

INTRODUCTION

RADICAL HOMEMAKING – POLITICS, ECOLOGY AND DOMESTIC ARTS

I never intended to write this book. My mother's generation fought for the right to go to work, to achieve personal fulfillment through professional accomplishments. I charged through high school and college at full throttle, ravenously ambitious, eager to start my own career as soon as possible. At age sixteen, I attended high school during the day and I took college courses at night. My first college paper was about the psychological benefits of enrolling children and babies in day care. Full-time. I completed college before I was of legal drinking age, spent a year working overseas, another year administering a housing rehabilitation program for flood victims, then enrolled in Cornell University and had a Ph.D. by the time I was twenty-seven. I was ready to conquer the world in a big way.

My ambition was probably fueled by the fact that my primary and secondary schooling took place in a town on the rural-suburban fringe, in Cobleskill, New York, the only town in our county with not one, but *two* exits along the newly built interstate. It seemed Cobleskill students were cultivated to gaze longingly at those highway on-ramps, to dream of the day they would lead us away from an otherwise backward rural county. The trouble was, in my heart, I never wanted to leave home. My family's farm was just barely inside the district lines. We didn't actually live in Cobleskill, but in the next town over, with *no* interstate to be seen. West Fulton was far above the valley floor, at the northern edge of the Appalachian mountain chain, and the Appalachian agrarian culture was still very much alive throughout my childhood. During the week I worked to get straight A's in town. On the weekends and summers, I worked in the hills on

a neighboring farm, where the inhabitants lived very well on only a few thousand dollars per year.

Ruth, the farm matron, kept chickens and a garden. She put up her vegetables for winter, sewed her clothes, and made pies and jams from berries picked on the field edges. Sanford, her octogenarian boarder, took care of the beef herd that supplied their winter meat, and kept the house, outbuildings, tractor and car in good repair. I loved every minute I spent with them, repairing fences, shoveling manure, cutting their grass, stacking firewood, raking leaves, and most especially, collecting my wages, which came in the form of mid-day feasts. I loved being on my family farm as well. I took great joy in spending time with my folks, spent endless days roaming the hills, and countless summer nights sleeping out under the stars.

Nevertheless, I faithfully adhered to my career track. But in an effort to find a path back to my own community, I studied subjects that I thought would help me get a job there, that would make me an asset to the local agricultural college or county government — rural sociology, sustainable agriculture, community and rural development, adult and extension education. So committed was I to finding a way home that Bob (my soon-to-be husband) and I took out a mortgage and bought a small cabin on fifteen acres even deeper into the hills, just seven miles from the family farm. Two weeks later he was fired from work. I never even got a job interview. The writing seemed to be on the wall. Sell the house, find jobs someplace else, leave town.

Bob and I were heartbroken. Our dream had been to help my family on the farm, to enjoy Ruth's and Sanford's friendship until the end of their days, to start a family in the place where I grew up, surrounded by a supportive community. Instead, we faced the same future that seemed inevitable for so many American couples — leave home to find work, fracture the extended family into nuclear units, and hope for ample salaries that would pay for the day care and assistance that loving relatives and neighbors could have offered at home.

My education had prepared me to accept this inevitability. But Ruth, Sanford and my family had, rather unwittingly, prepared me to reject it. Unlike so many people my age (I'm thirty-five), basic

homemaking and self-reliance skills were part of my childhood foundational knowledge. My community and family practiced subsistence farming, food preservation, barter and frugal living as a matter of course. I had been taught in school to plan for a six-figure income in a dual-earning family. But I learned growing up that there was an arsenal of resources available that could offer a happy alternative lifestyle. Bob and I did the math. We could move away, take on dual careers, get a new house, own two cars to get to work. By the time we subtracted out what we'd pay for commuting, a new house, professional wardrobes, taxes, and buying rather than growing our food, we were only \$10,000 ahead in annual income than where we would be if we stayed home and put our hearts and minds to work on our grassy hillsides. That was before we had figured in the costs for day care. Thus, Bob and I officially joined my parents on the family farm, I wrote cookbooks about sustainable food, we started a family, and we became homemakers.

