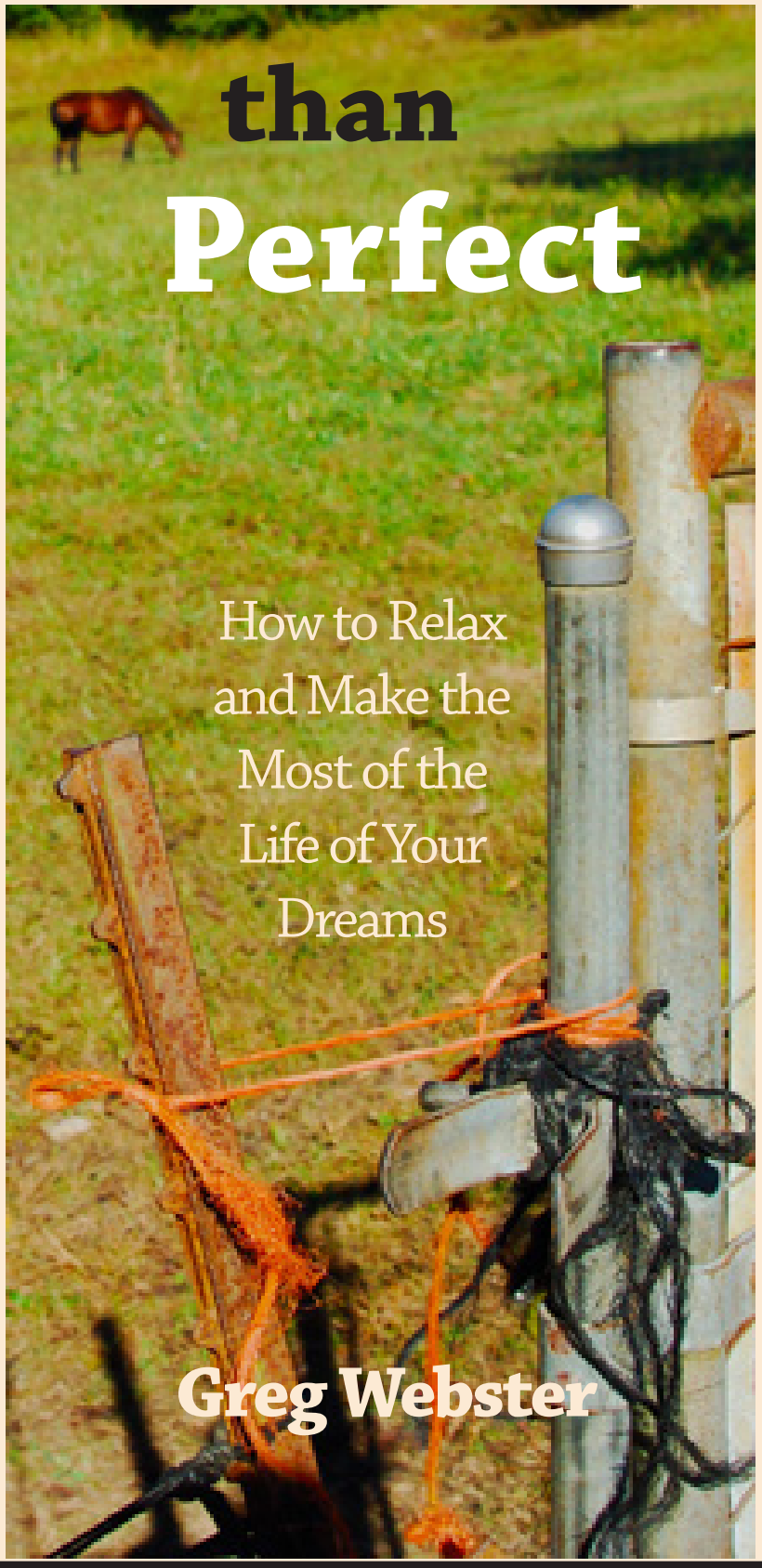
Better than Perfect



How to Relax and Make the Most of the Life of Your Dreams

Greg Webster

Better than Perfect

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Greg Webster

GregWebster.com

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info@creativecountryliving.com

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Contents

Introduction

Hay String and Other CROPs

I ONCE POSTED on my website at the time a list of ideas for how to use cast-off hay string, and when I did, I wasn't kidding about it being great stuff to get things done with. A number of folks contributed their ideas, and I stumbled across a few more myself. (Unfortunately, my wife Nancy stumbled, too—on hay string stretched across the barn floor—and broke her thumb when she fell. Her hand is better now but still a bit stiff.)

