the door on this one. Houses three and four proved to be dull and uneventful, without any story to tell. As we walked through, there was no attraction. Charisma and charm were absent. Thus far we had seen older homes needing work and deep pockets of money to renovate. Our hearts were weary. Would we ever find a place to call home?

The realtor's car stopped in front of house number five, a two-story American Foursquare built in 1905, a style of architecture that is boxy, simple, and pragmatic. The house sat in the middle of a block, stark naked with no landscaping, just dirt and weeds. We learned from our realtor it had been moved to this location when the village center was redeveloped. Spared from the wrecking ball, two men saw her potential and gave her a new life. After being moved and renovated, it was sold. The owners never moved in. Once again for sale, the house sat empty for a year. Why? we wondered.

For a year we had been searching for a house, a home. Was this the one? As a transplant to this neighborhood, number five did not look out of place, rather it belonged. Older homes were on either side and mature trees hugged the lot. Joining the other mix of houses on the block, this one fit perfectly into place, looked confident, even stately, with an elegance that brought smiles to our faces. The simplicity and wholesomeness of this house triggered our interest. New wheat-colored siding, large white framed windows, front and side porches reaching out from her two-story frame. A

recently poured cement driveway led to a detached garage, and a welcoming sidewalk curved to her front door. Everything invited us in.

We stepped onto the open side porch. Floorboards freshly painted dark green, new white spindles and railings gave this outdoor room a pleasing facelift. I envisioned a porch swing at one end. Simple and plain, nothing modern. Was it wrong to imagine, I wondered? Of course not. That's what this house hunting was all about. Could we see ourselves living in this place? This very particular place?

The door off the porch led us into a large kitchen that stretched across the full width of the house. Sunlight from the tall long windows spilled joy into the room and onto a beautifully aged maple floor. With its pristine white cabinets and dark green counter tops, the kitchen almost smelled like a pine forest in winter. Ten-foot ceilings gave a spaciousness to the room, inviting me to take a deep breath. I looked more closely. Noting the empty spaces for the appliances, I envisioned them white and in place. The refrigerator was planned to be across the room from the kitchen sink. I wondered if this would be an issue. A center island bridged the gap between the refrigerator and sink, easing my earlier concern. I noticed that the island was not designed to store stools underneath. We would need a small table and chairs. Where would they go? Quickly, I spotted two possible places.

"This is it! This is home!" Don's energetic voice penetrated my silent problem solving. My head turned to look at him. His smiling face exuded confidence and clarity. While I had to agree that the first impression was positive, even exciting, I was not ready to claim this old house as home. Only the kitchen had been seen. Disappointment could be lurking in the next room, on the second floor. What might we find that would be a deal breaker? Thus far, our house search had been one disappointment after another. What made Don say that, I wondered? How could he be sure so soon? And if he felt it, why didn't I?

"Really?" I managed to respond. "What makes you say that?"

"It feels like home," was all he could identify at the time. A year later he discovered the reason why. While looking at old photos he came across one of his beloved grandparents' home, a house with nearly the same floor plan, only flipped.

I suggested we move into the next room, keep exploring each empty space. The beautifully restored wooden floors from the kitchen continued throughout the house and led us on a respectful journey room after room. We took our time, looking with experienced eyes and hopeful hearts. Windows and doorways had wide hardwood outlines, simple, but not plain. Without draperies, carpeting, or furniture, no filter was needed to see the basic frame of this house. There was no sofa pattern, wall art, or ghastly colored walls to ignore or influence our seeing. What a gift to see a home void of a previous occupant, freshly prepared for the next. There was no other life to try not to see, only our life to imagine. For the first time in our yearlong search, optimism was palatable. I, too, could feel the sense of home beginning to enter my soul.

The bare spaces spoke to us. *What will you do with me? each room asked. Have you noticed my strong structure and good bones? I know I am old, a bit beaten up in places, but do you see my inner beauty, my potential? Are you here for a long while or will you fix me up then quickly sell? What are your intentions for me?* The spaces spoke with honesty. Simple and unpretentious, this house had an experienced past it was not hiding from us. It had lived other lives. Prior to being moved to this location and remodeled, the once family home had been sectioned off into a barber shop / hair salon, a tailor's workspace, and a rental apartment. Restored to a single-family dwelling, it was awaiting a new beginning, just as we were.