The trick that Ruth and Sanford had taught us was simple. Mainstream American culture views the household as a unit of consumption. By this conventional standard, the household consumes food, clothing, household technologies, repair and debt services, electricity, entertainment, health-care services, and environmental resources. In order to be a "successful" unit of consumption, the household must have money. Ruth's and Sanford's household was not a unit of consumption. By growing their own food, living within their means, providing much of their own health care, and relying on community, family and barter for meeting their remaining needs, their household was essentially a unit of *production* (just not by the standards of a market economy). Thus, their *income* wasn't critical to their *well-being*. In fact, over the course of her life, Ruth even amassed considerable financial savings.

This was the model that Bob and I, together with my parents, adopted for our own lifestyle. Admittedly, there are some modern twists and indulgences on Ruth and Sanford's ways. We are not the sort of folks who would willingly don sackcloth. The month of May will find me out in the fields with my father during lambing

season, while Bob watches the girls and Mom prepares the gardens. By the end of the month, our farmers' market season is in full swing, and Bob and I are selling Sap Bush Hollow meats every Saturday. Our daughters come to the market to meet their friends, or stay at the farm with Grammie and Pop Pop. During the week, the kids join me as I help move fence, milk the family cow, and do chores. On chicken processing days, Bob heads down to the farm, and the girls and I stay home to go for hikes, visit the neighbors, or explore the woods in search of fairies. The entire family labors throughout the season, tending livestock, cutting meat, making sausages, keeping records and weeding gardens, but there is ample time for us to take turns with vacations, canoe trips, afternoon swims and naps, and evening cocktails. As late summer rolls around, like Ruth, I pull out my canning gear and work 'round the clock to put up peaches, pears, plums, green beans, beets, tomato sauce and even some homemade stews. A giant crock fills first with sour dill pickles, then myriad fermenting mixtures of summer vegetables, then finally, at the season's end, with cabbages for a winter's supply of sauerkraut. Before mid-October, we team with friends to press cider; Mom pulls mountains of bright orange, yellow and deep green squashes out of the garden, which we stow away in our coldest rooms; I render pork and beef fat for lard and tallow for soaps and cooking; a fellow farmer swaps us a supply of storage onions and potatoes in exchange for meat; and the farmers' market closes for the season. We harvest the turkeys for Thanksgiving, and then begin our winter's rest . . . and play. Where Ruth and Sanford lived most of their lives in the confines of Schoharie County, during the winter months we take a different path. Our incomes and ecological concerns don't allow for cheeky weekends in Paris, but they do, every few years, allow for some pretty extraordinary extended travels. . . . Those trips have included renting a home for three months in rural France (where cheeky weekends in Paris *were* doable), a winter in Argentina researching a book, or extended trips across the country by train. The years that don't find us boarding planes or trains during our resting months are still full of fun. We take the girls to area museums or on short mini-vacations for home-

school study to learn about the pilgrims, our colonial history, witch trials, Native Americans, or to hear some live music. We do science experiments at our kitchen table, read long novels aloud at night, play music and sing by the fire, enjoy cider and popcorn while playing games (or fighting over toys), or pile up on the couch to watch a movie. Sunny wintery days find us out for walks, hiking through the woods on snowshoes, or sledding down the road.

My family has always understood that the key to success as farmers wasn't necessarily how much money we made, but how much money we didn't have to spend. What's good for farming is also good for homemaking. There are, admittedly, some things we do without. We limit restaurant visits, take advantage of local thrift stores, wear our clothes until they are threadbare, have only one car in our family, and we forego health insurance, both from inadequate finances and a conscientious objection to corporate health care (this will be discussed in further detail later in the book). We pay cash, make use of sliding scales and barter for the health-care services we require. We celebrate birthdays and holidays with verve, but Bob and I do not exchange gifts (although we do find or make a few things for our daughters). We make very heavy use of our library, and commit to keeping our car off the road at least one day each week during the growing season and two to four days a week during the winter. Because we produce so much of our own food, grocery shopping only needs to happen every other month. Using such tricks and accepting a few limitations, Bob, the girls and I have lived very, very well on less than \$45,000 per year.

Along this path, naturally, I became a local-food advocate. After writing two cookbooks about working with sustainably raised meats, I found myself taking on the role of a spokesperson for the integration of ecologically sound, humane animal production into a sustainable diet. (I felt like the dairy princess for the grass-fed meat movement.) As a result, in 2007, I was invited to speak at the national conference of the American Dietetic Association. My charge was to explain to several hundred dietitians what *exactly* this grass-fed meat movement was, why the darn thing wouldn't go away, and to justify why

Americans should be willing to spend money on food that was so much more expensive than what could be found in the grocery store.

