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Plain & Simple: The Will to Live Sustainably in an Unsustainable World

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PLAIN & SIMPLE:
THE WILL TO LIVE SUSTAINABLY IN AN UNSUSTAINABLE WORLD

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Diversity & Community Studies
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

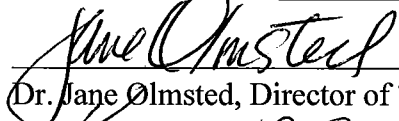
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Brandi Nichole Button

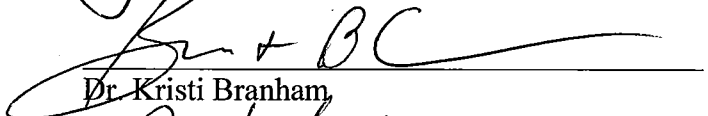
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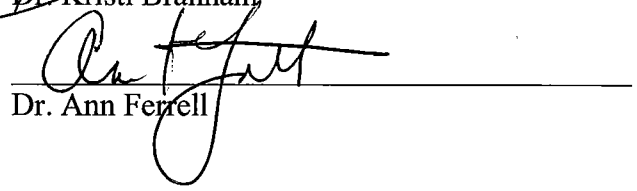
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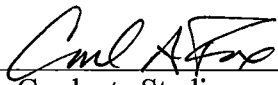
Dr. Jane Olmsted, Director of Thesis



Dr. Kristi Branham



Dr. Ann Ferrell

 7-25-13

Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

I dedicate this thesis to my mama, Cynthia Karen Scoggins Button, who always inspired me to read and do the best I could in school and to my daddy, Danny Neal Button, who taught me the secret to life is being who you are and proud of who that is no matter what others think about it. Also, I dedicate this work to my granddaddy Donnie Scoggins, whose respect for life, autonomy and nature radiates throughout my veins. Last, to Joshua Ames, whom without his support and patient perseverance I would not be finishing this work.

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There are several people who supported the fruition of this thesis project. First and foremost Dr. Jane Olmsted, who from the beginning of my graduate career has encouraged me to follow my heart and given me opportunities I never dreamed possible, Dr. Olmsted has spent patient hours networking, editing, discussing and encouraging. Next, Dr. Kristi Branham, who is the reason I continued with a graduate education and has been my cheerleader for the past 6 years. Without Dr. Branham I would still believe that I was not capable of conducting research, with Dr. Branham my research has been enriched by resources such as Alice Walker that are irreplaceable. Third, Dr. Ann Ferrell who taught me that it is possible for research to be fun and personal. Dr. Ferrell especially helped to guide the flow and clarity of my narrative. All of these women are not only mentors in my education, but friends, whom I cherish beyond words.

Obviously, this work would not be possible without the consent of Wren Smith, Janisse Ray and Meg and Alison Mott. All were kind enough not only to allow me to stay in their homes for a week, but follow them around like a lost puppy asking questions and taking pictures. Each inspired my reflections through the countless conversations we had over meals, gardening and chores.

Though they may never know who I am: Wendell Berry and Alice Walker, because they were the cornerstones of this piece ever having a chance of making any sense.

Last, Western Kentucky University for the kind travel and research grants that made conducting my research feasible.

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PLAIN & SIMPLE:
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Brandi Button

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150 Pages

Directed by: Dr. Jane Olmsted, Dr. Kristi Branham, and Dr. Ann Ferrell

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Sustainability is a buzzword covering a variety of fields and subjects. For the purposes of my research sustainability is “the ability to keep going over the long haul. As a value, it refers to giving equal weight in your decisions to the future as well as the present” (Gilman 1). The sustainability movement refers to activists, educators and researchers who are dedicated to finding high quality ways of living in the world that are environmentally benign for all who are now living as well future generations to come (Gilman 1). This research focuses on three women who engage in voluntary simplicity— “simplicity that is voluntary-consciously chosen, deliberate, and intentional- [and] supports a higher quality of life” (Elgin 4). The complexity of the subject of sustainability is why I chose to narrow my focus to such a worldview and because much of my educational background is in Gender and Women’s Studies I specifically focus on women. Feminist ethnographic methods of participant observation are utilized as well as rhetorical analysis. I examine the attentive roles that have afforded these women the ability to form intimate social as well as ecological relations in their community. The observations are recorded in a narrative form and contribute to the growing knowledge base of sustainability as well as resilience studies. The lack of sustainable practices on a large scale in our country affects every citizen who lives here through environmental problems like climate change and peak oil. The narrative form allows the research I have collected to maintain an accessible language which is important in reaching a greater

audience beyond that of academia. The narrative shows easy, manageable sustainable choices and changes that can be applied at the micro as well as macro level. These choices and changes are not exhaustive or all inclusive; rather they are suggestions for those who are interested in joining the sustainability movement.

Introduction

Although the field of sustainability studies has gained momentum in academia since the beginning of the 21st century, most analyses fail to examine simple choices and changes individuals make in their own community and place. For my graduate thesis I utilize feminist ethnographic methodology in order to address a particular worldview: “voluntary simplicity” (Elgin 4). I explored the experiences of three women in whose homes I stayed for one week. While with the women I used participant observation, as well as interviews in order to examine the attentive roles that have afforded them the ability to form intimate social as well as ecological relations in their communities. However, the heart of the research I collected lies more in the journey of the process. Through feminist-inspired ethnographic study my research unfolded as a challenge of mind, body and soul. I listened to the different women’s perspectives attentively, physically worked alongside them and spent restless hours contemplating the importance of relationships, solitude and peace. What I have written is only a portion of the overall experience which became a search for a deeper understanding of self, place and community.

“I wish we just lived in a little cabin in the woods somewhere,” my mom and dad said on a number of occasions. As a child I did not make the connection that my parents said this whenever they were overwhelmed by debt. However, the older I get the more I realize the stress-induced fantasy on their part has become a revelation and life goal on my part.

It seems ironic, because when my parents married at nineteen in 1981 they did live in a little cabin, though not in the woods. It was a house my great grandfather built and it still had a wood burning stove and cistern. My sisters and I grew up there until 1993, when my parents scraped together all they had and built a new house, tearing the old one down. Being thirty-two years old with four kids and having the income of working-poor, my parents had to take out a substantial home loan they are still paying on today.

They pressured my siblings and me to study hard, do well in school and go to college to become what “they could not,” and now I aspire to be who they started out as: young, close to nature and family, simple and free of financial debt. My parents like so many others of their social status are victims of an American Dream that was defined *for* them, rather than *by* them. Jennifer Hochschild, professor in the Department of Government at Harvard University, has an entire chapter dedicated to defining the American Dream in her book *Facing up to the American Dream*. Hochschild discusses the intersection of race and class with “what the dream is and how it operates” (15). Hochschild says that “the phrase elicits for most Americans some variant of [John] Locke’s fantasy—a new world where anything can happen and good things might” (15). However, she goes on to explain how the definition of the American Dream is complicated by race and class in terms of who came to pursue their own idea of the American Dream and who were brought against their will and thus had “to come to terms with a dream that was not originally theirs”(15). Further, the American Dream is based on “tenets of success”; success that is absolute, relative or competitive and “different kinds of success, need not, but often do conflict” (16). Similarly, for centuries,

philosophers, scholars, politicians and ordinary citizens have debated what “the good life” encompasses and my parents tried to define such for themselves and their children.

As a feminist I know our definitions are influenced by social structures and the place in which we are situated. According to Patricia Hill Collins, feminist scholar and activist, standpoint theory is “an interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power” (375). Collins says the notion of a “standpoint refers to historically shared, *group*-based experiences” (375). In standpoint theory the “*group*-based experience” is specifically “based on their [the groups] shared location in relation to power” (375). Based on Collins’ definition of standpoint theory, “the good life,” like the “American Dream” is subject to those who have the power to define it and even then it becomes relative to the individual’s perception. Although standpoint theory places more emphasis on the social conditions that construct social groups than the individual experiences of those who collectively make up social groups, there is something to be said for examining the individual’s experience as well.

In terms of my exploration of individuals seeking a particular way of living within the context of a broader community, Helen and Scott Nearing’s work is relevant to understanding the ways in which some people at least “put more into life and get more out of it” (5). The type of “good life” I relate to my parent’s fantasy of “a little cabin in the woods” and feel is of vital importance to understanding the worldview of voluntary simplicity comes closest to Helen and Scott Nearing. In *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* they recount how they moved from New York to Vermont in 1932 and started a homestead. The Nearings say in the Preface of

their book, “It was, of course, an individual experience, meeting a special need, at a particular time” and for their “special need” the good life included a minimum of values they felt were essential, including “simplicity, freedom from anxiety or tension, an opportunity to be useful and live harmoniously,” values whose “opposite (that is, complexity, anxiety, waste, ugliness and uproar)” are what “men associate with urban centers of western civilization” (6). In general they felt that they could find their essential values by getting back to the land and working to sustain themselves. The “twentieth century pioneering venture” of Helen and Scott Nearing was a response to “changing social conditions during the twenty years that began in 1910” which had cost them their “professional status” and “means of livelihood” (4). Most Americans know our country faced a Great Depression during this time. The Nearings’ “good life” was their response, because “whether we liked it or not we were compelled to adjust to the new situation which war, revolution and depression had forced upon the western world” (4). They wanted their own say in how they defined “the good life,” and their book rekindled a “back-to-the-land” movement that has roots going back to the early 20th century, when American economist E.G Nourse broached it in *The War and the Back-To-The-Land Movement* in 1916. Nourse’ account tells of the “toiler in factory, mill and shop” who has hope of “heaven” found in life on the land and the reality of the hardships faced when living off the land compared to economic gains of industrial work (Nourse 246).

The Industrial Revolution was not “a single event but many interrelated developments that culminated in the transformation of the Western world from a largely agricultural to an overwhelmingly industrial system” (Ritzer & Goodman 7). This occurred in the United States, during the 19th and early 20th centuries and is one example

of the way in which what constituted “progress” and a “good life” are influenced by those with power. With the expansion of industry, daily aspects of living were altered from a mainly agrarian society to an industrial one. The pressure to pursue an increasing number of factory jobs led to farmers leaving home and moving to cities. The industrial capitalist economy was born; “in this economy, the ideal was a free marketplace where the many products of an industrial system could be exchanged” and citizens were encouraged to place value in economic gain so they could participate in such exchange (Ritzer & Goodman 8). With such an “ideal,” however, reality proved there were unintended consequences and “within this system a few profited greatly while the majority worked long hours for low wages” (8). The reaction to such injustice followed in the form of labor movements as well as other radical movements, such as the one rekindled by Scott and Helen Nearing. Philosopher Ayn Rand says,

Capitalism does not tell men to suffer, but to pursue enjoyment and achievement, here, on earth—capitalism does not tell men to serve and sacrifice, but to produce a profit—capitalism does not preach passivity, humility, resignation, but independence, self-confidence, self-reliance—and above all, capitalism does not permit anyone to expect or demand, to give or to take the *unearned*. (*Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* 30)

Rand’s words may ring true if we are looking at a “full, pure, uncontrolled, unregulated laissez-faire capitalism,” but the reality in the United States is that our industrial capitalist system is not so “pure” and “laissez-faire.” In his essay *Economy and Pleasure*, Wendell Berry explains how the economy of the United States is one of competition—that is “limitless,” a system that “proposes simply to lower costs at any cost, and to raise profits

at any costs. It does not hesitate at the destruction of the life of the family or the life of the community” (*What Matters?* 101). Capitalism may intend to promote “independence, self-confidence and self-reliance” but from what group’s standpoint? Who is it that holds the position of power in order to benefit from capitalist? Our country was founded on a patriarchal social system in which men (white, upper class) rule and women (as well as other minorities) are pushed into positions of subservience and inferiority (Dicker 8). What of the knowledges of the populations in the United States who do not come from such a demographic?

I chose to study the lives of women in different locations east of the Mississippi who have dedicated themselves to sustaining their lives through “voluntary simplicity.” This term is used in the sense Duane Elgin writes about in *Voluntary Simplicity*: “simplicity that is voluntary-consciously chosen, deliberate, and intentional- [and] supports a higher quality of life” (4). Simplicity does not always have to imply sacrifice or have other negative connotations. Even though many assume simplicity implies the negation of some form of comforts the women I stayed with did not feel they were sacrificing anything except “stuff” they didn’t necessarily need or even want anymore.

I arranged to stay with each of the women for at least seven days, in their homes, interviewing and observing them. Feminist theorists Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman say, “having the opportunity to talk about one’s life, to give an account of it, to interpret it, is integral to leading that life rather than being led through it” (495). It was important for me to give the women I stayed with the “opportunity to talk” about their lives. I wanted them to be the ones who “interpret it” so they could lead me through their life “rather than being led through it” by me and my own interpretations. Lugones and

Spelman's essay "*Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'*" focuses on cultural imperialism and the importance of women's voice in cross-cultural dialogue. While planning my visits I applied their theory of friendship to what is involved when doing social change research. My research was motivated first and foremost out of friendship. Lugones and Spelman tell us "from within friendship you may be moved by friendship to undergo the very difficult task of understanding the text of our cultures by understanding our lives in our communities" (506). I feel true friendship involves the "difficult task of understanding" in many different facets. It is friendship that motivates us to *want* to understand, instead of simply seeing the surface of another being. My goal was to understand the text of the women's lives by understanding their interactions in their communities. In no way, however, do I feel the accounts in my study speak for all women; rather, they are examples of individual women who define their own "good life." Each of these accounts is represented with its own chapter.

I've recorded my findings using a reflective journal format. Much like accounts in *Women Writing Culture*, compiled by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, I believe my work should account for and reflect the unique situated knowledge of the women I created friendships with as well as my own interpretation of their experiences. The chapters are uniquely dated according to the days I was actually with the women. Under each dated section I describe the day's events using italics to show that these are diary accounts written while I was on-site. The font changes indicate when I was back at my own home analyzing and reflecting on the importance of the day's events. I seek to reflect on theoretical issues and on my own life, exploring what constitutes simplicity and

“the good life.” Behar utilizes such discursive practices in her own work *Translated Woman*. In both of Behar’s works the importance of conducting research *with* women rather than simply for and on them results in a stronger understanding (Gottfried 11). The only exception is my own chapter in which the italicized parts are from my personal journal and the non-italicized parts were written specifically for this projects purpose.

From the beginning of the research process I was in contact with the women through phone conversations and e-mail as well as face to face interactions. One exception was Meg and Alison Mott, who live in Vermont, so I was not able to meet them face to face until my actual stay with them. The women knew from the beginning of my contact with them that at any point they felt uncomfortable all they had to do was give me the word and I would cease contact with them. We agreed that at anytime I was recording our conversation they could turn off my recording device and that all conversations were subject to their permission for sharing through any median. Finally we agreed that they would read and edit anything I wrote referring to them and their worldview before it was turned in to my thesis chair so they would have the opportunity to decide whether or not I had interpreted their accounts accurately. I felt this would counter the problem of speaking for others that Linda Alcoff analyzes in detail in her article of the same title.

The order of the chapters follows the timeline in which I conducted my visits. The first chapter addresses my October 2012 trip to Panic Swamp in Putney, Vermont where I stayed with Meg and Alison Mott. Meg and Alison sold their home in town in 2008 and with their daughter moved onto 70+ acres to start from scratch and become self-sufficient, living for one year in a yurt while they built their permanent home. A yurt is

an eco-friendly, portable structure that is shaped like a dome. The Motts are part of a community that has decided to work towards a time “where food, energy and other essentials are locally produced” in order to address peak oil (Hopkins 212). On the other hand, as a family unit, the Motts also address climate change through the production of their own food, using methods such as composting, companion planting, crop rotation and as much manual labor as possible, similar to methods used when agriculture had a stabilizing effect on climate. This is also true for many of their friends. The town of Putney, Vermont, has been recognized as a “Transition Town,” defined as a town committed to "rebuilding resilience" by Rob Hopkins, author of *The Transition Handbook*. It is "a culture based on its ability to function indefinitely and to live within its limits and able to thrive for having done so" (13).

The second chapter is located in Bardstown, Kentucky, and is about my experience with naturalist Wren Smith in November 2012. Wren is currently the Interpretive Programs Manager at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. In the past she worked for the Kentucky Foundation for Women as coordinator of Hop Scotch House, which provides “time and space for feminist social change artists, activists and allies to explore new ideas and artistic expressions, deepen understanding of feminism and advance creative change” (kfw.org). Wren has found contentment in her own life and has developed a “loving eye” towards others, a way to respect them, without holding them in reference to her own self and her interests. Instead, she wishes to instill agency and integrity through kindness that empowers and encourages individual development. I am reminded of Alice Walker and hear an echo of Wren in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*: “The challenge for me is not to be a follower of Something but to

embody it; I am willing to try for that” (Walker 94). I think Walker is saying, in order for her to feel comfortable in her own skin, she must, not only become conscious of ideologies, but encompass them and express them through her choices, behavior and life (Walker 94). She needs to feel the “Something” as part of herself, without losing herself to it or worshipping it as an excuse to avoid responsibility for her unique self. Wren is doing just this.

The third chapter is about my visit to Reidsville, Georgia, in March 2013 where I stayed with Janisse Ray, author of five books of literary nonfiction and a collection of nature poetry. Janisse and her husband Raven own Red Earth Farm. The farm’s name comes from the indigenous ancestors who once inhabited it and the red clay found beneath the sandy loam soil. Since purchasing the farm they have revived its land using small farm practices. According to Kathy Rudy, a women’s studies professor at Duke University, “the best small farms strive to be ‘closed systems’—meaning they import almost nothing onto the farm (animals reproduce themselves through good husbandry practices, seeds are saved from the strongest plants for next year’s crops, etc.)” (Rudy 28). The time I spent with Janisse showed me what it looks like to take responsibility for your community and place—not just the environment, but the people, through sustaining, loving relationships. However, my visit also taught me about the importance of severing negative relationships and the exhausting process of healing the traumas those relationships place on us. Most of all she showed me what it means to have love; love for peace, love for justice, love for family, love for nature, love for others and love for self. All of these loves are crucial to sustaining the drive to “do what’s necessary, just and right” (Ray 193).

The final chapter is a personal narrative. I am from Park City, Kentucky, and in recent years decided to adhere more consciously to sustainable practices and a worldview of voluntary simplicity. The chapter starts with a brief genealogy because I feel understanding my heritage has led me to a closer understanding of myself. The chapter focuses on experiences that have had a significant impact on my embracing voluntary simplicity as a means to heal, physically, mentally and spiritually. It ends with my thoughts on the women I stayed with and how they have impacted my own worldview as well as revelations about the journey that is my life.

Each woman I stayed with represents a different approach to sustainable living and simplicity. All of them are white, as am I, and all have at least an undergraduate education and live in the United States. Other than these similarities each has her own unique life experiences and situated knowledges to bring to the conversation. I conclude with a summary of how my field work transformed and transcended what I originally had planned. I hope to contribute to existing scholarship about the ways in which ordinary women, through simplicity and sustainability, are making conscious efforts to take control of their own happiness and fulfillment as well as empower and inspire others to do the same.

In my experience with field research I've discovered it begins and ends "with a confession of ignorance" (Berry 34). Field research does not make us "intellectual heroes" but rather challenges us as scholars to let go of a structured agenda and embrace the beauty lying dormant within the organized chaos (Berry 34). This project has pushed me to examine my own expectations of what sustainability and social responsibility *should* be to other people. I had to take what inspirational writer, activist and poet Alice

Walker refers to as a “pause,” a step back to examine myself and my own preconceived notions. When I opened my ears and *heard* not just listened to what others had to say, the magic of community began to organically grow. I began to see what most of the authors I have read over the course of my research are continually hinting at, which is the importance of empathy and diversity as well as respecting autonomy and having faith that others are capable of making their own choices. When I let go and gave into the chaos of the experience it fruited into exactly what it was supposed to be, in my eyes, from the very beginning: a time to build friendship and community as well as illuminate the importance of sustaining the balance that many times we are too distracted to see is necessary in order to continue on the path of resilience.

When I was a child I absorbed my parents’ and family’s vision of “the good life.” I became tuned to what they valued and the principles by which they lived their lives. My interest in behaviors as well as the time I have dedicated to wanting happiness not only in my own life but the lives of others, has led to my studies in “the good life” and voluntary simplicity. I do not hold the universal answer anymore than anyone else does. My research started as an exploration of simplicity in the lives of American women, their unique experiences and how they came to define conscious and sustaining lives. What I found, much like Helen and Scott Nearing, is “an individual experience, meeting a special need, at a particular time” (3). I hope readers will learn from these stories and discover--if they don’t already realize it, that we all have the freedom to define the “good life” for ourselves, encouraging conversation, consciousness-raising and a chance to heal.

Chapter 1 The Motts of Panic Swamp



Alison (left) and Meg (right) Mott

10/1/12

The plan was to reach Putney, Vermont around 2pm today and spend the afternoon and evening speaking with Meg and Alison Mott, but of course life does not always work on schedule and I did not reach Putney until 6pm. It was not because of horrible navigation skills, but a poor start to a very long day, and I just embraced it as my fault and moved on. My only worry was Meg and Alison might not be as forgiving as I was. As it turns out, that too was silly. They were so welcoming and loving all of my worry was gone as soon as I hit their driveway.

My trip has completely spoiled me already. I was welcomed by Meg at the end of the road to make sure I knew where to turn and entered a home filled with the aroma of supper on the stove. Alison had prepared a soup made of local ingredients: pear, butternut squash, tomato and chicken stock all roasted and pureed into a creamy goodness. Each of us added a hunk of Gouda from the co-op where Alison works to further enrich the flavor of the soup.

"One thing is for certain," Meg announced, "We eat well."

I couldn't have agreed with her more. After the soup we had roasted potatoes from the garden alongside minute steaks they had purchased from a friend living "just up the road." And just as I was beginning to think that dinner was over, Meg pulled out a no flour almond cake she had prepared using eggs from the ducks I would get to meet in the morning, along with a small pint of ice cream that was made within reasonable driving distance as well. I had to ask, "So how far would you say the majority of your food is coming from?" They looked at one another and let out a little giggle. "Is it like a 100 mile radius?" I asked.

"More like a 10 mile radius." Meg replied.

"Of course there are some things that we simply cannot get around here, like olive oil," Alison chimed in wanting to be accurate, "but the majority of it we can."

"And it is getting a lot easier to do," said Meg, "especially since the Transition Initiative and another local group, Post Oil, have formed."

These initiatives are among the many reasons I was so interested in coming to Vermont for my research.

The town of Putney, Vermont, where Alison and Meg live has been recognized as one of the communities in the United States termed a "Transition Town," defined as a town committed to "rebuilding resilience" by Rob Hopkins, author of *The Transition Handbook*. It is "a culture based on its ability to function indefinitely and to live within its limits and able to thrive for having done so" (13). According to Hopkins the formation of this type of resilience results from a deeper understanding of what he describes as the "hydrocarbon twins," peak oil and climate change; "they are so intertwined, that seen in isolation, a large part of the story remains untold" (p.18). The discovery of oil reserves peaked in 1964, but for

the purposes of a Transition Town, Hopkin's definition of peak oil is "the point when further expansion of oil production becomes impossible because new production flows are fully offset by production declines. It is the midway point—the moment when half of the reserves have been used up" (21). Peak oil is explained in further detail in the James Kunstler's book *The Long Emergency*, which dedicates three chapters to the history and specifics of peak oil. I agree with Hopkins that climate change and peak oil cannot be separated if a community is to make a lasting transition. Kunstler considers climate change as a normal part of our planet's history; however, he notes that "Climatic shifts appear to have had a lot to do with the rise and fall of early civilizations organized around intensive food production" (151). He argues that pre-industrial human agricultural activity had a more stabilizing effect on climate compared to that of industrial agricultural practices of today (149).

