

# Go Climb a Tree (But Don't Forget to Vote)

by Catherine Schmitt

*Style over substance doesn't wash when you're trying to save the world.*

So you want to run away to the mountains and live among the trees, grow your own food and get your energy from the sun. Screw the modern consumer world, you're dropping out and hiking in. You are going to live by example and boycott, oh boy will you boycott, and eat organic and wear hemp and trade your car for a bike and huddle around a wood stove that burns logs you split yourself.

That's all well and good; well and good for the planet for sure. But it doesn't mean shit if you don't tell anyone why you are doing it.

Maine is a daydream destination for people who desire a life more connected with the landscape. And throughout history people have decided to make that daydream a reality and move to a place where one can construct a yurt or log cabin, turn an organic garden from the rocky soil, make honey and syrup, drive a van that runs on biodiesel, and live a simple life—a good life.

Harborside, Maine, former home of Helen and Scott Nearing, is perhaps the cathedral of the back-to-the-land movement. The Nearings dropped out of their modern New York City life in 1932 and moved to a plot of land in Vermont, and later Maine, where they built their own house by hand, grew their own food, and sold maple sugar. The Nearings also wrote a number of books, the most famous of which is *Living the Good Life*, the must-read bible of living off the land. Their story inspired thousands of people, mostly young, to travel to the Nearings' homestead in hopes of finding their own piece of land, advice, or just a way out of disillusionment. The Nearing property is now called The Good Life Center, and people still make the pilgrimage today.

About a year ago I went to see a very well-known environmental writer speak at the Good Life Center. The old home is set on the gnarly eastern coast of Penobscot Bay, a watercolor landscape, scoured fresh by the salt air and purified by winter ice. Inside, the house smelled like stone and sweat and garlic and tired ovens and old books. A big picture window let in golden light from the setting sun across the bay. The famous writer spoke to the choir, about global warming, about activism. And as he talked, I looked around. Young, rosy-cheeked women sat against the window, knitting. The men had white skin, brown hair, beards, glasses. There were lots of clogs, wool sweaters, long hair.

As the author talked, several things about the audience surprised me. The first was how shocked they seemed at his discussion of global warming. Didn't they already know this stuff? After all, they were all well-educated, well-off, and well-read adults. But almost everyone seemed slightly clueless

about how very real and very scary climate change is.

Surprise number two came when the speaker talked about politics; about voting and protesting. People shifted in their seats, whispered, sent uh-oh guilty glances to each other. The author talked about protesting at an SUV dealership outside of Boston, and other things he is doing to expose the reality of global warming. The gist was that it wasn't enough to run away to the woods, drop out, and live an environmentally-friendly lifestyle.

"But I write letters," piped someone in the audience. Good, great, do more, was the response. I could tell that some people had stopped listening, had begun to daydream about their roof that needed fixing and lettuce that needed tending. But other people were sitting up in their seats, leaning forward. Surprise number three: These people were looking to this guy, a writer of all things, for leadership. They wanted him to tell them what to do to save the planet. I was amazed. He wasn't a scientist, he wasn't the head of the Sierra Club or the EPA, and yet they wanted answers. It made me realize how desperate people are for leadership in this country. Maybe that's why Bush has done as well as he has, because it's so much easier just to let someone else do the job, no matter how incompetent he may be.

When asked, most people will say they care about the environment. But it doesn't always show up in their voting record or in their driveway. People mean well, but tell them, "You have to get involved," and they shrink back, mumble how busy they are, look away; myself included. People want to be able to buy the right thing, make the right personal choice, and get on with life. But it isn't enough. Not now, and certainly not for the future. We have an obligation to do more.

The Nearings continued to write and voice their dissent with the modern world even as they withdrew from it. They recognized that being silent about the good life would deny its possibility for others. As people who care about the health of the environment and the people living in it, our moral obligation is a political obligation. It isn't enough to grow tomatoes. While we are out pulling weeds, there are others scurrying around Washington, lobbying our representatives, and passing laws that result in environmental degradation and human sickness that our taxes pay for. More than ever, we have an obligation to vote, to voice. Otherwise, all our good deeds don't mean a thing. **WU**

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