Don and I spend countless hours talking about how we wish to live, work, and play. This kind of philosophical and practical conversation is one we share over a meal, a morning cup of coffee, and on road trips with miles of highway before us. We dream. We diagram. We decide. Buying a house without a plan of how we would live there was unthinkable to us. This house was to hold the space for our artistic endeavors. Don's



photography, my new pursuit of painting, we were writers. Our house needed to welcome family and friends for overnight stays, give space for offices, and have a floor plan that supported and inspired how we lived and worked. Both of us were re-inventing ourselves, not only in our marriage but in our blended families, work pursuits, and artistic nudges. We were looking for both the practical and the spiritual in a home. The house needed to have character, a sense of beauty, a pleasing simplicity. It needed to bring us to life in innovative ways, keep us interested and intrigued. It needed to help us find a sense of home within ourselves. Our lives were transitioning, re-arranging differently than before, and we were fully aware that an important ingredient was the place where we lived. Finding a place that knew about change, letting go, and re-inventing itself was perfect.

My mind was spinning with practical questions. Would our furniture, our sense of design fit here? Which room would be the guest room? How would we enter the house, by the back door or the side porch? My heart was full of feelings. Comfort, excitement, anticipation, eagerness, a peace that we had finally found a place to call home. There was nothing the house was trying to hide from us, and I found myself trusting its honesty, its simple nature. This house felt right, matched our yearning to live simply while stretching us into new lives.

"This feels like us, doesn't it, Don?" My

voice was finally able to speak the words I was experiencing.

"It does. It feels like home."

While listening to her spaces, we found ourselves committing our souls to a simple house. Without hesitation we promised her our love, to honor her structural integrity, to breathe new life into her. She promised to accommodate our hopes and dreams with a willingness to learn new ways of supporting our lifestyles and hospitality. Suddenly, it was difficult to think of our lives without the wisdom of this house. To us, home was a sacred partnership between house and owner. On that cold day in March, Don and I found a house. Now to create a home.

SAYING GOOD-BYE

Dust bunnies danced across the empty wooden floors, evading my woolen dust mop. It felt like a game of hide-and-seek, except there was no place to hide. All the furniture had been packed on the moving truck. The final task was cleaning the floors, making sure nothing was left behind.

My dust mop paused as I remembered Don's words shared over coffee that morning. "I think of Simplicity as a gift. A gift we were given. A gift we are giving to another. I look around and see all the ways we made this house a home."

When we met Simplicity, we were at the beginning of our marriage with new careers and artistic endeavors. We had hopes to grow well together in a place we could call home. Simplicity's emptiness was a white canvas on which to paint our lives and dreams. She provided plenty of room for possibilities and patience for our unknowns to be discovered. Getting ready to leave, her vacated rooms were full of stories and experiences: the day we met house number five; the months our son and family lived with us; the overnight stays by friends and family; finding studio spaces to create; the smell and sound of coffee brewing for our morning chats; the porches where we took deep breaths with our thoughts; watching the squirrels at play in the trees; and hearing the birds call to each other.

No room, no space was truly empty.

In every other home, I have walked through



the vacant rooms before moving, giving thanks to the spaces for their service to our lives. There was no need here. Simplicity lived inside me from day one. In so many ways, we grew up together, like siblings. She shaped our marriage, was my partner in designing two businesses, was a mentor in minimalism, and a safe place for my struggles. She offered flexible space for artistic pursuits and was always a teacher who asked, *What do you need of me? Let's make it happen.*

