

Personal Solutions, Family Solutions

by John Taylor Gatto

If you have no time for your family you want to ask yourself, 'Why must I always be do-ing something?' God made us human be-ings, not do-ings!' - *Heard over a car radio between Omaha and North Platte, Nebraska*

“Do nothing. Time is too precious to waste,” said Buddha. If that sounds like nonsense stop reading now, but if you feel you've been conditioned like a laboratory rat by the pervasive propaganda of 20th century institutions like schools and banks and hospitals, read on. One quick way to tell if mechanism has invaded your living tissue is to consider how important lists are to your life. Home improvement lists, self-improvement lists, lists of meetings, appointments, responsibilities, things to remember? Does list management fill much of your time?

And does your social life consist of watching actors pretend to be real people or telling your friends what you bought, what you nearly bought, and what you are going to buy? If somewhere along the way your life has come to seem pointless, then read on as I tell you how Janet and I came to do nothing with our farm on purpose. It might help you understand what Buddha had on his mind.

Twenty-eight years ago, after six years of living in Manhattan – I from Pittsburgh and Janet from Oyster Bay – we bought 134 acres of land in rural New York State located midway between Ithaca where I'd gone to school and Cooperstown where the Baseball Hall of Fame is. The land was in Chenango County, in the southeastern corner of the Burned-Over District, an area of great spiritual ferment in the 19th century which had produced the Mormons, the Perfectionists, the Millerites, the incident that launched the Anti-Masonic Party, and a host of other individualistic, quirky movements that attest to how rich life can be in an a-systematic society.

I bought the land with a fellow schoolteacher, sight unseen, in a manner I'll explain in a moment. Chenango County was, is, and always will be, I think, lightly

populated, a corn and cow/sheep land not fit for the attention of sophisticated tourists and real estate speculators.

The population of the nearest town to my farm is the same now as it was in 1905 and the whole county has about 50 inhabitants a square mile, about 1/6th less than it had in 1835 in the glory days of the Chenango Canal. Even in 1993 plenty of beautiful land was available there for \$500 an acre or less, 90 minutes from Syracuse, two hours of Albany, four hours from New York City. I paid much less than that in 1968 when I acquired the property, about \$48 an acre with a 7-year mortgage at 6 percent. That's probably the chief reason I bought the land unseen when I saw the ad in the real estate listings of the Sunday New York Times.

That particular Sunday I had been sitting with friends ranting and raving about how many great bargains are always available if you know what value is. I offered to prove the point on the real estate pages. "Just buy what no one else wants as long as you're sure that the reasons for not wanting it – dirt roads, no running water, things like that – are dumb." Then I read:

Tumbling Waterfall Retreat 134 acres. 7 year mortgage. 6%. Old barn, pond sites, 5 miles from Oxford, New York. \$6500.

The next day I picked up the phone, dialed the agent, and told him I'd wire the down payment that day, \$500. If you know your own mind (which isn't a priority of schooling) you don't often need expert advice to make decisions because you are the only real expert on what you need and what you can live with. How did I know the land was any good? That's easy, any good for what? What should it be good for, to make money? I thought it ought to offer a private place away from machinery where you could do just about anything you wanted without interference and nosy neighbours. With a little long-distance research I knew it was good for that so I bought it without worrying. At \$500 down and around \$100 a month payments almost anyone could have bought that land if they weren't afraid.

What was to be afraid of? The taxes were about \$300 a year and a nearby farmer paid \$100 to cut off the hay. He paid us to cut our "grass".

Wild land exists to put us smack in the middle of animal nature, creatures who regulate their lives in a different way than we do ours; it exists to teach seasons, fertility, and that there is no death, just endless translations from one form to another. Wild land gives you back the sky and the harmonies of the planet, but it charges an invisible price for what it has to give – you must leave it wild or it loses its power and becomes a green office.

By the time my wild land came along I was 32 and was just beginning to reach the stage in my own life where I could see that doing things the right way, rationalizing your time on the best principles of human engineering, and living your life from the prison chamber of your mind instead of your heart was a catastrophic mistake. I had already mutilated my family with too many rational decisions by that time and was slowly beginning to care.

