

HOLY
HYGGE

(HYOO-guh)

CREATING A PLACE FOR
PEOPLE TO GATHER AND
THE GOSPEL TO GROW

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MAKING HOME

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

C. S. LEWIS

I'm pretty sure he'll be spending the entire day alone," the text read.

"What's his number?" I hastily tapped. "I'll have my husband give him a call and see if he'd like to join us."

With Thanksgiving only days away, a friend from church reached out on behalf of a recent widower in her neighborhood. With one of his daughters living across the country and the other spending a semester studying abroad, it seemed he'd most likely be eating his holiday meal at a local restaurant alone.

Having only ever talked with the man a few times, I knew an invitation to celebrate with my family would be a hard sell. We were practically strangers. I braced myself for a brush-off, mentally

preparing bullet point rebuttals to any what-about-isms he might lob my way.

I don't know if it was his distaste for the mashed potatoes that would surely be served up with an ice cream scoop at the local diner or my promise to bake him a homemade apple pie that prompted him finally to accept our invitation, but he did. He arrived on our doorstep that blustery November night, the difficulty of the day etched across his entire face. After shrugging off his coat, he pushed a bouquet of wildflowers in my direction. "They were my wife's favorite. I probably should have put them in a vase," he mumbled. Briefly, the tension was palpable, but as all five of my kids scrambled toward him, hoping to be the first to show him the construction-paper placemats they had made, his features softened. His lips turned up slightly at the corners, and he let out an unfettered exhale, releasing weeks of loneliness and uncertainty. The rest of the night was spent in friendly conversation, enjoying stories of Thanksgivings past. Although at times he'd grow silent, with tears threatening to fall, he seemed relieved to know that all the parts of his life were welcome at our table, even the painful ones.

In truth, there was nothing remarkable about our time together. The meal was aggressively mediocre. The turkey was a bit dry, and the rolls were burnt on the bottom. But I knew he wasn't coming over to be fed. Not really. He was coming to belong. He was coming to feel at home again, if only for a few hours.

Though I had never experienced the death of a spouse, in my own small way I could relate to the sorrow that seemed to shadow this man's days. I was more than familiar with loss and could certainly empathize with the discomfort of wearing a life that didn't seem to fit. Home had often felt like a four-letter word to me too.

For my first twenty-two years, I lived in the inner city and

surrounding suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona. Unlike most families I knew, mine moved from one apartment or rental home to the next, never living anywhere for more than twelve months at a time. Ours was a family of dysfunction, secrets, and addiction of every kind. Just when I began to settle into a neighborhood, discover the best bike routes to the nearest library, and learn the names of the kids next door, I'd stumble into a stack of cardboard boxes that my parents had lined against the living room walls, announcing yet another move. We were drifters with no real home.

I moved so often in my first two decades that I sometimes didn't even make the effort to unpack. A backpack was as good a spot as any to keep my favorite stuffed animal. Why search for thumbtacks to hang a poster when I would just have to tear it down in a few months? I longed to make *home*—a place constant and comforting, a place where I could make memories and put down roots.

Fast forward to my early adult years when I found myself married to my college sweetheart, a godly man of Danish and Norwegian heritage, whose growing-up years could not have been more different from my own. He woke up at the same address every morning for the first eighteen years of his life. His was a home of "sameness." His was the home I had always wished for. It was normal. At least that's what it seemed to me when I agreed to pack up all my worldly goods in Phoenix and follow him to Minnesota, the state that boasts the largest population of people of Scandinavian descent in the entire country. We set up house in a teensy apartment nestled in the woods. We were young, thirty pounds lighter, and quite naïve about what the next twenty or so years would look like. But we were in love, and this was our home. I was determined to make it a place where people wanted to be—a place where *I* wanted to be.

It didn't take long before *sameness* and *normalcy* lost their charm, though. This was *his* home. These were *his* friends. This was *his* family. Everything felt monochromatic and hollow. I was an outsider tagging along, struggling to be content with the sleepy pace of a one-horse town and losing the battle to stay warm in the near tundra where anything above zero degrees in January is considered a heatwave.

I cannot stress enough how fierce the elements are in Minnesota. For nine months out of the year, Minnesotans face freezing temperatures, biting winds, overcast days, and premature nightfall. It feels like the sun has all but forgotten this part of the world and refuses to shine for more than two seconds each day. It's bleak, to say the least.