Here's a summary of the ideas we collected for using old baling twine:

- Patch a fence
- Latch a gate (see front cover photo)
- Make a gate hinge
- Use it as a lead rope for your horse
- Or a leash for your dog
- Hold together an exhibit at a craft fair
- Hang garlic to dry
- Secure awkward (but not heavy) loads to a front loader
- Tie up your tomato plants
- String up your hanging baskets
- Secure support posts for a firewood shelter
- Fasten together the sections of a rusted-out hay bale holder
- Close bags of mulch, garbage, or animal feed
- Tie a flag onto a flagpole
- Make a neck chain for reading glasses.

Since assembling the list of uses for hay string, I've come to see baling twine as a metaphor for all the things you *don't* have to do the right way in order to make a great life in the country. This is crucial because many

people let “doing it right” get in the way of doing anything at all. That’s why I’ve come up with the *Creative Rural Operating Principles* (CROPs) in this book. Creativity helps you make the most of whatever you have to work with.

Let’s face it. Most of us don’t have all the time and money in the world to accomplish our dreams, so if you have any hope of getting anywhere near them, you’ll have to do it “half-cocked.” But that is a world better than failing by doing nothing. Besides, who really cares if the results “ain’t pretty”? Neighbors are fewer and farther between once you get into rural America (or rural anywhere else, I suppose), so you won’t have a very big audience for your chewing gum and bailing wire solutions.

Hmmm. *Bailing wire*. Could that be where the chewing-gum-and-bailing-wire expression comes from in the first place? Perhaps I’m not the only one to hit upon the usefulness of a cast-off commodity like used hay string.

And by the way, in case you’re not personally familiar with hay string (a few of our online readers had to ask), it’s the roughly one-eighth-inch thick twine farmers use to tie hay together into bales—whether 1200-pound round bales you need a tractor to move, 50-pound square bales you can toss into a truck, or any of the variations in between. It’s tough stuff, especially when you double or triple it up.

And how do you get “used hay string”? By feeding your animals. Before letting them chow down on the hay, you cut away the string to make it easier (and safer) for your livestock to dine. That’s when hay string becomes the “leftover” part of a farm meal and the fun of finding creative uses for it starts.

My point, however, is not to fill you with how-to’s about hay string. The point is that using hay string represents one angle on the many ways to make a go of life “out here” without having everything “just right.” When the animals’ food stock doesn’t need it any longer, hay string makes a lot of things okay.

I hope to encourage you to go for it, no matter what may seem to be lacking in your resources. I wish you well in raising good CROPs wherever you live.

CROP 1

What Not to Do Right

ALTHOUGH I'VE HEARD it advocated at more than one seminar on how to start and operate a successful business, I've never been especially good at the ready, fire, aim approach to life. I'm definitely more the plan-it-first type. As comfortable as getting ready can be, though, analysis does produce paralysis, and, perhaps sooner than you may want, you just have to leap into an opportunity. Making a move to the country can be that way, and once you "go there," the chances to jump in are as abundant as the grass in your pasture.

During our early days on the farm, enthusiastic Nancy was generally better than I was at firing first and then figuring out what we were aiming at. So was my oldest son. Let's try the goat business, they agreed. At the time, I was still commuting an hour-and-a-half morning and night to a job 70 miles away in the city, and all I could say was, "Goats? I don't think we know much about raising them and doubt we're ready to take on something like that, but you're the ones here all day."

I was right, of course. We weren't ready. We hadn't yet established family quarters near the barnyard where the goats lived and were milked. In fact, the singlewide into which all ten of us crammed ourselves was more than a quarter of a mile across the field from the barns. I can still conjure a mildly painful mental picture of my brave, then 13-year-old, son leading his several younger siblings across the field through twilight for the evening milking. (That now grown son is still manifesting overtly brave activities as an Army combat helicopter pilot, so I suppose his early land navigation

practice has come in handy.)

