

Small Steps to Contentment

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By Donald Healy

Much of my children's lives were spent moving from state to state and city to city as a result of my military service.

Ashton and Conor had only known that a rural lifestyle existed through visits to family and friends, and the occasional state fair. We had often visited stables on military bases to get a feel for horses. At the end of my military service, we were living the typical urban life in Tacoma, Washington. While my wife, Sarah, and I finished our degrees in education, we maintained small gardens for flowers and vegetables. On weekends our family traveled far and wide to ride horses and muck out stalls. As a child, my family boarded horses in rural Pennsylvania and I felt that I was imparting much of that knowledge to my own children. What I didn't realize was that a childhood passion in myself was being rekindled--we began to discuss moving to the country.

During my student teaching, Sarah and I began researching all of the facets of moving to a rural homestead. Because of the nature of our profession and the current national teacher shortage, we had the choice of moving anywhere that we wanted. We considered the "hill country" of central Texas; northern California; central Montana; Charleston, South Carolina; Vermont; and central Virginia. After exploring our choices, we decided on central Virginia and Charlottesville. We flew east for a one-week job search. We both found jobs and out of curiosity decided to look at some homes with property. Our criteria were: a home less than 20 years old, 10 or more acres of grazing land, a barn, easy access to a main road and some privacy. The very first place the realtor showed us was our dream property. The home was a 12-year-old farmhouse with front and back decks. There were flower beds in the front garden, and a grape arbor and vegetable garden in the back. The house had a tool shed and henhouse below it, and a horse barn above it. The driveway wound down a hill and emptied out onto a major highway for commuter ease. Finally we were told that the total property consisted of 80 acres of field and woods with two creeks and a spring, 40 of which were fenced! That week we purchased our first rural home.

Over the last five years, we've made many lifestyle and attitudinal adjustments. We've adjusted to the clamorous summer symphony of crickets, frogs and owls, and the soul-full quiet evenings of winter. I know that on snowy mornings I have to get up an hour earlier to fire up the tractor and plow the driveway. We know that the warmest kind of heat comes from a woodstove filled with oak logs. We've built a chicken house where the garden used to be, and we collect brown, green, blue and white free-range eggs. We've reproduced the raised beds and hot boxes of Colonial Williamsburg to provide us with vegetables and herbs throughout the year. During the course of our experience, we've bought and sold sheep, goats and horses. We're left with a Percheron named Quinn and an Arabian named Caspian. They make good companions to the occasional horses we board. We've collected four stray dogs, Lucy, Chester, Fletcher and Jack, which keep our small farm and its residents safe from predators. Sarah has learned the fine art of canning, and we've enjoyed apple and peach butter, and blueberry and raspberry jellies derived from fruit harvested from local orchards. She's also made grape jelly from our prolific arbor, which is the most intense I've ever eaten. We've raised guineas and peafowl that have managed to rid us of ticks. In the spring we've been delighted by the hatching of keats and chicks, which grow into a multitude of shapes, colors and sizes.

Many mornings Sarah and I have sat on the front porch drinking tea and watching the hummingbirds swoop and dive in front of the rising sun. It's hard for us to imagine life without "the farm."