The Motts are part of a community that has decided to work towards a time "where food, energy and other essentials are locally produced" in order to address peak oil (Hopkins 212). On the other hand, as a family unit, the Motts also address climate change through the production of their own food, using methods such as composting, companion planting, crop rotation and as much manual labor as possible, similar to pre-industrial methods used when agriculture had a stabilizing effect on climate. This is also true for many of their friends.



Baina



Panic Swamp



Allyn Rd. Putney, VT

10/2/12

This morning it was not easy to rise because the rain was softly patting against the window over my head. It was still dark when my alarm started going off. Instead of staying in Meg and Alison's home I was keeping watch over the house built by their daughter, no more and possibly less than a football field's length away from their house, who was traveling during my visit. It turns out I am not that great at making coffee in a French press and I spent a good amount of the time I planned to use preparing for morning chores instead cleaning up the mess I made all over the counter and stove. When I finally ran upstairs to get dressed, I discovered my bag was overflowing with clothes. One of the feelings nagging at me since I arrived is how this trip has caused me to re-evaluate my own actions. The coffee fiasco itself showed me how much I have come to rely on an electric coffee pot, while my bag of clothes showed me how over prepared I was. I must acknowledge that I, too, even someone conscious of the materialism and consumerism that is so poisonous to our culture and someone who promotes a sustainable effort, still acts unsustainably at times. Recognizing this, forces me to be honest with myself and re-evaluate my own habits of comfort and convenience.

I made it over to the Mott house in time to meet Alison at the door with chicken feed in hand. This morning I would be helping with the morning chores. First she takes me over to the electric mesh fenced area where the chickens share a home with their guardian Baina, an enormous "puppy." Baina is a Maremma-Sharplaninatz mix a breed of dog known for its ability to watch over livestock. When the fence is securely turned off, we enter and go to a homemade cage in the middle of the habitat housing a brooding hen. Alison gracefully and gently feels underneath the sitting hen while cooing her and pulls out three eggs.

"Naturally, she wants to sit right now, but I am taking the eggs anyway, because we don't have a rooster so if I leave them they will just rot," she explains. Without a rooster, the eggs won't be fertilized, and so their only use is to be consumed. She doesn't force the hen out of the nest, just allows her to stay huddled as she places feed in a special container in the middle of the pen for when she is ready. From there we walk around the rest of the fenced area on our own little private egg hunt.

"Since we allow them to wander around it is somewhat of a challenge to find all the new places they are laying," Alison says as we look under brush for more eggs. She explains how Baina, the dog, is a good egg finder, but we have to react fast if she finds them first because she is fond of the taste of fresh eggs.

After we secure the gate, we go inside and Alison collects her milking supplies, a small metal bucket with a half moon opening in the lid and a smaller funnel-looking apparatus with a screen. We go into a small out building that she and Meg explained to me the night before was the first building they built on their new farm: "It actually came in a kit," Meg announced, "and we had to put it together."

It is obvious when I walk inside that the shed has been modified a bit for the keeping of goats. There is a shelf to the right under which hay is stored, while the left side has a unique wooden stage-like piece of furniture that has a pull-out bench and a place for the goat's head to go between two curved swinging boards that latch together by a hook as well as a place in front to hold a feed bowl. The other half of the shed is blocked off with wooden doors that don't reach all the way to the ceiling and serves as the shelter for the goats to stay in at night. I am introduced to Wreat, an Alpine mix with dull horns and beady eyes, and her kid Rizzo. Wreat responds willfully to Alison as she opens the wooden door and asks her to get up onto the milking platform. I watch as Alison gently brushes the animal and removes as many loose hairs as she can from the udder region. "I really should shave her udder to make sure the loose hairs do not end up in the milk, but it is starting to turn cold and I really hate to do that to her, so I brush it as good as I can," she explains in her precise manner. When Alison explains chore details to me, I can hear the high school teacher she was at one time. She then rubs Wreat's teats with iodine and squirts a little of the milk into the screened funnel that opens to a medal saucer underneath. This is her process to check for anything unusual with the health of the nipple. She only finds a small clot she feels is a sign that Wreat may be coming into heat.

"It could have an effect on the taste, but it is minor," she assures me. She sits on the stool and clamps her thumb and forefinger around the teat and squeezes lightly, as if she is trying to flip a quarter across her knuckles. When she finishes she weighs the milk and we take Wreat and Rizzo over to the chicken pen where they can munch on the brush where the hens are laying eggs. Next we go inside to put the milk in the sink with some cold water and an ice pack. She tells me that to maintain its freshness it is important to get the milk to at

least 40 degrees as soon as possible. We head back outside and feed Baina, putting her back in her pen so we can do the last task on our list, which is let the ducks out to “play.” As soon as they are loose they head for the kiddie pool at the side of the house quacking, it seems to me, with delight. That is it. In about an hour’s time we have completed the morning chores and Alison finally takes the time to prepare herself something to eat, before heading off to the day’s outside obligations.

The work at the homestead the Motts refer to as "Panic Swamp" is not the only labor they participate in. The other labors are what Paul and Helen Nearing refer to in *Living the Good Life*, what is known as the homesteaders Bible, as bread labor, civic work and professional pursuits or recreation (51-52). “Bread labor” refers to work done in order to meet the requirements of food, shelter, clothing, and whatever tools are useful in upkeep (51). I think of this as the labor that most of us participate in. It can be a part-time job or a full-time career. It is what we do in order to pay the bills. At the very least, it ensures we have food, shelter and clothing. “Civic work” is activities that contribute to the community. The line blurred between professional pursuits and recreation for the Nearings because they believed the recreational activities they participated in coincided with their own idea of what professional pursuits should be: activities one enjoys. The Nearings believed such activities could be used to block off the day into three four-hour sessions. In reality, especially in today’s time compared to when the Nearings began homesteading (back in the 1932), life does not always work into cookie cutter time slots, at least not in the lives of those living in our industrial, capitalist society. It is the recognition of our shortage of time in modern US society along with the realization that

more stuff does not necessarily equal more happiness that some individuals were and are still drawn to the back-to-the-land movement.

The back-to-the-land movement was [is] a social movement based around the idea of living a self-sufficient life close to nature. It was [is] characterized by the idea that everyday life is methodically practiced and based on a set of moral values or choices. For many people homesteading became [becomes] a spiritual practice, giving meaning to daily life through adhering to values of simplicity and anti-consumerism.

(middlebury.edu)

Both Meg and Alison's line of "bread labor" is unique. Alison works at the Brattleboro Food Co-op which is going through a difficult stage. Workers recently voted to create a union because there is a lot of stress with management. People work there who live in the community; the workers voluntarily cooperate with one another for mutual social, economic, and cultural benefit. Alison's position is not only unique because she has found a way to combine her bread labor and civic work, but because she works at the cheese counter, and she makes cheese at home from the goat milk she gathers. Her experience at the co-op has made her somewhat of a self-proclaimed "cheese snob" because she is able to examine the differences in texture and flavor of cheeses. I think it's magical that she's found this place in the world that harmonizes with her worldview. In terms of professional pursuits and recreation, working part-time at the co-op allows her to take care of "Panic Swamp," keep up with the chores there, grow and process her own food, and she still has time to sit down and read a book.

Meg is a professor of political theory a few miles down the road at Marlboro College in the town of Marlboro. Meg's position is unique as well in the sense that she too has combined all three: bread, civic work and recreation. At Marlboro she teaches to small, intimate classrooms of students where she can create a reading list that really gets students thinking about social as well as environmental issues. While I was there, she was teaching the book *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* by Kimberly Smith. She let me borrow the book, so I could read the chapter they would be discussing in class the day I was on campus. The work showcases environmental thought through the eyes of African Americans and fills important gaps in political theory through the discussion and analysis of class and race bias and the formation of ghettos as well as the use of slave labor. Even though Meg's work at Marlboro takes away from the time she would like to spend on her homestead (the week I was there she was on campus every week day), as an outsider I found it to be time well spent in civic work. The topics she teaches and the relationship she has with her students is extremely important in sharing her knowledge, as well as empowering herself, and influencing others toward a more simple way of life. When she arrives home from her teaching profession, she shares in evening chores and is able to retire to a loft to study or grade in a home that she helped to build, with very few technological distractions.

It is clear to me Meg and Alison have a great partnership and that they support one another, which is important when choosing to live simply because of all the extra challenges and chores that come about in self-reliant living. Similarly, the pioneers, Scott and Helen Nearing were able to accomplish so much because of their mutually reinforcing relationship. On top of all this Meg and Alison are privileged enough to have found "bread" labor that

allows them to participate in the support of the greater overarching goals in the Transition movement.

10-3-12

This morning as the dew hung heavy and a light mist trickled from the sky, I made my way over to the Motts' feeling myself falling into the comfort I have developed over the past two days, excited to breathe in the air and meet Baina at the front porch as Alison headed out the door. We began the morning chores of milking and feeding. At first I was skittish around Baina, afraid that she was going to get me wet and smelly, knowing I was going to Marlboro's campus with Meg today, but soon found this a hopeless cause and fell into the routine of her pushing against my leg and gaining the attention she begged and downright deserved.

Meg was waiting in the kitchen with oatmeal thick and yummy simmering on the stove. I watched as she and Alison worked in unison without speaking. They fed off of the energy of one another and danced about the kitchen tidying up for the next task of serving breakfast.

"Being able to take the time to prepare and cook your own food and sit down to eat is really important," Alison expressed to me during one of our many conversations. You see, it turns out the simple life is not so simple after all; it takes commitment, compromise, patience and endurance. The term "simple" can be misleading. I saw in her eyes how eating together keeps such a conscious and at times overwhelming way of life afloat. It shows in how every meal I have been invited to partake in is a communal, almost ritual act. Each step of the process, from preparation to completion and conversation over full bellies, has a spiritual and healing effect of its own.

After breakfast Meg and I headed off to campus, on the way picking up a fellow professor who lives nearby. The conversation in the car turned to the idea of a component on contemplative studies Meg and her colleague have been formulating for their courses. The conversation was intellectual yet engaging; it was enticing to dwell on the idea of contemplative studies and how it would benefit students to have a scheduled amount of time to meditate on the topics they are learning and the assignments they are completing in class in silence and reflection. In a sense part of their class would be exactly what I was doing now, sitting and pondering possibilities introspectively. I found Meg and her colleague were open to my curiosity and answered my questions both willingly and thoughtfully.

Marlboro has around 230 students, which has caused a challenge to the school's budget. The small number of students would make the college extraordinarily personable and attractive to my personality-type. The campus was established in 1946 originally as a place for WWII veterans to spend their GI bills and "try to make sense of the world," as Meg put it, which seemed to fit the setting as we pulled into the secluded campus that was once a farm. The old dairy house is where Meg's office is located, and the now blacktop paths we climbed to the social science building took my mind to a time when the paths could have been compacted dirt, which on a day like today would be a muddy, slippery mess. As students passed in their Muck boots, I had the tiny revelation of how frivolous it was to worry about Baina's wet paws earlier in the morning.

Meg showed me the library where I spent the morning writing until her 11:30 class. I accompanied her and participated in the lecture and class discussion. Meg immediately kicked off her boots and removed her socks to prance around in front of the chalk board in bare feet. Students trickled in and the class started with Meg distributing note cards and

asking everyone to write down the difference between a ghetto and an organic community. I was given the chance to explain to the class what type of research I was doing and why I was following their teacher around with a camera. Meg collected the note cards and redistributed them amongst the class. She then went from one side of the board to the other writing out what the students read off the note cards, and as a group we discussed what we felt needed more elaboration or clarity. The conversation was fluid; the students seemed open with their professor and exchanged mutual respect and attention.

Once we got into the conversation I realized how important to me it was to be able to sit in on today's specific lecture-A moment Kirsch and Rowan in *Beyond the Archives* refer to as serendipitous (4). The serendipity came as an opportunity in my research I was not expecting that was opened to me in discussion with Meg's students about the concept of being able to authentically *choose* simplicity. We discussed race consciousness, and Meg asked me to tie my research in by taking a gamble at what class consciousness might look like. I started by explaining why consciousness-raising awareness groups were so pivotal to the Second Wave of the Women's Movement and how these same awareness groups should be formed today to discuss the sustainability movement. I went on to describe how class consciousness, to me, is when an individual is able to examine themselves in relation to their socio-economic class, and then understand the privilege and/or oppression socially constructed around that class. This awareness allows conversation that is open and honest, enabling us to see invisible privilege we may hold due to class and how it can be used to counter oppression. Both race and class consciousness allow us to be aware of our place in social structures and how our choices affect others. I ended with an example. I told the class how the War on Poverty (1964) started in eastern Kentucky with upper class males coming

in to “save” the poor, helpless people there. The problem was that communities were not asked if they needed saving. Some men, such as my own grandfather, says, “some people called it poverty, but I never thought of it as poverty because I cannot remember a time I was hungry or cold.” He described growing up without electricity or running water as “the best days of his life.” I told the class we have to be careful in thinking we know what is best for others. Class and race-consciousness make it possible to examine privilege and oppression more clearly and discourages one-size-fits-all solutions.

Several ideas coalesced in the discussion along with Meg pressing me to apply my project. Kimberly Smith’s idea in *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* that ghettos have the potential to be transformed into organic communities as well as Smith’s encouragement to see the positive dynamics of organic community already present in ghettos touched me. It gave me the support I needed to see communities like my hometown, considered working and poor class, have the potential to be studied for positive organic community aspects and transformation in the areas lacking. Such a transformation appears to be occurring in Putney, where its residents are making an organic effort to transition their town. Even Marlboro College has created incentives for organic communities to blossom as shown in the effort to include students in decision making on campus. Meg explained to me how students are invited to all the meetings on campus that effect their campus and learning environment.

“The smoking ban was a really popular meeting,” Meg said, “there were a ton of students who showed up for that one because a lot of them smoke.”

Campus wide work day ended the school day. Meg and I tromped off to the school garden, where a new green house designed by one of Marlboro's students was being installed. Our job was to harvest the remaining vegetables and carry the bare vines to the compost pile. We then received the aromatic task of collecting all the rotting tomatoes with blight to put into a burn pile so the disease wouldn't spread to next year's crops. We finished dirty and content to head home where I would get my first chance to milk the goat.

When we arrived home Alison had the milking equipment clean and ready to go.

"Do you want to do it from start to finish?" she asked gracefully.

"Sure," I replied, hoping I didn't forget anything. My worry was in vain because she was there with me the entire time, guiding me as a mother would her own child, calmly and coolly directing me towards the materials I needed and the steps involved. What an amazing experience to take the animal to her podium, brush her and finally sit down with her to milk. Her udder was warmer than I expected and at first I wasn't as good an aim into the milk pail as Alison, but with a few more squirts I was able to get into a flow. Wreat was a good sport in allowing a stranger to step in and give a try at something she was used to going so smoothly with Alison. There was a point where I filled with pride, meditating on "I can do this, I can so do this." It made my heart smile. Eventually Alison did have to step in and finish up because Wreat's patience was wearing thin. Alison assured me I would get it soon enough; "just dream about it tonight," she said with wisdom. I slept soundly, reflecting on the possibilities that came to mind throughout the day and all of the stimulation I had received over the past 12 hours.



Alison Mott (from left) storing cheese, milking Wreat, and weighing goat milk

10-4-12

Another morning of fog and drizzle. It's becoming a pattern. I didn't mind it so much, except for the effect it had on my ability to wake up. As if the moist fog and darkness were telling my body to stay in bed. I thought about Alison, how she had probably been up since 5AM and here it was going on 7AM and I hadn't even made it into my work clothes yet. I rose, made coffee, got dressed and walked the lovely little path between the rows of orange trees to the Motts'. I found Alison alert and ready to start the day. There was no time for me to eat breakfast because the ladies were waiting; all of them, dog, chickens, ducks (minus the five drakes) and goats to be fed, milked and cared for.

One of the pitfalls of "living the good life" as Meg and Alison define it, is realizing your wants are compromised by the needs of the animals and plants you are responsible for. I followed Alison out the door, assuring her it was my own fault I had missed breakfast and I would eat later. We milked and fed the goats and then headed towards the house to take in the milk and let the ducks out on the way. She asked me to keep an eye on Baina from the inside, while she was cooling the milk. It seems Baina has a slight curiosity in how duck might taste. My job was to press the button on her remote control collar, which would send a shock of discipline her way, if she were to go after one of the ducks while we were inside. Just as Alison showed me the button to push, Baina saw an opportunity and grabbed a drake by its neck. Alison tried the remote, but Baina couldn't feel a thing. I still had on my boots and ran through the yard yelling at Baina to let go, which she did, giving Alison enough time to put her boots on and grab Baina by the leash. She escorted her to a holding cell in the chicken yard. We examined the drake and saw he would be fine. I thought to myself, such irony, a dog bred to protect fowl and still so determined to get a taste of what it is supposed to be protecting from other predators.

When all the excitement settled down, Alison and I went back into the house to begin the day's big project: cheese making. It is one of the many skills Alison brings to the homesteading life. Today we were making feta and ricotta. My mouth watered at the idea. We started by combining the milk gathered from Tuesday through this morning which made almost 2 gallons.

"The milk we are using today is no older than 48 hours, which is good. Ideally you want the freshest milk available when making cheese, no older than 72 hours if it is raw because of bacteria," Alison explained. "It is also important to calibrate your thermometer," she went

on, "because we want to try to keep the milk around 86 degrees." She told me of a time she started making cheese and didn't realize her thermometer was 10 degrees off until it was too late, and the taste of the cheese was compromised. We used a mesophilic culture for the feta, "meso" being Latin for moderate and "philic" being the Latin for "like," so the culture we were using liked moderate temperatures, whereas a thermophilic culture likes heat, she taught me. "The heat-loving cultures are used in making yogurt," she said passing the pot of milk from the sink to the stove top with calibrated thermometer in tow. I watched the temperature of the milk as I made my breakfast of duck egg omelet in the black iron skillet she'd left out for me. As she went out to move Baina's food inside her pen, she told me to fix as much as I wanted. When she returned, she offered to fry some cornbread from the night before to go with my omelet.

When the milk reached 86 degrees, it was time to take it off and put it in a portable sink inside the kitchen sink filled with warm water; this is to make sure it stays a constant temperature. Alison explained how the portable sink inside the actual kitchen sink helps make the process flow better because we had access to a drain and could add warmer water as needed to keep the temperature constant. The next step was putting in the rennet. Alison uses liquid rennet. She measured it out, at the same time discussing how it came to be produced in a lab. The original rennet used in cheeses came from the lining of the animal's stomach; it is the rennet that allows the cheese to flocculate, which means "form masse." We reached flocculation in less than a minute, which Alison said wasn't ideal, she likes for it to take a little more time, but it would still work. We waited thirty minutes and then used a knife to look for what is known in the cheese-making world as a "clean break." She showed me how she inserts the knife at an angle into the mass, when she is able to lift up and the whey is

distinctly separate from the flocculated milk, which is indicated by a smooth edge where the blade went in, then the “clean break” is verified. She begins to cut across the mass and explains how there is a device you can buy that makes sure the cheese is cut into exact $\frac{3}{4}$ inch squares. She improvises with her knife and goes back over with 45 degree angle cuts. After ten minutes, she stirs the cubes and whey by hand, and cuts the pieces still a little big. I watch as she runs her hands underneath the mass of cubes and pulls whey up from the bottom of the pot. She seems to go into a trance, her hands smoothly pulling and dropping into the pot she stands over. Twenty minutes go by and she asks me to get a bowl from the bottom drawer as she prepares a pan with a strainer placed inside, and collects cheese cloth from another drawer.

“It is good to get the really tight knitted stuff,” she told me showing me a comparison between it and some other cloth she had in the drawer that seemed almost sheer when held up to the light. She took the cloth and lined the strainer, then began to pour the whey and cubes into it. “We are collecting the whey from this in another pot so we can put it back on the stove and make ricotta,” she told me. She pulled the corners of the cheese cloth together and started to tie the cubes inside, reminding me of a method a hobo would use for his knapsack. The knapsack of feta was hung from a small bungee cord over the bowl I had gotten from the drawer. The ricotta only made sense while we were doing feta cheese, according to Alison, because ricotta requires whey less than 3 hours old and we had plenty of runoff whey from our feta. We heated the whey between 195 and 200 degrees, making sure not to boil it, and watched as it coagulated. Alison placed the clabbers into a cloth of their own to drain over a little dish. The cheese would sit for the next 24 hours draining whey left in it and then Alison would store it in her very own “cheese cave” she’d created in the

basement. The cave was an old refrigerator rigged with a temperature control on the outside so she could control the temperatures of both the fridge and freezer chambers. To allow for air flow she had taken the lining off of the fridge door, so it did not seal all the way. As she talked about the fridge and showed me the cheeses that it kept, treasures of trial and error since she began, Alison seemed illuminated by memories of figuring out what worked best and how she could now concentrate on flavors and different styles of cheeses.

We sat down for a lunch of leftover casserole made with rice, corn, cheese, and other goodness. Looking out the window we saw the ducks, one of them beginning to molt and a few tucking their heads into their wings for an afternoon nap.

“It will be interesting to see what happens with five drakes,” Alison mentioned looking over her flock. She told me when they didn’t have drakes, they noticed the females would mount each other in the kiddie pool they fill with water. “It was never one being dominant, they would take turns of being on the top and bottom,” she said, “I wonder if they will still have lesbian relationships with the drakes around?”

Just think how much nature can teach us about the sexes, gender and sexuality. It is fascinating really. Judith Lorber in her book *Paradoxes of Gender* explains the social construction of gender through a chapter entitled, “Night to His Day: the Social Construction of Gender”. Our duck conversation allowed me to visualize what she refers to when she describes how in Western Civilization, “social statuses are carefully constructed through prescribed processes of teaching, learning, emulation and enforcement” (17). Our culture only recognizes two gender categories: male and female. It polices all behavior that falls outside the agreed upon social norms that are taught, learned, emulated and enforced and

uses the excuse that they “are not natural.” In nature we see a different story: the ducks have no idea they are male or female, no concept of what is “socially acceptable” sexual behavior. When the female ducks were without drakes, they simply mounted one another; it was just natural, in the truest sense. I hadn’t thought about it, but now I couldn’t help but draw the conclusion that a person keeping animals and participating in their care is more exposed to the “nature side” of gender. The animal-keeping aspect of homesteading allows for an individual to become better equipped with awareness that can lead to a broader world view. In the sense that day in and day out the caretaker is witness to different species of beings participating in sexuality that is neither taboo nor unnatural. I feel as though these are the subliminal messages found in nature urging us towards the social responsibility component that is so pivotal to sustaining community.



Wreat



The yurt Meg & Alison lived in for one year.