Was this really what I had signed up for when I agreed to make a home in this state? I asked myself often. I felt lonely, cold, and misunderstood in this new place with these new people. I longed for home. Trouble was, I didn't really know where *home* was. I knew it wasn't *there*—moving from one ramshackle duplex to the next because my dad couldn't seem to hold down a job and keep up with rent. But it couldn't be *here*, where everything was different and yet always the same. Could it?

The culture and climate shock thrust me into an emotional tailspin. Little things began to fester and grow.

For goodness' sake, why can't Minnesotans call it a casserole like everyone else in America? Why do they insist on calling it a "hot dish"?

Duck, Duck, Gray Duck? Why are they teaching their children such blatant falsehoods? It's goose! Duck, Duck, Goose!

My teeth started chattering in September. It's now May. Should I see a dentist? I think my alignment might be off.

Everyone here seems so comfortable and cozy in the cold. Don't they know it's like -400 degrees outside? They're walking around in

outfits so skimpy they could be folded up and shoved inside a sandwich bag for easy travel. Meanwhile, I'm wearing every single sweater I own. I look like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

Why can't I be happy like other women at work, at church, at the grocery store? Everywhere I go, everyone looks so content.

Why is it taking me so long to make real connections? I thought staying meant I'd make lasting friendships.

I know that I chose this life, but I thought things would be different. I thought things would be better.

Home is supposed to be the nicest word there is. Why do I always bristle when I say it?

Like the children of Israel who came upon the bitter, undrinkable water of Marah in Exodus 15:22–27, I went looking everywhere for something to make life sweet—something to help me like living in Minnesota. That's when I began to look closely at those around me—to notice what made them so hearty and heartwarming. Despite grim and often uncompromising weather conditions, not to mention some very difficult life circumstances, my Scandinavian friends and family seemed unshakable. This was especially true for the ones who had put their hope and trust in Jesus. They were not only content; they were joyful.

The tenacity of spirit and strong resolve found in their homes wasn't just due to their thick skin, as some have jokingly suggested. It was more than that. The difference between them and me was that they had learned two simple truths that intersect at the core of their Danish way of life—a lifestyle I would learn to associate with the term *hygge* (pronounced HYOO-guh):

1. You can't always change your circumstances; you can only change your perspective.
2. Your outer life will always affect your inner life.

Like the log thrown into the water by Moses on the shores of Marah, these two foundations were what made Minnesota living so sweet. I had the same water, but without *hygge* it had a bitter taste.

A HYGGE PRIMER

Hygge is a funny word. It's not one that rolls off the tongue with ease. Even after tapping it out on a keyboard for what feels like four million months, I'm questioning whether my spell-check will hold up. The entire process of training my computer *not* to autocorrect it into *huge* or *haggle* takes herculean effort.

The term stems from a sixteenth-century Norwegian word *hugga*, which means to comfort, console, or encourage. It is loosely

connected to our English word *hug*.¹ While the word or derivations of it have been around for hundreds of years, it wasn't until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Danish people experienced a social shift from elite living to more domestic family life, that *hygge* began to transform the Scandinavian home.²

I wish I could scribble out a concise definition for you, one that wraps *hygge* up in a neat American package. But the truth is, *hygge* is hard to translate. There's no parallel English

version. To complicate things further, it spans the Danish language, shrouding itself in several different parts of speech. *Hygge*

Hygge is simple but sophisticated, warm and inviting, homemade and rustic. Hygge is the opposite of hustle. It eschews overabundance. It savors. It takes things slow and envelops you in sanctuary. Hygge is home, or at least it is to the Danish people.

is a noun. It's something you share, something that inspires you. *Hygge* is a verb. It's something you do either by yourself or with others. *Hygge* is an adjective. It describes peace, contentment, and joy. *Hygge* is a feeling, a concept, a lifestyle. In its most unsophisticated forms, *hygge* is a mindset—a way of making the mundane and necessary tasks of life more meaningful and beautiful.

When you sit in a comfy chair by the fire, that's *hygge*. When you arrange a fresh bouquet of favorite flowers on a bedside table, that's *hygge*. When you're sipping a frothy latte in an oversized mug, that's *hygge* too. Candles, soft furnishings, natural light, scents of nature, fresh-baked pastries, intimate gatherings with friends—these are all *hygge*.

