

PREFACE

This book originated with a somewhat angry question. It came from a reader of *Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin Off the Grid and Beyond the American Dream*, my previous book about living in a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot off-grid cabin in North Carolina. “It’s easy,” she wrote, “to find minimalism, joy, connection to nature, and abundant time in a shack in the woods. But how the hell are the rest of us supposed to stay sane in our busy modern lives?”

I received a hundred variations of this question in emails, after lectures, and during television and radio interviews about *Twelve by Twelve*.

I always answered by saying I was living 12 x 12 values...but in Queens, New York — the home to which I returned after my time in the cabin. But as each year passed, the reader’s doubt increasingly became my own as overwork, material clutter, and the lack of contact with nature — “civilization,” in short — brought me to a point of extreme unhappiness in Queens. Eventually, I too doubted it was possible to live 12 x 12 in a city, and I felt an urgent need to decamp far from urban life.

Not so fast. As I reached this point, my newlywed wife, Melissa, was offered an excellent job that demanded we stay put in New York City, and I suddenly had no choice but to figure out how to take what I’d learned in the 12 x 12 — about the Leisure Ethic, connecting to nature, and living simply — and somehow make it work in the real-world context of a marriage and two careers.

In an attempt to do this, Melissa and I embarked on an experiment. We sold or gave away 80 percent of our stuff, left our 1,600-square-foot Queens townhouse, crossed the Williamsburg Bridge, and moved into a tiny rental: a 340-square-foot “micro-apartment” — roughly two 12 x 12s — on the fifth floor of a nineteenth-century walk-up in downtown Manhattan.

New Slow City is a memoir of that experience, in which we spent a year living the Leisure Ethic in a New York minute. It is an adventure into smart-city trends ranging from Slow Food and Slow Travel to technology fasting, urban sanctuaries, bodysurfing the Rockaways, and rooftop farming. Books like David Owen’s *Green Metropolis* (on the eco-city), Carl Honoré’s *In Praise of Slowness* (on the global Slow movement), and Alex Mitchell’s *The Edible Balcony* (on urban agriculture) wonderfully capture specific facets of *New Slow City*, but this book aims for a more holistic, personal approach. Through the microcosm of one couple’s quest to, as the *Twelve by Twelve* reader wrote, “find minimalism, joy, connection to nature, and abundant time,” I examine what Urban Slow means, and what it feels like, in real terms. For us, it meant working less (I scaled back to a two-day workweek), having a light ecological footprint, and living in the present moment.

To protect their identities, some people’s names and distinguishing details have been changed. Also, I’ve sometimes collapsed multiple conversations into one or telescoped chronology. I trust readers will forgive me for a little literary license to tighten the book’s narrative in this true account of a year in New York.

Cities aren’t the enemies of a centered life. Mindfulness arises from inside, after all, so what’s needed, I came to discover, are the right questions and practices. Nor are cities the enemy of the environment. Because of New York’s

population density, the average New Yorker has one-third the carbon footprint of the average Vermonter. According to current population trends, the world in 2050 will swell to ten billion people — 70 percent of them urban — and their appetites will grow. Figuring out cities is vital.

It's urgent we begin to do so now. Gallup recently reported that 70 percent of American employees are either unhappy or disengaged at work. Anxiety levels among adolescents and adults are soaring, even compared to just two decades ago. One out of every four adults in America experiences some form of depression in the course of their lives. In Japan, they have a name for people who die from overworking: *karoshi*. Could we in the United States be tipping toward becoming a nation of *karoshis*? I, for one, became so stressed by constant work and the pace of city life that — before our *Slow Year* experiment — I found myself nearly a *karoshi* myself. I'm convinced that society must find a new equilibrium between the demands of business, the consumptive habits of society, and our own personal happiness.

This great task begins with a pause.

We need space to ask the core questions, like: How do we find balance in a world that is changing more quickly than ever before in history? How do we overcome our culture's ingrained habits of too much clutter, total work, and permanent distraction? And is it possible for individuals, against the odds, to incubate a new urban culture that's slower, saner, and fit for the future?

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