10-5-12

Another day of rising early to meet Alison for morning chores-- Friday and finally the sun has decided to grace us with its presence. I am amazed at the difference the light makes in my ability to get going. I find Alison in the kitchen making tea. She ponders what we will

set as our objectives for the day. I admire this, her setting a goal for us to reach. She decides we should work on a project she talked about doing earlier in the week: secure a fenced-in area around the already established goat pen and yard. This will allow Wreat and Rizzo a greater variety of diet and for overgrown brush to be taken down in the process. The old adage killing two birds with one stone comes to mind.

“Some days are easier than others to get started,” Alison said. I thought back to how I felt yesterday morning and the assumption that Alison just leaps out of bed every morning ready to go to work on the homestead.

“However, once I do get outside it makes me so happy,” she continued. She went on to discuss how houses and their walls confine us and make it an effort to go outdoors. The fact most of us are protected by insulation and walls, ceilings and temperature control is another difficulty in the sustainability movement we don’t always address; it is a stumbling block to the connection we have with nature. The type of shelter we live in has a dramatic effect to whether or not we chose or are forced to go outside.

“When we lived in the yurt, I felt like we were even more in tune with the seasons and every little sound going on around us,” she told me, “I mean we didn’t have running water or electricity, so we were very much aware of the length of the days and weather conditions.”

She is speaking of the time in 2008 when she and Meg first moved to the property, which would later be referred to as Panic Swamp, and the temporary shelter called a yurt they stayed in while building the house they live in today. A yurt is a tent-like, dome structure that sits on a homemade foundation the Motts chose to build a wooden platform

that rises about five feet off the ground. The yurt is designed for a variety of weather conditions and comes equipped with a sky light in the middle, as well as thick plastic windows around it, which are reinforced with a criss-cross of wooden supports. It is true what she says about the sounds. Tuesday I fell asleep reading because the sound of rain surrounding me had me completely relaxed. I feel as though most of us don't take the time to realize what walls, insulation, and central heat and air deprive us of. Inside the yurt I was in tune with all of the sounds of the nature surrounding me. This is ideal in the woodsy setting of Panic Swamp. I also wondered what the sounds of a metropolitan city would sound like magnified in the yurt. Consumerism in the United States has driven people to have bigger, better, more convenient housing and why not? However, for those who are denied or deny themselves the comforts of contemporary shelter seem to experience the seasons and grow a tolerance for heat and cold. Most don't even have to experience the seasons if they don't want to, except through the occasional walk to the car. Even in the car we control the temperature. Some Americans only have a tolerance for comfort, and do not want to imagine giving up their central heat and air. Others consider it progress because extreme heat and cold can be dangerous and even deadly and in many ways it is progress. However, what is often overlooked about such comforts is the hidden costs beyond the monetary-- environmental, psychological and emotional. When we lose our connection with nature, we lose a piece of our own consciousness regarding the balance of life outside of human-made chaos; we lose our sense of responsibility to nature, and take it for granted. Wes Jackson is the founder and current director of The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. In his book *Becoming Native to This Place* he explains the consequences of taking for granted not only our own health, but the health of the land: "We take health for granted, so we have given it

little value. It is precisely because disease pays that we have little understanding of the nature of health. The ‘conquest’ of disease has become a modern search for gold, especially for much of the current medical establishment” (110). The same can be said in taking nature for granted; it then becomes a resource for those in power to “conquer” it for the sake of wealth, greed and comfort.

After the chores are complete, we formulate a plan to get the fence started. We walk out into the existing goat area and look for the best way to enter. The curious goats follow close behind. Wreat begins rubbing her head up against Alison who acknowledges by scratching her behind her ears. “She is being particularly friendly today,” she observes. Alison believes she is showing signs of wanting a different kind of attention. Her milk flow has been dropping little by little each day and has begun to taste more “goaty.” When I tasted it for the first time I knew what she meant; to me it had a musky hay-like taste. This usually means one thing; Wreat is coming into heat and it may be “time for a play date,” as Meg called it. Wreat will be taken to a neighbor’s to breed soon because the Motts do not keep a buck.

Shortly we are clearing brush and making a path just wide enough to string the fence through. Next we take the mesh wire and electric fence and begin setting post along the path. When we finish Alison goes to the house and gathers her tools for wiring up the fence. Another skill: Alison the electrician. She comes back and goes to work stripping wires and making connections as I drive in extra posts where the fence seems a little loose. When everything is in place the fence is turned on, and we hear a clicking, almost popping sound. Alison listens closely and follows the noise to the corner of the goat shed; she asks me to turn off the power supply and begins to look over her work. We go through a routine of my turning the fence on and off and Alison maneuvering and reassessing the situation. Finally,

the noise is under control. In observing her patient perseverance, I understand how she came to excel in the skills she exhibits. She is a model of determination, another theme I have started to associate with the homesteading lifestyle. When she is satisfied with her electrical work, we decide to reward ourselves with a little rest for a job well done and we go our separate ways.

In *Living the Good Life*, the Nearings express the need to balance labor, social encounters, and solitude, or a time for reflection and introspection. I chose to use my rest time in solitude to reflect on some of the experiences I've had over the past few days and the relationships I've formed with Meg and Alison as well as what purpose my research has. In a place with no internet connection, no TV, and choppy phone service, my ability to reflect was easy. I opened some windows in the pine scented cottage and began to think. When late afternoon rolled around, I felt refreshed and ready to start again. I cleaned and organized with new found energy and optimism.

In the evening, we went to the local pub for dinner with Meg's mom who recently moved from Louisville, Kentucky to Putney and who said she was pleased to make conversation with a fellow Kentuckian visiting Vermont. I especially enjoyed the conversation and the familiarity that she brought to me over dinner. I was reminded of the place and people awaiting me back home as well as the strides I have made over the last few years in my own homesteading efforts, the attachment I have to my place and how I have grown into it. Here I was in Vermont sitting with a woman from Louisville, Kentucky, discussing karst topography and the Kentucky Museum on Western Kentucky University's campus while at the same time talking with her daughter about voluntary simplicity and

sustainable efforts. It was another serendipitous moment I paused to acknowledge in the light of my research.



Alison eviscerating a chicken

10/6/12



Alison and neighbor preparing for the chicken harvest



Neighbor scalding chickens

Today I cannot help but wake up alert as my head wraps around today's main objective. In a few hours Alison and I will travel to a nearby farm to slaughter about 50 chickens. In the past Alison and Meg have raised their own fowl to be slaughtered. This year they have split costs with a friend who has land to care for the birds during the summer. We will help process the chickens for storage, and each family will take home half of the birds. I get dressed and walk over to meet Alison who asks for help cleaning out the container where we'll store the chickens. She goes out to do the morning milking to ensure we leave on time. Meg is staying behind to grade papers, so she will take care of the rest of the morning chores. As we walk out the door, the phone rings and it is Meg's mom; she tells Alison she now knows where the phrase "bright as a button" comes from, referring to my last name.

This makes me blush outwardly and smile inwardly. I acknowledge the closeness I feel with the family I have come to research.

On the way to the farm, Alison describes the people we're going to work alongside and the farm where the processing will take place. A couple who owns the place uses all horse-powered equipment for farming and are courteous in lending space and equipment for the job. This couple is also a part of the transitional community of Putney. It seems this is a theme in the network of families; they have respect for one another and a practice of sharing. We arrive as the last preparations are being made by the other two individuals, one a seasoned veteran of homesteading and the other a blossoming young woman yearning to take over her family's farm. We get the formalities out of the way and go over the eight basic steps in the process. First, the chicken goes into a long metal cone head first and hangs upside down over a five gallon bucket; a sharp knife is used to cut through an artery in its neck. Next, when the animal is deceased and has bled out the head is removed. The body is taken by the feet and placed into a hot water bath between 150 and 180 degrees and swished around for about one minute, then taken over to a table where the legs are removed. Two carcasses are placed into a homemade contraption patented the Whiz Bang Chicken Plucker lined with rubber teeth on the sides and bottom. The plucker is turned on and the bodies spin around as feathers fly into the air. When the machine is turned off, the chickens are removed and put into a cold water bath to be preserved. Next the neck is removed with another sharpened knife and the bird is placed back into the water to await Alison, who has positioned herself at the end of the assembly line to eviscerate the carcasses. This is the final step and involves making careful incisions into the carcass around its back end so the bowels are not punctured and can fall out first so the meat is not poisoned by defecation left in the

animal. Once everything is safely removed, she shows me the different organs and how the gall bladder must be treated delicately so as not to bust it or the bile in it can poison the meat as well. The heart and liver are placed into a stainless steel bowl filled with clean, chilled water, and the rest is placed in what is dubbed the “gut bucket” to be added to compost later. All of the leftovers from the birds not used for human consumption will be used in other forms to sustain life. Other animals on the farm will eat them or they will be composted into fertilizer to go into the soil of another year’s garden, and the necks and feet will be used to make broth; there is hardly any waste.

I take a place at the beginning of the assembly line and move chickens from coop to cone saying a small prayer for each life I take as I pull the knife across the bird’s neck and feel the flow of warm blood over my knuckles. At first, I feel numb, but soon I am in tune with the delicate balance of life and death. Each of the animals I hand off down the line will soon be packed in ice and taken to two families’ freezers where they will be taken out and thawed one by one over the winter months to provide nourishment for working bodies. The ones who provided the animals with nourishment and sustained them over the summer will now be benefiting, and the circle of life continues. I know some have strict restrictions about animal or animal products being in the food they consume, and I applaud them for their convictions and self-control. However, participating in this activity allowed me to experience and respect first-hand through all of my senses what nature provides us with and just how grateful I am for the food I eat. It gave me a heightened awareness of balance in life. Each family was only raising and taking as much as they needed in order to store up for the winter and they showed respect for the lives of the animals they would slaughter while they lived, using sustainable practices and allowing them plenty of space and time in the outdoors.

The day ended in a blur of cleaning and debriefing. In the end the count was 44, and each family packed up its share and headed home to let the birds soak overnight in the cold water bath that would allow the meat to tenderize. Alison decided we should stop and get some ice to put on our bounty because we had a few errands to run before heading back to the house. Meg and Alison both have expressed to me that their car is a challenge in their quest to be sustainable. They simply have to have it in order to commute back and forth to their bread labor jobs. To ease this conundrum they make it a point when going out to make the trips multipurpose. We got feed for the goats, stopped by the co-op Alison works at for some staple items, and then dropped by the general store to get freezer storage bags. For such hard work and effort Alison rewarded me by stopping at the local orchard last and buying my first cider doughnut, which was delicious. We talked about how I would be leaving in the morning and how hard it was to believe last week we didn't even know one another.

Once home we unloaded the car and took the storage container of birds behind the house to a covered area, filled it to the top with water, and then placed heavy boards across the top. Alison told me the birds would set overnight in the cold water bath and we would transfer them to the freezer bags tomorrow. When it was all said and done, we were exhausted. We went our separate ways-- she to help Meg finish up dinner and me to take a bath and pack for my return home.

I walked taller on the way back to the cottage, empowered by the day I had; all I had accomplished, fears I had overcome, conversations I had and the adrenaline of a hard day's work pressing me onward. What was going on inside of me? I realized I was capable of responsibilities I'd never considered before. The independence I'd felt when completing

tasks with Meg and Alison over the past few days formed a feeling of strength within me and a new confidence was asking to be acknowledged.

In the introduction to *Feminism and Social Change: Bridging Theory and Practice*, Heidi Gottfried summarizes concepts in feminist theory such as situated knowledge and how:

We can begin to counter essentialism inherent to stand point theories, to recognize that the knowledge we claim is conditioned by the locations we occupy (Harstock 1987a:32), to take as reference points positions other than white, industrialized work, and heterosexuality, and to allow for multiple and shifting perspectives that enable us to learn about ourselves from the experiences and knowledge of others (Martin and Mohanty 1986). (14)

I am a 27-year-old, heterosexual, white, female, raised in south central Kentucky by working-class parents. I went to public school in Kentucky and I obtained my Bachelor degree within 35 minutes of my hometown and now I am working on a Masters degree in the same location. Coming to Vermont and staying with a lesbian couple in their fifties who were raised by upper-class families and now live in a “transition town” they are actively involved in has allowed my research to take on “multiple and shifting perspectives” and enabled me to learn more about myself through the “experiences and knowledge” of them. I feel blessed to be in this position and saddened by the thought I have to say goodbye. It is one of the challenges of such engaging and personal research methods as those practiced in feminist thought and elsewhere too. The empowerment and knowledge I have gained from this experience is worth the emotional dilemma I face in saying good bye, and I now have two new friends and counselors who’ve made an impression on me and my work.

Before dinner Meg and I sit down to talk and fill in any holes I may have in the information I wanted to gather there. She brings up Aristotle. She is a professor of political theory, so it is common for her to quote ancient philosophers.

“Aristotle said, ‘nature makes nothing in vain,’ isn’t that just beautiful?” she asks. She goes on to explain that she interprets this as a balance we should all strive to meet and Aristotle would tell us it is no good to try to live a lifestyle of any extreme, which can be both unsanitary poverty to inflated greed and wealth, rather than staying within one’s means. It was a beautiful way to summarize Aristotle, but I found myself thinking about people in extreme poverty- who defines their means? How do means come to be defined differently? We discussed how ideally everyone should be allowed the opportunity to live within their means, if they have means, and construct a balanced life.

Learning what your place and means are, understanding and being honest about what real *needs* one has, respecting nature and its sustaining forces and being in tune with how to acclimate and embrace the worldview that fits that unique situational point is the beginning of the journey to sustainability. On the flip side is the reality we don’t all have equal access to the same type of means. I also question whether or not North American social structures allow us to live “authentically chosen lives”? Who is to say it is not a good philosophy to strive for, because of the spiritual element it fulfills? As long as we are capable of acknowledging the privilege we hold in such a position to strive towards it and dedicate ourselves to the empowerment of others who are less privileged. I feel Meg and Alison have given to me empowerment in their willingness to share their lives with me and teach me new skills.

As we talked we moved in the direction of spirituality and how we both had upbringings in religious sects: me Baptist and Meg Catholic. Meg mentioned Spinoza, another philosopher, “who came right out and said, ‘nature is God.’” She understands this as a higher order surrounding us and connecting us all together: nature and human. She explained how she loves to go out and study the sky, almost ritually. I too spend time connecting spiritually with nature, in my garden and taking in the stars. A heightened awareness comes from taking the time to live closer to the Earth that is in many ways spiritually, physically, and emotionally rewarding. Perhaps it is the comfort and peace found in a moment of spiritual affirmation where one finds the drive to live sustainably in an unsustainable world. One just needs to reach across the barriers that keep them from it.

Chapter 2 Faeries, Trees and Honey Bees

I met Wren Smith last spring and immediately took note of her kind eyes and how she offered me a hug, even though it was the first time we had met. In a meeting with her and a co-worker she was quiet. Wren sat back and listened to what others said, rather than speak up at any given opportunity. When she did speak it was in a considerate tone and in such a way it made me feel as though she chose her words with a keen thoughtfulness. During the summer I was presented with the prospect to pursue an internship working with Wren at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. I accepted with enthusiasm and anticipation of all I could possibly learn from the experience.

Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest is located in Clermont, Kentucky just off Exit 112 on I-65 North. Clermont is also home to the Jim Beam Distillery and part of the provocative Bourbon Trail in Kentucky. The arboretum is actually located right across the road from the distillery. It seems fitting since Isaac W. Bernheim, a German immigrant who came to Kentucky as a peddler, made his fortune in the whisky distilling business in order to purchase the 14,000 acres in Bullitt and Nelson counties (bernheim.org). In his will I.W. Bernheim stated

I have expressed my intention that said property ... be held in trust ... and said fourteen thousand (14,000) acres be used for a park, for an arboretum, and, under certain conditions, for a museum, all of which are to be developed and forever maintained ... for the people of Kentucky, and their friends, as a place to further their love of the beautiful in nature and in art, and in kindred cultural subjects, and for educational purposes, and as a means of strengthening their love and devotion to their state and country. (*Bernheim History*)

I dare to say Wren is one of those “kindred cultural subjects” Issac Bernheim had in mind when he envisioned the future caretakers of the land he left behind that he would not be able to oversee.

When I first asked Wren to be a part of my project, she was hesitant. We met outside at a picnic table behind Bernheim’s education building; as I faced Wren the sun was warm on my back. She didn’t think she was right for my project. Wren basically felt my project was about showing how individuals live sustainably and in her humble way explained how she lived a lot more sustainably at an earlier time in her life than she did now. I respect Wren’s view and see her interpersonal skills at Bernheim through her interpretive programs there. The very fact Wren listens intently while I fumble through my sentences and try to make sense is an example of the kindness and respect she shows towards others. These characteristics of Wren are what interest me. Somehow my gibberish convinced her to feel confident in my interest of her life.

As famous philanthropist and social activist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jane Addams, says in her book *Democracy and Social Ethics*, “our democracy has taught us to apply our moral teaching all around, and the moralist is rapidly becoming so sensitive that when his [her] life does not exemplify his [her] ethical convictions, he [she] finds it difficult to preach” (2). This concerns me when it comes to individuals like Wren. It is obvious to me she holds nature ethics close to her heart, but is still hesitant to say her life exemplifies her ethical convictions. I encounter a Zen moment each time I am in her presence that keeps poking at my curiosity. I had faith in Flannery O’Connor’s words, even though her comments addressed fiction writers, “If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don’t have to

know what before you begin. In fact it may be better if you don't know what before you begin (*Mystery and Manners* 106). Instead of stressing over not knowing exactly what it was that drew me to Wren I decided it "may be better" if I didn't "know what before" I began.



Colorfest 2012- Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest

10/20/12

I arrived at Bernheim this morning to a scene I had not yet experienced there. The parking lots overflowed with cars and patrons walked in all directions. In the education parking lot Porta Potties lined the corner blocked off with orange cones and caution tape. A large tractor pulled a wagon covered with bales of hay through the cones. Throughout the lawn of the Education center tents and tables displayed a smorgasbord of nature and her bounty. I later found out these are called "discovery stations" and are for children to test their knowledge as well as learn new concepts about nature. Colorfest 2012 was underway at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. I had come up to collect interviews for the Edible Garden Project at Bernheim as part of my internship

through Western Kentucky University, but also to stay with Wren Smith for the week at her home in Bardstown.

I spotted Wren at one of the discovery stations helping a volunteer set up her materials. Wren stopped what she was doing and greeted me, saying how glad she was I was here. She showed me to a station she had set up for me to conduct interviews and told me if I needed anything just to find her. Then off she went from one station to the next helping volunteers and assuring everyone of the great job they're doing, all smiles. Throughout the day, Wren introduced me to individuals she knew and told them about my project at Bernheim. Most of the interviews I collected were a direct result of Wren's networking skills.

At the end of the day she and I walked around to the different stations straightening up and getting materials in order to begin again tomorrow. One station involved busting winter squash and a pile of them lay beside some hay stacks outlining the station. I'm not sure what the purpose of the station was, but it sure did look as though the kids were having a good time during the festival rolling the squash down the hill.

"These are still good," Wren said bending down to pick up one of the busted squash, "I hate to just see these go to waste," she continued pulling little pieces of straw off of the bright orange meat of the butternut squash. "What do you think?" She looked at me curiously.

"I think you're right," I said, "There's no sense in letting them go to waste."

We picked up the half busted acorn and butter nut squash and wiped away the little bit of dirt and grass stuck to them and placed them in a basket Wren was carrying. It seems Wren is always carrying a bag or a basket to collect specimens; if she doesn't have one on her, she is within close proximity of one. We carried our foraged items back to Wren's truck and I followed her home.

Wren lives down a winding country road in a little white farm house surrounded by a wooden fence. The house sits close to the road, so as much as Wren wants to get a dog, she hasn't. I looked around the property; she is surrounded by rolling fields. The back field had horses and over to the side behind a neighbor's house: alpacas.

"I know I don't have much land, but it is so nice to have neighbors that do," Wren said ever so humbly." In a way it is like I have my own horses and alpacas without having to take care of them" she continued. We both laughed and headed into the house.

Immediately Wren began apologizing for all her "clutter." I saw shelves of books and music surrounded by unique works of art from a variety of media. Two display cases were in the living room, not full of fine china or mementos and trinkets, but rather small alien looking figures made out of twigs, nut shells and insect wings. I would ask about these later. The counters covered with baskets of the last harvest from the summer's garden and throughout crooks and crannies evidence of a bee keeper: jars of honey, empty jars and bands, and even a large extractor sitting in the bay window of the kitchen. This is not clutter; this is a collection representing the knowledge and skills I wanted to know more about.

We walked outside to feed the chickens. Wren introduced all of them to me as they curiously walked close to our feet and then backed away and then repeated the motions over again. Marilyn, Dolly, Sam and Oprah; each given a name to fit her traits and features. My mind goes off to the book I am currently reading, *The Chicken Chronicles* by Alice Walker, as Wren explains the personality of each fowl. Like Walker, Wren has grown a bond with her feathered friends and shows appreciation for their individuality. I was curious why there was no rooster present, and Wren explained how she didn't like the aggressiveness of roosters. Similar to the Motts, she decided against having one and there was really no need since laying hens will lay without a rooster present. With the chickens safe in their coop for the evening, we went back inside where Wren introduced me to Amos and Alice feline brother and sister Wren rescued from a local shelter.

We headed to the kitchen, where the aroma of garlic and sweet potatoes hung thick and sugary in the air. Wren put on an oven mitt and pulled out a baking sheet covered with white potatoes, butternut squash, sweet potatoes and onions, which had been slow roasting all day at 250. She pulled a spoon from the drying rack next to the sink and began scooping the meat out of the skins of the halved potatoes into a stainless steel soup pot. She wiped her hands, opened two cans of broth and poured them in with the potatoes and then scooped out the meat of the winter squash adding it along with the roasted onions to the mixture. As she skated around the kitchen, she prepared a kind of "root stew" she was fond of. I thought back to my trip to Vermont and how on the first night Alison was preparing winter squash soup with fresh Gouda. Similar to my time

with the Motts, Wren and I would be dining on vegetables that are in season. Not only is eating in season good for our bodies, it is good for the non human world as well.

Nature thrives on biodiversity, even down to the smallest micro organisms in the soil. Vegetables grown in-season and variety allow the soil to regenerate and retain nutrients it would not get compared to land used to grow the same crop year after year. Americans have gotten so accustomed to being able to get what they want to eat when they want to it from the grocery store, some children and young adults have no concept of what it is like to eat in-season or even what that means. Most foods are best when in-season-- ready for harvest in the season the food should naturally reach its peak maturity. Various local food advocates argue foods that are in-season have certain vitamins and minerals that act as natural aids to bodily defenses and systems for ailments that align with certain seasons. For example, butternut squash comes into season when the weather starts to get cold and the days become shorter.

Some Americans suffer from seasonal depressive disorders and butternut squash is packed full of Vitamin A, which is a “catalyst on which innumerable biochemical processes depend,” and which has proven, “ample protection against all types of stress” (Fallon and Enig 37). It also has B6, which “helps the body use fat and proteins” and is a “catalyst for red blood cell formation” (Fallon and Enig 38). Both help in giving us the restorative powers and energy we need during winter. Onions, white potatoes, sweet potatoes and winter squash all contain Vitamin C, which is promoted to fight off the common cold. In a way it is like growing your own healthcare at the same time supporting the health of the earth.

