

Book Review

Donald B. Kraybill. *What the Amish Teach Us: Plain Living in a Busy World.* John Hopkins University Press, 2021. Pp. 173.

Greg Homan

Associate Professor
Wright State University, Lake Campus
greg.homan@wright.edu

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Donald B. Kraybill, the distinguished professor and senior fellow emeritus at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown (PA) College, offers a thoughtful and interesting analysis of Amish culture and contemporary issues through a collection of 22 essays. Not a historical analysis of the Amish, this text instead presents concepts through engaging stories and reflections on experiences studying the Amish over a period of decades.

Kraybill begins by analyzing basic foundational concepts, such as the relationships of the Amish with the outside world, the structure and social fabric of Amish society, and the role of church and religious foundations in the maintenance of community. The author challenges readers to understand the intricacies of Amish relationships with external society and the careful boundaries established to differentiate themselves and, thus, to survive.

Kraybill continues with an exploration of value concepts, focusing on issues such as “smallness” and “tolerance.” Using personal experiences of engaging and interesting interactions with the Amish, he shares the Amish paradigm of living steadfastly with religious convictions without passing judgement on nonbelievers. Challenged daily in small actions and periodically through life-altering experiences, the Amish apply their spiritual beliefs in a modest and humble manner.

A series of essays on family, children, and parenting explore how the Amish approach their closest relationships in the home. Deep personal relationships guide the way the Amish interact with each other in the complex and interwoven social fabric that is Amish community. The author explains the approach the Amish use to model and guide their children in what appears, to outsiders, as harsh and unyielding. However, the Amish value patience, obedience, and conformity as traits encouraging success into adulthood.

Essays on education and apprenticeship describe the Amish approach of preparing the next generation with the skills and abilities to survive. Resisting modernity and balancing a relationship of being “in the world” and yet “separate from the world” is a continuous challenge for the Amish. A basic foundational education, combined with an informal apprenticeship, is used to provide Amish youth with the basic skills necessary to be successful. Practical hands-on education through



“trial and error” and direct application of skills provides the Amish a time-tested method for preparing young people.

Kraybill moves on to an analysis of current issues for the Amish, with the topics of “technology,” “hacking,” and “entrepreneurs.” According to Kraybill, the Amish are “not willing to accept whatever modernity brings their way. Their eye is on long-term planning—on the downstream consequences technology might have on their community and its future.” Giving careful attention to technology and its implications, the Amish make decisions about how to use technology to maintain their social capital and community relationships and also survive in a complex modern world. “Hacking,” from the Amish perspective, is the ability to navigate the limits of technological restrictions and distance from the outside world using alternative approaches and engineering skills to adapt and ensure economic and cultural survival. Kraybill explains the success Amish tend to find in business, capitalizing on their work ethic, ingenuity, and social structure of family and community to yield a surprising 95% success rate of business sustainability.

Patience, limits, and rituals are the next concepts discussed. Kraybill uses stories of practical perspective, examples of applying an old-fashioned approach of being comfortable with waiting and praying for God’s will. According to the Amish, the best things in life require time and patience. Limits are not necessarily seen as a constraint to most Amish, reducing choices. Instead, accepting constraints is seen as a way of simplifying life through the ease of conformity and compliance. Amish spirituality is quiet and patient.

In the next essay, the author discusses retirement in the Amish community, a stage of life approached with reverence and great love. The Amish elderly, as opposed to many of a similar age in mainstream society, do not find themselves isolated. Rather, according to Kraybill, they are embraced and cared for by family.

Kraybill proceeds by analyzing the concepts of forgiveness, suffering, and nonresistance. Applied to the challenging Nickel Mines School shooting in 2006, the author showcases how the Amish live their faith and core values, even when facing great challenges. The Amish lean on each other, capitalizing on strong social capital and bonds to support one another and deal with difficulty. Kraybill writes, “Nonresistance also guides aspects of daily life. Silence, rather than a boisterous retort of argument, is the Amish default amid conflict. Nonresistance is the ultimate yieldedness to God’s will.”

As with all other aspects of Amish life, they approach death with the same love, patience, and humility. Relying on each other, with simple, yet highly ritualistic approaches, the Amish accept death as a natural stage in life.

Throughout this collection of thought-provoking essays on the Amish, Kraybill expertly provides personal experiences and Amish perspectives that will open readers’ eyes. He presents concepts clearly, using stories that explain and entertain the reader. I recommend this text as an opportunity to further understand the complexity of the Amish, the social norms guiding their survival, and the approaches they use to deal with modern challenges.