But Nancy and Philip were right, too. At worst, their venture in milk goats was an experiment to see just what it would take to have healthy milk for the family and perhaps some well-bred animals to sell. “Right” would have been finely-fenced pasture near the house (not to mention having a real house), a barn with milking equipment and running water, at least one well-trained livestock guardian dog (instead of three poorly trained ones), and a ready-made market for our animals.

That kind of right, though, would mean that now, 15 years later, we’d still be planning for our first herd of goats. Instead, we learned volumes about goats and grew to appreciate the fun of their often pet-dog-like personalities. It also allowed us, several years later, to quickly resume our by-then abandoned goat-raising in order to provide healthy, homemade infant formula when our eighth and last child was born. Serious birth problems, in which we nearly lost both Nancy and baby, made Andrew the only one of our children (including twins Rachel and Grace) that Nancy couldn’t nurse. Home-grown goat milk became the base for infant formula that provided far better nutrition than the grocery store soy-phospholipherous-faked-up freeze-dried material would have.

And by the way, now we milk a cow every day and still don’t have running water in the barn.

CROP 2

But Won't I Need a Tractor?

Unless you plan to become a professional farmer on more than a ten-acre spread from day one, probably not. In time, it might be nice, but we managed for three years on 100 acres with no tractor of our own.

Suppose you need bush hogging done. Believe me, there are plenty of folks in the country who will be happy to let you pay them an hourly wage to spend a handful of days each year zipping weeds and tall grass off your property. The cash outlay on a cutting day may seem painful ($60 an hour, for instance, for 8 hours = $480), but that amount is a trickle in the creek compared to the cost to purchase and maintain a good tractor.

Early on, I even arranged to "barter" bush hogging ("bush hogging," by the way, means using a heavy-duty, rough-cutting mower to hack down everything from long grass to saplings). The widow next door (literally) had a tractor and fields to bush hog but no one to operate the tractor. Her next door neighbor (me), on the other hand, had the same kind of fields, no tractor, but someone who was itching to learn tractoring (me again). For a couple of years, I used her tractor to cut her fields in exchange for her letting me use the tractor to bush hog mine. It was a happy trade.

Is it convenient to have a tractor sitting in the barn waiting for you to put it to work? You bet (except when it needs fixing). I've found more chores to do with a front loader than I could ever have imagined before having one to use, but it's not essential. Absence of a tractor is certainly not something that should stop you from cranking up farm life if you don't have one or think you can't afford one.

And what about harvesting your hay? After 15 years here, I've never once cut my own hay, and even if I stay here until I'm 120, I have no intention of ever cutting hay myself. The hay-share deals with cutters and balers around here who already have $50,000 worth of cutting, raking, fluffing, bailing, and loading equipment is too good to pass up. Even when my one-third share of the crop doesn't feed my horses and cows all the way through the winter, payments on a couple dozen round bales at $35 each are way less than payments would be on the array of equipment I'd have to own in order to do it "for free."

CROP 3

How Will I Get Everything Done?

THE ANSWER to this one is easy: You won't.

You'd think everyone would figure this out sooner rather than never in life. Whether you're living a noisy existence in the suburbs or a "quiet" one in the country, you'll never get it all done. I'm tempted to add: So just quit trying. But that's not quite the right answer, either.

An acquaintance I once met at a business meeting in town seemed fascinated—and perhaps a bit horrified—when she found out I lived on a hundred acres of land in the country.

"I can't even take good care of my yard," she observed. "I can't imagine what it must be like to look after that many acres."

I explained that land tucked away in the country doesn't require the manicure that a highly visible lawn and garden in a suburban neighborhood does. She remained skeptical. More than anything else, I suspect she simply wouldn't want to live so far from the mall, but "keeping the yard neat" was a less revealing objection.