“Do you like music?” asked Wren when we finished eating.

“I love music!” I answered maybe a little too ecstatically.

“Do you play anything?” she asked.

“No, but I sing some with my boyfriend. He is a musician and we like to spend a lot of time at the house singing and playing.” I replied.

“I would like to hear you sing sometime,” she said.

“Maybe, sometime,” I said, becoming shy, “I always warn people that my voice is an acquired taste.” She giggled and inquired what kind of music we played and sang. I told her that a lot of it was more folk, bluegrass, Americana sort of stuff.

“Oh, I have someone I want you to hear, I bet you would like them,” she said as she went over to the corner to look through a shelf of CDs. As she searched, she told me about The Reel World String Band and how she was friends with one of the women in the band; she glowed as she spoke of a song called “I Can See Your Aura.” After a few minutes with no luck she decided to put in another CD by Mary Gauthier. Immediately I was taken in by the haunting voice of the woman on the stereo, who I had never heard before and suddenly I felt closer to Wren in this simple act of sharing music. We spent the next hour or so drinking tea and sharing music before we called it a night.

In “Intensely Pleasurable Responses To Music Correlate With Activity In Brain Regions Implicated In Reward and Emotion,” by Anne Blood and Robert Zatorre, the authors show that “although music may not be imperative for survival of the human species, it may indeed be of significant benefit to our mental and physical well-being” (11823). As I sat with Wren and shared music I began to feel the tension in my body release. Where once I was nervous and unsure about staying the next six nights in someone’s home I barely knew, suddenly I was overcome with calm. Music has always

had this effect on me and to find this common ground with Wren became a new avenue for us to engage in conversation that went beyond articulation. I still have a Dove chocolate wrapper that I opened in high school tucked away in one of my scrap books that says, “Music touches feelings that words cannot.” A part of my own “clutter” I collect as a reminder of who I am and what I have come from, but in this moment I am glad I hung on to it.

I retired to an upstairs room with a 5 gallon bucket in hand, because I have a small bladder and in old two-story farm houses you are lucky to have the one bathroom downstairs. I think back to my mom always referring to the house I grew up in and how we “didn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.” I giggle as I imagine what she would think of me and my 5-gallon bucket. Of course I wouldn’t be throwing my pee out Wren’s second story window, but would take it out into the yard to dump each day, my contribution to the garden. *Mother Earth News* reported in 2011 that human urine has actually shown to

Be a valuable fertilizer for garden plants. The average adult produces about 1 1/2 quarts of urine per day. Diluted 1:20 with water, this would make about 7 gallons of high-nitrogen liquid fertilizer, so a family of four could produce enough high-nitrogen fertilizer for an average garden and lawn. (Pleasant, 75)

We have been collecting our urine at my house during the summer for the past couple of years. My boyfriend actually keeps a 5-gallon bucket on the front porch to use during the winter. I snuggle into the creaky full sized bed and cuddle up under the down comforter and blankets. I pull the pillows around me trying to imitate the way I snuggle

up to my companion back home. I think about him as I close my eyes and try to put my mind at rest of the worries and obligations I am missing back home as well as the people who mean so much to me.



Mud Pie Discovery Station- Colorfest 2012

10-21-12

On the way to Bernheim this morning for day two of Colorfest, Wren and I had an insightful conversation about the delicacy of her job as a naturalist teaching wild edibles and native plants. She shared with me her love of plants, the study and observation of them and her opportunity to share it with others at Bernheim. She recounted a story of a child at Colorfest who was playing in the recycled percussion discovery station, who looked up at her and said, "This is the happiest day of my life." I saw the sincerity in Wren's eyes as she opened one arm widely to express just how beautiful the child's response had been.

When we got to Bernheim it was early and the festival would not get in full swing for another hour or so.

“Do you want to get a basket and collect some leaves and nuts for the mud pie station with me?” she asked.

“Of course” I said. We started underneath the Black Tupelo trees next to the education center collecting handfuls of ovate fire orange leaves that had fallen, picking up random hickory nuts as we went that had been scattered about. Wren asked if I had ever heard of tupelo honey. I told her I had and there was a band my partner’s friend is in called Tupelo Honey. She explained to me that this was a relative to the tree the honey is named after and in order for beekeepers to get true tupelo honey their bees have to feed off the Tupelo blossoms. I take in the moment and look at the remaining leave on the trees, blazing in the sunlight. Wren is full of useful knowledge, she knows the nature surrounding us intimately and it seems like second nature, the way she opens up to others building a bridge to such knowledge.

After we had gathered two baskets full we took the contents to the mud pie discovery station. Wren began her ritual of greeting the naturalists in training. I followed her around like a lost puppy soaking in my surroundings and helping with set up. Visitors started to arrive and the second day of Colorfest was in full swing.

Wren’s attention was needed elsewhere. The children of Colorfest are about to get a surprise visit from Bertha Maple. This is an alter ego of Wren’s who appears in costume to bring to life the forest of Bernheim. Bertha dresses in all black clothing with limbs flimsily hanging and a cheerful green face adorned with a crown of leaves. An aura

shines as little faces light up, wide-eyed and enchanted. Every adult in their presence seems to envy their delight.

I walked around the festival and took in stimulation through all five senses. I heard children laughing. I smelled hay from the wagon filled with patrons ready for their ride. I felt the soft wool women spun into yarn. I focused on the smallest detail of the pattern on the corn snake's belly one naturalist in training was displaying. And when I was hungry, I tasted the sweet sticky kettle corn while taking in the larger picture of the tents and activities spread over Bernheim's acreage bustling with grandparents, fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, daughters, sons and friends. Funny thing is just as I was taking in all the familial bonds encircling me, my own great aunt and cousins walked by. I hadn't seen them in a long time and I ran after them to catch up and enjoy the festival with family of my own.

As Bernheim's Interpretive Programs Manager, Wren has developed educational programs for visitors to Bernheim, but Wren went beyond her initial duties and envisioned the Naturalist in Training Program for Bernheim. According to *Bernheim.org*, the Naturalist-in-Training Program "has grown from a handful of volunteers since its inception in 2002 to a vibrant community of very active volunteers that offer a wide variety of nature programs, hikes and discovery experiences."

The pride Wren takes in her volunteers is genuine and not hidden. At the end of Colorfest she and I discussed all of the volunteers I met throughout the day and how they had grown into their expertise in the program. One of the tenets Wren implements is cultivating the interest and talents the volunteers already have coming into the program. I can see this in the way each of them has an area of expertise they share with the visitors

to Colorfest, whether it be frogs, bugs, trees, snakes or astronomy. Wren's leadership reminds me of feminist theorist Sarah Hoagland's thoughts on the aim of morality, which is "not to control individuals, but to *make possible*, to encourage and enable, individual development" (Hoagland 285). Wren has equipped her volunteers with the tools necessary to interpret their love of nature in such a way to make a connection with guests. Wren is there "to encourage and enable individual development." Naturalists-in-training (NITs) speak in an accessible language to patrons. In doing this they build a bridge to individuals who may never be exposed to nature otherwise. Wren speaks passionately to her volunteers about this bridge building technique that echoes the ethics of care found in feminism and ecofeminism. In not trying to "control individuals" Wren has made it possible for the volunteer NITs to apply their individual skills and knowledge to this bridge building technique and exemplify Bernheim's overall mission statement of "connecting people with nature" (Bernheim.org).

Marti Kheel expresses the need for this connection in *Nature Ethics: an Ecofeminist Perspective* when explaining how metaphors cannot be the *foundation* of a nature ethic but rather, grafted onto people's consciousness once the emotional "soil" has been adequately tilled. According to Kheel metaphors can encourage caring conduct toward nature but "it is not a substitute for a genuine, deep-rooted sense of connection" (214). It is this tilling of the emotional "soil" that I feel Wren and her volunteers accomplish through their programs.

Kheel suggests that our modern Western culture has placed us in a situation where we most have an extraordinary separation from nature. However, she also feels, as with other ecofeminist, that as living beings the yearning to reconnect with nature is

experienced through a deep psychological and spiritual need (216). Throughout her book Kheel expresses the flaws in a masculine perception of how this need should be satisfied. According to her analysis of the works of Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold, men in conservation and preservation have justified the act of sport hunting and protection of the whole, whether species or ecosystem, as the concentration for reconnection. However, ecofeminists suggest there are alternatives to this patriarchal view of what binds us to nature and healing the severed wounds of our disconnect. One of those is the art of play, “play as a social activity connects individuals together in a joyful, imaginative realm” (216).

Wren is certainly all about play. When I watch her perform as Bertha Maple it’s clear she understands how important play is to connecting visitors to nature. Not only this, but she has developed an entire program at Bernheim based on faeries. At one of Bernheim’s spring festivals, Bloomfest, children and adults are encouraged to dress up as faeries and acquire an “Official Faerie Building Permit” in order to create a comfy abode for the many woodland faeries that inhabit Bernheim. The permit has a list of CODES: **C**onnect with nature, **O**pportunities to slow down and pay attention, **D**iscover the tiny treasures that nature offers, **E**nlist the service of your imagination, and **S**hop at the Faerie Market (in order that natural materials are not over harvested or horded). It also encourages visitors to, “whistle or sing while you work,” “be generous with others,” “be imaginative,” and to be “respectful of the space.” Through such programs Wren invites others to be “responsible” in nature, which Kheel sees as pivotal to a nature ethics and the development of consciousness to such ethics (251).

Wren shared with me why she began making faeries. She had been visiting a friend who lived off the San Juan Islands, when her friend got a notice from her landlord that the tenants would not be able to garden in the future. Wren spoke of how her friend's face turned "ashen" and how she knew how much her friend loved to garden and gardened in a wild fashion much like she does. Her friend had gardened there for ten years, building up the soil and tending to its needs. Wren explained how she just stood in her friend's garden when her friend went inside grief-stricken from the news. Wren began to collect seed pods; she wanted the seeds to be a metaphor to tell her friend that she was "going to garden wherever she went." Wren said she, "just looked down and there was this little fairy creature. With a leg here and a leg there and a head there, so I went inside and I got some glue and put it together and the next thing you know I was putting a lot of these together. So that's when I started making those little faeries out of natural materials."

Wren likes to think of them as gifts from the garden that remind us of the possibilities of enchantment and magic and all the good things she thinks keep us connected and root us to the earth.



Wren's Faeries (2012)

10/22/12

When we got home last night Wren and I sit up talking about her journey to becoming a naturalist. She told me about the travels she has experienced as part of her career and the opportunities she has had to contribute to journals and different conferences. I found it fascinating that Wren had a speech problem growing up and how she found encouragement in technology because it allowed her to record and reorganize her thoughts. How word processing opened up an entire new arena to her writing and expression of self as well as the ability to share her philosophies on and love of the natural world.

She told me how she started out living in barns and fixing them up as a residence. She showed a hint of shyness in comparing her living conditions today with ones she had once felt so passionately about. Not that she lives extravagantly, but that she has allowed herself the comforts of storage and indoor plumbing, a more permanent residence with more amenities than other dwellings she had consciously chosen in the past. She

expressed how she had grown into herself over the years and how this recognition allowed her to respect the balance of her own needs with nature's needs. She reflected to me a woman who knows herself and her own limitations and respects and values her own mental and spiritual well being. She claimed herself as an introvert and expressed the importance of reflections and time for contemplation as such. She lives alone, but does not feel lonely.

This morning I woke up and looked out the second story window overlooking the garden. Wren was there in the garden with shovel in hand next to a wheel barrow overflowing with dark rich compost. I hurried and got dressed and headed down the stairs. Wren walked in the back door and offered me some breakfast.

"I'm sorry I slept in," I said sheepishly.

"Don't be sorry. I want you to feel completely at home here, you didn't sleep in you just got up when you felt like it," she said reassuringly. She pulled out wheat berries, honey and oatmeal and told me to help myself. She had been gathering alpaca manure from her neighbors and was going to be outside spreading it on the garden.

"When you finish breakfast we will get into the hives if you want to?" she offered.

"That would be great," I answered.

Wren brought in two pairs of white coveralls and handed me one of them. She then helped me put my arms into a netted white hat and I pulled on gloves that went up to my elbows. For the first time I would be checking bee hives. Wren showed me how to fill up the smoker tool necessary to calm the bees and what different tools we would use and the purpose of each. One of the tools is called a hive tool. It looks like a miniature crowbar with a smooth flat end and another end that is bent down used to hook the brood

frames and pull them up so they can be removed. The flat end is used to separate the brood frames when they get stuck together with wax. We needed to check the hives to see if the queen was still present in each one as well as for signs of pests, such as wax moths. Our ultimate goal was to condense the hives for winter so the bees could stay warm through the cold season.

My heart fluttered as Wren took the top off of the first hive and hundreds of bees hummed in a vibration that made my skin tingle. With the hive tool Wren pulled out some of the frames to check for signs of health. We continued this process removing one box at a time. The closer to the bottom of the hive we got the more concentrated the bees and the humming got louder and more bees flew around my netted space suit. I looked at them with curiosity and astonishment. Wren seemed completely at ease with the activity and not at all nervous of the thousands of tiny stingers surrounding her. She was here in peace, looking out for the safety of her bees. As we placed the boxes back on top of one another a wretched crunching came from underneath the heavy white boxes.

“Gosh,” Wren winced, “I hate that sound.” She tried her best to miss all of the bees that settled on the sides of the boxes and asked me to smoke them so they would move while she replaced the boxes. I could see the love she had for her bees as she patiently and carefully replaced each box.

Wren has two varieties of bees: Italian and Russian. She has found that the Russian bees are more aggressive and seem to have a shorter temper when she is working in the hives. They are also more aggressive when it is warmer outside. For this reason we got out to the hives when it was still early and pretty cool. It is important to check the hives every so often to make sure they are “queen good.” This means a queen is present,

the brooding patterns are good and the hive is strong. The queen is important because she keeps the hive together. Worker bees will not seek out a new hive without the queen because she lets off a certain pheromone that they follow, which enchants and keeps them coming back to build the hive.

Wren has five hives. Originally she had twelve, but decided to combine them in order to have six strong hives. She lost one of those hives for reasons she is not really sure of. She has been keeping bees going on five years. Although she has several books on bee keeping she has found the best way for her to learn is by talking with experienced beekeepers. According to her, “they all have their methods” and no two are exactly alike. I am new to beekeeping and am excited about the fact I am going into hives for the first time with someone more experienced than myself. I take mental note that the way Wren does it may not be the way other keepers do it.

The third hive we checked was not “queen good,” the brooding patterns spotty and overall bad, and it looked as though wax moths had affected the hive down to the last box. A wax moth is “an opportunistic pest that takes advantage of weak hives, as well as unprotected comb... the adult is about three-quarters of an inch long; the larvae are fat worms that can be about an inch in length” (Kelly Bee News). Worker bees remained in the hive so Wren decided to carry the infected boxes to the other side of the yard until she could talk to her neighbor, a veteran beekeeper whom Wren goes to for advice, when she feels like “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Recently, beginning in 2007, honey bee populations around the world have dwindled. In 2009, a documentary entitled *The Vanishing of the Bees* was released to highlight this issue. In the film we learn one in every three bites of food we eat is

germinated by the pollination of bees. A single bee can pollinate up to 100,000 flowers in one day. The phenomenon of disappearing honey bees in 2007 was given the name Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) by scientists hired to investigate the problem. However, the cause of CCD has long remained a mystery. Although there is no one clear answer to why honey bee colonies are collapsing, concerned environmentalists and beekeepers have found direct ties to such industrial agricultural practices as pesticides, monocultures and genetic engineering. The film covers how scientists and beekeepers have had to start with “shot in the dark ideas” to control CCD, but none of them are truly effective in stopping the disorder from wiping out 30% of hives a year (Langworthy and Henin).

During the 1970’s in the United States, beekeeping went to an industrial scale as agribusiness increased and farms began using the “Earl Butz-inspired policy of planting fence row to fence row” (Gottlieb and Joshi 89). Under Butz policy there was a “wholesale shift” where farmers were encouraged to grow as much as they could fit on the land they farmed. Beekeepers providing for large farms, such as these, keep as many as 3,000 hives and make a living contracting with farmers who need the bees to pollinate their massive fruit and vegetable production. Bees’ pollination produces 15 billion dollars worth of food annually in the United States alone (Langworthy and Henin). During the 1970s, scientists discovered ways to move genes for antibiotic resistance around from one type of bacteria to another which made it possible to create genetically modified organisms (GMO), such as seeds and plants. This transformation to GMOs was part of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s push for the “development of new types of food products” (Gottlieb and Joshi 76). The first appearance of GMO food on the market for human consumption was Flavr-Savr tomatoes, developed in the early 1990s by

Calgene, Inc. The long term health effects of GMO food are still shady, and the main player in their production, Monsanto, (which bought out Calgene Inc. soon after its success with Flavr-Savr tomatoes) continues to seek protection under the law in order to avoid responsibility for unintended and unforeseen consequences of their GMOs. Most recently they were able to get, what has become known as the Monsanto Protection Act. Some food advocacy groups consider the Act, “another special interest corporate giveaway that fundamentally undermines the federal courts’ ability to protect family farmers and the environment from potentially hazardous genetically engineered (GMO) crops that have not been proven safe,” signed into law by President Obama under H.R. 933 (fooddemocracynow.org).

Crops that honey bees will no doubt be used to pollinate. Right now thirteen new genetically modified crops wait to be approved by the USDA with the Protection Act in place. Food Justice Activists believe “any new approvals could threaten the livelihoods of America’s farmers, as the approval of even a single one of these untested crops can lead to widespread contamination of farmers’ crops.” Contamination to crops honey bees pollinate. ([fooddemocracynow!](http://fooddemocracynow.org)).

The widespread recognition of Colony Collapse Disorder and the likelihood GMOs could be involved has sparked recognition of the importance of organic bee keeping. Under such holistic beekeeping practices bees are not fed sugary syrups made from water and white sugar, like industrial beekeepers use, and no miticides are used on hives. The bees are respected for their contribution to pollination and rewarded with a rich diet of their own honey and raw nectar. Only a sustainable amount of honey is used for the keeper’s own consumption. Also unique to organic bee keeping is the queen is not

killed to make way for a lab-made queen. A queen bee can naturally live up to five years allowing for diversity of genes in the hive strengthening the overall immune system of the hive. The use of lab queens on the other hand narrows the gene pool because they are artificially inseminated, organic bee keeping is meant to “treat and not exploit bees,” according to *The Vanishing of the Bees* (Langworthy and Henin).

Perhaps of just as much importance is that organic bee keepers provide GMO-free plants, grown from GMO-free seeds. How long can these types of preventative measures succeed with the widespread use of GMO crops and seeds as well as the herbicides and pesticides used on such large scale industrial farms? What choice do beekeepers have if they are trying to earn a living wage on the bees they keep? Bees were not meant for such industrialized practices as being trucked from Florida to be used in California to pollinate almonds and then hauled back across country on semi trucks from California to Florida. Dee Lusby, an organic beekeeper from the film says it is “a system that is going down a road to hell” (Langworthy and Henin). Instead she and other organic beekeepers feel we don’t need one person with 60,000 hives, but rather 60,000 people with one hive each.

In Wren’s case, we need one concerned naturalist who uses her honey to barter with friends and give away as gifts on special occasions. Sure she sells some from time to time but *Bee Enchanted Honey* is also one woman’s commitment to the vitality and importance of bees to the balance of not only plants, but all of nature. One beekeeper summed it up quite well in *Vanishing of the Bees*; “bees are an indicator of environmental quality, when the bees are dying then something’s wrong” (Langworthy and Henin).



Wren Smith checking her hives (2012)

10/23/12

This morning I woke up to the most beautiful sky, a pastel palate of pink, blue and wisps of white set off by a brilliant orange sun which forced me to get out of bed and wander from window to window as if I were a child on Christmas morning watching it snow. It was overpowering and spiritual as though a higher being demanded my attention. “Wake up sleepy head, look at what I am offering you this morning” it called out to me. Last night I was feeling homesick so it was a pleasant reminder as to why I am here doing what I am doing. Sometimes life gets in the way of allowing us to take the time to remember what means so much to us. Last night I had allowed too much of what we humans call “reasoning skills” to creep in. It’s funny because in sociology classes I learned this is the skill that supposedly separates us from the animals; it is what makes humans “superior” in the eyes of certain theorists and philosophers. I would argue that it puts us at a disadvantage. Many times my obsessive compulsive thoughts are what get in the way of my taking action. They keep me from living blissfully at peace in my

surroundings. They take me down a road of angst and worry, making thoughts more complicated than they should be.

*How great it would be to experience life as a dog or chicken, I think. How wonderful to spend life sleeping, pecking, discovering, eating and lazing around. On the other hand, how strange that would feel, to not have anything but the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, air, water, and space. In *The Chicken Chronicles* Walker speaks of how some humans think highly of big brains, but she has never believed that smaller brains are somehow deficient. Instead she tells her chickens, “For instance, your head is small and your brain as well. Yet they both seem adequate for what you appear these days to enjoy most in life” (*The Chicken Chronicles* 44). She goes on to explain how the chickens show contentment in being with friends, eating well, sleeping when they want and enduring a pecking order when they feel like it. In the context of voluntary simplicity these are the goals some individuals strive to accomplish sustainably. To be fully dependent on themselves in a sustainable manner, meeting their basic needs and finding contentment in what they enjoy most in life ; something the other than human animals have naturally ingrained within them. Alice Walker would argue non human animals silently teach us deep meanings about life if we take the time to observe them. Instead of trying to act “superior” to that, we should love and praise them for it.*

Of course I also have to acknowledge the romanticism I am placing on the animal kingdom, another side of nature comes out in the survival of the fittest, pecking orders and the distinct behavior of alpha males. One can witness throughout the animal kingdom acts of violence and destruction that don’t paint the picture of Disney-like characters magically working in harmony with no pain or suffering. In fact, the role of

death in nature is pivotal to understanding the cycle of life. Death is as much a part of living as life is; it is what keeps life sustainable. It seems to be a less popular subject among humans; we reasoning beings who are jaded by the thought that we may be able to defy it or avoid it in some way.

Reflecting on all this reminds me of a conversation Wren and I had about death while we gathered materials for mud pies at Bernheim. She told me how much the whole funeral industry bothered her. The chemicals that are used as well as the distance some humans try to place between themselves, their bodies and the earth. We discussed what it would be like to go into the ground naturally, without the embalming process. Wren has interpreted the process in her own unique way through displays of her faeries. The faeries she created for the display have twig legs and walnut shell bodies, seed pods for heads and dragonfly wings. All are made from natural materials Wren has collected. She exhibited a display of faeries at Bernheim entitled “The Faeries Ritual for Planting Their Dead.” I had never thought of it that way before. Most of us in the United States are exposed to a socially acceptable burial that consists of embalming or cremation, and depending on which, a casket, tomb, vault or urn.

I am reminded of a TED Talk I watched last year by Jae Rhim Lee. In it Lee presents a prototype burial suit that she has been working on. The suit is made of spores from mushrooms that develop over time. The research she has done with fungi led her to the idea. Ideally when a person is “planted” in the suit, the transplanted spores develop into a fungus that recycles the body and makes it into organic material that replenishes the soil (Lee). In the same way Wren’s faeries showcased planting their dead into the earth to bring forth new life. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that there is an

interdependent cycle on which all of nature depends: production, consumption, and decomposition (Ruether 51).

