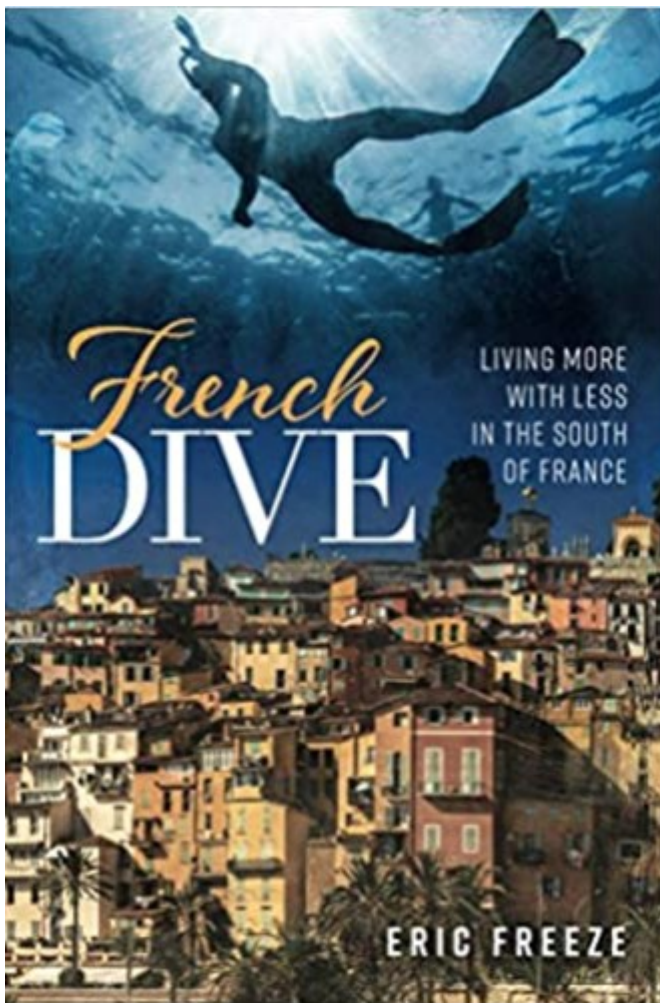


Living a simplified life in France

Eric Freeze and his family moved to Nice—in order to spend less and live better.

by [Jeanne Murray Walker](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue

In Review



French Dive

Living More with Less in the South of France

By Eric Freeze

Slant Books

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Eric Freeze has written a fascinating account of his family's move to France. It's not a story of a retreat into contemplation, but rather one of parents who abandon their middle-class American lifestyle to travel with their four young children to the noisy center of Nice.

There they live for a year in what they can afford on his sabbatical at half pay: a tiny apartment. They rub shoulders with French neighbors, tradespeople, shopkeepers, and teachers. They joyfully gather vegetables in the late afternoons from outdoor market vendors who are about to throw them away. They enjoy walking or hitchhiking to most places—even though they often need to carry the youngest child—until they finally buy a small used car. Eric, the father of the family, dons a wet suit most mornings and teaches himself to spear fish for their dinners.

Freeze refers to the movement he and his wife join in France as *les décroissants*, which literally means “the diminishing.” The central tenet of this movement is to simplify, to avoid cluttering your life with unnecessary stuff. The catchphrase in French, he explains, is *depenser moins, vivre mieux*: spend less, live better. “At the center of all the suggestions is time,” he writes. “Time to spend with family. Time for leisure activities or artistic pursuits. Time to eat, to socialize, to exercise.” This is the way to live better, “not only for yourself, but for others around you on a planet with limited resources.”

It is intriguing to follow the Freeze family as they learn how to live more simply and openly. They struggle through the streets of Nice carrying car seats and backpacks. They pick up used furniture at secondhand stores or from the dump. Their children face unfamiliar challenges in the schools, which are far more regimented than the American schools they've experienced. But the rewards are also plentiful. The kids learn French. They experiment with new foods and figure out how to make new friends. The Freezes grow closer as a family. Eric meets a local painter with whom he begins a productive, ongoing collaboration.

Reading about the Freeze family's plunge into simplicity, I thought of Jesus' words: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures

in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19–21). American Christians often pursue the same treasures as other Americans: a comfortable lifestyle, a well-paying job, a nice home in a good neighborhood.

I also thought about the way American Christians tend to huddle together, avoiding people who speak languages we don’t know or who have customs different from ours. Jesus was all about crossing cultures. After all, he emigrated to earth to live as a man. When a lawyer asked him, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told a parable about a Samaritan who rescues a badly wounded stranger even though the stranger belongs to a culture at odds with the Samaritan people (Luke 10:25–37).

Freeze doesn’t challenge his readers to follow his family’s example. He doesn’t cite the challenge Jesus issues in Luke 9:25, “For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits himself?” Freeze is far more subtle than that.

Instead, he offers enlightening, detailed, quotidian journal-like glimpses into the joy of living a simplified life. The family gets to know French workmen, improvises menus from the vegetables and fruits they find at the local market, embraces celebration in the noisy streets, and practices patience with one another in cramped digs. They honor the French language by learning it well and using it at home. And they welcome the children of friends and neighbors into their home while still maintaining and strengthening their own identity.

This book shows how simplifying life and welcoming a new culture can radically reanimate existence—not only for the family who tells the story of living in such a way, but for the reader who encounters it. I was born and raised on one of the largest lakes in Minnesota, but I never learned to swim. Still, I found myself riveted by the chapters in this book about diving and spearfishing. I know how to translate written French, but I can’t speak it. Still, I learned from this book how to teach kids a new language. Freeze offers a refreshing, visceral, nondidactic argument for just the kind of active empathy and cultural understanding Jesus advocated.