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Laboring Toward Leisure:  
The Characterization of Work in  
Maine's Back-to-the-Land Memoirs

*So many hours I must tend my flock;  
So many hours I must take my rest;  
So many hours I must contemplate;  
So many hours I must sport myself;*

—William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI*, 1623

When I became a farmer at age twenty-five, the weighty work ethic I had been hauling around from job to transient job finally found a home. Farm work never ends, and neither did my ability to rise to the task of yet another emergent project, another early morning of chores, another broken fence line birthing pigs on the loose. The more I worked—hauling water, cutting firewood, digging holes, and bending to plant—the stronger my body became. My prime error was confusing this physical power with invincibility, mistaking my mass of muscles for human mechanization. Yet, I *felt* like a machine: I would add fuel (minimal sleep, food, caffeine) and work all day, often letting my gauge graze Empty before taking a break to refuel—but rarely rest.

Why? What inner sense urged me toward compulsive work? What ingrained ideas pushed me to produce food at the expense of personal peace? I woke in the rainy dark of pre-dawn to haul a trailer packed with pigs around slippery switchbacks, spent hot days unfurling thin wire, hoping the threat of shock would keep my feral herd secure, endured long evenings massaging cabbage, peppers, and carrots into kraut. If my exhausting overdrive was the result of learned behavior, I realized, I needed to examine my Maine raising for clues. At first, my immediate family—artist mother, carpenter father, winsome baby

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brother—revealed little. Then, I began to consider the back-to-the-land culture in which my parents had steeped themselves by the time I was born in 1985. What might the literature of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s—and particularly the memoirs of that time—reveal about labor and what I now know as its necessary balance point, leisure? How do the handful of back-to-the-land Mainers who recorded their experiences characterize labor—the foundation of their traditional-by-choice lives—and how is the character of leisure revealed in these writings, if at all? Despite their best efforts, did these countercultural exiles harbor vestiges of America’s long-held Puritanical attitudes about work, rest, and virtue when they escaped the urbs and suburbs for the woods of Maine? Do I carry those antiquated ideas with me as I work, five decades on?

I have learned the hard way that neither labor nor leisure are self-supporting. The natural world, if observed, soon teaches us that the antidote to imbalance lies within the opposite. Every autumn, leaves blanket the forest floor, making mulch to protect tender shoots from the killing frosts of spring, which, in turn, grow tall and drop their own leaves. I now know that a healthy dose of leisure restores what too much labor has set asunder. As I navigate this novel practice of balance, I continue to ponder the roots of my habit of compulsive overwork. In poring over Maine’s back-to-the-land literature, I discovered that the memoirists’ characterization of both labor and leisure reveals a bias toward labor for adherents of the homesteading movement of the 1970s, an asymmetry that these rural refugees passed along to the next generation. Thus, as I read, I also uncovered a clue to the root of my own ingrained imbalance of leisure and labor.

### **The Good Life**

Within the early pages of every back-to-the-land narrative I read, each memoirist offers dreams of the life they thought they would find upon returning to the land. As Eleanor Agnew writes in her book *Back from the Land*: “We imagined ourselves under blue skies with cotton white clouds floating by as we wielded our axes and hoed the garden. We anticipated the spiritual and aesthetic as well as the economic benefits of

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hard physical work, fresh air, and sunshine, hands-on tasks caring for soil, trees, vegetables, and animals” (88). Similarly, Jean Hay Bright, who memorialized her own story in *Meanwhile, Next Door to the Good Life*, recalls: “Getting away from the crowds, living in the woods, figuring it all out and pulling it all together, sounded like an exciting challenge...we would be 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneers...pack everything we owned into the Volkswagen van and head north into the wilderness” (13). Such starry-eyed visions were common. These “pioneers” found all of the above, and more.

An examination of Helen and Scott Nearing’s *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* illuminates the foundations of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s—and highlights the path that connects the traditions of homesteading and writing nonfiction. The Nearings, who embarked upon their own journey back to the land—in Vermont, in 1932—self-published *Living the Good Life* in 1954. After two decades of homesteading, the Nearings were well-positioned to report on the practice of rural life and the struggle for self-sufficiency. Following their move to Harborside, on Cape Rosier, along the coast of Maine, interest in *Living the Good Life* made them the reigning experts on going back to the land.

Though the couple’s cash crop had shifted from maple syrup to wild Maine blueberries, the Nearings were still practicing living “sanely and simply in a troubled world” (HS Nearing). Under the apt heading “Neo-Yankee Back-to-the-Landers,” Dona Brown, author of *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America*, discerns: “In that new time and place, Scott's advancing age, his decades of radicalism, Helen’s eastern spiritualism, and their shared commitment to personal austerity would combine to create a sense that the two were living incarnations of the back-to-the-land spirit” (Brown 2641). According to Melissa Coleman—whose mother (Sue) and father (the master organic gardener and author Eliot Coleman) purchased sixty acres from the Nearings and began clearing land for their own homestead—“[*Living the Good Life*] set my parents on this unexpected course of their lives together” (Coleman 21). This same book fueled the back-to-the-land dreams of innumerable other couples, singles,

and communal groups during that period. While the Nearings were not the only—and certainly not the first—proponents of the back-to-the-land lifestyle who published a nonfiction narrative extolling the virtues of simple living, *Living the Good Life* caught the hearts of the next generation of back-to-the-landers in a way that no other book did.