Ruether emphasizes the importance of death to the cycle and how much we humans have become detached from death. She explains how nature has its own process of ridding itself of pollution through the breakdown and decomposition of plant and animal waste to fertilize the soil so that new growth can form (52-53). “This cycle of production, consumption, and decomposition in nature prevents waste from accumulating . . . the crisis of pollution that afflicts modern civilization results, in large part, from its failure to imitate nature in this system of recycling” (Ruether 53). She feels the answer to the problem of “cultural avoidance of death,” which results in our culture’s inability to create sustainable ecosystems, can be found in appreciating and cultivating diversity and balance. Death and decomposition are an essential part of biodiversity being sustained, “The death side of the life cycle is an essential component of that renewal of life by which dead organisms are broken down and become the nutrients of new organic growth . . . in nature death is not an enemy, but a friend of the life process” (53). Ruether explains how religion and philosophical beliefs have led humans to develop a sense of death as “deliverance from mortality,” a means by which to escape life and become an immortal being or, the Platonic, “last enemy to overcome” (54). She envisions a world in which death can be acknowledged and respected as part of the natural life process, a revelation of our connection to everything and the rights and responsibilities that come with such a revelation; “the struggles to change the death system must be rooted in joy in the goodness of life” (269). We can find joy in life while we have it and honor the natural

process of decomposition our bodies will go through in order to sustain new life when we are gone.



The Faeries' Ritual for Planting Their Dead

10/24/12

Wren and I talked last night about King Solomon and his statement in Ecclesiastes, "With much knowledge, comes much sorrow." What exactly does that mean? Obviously it will have different meanings based on who is doing the interpreting. Much like the "good life" and a person's idea of what a "simple" life entails, Solomon's phrase becomes relative to one's perception. I told her the further along I got into my studies the more I learned about what is happening all around me that I felt I had no control over--- social structures and issues that perverted and persisted regardless of the fight to overcome them, the natural world being ripped apart and raped in front of my very eyes with no end to the greed that fueled this process, even down to the secrets revealed to me by friends and family I love and care for, but knew not how to alleviate their pain and suffering. I told her at times I wish I were blissfully ignorant, so I would

not carry around the sadness I feel. I knew it sounded somewhat foolish, but I really felt as though my sensitivity is more heightened than most due to the grief I feel sometimes in public. “It is the weirdest thing, I literally feel the pain coming from complete strangers,” I said, “there are times I have walked into a place and just know there is tension or something bad has happened and there are times I feel sadness coming from others that drives me to tears worried about the happiness and quality of their life. These are people I don’t even know, but the story I create in my head makes me so sad for them.”

“You know,” she said “a lot of times in the south, women especially, are taught to be nice. Not necessarily honest, but nice. It is this niceness that is expected, so you don’t seem mean or uncaring. I feel like there is a difference between being nice and being kind,” she said, “when you are kind you are honest. With yourself and with others, you are able to express openly how you feel, even if it is not what the other person wants to hear. In doing this you are also being kind to yourself, because you are respecting your own feelings and needs. When you are nice it is not always genuine and it can hurt not only you but others as well.”

Wren explained “appropriate care” relative to “good” or “nice” people being taken advantage of, especially over time, if they don’t learn to take up for themselves. Honesty with ourselves and others allows a person to set boundaries. When we can set boundaries then we don’t become so overwhelmed by expectations others have for us. If we know ourselves intimately then we are able to recognize the difference between nice and kind. We are able to take the challenges presented to us and decide for ourselves we are at a place in our life when we know we would not be able to give it our all.

I can see Wren has thought long and hard about this. The woman before me is not the same person she was thirty years ago when she was closer to the age I am now. We tend to accumulate layers over time. We can start out the simplest of beings, and over time our stories, our experiences, our beings, build on and through one another. Before we realize it we are a complexity that is not easily known. Wren tells me it is easy for her to talk to me because I seem genuinely interested and I ask such great questions, but still I feel I only know the surface of this single woman who sits before me. I think of all the other women in my life and how little I know about each of them, how little we all know about one another.

In her work, *Nature Ethics*, Marti Kheel says that what is needed “is not care as a universal norm, but *appropriate care*” (224). I envision “appropriate care” in the Wren sense, knowing the difference between nice and kind, approaching relationships with others and ourselves with the appropriate amount of attention and honesty. Respect and generosity come from honesty and appreciating the individuality of the one perceived (225). Marilyn Frye has made the argument for a “loving eye” and how she who sees through one understands she “is separate from the other whom she sees...their interests are not identical...nor does she believe they are or try to pretend they are” (*The Politics of Reality* 75). This plays a crucial role in “maintaining and dismantling oppressive structures” (Kheel 225).

Wren has found contentment in her own life and has developed a “loving eye” towards the others in her life, a way to respect them, without holding them in reference to her own self and her interests. Instead, she wishes to instill agency and integrity through kindness that empowers and encourages individual development. I am reminded of Alice

Walker and hear an echo of Wren in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*: “The challenge for me is not to be a follower of Something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that” (Walker 94). I feel like Walker is decreeing, in order for her to feel comfortable in her own skin, she must, not only, become conscious of ideologies, but, encompass them and express them through her choices, behavior and life (Walker 94) . She needs to feel the “Something” as part of herself, without losing herself to it or worshipping it as an excuse to avoid responsibility for her unique self. Wren is doing just this.



Wren helps a child at Colorfest make a seed bracelet
(2012)

10/25/12

My last day with Wren has been a whirl wind. She and I had to work this morning at Bernheim, so there was a lot less interaction between us. She had children’s programs to do and I had interviews to edit. I sat at my desk a long time this morning just going over the week in my head. I thought about the time Wren and I had spent in her garden, the time we had in the bees, the time we spent cracking nuts on the front porch and the

different wild foods she had let me try while I was with her. It is funny, one of the main reasons I thought she would be such an interesting subject is her work with wild edibles. Wren has taught numerous workshops on the topic and is an avid gatherer of wild foods. She cooks with them and preserves them. She knows plants as intimately as she knows herself and does her best to point them out to me and name them.

It seems odd to me that I have not recorded any of these experiences in my field notes. Not a single plant. My mind is trying to wrap around what I must have been thinking. Suddenly I am brought out of my day dream by Wren's soft voice.

"Are you planning to have lunch soon?" she asked

"I guess," I said. "To tell you the truth I haven't even thought about it yet." She laughed and said something to the effect that I must be working too hard. I thought to myself about how little I had accomplished this morning, instead worrying about not recording her expertise on wild edibles.

We went outside and sat at one of the picnic tables. Wren pointed to a tree in front of us and said, "Do you see the wolf in that tree?" Knowing her well enough at this point, I knew I was not looking for a real wolf, but rather the image of one in the bark and branches. I studied with all my might, but could not see it.

"Here," she said and wiped her hands together and got up to walk over to the tree. She studied the tree from one side then another, and then pulled back some smaller saplings that blocked the front of it. She pointed to a place where a branch had broken off.

"Right there, do you see it?" She asked.

“I do!” I said excited. What I couldn’t see before now seemed to jump out at me from the trunk.

“Isn’t that neat?” she said, nonchalantly sitting back down to finish her lunch. Isn’t that neat I thought to myself.

I came to stay with Wren thinking that I was going to be able to use her wisdom and knowledge of wild edibles to connect her worldview to sustainability. I came with a preconceived notion of what I would find. Instead I left with a whole new vision that jumps out to me. Wren is a woman who lives close to nature and shares it with others almost daily. Yet she has more layers than that. What is intriguing to me about her is not that she forages and eats wild edibles but she is full of magic and a sense of self that is not easy to find. She sustains herself, her own soul, which in return allows her to see and feel connections most of us overlook. She is able to cultivate respect and kindness in others through the respect and kindness she has for herself. In sustaining her *self* she has come to a place where she can plant seeds in others to want the same.

Chapter 3 Red Earth Farm: Necessary, Just and Right

Simplicity.

*How happy is the little stone
That rambles in the road alone,
And does n't care about careers,
And exigencies never fears;
Whose coat of elemental brown
A passing universe put on;
And independent as the sun,
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute decree
In casual simplicity.*

(Dickinson 162)

3/10/13

I left out on the road this morning after breakfast at my granny and granddad's house with Josh. Mom, Dad and my nephew were all there to tell me goodbye. I got started a little later than expected, but that seems to be a pattern with me. I lost an hour with daylight savings time and was hoping to get to Red Earth Farm in Reidsville, Georgia before the sun went down. I don't like driving at night.

The drive through Kentucky and Tennessee wasn't anything, and I felt like I was in Chattanooga, TN in no time. Soon after I saw the "Welcome to Georgia" sign declaring "We're glad Georgia is on Your Mind." It wasn't until I reached Atlanta that traffic became an issue. After passing the 1996 Olympic flame, traffic came to a standstill

under one of the overpasses. In the lane to the left of me I watched as a mid-size SUV slammed into the back end of the SUV in front of them.

My heart began to race and I watched as a mother frantically got out of the front SUV and checked on her child in the backseat. Behind me a guy laid on his horn for me to keep going, “welcome to Georgia” I’m sure was on his mind. After making it through what I will now refer to as Hell Hole soon traffic came to a stop again as smoke poured out of the trees on the North bound lane of I-75. A fire truck arrived and a tall man in a blazed vest started pulling hose down the side of the guard rail along the interstate.

Once through the stand-still traffic, and just a few miles south of Atlanta, vehicles were backed up again on both sides of I-75 because a Chevy truck had run into a small passenger car. The trailer of carpet had flipped over across the left lane of southbound traffic. At this rate it didn’t look like I would make it to Reidsville as early as I had expected. I was beginning to think people in Georgia were in too big of a hurry, even though they couldn’t get anywhere fast in this traffic.

I got to the Reidsville exit at 7PM. The first place I stopped was a gas station to relieve myself and when I pulled into the parking lot I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. In the center of the parking lot was a big cage with a white cockatoo. Apparently this gas station doubled as a petting zoo; to the right was a field with goats and caged birds. Inside the gas station they sold feed by the zip lock bag. I have to admit, “what the hell have I gotten myself into?” crossed my mind.

I was about 20 miles from the road I needed to be on. Houses flew by separated by tall pines and swampy looking marshes. After a few short turns I was on an open country road and I took in the land and beauty surrounding me.

“Turn right onto county road 187,” the robotic GPS lady said. I looked to my right; it was a dirt road with a fence pulled tight and a sign that said, “Close Gate After Entering!” My gut told me this was probably not the way I needed to go, so I turned back onto the paved route and waited as the GPS lady “recalculated.” I eventually got to the right road, which turned out to be dirt as well (I later found out this was a dirt/sand mixture).

I felt a slight sense of panic when the GPS lady so proudly announced that we were, “arriving at destination on right,” and looked to find an open pasture with no driveway. Lucky for me my granddaddy had warned me before I left home not to trust “those silly things too much,” and instead to rely on my keen navigational skills (sarcasm intended). It wasn’t long until I saw it: a big white house set back off the road with a wraparound porch and yard full of, gardens and animal life.

“This has to be it,” I caught myself saying out load. I walked underneath a gnarly tree covered with Spanish moss towards the porch, leaving my belongings in the car.

“Hello, Brandi, you made it!” Janisse greeted me with a hug. Raven, her husband, was waiting on the porch with a little sandy-blonde haired girl. In an instance I felt at home as three dogs followed me up the steps, Cypress, Matilda, and Thunder.

“How old is this house?” I asked soaking in the beautiful rich wood of the inside floors, walls and ceiling.

“1850s” Janisse said. She explained to me how the house was originally a true federalist style. At one time it was symmetrical with two rooms on each side; one downstairs with another directly above it and a porch that went across the entire front. Now it is longer, with the addition of a bathroom and other rooms, and the porch extends down both sides of the house. When I looked through the front door, it was a straight shot to the back walkway that led to what appeared to be another house all together.

“In federalist architecture they built the kitchen separate from the house, in case of a fire, because they were cooking with wood. This way they could ideally save the rest of the house in the kitchen caught on fire.” Janisse explained as she took me through the house across the walkway and into the kitchen, a beautiful open pine board room with vaulted ceilings.

“Are you hungry?” she asked as she pulled out a cubed steak and started to heat a black iron skillet on the stove “We just ate, but I left everything out on the stove for you. I’ll just fry up a steak real quick.”

I felt spoiled. She filled a plate with cubed steak, a mixed greens salad, fried green tomatoes, and heirloom sweet potatoes, all right off the farm.

Janisse and Raven own Red Earth Farm in Reidsville, GA. The farm’s name comes from the indigenous ancestors that once inhabited it and the red clay found beneath the sandy loam soil. Since purchasing the farm they have revived its land using small farm practices. Kathy Rudy, an associate professor of women’s studies at Duke University, who researches ethics, animals, feminism, religion, food politics, conservation, and ecofeminism feels, “the best small farms strive to be ‘closed

systems’—meaning they import almost nothing onto the farm (animals reproduce themselves through good husbandry practices, seeds are saved from the strongest plants for next year’s crops, etc.)” (28).

While I finished dinner, Raven told me in his own way about the different aspects of Red Earth Farm through stories. Each story he told represented an aspect of his and Janisse’s life in relation to their land and the animals they keep as well as the ethics that guide their husbandry practices. He told me about his trips to the livestock auction and the rabbits they started raising last fall, the round garden he had worked up today, and the jersey bull calf that had passed away. His eyes got big and excited when he spoke about the goats and how two were getting ready to kid, but also the trouble of trying to feed all of their animals with non-GM grain.

Genetically modified (GM) seeds were introduced to American markets in 1996, they are seeds that are “engineered through their DNA to take on new characteristics” (*The Seed Underground* 13). Most commodity crops are grown with GM seeds. Within a decade of their appearance on the market, half of all the corn grown in the United States was grown with GM seeds, and that number is growing. One concern is , “because most GM products are released in the United States without independent environmental or health testing, nobody knows exactly what effects these organisms will have on humans” (*The Seed Underground* 15).

As I listened I felt a stronger appreciation for the food I was putting into my mouth, with each bite there was a feeling of connection to Raven’s stories. Satisfied and full I went with Raven outside to do the evening chores, since it was already dark he

handed me a headlamp as we walked around a big garden and towards a fenced in area to the side of the house. We let the goats go outside the fence and snack on acorns, a natural de-wormer, and then put the sheep in their separate stalls for the night. The new lamb, Truth, went in with its mother Sojourner. Next we herded the goats toward another wooden framed pin that was behind the barn. Ingrid and Harriet had swollen bellies, and Ingrid's udder was round and full, signs she was close to giving birth. The males, Noam and Chomsky, went into two separate pens and the soon-to-be mothers received some of the non-GMO grain that Raven spoke of earlier. Last, all of the fowl were put into large pens throughout the yard and safely locked in to keep them protected from the predators of the southern Georgia night.

When we came back inside Janisse was cutting up tomatoes. Tomatoes in March, I thought to myself? She told me she had rescued them from a friend who had a high tunnel. High tunnels, or hoop houses, are unheated greenhouses that are an integral part of local food production systems. They extend the growing season and provide protection from the elements as well as a production system that poses less risk of crop failure. Janisse's friend was trying to get a head start on the Florida growers and profit off of the organic market with the high tunnel. Unfortunately, he missed his chance and the Florida growers still beat him to the punch; the prices of tomatoes were such that "he could barely give the tomatoes away." Janisse decided to take as many as she could to can and freeze so they would not go to waste.

Janisse and Raven show self-sufficiency in raising their own non-GMO foods. Not only this, Janisse shows an innovative pro-action in all forms of local food promotion

and production through the act of salvaging her neighbor's tomatoes. These are just a couple of the reasons I have come to stay with them over the next week.



Janisse & Raven's front porch



Country Road 187 Reidsville, GA

3/11/13

I woke up this morning to a sound of creaking. At first I thought I had slept soundly through the night and the darkness was only the adjustment of light to Daylight Savings Time. I thought what I was hearing was Janisse and Raven stirring for the morning chores. As my senses became unclouded from the drowsiness, the sound became more of a pang, than a creak, on the tin roof of the historic home. Rain maybe? It sounded too out of sync to be rain; I looked at my clock on the bedside table: 3:48AM. Whatever had stirred me, it was useless to try and go back to sleep. I turned on the bedside light and got a notebook from my bag and began to write some of my first impressions of Red Earth Farm. When my writing took a turn toward incoherent ramblings, I decided I would catch up on some reading. I woke up at 9AM.

I got dressed and headed down stairs to find Janisse and Raven in the kitchen. Janisse was busy cutting up more tomatoes and Raven was sitting at the kitchen table.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning. I’m sorry,” I said

“Don’t be sorry. You are here to heal yourself and sleep in and do what you gotta do,” she assured me. Here she has allowed time out of her busy schedule, to allow me to study her, and yet she is not the least bit off put by me sleeping in.

“There is stuff here to make pancakes and here is some sausage that we grew,” she said. “Now you are going to have to make cowboy coffee, but I put the stuff out over there and there is water boiling,” she directed me towards the filter and funnel sitting on the counter beside a cup and a bag of organic coffee.

“How’d you sleep?” she asked.

“Pretty good,” I said, “I woke up, wide awake at about 4AM. It sounded like it was raining.”

“That was dew,” she said laughing, “Raven swore he wasn’t going to be able to sleep in this house when we first moved in because of the dew hitting the roof.”

I went out with Raven to do morning chores. We went around the yard and he opened the pens that held the chickens, ducks, and turkey. Next we went to different barrels scattered across the yard where he removed the tops and scooped up a Folgers coffee can full of goodness for the different animals. First the hogs, then the peacocks, then the chickens and ducks; after the fowl and pork were taken care of he went into the barn and got a can full of goat feed and a can full of rabbit feed. We headed over to the new rabbit pen he had completed yesterday and he showed me the different makeshift shelters he had created for the rabbits as he put food in their bowls. We then walked over to the pen where the goats stayed during the night and he led one, while the others followed over to the open pasture to join the sheep.

Finished with these initial chores, I went back into the kitchen and made a pancake and fixed a plate with it and sausage Janisse had left in the big black iron on the stove. I then used the funnel that fit over my coffee cup to filter the boiling water through the organic coffee grounds. It was some of the best coffee I have ever made and such a simple process. Janisse sat with me and told me she had to go into town for a doctor's appointment, but I was more than welcome to go for a walk or catch up on some writing while Raven worked on his college Algebra homework. He has returned to school to get an art degree just for the sake of learning, which I admire. When I finished breakfast she left and I went upstairs to the room she had prepared for me the day before, to write. I felt at home here. What made it even more enchanting was I knew I would be writing in the room across from where Janisse writes; that inspired me.

Janisse is the author of five books of literary nonfiction and a collection of nature poetry. Each of her works reflects the care and concern Janisse has for others and the natural environment. I was introduced to her writing through *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and felt a strong connection to her, especially her southern heritage and the love she has for her place. The story of her family life was delicately knitted with the story of the disappearance of the long leaf pine forest in south eastern Georgia. Her book left me yearning to be able to write something as touching. I was ecstatic about getting to write in the home of a writer who I respected. I sat down at my laptop and readied myself and the words refused to come. No worries, I thought, I would take a little walk down the road and come back to it.

I went down the sandy driveway to the road that looked as though it led to nowhere either to the left or right. Since I had driven in from the left I decided to go right.

As I walked I looked at the trees lining the road and the green beginning to appear. I passed a broken down shack that screamed at me to pause and recognize the history the place must hold. Before I knew it I was at the end of the road; on the left a huge white plantation looked eerily empty. I turned around and headed back towards Janisse's drive. The feel of being out in a hushed swampy landscape energized my bones and I walked lighter. This is one of the reasons I love my own country home and I begin to wonder what must be going on there. I am on spring break and it would have been a great opportunity to catch up on chores and garden preparation at my own home, but alas I am in Georgia learning about how others have come to develop a worldview similar to my own. The task at hand is to learn as much as I can from Janisse.

It wasn't long after I got back from my walk that Janisse made it back to the house and asked if I wanted to plant some seeds. We started gathering flats, seeds, sharpies and tape for labels. She filled the flats with soil and brought them over to a picnic table in the back yard. As we planted the seeds she told me about the different places she had collected them. All the peppers, eggplants and tomatoes were non-GMO and many were heirlooms. She read me the name and I made a label with the tape and sharpie as she quickly poked holes in each section of the flat with her finger and placed a tiny seed inside, fighting to keep the wind from blowing the seeds around. She seemed tense and rushed, but still wanting to tell me about each seed. As we finished up she told me she had gone to the doctor to get results from a lump that was found in her breast. She found out that it was not malignant, but how scary anyway I thought to myself. Here was a woman before me that was fighting to do everything right, she promoted local sustainable agriculture practices, she cared about the health and safety of others, she used

her talents in writing to promote social and environmentally just practices and yet she faces the scare of cancer. It sickens me to think how poisoned our environment already is. Janisse saves seeds from the garden she tends, but has collected many others in doing research for her most recent book. The seeds she collects and saves are non-GMO.

The last book Janisse published is *The Seed Underground: a Growing Revolution to Save Food*. In it she passionately defends the importance of seeds and their place in the local food resurgence. Not only does she give accounts of how best to save and store seeds and gain access to heirlooms but in the chapter “Stop Walking Around Doing Nothing” she cries out with conviction and gives a testimony on hope, love and fight that leaves me saying “amen” every time I read it. Janisse’s concern for the health of the environment and all beings shines in the particular research she includes in the book, especially that on GM and non-GM seeds. She weighs the pros and cons of scientific research but is also poignant in her convictions. She does not allow the emotion in her book to cloud the science. In fact her emotional tone illuminates the reasons to care why the science is lacking in the area of the long term effects of GMOs on humans and the environment.

As Janisse and I walked over to the long rows of one of the gardens to plant potatoes I thought about what she has says in that chapter. Before me is a strong, vibrant woman who keeps going, a woman who does not act because she has hope, but acts whether she has hope or not, even though I feel as though she is filled to the brim with hope. As she said, “It is useless to rely on hope as motivation to do what is necessary and just and right. Why doesn’t anybody ever talk about love as a motivation to act? It’s not hope or love that keeps me going. It’s fight, which I will define as a life force surging in

my heart” (*The Seed Underground* 193). This life force surges so much from her heart that it is impossible to be around her without feeling its energy.

We went inside and got cleaned up for dinner. We had a salad from the garden, chili made with beef from the farm, and bread. We talked about farmer’s markets and the roles each of us plays in our community’s market. At home I volunteer with our local market and help with management on Saturdays as well as general support through promotion and helping to coordinate events. Janisse and Raven sell at their local market and have been key figures in its promotion and success. We exchanged perspectives on the type of leadership needed in farmer’s markets. It was interesting to hear what they did and think about how we could implement them at our own market back home. As the conversation settled Janisse asked if I would like to go for a bike ride to get the mail.

We headed out just as the sun was setting and I felt like a little kid peddling away down the old dirt road. The mailbox was at the end of the road that I had walked to this afternoon and Janisse told me about the neighbors we passed and the old plantation home I noticed earlier.