As I tooled away on my presentation, the final requirement was the most troubling. I could come up with lots and lots of reasons *why* we should be willing to pay more for our food. Social justice. Ecological benefits. Stronger local economies. Superior nutrition. Animal welfare. Saving farmland. Reversing global warming. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels. But I realized then, that *why* was never going to matter if Americans couldn't figure out *how* to afford it. Up until then, the grass-fed movement had been pegged as a niche farming vocation that appealed to the wealthy folks who were in search of higher-quality foods. It was not regarded as an option for the rest of America.

But truth be told, when I crunched the numbers, a farmers' market meal made of a roasted local pasture-raised chicken, baked potatoes and steamed broccoli cost less than four meals at Burger King, even when two of the meals came off the kiddie menu. The Burger King meal had negligible nutritional value and was damaging to our health and planet. The farmers' market menu cost less, healed the earth, helped the local economy, was a source of bountiful nutrients for a family of four, and would leave ample leftovers for both a chicken salad and a rich chicken stock, which could then be the base for a wonderful soup. But when push came to shove, I knew that Burger King would win out. The reason? Many people don't even know how to roast a chicken, let alone make a chicken salad from the leftovers or use the carcass to make a stock. Mainstream Americans have lost the simple domestic skills that would enable them to live an ecologically sensible life with a modest or low income.

Ordinarily a calm public speaker, my hands shook when I stood in September of 2007 before an audience of 600 professional registered dietitians, many of whom were women. I had a painful message to deliver, one that I considered leaving out every time I rehearsed my speech. Eating local, organic, sustainably raised, nutrient-dense food was possible for every American, not just for wealthy gourmets or self-reliant organic farmers. But to do it, *we needed to bring back*

the homemaker. As I made this claim, my toes curled in the tips of my shoes. The room was completely still. And then, before I could continue on, the crowd burst into spontaneous applause. I learned in conversations afterward that I had called attention to the elephant in the room, a simple truth that was felt by so many dieticians who were trying to help families reclaim good nutrition and a balanced life.

As I looked more closely at the role homemaking could play in revitalizing our local food system, I saw that the position was a linchpin for more than just making use of garden produce and chicken carcasses. Individuals who had taken this path in life were building a great bridge from our existing **extractive economy** — where corporate wealth was regarded as the foundation of economic health, where mining our earth's resources and exploiting our international neighbors was accepted as simply the cost of doing business — to a **life-serving economy**, where the goal is, in the words of David Korten, to generate a living for all, rather than a killing for a few¹, where our resources are sustained, our waters are kept clean, our air pure, and families can lead meaningful and joyful lives.

More than simply soccer moms, Radical Homemakers are men and women who have chosen to make family, community, social justice and the health of the planet the governing principles of their lives. They reject any form of labor or the expenditure of any resource that does not honor these tenets. For about five thousand years, our culture has been hostage to a form of organization by domination that fails to honor our living systems, where “he who holds the gold makes the rules.” By contrast, Radical Homemakers use life skills and relationships as a replacement for gold, on the premise that he or she who doesn't *need* the gold can *change* the rules. The greater our domestic skills, be they to plant a garden, grow tomatoes on an apartment balcony, mend a shirt, repair an appliance, provide for our own entertainment, cook and preserve a local harvest or care for our children and loved ones, the less dependent we are on the gold.

These thoughts led me to wonder if salvation from our global woes — the rampant social injustices, climate change, peak oil — was going to be dependent upon the women, upon questioning all the

hard-fought battles of both the first and second waves of feminism that have swept this country. Women, after all, have been the homemakers since the beginning of time. Or so I thought.

Upon further investigation, I learned that the household did not become the “woman’s sphere” until the industrial revolution. A search for the origin of the word *housewife* traces it back to the thirteenth century as the feudal period was coming to an end in Europe and the first signs of a middle class were popping up. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains that housewives were wedded to *husbands*, whose name came from *hus*, an old spelling of *house*, and *bonded*.² *Husbands* were bonded to houses, rather than to lords. Housewives and husbands were free people who owned their own homes and lived off their land. While there was a division of labor among the sexes in these early households, there was also an equal distribution of domestic work. Once the industrial revolution happened, however, things changed. Men left the household to work for wages, which were then used to purchase the goods and services that they no longer were home to provide. Indeed, the men were the first to lose their domestic skills as their successive generations forgot how to butcher the family hog, how to sew leather, how to chop firewood.