*Living the Good Life* also addresses the question of labor and leisure more directly than any of the writing that was born out of the wave of the back-to-the-land movement that their writing helped spawn. “We wanted to make our living with our own hands, yet with time and leisure for avocational pursuits,” the Nearings state in their preface. “Instead of the hectic mad rush of busyness, we intended a quiet pace, with time to wonder, ponder and observe” (HS Nearing ix, x). The requisite *how*, too, is forthcoming; they offer detailed descriptions of their daily habits, in their singular, proscriptive style: “Each day was divided into two main blocks of time—four morning hours and four afternoon hours...we first looked at the weather, then...we decided which of these blocks of time should be devoted to bread labor and which to personal...activities” (42-43). Their characterization of labor and leisure was straightforward and precise: four hours of each per day, depending on the weather—a recipe that sounds simple, perhaps foolproof: “If one’s bread labor was performed in the morning, the afternoon automatically became personally directed. One might read, write, sit in the sun, walk in the woods, play music, go to town. We earned our four hours of leisure by our four hours of labor” (43). Or, as neighbor Jean Hay Bright later characterized the revised Nearing formula, “Helen and Scott’s 4-4-4 plan, of four hours per day doing hands-on bread labor, four hours for intellectual head work, and four hours of socializing, was designed to provide the personal balance one needed for a full life” (Bright 292). Although this balanced prescription became the supposed foundation of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s, the coming years would reveal that the supposed integrity of the “simple life” did not always fit into the schedule that Helen and Scott promoted.

### **Labor as Character**

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Just as I was not born a farmer, I was not born with a do-or-die work ethic. No child comes into this world frothing at the mouth with the need to justify her existence through productivity. Instead, we coin phrases such as “sleeping like a baby,” and “wide-eyed as a child”—expressions that mark the leisure and curiosity innate to our species before the heaving, modern world puts its greasy hands on us. The compulsion to work, then, was not with me from the very beginning. Instead, I acquired that habit from my early environment, which was rich with dedicated community, attempted self-sustenance, and the supposed inconveniences of rural living: dirt roads, cottage industry, wood heat, and plenty of sacrifice—real and imagined. My back-to-the-land childhood was where I came to believe that homegrown and handmade were the points of pride upon which I ought to build my life, against which I would prop my worth.

While the Nearings—alone in their explicit theorization of work-life balance—are conscious to characterize both labor and leisure equally, their words supposedly giving no greater weight to either activity, they devote the overwhelming portion of *Living the Good Life* to a discussion of the hows and whys of building, gardening, and other labors inherent to their lifestyle. Much of *Living the Good Life* is devoted to the worship of work. The Nearings’ zealous literary tone proclaims their affinity for labor, characterizing the practice as not only an essential part of life, but synonymous with it, as Helen later recalls in *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*: “‘Work,’ Scott said, ‘helps prevent one from getting old. My work is my life. I cannot think of one without the other. The man who works and is never bored, is never old’” (H Nearing 173).

Despite their blatant love of labor, the Nearings adhere severely to their four-hour plan. While the pair admits that, for some especially tough cases, cultivating leisure may be more important than labor, the frequency and enamored tone with which the Nearings discuss their work reveals that, for them, labor wielded a power that leisure could not quite fend. Scott, in particular, wrote about labor with a relish that he reserved for work alone:

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I do a great deal of physical work by hand. This morning I was stripping off sods with a mattock and piling them with a fork on a sod pile, then removing the underlying clay with a shovel and a wheelbarrow. A bulldozer would have done the same thing in 1/50<sup>th</sup> of the time. I might have stood and watched; but this morning I enjoyed every minute of the work and felt deprived when I was called to breakfast. (HS Nearing 163)

Scott's language in this passage highlights his zest for the physicality of hand work—as set, here, in defiant opposition to the ease of machinery—which is evident in the way he selects words that build a moving image. The simple detail in his phrase “stripping off sods with a mattock” serves to embody the practice of labor—even, I imagine, for a reader who has never before stripped sod, nor swung a mattock. And the Nearings' audience—eager, green, raised in the suburbs—was largely comprised of just such a reader.

*Living the Good Life* offered these hopeful folks the impression that the Nearings were able to build not only their Forest Farm homestead in Vermont but also their Harborside, Maine homestead on just four hours of labor per day.

No wonder that Coleman writes about the dogged way her father, Eliot—who became the Nearings' neighbor and their most notable disciple—seemed determined to work with little rest:

As the cold of December closed around us, he spent the short days and into the night adding a twenty-by-eighteen-foot room behind the house.

“You need to take it easy,” Mama said...[as] he came in from pounding nails in the dark.

“I have to get the roof up before the snow,” he replied, eyes closing the minute he lay down.

(121)

The matter-of-fact tone of *Living the Good Life* characterizes this daily labor, though crucial for survival, as not overly onerous, as if ‘it's all in a day's work.’ Yet, the fuzzy nature of details about how many hands pitched in to make the Nearings' four-hour labor plan function is just one of many examples of the prominent couple's apparent habit of refocusing the facts. The Nearings' indulgent telling undergirds the

difficulties that myriad back-to-the-landers would encounter when they attempted to apply these seemingly straightforward methods to their own rough and frazzled land. While these incongruities—which involve topics as variable as diet, pets, and healthcare—may call the Nearings’ definition of ‘nonfiction’ into question, the practice of labor remains central to their revisionist narrative, especially as the couple aged in Harborside.

