

## *Introduction*

Visitors to our farm, looking at our hand tilled gardens, off-grid solar powered earthen buildings, outdoor kitchen, and generally simple, basic lifestyle will often ask if we grew up on a farm. They want to know how we ended up living the way we do. How did we get here?

We both grew up in relatively normal, white middle class families. Terra's first job in high school was at a McDonald's inside of a Wal-Mart. My first jobs were in tutoring, childcare, and computer programming. Our lives were fairly average.

Then, about fifteen years ago, Terra and I embarked upon our quest for connection to the roots of our existence. We didn't exactly know this at the time. Throughout this period, we have constantly evaluated and questioned the ways that we support ourselves physically on this earth. For us, this is easily broken down by evaluating our basic needs: food, energy, shelter, healthcare, water, etc. By thoroughly assessing our basic needs and stepping outside of the cultural assumptions about how we meet them, we have arrived at a profound and somewhat unique understanding of our connection to the world.

We tell our visitors that we started farming because we wanted more connection to our food and more freedom. We wanted to eat better, and we didn't want to work for anyone else. Why work another job to earn money to buy food when we can work out here in the garden and have better food than we can find in any grocery store?

Sometimes, they still want to know more. Where did we get the idea to start farming if we didn't grow up doing it?

We can only reiterate the importance of our food, and our rejection of most of the food that is available to us if we don't have our own farm. As a culture, we generally accept that we will all get our food from a grocery store or a restaurant, and in either case we really don't know much about where that food was grown or how it was produced. This assumption is largely unquestioned.

Terra and I observe that people in the United States mostly operate under a set of cultural assumptions that make up the *default condition*<sup>1</sup>. Operating within the default condition, if one has the means to do so, likely includes: buying food at a grocery store or restaurant, travelling most places by car, living in nuclear family units and in an insulated house with some climate control, getting hot and cold water out of taps conveniently located throughout one's living space, having a phone, television, internet, and electricity, and working for money to pay for all of this.

Terra and I recognize the default condition as a choice.

Our willingness to explore and develop possibilities outside the default condition has given us a somewhat unique perspective. We have been able to achieve a degree of freedom that is rare among our peers. Our experience is that life is easier when we are connected to our basic needs, either by directly producing them ourselves, or cooperating with a community effort to produce them.

---

<sup>1</sup> This term and a few others are defined in a glossary at the end of the book. Please refer to it if you feel need for clarification of terms at any point.

## *Terra's Take*

*A significant turning point in my path toward greater connection to my basic needs came as I was finishing my theatre degree at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC).*

*Theatre set me up for living outside of the default condition by encouraging me to question human behavior in order to accurately portray it. I naturally applied that questioning to my own life.*

*Although I have thrived in theatre since I was about thirteen, I began questioning whether I could be truly myself while trying to pay rent in New York City and make it professionally as an actor with forty thousand dollars in student loan debt. I imagined I might pretend to be whoever I needed to be to get the part, to pay rent, to pay off that debt, etc.*

*That led me to forsake theatre as a career.*

*I joined an AmeriCorps program which allowed me to place my school loans on hold and earn some money to pay them off. The most enticing part was that this program offered room and board in exchange for helping youth at risk. The catch was that I would live at a psychiatric hospital in the woods without electricity or running water.*

*My first week in service, I attended a training that blew my mind with the concept that we all have choices in every single moment—We never *HAVE* to do anything. We *CHOOSE* to do everything. We may not choose our circumstances, but we do choose our actions and thoughts. When we feel like we don't have choices, it's really that we don't like the consequences of some of our choices.*

*This was so powerful that I actually had to leave the room, go to the public restroom and crawl under the sink to cry.*

*It was that CRAZY.*

*I picked up the pieces of me and put myself back together. I began by practicing with my new awareness of choice. Eventually, I recognized that if all of our behaviors are choices, then I could live any way that I wanted to. It turned out that I enjoyed living in the woods without electricity or running water, and I chose to continue living that way. This is what led me outside of the default condition.*

I found my path toward greater connection to my basic needs through a relatively dramatic experience in the fall of 2001, when I was 21 years old. At that time, I was an extremely successful engineering student at the University of Colorado, in Boulder.

As I approached graduation, I became depressed for a number of reasons. A significant cause of my depression was that most of the career paths before me as an engineer seemed likely to confine me to a cubicle (or possibly a nice office) for the rest of my life. I was also unable to find work that seemed clearly valuable for society as a whole.

One day, I happened across *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, and was struck powerfully by the passage on Work, which essentially says that we should all be doing whatever work is most meaningful and fulfilling for us. The entire passage is brilliant and beautiful, and it ends with the statement:

*Work is love made visible.*

*And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.*

*For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.*

*And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distills a poison in the wine.*

*And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night.*

I copied down this passage carefully in calligraphy, and carried it in my pocket the next day. I attended two classes that morning, but the entire experience felt futile and meaningless. At about lunch time, I walked over to the registrars office, and told them I wanted to drop out. They said there wasn't much to do about it at this point in the semester, so I left, walked to the top of a hill, and just started rolling down it, walking back up to the top, and rolling down again.

Then, I spent the next week or so saying goodbyes. Most of my peers were astounded that I had the ability to walk away from my education, and *over a dozen people told me they felt trapped*. I never forgot that. I resolved to never become trapped.