“It’s empty” she said, “the lady that lived there died and left enough money for it to be kept up, but no one lives there.” Something about the place seemed unusually creepy to me. Once we had the mail she asked if I wanted to go a little further down the road, where we crossed Slaughter Creek.

“When I was a little girl one of my neighbors told us a story that Slaughter Creek got its name because it literally was red from the blood of the Native American raid that went on here,” she said, “She told us river boats used to come down and they would yell

‘injun side’ and ‘white side’ to say where they were landing based on the inhabitants on each shore.” I thought about the creepy house and how it wouldn’t surprise me if the reason it creeped me out so bad was because in another life I was a Native American girl running for my life across the creek. Alice Walker talks about other lives in her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* where one of the characters in the book, Lissie, an elderly black woman recounts memories from her past lives: some as male, some as female, some black, some white and some even as animals. Walker’s story sticks with me and often I imagine myself in past lives especially when I become overwhelmed with feelings of unease or joy. I know these are two extremes, but it makes sense to me that strong emotions might trigger such memories.

We stopped our bicycles in front of a little white church with a sign that said Est. 1868. Janisse told me how she sometimes went when they had church meetings for the fellowship. The crowd was modest and she didn’t necessarily believe in everything that was said, but it gave her a feeling of comfort, being in the building and in the crowd itself. Especially during the winter when they could build fires in the tiny wood stove in the middle of the church. I think it is similar comfort to what I feel when I go into the church I grew up in back home. There is a familiarity and acceptance in the congregation of people who watched me grow up. Churches are important public spaces in communities because they are social organizations that bring people together on a regular basis. I don’t essentially agree with all of the beliefs that are spoken from the pulpit of the church I grew up in, but I respect the compassion, kindness and generosity of the congregation that nurtured and supported me as I blossomed. In their book *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy discuss the patterns of

resilience and how it relates to systems and society, “resilient cultures are rooted in diversity and difference and are tolerant of occasional dissent” (Zolli & Healy 210). The community I build around me today differs but is also similar to the congregation I grew up among. Both reflect a conscious effort to support the development of “diversity and difference” among community members in their own way. However, it is because of my “occasional dissent” from traditional organizations and my home town of 600 people that I have developed this desire to support diversity and difference.

We rode back to the house and shut the gate behind us in the light of the moon. I walked upstairs to my room and thought about the day. I thought about home and my mom, the house I was raised in and the love and faith that she filled it with. I thought about the sometimes forceful way religion was pressed upon my siblings and me and the other side of my mom who just wanted to make sure we were safe and happy. It seems like she battles with her own faith a lot of times as if somehow her actions caused me to stop going to church. I have told her many times it has nothing to do with her. Going to church doesn't make me closer to God, and I don't think God finds it is very admirable that I am a “good person” simply to avoid Hell. What is overlooked in much organized religion is the teachings of kindness and love, which should be at the forefront. It reminds me of the way our media constantly reports on war, crime, and violence that is happening as well as the sick people in the world who commit heinous acts. What about the good? Where are those stories? What about the message of love and kindness and community instead of fear, war and hate? I fall asleep saying a prayer thanking God for the blessings in my life and the chance to have met Janisse and Raven.



Variety of Saved Seeds- Red Earth Farm (2013)

3/12/13

This morning it was rain that woke me at 5AM, soothing and methodic. I didn't fight not being able to sleep, but instead woke up and put my recorder in the middle of the room to capture the sound so I could share it with my dad when I get home. He always talks about the comforting sound of rain on a tin roof. When I heard the others getting up and around I put on some clothes and headed down to the kitchen, where Janisse was preparing pancakes and sausage. She had been up since 3AM. Since it was raining she thought she would work in her office; and this would leave me some free time to catch up on my own writing, reading and contemplation.

I started to read some in a book I have due next week for class, and surrounded by the sound of rain pitter pattering my eyes got heavy. The bedroom Janisse and Raven prepared for me is on the second floor. It is a sanctuary of deep brown pine board, with white washed windows on three of the walls and a brick fireplace on the east wall. Raven told me yesterday they have never used the fireplace upstairs, but I imagine those who dwelled here during the late 19th and early 20th century used it extensively to stay warm on cold Georgia nights. There is something magical about staying in a house with so

much history. To meditate on the possibilities of those who have come and gone over the course of three centuries.

When I opened my eyes my book was lying beside me and it was late in the morning. I could hear Janisse working away in the office across the hall. I decided to write. A few hours later it was time for lunch and I had accomplished only two pages.

“How’s it going?” Janisse inquired.

“Well, not so good,” I told her. “I have been working on the same chapter since November. You know I thought I knew what writer’s block was, but I swear this is getting so frustrating. It’s like every time I sit down to write I just don’t know what to say, or I can’t put my thoughts together the way I want to.”

“So let me show you something one of my professors taught me,” she said. She put her fork down beside the lovely salad she had prepared us for lunch, flowing with greens from their garden and organic black beans. She went over to the counter and pulled out a composition notebook flipping through it to find an empty page and opened it landscape style on the counter between our bowls. As she drew out boxes she started to explain to me the process of building up to an epiphany and connecting the different scenes together.

“Do you mind to get what you have down and read it to me?” she asked.

I jumped at the opportunity, of course I would love to get her opinion on what I was writing, I mean after all she is the one who knows what she is doing when it comes to writing. Janisse listened carefully and attentively as I read aloud the 18 pages that I had written, stopping me every so often to ask questions, and suggest ways I could

expand. She did this patiently and with a kind disposition, assuring me that what I had was good, while at the same time encouraging me to keep on.

At 4:30 we left the farm to meet a friend in Statesboro, about 45 minutes away from Red Earth Farm. From there we drove another hour to the town of Guyton for the Coastal Organic Growers meeting. This is a community group that gathers once a month over a locally grown potluck meal in order to discuss what is going on in organics in the area. On the drive to the meeting, Janisse's friend discussed with us his own pecan grove and his experiments with olives and pressing olive oil. I was excited to hear more about what others were doing and I anticipated what I could learn from the group.

I was greeted with smiles, handshakes and curiosity as to how I had come to Georgia. Immediately I felt a sense of acceptance, everyone interested in my visit and in telling me about what they did on their farms. Upon learning I'm from Kentucky one brave robust white haired gentleman began telling me how he really felt about Abraham Lincoln and I joked back with him cutting up about which one of us had our facts right. I felt at ease and the group seemed light-hearted as everyone passed around glasses and sampled the homemade wine.

Before the meal, each dish was presented by the farmer who brought it, saying what was in the dish and how it was made. A moment of silence was taken as gratitude for the bounty of locally grown food and then we began eating. I had slaw with ginger and carrots, quiche, deviled turkey eggs, pecans, wheat berries, strawberries and pomegranate wine; all from right here in southern Georgia.

Over dinner I met a couple who are growing their own mushrooms. He slowly explained the process of inoculating logs while I wrote down each step, so I can try to do the same when I return home.

“First,” he said, “you cut a tree, we use gum trees, and you want it about this big around,” showing a circumference of about ten inches with his hands. “Then you drill holes about two inches apart and in a star pattern all the way around the log.” He continued on until I had the whole process recorded and the name of trusted suppliers to order spores from.

After dinner, there was a meeting about local organic growing as well as upcoming community events. By the end of the night, I felt like part of the group exchanging hugs, farewells, and sentiments of good luck. This is the reason I keep pushing, I thought. The feeling I have right now; the feeling of friendship and community with people who were mere strangers a few hours prior. I said a silent thank you to the starry sky.

When we got back to the farm Janisse and I got out of the car and she pointed out Orion and The Big Dipper to me as well as the North Star. The sky seemed to go on forever with the stars so prominent against the thick blackness. We said our good nights and I went to bed satisfied and calm.



Coastal Organic Growers Meeting
Guyton, GA (2013)

3/13/13

This morning I woke up at 7AM and went down to prepare my cowboy coffee. While I made coffee Janisse showed me the different oils she takes that are good for the brain. She pulled out coconut and fish oil. She then showed me the kombucha and kefir she had in the corner in glass jars. The color of them reminded me that I needed to empty my pee jar from upstairs.

Coconut oil is made up of saturated fat that is considered medium-chain triglyceride (MCT's) which are readily converted into fuel used by brain cells for improved brain function. Sally Fallon, an avid nutrition researcher and contributor to holistic health publications, published a cookbook in 1995 entitled *Nourishing Traditions*. In it Fallon tells us in western medicine the politically correct view is that all saturated fats are bad and will lead to some kind of cancer and heart disease (Fallon 10). Research is beginning to show there are health benefits for certain saturated fats like those found in coconut oil. Advocates of coconut oil argue that the real fat culprit that predisposes Americans to bad health is polyunsaturated fat, "primarily from vegetable oils derived from soy, as well as from corn, safflower and canola" (Fallon 10). These oils tend to become "oxidized or rancid" when exposed to heat as in cooking processes and form free radicals that are extremely chemically reactive. Exposure to free radicals has been linked with premature aging, autoimmune diseases such as arthritis as well as Parkinson's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease, Alzheimer's and cataracts (Machlin and Bendich). On the other hand the coconut oil is "nature's best source of lauric acid, an essential saturated fatty acid that enhances the immune system and protects us against viruses, yeasts,

parasites and other pathogens in the gut” (Fallon 160). It is often used in baby formulas and is a staple of tropical populations’ diet protecting them from bacteria and fungus prevalent in their food supply.

Kombucha is a “sweetened tea that’s been fermented by a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast (a SCOBY, a.k.a. ‘mother’ because of its ability to reproduce, or ‘mushroom’ because of its appearance)” according to food advocacy groups it is gaining popularity in the local food movement. Kombucha has been around for over 2,000 years but in 1990s was introduced in the United States (foodrenegade.com). Even though no major medical studies have proven the health benefits of the drink in the United States, advocates for the drink feel this is only because kombucha can easily be made at home for less than fifty cents a gallon and no one in the drug industry stands to profit off of research on the drink. Research shows the B-vitamins, antioxidants, and glucaric acids in kombucha promote certain health benefits. Studies show that glucaric acid helps to prevent cancer (Walaszek 1), while glucosamines are a strong preventative and treatment for all forms of arthritis. The living colony of bacteria, the SCOBY, makes kombucha a probiotic, proven to improve digestion, mental clarity and mood stability and the drink is rich in antioxidants that promote energy levels and the immune system (foodrenegade.com). It’s not so much that kombucha is used to cure an illness it is a preventive measure to promote good health.

Kefir is another food that is slowly making its way into the local food movement in the United States. Recently a medical doctor who is part of the farmer’s market I help with at home informed me of all the benefits of kefir and confessed he had been using it himself. To make kefir one only needs kefir grains or powder which can be purchased at

natural food stores, and fresh whole milk that is non-homogenized. The kefir has a culturing power on the milk and contains “strains of beneficial yeast and beneficial bacteria (in a symbiotic relationship)” which give it antibiotic properties “creating a sort of nest where beneficial bacteria can settle and colonize” (Fallon 86). It is truly unique because no other milk culture forms grains. It is especially appealing to individuals who are lactose intolerant because the bacteria and yeast growing in kefir consume most of the lactose and provide an ample amount of lactase which these individuals lack in their intestinal track (86).

Janisse’s kitchen was full of healthcare she had created herself. Preventative measures were surrounding me as I looked at the counters full of glass jars, growing scobys, preserved fruits and vegetables, jars of coconut oil, raw nuts and assorted herbs and teas. She went out to the walkway where two large freezers were full of the grass fed non-GMO meat Raven had butchered himself. She grabbed a box of half shelled pecans and began pulling the meat from them, separating the shells as I talked with her about her journey to Red Earth Farm.

Janisse was born on February 2, 1962 in Appling county Georgia to a working-poor family. In her book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* she recounts her experience growing up in Baxley, Georgia, on her father’s junkyard. When I asked her if she felt her upbringing affected her choice of living today, she responded:

Yes, I saw my father was able to live a very wonderful life with a shockingly low income and that what he gained from that was the ability to choose what he does. What my dad taught me was not to be afraid of

going your own path, that not everybody just has to just be a cog in this system, where you start working when you graduate from high school or college and work all your life until retirement age and what you get are evenings and weekends and a couple weeks vacation. So I own my life and my dad taught me that. (Ray Interview, 2013)

According to Janisse her father was “incapable of having a boss” and so at a very young age he started a junkyard and that is how he supported his family. He was an original recycler because he “salvages everything, including people” and sustainability is what he was doing with his junkyard. Even though he doesn’t agree with some of her ideologies now, she feels she “got it from him.” In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, she states, “what I come from has made me who I am” (Ray 33). She feels her life is “rich”; it is an incredibly high quality of life, and it requires a lot of imagination and hard work to maintain. On the other hand she expressed how in some ways her life indicates she is “stuck in a system that I don’t want to be in and trying really, really hard to get out of it.” When I hear these words I think of a poem, in which Alice Walker exclaims: “I want something else; /a different system/ entirely. One not seen/ on this earth/ for thousands of years. If ever” (*Democratic Womanism*). In the poem Walker expresses her disgust for the current treatment of the earth and people on it and urges women of the world to step forward and say “enough!” to “organize ourselves...allied with men/ brave enough to stand with women” in order to “nurture our planet to a degree of health” (*Democratic Womanism*). Walker makes it clear that she is “not thinking of a talking head kind of gal” she is “speaking of a true regime change.” I see Janisse as part of this regime of change.

Late in the afternoon Janisse and I drove down the road to the confluence and I learned that a slough is a type of cypress swamp. We couldn't even make it down to the landing because the Altamaha River was swollen and had flooded the picnic area. Instead, we went back to the house and walked through the woods behind the house to Slaughter Creek. Janisse took off her shoes and socks and began to roll up her pants. We waded in the water and walked across a log, nature's homemade bridge. Watching her balance herself across the log barefoot I imagined her as a child playing in the same southern Georgia woods. She looks strong and confident, content and in love with the place that surrounds her.

Back at the house Raven was finishing up supper preparations and we held hands and took turns saying what we were thankful for before we began eating. I felt the loving kindness that pulsed through the circle. Janisse and I did the dishes while we listened to a Catie Curtis song about a father who had junk in his yard.

"This is my daddy's song" Janisse said as she put the leftovers into mason jars.

*And that's the fun of it, it's that mystery
In all these things bearing other people's history
You can look at this stuff, wonder where it's been
You can pick it up and you can use it again
So if you need something when times get hard
You can probably find it in my dad's yard
And if you need hope if you're coming apart
You can surely find it in my dad's heart*

(Dad's Yard, 1994)

3/14/13

I woke up and went down to turn on the hot water heater so I could take a shower. When I walked into the kitchen area, Janisse was doing yoga. She told me she had some errands to run this morning and so I showered and ate breakfast while she went into town. When she came home I could tell something was bothering her.

The sandy-blond haired little girl I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is a child that Janisse and Raven have taken into their home due to extreme circumstances. The child is a survivor of unmentionable abuse and Janisse refuses to think anything but that the child will heal from the emotional and psychological scars. I do not feel comfortable discussing the child because of the fragility of her situation. However, I could not write this chapter without acknowledging the crucial impact the child has on Janisse's life at this time.

Janisse began to explain to me the difficulty of trying to save someone else while at the same time losing your own sense of self. She explained how being presented with the child made her feel as though she is transitioning into another state of her being. She was becoming someone she didn't know she was supposed to be. I listened intently and could feel the hopelessness she felt in wanting so badly to make everything right for the child, while at the same time not knowing how. I see the love in her eyes fueling the fight as well as the pain and frustration that comes with knowing the loss we bear, especially when children have been reduced to a disposable state. In her mind it was never an option but to take the child in and help her to heal. I thought of her comment about her father salvaging people and admired the virtue she gained from him.

In *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, authors Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy discuss why some people and communities thrive during times of upheaval while others fall apart. Janisse is what I would consider a *resilient* person capable of maintaining a “core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances” (Zolli & Healy 126). She has what social psychologists refer to as *hardiness* in that she can find a meaningful purpose in her life, she believes in her ability to influence her surroundings and the outcomes of events, and she recognizes that positive and negative experiences will lead to learning and growth (128). She is also a *kind* person, honestly expressing that perhaps my visit was just too much at this time in her life. She took the time to cognitively reappraise the situation and regulate her emotions, which are traits of resilience. I already respected Janisse, but the fact that she was able to be honest with me took that respect to another level. I assured her that I could leave anytime. I was ready to pack up and go, though I didn’t want her to think she hadn’t taught me anything, because the time I had spent with her was so enriching and there would be plenty for me to write about. We decided I would be on call to leave and if it became too much I would go. In the mean time she caught up on alone time and I retreated to my room to work on my writing.

Back in my room I reflected on the conversation we had and the complete lack of control I felt in the situation. I wanted so desperately to do something to make the load easier for Janisse. I felt my own hopelessness rising in my throat and cringing in my stomach at the horror the child has faced. I am convicted by the words of Alice Walker in We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: “be aware that other children of the world are your responsibility as well. You must learn to see them, feel them, as yours” (24). I

do the only thing I know to do in these situations, I cry, not because I am sad, but because I am grieving for the ones I have grown to care for, I cry to release the frustration of not knowing what to do, I cry to acknowledge that sensitivity still exists in a desensitized world.

In the afternoon Raven comes to tell me that Ingrid has birthed a kid. I get my camera and go out with him and Janisse to look at the new baby. The mother is eating her baby's afterbirth. She does this to gain nutrition; it actually helps with blood flow and stimulates milk production and in some cases wards off predators by ridding the area of the smell. According to a USA Today health and behavior article on placentophagy women in the United States are considering eating their own placenta because it "is rich in chemicals that can help mitigate fluctuations in hormones believed to cause postpartum depression" (Friess 1). In a 2013 survey a majority of the 189 women surveyed who ingested their placenta after giving birth reported, "perceived positive benefits and indicated they would engage in placentophagy again after subsequent births" (Selander et al. 93). Others, like the BBC, dispute the claims arguing that animals eat their placenta for nutrition and since people are already well-nourished there is no reason to do it ("Why Eat a Placenta?" 2006). I hold the baby kid and think of Ingrid swollen and struggling to carry the weight when I first arrived and then the anguish she must have endured to birth her, the way she is careful to eat the afterbirth and the continuous circling around the kid in the pen in order to protect her baby. I think of my own sister who is back home round with child and the agony of the journey she has been on to carry a healthy child to birth. I think of the sandy-blonde haired child running around in the yard in front of me and how it was possible for her mother to endure such an experience

and just give her away. How can we ignore the innocence and purity of children and the safety they deserve?

As I crawl into the bed tonight to go to sleep under the piles of quilts and blankets, I am reminded of the first house I grew up in. The way my twin sisters and I would cuddle up together under in the same bed to stay warm with no central heat. I loved those days. My sisters accuse me of being too nostalgic at times, but I really did love the closeness I felt with my sisters and the excitement of seeing just how many blankets and throws we could pile on top of us to stay warm. I think of these times and how much I want all children to experience such happiness and security.



Ingrid with new kid

3/15/13

I woke up this morning to the sound of a little voice coming from downstairs, “Miss Brandi, Miss Brandi, Miss Brandi, are you ready for breakfast? It’s ready if you want to come eat with me.” I looked at my clock it. 7:15AM. I rolled out from under the thick mass of quilts and blankets. Last night was the coldest since I have been in Georgia.

When I got downstairs Janisse and Raven were in the kitchen. She already had breakfast on the stove; grits, oatmeal and sausage. He was at the table sipping on a travel mug. They both greeted me with warm smiles.

“There is water heating on the stove for coffee,” she said.

She disappeared into the other part of the house and I started to make my cowboy coffee while Raven and I talked about his plans for the day. When I was half way through my first cup of coffee Janisse appeared in comfortable black pants and a tank top. Raven and she said their good-byes and she asked if I would like to see her do some things on the trapeze.

Now I had been curious about this trapeze since I had arrived. I didn't want to pry, but I noticed it the very first day tied back in the open kitchen area of the house. Of course I wanted to see her on the trapeze! I had never met anyone who had her own trapeze, much less really knew how to use it. She stretched and prepared as I fixed another cup of coffee. She went over to the stereo on the side wall and put in a CD. The song began and talked about strength as Janisse gripped the bar and flipped onto it.

Here is a woman who had confessed to me just the days before how she worried about her own health and whether or not she was doing enough to keep herself in the shape she wanted. I watched wide eyed and in awe as she twisted and turned. She went gracefully from one move to the next extending and retracting around the bar. She wrapped her legs around the rope and fell back, reaching her arms over her and then lifted herself with her stomach muscles, turning and spinning into poses I have seen in yoga, but never on a trapeze. I was transfixed.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked

“When I was in Brattleboro, there were twins who had been with the circus. They called themselves the Gemini Twins and when they were 35 they came back to Brattleboro and started a circus training center. They teach ribbon twirling and trapeze, so I took lessons there.”

“That is so great, my mom would never be able to do what you just did,” I said.

“A lot of people are bound by their own fear” she said. Amen, I thought to myself. I have been one of those people for a long time and am just starting to realize how much my fear has kept me from doing.

As I watched Janisse on the trapeze I thought about the conversation we had the day before. How helpless she had seemed in a well deserved moment of weakness. She reminded me of Alice Walker when she writes, “the writer’s life, riddled as it is with pauses, times of incredible emptiness, times that can sometimes feel as fearful as the deepest night . . . with time, with maturity, and above all, with patience, one learns to dance with them” (*We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* 69). I felt I was observing Janisse practice this dance. When she was finished she got down and asked if I would like to meet her parents. I couldn’t have been more surprised or excited.

We drove to the next county over where she was born and pulled in front of a brick house surrounded by salvaged items. At first it looked as if her parents weren’t at home, but as we walked back around to the front, they pulled in to the drive. I met the real live Franklin and Lee Ada. Franklin began to size me up first thing, and he showed me to the side door of the house, asking if I was going to be the next Rachel Carson or Emily Dickinson. Lee Ada smiled sweetly and patted my arm, brushing the grey curl

from out of her eyes. She guided me to a chair in the kitchen and we all sat around the table. She and Franklin were lively and had an air of lightheartedness surrounding them.

Janisse began gathering utensils throughout the kitchen and sat at the table peeling apples while Franklin asked me questions. She said she was going to referee the conversation to make sure I got to talk at some point. We laughed and she and her father poked back and forth at one another. This is a *home*, I thought to myself. I did not think of it as a home in the traditional nuclear family sense, because there was a father, mother and daughter sitting in front of me. I thought of it as a home because of the love that radiated throughout the space. Love that I felt a part of as well. It wasn't long until Janisse's brother Dell came by and joined us. There is nothing like "just visitin'," as my granny would call it, or "sitting till bedtime," as Wendell Berry would refer to it (145). I was a part of something special sitting around the kitchen table with a family, enjoying each other's company. Janisse told Franklin I sang, and he told me that he would sing a song. As he started, my heart began to smile: "well I woke up Sunday morning with no way to hold my head that didn't hurt." I knew the song well, one I had learned from my granddaddy.

Dell and Janisse teased one another across the table, as she carved apples and Ada Lee quietly observed. There was so much adoration in the room. A feeling of confidence in the healing powers of family came over me. To me, family is not just biological, rather family is made up of people that love, respect, and watch out for one another. Family, regardless of blood relation, holds one another accountable and gently guides one another through forgiveness and understanding. Franklin said he wanted to show me something and took me to a back room where he pulled out a laminated copy of a *New York Times*

article. It was a story about *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and he pointed to each of the pictures and told me where they were taken. He gleamed with pride and I saw in his eyes the love he has for his daughter.