In her memoir, *Meanwhile, Next Door to the Good Life*, Bright pointedly—and rightly—inquires: “Why did [the Nearings] need to create a myth when reality would have done quite well?” She was referring, in part, to *Living the Good Life with Helen and Scott Nearing*, a 1977 Bullfrog Films documentary that aired on Maine Public Television (199). In this film, “Helen says very clearly and deliberately that Scott mixed most of the cement for the new house himself in a wheelbarrow, and that she laid every stone... She doesn’t mention Keith, or Brett, or Fred Dyer and his crew, or the cement truck, or Forrest Tyson, or the hundreds of unpaid volunteers” (Bright 199). While Bright never attempts to answer her own question, the conclusion seems obvious. When life and labor feel so impossibly intertwined, as was the case for the Nearings, any admission of slowing one’s capacity for labor is tantamount to sprawling on one’s deathbed. “Helen and Scott, she then in her 70s and he in his 90s” (Bright 199), could not bring themselves to acknowledge how they had adjusted their lives to allow for less—or, at least, gentler—labor.

As noted above, Scott believed: “The man who works...is never old” (H Nearing 173), yet the inverse of that statement implies that one who does not work, or works in a diminished manner relative to his age or ability, must admit weakness. The Nearings passed this limiting mindset along to their disciples, reinforcing the toxic Puritan notion that strength of character is informed solely by devotion to labor. Helen, reflecting on Scott’s late nineties, writes: “He still worked... though not with his former staying power. He was obviously no longer so compulsively active nor so strong, although he still chanted ‘Do your daily chores and bring the wood in from outdoors’ as he carried in three logs instead of six, then finally, apologetically, one or two at a time” (170). This dispiriting anecdote (notably, the use of

“apologetically”) causes me to wonder whether Scott, when forced by his aging body to reorient himself toward leisure in his nineties, ever regretted his determined characterization of work as life. Did he rue his choice to preserve this perspective on the page, to enshrine in memoir his do-or-die work ethic, making it that much more difficult to adjust to what his body needed as he grew older?

When my breaking body—like Scott’s aging one—nudged me, too, to slow my tempo from carrying two brimming totes of firewood to a few sticks at a time, I resisted the shift. *I’m in my early thirties*, I thought. *This cannot be happening*. But resistance only spiked my spine with sharper pain and wore my weary wrists down to the point of surgery. I had sacrificed my body at the altar of labor by working hour upon hour without stretch or rest, by starting my panic-fueled day with pigs on the loose and a cup of coffee, thick with cream, as my only fuel. Day after day, I wore my body down, telling myself that I was instead building my muscles, my capacity, my farming acumen. Like Scott, I characterized labor as life, and I was unable to separate the two.

Eventually, the Nearings’ writing begins to hint at the scads of help they leveraged on their homestead—particularly volunteer, but also compensated, as they eventually admit in *Continuing the Good Life*, published in 1979, when discussing building the Harborside garage: “Keith did the hand hewing of the timbers, the form work and general carpentry” (Bright 199). Keith, Bright’s husband at the time, apparently did much of the Nearings’ homestead labor—including hand-hewing machined beams they had shipped in from Oregon—but this was the first time he was acknowledged. Maybe Scott’s advancing age released them to—finally, yet quietly—admit the truth that their neighbors, and hundreds of ‘apprentices,’ had known for years: the way they characterized themselves, as “incarnations of the back-to-the-land spirit” (Brown 2641), was not the whole truth. That, perhaps, the ‘good life’ was not nonfiction after all.

This carefully constructed mythical reputation left admirers ignorant of the “possibility that the Nearings’ recipe for getting back to basics might be more cod liver oil than ambrosia” (Conway 33). The couple hosted “countless people, young and old” (HS Nearing 199)—“roughly 2,500 a year” (Conway 35)



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—on their homesteads, many of whom stayed for the season, sleeping in a campground between the Nearing and Coleman properties, and working as apprentices on one or both farms. Despite these extra hands, the work was never-ending. Melissa Coleman quotes her father, Eliot, as recorded by a journalist: “Heaven knows, there was enough to do on our place. When winter comes, there’s no going off to California. You have to stick it out and work much longer hours than the Nearing work formula suggests” (29).

Eliot’s scoffing tone—“no going off to California”—hints at the outsized character of work on the Coleman farm as well. Hard labor, when put into daily practice, soon outgrew even the Nearings’ proscriptive, orthodox characterization. While the Nearings leveraged their relative celebrity by arranging speaking tours in warmer climes, their neighbors—the Colemans and Bright—stayed behind to wrestle ice and snow during the frigid Maine winters. The daily work to stay warm, dry, and well-fed became more than a full-time job for these homesteaders; the practice of labor grew into a powerful character in their lives. While none expected life on the land to be easy, and they surely believed in the capacity of hard work to *build* character, none of them had anticipated the degree to which the act of labor itself would become a leading figure.

### **Labor on the Land**

In *Carrying Water as a Way of Life*, Linda Tatelbaum, who worked as a professor before going back to the land, offers this stark report of the year 1977: “We buy 75 acres in Maine and build our own house, plant a garden. We use only hand tools, including the two-person crosscut saw which nearly destroys but ultimately improves our marriage” (2). A few counties away, and nearly a decade before, Coleman’s parents, Eliot and Sue, labored on their own sixty-acre tract, purchased from the Nearings. Coleman’s recollection of her father’s dogged dedication to work embodies the vigorous honesty of nonfiction; her childhood memoir centers labor above all:

Tearing up stumps, struggling to grow food for our little family...it seemed nothing could stop him...the twelve- to sixteen-hour workdays and his part-time job left little time for [us]...Mama's day had multiple demands as well—hauling water for the pump sink in the kitchen, grinding grain with the hand grinder for baking bread, preparing meals, sewing and mending clothing, caring for me, and helping Papa while I napped. (29)

Here, Coleman utilizes repetition to set a mood that characterizes the never-ending quality of work on the homestead, an effective habit each of these back-to-the-land authors use to highlight their daily travails.