So what if I'm too busy collecting farm-fresh eggs to weed-eat around the maple trees in my front yard—or too cash-flow poor or mechanically challenged to fix one of my three broken weed-eaters? Maybe by the time ten cars pass my property sometime during the next week or two, one of them will stop and complain about my mess, but I doubt it. And there's no neighborhood garden club to cite me for delinquent lawn management. It's up to me to manage obsessive-compulsive instincts so as to live peaceably

with the lack of pristine order in my lawn and pasture.

A once-a-year fence line trim job will have to do where a quarterly one would be nice (and, no, I'm not willing to poison my ground with Roundup® just to have the fence line look pretty).

Make a list of your goals for fixing and maintaining things, to be sure. Writing it down gives you permission to forget it until timing and funding come together to let you make progress. Then, accept your limitations and be thankful for the few things you do find time and money to get done. Meanwhile, drink in the scenery every day and enjoy it without dissing yourself and your situation in life for not finishing the projects on your list.

CROP 4

Department of De Fence

Besides a place for the family to live, the most important infrastructure on any farm is fencing. Unless you plan never to raise any animal other than a cat or dog, you'll need some kind of fence (if you truly aspire to non-animal-raising country life, you can skip this CROP).

I'll admit that if I could do one thing absolutely right, fencing would be it. I'd have perimeter fence around everything to keep animals in, yard fence around the house to keep animals out, cross-fencing for separate grazing paddocks, barnyard fencing, decorative fencing, movable fencing, and maybe even a few other types of fencing I haven't discovered yet. I'd have well-stretched, arrow-straight, firmly-anchored field fence and solid metal gates with stainless steel latches. There would be treated wood fences with high-framed entryways for the driveway—even a sign at the top showing the name of my farm. I'd use electric fence only where it is truly the best fencing solution. And I would recycle every millimeter of barbed wire on my property and never let another piece of the stuff within an inch of the perimeter (I'd say "within a mile," but I can't keep my neighbors from using barbed wire along our common boundaries).

But what do I have? Drooping, rusty field fence, held together in especially droopy places with hay string. Gates made of cast-off cattle panels, hinged and latched with—you guessed it—hay string. Electrified wire where cross-fencing with real field fence should be. And barbed wire—miles of it. In fact, my last fencing project was putting up another 1200 feet of the demonically jagged tentacles to replace the ancient, rusting-into-the-soil

fence at which the horses chuckled when wandering past on their way into the neighbor's woods.

Yet the set-up I have works. As annoying as it is to be late for church because we had to lead the cow in from the road before we could milk her, finding the latest hole and twisting it together with free hay string is a small price to pay for enjoying homegrown milk on an inadequately fenced farm. If I waited until I could do the multi-thousand-dollar fencing job of my dreams, I would likely be drinking watery, store-bought milk until I die (which would probably happen sooner), and my daughters would be 75 before they learned to ride a horse.

So you have to have some kind of fence. But if it's not worthy of a photo op in the Premiere Sheep Supplies catalog or a Tractor Supply Company annual report, don't let it stop you. As long as it stops the livestock most of the time, you'll do okay.

CROP 5

Grow with Your Garden

There are approximately 37,000 different gardening methods. I know. We've tried them all. And they all work.

You haven't taken the Master Gardener Course? So what. Don't worry if you've never even grown a blade of grass. Better to jab a seed or two in the ground and let nature take its course than never to have a garden at all. In fact, our first foray into country gardening was just about that simple. While we did have a neighbor till the ground with his tractor, that was about the only thing we did right. Our seeds, though, were not deterred.

We learned that squash, in particular, can be very prolific. We picked, boiled, ate, canned, and gave away squash until we couldn't keep up with the ripening fruit. Growing (and growing and growing) season ended with dozens of squash turning our garden into a compost pit. Somehow the plants had missed the part about not flourishing simply because we didn't know what we were doing. To the contrary, I think they took advantage of us and decided to overwhelm the neophytes instead.

Since then, we've tried other methods. Raised beds, till-and-plant in different locations, "lasagna" gardening (using old newspapers for fertilizer and plant bedding), black plastic for cover, cast-off hay for cover (don't try this one at home—or anywhere else—unless you like pulling up twice as many weeds as usual due to the seeds that invariably come with the hay), letting random stuff grow (good for assisting wild edibles in their natural tendency to thrive), and wood chips, to name as many as I can think of.

