

## *Foreword*

Sometimes, when working in the field with an intern, we will uncover a nest of mice or voles or some other critter that no doubt finds our sweet potato patch a very convenient nesting site. If I am quick enough with my shovel, I can often spear one or two of these before they scatter, which my interns have sometimes found shocking. Many of the folks who find their way to our farm are trying to learn to tread lightly, to live non-violently, to respect life, and hold sacred the place that all living things have upon the earth. How is it that I can shatter that peace so quickly with the spearing of these cute fuzzies? Surely they have a right to live as well!

After the initial shock, I may try to explain myself. I am protecting my food supply and that of my community. This is a natural behavior that many other animals would no doubt exhibit. I have been asked if I plan to eat the rats (because surely I wouldn't kill something if I didn't plan to eat it). I am not squeamish about such things, but it doesn't seem like there'd be much meat on them. Couldn't we trap the rats and move them somewhere else? Somehow, I have broken my interns' sense of peaceful coexistence with nature, of working the land in harmony with the earth.

I understand. I remember living in a three-walled adirondack in the mountains of North Carolina when the mice started moving in at the beginning of winter. Terra and I wanted to share our home

with the critters of the woods and live peacefully among them. In the vein of Gary Snyder's *Porous World*, we would let the outside in. I really never minded brushing the mouse droppings off my shelves each morning. Listening to their scurrying feet along the rafters a foot or so above our heads in our low roofed dwelling was only slightly unnerving. Then they ate our clothes. And our bedding. We broke down, got some live traps, and relocated about a half dozen of the stupid mice. The smart mice continued to repurpose our shirts for their cozy nests, hidden in the firewood piles. We broke down again and got spring traps. The first night we set them, we caught about twelve mice in four traps over a twelve hour period. We continued to trap a half dozen mice or so each night for a short while and reduced the population to a manageable level. The mice finally went away in the spring, when a snake moved into the woodpile. He was a much more congenial neighbor.

All this is to say that my experience in living with nature is that war is part of life. My sword is my shovel. I shall not want.

The violence that I carry out daily is a part of me. I will not say that I enjoy killing an animal, whether on harvest days when we slaughter chickens or in mashing bugs or spearing rats to protect my crops. But I prefer to own these deaths, rather than commission them out, for I also carry the violence that I do not execute myself but pay for in order to maintain the systems that support me. For example, in paying my electricity bill each month to maintain the freezer that stores much of my food, I pay my utility company to carry out all sorts of violent acts, from trimming tree branches that overhang power lines to removing mountain tops to extract coal. The utility company cannot deliver the power for my freezer without that violence, and my use of and

payment for that power demands these acts. I have commissioned the utility company to carry out these acts for me. In this instance, they are my hitmen.

We have developed, then, a hitman culture where the outsourcing of violence has become so pervasive that it is completely forgotten. When my customers buy my sweet potatoes, they don't think about the rats I speared to supply them with this meal. I am their hitman. They pay me, they get their sweet potatoes. That's it, no questions asked.

I may, holding a bloody shovel, try to explain some of this to my mortified helpers after shattering their tranquil morning. I may ask, "If these potatoes are eaten by rodents, they will have to be replaced by other potatoes, grown on other farms. Do you think no animals are killed on those farms?" I may try to conjure a picture of this other farm, more mechanized than mine (because any farm would be more mechanized than mine), where animals are perhaps run over by tractors without anyone to notice their passing. I may try to draw a connection to the cost (in life) of transporting these potatoes over longer distances, the oil used in that process, and wonder how many human and non-human animals are killed, poisoned, or lose their habitat in the extraction process of that oil. I may make the claim that the killing of these unfortunate rodents is, in fact, a peaceful act—sacred violence—that may save more lives than it takes. My interns have nodded thoughtfully to these arguments, and it is clear that they have learned something today. They have learned not to tell me when they find fuzzy critters in the sweet potatoes.

The thing about this hitman culture is that we can never really quantify the violence we're paying for, because it takes place off-stage, out of sight.

The systems involved are terribly complex, and almost every part of every system that produces our basic needs has some potential for violence. To some extent, that's just the nature of things. Even when I produce my basic needs directly, it's generally somewhat violent. I do feel concerned, however, about the prevalent systems for providing basic needs in our culture, the extent of their violence, and the extent to which that violence is hidden from those paying for and requiring it.

This book explores our basic needs, how we all meet them as a society, and how our family has chosen to meet them directly. We want to share the connection our path has given us to the sources of our fundamental existence.

## *Terra's Take*

*Paul and I have spent our life together examining the default conditions of our culture and co-creating inspiring alternatives. We want to share a message—and a model. We don't expect anyone else to make the same lifestyle choices, but we hope that our experiences can inspire you to see unexamined possibilities in your own life.*

*We have committed our own lives to making positive impacts, even within a destructive framework. We are raising our daughter to do the same.*

*This morning while I was typing this, our 3 ½ year old daughter Zinnia initiated the following dialogue:*

*“Mom, I want to talk with you right now.”*

*“I love talking with you honey, but right now I'm trying to write this book.”*

*“Let me write the book Mom. I'm gonna save the world.” She gets a piece of paper, folds it, and then begins her own writing. “In order to save the world, I need to have some world to live in because I'm going to be a big girl, because I'm gonna have another birthday.”*

*Ultimately, we are writing this book for our daughter and for all our sons and daughters. We are not trying to save the actual world; the world will be fine. It is really our children we are trying to save. They inherit our present actions. What steps can we take today to create the world that we want to give our children tomorrow?*

*As I have been pondering my own next steps, I have been touched by both David LaMotte's and Eve Ensler's powerful words:*

*David LaMotte, in his book World Changing 101, says "It is not naïve to think you can change the world. In fact it is naïve to think that you could possibly be in the world and not change it."*

*And, in her performance art piece I Call You Body, Eve Ensler writes:*

*"We have to dance now, do you hear?*

*We have to dance for our lives*

*We have to dance for the earth*

*We have to dance for our sons and daughters*

*We have to dance the new world."*

*So we offer this book as a resource, an example, and a call to action to join us in dancing to create the new world. Look within, set aside the stories of why and who and what and where. Look within to the goodness and truth that is our essential state of being. From this place, move through your life. From this place, recognize our interconnectedness with all that is around us. We must choose a life of connectedness in order to flourish.*