

# welcome

## The Well-Lived Life

**W**hat is it? I sat across the desk from an executive in an ad agency, a man who had just moved east from California. He was smart, attractive, funny, warm, full of spirit—and completely harried. “Thank God it’s Friday,” he said. “I can’t wait to go home, go to bed, sleep late, get up, have a cup of coffee, push the vacuum cleaner around for an hour, and go back to bed. That’s my idea of a good life.”

Extreme? Yes. But it struck me that there was a certain sweetness to his spontaneous anticipation of keeping house. I understood what he meant. We all have those days (or weeks or months) when only the simplest pleasures seem desirable—those days seem to come when we are making ourselves crazy in pursuit of what we thought was the well-lived life. There’s no question that living well means different things to different people. For some it means a life in pursuit of power. Or wealth. Accumulation. Display. For others it has only to do with a life that revolves around family pleasures. For a noble few it means a life of spirituality. A turning inward for guidance, and a turning outward only to guide others. It might even mean a life of shunning the material world altogether. Which brings me to the furniture.

I am a person obsessed with houses and gardens. For me, living well begins at home. It is the place that refreshes and restores me, the place from which I launch my engagement with the larger world, both social and spiritual. Richly and sensibly appointed rooms aren’t just a way of throwing money at the walls (or, in the garden, into the dirt). Decorating has power. Our rooms have a huge influence on our lives. They express our passions, our desires, our interests, our habits, our loves. A room full of books with a comfortable sofa is a room made for contemplation and for discovering the wisdom in others’ words. A room full of sofas and chairs that can be pulled into different groups, around a low table for drinks or in front of a fireplace, or in the bay of a large



window, is a room for conversation, for the pleasure of discovery in one another. Walls covered with art tell you something about where truth or beauty or provocation lies for one person; bare walls, and perhaps a window framing the trunk of an old tree that has been lovingly tended for years, tell you another story. Lawns whose sweep embraces ball games, and gardens that encourage hide-and-seek, tell us one thing; rooms whose furnishings graciously welcome animals—and small children—tell us even more.

Sometimes I’ll see something in a photograph that unexpectedly takes my breath away. The corner of a sunny conservatory filled with flowers, snow piled up outside against the windowpanes, the light dancing and glittering. Or an armchair in front of the dying embers, a large round table nearby, gleaming with fresh wax, piled high with books, whiskeys, flowers, candles. It isn’t just the things in the picture. It isn’t about buying. Many of us have enough—more than enough—stuff. There is always the restless questioning—is it the right stuff? But that’s only because we’re looking for something else. The pictures give us a clue to what we want. We imagine our own lives into the pictures. Part of the magic of decorating is the chance to reinvent the way we live. Part of the magic of photographs is that they give us a free trial. They stand still, welcome us in, give us a chance to try on a room, and leave as quickly as we want. Much easier than visiting houses—where you can’t sneer, snoop, swoon, or fantasize about stealing.

It’s the quality of the experience a room gives us that counts—a quality of repose, or sensuality, or discernment. I can feel those rooms. I can feel what life is like in those rooms, and I’ll think to myself, gazing into the photographs—there it is, that’s how I want to live. These are the traces of a life well lived.

Dominique Browning, EDITOR