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From Glutton to Green

By Jenny Rough



Together we made five: Mom, Dad, two brothers and a sister (me). And together we lived on planet Earth, but we didn't preserve planet Earth. We left the faucet on while brushing our teeth. We tossed glass bottles, tin cans, plastic jugs, newspapers and magazines into garbage bags that were hauled directly to a landfill. We bought too much food at the grocery store and didn't notice it perishing in our fridge. We happily switched on lights—closet lights, garage lights, even shower lights—often forgetting to flick them off as we headed out the door. If you asked us what the word "recycle" meant, we might have guessed: "To ride a bike backwards?" Not that we were too familiar with bikes. Our home was a McMansion of countless, largely unused rooms, with an attached three-car garage crammed with gas-guzzling SUVs.

In short, I didn't grow up green; I grew up glutton.

I don't hold it against my parents, though. When I was 12, my dad took me to his old neighborhood and pointed out the unloved house where he'd been raised—all chipped paint, smudged windows and neglected yard. The porch—packed from floor to ceiling with junk (damaged boxes, broken furniture and a lame hobby horse)—had ripped screens.

"You lived there?" I marveled as we drove by, my eyes as large as softballs.

My dad was reared by an alcoholic mother who tried to kill herself with a shotgun (she used her toe), and a young, uneducated father who was adamant that his son become a doctor. Dad chose a legal career instead, and worked diligently to raise his children in suburban affluence. Shifting his life from rags to the riches of upper middle class America was a gigantic step for my father—even if his step left an incalculably large environmental footprint of leather Johnston & Murphys.

I continued the wasteful practices of my upbringing through college and right up into my 20-somethings, when I met my husband. His love for animals had piqued a concern for the environment which ultimately led him to green living practices. One day, eating frozen yogurt from a Styrofoam cup, I realized I, too, needed to do my part to sustain the Earth. Partly, it was the dynamic I was experiencing in my life at the time: I had followed dad's career path, but detested being a city-bound lawyer. I was burned-out and weary of clogged freeways, smoggy air and ear-deafening construction. I longed to immerse myself in nature.

Thus began a series of trips into the wilderness, where my connection to Earth deepened immediately. One week, I borrowed a friend's Colorado cabin—a Buddhist mountain retreat. Nestled into this sparse, eco-friendly dwelling on 35 acres of wild, free land, I quickly unpacked my mind. My spirit felt gentled and refreshed. But I also wondered how I'd manage. There was no garbage disposal or

dishwasher, no central air or heating. All warmth was provided by a wood-burning stove and large windows that welcomed the sun. Water came from a cistern, and I became conscious of every drop. It felt like using cash instead of credit cards—I could see the waterline dip every time I flushed, took a shower or rinsed a plate.

Mornings found me outside on the wood deck with a steaming mug of tea. Turkey and deer wandered through to drink from a watering hole. The breeze carried my thoughts. I loved this style of living, but could I live in a low-energy home permanently? Was I ready to give up strong water pressure and long, hot showers? Was I willing to relinquish the convenience of buying new items, and instead seek out used or recycled replacements?

Reflecting on that deck, I realized I was ready, especially if it meant playing a role in bringing the fresh air, blue sky and clean rivers of that mountain retreat back to the rest of the world. I'm still at the beginning of my journey with a lot to learn, but it's my turn to take a gigantic step: moving from red living ("danger to the planet") further along the color spectrum to living green. Though I'm grateful to my dad for all he gave me, I hope my footprint on Earth will be of a different kind. Maybe in a pair of Crocs or organic hemp sandals.

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