Next door to the Colemans, another couple began to carve out their own slice of home from a forested swath of land, also purchased from the Nearings. Jean Hay Bright, who went back to the land in 1972 with her first husband, Keith, remembers feeling pure joy “when I took stock of what we had accomplished that day—the trees the guys had felled, the logs that were piling up in the clearing, the timbers that were being cut and squared to fit the giant tinker-toy house we had designed” (51). Like back-to-the-landers across the continent, these “Neo-Yankees” were beginning to appreciate the feeling of freedom that working one's own land could offer (Brown 2574). Yet, while the young homesteaders thought they understood the nature of their work, their association with labor had only just begun.

In *Carrying Water*, Tatelbaum characterizes her relationship with labor in a way both wistful and determined: “I walk uphill to the house, steady, my arms hanging straight from my shoulders as they are made to do, weighted by forty pounds of water...I could as easily turn on a faucet in a city apartment and let the water do the running. But...[this] feels good to me” (18). Agnew, who buoys her memoir, *Back from the Land*, by interviewing her compatriots, offers this from Patricia, who “used to joke that we didn't have running water, we had walking water,” as she hauled it up the hill “with two six-gallon buckets,” from her own Maine spring:

The worst was in the winter. That was a hideous time. You had to break out a square of ice just big enough to put the bucket in and pull it out. The snow was so deep that you would invariably slosh

half the water all over yourself tripping through the snow, and it would freeze before you got it back to the woodshed...you'd have dungarees that were ice-sodden, heavy thick things, and you'd have to [repeat] the whole trip...because so much spilled. (41)

With every sentence, Patricia's task appears more dismal: from "break[ing] out a square of ice" to "tripping through the snow" and "slosh[ing] half the water," knowing that she must repeat the trip in "ice-sodden, heavy thick" clothing—all details of chilly labor rare few would relish.

In these narratives, hauling water is almost always described as arduous, monotonous, unending work—and, most often, this work was performed by women. The adjectives that Patricia here employs ("worst" and "hideous") make clear that the labor of hauling water felt like drudgery. Tatelbaum—for whom carrying water loomed so large that she enshrined the daily task in the title of her essay collection—characterizes not only the work ("I walk uphill to the house...weighted by forty pounds of water"), but her physical self (18). She chooses words that convey solidity as she writes: "My body becomes my pony, faithful little feet, strong limbs that do the job day after day. I cease to be involved in it at all. I am the motor behind the work, the woman carrying water" (17). No matter how carefully conserved, and reused, more water was always needed: for cooking, canning, laundry, and the occasional bath. Since the household work was considered women's work, carrying water most often fell on their shoulders as well. Interestingly, every Maine back-to-the-land memoir I found was written by a woman; for every one of them, the toilsome task of hauling water—in, out, over and over—features prominently in the way they characterize the daily labor back-to-the-land women did.

Sue, Coleman's mother—one of the few women featured here who did not publish her own account of that time—did keep a detailed journal, which helped Coleman reconstruct her mother's perspective and many household tasks. As Sue recorded: "my main and most important job is keeping the home together, doing the chores, kitchen work, washing our clothes, keeping [daughters] Heidi and Liss happy, milking and caring for the goats, and in my spare time cutting firewood" (Coleman 132). She

characterizes her “main and most important *job*”—singular—as eight separate tasks. This onerous list of the “most important” includes nothing that resembles leisure. Even “keeping [the kids] happy” reads like a chore—a clear indication of overwhelm.

At times, Tatelbaum characterizes labor as exciting—at least at the start, like when she found an old, dry well on the land, clogged eight feet down by trash and rubble. After days of hard labor, her thrill withers. “But ten feet turns to twelve, thirteen, fourteen, as rocks removed reveal more fallen rocks. My fingers, arms, legs, back begin to break, my spirit breaks. Memory of those who dug this well so long ago no longer sustains my labor. But down I go again, tying, climbing out, hauling up.” She lists each tiresome step, recreating the exhausting work required to reach her prize: “two dozen bucketsful of broken glass, rusty metal, rotten boards, and mud.”

In her memoir, Bright, too, frequently describes daily labor as grind, as survival, using strong verbs, such as “flopped” and “huddled,” that characterize the hardship inherent in homesteading work (80). In addition, her conversational tone—which is heightened by inclusion of her own journal entries and letters to her mother—enhances the familiar quality of her voice:

[by] the third week of December, we had just finished getting the roof boarded over, and had started to put on the tarpaper...we had only secured three strips before the snow hit. It was a real sudden blizzard, with the wind blowing up a fury. Within minutes, the roof got too slippery and we had to come down.” (76)

Here, Bright uses the tools of nonfiction to re-create her reality. They had to wait until Spring to install the cedar roof shingles, but the immediacy of her descriptive verbs (“the snow *hit*... the wind *blowing up* a fury”) conveys the urgency of building shelter, in Maine, in early winter.

