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Book review

The Wabi-Sabi House; The Japanese Art of Imperfect Beauty

Robyn Griggs Lawrence

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There's a mother I know whose house is immaculate. Her three daughters are quiet and docile. She takes pride of the fact she does all the housework herself. Her home, a possible winner in the Martha Stewart competition, is polished, color-coordinated and perfectly manicured. She handed me a cup of tea in a delicate cup. I didn't dare put it down. I was afraid of leaving a saucer ring or worse yet, spilling tea on the pristine leather couch.

My house is full of glass stains on the tables and wine stains on the carpet. Cat hair clings to the curtains and with a rambunctious family of five, the bathrooms are never truly clean. I can assure you, no guest of mine ever worries about where to put his or her mug of tea.

I've read a few of those magazines filled with pictures of un-lived-in rooms. I admit to longing for a clean, damage-free house (or even just one room). I struggled with the expectation to be a perfect house-keeper. I knew my motives were honest- I wanted my family to be surrounded in beauty and comfort. I'd reduced my expectation over the years but still I wanted my home to be a sanctuary but I couldn't quite figure out how to resolve the magazine images with my actual home. That is, until I heard about the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi.

I first read about the art of imperfect beauty years ago. I carried the description of a gardener, who after raking up every leaf and plucking every weed in his garden gently shook a blooming cherry tree so the blossoms scattered cross the path. It was an intentional way of creating balance by using nature's beauty.

It turns out that Robyn Griggs Lawrence wrote that article and now has written the definitive volume on wabi-sabi, a sacred, natural approach to keeping house.

Lawrence defines wabi-sabi as, "the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death." It places value on building materials, things and

arrangements made by real-people's hands. It is about living within the cycle of life-through honoring objects that wear time, and learning to discern what works for you and your family. Lawrence offers us a container for measuring, understanding and honoring the beauty of humble balance. I would venture to say, in the process, we learn to match our outer environment with our inner one. As we clean, purge and arrange our homes in a wabi-sabi way, we clean, purge and arrange our thoughts, habits and family dynamics.

Lawrence's book, printed with a warm brown tone (earth colors are the wabi-sabi palette), makes wabi-sabi accessible, desirable and most of all, deeply inviting. I wanted to inhabit the wabi-sabi home and began looking for where it lived in mine.

Learning wabi-sabi is not like learning how to make a perfectly symmetrical flower arrangement. Lawrence is not suggesting that we all trade one designer look for another. Instead she offers us a new approach to hearth-tending. While she urges us to unclutter, she wants us to evaluate each item we keep- is it something that resonates within us?

"The first step in creating a wabi-sabi home that nurtures the soul is simply an attitude adjustment," writes Lawrence. She encourages us to focus on our homes positive attributes rather than the often small flaws that can bother us so much; we never truly enjoy our homes. She gives lots of specific tips and ideas for how to look at our homes. One I like is "very wabi"- don't live beyond your means.

The book, a work of art in its own right, gives us more than permission to make our house a home. It gives us a framework of discernment, an ancient approach to living a life of gratitude, comfort and imperfect beauty.

I think I'll go sit in every chair in my house and see if there's a place for my cup (handed down from my grandmother) of tea.

Anna Stewart, mother, mentor and author, has published over 300 articles. She is the author of *Mother Blessings: Honoring Women Becoming Mothers*, an artful guide for creating ceremonies for pregnant women or families adopting. Order it at www.wovenword.com or www.amazon.com. She also serves as an instructor for coaching pregnant women through the Academy for Coaching Parents (www.acpi.biz). Go to her website, www.motherhands.com for more information on Anna's workshops.