As the industrial revolution forged on and crossed the ocean to America, men and women eventually stopped working together to provide for their household sustenance. They developed their separate spheres — man in the factory, woman in the home. The more a man worked outside the home, the more the household would have to buy in order to have the needs met. Soon the factories were able to fabricate products to supplant the housewives’ duties as well. As subsequent chapters in this book reveal, her primary function ultimately became chauffeur and consumer. The household was no longer a unit of production. It was a unit of consumption.

The effect on the American housewife was devastating. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, documenting for the first time “the problem that has no name,” *housewife’s syndrome*, where American girls grew up fantasizing about finding their husbands, buying their dream homes and dream appliances, popping out

babies, and living happily ever after.³ In truth, pointed out Friedan, happily-ever-after never came. Countless women suffered from depression and nervous breakdowns as they faced the endless meaningless tasks of shopping and driving children hither and yon. They never had opportunities to fulfill their highest potential, to challenge themselves, to feel as though they were truly contributing to society beyond wielding the credit card to keep the consumer culture humming. Friedan's book sent women to work in droves. And corporate America seized upon a golden opportunity to secure a cheaper workforce and offer countless products to use up their paychecks.

Before long, the second family income was no longer an option. In the minds of many, it was a necessity. Homemaking, like eating organic foods, seemed a luxury to be enjoyed only by those wives whose husbands garnered substantial earnings, enabling them to drive their children to school every day rather than putting them on the bus, enroll them in endless enrichment activities, oversee their educational careers, and prepare them for entry into elite colleges, and to win a leg-up in a competitive workforce. At the other extreme, homemaking was seen as a realm of the ultra-religious, where women accepted the role of Biblical "help meets" to their husbands. They cooked, cleaned, toiled, served and remained silent and powerless. Bob and I fell into neither category. And I suspected there were more like us.

I was looking for a different type of homemaker — someone who wasn't ruled by our consumer culture, who embodied a strong ecological ethic, who held genuine power in the household, who was living a full, creative, challenging and socially contributory life. For lack of a better word, I wanted to find folks who were more . . . *radical*. I began writing and speaking more on the subject, and in November of 2007 I posted a call on my Web site, seeking such homemakers:

If you have learned to live on less in order to take the time to nourish your family and the planet through home cooking, engaged citizenship, responsible consumption and creative living, whether you are male, female, or two people sharing the

role, with or without children, full or part-time, please drop me a line and tell me your story.

With the help of a full page story that appeared in *The New York Times* and a few other magazines, blogs and newspapers, my inbox filled up with over two hundred letters. Unable to fully document the lives of all these people, I selected twenty homemakers to interview, seeking a balance of young and old, rural, urban and suburban, single and married, male and female, with children and without. I wanted to know who these people were, how they chose their life paths, how they were faring in our American economy. I wanted to see their domestic lives with my own eyes, to gauge the balance of power in their relationships, to gain insights about their impact on their local communities. I wanted to know if they were able to thwart the chronic depression that Betty Friedan wrote about, and if so, how they did it. I wanted to understand their tactics for both surviving and thriving. I packed up my family whenever we could squeeze away from the farm, and we eventually worked our way across the country, from Maine to Los Angeles.

As I got to know each of these families, I learned that most Radical Homemakers do not have conventional jobs. They simply refuse to work to make the rich richer. They do have some form of income that comes into their lives. But they were not the privileged set by any means. Most of the families that I interviewed were living with a sense of abundance at about 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. That's a little over \$40,000 for a family of four, about 37 percent below the national median family income and 45 percent below the median income for married couple families.⁴ Some lived on considerably less, few had appreciably more. Not surprisingly, those with the lowest incomes had mastered the most domestic skills and had developed the most innovative approaches to living.

I learned that Radical Homemaking is a domestic choice made by all the adults in a household. It is true that a man may work outside at a job that honors the four tenets of ecological sustainability, social justice, family and community, while the woman stays home. But the

reverse may also be true. Sometimes neither partner works outside the home. As we'll see later on, this is in no way a throwback to the 1950s household. Nor can it be confused with some form of ultra-conservative religious sect. Radical Homemakers draw on historical traditions to craft a more ecologically viable existence, but their life's work is to create a new, pleasurable, sustainable and socially just society, different than any we have known in the last 5,000 years. While they learn from history, they do not seek to recreate it in all forms. Women are not second-class citizens. The governing tenet of social justice precludes treating any member of the family as subservient.

