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Homesteading can be either steady or unsteady

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BLUE GRASS, Va.—The first college course I taught was on a subject about which I knew absolutely nothing: homesteading.

It was the fall of 1969, and I was in my first full-time job. I was so low on the academic totem pole that I had six feet of dirt on top of my head.

Still, I was the *de facto* chairman of the (unorganized and barely acknowledged) division of social sciences at New Hampshire's tiny Franconia College—also its only member.

Franconia encouraged curriculum experiments of the let's-learn-together sort and tolerated most other kinds of experiments. In another one of my courses, several male students spontaneously took off their clothes in class. I continued blathering on as if nothing unusual had happened, which, in a Franconian sense, was true.

A female witness commented that she had not signed up for anatomy, but was reassured that Franconia boys looked pretty normal, all things considered.

This was the high point of my academic career.

Back to homesteading.

I'd grown up in Pittsburgh where the City's last working farm had been turned into my post-World-War-II housing development. I went to an Ohio college surrounded by flat cornfields where in four years I only met one student who came from a working farm. I went to graduate school in New York City where the most that can be said of my labors on that farm is that I successfully raised hackles and tensions.

1969 was a miserable time. The War continued. Black Panthers were on the prowl—and being shot. Campuses were collapsing. Weathermen were running around making weather on themselves. Women were blaming men; blacks were blaming whites; 20-year-olds were blaming their parents; and President Nixon was blaming his enemies.

Retreat into the countryside offered calm. Woods were peaceful, unlike the urban slums where I'd lived for three years as a graduate student.

A friend had a primitive cabin near Greenfield, Mass. I swung an ax there for the first time and helped dig a pit for a two-seat privy. I felt useful.

At that time, two books provided models for rural self-sufficiency: Ed and Carolyn Robinson's, The "Have-More" Plan: A Little Land, a Lot of

Living (1948); and Helen and Scott Nearing's, Living the Good Life: How To Live Simply and Sanely in a Troubled World (1954, 1970).

The ground for these books had been tilled by Bolton Hall (A Little Land and a Living [1908]), an early back-to-the-land advocate who founded the Vacant-Lot Gardening Association in New York City in the early 1900s; and Ralph Borsodi's Flight from the City (1933).

The Robinsons emphasized DIY self-sufficiency and the integration of animals and garden for bountiful food production on a few acres. They represented homesteading's soft path to the extent that they incorporated machines and technology free of guilt.

The Nearings, however, were rigid ascetics who built stone buildings by hand and were uncompromising organic vegetarians.

Scott, a left-wing professor, had been drummed out of the University of Pennsylvania for his opposition to World War I. He and Helen washed up in the Vermont woods in the early 1930s. (I, too, had taken a few rim shots in the spring of 1968 at Columbia and, as a result, found the trajectory of my academic career resembling a one-day, 700-point loss in the Dow Jones Industrial Average.)

Rural self-sufficiency in Nearing's case was a creative adaptation to being unemployable.

The independence the Nearings sought from the American economy meant that they had to live as free of the need for income and cash as possible.

They sought to make a living "with our own hands," with an emphasis on hand labor—no machines, no electricity, no petroleum-powered motors, no phones. They tapped their maple trees, grew their vegetables and made a little money from books and lectures. This was homesteading's hard-path alternative to the Robinsons.

After moving to coastal Maine, Scott excavated a pond over three years using only a pick, shovel and wheelbarrow. Helen estimated that he (and some volunteers and "apprentices") removed 15,000 wheelbarrow loads of dirt and rock—a task that a backhoe could have knocked out in two days.

Scott saw no reason to spend precious cash for simple labor that he could provide for free. And he may have been seeking solidarity with Chinese peasants under Mao—all of whom, I think, would have gone with the backhoe had they had a choice, which they didn't.

The now prominent organic gardener, Eliot Coleman, bought 60 acres for \$2,000 from the Nearings in 1968 and moved there from Franconia College with his wife, Sue. He built their 400-square-foot house with hand tools. They lived with two young children absent electricity, indoor

plumbing and heat other than from wood stoves. They used dried peat moss for toilet paper.

Both the Nearings and Coleman preached and practiced a rigid purity regarding hand labor and vegetarianism (which nearly killed Coleman for a lack of B vitamins). In many ways, they recreated the harsh homesteading conditions of the mid-19th Century.