“Do you want to be a writer?” he asked.

“I’d like to be,” I said.

“Well, let me tell you something. Acordin’ to the Bible all liars are gonna burn in the lake of fire. That’s just how it is, BUT a good writer can take that truth and stretch it just about as far out as they can get it.” He took one hand and pulled it away from his other, expanding his span until his right arm almost touched the floor. We all laughed.

In this setting I can see the way Janisse has adapted to her locality. I see the rules of neighborliness, love of precious things and the wish to be home that are so important to sustaining relationships. Janisse returned home to be of use to her community and place. In contrast, in 1988, Wendell Berry argued, “the child is not educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community” (149). Janisse has used her education as a tool to preserve her place and community. Her writings are the stories of her people, her place, and her passion. They are tools to guide the younger generation like myself to recognize the importance of such bonds and nurture them in our own lives. To me if Janisse is transitioning into anything it is a wise, strong mother of the upcoming generation who want to heal their own communities and place in the world.

As we got up to leave Franklin, Lee Ada, Dell and his wife Rita followed us out to the truck. Everyone gave me a hug bye and said they enjoyed meeting me. Franklin told

me to come back sometime when I could stay for supper and Lee Ada told me to have a safe trip home. We took the long way back to Red Earth Farm and Janisse showed me the house she and Raven lived in when they first moved back to Georgia. It was her grandmother's farm and there was an old growth long leaf pine in the back yard.

Back at the farm we had roast, massaged kale, mashed potatoes, gravy, carrots, celery and onions, sauerkraut, and I tried some persimmon wine courtesy of Dell. After supper Janisse went to check on Ingrid and to see if the kid would latch on to Ingrid's utter. Raven explained to me that one of Ingrid's teats had been damaged and was swollen too big for the kid to latch on to. If it did not latch on soon they would have to bottle feed it. Not only this, but Ingrid was at risk of mastitis if her bag was not emptied soon. Janisse came back and reported that the kid still had not nursed so we went out as a team with a bottle, bucket, and some quart jars.

Raven cleaned Ingrid's utter and began milking into the bucket. When there was enough Janisse poured it into the bottle and then asked if I wanted to feed it to the baby. I had never bottle fed a baby goat before. I held the small naying animal in my arms and tried to hold the bottle up straight, the way Raven showed me in order for the milk to go down without choking the animal. Once they had enough milk to relieve some of the pressure from Ingrid's swollen bag, milk that could be stored and fed to the baby later, we put the rest of the animals up.

I went to bed thinking about the way each of us sprung into action for the health and safety of the new kid. We felt responsible for her. The same way we should all be responsible for each other.



From Left: Rita, Janisse, Dell, Lee Ada and Franklin Ray (March, 2013)



Janisse on the trapeze (2013)

3/16/13

I woke up early this morning to pack. The sun was not yet up and I turned on the table lamp so not to cause too much disturbance of the dark silence of the house. It seemed like it was only yesterday when I arrived. I had learned so much and yet there was still so much more I felt I needed to know before I left. As the sun came up and brought new light into the room I finished zipping up my bag and straightening the sheets and pillows on the bed. I took the gallon glass jar from beside the bed and crept down the stairs out into the young orchard where I poured the liquid fertilizer.

When I went inside to sanitize the jar and wash it out Janisse came in wearing pajamas.

“Are you leaving now?” she asked.

“Not right this minute. I just wanted to get everything packed and clean this out,” I said holding up the jar. We giggled.

“I appreciate that,” she said. “Before you leave I have some things I want to give you.”

She went into the other side of the house and I began making my last round of cowboy coffee. When she came back she had a bag with odds and ends for me to take home. I got Georgia pecans, peach jam, pickled jalapenos, some books, and cow horn okra seeds.

“This is too much,” I said.

“Take it,” she said, “I want you to have it.” I felt so loved. Next she put some dried luffas in a bag for me to harvest seed from and to top it all off she gave me a variety of sweet potatoes to plant in my garden back home.

“We’ve got to make you something for lunch if you are going to be on the road,” she said and began to pull leftovers out of the fridge. I felt like I was under the care of my own mother. When everything was packed and ready to go I said my goodbyes.

Traveling back to Kentucky I thought about Janisse and what I observed as her place in the world at this time. I thought about the past she shared with me and the accounts I have read in her books. I thought about the Janisse I know as a nature writer and the Janisse I now know as a mother--- a very protective mother who loves the earth, the sky above her head, the fields and animals, her neighbors, the elderly and children and has “a reverence for growing things,” and who shows an “enjoyment for life’s daily miracles,” (*We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* 243). The time I spent with Janisse showed me what it looks like to take responsibility for your community and place--- not just the environment, but the people, through sustaining, loving relationships. However, my visit also taught me about the importance of severing negative relationships

and the exhausting process of healing the traumas those relationships place on us. Most of all she showed me what it means to have love; love for peace, love for justice, love for family, love for nature, love for others and love for self. All of these loves are crucial to sustaining the drive to “do what’s necessary, just and right” (Ray 193).

Chapter 4 Begin Again

4/27/13

Four years ago today I had to make the decision to begin again. I have been thinking about beginning again a lot at the end of this semester. While studying Alice Walker's We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For I took her advice on meditation, ordered a book by Sharon Salzberg, and started to practice guided meditation each morning using the CD that came with the book. In the first meditation I learned how to concentrate on the breath. She continually assures the listener "and if thoughts and images or emotions or sensations should arise just let them flow on by; you're breathing. They can come and go without your chasing after them to hold on or push away" (Salzberg). She continues: "the moment that we realize our attention has wandered is the magic moment of the practice because that is the moment we have the chance to be really different . . . simply let go and see if you can begin again" (Salzberg). A moment we have "to be really different" to wake up and realize "our attention has wandered." I meditate on this phrase a lot, especially on days like today.

I was born in January of 1985 to a couple of twenty-three-year-olds who already had identical three-year-old twin girls. Mama and Daddy were raised on family farms in small communities in south central Kentucky, by God-fearing Baptist women and hard-working men. Men who worked in factories and had a tobacco crop every year to supplement their income. Granny and Granddaddy got married their senior year of high school and Mama was born in December, 1961, a year and a half after their graduation. Grandma and Grandpa Button never went to high school. Grandpa Button went to a one-

room school house and stopped going in eighth grade to help his family on the farm. Grandma Button married him in 1944 when she was fifteen-years-old and almost immediately they started creating their own family. Danny, my dad, came along in 1961, and was their sixth child; he became the sixth out of eight. He graduated high school with my mom in 1979. Mom had gotten a scholarship to University of Kentucky and went off to pursue a college degree, but home-sickness set in and she came home after only attending one semester. In August of 1981 my parents got married and a year later they had my twin sisters. With the addition of my younger brother in 1988 we became our own family.

I grew up in a small house just a quarter of a mile from Granny and Granddaddy. Granny's father built the house and I loved it. It seemed a lot bigger when I was little. I look at pictures of it now and realize just how small it actually was. It had a tin roof, front porch and swing, cistern, ceiling fans, wood stove, and in the winter we used hay bales around the bottom of the outside of the house and thick plastic on the windows for insulation. The floors were old and I remember one day part of the kitchen floor in front of the sink gave way and my sister Casey fell through, her feet landing on the dirt foundation. This of course frustrated and scared my mom, but my sisters and I loved it; we could actually see the puppies that our cocker spaniel had given birth to under the house! I think back to the six of us in that house together and laugh at just how close we all were forced to live. Mom always likes to say, "It's a wonder we didn't kill each other," in a light hearted twang. The bedrooms basically had no doors, so we were always around each other, unless we were outside. Like my grandfathers, Daddy works in a factory and when I was growing up we had a small tobacco crop every year to

supplement our income. Even outside we were drawn together in the tobacco patch when we pulled it, set it, cut it and stripped it. As I got a little older, my parents gave my siblings and me an ultimatum; we could choose between taking a family vacation to Disney World or building a new house. Now hold on a minute before you go off assuming that this choice was obvious and easy. When you put the option in front of four young children that have no idea what a vacation is besides going to Gun Town Mountain, there was some serious discussion to be had. In the end, my sisters and I came to the conclusion that Disney World would be awesome and magical for a few days, but a new house meant that we would have our own rooms, like, forever. So we opted for the house. I'm pretty sure my parents were going to go with this option anyway.

I still remember crying the day we started demolishing the old house. I kept a piece of the wallpaper from my bedroom for a long time in a drawer. Something about tearing that house down, even at just eight-years-old, hurt me to my soul. I didn't know then who I would be now, but it makes sense why it hurt so badly. The old house had been a womb of comfort, closeness, warmth and familiarity. The new one was built in the old one's place, literally, erected like a new, shiny, phallic, dominant better. Sure, it had its good qualities, or what my parents thought of as improvement. It had central heat and air, two stories, plenty of storage, a garage, new plumbing, insulation and floors that wouldn't or at least shouldn't fall through, but what does that mean to a little girl? I knew it was nice, but I also knew it didn't feel like the old house.

As with any childhood, I got older and the world around me began to take on new meanings. Suddenly, I was in middle school and confused about who I was, a chunky awkward smart kid. I wanted to be popular or play sports, but that wasn't where I fell in

line. I was more of the gifted and talented, Beta type, because that was what I was targeted as “good” at. I fought it. I tried to be cool. I had friends who were cheerleaders and football players, some of the “cooler” friends I made were because I never missed school and always had my homework so they could copy off me and make a good grade. Some were genuine, and expressed similar morals such as the importance of family, religion and simplicity. By the time I was in high school, life had gotten so complicated and the hormones had made their presence known and I turned into a perfectionist with an eating disorder. Since my mother had never finished college, she instilled in my sisters and me the determination to go to college. She swears she did not pressure us to this day, but the way we remember it is we could not miss school, we could not miss Sunday school, we needed to join any club we could, we needed to make As so we would get scholarships, because there was no other way to afford school. In Mom’s eyes the best scenario was for us to grow up and go to college, so we did not end up getting married young, having kids and living in an old house where the floor fell through, not sure if we could afford anything better. In my eyes, at 16 and a sophomore in high school dealing with my own adolescent ideas of shortcomings, the best way away from everybody causing me so much anxiety was a scholarship.

It was around this same time the federal tobacco program ended and my dad, along with my uncle and granddaddy, could not afford to raise tobacco anymore. I chose the words “could not afford” for my kins’ situation because the price of fertilizer and fuel had risen so high that the small quota of tobacco each of my family members owned and were allowed to grow did not add up to enough pounds of tobacco to make any money off of it when the overhead costs were considered. My granddad says, “they [small

farmers] didn't really have a choice" and my dad said, "you were crazy *not* to take it." The U.S. government was planning for several years to get out of the tobacco business and the program finally came to an end in October, 2004 (Ferrell 28). So, in a way my dad was right a person would be crazy to try and put the labor, time and money into something that the government was willing to pay them outright to simply not grow. However the time we spent as a family out in the field and in the barn working in tobacco, to me, held a value beyond monetary. Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer and a prolific writer who has a profound influence on my own writing says we should re-examine the rule of industrial economics that says "all hard physical work is 'drudgery' and not worth doing" (*What Matters?* 101). Specifically in addressing this rule Berry speaks of his time working in tobacco in his native Henry County in Kentucky,

That tobacco cutting *can* be drudgery is obvious. If there is too much of it, if it goes on too long, if one has no interest in it, if one cannot reconcile oneself to the misery involved in it, if one does not like or enjoy the company of one's fellow workers, then drudgery would be the proper name for it. (Berry 101)

However, Berry continues on to say, himself and most of his companions in the work, much like my own family and neighbors, "would not say that we take [took] pleasure in all of it [tobacco work] all of the time, but we do [did] take pleasure in it" (102). The reason for this pleasure is the camaraderie we experienced when we worked together. As a family we talked, "some of the best talk I have ever listened to I have heard during these times," we laughed, told stories and experienced profound kinship in sharing tobacco work. Berry sums it up in saying the tobacco harvest is the only remaining farm

job in our part of the country that involves a “traditional neighborliness” (103). Of course the tobacco work does not come without its drudgery, but as I got older I realized such drudgery is outweighed by the way “children learn to work; they learn to know their elders and their country” through the tobacco harvest (103). It is funny because the whole time I was growing up I would announce to my dad how “my children would never have to work in tobacco” as if I knew what I was talking about. When we stopped growing tobacco it had a profound impact on me, but I didn’t realize how much so until later on in life.

Once again I felt that pulling at my soul that I had when we tore down the old house. I did the only thing I knew how to do: focused on school. In the end, I never missed a day of Sunday school from birth to twelfth grade, I never missed a day of public school from Kindergarten to twelfth grade, my senior year I was president of the Pep club, Vice President of Y-club, Reporter of our senior class, was a member of the FPS team, Beta, and other small school organizations and participated in Jr. Miss winning the academic prize. I graduated high school with a 4.0. I applied to one college, Belmont University, because of my love of music and its ability to calm and comfort me. Even though I did not play any musical instruments, I wanted to be surrounded by musicians and Belmont located in Nashville, Tennessee is nationally recognized for its Music Business program. It was the only place I wanted to be and I had decided if I did not get in there, I did not care about going anywhere else. I was accepted and offered an academic scholarship that did not cover even a quarter of the tuition.

In order to supplement what I could not get in student loans, because I had to take them out on my own as an eighteen-year-old, I went to work at the factory that my dad

still works at to this day. I worked 12-hour night shifts on the weekends 7PM to 7AM, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and every other Sunday. Talk about a rude awakening. I was exposed to a social group that I had never known existed. Forty-plus-year-old men hit on me trying-- to convince me that their marriages were over, while others were so burnt out from the factory life they carried huge circles under their eyes and seemed sad all the time with leathered skin and calloused hands. I listened in the break rooms as they talked about the bills they had and the burdens they carried trying to make ends meet in a world that was working against them. It was 3AM in the outside break room when my dad, a man of few words, asked me if I thought this kind of work was more enticing than going to college. The man who raised me, put a roof over my head, food on my table, and clothes on my back with this same job, caught me off guard. That was a hard question to ask and an even harder one for me to answer without suggesting I was trying to be better than my dad. Of course I said I wanted to go to college, but I appreciated him more now that I had been in his shoes, than ever before in my life. He told me that every time I even thought about quitting school to remember what he was doing.

It wasn't long after this conversation with Daddy that I read a *Rolling Stone* article one night in the break room about child soldiers in Liberia. Both the conversation with dad and the article led me to think more seriously about what direction I wanted to take in college. Since I could not play music I wanted to be a producer or band manager and spend my life on the road with bands. My experience at Donnelley's presented some moral dilemmas I hadn't really considered when dreaming about being on the road with bands. Mulling over my father's wisdom and the objective account of a larger world that existed outside of my small hometown became a battle of the ethics I held dear. Making

money signing bands didn't seem all it once was cracked up to be in my mind when I considered the children Charles Taylor brainwashed into cold blooded killers at ages as young as 8. Hanging out on the road seemed a little immature when I thought about the sacrifice my dad had made in order to provide for his family. Something told me then that there was more to life than fortune and fame as well as defining happiness through attaining such.

I moved to Nashville, Tennessee in August of 2003 and began classes at Belmont University very quickly switching to an undecided major. After all that I had learned about myself during the summer, I could not pursue something like music business and still feel good about myself. I needed to be in a field that cared about people. The first groups I got involved with in college were social work and Baptist Campus Ministries (BCM). In the comfort of these groups I was around peers and instructors who shared my passion for humanity and was exposed to experiences that allowed me to grow as a person. With BCM I went to New Orleans and fed the homeless as well as worked with children at a women's shelter who had been the victims of domestic violence. In my social work classes I did community service at runaway shelters and retirement homes and was made a mentor to a seven-year-old girl from the inner city schools. This whole time I was developing more of an idea of who I was and what I cared about. On the other hand, my eating disorder had gotten worse, and living away from my family without any sort of accountability, I had gotten down to the smallest size I have ever been. I ran six miles every morning before class, ate about 800 calories a day, if that, and studied harder than I ever had. In the end, I left Belmont for home on Christmas Break with all As and no energy. My mom was the one who worried most, and when she hugged me and ran

her hands across my back she immediately thought the worse. In actuality, going to Belmont encouraged me to quit a lot of the bad habits I had started in high school. I didn't drink, smoke, or cuss and my virginity was still intact, but in reality I was miserable. I had become a part of groups that made me look towards others' problems and try to find ways to help them, but I was not willing to take the time or attention to help myself.

In the summer of 2004 I moved back home and through the persuasion of doctors, counselors, and family members, I transferred to Western Kentucky University for the 2004-2005 academic year. During that summer I began work at Mammoth Cave National Park, which became one of the greatest influences my young adulthood. Through this position I was able to be in nature 40 hours a week. I began to see how healing nature can be. One night in the climax of my eating disorder I fell on my knees in tears and prayer, begging God to take away the pain. I felt I could not mentally or physically go on living as I was. In response, I had an epiphany that night that all I needed to do was look around me. Everything that was manmade, did not matter, the only thing that did matter was His creation, the only thing that was pure and worth fighting for came from Him, the rest was bullshit. Maybe it sounds surreal or too easy, but to me it was what I needed to keep going. At WKU I started to become part of groups that led me towards my personal goal of obtaining peace of mind. I did not heal from my eating disorder overnight, in fact, it took at least four more years for the process to unfold, but I did make a conscious effort to surround myself with people who I felt had the best intentions for others. When I took my first sociology class I knew I found some direction. The professors seemed to be on the same page as me. I found myself making good grades naturally, this stuff applied to

my life, the theories fit into my existence and the discussions I had with classmates made me feel strong and hopeful that others out there believed in the same values as me and wanted to see those values manifest throughout society. These classes and discussions led me to view the world through a new lens, questioning everything and learning from the answers. I was finally able to articulate why things like tearing that old house down hurt me to my soul, meaning I ached on the inside and all over with no physical reason why. The new house was a symbol of the so-called “progress” of the American man, yet left behind was a time of accountability, closeness, humility and most of all love. I knew now why the tobacco buyout was a big deal to me. A part of my family’s emotional well-being and bonding was lost to the buyout and the physical exercise that had once been readily available and required was no longer seen as anything but drudgery.

In the fall of 2007 I began a women’s studies minor. I began to see that my eating disorder was a very real problem that was not going to just go away, and it had formed strategically over the years through my interpretation of the patriarchal society we live in and our obsessive beauty culture alongside the lack of control I felt in certain situations while growing up. In women’s studies, much like my experience at Belmont, I was given the opportunity to participate in experiences that led me to people and groups that felt as passionately as I did about the fact that all people should have the ability to prosper, enjoy and be a part of the world equally. I went to lectures of famous activists, and feminist authors like Gloria Steinem. I gained strength and with it the desire to heal myself so I could be fully capable of helping others. I volunteered to chair the Vagina Monologues my senior year for my feminist theory class. In doing so I coordinated with other class members and women’s studies professors to put on a full cast production of

the Vagina Monologues in Garret Auditorium. We raised over \$3,000 for Hope Harbor a non-profit in Bowling Green. This was the first experience I had networking with others for a tangible outcome, my classmates and I came together and coordinated the event through planning, preparation and advertising. The event was well attended and I fed off the confidence that it gave me. I wanted to do more, not just talk about it, *do* it. I graduated in May of 2008 on top of the world and began a new job at Mammoth Cave that summer as the only female general seasonal centennial ranger under Law Enforcement and Emergency Services.

Working around only men, became a challenge all its own. I began to experience what we refer to in the women's studies world as burnout. It didn't seem to matter how hard I tried, I was "cute" and "dramatic" more than anything else to the men I was working with. I started to feel like there was no real need to be as fiery as I was about social justice in the National Park system or proactive for natural resource protection—the desire to preserve resources in their natural condition. There was a pattern of common responses to my inquiries, "that's just the way it has always been" or "these things works themselves out." My women's studies mind wanted me to say, "of course, they are white males, things have always worked out this way for them," but I knew it was more complex than that; after all they were all individuals who had had their own experiences, and who had gotten into the field of natural resource protection, for some values that were the same as mine: Right? I was confused. How did natural resource protection even find its way into my own values? I began questioning who I was and to lose the grip I thought I had tightened on my sense of self. My retreat was silence coupled

with frustration, control was still an issue. It was in the spring of 2009 that I got my answer to some of the loose ends that had not yet exactly come together in my journey.

You are using
Have used
Up
The old life
The old way.
—Alice Walker

April 27, 2009 I woke up from a night of binging and purging and decided I wanted to plant wildflowers. My sister and I went to town and I picked out as many native wildflowers I could find at our local nursery. I bought mulch and a few hand tools and she and I headed to the trailer I was renting across from Granny and Granddaddy's house to sow all of the plants around my porch. Once we got home I pranced around to the back yard in my camouflage shorts and grey tank top and pulled an old shovel out of the shed. I was in much better spirits than the night before and I noticed the feel of the grass on my feet in the brown leather flip flops. Once I had the ground turned up Stacey and I started to plan the layout of the flowers. Josh (a friend at the time and my companion now) pulled up while we were starting to plant the flowers. We all finished the job together, digging, watering, and mulching. We had such a good time that we decided to go play miniature golf in Cave City. Since it was still a little early for tourist season Kentucky Action Park was closed and we decided we might as well run out to my aunt's house and see how far along on the moving process they had gotten. Josh was planning to rent the house and we thought we might be able to help them finish up.

When we got to the house we played around in the yard some and swung from a thick rope hanging in the big maple out front. Jay, my aunt's husband, went to load his

Jeep Wrangler on a trailer. It was a modified Jeep for four wheeling. He asked if I wanted to go for a ride through the field before he loaded it and I said yes. I used to dwell on what would have happened if I said no. I have the hardest fucking time saying no and it used to be a lot worse, especially when it came to reckless behavior. It haunts me to think about how much I disrespected my own life at one time. There was really no reason for it. I can say that now, but at the time it was as if I was lost in another reality where I would never be good enough, I had no direction in my life and I felt like a stranger to my family. I had been gradually digging a hole for myself over the past six years falling deeper and deeper into a grave of self starvation and binging on everything from food to recklessness. The whole time something inside of me was fighting for me to stop, to pause, to get my shit together.

The Jeep flipped, I fell out the side and landed on my back hard, I looked up and then saw it coming towards me, and time literally went into slow motion. I have no other way to explain it. I saw the jeep flipping and had the thought I should roll out of the way, but something told me to just stay still. I say something, to me this is God, to others it may be something else entirely, but to me it was like a parent just assuring me the best thing I could do was stay calm and be still. So I did and the Jeep came down on its side and I put my hands up like I was going to catch the row bar and it just came down across my throat pinning me to the ground. I looked up and the last thing I remember seeing is the bug-eyed expression on Jay's face. Everything was black, but I could hear the melody to a song I knew. I listened harder, "what is that song?" I thought. Suddenly, I remembered I was doing something. I was somewhere, I was doing something...I was with Jay!

I opened my eyes and saw my aunt, my sister, and Jay. Each of them works in the medical field in one way or another and each saved my life together as part of a team. I had the best family emergency medical team available on the scene; I was already in a collar and prepped for the ambulance. "Man, am I glad to see you guys," I said and then I actually tried to get up and say I was okay that I didn't have health insurance and I would be fine. It truly is amazing what adrenaline and shock can do to a person's body chemistry. They held me down in unison.