Labor, though, especially for the women, was not all swinging hammers and hauling stones. Peas still needed to be picked, water hauled, meals cooked, and:

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Some days Mama would sink under the weight of it all—the work of keeping life in order that never ended, the urgency to put away food to survive, and the burden of another being strapped to her body, nursing from her, needing her for everything.

Then there was the bucket of dirty cloth diapers, and no fresh ones. Dirty bowls in the sink and no clean ones, stains on her favorite shirt, a broken mason jar. Seaweed that needed to be hauled by the trailer load...to cover the garden beds and provide potassium as it decomposed over the winter. Carrots and beets to be placed in sand in the root cellar, string beans to be canned in mason jars, winter squash to season on the patio, onions and garlic to braid and hang from the ceiling alongside spearmint, chamomile, and lemon verbena for tea and basil, rosemary, and thyme for seasoning. (40)

Coleman establishes mood by reciting this intentionally tedious list. Just *reading* the account can prove exhausting, thus offering a taste of the wearisome routine of labor in back-to-the-land life. Even at night, the work did not cease, as Tatelbaum—also a new mother—reveals in her own tally: “At least if I could switch on a light when baby cries at 2 a.m., not fumble with a kerosene lamp while milk leaks down my chest and baby howls...At least if I had a drain, so I didn’t have to lug water in *and* out...I’m so tired” (3). Again, repetition, the homesteading memoirist’s true friend, aids Tatelbaum—who is also a poet, evidenced by her refrain, here, of “at least”—as she aims to convey the monotonous tasks that motherhood added to her already work-worn life.

Still, for the men as well as the women, the labor went on—inside: cooking, mending, canning, nursing; outside: hoeing, digging, building, composting—even when the weather, or daylight, refused to cooperate. “Every morning Papa was back at it again,” writes Coleman. “In the last of the light before going in for dinner, he spread the new garden plots with white rock powder over the compost and manure, so that when he returned in darkness it would catch the moonlight to guide the rototiller down the rows” (55). This carefully curated image of Eliot Coleman leveraging the moon to illuminate powdered rock as

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he tills the garden far past last light lets Coleman's reader not only visualize the white-striped garden, but see in her father's actions the larger-than-life character that labor embodied on their farm: creative nonfiction at its best.

Just as homesteaders who swim and nap all season will have no food or shelter to carry them through the winter, an imbalance on the side of labor can tilt the venture just as catastrophically. When overwork eventually drained the joy out of the Coleman homestead, Sue left, and even the most dedicated apprentices backed away. Still, labor called: "Papa...was already long gone out to the gardens, the endless list of all the things that needed to be done cycling in his head" (231). In a similar vein, Agnew quotes Sandy, a homesteader who reported that her husband "worked hard and fast, insisting on his idea of maximum efficiency—which involved a certain amount of wheel spinning—anxious to finish the task at hand. After a while he learned there was no end to the work...but he never learned to enjoy that cycle" (175). This exhausting characterization suggests that, on these Maine homesteads, labor remained sovereign.

The handmade nature of the lives that these back-to-the-landers sought necessitated a reasonable degree of dedication to laboring on the land. Still, Coleman characterizes the consequences as dire: "our survival lay in the precarious balance of Mama's and Papa's emotional investment in our lifestyle...they had to constantly feed their vision...or it would wither and die" (83). Thanks to the foundational nature of the Nearings' reverential preference for work over relaxation—and the demanding particulars of the northern climate that this group of back-to-the-landers chose—leisure took second place. Work—whether in the home, on the house, or in the garden and woodlot—remained the priority for most of Maine's back-to-the-land community. This collective record of the lopsided valuation of labor over leisure indicates why I may have inherited a skewed work-life balance from my own back-to-the-land forebears. Still, the dominant mythology of the virtuous, hardworking laborer began long before the 1970s.

### **Labor as Virtue**

The “Neo-Yankee” homesteading memoirists characterized their experiences as labor-heavy, and—most often—low in morale (Brown 2509). Did these back-to-the-landers feel a need to shine as the self-sustaining, hardworking righteous, or was appropriate recreation as absent from the lives of the back-to-the-landers as it was from mine, decades later?

Regular leisure was not quite as lacking from some homesteaders’ routines as certain accounts suggest (Agnew’s particularly dour report comes to mind). The fact that Coleman—the only one of the memoirists who reflects on her back-to-the-land childhood—recalls numerous sauna parties, moonlight swimming outings, and instances of fireside music-making indicates that such events were common. Dozens of apprentices lived at the Harborside campground, and this rollicking group surely increased the fun quotient—and perhaps its consequence—as compared with singular family homesteads, such as those of Agnew and Tatelbaum—who reports her leisure looked more like: “turning the page of my book” by lamplight (23).

While no account avoids leisure entirely, the overwhelming focus on exhausting work characterizes the intensity of labor on the land. Homesteaders also vied with one another in a type of rural one-upmanship. One scholar has argued that the back-to-the-land “movement” was not truly a movement at all, given the lack of uniformity of principles, which sometimes helped to foster competition centered on virtue (Jacob 85). In the chapter “Back to the Garden,” Dona Brown observes: “The struggle for consistency, moreover, can lead to a kind of competition that spirals downward: you pump your water by hand, she brings it in from an outdoor well, but I carry it in buckets from a stream” (2538-2539). The poet Tatelbaum memorably characterizes this impulse as “keeping up with the Nearings...just another form of [the capitalist] ‘rat-race’” (4). “But this kind of ‘rat race’ was something new,” Brown continues: “Earlier back-to-the-landers had not typically valued hardship for its own sake or flaunted it as a badge of honor. Returning to the land had entailed a rejection of the role of consumer, to be sure, but most early back-to-the-landers had intended to better their material conditions, not sacrifice all comfort to a higher good

(3013-3016). Proper movement or no, perhaps the counterculture did not, in fact, fall far from the tree: hard work was quietly characterized as virtuous, much labor remained divided along gender lines, and the powerfully capitalist sentiment of one-upmanship flourished.