While my favorite so far is wood chip mulch (fewer weeds, natural nutrients, and repeat use without much soil prep), you may find something else that suits you. If you've been reading tomes about different garden types and are trying to discern which one is right, forget it. At the risk of sounding like the relativist I'm not, gardening is a case in which what's right truly is what's right for you.

If one particular type of garden strikes your fancy, give it a go. The worst that will happen is that it won't work as well as the book said it would, and you can try something different next year. Meanwhile, you'll likely have a neighbor or two whose gardens are over-producing. Many folks will give you their excess or let you buy it from them. We've even had neighbors who gave up picking because they had so much, and they invited us to "glean" their garden just so it wouldn't go to waste.

So: Lack of gardening experience is no excuse not to do country. Try something, and your gardening expertise will grow with each passing season.

CROP 6

In a Fix

WHAT IF the tractor breaks? Or the mower? Or weedeater? My farm truck? The air compressor? You may think being a whiz with machinery is a requirement for successful farm living. I'm guessing it's nice to be one, but I wouldn't know from experience. So what do you do if something breaks?

Find someone else to fix it. "Out here" seems to come with more than the usual per capita share of mechanical geniuses. And if that doesn't work, most towns nearby will have a bona fide professional who can do the job. Waiting to get repairs done is a great way to learn patience.

CROP 7

Friendless in the Country

LEAVING A SET OF FRIENDS to make a move anywhere is difficult, whether from city to city or city to country. Understandably, though, the city to country move may be more intimidating for those who have never done it. If you're used to urban social patterns—church, neighborhood associations, Boy or Girl Scouts, little league teams, or any of the assorted connections that come naturally with denser populations—transitioning to more sparsely settled areas may be a bit scary. Yet connections happen in the country, often quickly.

The nearest incorporated town to our farm is Lynnville, Tennessee, seven miles east of us. Its population holds steady at around 400 and is serviced for news by the weekly newspaper published in Pulaski, 18 miles south of here.

We moved to our farm in March of the year, and shortly afterward, the newspaper ran an article announcing that the spring tourist season had officially arrived. Tour vans had been seen stopping in Lynnville. We still think we were the ones that had been observed showing up in town for the first time. In those days, our family of ten travelled everywhere in a 15-passenger van that we had, in fact, purchased several years earlier from a *tour* van leasing company in Nashville. At least we got noticed.

The nearby neighbors noticed, too. Having landed on our farm from "the big city" in early 1999, we were evidently a time-sensitive curiosity. Very soon, a gentleman from the next hollow over—whose land actually bordered ours on the far back side—stopped in to see what we were about.

"Did you come out here because of Y2k?" he wondered.

Not that we hadn't thought about the dangers of social collapse at the turn of the millennium, but it wasn't our prime motivator for the move. We had been shopping for land more than two years before we ever even heard that the world as we knew it would end in 2000. We discovered the "wisdom" of our plans once they were already in process.

We assured our neighbor that we weren't just temporary preppers who would scurry back to town if the world survived past midnight on December 31, 1999. We were out here for the long haul.

Our long haul so far has been 15 years. So you might assume that we're well settled and integrated into the community by now. And by some measures, we are. We have more good friends than ever, comprised of other transplants like us (you'll be encouraged by how such folks naturally find each other) as well as some true long-timers.

In our neck of the woods, "long-timers" has its own significance. They are the ones who are the *residents*. The rest of us are still newcomers. In fact, the man who asked us about our Y2k-motivated move is one of the newcomers, even though he's been here six years longer than we have.

So what constitutes a resident? Let me tell you about that.

About half of our long-haul ago, a neighbor up the road (another newcomer—from Florida) invited us to a Christmas party at his house. Since the neighbor had jumped right into the haying business the first year after his move, he got to know a lot of folks very quickly. Even though here five years less than we had been, this guy knew many people I didn't, and one of his guests was an man in his 80s, a resident. How did I know? He had the story to prove it.

We engaged in a fascinating conversation about his family history. He vividly recounted the story he'd heard his grandfather tell about the Civil War. His granddaddy had been six-years-old when Yankees swept through the community and burned down the family home. It might as well have happened last weekend.