Women, I think, got the shortest end of this very short stick. Sue Nearing had to wash her family's clothes in the Atlantic and keep a fire going in her kitchen cook stove. She was ground down by the unending work needed to survive.

Homesteading does not have to be an exercise in impoverished self-denial expressed in 14-hour days of manual labor.

The drudgery of the Coleman hard path wore them out. Their daughter, Melissa, wrote an honest account of life in her father's homestead. (Melissa Coleman, [This Life is in Your Hands: A Memoir](#), 2011.) She describes the good times as well as the awful consequences of their self-imposed, money-less primitivism—illness, infidelity, divorce and the death of a child.

In his second round, Eliot softened and figured out how to make homesteading work rather than fail. (www.fourseasonfarm.com)

Decades later, a new wing of the homesteading movement has gone upscale. Forsaken is the hard path. Instead, we are seeing what might be called “designer homesteading,” fueled in part by the very commerce that the earlier generation tried to escape.

Evidence?

Anne Marie Chaker recently wrote about a market of about \$200 billion in retail sales devoted to homesteading paraphernalia, organic food and green household products. (“Backyard Farming Gets Fancy: High-End ‘Homesteaders’ Want Pricey, Stylish Tools; The \$1200 Chicken Coop,” [Wall Street Journal](#), January 30, 2013.)

Consumers targeted by companies like Williams-Sonoma and Garden Tool are 30- to 60-something homeowners with lots of cash, and particularly women with grown children who, the CEO of Urban Outfitters said, are looking to substitute lifestyle for apparel.

Why, I wonder, would suburban homesteaders pay \$80 for a galvanized watering can when its equal can be purchased at Lowe's or the deliberately farm-collared Tractor Supply for only \$17?

What is there about spending more than necessary at an upscale hardware store that makes it compelling? I'm as dense as granite on this point. Are the marginal dollars spent of no concern? Will I feel better about

digging in a bed of asparagus with a \$150 spade instead of a perfectly functional one for \$25? Will the asparagus feel better? Will it taste better? Will I be happier? Will the lion lie down with the lamb?

It must be supplier cachet—the same mystery reason that people eagerly pay Tiffany \$10,000 for the identical stone they can get at Joe Schmo Jewelry for \$1,000. Once on your finger, no one can tell the difference. (I can report that this argument may not be widely accepted by some among those unnamed parties with whom I regularly consort—especially on Valentine’s Day. My advice to men: Never throw out a Tiffany gift box.)

Despite what I’ve just written, I think the luxury trade is neither good nor bad since each of us, fortunately, is free to spend or not spend what we have wherever we want—at least most of the time.

In 1969, as you might expect, I had no idea that I would be ranting about homesteading’s celebrities, Tiffany prices and \$80 watering cans four decades later. I’ve noticed that certain themes persist in life.

While my wife and I live on a farm in the American outback, we have chosen a softer path than the Nearings, though it’s a bit harder than that of homesteaders featured in the Wall Street Journal.

We spend some time most days doing hand labor, but not so much as to dominate or define our lives. We always have animals around, and none of them have felt the need to take off their clothes when I begin a barnyard lecture. We make a perfunctory effort each spring to garden. We are not hostile to internal combustion engines, and we shop at supermarkets. We are on the grid and have no plans to leave. I don’t find enlightenment through farm chores; I find things that need to be done.

We walk a middle path, where we hope to find a workable balance. (The party with whom I share toothpaste would be much happier on this trail were I to have the hardwood floor in the living room warmed to a comfy 40 degrees each winter morning. I’m now weighing the pros and cons of buying a \$10 rug scrap from Tractor Supply. No one can say that I’m rigidly opposed to satisfying unreasonable and frivolous wants.)

Homesteading is a conscious lifestyle choice that has to be put into practice every day. It’s not like living in the burbs. It suits some, but many would find it burdensome.

The reward of doing it a bit is that you appreciate the seasons, respect the weather, know the land from which things come and assemble a repertoire of stories that entertain those who live more conventionally.

That is what I learned from teaching a subject about which I knew nothing at Franconia College 44 years ago, where, I should add, I kept my clothes on in all classes. Even so, my nine-month contract was not renewed by order of the new president, 23-year-old Leon Botstein.

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