Hygge is simple but sophisticated, warm and inviting, home-made and rustic. *Hygge* is the opposite of hustle. It eschews overabundance. It savors. It takes things slow and envelops you in sanctuary. *Hygge* is home, or at least it is to the Danish people.

To be clear, the Danes don't hold a monopoly on comfy and cozy. Other Nordic and European cultures have put their own unique spin on *hyggelig* living (this adjective form is pronounced in Danish something like HYOO-guh-leh). In the Netherlands, it's *gezelligheid*. In Norway, *koselig*. *Lagom* is practiced in Sweden, while the Germans prefer *gemutlichkeit*.³ All of these countries, while vastly different in customs and creeds, have found a common bond in their ability to build community, to invite closeness, to create well-being, and to celebrate the everyday.

Not surprisingly, this cultural liturgy has landed the Danish people in one of the top two spots of the European Commission's well-being and happiness index for the past forty years.⁴ And why not? In a world largely defined by rush, *hygge* welcomes rest. It invites you to enjoy the simple pleasures of slow living, savored moments, and fostered friendships.

A TRENDING TOPIC

Hygge has become a cultural buzzword in recent years. One can't go far without stumbling into a bit of curated *cozy*, boxed up and shrink-wrapped for easy carry-out. *Hygge* has been mentioned on national commercials and garners an entire collection of home decor on Target.com. It was a runner-up for the 2016 Oxford Dictionary's word of the year,⁵ was featured as the design aesthetic on HGTV's Urban Oasis 2019,⁶ and has been hashtagged more than eight million times on Instagram.⁷ It's a trending topic, to say the least.

Unfortunately, with popularity comes pollution. *Hygge* has been mismanaged and marketed in order to appeal to the masses. It's been relegated to store shelves, paint colors, and sound bites. In some ways, the commercialism of *hygge* has cheapened it. Most people don't truly even know what the word means or how to use it in a sentence. What's worse, the *hygge* frenzy has created a cult-like following of folks snatching up all the *cozy* they can in a relentless pursuit of happiness. Well-meaning women are buying fuzzy socks and flannel sheets, mugs, and bath salts. They're baking bread and drying flowers, throwing candlelit parties, and planning nature outings. They're sitting by fires and reading books with woolen blankets on their laps. *Hygge* has become the newest definition of health and well-being, a "healthy hedonism."

Of course, there's nothing wrong with pursuing coziness. But here's the cold hard truth: unless it's seen with a proper perspective, *hygge* will only ever be like fancy trim work laid over a shoddy foundation. To build a life-giving home, you need more than just essential oils and a high-priced entryway rug. Because the truth is, eventually the coffee will get spilled on the new chenille blanket and the cat will play tug-o-war with that favorite wool sweater. Someday the candle may tip, leaving you to watch the whole thing go up in flames.

Hygge is just a temporary fix. It's a lifestyle Band-Aid that will help create a home in the short term. True and lasting comfort, though, can't be tablescaped or found in some twelve-step Scandinavian formula. The perfect blend of coffee can't cultivate true contentment. There's no flannel blanket big enough to cover deep soul ache. A long walk in the woods won't change a life for the long haul. Reshaping an atmosphere can never permanently reshape a heart. But it can help, especially when paired with the hope of Jesus.

JESUS AND

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that Jesus is somehow insufficient, that He falls short, or that He won't deliver on His promise to grant us all things that pertain to life (2 Peter 1:3). As a follower of Christ, I know the Lord can never be tacked onto something or made into an addendum to someone else's agenda. I give no merit to the "All I need is a little bit of coffee and a whole lot of Jesus" mantra. These types of sentiments might look great on the wall art and graphic tees pedaled online or at the corner gift shop, but they undersell the transforming power of Christ. We can't be glib about His finished work. We can't add or detract from it, making an idol fashioned to our liking. We don't need Jesus *and* fill-in-the-blank. All we need is Jesus. Full stop.

Perhaps it's that very sufficiency found only in Christ that makes *hygge* so compelling to so many. When you peel back the surface layers of this Scandinavian practice, you find seven tenets at its core. You don't have to look hard to see that they seem strikingly in line with the abundant life offered in Christ. Hospitality, thriving relationships, well-being, a welcoming atmosphere, comfort, contentment, and rest—these are the markers of *hygge*. But they're also qualities seen in the first Garden home and exhibited by Jesus.