Why did these back-to-the-landers consistently celebrate hard labor and the painful consequences wrought by overwork? Agnew, who packs her memoir with generational research, posits that “far from being original, the back-to-the-land philosophy was a reincarnation of several long-standing American traditions—the idealization of nature and the valorization of agriculture and manual labor, which have persisted as threads of the cultural consciousness since the founding of the nation” (85). Agnew quotes Gary Cross, who wrote in *An All-Consuming Century*: “Americans have a ‘long history of tension between the pursuit of material pleasure and the quest for simplicity,’” before pointing out that “American culture’s persistent strain of Puritanism, which associates self-denial and moderation with virtue, may have fortified our back-to-the-land allegiance to bare-bones surroundings” (28). Tatelbaum, whose poet’s mind has a knack for simple perfection, further distills Cross’s point, balancing two four-letter words to write: “But easy scared me after so much hard” (31). While back-to-the-landers sloughed off as much of modern American culture as they could, seeking to start again, free, in rural places like Maine, they could not leave the Puritan roots of American culture completely behind.

Evidence of this Puritan angle is found in the repeated characterization of the handmade item as higher value: “Bread pounded and shaped from homemade dough and cooked in a woodstove heated by the wood of our own sun-splashed forest produced a food item that was morally as well as chemically superior to an anonymous loaf of bread from the store because it had been fashioned by our own hands, with detail and love,” writes Agnew, contrasting this “homemade dough” with the pitiable “anonymous loaf” eaten by most (28). Cross undergirds Agnew’s argument with a reminder that: “The gospel of the simple life proclaimed that pleasure and meaning could be found in quiet, repeated, and simple experiences and in work with ordinary objects,” a view with which I agree, despite the sneering moral high ground



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such a statement suggests (Agnew 28). Anyone who has ever stood knee-deep in the prickly green-scented velvet of a tomato patch, biting the warm burst of a perfect cherry tomato, heated by the sun and enriched by compost made from table scraps, knows well the elegance of this simplicity. When served pink, hard, tomato-shaped wedges on a salad in town, the grassy fragrance of that hot afternoon in the garden comes wafting back, and the facsimile becomes impossible to eat.

The back-to-the-landers of the 1970s were opting out of a world brimming with facsimile, an era when reproduction—mass-production, paired with burgeoning throwaway consumer culture—gained deep traction in American life. These idealistic homesteaders were attempting to build lives into which the long-traveled tomato—the disposable plastic toy, the microwave dinner—would not find purchase. Yet, to escape these easy beacons of American consumer culture, the back-to-the-landers committed themselves to the arduous work of hewing handmade lives in the Maine woods, much like the European colonizers from whom many of them were descended. No wonder, then, that these supposed counterculturalists shouldered hard-nosed Puritanical perspectives about work. Yet, as their memoirs reveal, when both joy and meaning are present, so can be pleasure—even during times of hard labor. True leisure makes fewer appearances, but, with repeated practice, rest correlates with long-term resilience.

### **Leisure as Requisite**

In Maine's back-to-the-land narratives, leisure is often characterized only in opposition to work—as set forth by the Nearings (“we earned our four hours of leisure by our four hours of labor” (43)). The idea that rest exists as a reward for work, that leisure must be bought and paid for before being enjoyed, is both exceedingly logical and potentially devastating. True, on a homestead, where subsistence is the means of making a living, if the garden is not planted in the spring, tended in the summer, and preserved in fall, there will be little to eat through the winter:

Occasionally our difficulty was not to get people to work, but to keep them from it. The garden was a special temptation...After a morning of planting or thinning, there would be some ragged

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edges that were not cleaned up by noon. It was so easy to slip down to the garden after lunch, intending to plant just one more row...Before you knew it, half the afternoon was gone. (HS Nearing 44)

The same argument can be made for firewood: *just a few more logs will round out this load*. I have often stood with feet bedded in dry leaves, oaks stretching above my head, chainsaw in hand, postponing restful plans that pale when compared with the undeniable need to warm my house through the coming cold season.

Only Melissa Coleman, recounting her childhood in the memoir *This Life is in Your Hands*, seems to feel that leisure deserves its own story, perhaps because she so yearned for a few easeful hours with her hardworking father. While plenty of labor—including obsessive overwork—went on at the Coleman homestead on Cape Rosier, leisure has its own comfortable home inside her narrative: “On the good days it was hard to remember what the bad ones felt like. On the good days, the world was full of beauty... There was time again to nurture ourselves” (42). Seasons later, she continues: “In the quiet of winter, we found some of our old happiness. The pace of the farm slowed to the rhythms of hibernation as Mama sewed and mended and Papa rested and dreamed over seed catalogs and snow fell endlessly outside the windows” (177).