I was life-flighted to University of Louisville hospital where my clothes were cut off of me and I heard someone ask where I was from. When the flight nurse said "Barren County" one of the medical professionals in the room made the comment, "at least this one's got her legs shaved." I started to cry and they realized that I was not under any anesthetic (I had refused it on the helicopter ride up). They rushed to ask me what was wrong and I said I didn't want to be naked in a room full of people. They rushed around and got a sheet to cover me. When my family got there I found out that I had broken my C2, the second vertebrae in my neck that gave my head the ability to turn from side to side and up and down. I also fractured my C3, the third vertebrae in my neck, through a blood vessel and squashed my esophagus and windpipe, as well as tore the outer layer of my carotid artery. I lay on my back without being able to move from the neck down for the next 12 hours in an ICU room while the neurological team tried to decide how best to proceed. My C2 was the problem because it was cracked all the way around, almost like I had broken it off. My spinal cord was exposed and they thought if they did surgery, they might hit it. (Later on one of the doctors at the University of Louisville clinic would tell me that if my head had gone forward a centimeter it would have basically fallen off and

back a centimeter and it would have pinched my spinal cord, possibly leaving me paralyzed.) They decided to put a halo on in order for the bone to heal itself. A halo is basically a cast for your neck, except instead of plaster, metal bars run from your chest to the top of your head and the same in the back going from your shoulders. All the bars meet at a metal halo that is screwed in two places on the forehead and two places almost at the top of your ears, where the temple tips of glasses would lie. The metal bars stay in place because they are connected to a plastic shell that is lined in wool for comfort. I wore this God-for-saken thing in May, June and July in Kentucky. It was not comfortable and I am sure it smelled horrible.

I had to enter into,
give myself over,
and endure the pause.
-Alice Walker

Back at my mom and dad's house, not even a half a mile from my rental trailer the realization hit that I had a decision to make. This was the perfect excuse to lie back and wallow in self pity. The injury provided a legal supply of pain pills, as well as nausea and sleeping aids to "get me through" the "healing process." However, I had seen too many friends and family fall victim to the prison of pain pills. Many of these addictions started because my acquaintances were prescribed them by a medical professional.

It wasn't until reality set in that I was faced with the decision to begin again. As I was being released from the hospital and after the initial shock of hearing the list of things that I couldn't do from the doctor, I started thinking about all the things I could do. Eventually, even some "can't dos" I could do with my own discretion. Slowly I began to begin again. I gave myself over to the long nights of sleeplessness, keeping a journal and dwelling on the time I had lost to an eating disorder and reckless behavior. I began

to read The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis and I thought about his words in relation to my life. I had somehow gotten off track, my attention had wandered, but I felt like I had a second chance. I yearned to begin again.

Loss of vitality
Signals emptiness
But let
Me tell you:
Depletion can be
Just the thing.
-Alice Walker

Some nights I cried from the lack of sleep and my brother would sit up with me on the screened back porch listening to music. Some days I almost went crazy from the itching of my head. Because I could not wash my hair myself, my sister came over with a lounge chair and a plastic water pitcher. She would spend at least two hours, taking my long hair down, untangling it, washing it, brushing and braiding it. All of this so I didn't have to cut my hair. When I couldn't stand being inside anymore my daddy would take me to Mammoth Cave to walk on the boarded trail and one time to the Mule Pull in Bowling Green. My mom was right by my side and I had flashbacks to childhood the first time I took a bath when I got home and she ran the water and stripped me down to get inside, helping me into the tub and then coming back in to help me get out, and dressing me before I had the strength to do it myself again. The days when my parents had to go back to work my granddaddy would come down and we would sit for hours listening to Jerry Clower or just talking about the Fox Fire series and old wives tales, or how it was when he was growing up. "During the pause is the ideal time to listen to stories," Alice Walker writes, and I did more closely than ever before. When people think you are going

to die or at least realize that they almost lost you, they start to tell you weird things. It seemed like everyone had a confession that they had to make to me.

When my strength was up I went with Josh back to the scene of the accident, where he was living, and helped him plant a garden. As each month passed I felt stronger than the one before, mentally and physically. I was moving hay around in wheel barrows before the end of the summer, and I was having conversations with my mom and dad that I had never had before. Like Wendell Berry I came to “understand my parents as fellow humans and fellow sufferers, and in my own way returned to them as a friend forgiving the inevitable wrongs of family life” (What Matters? 151). I returned both to my parents and to the land, the place and the roots that fashioned me, as an old friend and was reminded of the love and kindness there. Perhaps more importantly, I was able to forgive myself of the inevitable wrongs I had committed.

We are not
Over
When we think
We are.
—Alice Walker

On July 16, 2009 I got the halo removed. My mom, my sister, my best friend Katie and Josh were there. I was told I could not have any type of anesthetic to remove the screws from my head. I sat in a blue pleather swivel chair with a doctor on each side of me, one male, and one female. Josh held my hand and on the count of three both doctors began to use a tiny wrench to unscrew the halo from opposite sides. It felt like the screws were going further into my head and I screamed for them to stop. The female doctor assured me that it was just the pressure being released and it would give soon. I had never experienced physical pain like that before in my life and haven't since. In the

bathroom afterwards my sister was helping me put my hair up and I pulled a slimy, stringy piece of skin from the right side of my head.

“What is that?” I asked holding it up.

“Oh gosh,” she said and grabbed a paper towel, “That’s just part of the skin that grew up around the screws.” She has worked as a registered nurse and physician’s assistant for some time now and has seen her share of what most would consider gross. She pulled it from my hand with the paper towel and threw it in the biohazard box. We couldn’t help but laugh.

For the next month I wore a c-collar, which couldn’t be taken off, even to shower. I went to Josh’s place and worked in the garden. I mowed the yard and weeded. I stayed by myself to read and write, looking out into the field while he went to work at Mammoth Cave. I began to slowly meditate on how far I had come from the person who planted wildflowers just a few months earlier. I began to understand and appreciate my place in the world. I began to envision myself beginning again. I don’t think this vision would have been possible without a few critical elements:

- 1. The family that rescued and supported me with love, determination and hope.*
- 2. The land that I helped to heal as I healed physically and mentally and Josh, my teacher and partner who guided me patiently in learning the art of sustainability so that I might work to heal that land and myself.*
- 3. The overwhelming support of friends, co-workers and community who came to visit, encourage, fellowship and entertain me.*
- 4. Redefining myself and returning to school to pursue graduate studies under influential women who respect the unique perspective I have to share.*

In 2010 I was able to buy the land and home Josh was renting from my aunt where my accident had occurred months prior. Since then Josh and I have worked to heal each other and the land of scars left by neglectful tenets. The longer we have worked on the garden together the more we have grown to know each other. The more the garden has extended across the back yard and most of the south side of the house, the more our understanding and respect for one another have grown. We continue cultivating the soil of our relationship in the process of cultivating the soil surrounding our home. In the garden we talk and when we talk we tell our stories. The garden is therapeutic space.

It is the garden that taught me how to eat healthfully again, after an almost seven-year struggle with an eating disorder that had taken over my life. Even with such trauma as a broken neck, I was still stricken by the mental grasp of ED. The first week I was home from the hospital I mentally broke down thinking about the weight I might gain not being able to exercise in the halo. By being honest with myself and others about how bad the problem had gotten I was able to start the recovery my body and mind so desperately needed. I went back to literature I had read in women's studies and began to think about how truly distorted my body image had gotten. A huge part of my new awareness involved growing my own food with Josh. In restoring the soil and growing food from that soil that was as healthy and pure as the dirt, I began to see how important it was to restore my own body. Slowly calories began to matter less and nutrition began to matter more.

The garden restored my sense of self while at the same time taught me what it means to really be connected to something greater than myself. To care about that connection down to the subatomic level. Feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether

says, “even our bodies despite the appearance of continuity over time, are continually dying and being reborn in every second” (*Gaia and God* 223). Ruether is referring to the subatomic level of cells we are made up of that are invisible to the naked eye, but in fleeting moments are alive and then gone, such as the living flakes of skin we kill when we scratch our arm. This same process is seen in the garden through the compost made of organic, decomposing material. When a tiny seed is planted into the compost squash, potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, onions, garlic, spinach, lettuce, carrots and peas are “reborn” from the “dying” material. An abundance of life-giving nutrients comes from that which has passed away. How accurate a metaphor for the person I was before my accident and the person I am striving to be today.

With the revelation of connection and my work in social responsibility, I feel there is no other way for me to live than as the least burden that I can be on the world. No longer do I feel this means I must be silent and disappear into myself, but rather in a meditative sense of living and being in the world that is least destructive to myself and all sentient beings. The more I gardened, the more I began to see other areas of my life that were affecting the overall health of my environment. I have battled with the definitions of “wants” and “needs” for a long time and who gets to define these? To me, one has to start with needs—the basic essentials of life in order to survive, which are food, shelter, and clothing—and then worry about wants—everything else that makes life more comfortable. To talk about a sustainable lifestyle as if it were merely a choice everyone *can* make or even *want* to make is indeed elitist. At the same time I struggle with the fact that people such as my ancestors in Kentucky were some of the first to develop and practice truly sustainable ways of life and it was not because it was hip or posh, it was

because they had to in order to survive quite literally. Maybe they yearned for what they considered an “easier” life evidenced in a middle-class lifestyle or with modern technologies. In *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* Wendell Berry speaks of how people in Kentucky, in response to the Great Depression, “came home because at home they still had families who were growing a garden, keeping a milk cow, raising chickens, fattening hogs, and gathering their cooking and heating fuel from the woods”(24). My kinfolk were no different. I remember the stories my grandpa Button would tell of what “they had to do to get by.” Unlike, Helen and Scott Nearing, my family did not *choose* to respond to the Great Depression by fleeing to the country. My family was already in the country, living off of the land and sustaining themselves by “growing a garden, keeping a milk cow, raising chickens and fattening hogs,” because it was all they had ever known. It is funny how the table turns whenever crisis recedes and the fear created from the Depression began to fade. Soon the practices my ancestors relied on as a way of life and the Nearings used in response to the Great Depression were labeled “backwards” in the coming of age industrial era. By the 1960’s a full on War on Poverty was declared by President Lyndon Johnson.

Johnson announced the War on Poverty from the front porch of a home in Martin County, Kentucky in 1964. It was later that same year that he also signed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) and created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) which together were to be the “strategy and ammunition to fight the war on poverty” (Bauman). The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was established in 1965 as a result of the Johnson administration: “ARC’s primary role is to promote economic competitiveness and social development of the Appalachian Region (Partridge et al.). According to the

ARC website, in 2013, Kentucky has the highest number of distressed counties in the thirteen-state region with 40 counties listed, Martin county, the very county that President Johnson was standing in when he declared the War on Poverty is one of them. Billions of dollars have been made off of the timber and coal that flows from eastern Kentucky and yet the workers and the community members of the counties where these resources were exploited are still living in “designated distressed counties.” Such counties are considered in the “worst 10% of the nation’s counties” based on each “county’s averages on three economic indicators—three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate” (Partridge et al.).

I cannot say for sure whether or not Lyndon Johnson was thinking about the unintended consequences of his act in declaring a War on Poverty and the plethora of social welfare programs that were created as blanket solutions to the diverse range of causes associated with poverty. I am not convinced that he truly wanted to encourage or even understood the undertaking of something as admirable as the “maximum feasible participation of the poor” in the agencies that were created (Bauman). Too many times the poor have had wool pulled over their eyes through the charismatic tactics of sly politicians which has resulted in exploitation and broken promises. Something as lofty an aspiration as “maximum feasible participation of the poor,” demands patience, understanding and care of localized poverty. These localized demands make it possible to see how different communities have different needs. There is no one blanket solution for all impoverished communities, rather each community’s solution is relative to that community: geographically, economically and socially. It requires taking time to educate and network leaders within a community instead of coming from outside the community

and telling a community what is best for their situation. In Linda Alcoff's essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others" she explains how one problem in speaking for others is, "The practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (7). I feel this has happened with not only my ancestors in relation to the War on Poverty, but a number of rural and urban communities across the United States and possibly throughout the world.

It is fifty years of so-called "progress" later and we are witnessing a growing popularity in sustainable practices, introduced as cutting edge responses to environmental problems. It reminds me of a quote from the movie *Cold Mountain*, "Every piece of this is man's bullshit. They call this war a cloud over the land. But they made the weather and then they stand in the rain and say 'oh shit, it's raining!'" (Minghella). Although the character in the movie was referring to the Civil War, I feel as though what she says resonates with remarks made by politicians and disgruntled taxpayers who claim social welfare programs are consuming too much of our country's tax revenue. The methods my ancestors used to sustain themselves and their families, that was labeled as "poverty" in need of a full on war to combat them, are now considered posh. What was once a natural art passed down from one generation of agrarians to the next slowly disappeared and sadly was taken for granted under the guise of reaching for a "better life" one in which "poverty" could be eliminated by "progress." Progress that was defined *for* them rather than *by* them and progress which has now come full circle resulting in climate change and peak oil that is in need of being combated with the same arts which were labeled backwards. What further complicates matters is those who have always had access to

both needs and wants may desire to get away from the wants but others who've never had access to wants, and barely their basic needs met, desire to possess wants. Who could blame them?

When I talk to Grandma Button and Granddaddy, they tell me stories of time past when they canned everything they grew, times when they did not have running water or electricity. Granddaddy has told me on more than one occasion, "those were some of my best days." He told me once, "you know some people called it poverty, but we didn't know we were poor, because we had food to eat, a bed to sleep in and we were warm." Daddy remembers the first time he saw industrial canned food. He said it wasn't until he started going to school, because Grandma Button had always canned the vegetables they grew, poke weed from the fields and fruit from fence rows and trees in the yard. Granny's daddy was one of the last farmers around my hometown who used mules to farm his acreage, putting off getting a tractor for a long time and Grandpa Button's dad, Pappy, was an original mule skinner—he drove teams of mules that pulled loads of timber in the early 20th century. Aunts and uncles on Dad's side have told me stories about my great grandmother singing to her children at night while Pappy was off. Granddaddy's mamma sang as well with her sister Edna on W-KAY the local radio show in Glasgow, Kentucky. These are my people; this is my heritage. In a time not too long ago, my people were some of the original homesteaders and frontiersmen, and they were sustainable not out of choice, but because they had to be.

Eating with Grandma Button, who is 84, not too long ago for Daddy's birthday we had pinto beans, corn bread and poke salad. Daddy asked Grandma Button how she got her beans the same way every time and she explained to him that if she ever has to

add water to them she adds hot water, because cold water stunts the cooking. She acted modest as if it didn't really make a difference, but I know it does and so does my dad, because this woman has been cooking the same beans the same way for over 70 years. Then she said something that took both of us off guard.

“Course I can't stand to eat pinto beans, unless I have something to kill the taste, like that pepper relish,” she said, pointing to the relish she cans every year that I swear is worth more than its weight in gold. Daddy looked at her stunned.

“Why did you make 'em so much growin' up then?” Daddy asked.

“We had to eat 'em. Most of the time that's all we could afford,” she said laughing.

Daddy laughed with her. This woman has probably cooked and eaten more pinto beans than anyone else I know and yet she doesn't even like them.

These are my people. They do what they have to do when they have to do it. They understand just because you can do something doesn't mean you should especially if it is going to harm someone or something. They work hard, live hard, love hard, play hard and pray hard. They have not always had the “wants” in life, but creatively and caringly developed alternatives to sustain themselves. They carried craftsmanship and artisanal skills in their social genes through generations of peasants, farmers, musicians, and naturalists. Unfortunately many of those skills were taken for granted as not efficient enough to be of use in a capitalist, consumer culture and the children of my parents' generation were taught to strive to be “better than that.” They were encouraged to go to college, go into industrial work, go for a career, anything but farming or the “drudgery” of sustaining yourself growing your own food and living within your means. They are the people Wendell Berry refers to who are being “educated out of existence.” Luckily, my

own parents' didn't get too far away; at least my extended family was a part of my childhood and continues to be a part of my life and place in the world. Not only my parents' generation, but my own generation and all of those to come have been cheated. When Johnson declared the War on Poverty, if he really cared about the "maximum feasible participation of the poor," he should have considered waging war on something more along the lines of greed or ignorance. If we cared about the participation of the poor, perhaps we should look more closely at the worldview of those in poverty and what we can learn from their sustainability and conservation practices.

In today's time, we are faced with peak oil, climate change, global warming, depleted soil, and poisoned water and suddenly there is a revived interest in slow foods and sustainability. So much so that anyone in the proper socioeconomic class can drop well over \$2,000 at one time stocking up on "agrarian" home décor from Williams-Sonoma (Williams-sonoma.com). Suddenly DIY kits are selling like hot cakes encouraging those in upper classes that they too can homestead and grow their own food all while looking good, keeping in good fashion with this whole climate change thing. Consumer culture at its best is a \$24.95, 12lb bag of chicken scratch (Williams-sonoma.com), when everyone around home knows you can go to the feed mill and buy a 50lb bag for half that price. I have become so frustrated with the posh consumer culture suckling off of the sustainability tit. To me, companies like Williams-Sonoma are no better than Monsanto, because they perpetuate a system and idea that is flawed and creating havoc on our communities and environment. What ad campaigns like the one described does is make sustainability and agrarianism into a "means that can be used to advantage" (Berry 72). In Williams-Sonoma's case an "advantage" in the consumer

economy. This just further divides and disadvantages nature as well as community. When you put a price tag on the tools used to live sustainably then you are automatically contradicting the message and meaning of sustainability. Part of Wendell Berry's message is that our current consumer culture makes it impossible to keep corruption out of something as pure as concepts like agrarianism and sustainability; a consumer culture and economy implies a buck can and should be made off of any and everything. It is something I feel needs to be addressed.

We must balance extremes of poverty and corporate capital wealth. We have to be willing to compromise to recognize our hypocrisy and humbly accept compromise on both ends of the spectrum. Why must we wage any war at all, why not wage hope, hope for a new way of communicating and understanding one another's unique situated needs and hope in awareness and nurturance of the ways in which all beings are connected and worthy of safety, health, and hope in the recognition of the need for new definitions of *wants* and *needs* that are fair and just for all beings.

Conclusion

I think about what my parents used to say and sometimes still do: “I wish we just lived in a little cabin in the woods somewhere.” It’s as if I have carried this longing through the years and now am grasping at it to answer the great mystery of my life. I am living in my little cabin near the woods and have slowly been removing myself from the traumas of patriarchal, Type 2 capitalist society, “a specific type of market economics where preference is given to those with large amounts of capital” (DeMille 1). Over time I was forced to face that my attention had wandered, I learned “the magic of the practice” and embraced a “chance to be really different,” drawing on the energy of community, family and love (Salzberg). Each morning brings me a day I can and need to begin again. I have realized the wisdom of some of the lessons I heard my entire life, but never truly understood. The process of learning to sustain myself is not always a glorious one, but I find encouragement in the women I have stayed with, their unique journeys and their wisdom. I find inspiration in the connections we make across generation, place, health, and environment.

This study has unfolded as more than a study of Voluntary Simplicity, The Good Life, choice, and women who are making a tangible active effort to live sustainably and responsibly. The study is and has been a healing process. By staying with strong, independent women whom I admire and hope to emulate, I have learned some of what it takes to live a balanced life sustained emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Women who were told they *could not* throughout their life and marched forward with a vengeance towards the *yes I can*. These women healed themselves through their passions for the natural world and community and then took upon themselves responsibility for other

sentient beings. These women regardless of the traumas they faced or names they were called were still resilient enough to stand up and say, “ENOUGH”!

I feel confident after my field research that I understand that the path to happiness and liberation is inside me and like Alice Walker, “Now I understand that all great teachers love us. This is essentially what makes them great. I also understand that it is this love that never dies, and that, having once experienced it, we have the confidence always exhibited by well-loved humans, to continue extending this same love” (*We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* 95). These women have given me the encouragement and support of true community, kindness, and friendship, which in turn has helped in nourishing the brokenness inside me. I hold the path to my own liberation and ability to be like the women who appear in my thesis. The only way I know to repay them for the love they have shown is to pay it forward and use the empowerment I feel to confidently say, “Enough!” even when it is not considered socially acceptable to do so.

I live the life I do, where I do, because it is home and I love it deeply and intimately. I want to know the stories it holds in order to heal myself, the community, and the soil. All these healings are vitally important in giving the sustenance needed in order to not only survive but enjoy life. We are not here merely to survive. For too long I felt that was what I was doing: surviving. Now I am living a conscious life, aware of my place in the world and what responsibility comes with such knowledge. It is not easy, but I have no other choice but to endure the struggle for what is just and right. I cannot support the absolute will and drive within my heart with scientific theory or law, all I know is what drives my actions is real and connected to the belief that I, others, and all of nature deserve health, happiness, security and the ability to live at ease.

Some have gotten so far removed from nature that it frightens them. What I learned throughout the experience of my graduate career is I cannot define the “good life” for others. What we consider “success” is affected by our unique experiences and situated knowledge as well as social conditions and structures. Those who are fortunate enough to have the time and ability to meditate on who they are and raise their consciousness get ever closer to becoming native to their own selves and realizing the interconnectedness they hold in relation to the place that surrounds them. It is from this native standpoint each can decide what their “good life” may be. This is why I challenge those with privilege of time and ability to *see* those without such privilege, to *feel* them as *ours* (Walker 24). We must be aware that others are our responsibility as well, and until we do, none of us will ever be able to live truly responsible and sustainable lives. One of my passions is in healing. I want to learn as much as I can and apply that knowledge to do what is “necessary, just and right” so that all beings may heal (Ray 193). If in the way of the women in this thesis, I can share my journey with others and ease the burden they bear, I will consider myself successful.

My research started as an exploration of simplicity in the lives of American women, their unique experiences, and how they came to define conscious and sustaining lives. I felt drawn to the women because the good life they define for themselves is similar to the definition I hold for my own life. However, the heart of the research I collected lies more in the process. My research unfolded as a challenge of mind, body, and soul. I listened to the different women’s perspectives attentively, physically worked alongside them, and spent restless hours contemplating the importance of relationships, solitude and peace. What I have written is only a portion of the overall experience which

became a search for a deeper understanding of self, place, and community. This is an ongoing search. There is no beginning and no end. In order to feel confidently that I know my self, my place, and my community, I have to make a conscious effort to divert my attention from its normal focus—worry, angst, insecurity, melancholy—on a daily basis. I have discovered healing is a process that does not happen overnight; it must be worked at daily with esteem and support, support of self, place and community.

I have come to compare my healing process with the journey of my research process. It has been up and down, confident at times and yet frustrating as hell at others. There have been times I have simply wanted to give up and throw in the towel and times when I couldn't help but believe all the pain and tears were for a greater purpose. Much like my healing I do not feel as though this is the end of my research, rather it is something I will continue to work at on a daily basis with sustained attention and concern. I will continue not just because it is important to me, and it is a large part of what defines my own good life, but because I believe with all my heart I have to in order to heal and become whole so I can truly encompass the ideologies of sustainability and social responsibility towards myself, my place and others.

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