The “life” part of life just won't engineer all the way unless you're willing to become a mechanism. All the rewards of the good life that can be counted, like money and titles and honours and complex property requiring expert advice to manage – the material things – were at the bottom disturbingly unrewarding. I hadn't always thought that way for I had gone to two Ivy League colleges specifically to accumulate material and display it as evidence of my worth. And I did that for a while but it left me feeling worthless. A great puzzle for many of us, that irony.

After I bought that land I forgot the lesson I'm trying to teach you – or rather Buddha is trying to teach you and me. For five years I raced about digging ponds, chopping trees, clearing paths, pulling rocks, unclogging channels, planting – always making lists, plans, agendas. I was always “improving” things. I loved to drive in the little towns of the county to shop and see movies and sit around bars pretending to be a country gentlemen, but regularly Janet would ask why we couldn't just stay on the land, why did we always have to be going and doing? At first it baffled me, but later as I reflected on it I understood that Janet was keeping score a different way and that intrigued me. Stay on the land and do what? Work, of course, to “improve” it, but then what?

One day after finishing some important project I made a list of all the things I had yet to do according to the Master Plan of my land ambition. There were 50 major projects remaining, and at two a year, which was all I could manage racing back and forth from New York City on weekends and summers, I would be 65 when they were done. According to my schedule I could begin enjoying my land 30 years down the line.

Something was dreadfully wrong. What was wrong was that I was a fool. Like so many of us I was a part in an abstract idea-machine called “progress”; like an accountant I measured success by the bottom line of things done, gotten out of the way, finished, terminated. That's how a computer might be set to keep track of work, but the pleasure of being lies in the process, not the mere product, primarily in “being” and only peripherally in “doing”. In the world we've fashioned built on our envy of machines we've arranged things to reverse the natural order of importance; somewhere deep down everyone understands this, but in avoiding the truth we assign ourselves a miserable destiny trying to be machines. Those who succeed best at this lead horrible lives regardless of appearances. Watching and being part of the natural world and understanding it is the great domestic challenge – without success at this we never have a home – what Nature can give it stops giving when it is over regulated, or exploited with ag-school technology and bulldozers.

We all need the wildness of the non-human planet to restore our spirits, not parks and beaches where the human element is still the central focus and regulation runs rampant. Instead we collect evidence of our domination by mapping it, scheduling it, and controlling it. And all that gives us is a green imitation of city life and square tomatoes.

So now I do nothing with my farm. I go there to let it teach me things. Sometimes I putter but not often because time is too precious to waste. The living quarters are in an old barn with “1906” drawn in the concrete on the milking floor. My original intention was to build a broad covered porch around the whole structure and arrange the inside like a private cathedral with a 50-foot ceiling. Still not a

bad idea but now, 27 years later, it remains a barn and that turned out to be a better idea.

There's about 1,200 square feet of open space on the hay floor and way up in the air against the roof is a 20x20 insulated room reached by climbing three banks of wooden straps. Kenny, who was the boyfriend of one of my college students, built the room, roofed and refloored the barn, in exchange for 5 acres of land.

Good deal all around.

But much of the time we don't use the insulated room, instead sleeping in the two lovely old beds under the lofty roof with mice racing about the rafters in plain view (not too many), bats squeaking in the eaves, barn swallows twittering, and the most amazing light pouring through inch-wide spaces between the vertical wall boards.

It's very much like living in a bird house. We draw water from a gorge a half-mile away which probably should have been tested but never was; drinking hundreds of gallons, at first tentatively, then with delight, was the test. No water ever tasted like our gorge water run over rocks; I've come to see that participating with the water you drink is a wonderful way to feel good; it took some time to get used to the walk back and forth and to clear away the machined notion that time was somehow being wasted.

Bathing is out of a bucket or in pools and ponds, and the toilet is wherever you are with the details varying according to the person and a proper respect for such things. On Manhattan's famous Upper West Side we have three bathrooms but they give us no better results. In over a quarter-century I can honestly say we never missed running water or plumbing, and the transition from both was effected almost at once. That was surprising, how close to the surface our human good sense is, in spite of all the conditioning and mechanical overlay.