The quiet season, though, was not all hibernation and planning for spring. Bright recalls community sauna events with neighbors who “had a sauna and bathhouse on the shore of their saltwater farm just off the Cape, and the sociability to invite a bunch of us back-to-the-landers without inside plumbing over to use their facilities a couple of times a month” (67). Coleman remembers those same gatherings: “The sauna made us hot enough to stand outside in the winter with no clothes, and everyone was excited, running to dip in the ocean and coming alive from the heat and the cold water” (142). Nor, in Cape Rosier’s tight-knit back-to-the-land community, did one have to wait for winter to have a little fun—only nightfall:

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In the evenings, if he had the energy... [Papa] would make a batch of popcorn with butter and brewer's yeast and bring it over to the campground to hang out with the apprentices and increasing numbers of random visitors who came to see the Nearings and now our farm, too... Music, the smell of wood smoke, and voices talking and singing, drifted from the campground... From my perch on Papa's shoulders I could see the fire pit glowing... the chords of a guitar would join the stars twinkling above (154, 118).

The apprentices, perhaps because they tended to be younger than the settled homesteaders and they had fewer pressing duties—children, property taxes, the coming winter—to worry over, seemed always to be the center of play. “After lunch people practiced throwing the wooden curve of a boomerang in the back field... and relaxed in the shade of the tree as Kent practiced walking on his hands” (207). Coleman's school friend Heather would accompany her to the rocky beaches “where everyone swam after work, and naked and free, we spied for hours in the tide-pools and seaweeded rocks for starfish, sea urchins, and snails... there'd be people hanging out in the campground... around the firepit, swinging on the rope, playing guitars and harmonicas, returning from swimming at the beaches, or picking raspberries” (202, 235).

In her memoir, Coleman also recalls the structured leisure time that occurred weekly at the Nearing homestead next door. On Sunday evenings, Helen would host a small concert—either live music or a curated selection of records. Coleman remembers that “the room [was] full of smells from a potluck and the sweat on the skin of the people gathered in the warm summer evening” (113). In her late memoir, *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*, Helen, who was a classically trained musician, also writes fondly of making time for music in her hours of rest, characterizing this musical leisure with such affectionate phrasing as “find time to get back to my violin,” and “I rollicked through easy pieces.” She paints a bright, dichotomous image of playing for “long hours in the big sunny living room, watching Scott dig a pond in

the back of the house while I did scales and exercises” (H Nearing 124)—an anecdote that serves to highlight Helen’s slight predilection toward leisure, as compared with her husband.

Nor, apparently, has the Cape Rosier tradition of wedging some relaxation into the work of homesteading waned in the decades since. Coleman, with an eye on the present, reports: “Every Wednesday, to this day, the neighbors come together amicably, and often quite raucously, for a sauna and potluck, hosted by each in turn” (318). Her inclusion of this update serves as an implicit reminder of the irony of endurance: those homesteaders who remained perhaps did so because of a willingness to balance their labor with time for requisite leisure.

### **Parsing Leisure from Labor**

In Helen Nearing’s penultimate work of nonfiction, *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*, which she wrote after Scott died at one hundred years of age, she claimed that: “Outdoor work was Scott’s recreation” (124). Yet, is *loving work* really the same as *leisure*? Helen recalled that when others would ask them what type of recreational activities they enjoyed, the esteemed couple would reply: “Everything we do is recreation, is enjoyable, otherwise we wouldn’t do it” (165). Similarly, Coleman remembers the apparent pleasure her mother took in hauling water: “Mama looked like an ox in her yoke, with Heidi on her back, as I followed her the quarter mile to a spring in the woods...Whenever anyone offered help, Mama refused, saying she enjoyed the task” (146). We all have work that we prefer over other work—like the way households tend to divide chores: *I hate to vacuum, but he loves it*, or *I always wash the dishes because I find it relaxing*—but most don’t usually characterize that work as “recreation,” like Scott did.

The Nearings were always ready to stretch the metaphor: “Our largest venture was putting a stone wall around our one-hundred-square-foot garden. This took fourteen years to finish as it was a spare-time job and done in off moments. We enjoyed working at it and saved it for recreation, instead of golf or tennis,” Helen writes (H Nearing 125). “We have never worked harder and have never enjoyed work more...the work was significant, self-directed, constructive, and therefore interesting” (HS Nearing 43). I,

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too, used to think that mindfulness while working—that working with intention, that feeling the steam rise from the earth each early morning as I carried buckets, that appreciating the cool dampening of evening—was the same as leisure. Like Scott Nearing, I saw work as my recreation. I exercised by chasing pigs, hauling water, and digging holes. I had no need for “golf or tennis”—or so I thought. But, when I finally welcomed pure leisure into my life by, first, sitting on the porch and painting after lunch or, later, retiring to the hammock with a book in the heat of the day, the myth I had crafted began to crack.

In *Back from the Land*, Agnew again references Sandy, who seems to be tuned into a truly sustainable attitude about labor: “Living on the land, says Sandy, is similar to appreciating fine music. ‘It is important to pay attention to the beat below and the melody line above, or you will miss the whole point, which is pleasure’” (175). Yet, the Colemans, who lived in a community quite attuned to leisure, never seemed to have enough time for the various demands of family and homestead. Tasks undone began to feature alongside the lists of labors completed, and stress cracked both of Coleman’s parents—her father’s body and her mother’s mind.

