

The Power of Leaving

Janaki
Fisher-
Merrit
working in
field

In fourteen interviews, I did not meet a population of young people eager to leave the countryside in order to make something of themselves, as Gruchow once predicted. I did learn that, to a person, they left home. Many left with the sincere desire to return and many will return, yet they all, for varying lengths of time, left to feel the outer world and to test life and educate themselves, in part, by being away from the home and family structure. Maybe this runs counter to the idea that to populate the countryside we must keep the children around. Maybe there is a leaving and returning, a cycling of energy that must naturally occur.

I can see in these cases that there was a perspective gained in the leaving, an empowering of spirit in the very going away and 'making it' off the homestead. This may be a universal need for any generation as they differentiate from their parents.

Plus for every young person leaving home there's a set of parents who let go. In this population of families, parents clearly opened their hands—in every case. I ponder this wise openness even with the added pressure of needing their labor, energy, and congruity on the newly sustainable farm operation.

"My parents were always very supportive of Perry's and my choices," says Brandon Rutter, who grew up on Badger-sett Farm. **"We could do anything we wanted to do. Now I**



see that is both blessing and curse. I mean if you love everything and can do everything, it's hard to choose!" ❖

"The longer I lived in the city, the more I appreciated space."

Malena Handeen speaks of this and about Montevideo, Minnesota: **"From about high school to age 21, I had no long term plans of any kind. I pushed against anything there was! I had to push off and away from my parents. I knew by our foods and other things that they were so different from mainstream culture—and I didn't know what was going on outside of our family. My dreams seemed so unattainable. I only ever thought of being an artist, and I figured I couldn't do that out here. There was nothing happening out here. But the longer I lived in the city, the**

more I appreciated space. I was in a colony of visual artists [at college] and I was glad about that, but I knew I wanted a garden, a cat, and not a house cat, a country cat . . . Later, I realized more and more that I could trust my parents' advice. As I became a friend with them, I saw their predictions come true. I was really way luckier than I had thought." ❖

Malena Handeen went away to identify herself as individual and as artist. She was not alone among those I interviewed. Several I talked with spoke clearly about this measuring of home against an outside world.

Janaki Fisher-Merritt now farming near Wrenshall, Minnesota found his environmental studies at Carleton **"wishy washy."** (That is a statement measured by home if I ever heard one.) He found that he kept wanting to make his studies relevant—this comes from one who has worked on the land and learned from the daily relevancy of growing or storing vegetables. **"I don't know how many papers I wrote about farming [at Carleton]. The more other things I did, the more interested I was in farming."** ❖

Some in the group of interviewees at first wanted nothing to do with farming after leaving the farm. Amanda Bilek is one. **"When I graduated in Staples, MN, the last thing I ever wanted to do was anything with agriculture or the farm. It took being out of that environment to appreciate the value of the farm. You come to college in St. Paul and are around all these kids who grew up in the suburbs and who don't even think about where their food is coming from."** ❖ It was natural for Amanda, after slaughtering all those chickens on Saturdays, to want to know the source of her chicken sandwich!

Melissa MacKimm would agree about wanting to leave the farm, and she traveled farther to find the connection back home. **"When I graduated from Blooming Prairie High School, the only thing on my mind was to get as far away from the farm as I possibly could. Not looking back, I came up to Hamline University for that reason."** Some time later, she lived for a half-year on a farm in Switzerland, and that's when she thought, **"OK, wait a minute . . . I know what I want to do. That's when it kind of all went 'duh!' When I returned to school, it was much easier, I was older and I knew what I was after. I think it was in Switzerland when I just realized that I was a much simpler person. I figured out I was thinking too hard, that I just needed to go with my instincts, to see that yeah, this is really what I'm passionate about."** ❖

Josh Van Der Pol went to Willmar for two years taking classes, thinking about other careers, and even considering a job in accounting. He then came back to Clara City where he worked in his future in-laws' floral business. Finally it became clear to Josh that he just couldn't work inside. That's when he started reconsidering what the home farm offered him.

When you leave and gain perspective, even the scale of things back home seems to change. For Craig Fernholz, this has already been true. **"I went home two weekends ago for my five-year high school reunion, and I showed up on the farm when Mom and Dad were gone. Got out of the car. Walked into the house, went back outside. And the first thing I noticed was that everything (the height of the tractor, how big the shop was, how big the lawn was . . .) everything was a lot smaller. Almost manageable in my eyes. Almost. Like maybe a couple more years and maybe I'd come back . . ."** ❖

“I must see the stars at night.”

It is in the leaving that we know what we miss. Craig Fernholz now lives in the Uptown area in Minneapolis. **“One thing I do miss, living here, is the stars. Coming to the Cities—well, I finally saw my first shooting star last night after about a year and a half down here. Out near Madison, Minnesota? No place compares. Well, maybe Scotland; I was way up in the Isle of Skye and we were staying where it was completely pitch black except vast stars everywhere.”** ❖

Inga Haugen is attending college at Concordia in Moorhead, Minnesota, and working at a garden/nursery. She dreams of getting her master’s degree in Library Science, maybe in Fargo. But she left the farm with a clear intent to return one day. **“I refuse to live in a place where I can’t see the stars at night,”** stated Inga.

So when these young people leave home, they immediately measure their new lives against their lives back then. Who doesn’t? And city people can be pretty uninformed. Once while driving, Inga Haugen and a friend passed one of those boldly painted Land O’ Lakes semi-trailers showing cows grazing on grass. She ranted at that, calling it false advertising, and her friend was surprised, asking, “Aren’t all cows raised on grass?” Far from the truth, explains Inga. **“It was naïve of my friend to think that all cows live on beautiful green pastures.”** ❖

Recalls Katie Fernholz, **“I remember one time being homesick in Alaska because the wind started to blow. And it was the wind that I remembered from Madison, Minnesota. It was always windy out there, and the openness . . . I laugh at the hill-country people talking about going ‘to see the**

sunsets’ in this location or another. [At home] we could always see every sunset.”

More from Katie: **“Alaska taught me the value of stability. Alaska was exhausting, cut-throat, and competitive. Everything in Alaska is gone tomorrow; there is no stability, no stable social structure. I longed for predictability and I learned that Minnesota is a place to put down roots.”** ❖

There are those phrases again: “I longed for . . . and I learned.” Is it through longing that we do finally learn? And how do you “long for” anything without leaving it? How can you seek to close a gap until you feel the gap?

These do not sound like young people who believe rural life is expendable nor does it sound like youth who have abandoned dreams in order to become cogs in any sort of industrial wheel. They see farther than that, and one might ask why this is true. Maybe the freedom to leave home is part of the reason they can imagine this larger picture. While leaving home did not make all of these young folks immediately desire to return to rural America and live on the land, the contrasts they see in life most definitely call them to value the land and their growing up years on the land.