After a little travelling, I ended up in an AmeriCorps program in Douglasville, GA where I met Terra. When I arrived for my interview for this program, my interviewer had pinned above her desk this exact same portion of this exact same passage from *The*

*Prophet.* I chose to interpret this as a sign that I was in the right place.

While we served in AmeriCorps, we worked with a very cohesive team of people who were motivated to make the world a better place. Within this community, we began experimenting with gardens and Terra and I fell in love over a mutual interest in rainwater catchment.

This community, perhaps unconsciously, created a space for exploring the ways that we are connected to the rest of the world. As these connections became clearer for us, we grasped how disconnected we were from our basic needs, and we began to see the violent systems that produce those needs for us—the hitman culture. Having made the connections between our choices and their effects, we could no longer continue to operate within the default condition, because it requires a fragmented worldview that denies these connections. It is only when we see the world as broken up into different parts that we can ignore the connections between those parts. The hitman culture is entirely a product of this disconnection.

After finishing our service in AmeriCorps, we made our way up to North Carolina where we spent two years living at an outdoor primitive education farm and summer camp called Turtle Island Preserve. We worked there as interns two days a week in exchange for a place to live while I finished my degree—this time in Appropriate Technology at Appalachian State University (ASU).

Our home at Turtle Island, the adirondack, was a very primitive three-walled log shelter with a very low roof, and a dirt floor. It was very open to the elements, and measured about 140 square feet.

When I first saw the adirondack and considered making it our home for the next two years, Terra was not with me. I felt excited about the possibility of staying there, and hoped that she would feel the same. I had a strong awareness when I first showed her the adirondack that not many women would be interested in living in such primitive conditions.

She looked in and around the structure, walked over to the creek where we would get our water, and said that it looked like fun. So we moved in. Terra and I feel extraordinarily blessed to have found in each other a partner who is willing and excited to choose these adventures together.

We enjoyed living in a primitive setting, because getting rid of all of the amenities associated with modern life allowed us to meet most of our basic needs without participation in the hitman culture. Modern spaces have a lot of infrastructure. This infrastructure enables us to use resources so easily that it becomes difficult to be mindful of their use. In our hitman culture, our resource use is directly connected to violent, marginalizing and destructive processes. So, living in modern conditions with access to this infrastructure makes it easy for us to slip into financial support for all of this violence.

### *Terra's Take*

*Our path has not been a one way trip toward primitive. Our lifestyle has fluctuated. Our years in AmeriCorps and our years at Turtle Island both represented intense experiences where we were continuously examining our lifestyle choices. Immediately following each of these experiences, we lived for*

*one year in Asheville, NC. Each time, we lived with friends who had previously come from the same program that we had just completed.*

*These households felt like halfway houses between society and the worlds we had just emerged from. We spent these years experimenting with the things we had just learned and fitting them into our modern surroundings.*

*During our first year in Asheville, after AmeriCorps, we had gardens, a gray-water system, and we used rainwater to wash our laundry. I did some theatre and yoga, and focused as much energy as possible on paying off my school loans by working a variety of part-time service jobs, ranging from barista to certified nursing assistant (CNA) on a brain trauma unit. I continued with my part-time work and maintained my focus on paying off student debt when we moved up to Turtle Island.*

*During our second year in Asheville, after Turtle Island, we lived within the city limits, but had goats, chickens, gardens, and a sawdust bucket off the back porch for peeing in. We felt right at home. I was able to participate in local theatre, bike to work, and dumpster dive a lot of our food while still largely living within the norms of our hitman culture. We maintained a frugal lifestyle which allowed me to finish paying off my student debt.*

*I graduated from UNC in 2001, over \$40,000 in debt, deferred the loans for two years, and had paid it all off by 2007. I only worked a full-time job for one of these years. Through commitment, simple living, and frugality I gained my freedom.*



When we have lived in modern default conditions, we have found that the mindfulness required to limit our resource use and our associated participation in the hitman culture is extremely taxing.

### *Terra's Take*

*When we are living in a space with modern infrastructure, it feels like we are in a river with a strong current, and we feel it pulling us back into our addiction to the default condition.*

*It takes a lot of effort just to stay where we are in that river, and constant evaluation and awareness of choices and actions.*

Having spent much of our lives within these spaces, we felt a strong need to create an inspiring alternative place with a new default—a space where it would be easy to live within our means without unconsciously supporting the hitman culture. Such spaces are integral to our reconnection.

Full Life Farm is designed to be such a space. While we operate as a working farm, sell at the farmers market every week, and feed ourselves and several other families, we see ourselves primarily as an educational facility. We offer internships and have hosted over a hundred interns as well as a few school groups and workshops.

We teach about primitive living, farming, earthen building, home and farm economics, community, and many other skills that are required of people who are interested in directly producing our food, shelter, water, energy, health, etc. We are cultivating a deeper connection with these needs, and the plant and animal communities that support us. We are holding a space for sacred violence where visitors can connect in gratitude to the lives that

support them, and learn to see the violence inherent to the fulfillment of our basic needs. It is only by recognizing and connecting to this violence in a sacred space that we can begin to address the rampant destruction of the hitman culture.



Terra's painting of the adirondack during a winter full moon. We hung sheets of plastic on the open side in the winter.