So, where exactly lies the line between labor and leisure, or do the two habits overlap in a comfortable, blurry fold? Is the Nearings’ strict “four hours per day doing hands-on bread labor, four hours for intellectual head work, and four hours of socializing” prescription the full solution (Bright 292)? Or can *how* one chooses to work change drudgery to pleasure? Although the Nearings damage the credibility of their memoirs by characterizing their life as more self-made and better-balanced than was likely truthful, parts of their doctrine still ring right—whether they practiced it like that or not. Particularly appealing is their tenet about not rushing: “We took our time, every day, every month, every year. We had our work, did it and enjoyed it. We had our leisure, used it and enjoyed that” (HS Nearing 43). Similarly, Sandy—quoted by Agnew above—reports being able to tap into this *how* and blend her labor with pleasure: “I worked slowly,” explains Sandy, “savoring the feel of the garden soil, the fragrance of tomato plants, the colors of the forest when we put up our winter firewood in the brisk autumn days” (Agnew

175). Yet, despite the measurable advantages of this mindful style of labor, enjoying work is no substitute for rest.

Tatelbaum, whose slim essay collection offers rich, poetic images of her back-to-the-land working life, does more than perhaps any of the other writers to draw her experience with labor forward into the present day. Tatelbaum reminds her readers—and herself—that, even after adding electricity (solar, of course), a dining room with a picture window, and acquiescing to grocery-store bananas, the old worn-out exhaustion, born from long days and cold nights, still lives somewhere inside. After what is perhaps the book's blue-ribbon line: "All I can say is that a little self-imposed hardship can go a long way toward making you an ornery cuss," Tatelbaum again leans into the homesteaders' favored method of characterizing labor as tedium—repetition:

Even when you soften your life a bit, succumbing to your own fatigue, you never forget what it was like to wring out those cloth diapers and load them into a bushel basket for the weekly trip to the laundromat. You never forget grinding the flour for your baby's pablum, or the way you wore him on your back as you hauled water for a few more years before calling it quits. Everything you do, after such a life, has the flavor of all you've been through to arrive at what little comfort you can now afford. (57)

This lingering "flavor"—or character, the residue of all the "self-imposed hardship" over which these back-to-the-landers labored, infused not only into them, but also into their children, offering us a persistent, pungent taste of intergenerational, self-induced fatigue.

After ten years on the land, Tatelbaum—a late-adopter, as my parents were, going back to the land in the late seventies—seeks to return to the model of balance that Helen and Scott Nearing extolled, however idealistically, half a century before: "Simplicity is complex. While I never believed that the simple life meant the easy life, what I didn't foresee was the strenuous personal quest that lay before us as we grew with these choices" (30). This growth entailed a loosening of austere simplicity: "I don't want to make my

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own Grape-Nuts or grow my own mustard seed!...Call it enough to eat from the garden year 'round. Call it enough to be minimally responsible for the world's pollution" (4). Tatelbaum writes from lived experience. She calls up from the bottom of that old well to remind her readers that labor for labor's sake ("make my own Grape-Nuts") is a recipe for resentment ("making you an ornery cuss"). *Relish the work that feels vital to you*, I hear her seasoned voice intone, *do what feels joyful and right, and leave the rest.*

I can listen to Tatelbaum's call for balance—and recognize the writerly wisdom on display in her nonfiction—thanks to my own well-trodden path from overwork to felicitous leisure. In my seventh summer of farming, I finally began to hear the words that loved ones had been spouting in my direction for years: *slow down*, they said. *Why not take a couple of hours off in the middle of the day, to nap, or read, or sit for a minute and rest after lunch?* Yet even a few moments of rest seemed appallingly inefficient to me, despite my many injuries. I worked every minute of my day—even the short time between supper and sleep saw me canning tomatoes, grating zucchini for relish. I felt compelled to produce, but I also understood that I needed to learn to be still.

For me, painting was the gate that led away from laboring every waking hour. When I made time to sit—at first, only on the hottest days—for an hour after lunch to paint, I persuaded myself that I was still being productive, that quiet work was as worthy as digging holes or hauling firewood. Although I did not believe my own assurances, I continued to make time to paint; at the end of my midday siesta, I would have a new painting to prove that my restful time had not been wasted. The meditative quality of drawing wet paint over wood, color over neutral, slowly worked on my brain, easing those rigid ideas about what time well spent feels like. This creative habit opened the door to other quiet labor, and the weeds in my gardens began to disappear. Slowly, work became more mindful, less rushed, and increasingly joyful.

Resting has made me a better worker, too. Making time for leisure *improves* the quality of labor—a fact longstanding yet widely unaccepted due to the “cult of efficiency,” as coined by Bertrand Russell (Headlee ix, 31). The fewer nights I stay up past my bedtime chopping apples for sauce or cabbage for

kraut, the more rarely I suffer a sliced finger. My mind, when rested, becomes keener, decreasing the useless, distorted “idea of maximum efficiency” (Agnew 175).

As I began to spend more time doing quiet labor, pure leisure—rest for the sake of rest—no longer felt so far out of reach. My current definition of what makes work worthwhile is about what feels right rather than what sounds impressive. Although my mind still tries to convince me that the solution to overwork is to push through and labor harder, my healing body reminds me that a commitment to regular leisure supports my working life more effectively than any other practice. My yet-imperfect habit is to make time every day for leisure, and my intention looks, surprisingly, a lot like the Nearings’ revised plan: “four hours per day doing hands-on bread labor, four hours for intellectual head work”—most often, writing nonfiction—“and four hours of socializing” (Bright 292), or another leisurely activity. Although the Nearings embellished the telling of their personal back-to-the-land myth, leading many earnest homesteaders into lives of unexpected toil, occasional pleasure, and eventual self-realization, Helen and Scott Nearing did have the foundation of the ‘good life’ right. Like a balanced, back-to-the-land Michael Pollan might write: *do real work, not too much, and take a rest.*



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