Our barn holds about 3,000 books which must fend for themselves in all seasons housed in many makeshift facilities. All were bought at country auctions for a dollar or two a box, lots of 19th century evangelical stuff, hand-coloured children's books, Crime Club thrillers, whatever – when you read in a barn it's like

discovering reading all over again. It's the greatest fun, far beyond television, movies and Broadway shows; having had both over a reasonably long lifetime I feel I can say that honestly.

The main activity on our farm is keeping animals, as it is on many farms, but the difference is we don't own any of them, and they feed themselves. Deer are so plentiful they are a daily experience, snorting, playing like young dogs, hanging out; wild turkey are common, too, and at night they flock by the squadron in the gorge behind the barn; snakes abound but no one has ever been bitten, skunks, turtles, racoons, coyote, fox, mink, one bear, and a large colony of blue herons that land on the pond and fish like pterodactyls off our half-sunken dock. The bear moved in on the stream at the foot of the hill last year. Live and let live works better than regulation; it's nice to have a bear around.

The most unbelievable creatures of all are the night moths. Janet discovered these one night just outside the barn flying in the half-light; their shapes and colors are so divorced from any normal insect life I'm familiar with. I felt transported into a prehistory when the world was new just watching them.

When I used to schoolteach, my kids and I would discuss style a lot, getting a style of your own and how that must be done. I gradually came to feel it was very difficult unless you were alone a lot, had time and space to yourself, were free of the need to attend other people's urgencies all the time – or the urgencies of a commercial world. How can you expect to be unique if every minute you draw models from other people and the shadows of other people drawn from television? How can the unique destiny that is in every one of us exercise itself if you always submit to the scrutiny and judgment of authorities? Authorities on what? Certainly not on you unless you have been diminished into something predictable, tamed by regulation, simplification, and rationalization. A steady diet of that will waste all your time.

Compelling evidence exists that we are meant to be unique individuals who live in harmony with other unique individuals: think of the harmony of snow falling, but the brilliant oneness of each snowflake; think of the harmony of beach sand, but

the brilliant oneness of each sandgrain; think of the harmony of a field of grass, but the brilliant oneness of each blade in shape, and even hue. Are we that way, too? Consider your own fingerprint, unlike any on earth, your unique signature – can you think of a reason for evolution to produce such a signal unless the organism is one of a kind? And if you think of God instead of evolution it will be even easier to deduce a purpose in all of this. If people are inherently sortable into a few categories – as industrial civilization makes them out to be – then the fingerprint is a crazy detail, it only makes sense as a guide to the individual experiment that each of us is.

As Buddha said, time is too precious to waste doing much of anything. I'm still learning what that means, but I never might have known about this at all if I hadn't bought a big piece of wild, unregulated scrub land and left it that way. I hope my children's children leave it that way, too, if circumstances allow them to inherit it. I learned just to be from watching sunfish in the pond, birds taking dust baths on the dirt road, frogs watching me as I watched them. Janet once said, "Hey, look at us, we're watching the birds, not just 'bird watching'." It's an important difference.

Of course we do things, too: we eat lots of wild foods that we used to call weeds, we dig up blueberry bushes for gifts, build bonfires at night, transplant wild flowers, stuff like that. I finally figured out why real farms are often messy looking around the buildings, when you kick over something unimportant it doesn't need to be picked up right away, and nothing should ever be thrown away that might be useful tomorrow.

In the time we won back decontrolling our reflexes we came to learn to manage our spirits better; it's impossible to live this way without coming to love nearly everything, and feeling an obligation to it, too. We have a laboratory of nature stretched out daily for our understanding, not our exploitation. The greatest use of wild places isn't in "using" them but just in being there.

Personal solutions exist. Out of personal solutions great solutions can be put together. The one I've described just now is within reach – wild land, the less

road-accessible and “improved” the better, is available in abundance within an easy drive of every metropolitan area in North America, much more so today than it was a hundred years ago. Get some as soon as you can, the wilder and scruffier the better. Then do nothing. It will be your school. And it might become your home.

I wish I might have been brought up to live in productive harmony with the land, but lacking that I'm grateful to have discovered the next best thing, to accept stewardship of it until someone better suited to live upon it self-sufficiently comes along.

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