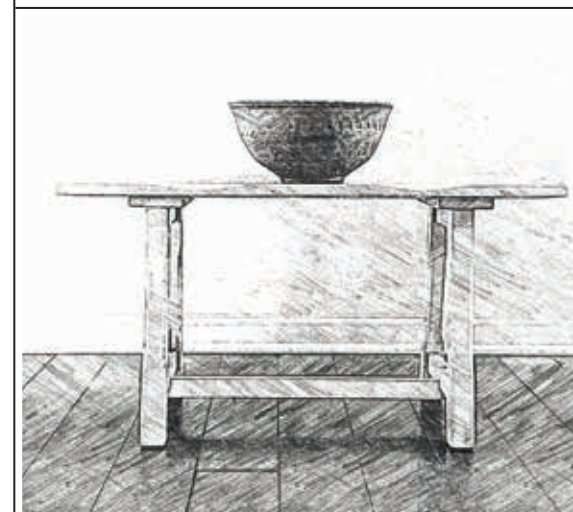
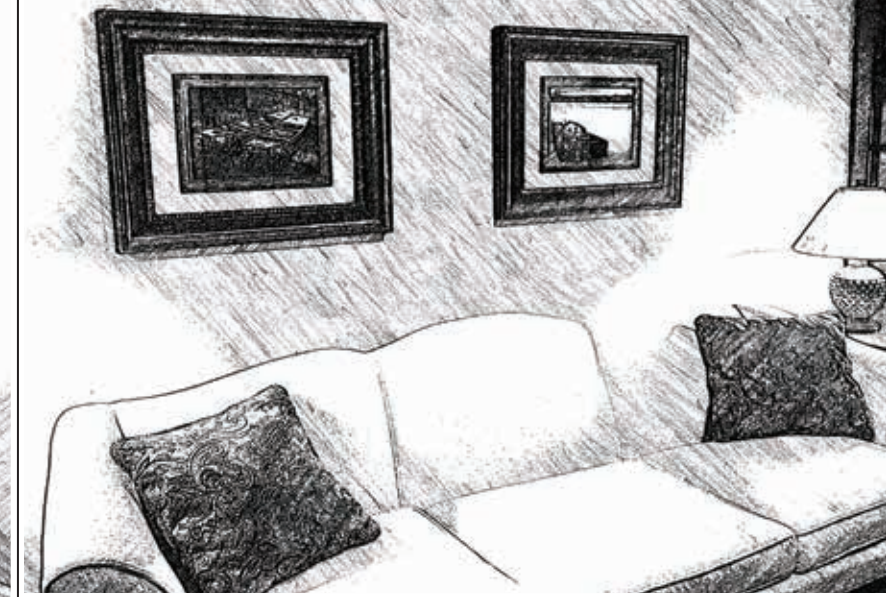
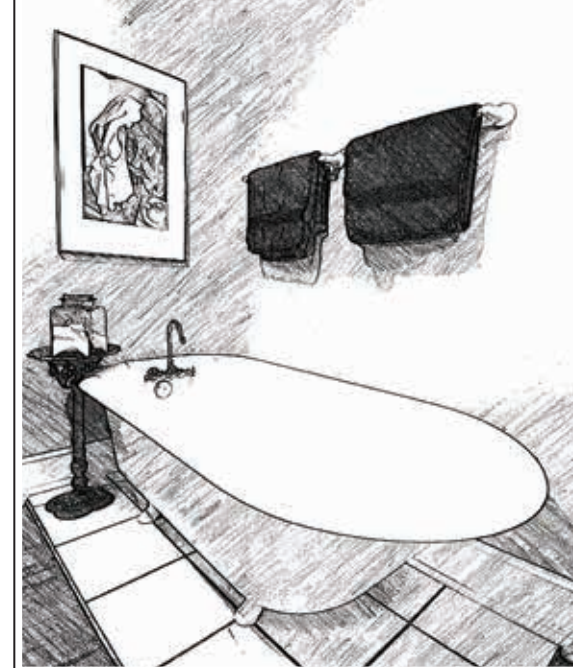
I did not retrace my steps on that final day. While the rooms were empty, my heart was bursting with memories and immense gratitude.

I felt Simplicity nudge me toward the door.

I need some quiet time to get ready for the new owners, I heard her say. You have received all I can give and now a new life awaits us. There is no sorrow in this parting, no longing or regrets. Both of us have clarity about who we are and what we are called to do. Let's go make that happen.

With one last sweep of the dust mop and a deep sigh, I closed the door. She would sleep alone that night. Her new owners would arrive in the morning. She would begin a new chapter of life, just as we would.

Goodbye, dear Simplicity. There is no way to measure our gratitude. ❀



THE AMERICAN FOURSQUARE



The American Foursquare was popular in the early 1900s and was in part a reaction to the ornate and mass-produced elements of the Victorian style of architecture. The typical American Foursquare house is plain, devoid of



ornamentation; has a square, boxy layout; has two stories plus an attic; and often has a center dormer and a large front porch. The boxy shape provides a maximum amount of interior room space and makes good use of a small lot.



Image info