Some of the Radical Homemakers I came to know professed a strong spiritual faith. Others did not. If there was one unifying belief among them, it was to question all the assumptions in our consumer culture that have us convinced that a family cannot survive without a dual income. They were fluent at the mental exercise of rethinking the "givens" of our society and coming to the following conclusions: nobody (who matters) cares what (or if) you drive; housing does not have to cost more than a single moderate income can afford (and can even cost less); it is okay to accept help from family and friends, to let go of the perceived ideal of independence and strive instead for interdependence; health can be achieved without making monthly payments to an insurance company; child care is not a fixed cost; education can be acquired for free — it does not have to be bought; and retirement is possible, regardless of income.

As for domestic skills, the range of talents held by these households was as varied as the day is long. Many kept gardens, but not all. Some gardened on city rooftops, some on country acres, some in suburban yards. Some were wizards at car and appliance repairs. Others could sew. Some could build and fix houses; some kept livestock. Others crafted furniture, played music or wrote. All could cook. (Really well, as my waistline will attest.) None of them could do *everything*. No one was completely self-sufficient, an independent island separate from the rest of the world. Thus the universal skills that they all possessed were far more complex than simply knowing how to can green beans or build a root cellar. In order to make it as

homemakers, these people had to be wizards at nurturing relationships and working with family and community. They needed an intimate understanding of the life-serving economy, where a paycheck is not always exchanged for all services rendered. They needed to be their own teachers — to pursue their educations throughout life, forever learning new ways to do more, create more, give more.

In addition, the happiest among them were successful at setting realistic expectations for themselves. They did not live in impeccably clean houses on manicured estates. They saw their homes as living systems and accepted the flux, flow, dirt and chaos that are a natural part of that. They were masters at redefining pleasure not as something that should be bought in the consumer marketplace, but as something that could be created, no matter how much or how little money they had in their pockets. And above all, they were fearless. They did not let themselves be bullied by the conventional ideals regarding money, status, or material possessions. These families did not see their homes as a refuge from the world. Rather, each home was the center for social change, the starting point from which a better life would ripple out for everyone.

Home is where the great change will begin. It is not where it ends. Once we feel sufficiently proficient with our domestic skills, few of us will be content to simply practice them to the end of our days. Many of us will strive for more, to bring more beauty to the world, to bring about greater social change, to make life better for our neighbors, to contribute our creative powers to the building of a new, brighter, sustainable and happier future. That is precisely the great work we should all be tackling. If we start by focusing our energies on our domestic lives, we will do more than reduce our ecological impact and help create a living for all. We will craft a safe, nurturing place from which this great creative work can happen.

A note on how this book is organized: This volume is divided into two sections. Part One is more in-depth and theoretical. It looks at the history of domesticity and feminism, and provides an in-depth critique of our current cultural and economic systems. My aim is to demonstrate how Radical Homemaking can function in rebuild-

ing a life-serving, socially just and ecologically sustainable economy while honoring the values of feminism. In Part Two, the Radical Homemakers themselves speak out. Rather than listing each family I interviewed and rattling off the pertinent lessons they offered, I have organized Part Two as a discussion of the overarching themes and lessons I gleaned from their interviews and letters in aggregate. My intent is to give a clear picture of the many ways this lifestyle can work, to explore the homemakers' most common decision-making processes and their tactics for thriving. Essentially, Part One is the theory and Part Two is the practice. My hope is that the two parts, in balance, create for readers an opportunity to evaluate this way of life and to see how it fits into a picture of great social change. Naturally, each of the people who participated in the study is a worthy subject on their own. And since their lives reflect different segments of our American culture, I assume that their personal stories will also be of interest. Thus, the appendix includes in-depth stories of all the different people who participated in this research, arranged alphabetically.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *All of the quotes and anecdotes are taken directly from interviews and letters with twenty different Radical Homemaking families. In order to honor their privacy, their names, along with a few details about their lives, have been changed. The only exceptions are three individuals — Erik Knutzen, Kelly Coyne and Nance Klehm — all of whom write and speak on subjects that tie in very strongly with the Radical Homemaking movement.*