When calculated with an earthly formula, these seven principles fall short and present a half-truth of what it means to build a sanctuary in this fallen world. A half-truth is just as dangerous as an outright lie, for it gives you a false sense of security, making you feel you've covered all your bases and checked all the boxes, when in reality, its bedrock is sinking sand.

Yet *hygge* can have a place in the life or home of a Christ follower. In the same way a favorite devotional book does not replace your time in God's Word but merely helps to set your gaze in the right direction and offer practical application to what you're learning in Scripture, *hygge* can be a kind of companion for making a home where people can feel their way toward God and find Him (Acts 17:27). When viewed correctly, *hygge* can be a physical tool that reflects your spiritual life and invites others into a relationship with Christ.

A NEW PROMISED LAND

One has only to look to the Old Testament to see how what is often viewed as a secular practice can have a sacred purpose. The Israelites of old were instructed by God to set up their home in the Promised Land in such a way as to show His holiness to the world. Their work and their rest, their daily rhythms and special rituals, their physical possessions or lack thereof, and even their very lives were to be a reflection of who God is and what He has done.

Twelve stones deliberately stacked just to the side of the raging Jordan River revealed the might of the hand of the Lord and how He had parted the waters on the people's behalf (Josh. 4:19–24). An annual seven-day stay in a thatched hut during Sukkot commemorated not just their deliverance out of Egypt, but also their Deliverer, the Lord their God (Lev. 23:42–43). Enjoying loaves of yeastless bread from the fifteenth through the twenty-first day

of the first month became a lasting ordinance, to help the people remember how God passed over the houses of Israelites and spared their sons (Ex. 12:27). A small, ornate box hung on the side of each doorpost reminded the people of the ancient words of the Shema each time they entered and exited their homes (Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21).

Stones, huts, bread, and boxes—all these were outward displays of the inner life. They stood as both reminders and revelations of how the people of Israel were feeling their way toward and finding God. None of these practices added to their abundant life, the practices just recalled them to it and revealed their abundance to the world.

Stacked stones and thatched huts were for *then*—back when the Promised Land was a place. But now on the other side of the cross, the address has changed. Our Land of Promise is no longer a place; it's a Person. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus said in John 15:5. That word *abide* means "to remain, to dwell."⁸ It means to make *home*.

It seems natural to view *hygge* as something that belongs solely to the secular world. Perhaps that's because we're quick to divide our lives into two separate piles. The parts that pertain to God, His work, and our worship of Him are placed over *here*, and everything else gets put over *there*. We label certain kinds of music, certain kinds of movies, certain kinds of books as "Christian" or "sacred" and put all the rest in the "worldly" or "secular" category. But the truth is, in creating two separate columns, we forget that Jesus,

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is no longer a place;
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our new Promised Land, was both fully God and fully man.

Jesus' life was not a dichotomy of sacred and secular. Every part had eternal weight. He was the Christ who just happened to be a carpenter. He spoke of the *someday* marriage supper of the Lamb but also celebrated the *here and now* wedding feast of a friend. He taught about living water and the bread of life but multiplied actual

bread and fish for a hungry crowd. To suggest that some of His life was sacred and the rest was secular would be to deem only a portion of Christ's time here on earth to be "Christian." Jesus didn't split His life and time into spiritual and secular, and His outer life was exactly consistent with His inner life. He wisely recognized that outer behaviors affect and reflect the inner life.

For the believer there is nothing secular. It's all sacred when put under His authority for His kingdom purposes.

He ably held on to both, and we'd do well to follow that example.

From the whispered prayers of Sunday morning to the late-night phone call to a friend on Monday night; from the altar we kneel beside in the church sanctuary to the sink of dirty dishes we lean over in the kitchen after supper, from the offering we drop into the plate as it passes down the pew to the 1040 form we submit to the IRS each April—every part of our lives has eternal weight. Since God is both Creator and Redeemer of all, and since, as 1 Corinthians 15:27 says, everything under creation is subject to Christ, for the believer there is nothing secular. It's all sacred when put under His authority for His kingdom purposes—and that includes the cultural practice of *hygge*.

CALLING ALL HOMEMAKERS


In complete transparency, I confess I'm not Danish. I'm not even a little bit Scandinavian. I didn't grow up in a *hyggelig* home. Truth be told, I wouldn't have even known what one was. Chances are, you're not Danish either. It doesn't matter. You're a woman created in the image of God and as such, you are a life-giver. You are a homemaker.

Homemaker. Now there's a word that has certainly fallen out of vogue in recent years. It feels old-fashioned and narrow-minded, restrictive even. But let's not forget that before God made humanity, He made a home for them. With breath-filled words, He hung the stars to drive the shadows away and flung the planets into motion, setting both time and space. Out of nothing, there was something. In the middle of it all, He built a sacred place, the first home. God was the first homemaker.

For Adam and Eve, Eden was the backdrop for building relationships, for nestling into a pleasant rhythm of work and rest, for finding comfort and contentment with God and with each other. *Home* in the Garden was perfect.

But as you probably know, sin came slinking in, covered in false hopes and empty promises and carrying an eviction notice. Because of God's holiness, a change of address was necessary. Adam and Eve had to somehow accept that their home was not their home anymore.

Sadly, ever since that grim day in the Garden when *good* was traded for *good enough*, all of humanity has



*We're so busy chasing
rest we can't ever
truly find the peace
we crave.*

been homeless. We're nomads, traveling this life doing our best to recreate that once-upon-a-time home. In our transient, mobile society, home often feels like a far cry from paradise. It's simply

*Your heart is Christ's
home, and He's called you
to lead others to that same
Land of Promise.*

the place where our mail is delivered; a collection of rooms to store our stuff; a series of outlets for recharging our electronic lives. Even for those of us who never wander too far from our front stoop or dorm room door, home feels like a layover to the next big thing. We're lonely, anxious, overscheduled, and discontent. We're so busy chasing

rest we can't ever truly find the peace we crave.

Our homes are anything but sanctuaries, and we secretly long for the life we see in those perfectly positioned nine squares over on Instagram—from the college graduate struggling to make a home completely from scratch to the single woman juggling the responsibility of making a home *and* a career, from the newlywed wrestling to combine *his* and *hers* in order to make a home that looks like *ours* to the mom straining under the weight of making a home that her children will both enjoy now and want to come back to someday. I don't know which of these women you are, but I know this: if you're a Christ follower, you're also a homemaker. Your heart is Christ's home, and He's called you to lead others to that same Land of Promise.

Hygge has been ingrained in the Danish people by the right of genealogy. It may not come as naturally to you, as an outsider. Unlike my friends and family, you've not been born cocooned in all its layers. Neither have I. But after two decades of living among

folks practicing *hygge*, I've learned a few simple *hyggelige* habits to help me bring eternal sweetness to the world.

While in the center of a life of sameness, *hygge* taught me how to look for miracles in the mundane. When plagued with the perfection of Pinterest, *hygge's* simple aesthetic foundations helped me create a home atmosphere that reflected the beauty and comfort of Christ. Above all, when I was desperate to leave a legacy of faith, *hygge* showed me how to escape the pressure of a social media-saturated world and establish the kind of emotional, physical, and spiritual habits that can influence my friends, family, and neighbors for generations to come. It has helped me live a life of purpose on this side of the first Garden while I wait for my future home in the second. In the past twenty years, I've learned to be at home with *hygge*, and in turn, it has helped me be at home with *home*.

I share what I've learned from the place of a *student*, not as an *expert*. These chapters form a kind of CliffsNotes of my lessons learned. I've divided them into the seven tenets of *hygge* that seem to sync with the life of Christ. His life was more nuanced than what can be expressed on a seven-point list. But these seven categories represent the ways we can see *hygge* in Him, or more accurately, see Him in *hygge*. We'll look to the beginnings, in Eden, and show how *hyggelig* living mimics the perfection found in that first Garden home and later in the life of Christ. Then we'll explore the cultural applications of the Danish *hygge* lifestyle to look for simple and practical ways we outsiders can infuse them into our faith-filled homes in order to create a place for people to gather and the gospel to grow. The questions and Scripture readings included at the end of each chapter will help you consider *hyggelige* habits for making your *home*, and a brief prayer at the end of each chapter will draw you in closer communion with the One whose Spirit is making *home* in you.

The idea of *hygge* is compelling in our current culture of excess and isolation because it promises community, contentment, and rest. *Hygge* can cultivate all of those, but only when placed at the foot of the cross. The world is ripe for the comfort of real sanctuary living. The practices of *hygge*, in close cooperation with our trust in Jesus, can form a holistic approach to creating the kind of home and rich life that humanity has longed for since the perfection of the Garden.

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