A first generation Southerner myself (my parents and grandparents were Midwesterners, from Iowa and Wisconsin), I had learned from the days of elementary school to respect the notion that Civil War history could still be a sore point for some people. Now I knew it could actually be a painful memory, too.

Another trait of residents is a fine work ethic. They grew up milking thirty cows by hand each day before heading off to school. Or learned what to plant and when to plant it before they learned to read. And they can repair a broken hay baler in the field by flashlight at 10:00 P.M. because they watched their granddaddy do it a dozen times while growing up.

Although you may run into a resident now and then who'd rather think of you as someone who doesn't belong "out here," we've mostly found them very welcoming. They seem to recognize and appreciate that we landed among them because we think it's a better place to be than wherever we were. The common bond of appreciating the land is real and warm, no matter how long or short a time you've been around.

CROP 8

How Will We Ever Find the Right Place?

I WON'T MINCE WORDS on this one. Finding a place in the country that's right for you can be tough. Really tough. Really, really tough, in fact, if not downright despair-inducing hard. (If you're already a rural inhabitant, you may know what I'm talking about and might enjoy the catharsis of reading on. Otherwise, this is a section you can skip.)

We know some people who seem to have had a golden touch when it came to finding their place in the sun and under the stars. One family near us moved to Tennessee from Alaska. How did they manage it? After an extensive Internet search of possibilities, they narrowed the range to central Tennessee. They lined up a series of properties for sale. Then father and oldest son took a trip here to check out the prospects. Having nearly wrapped up their week-long tour, they decided to see one last property, and although they had viewed many good places, that one last farm had everything on their check list. A month or two later (I honestly don't recall exactly how long), they were at home on a farm ten minutes from us.

While I'm sure there are other such "miracle" stories, our miracle didn't happen that way. Not nearly. Instead, the Lord must have known we needed to suffer in order to appreciate our ultimate "glory." We started the search with six children in the 15-passenger "tour" van. At the time, our twins were a year old, and our oldest was 11.

Hours on the then-rudimentary Internet led to even more hours in the

van where we managed multiple age-graded car seats, a double portion of diapers, pounds of crumbly snacks, and countless rest room breaks. For three years, we roamed the middle Tennessee countryside on most weekends—long enough for Nancy to get pregnant again, deliver our seventh child, and add yet another car seat to the van.

We made offers on three different properties (one of them twice), burned out two different realtors, and nearly had to take out a second mortgage to pay for the gas. (Okay, I admit: that last comment is an exaggeration, but we certainly burned up many of the "extras" we may have been able to afford otherwise.)

Our miracle finally did happen, even though we passed it up the first time we saw it. One overheated summer, we made a lackluster drive-by at what our overloaded brains and emotions took to be an unappealing house and barn. We scratched that piece of heaven off our list.

Three months later, some city friends who were likewise searching for a way to transition to country life described a wondrous piece of property with ponds, creeks, fields, and woods that was a bit out of their price range but that they thought might be just within ours. The location sounded oddly familiar, but since these friends knew us well, we took their word for it and drove 60 miles south to see the property. And there it was: the unappealing house and barn which now didn't appear nearly so unappealing. Perhaps the October air had cooled our brains. We had also refreshed ourselves by taking a few weeks off from the search.

This time, we drove the property, and our check list was fulfilled. Not only that, in the intervening three months, the owner had dropped the price nearly $30,000 which did, in fact, bring it into our price range. Now, 15 years later, I'm sitting in that unappealing house writing this book.

Miracles happen—so does pain and suffering.

CROP 9

An Inconvenient Life

I'VE HEARD people draw back from the idea of country living because:

• I couldn't imagine being more than ten minutes from the grocery store. What if we run out of something?
• It's too far from a hospital. What if somebody gets hurt?
• No restaurants nearby? I can't give up going out to eat so easily.
• I enjoy the culture of the city too much—theater, symphonies, the ballet.

My quick responses are:

• *Plan ahead*. Take advantage of any trip into town to stock up on what you need. Then be willing to suffer a bit if a crisis arises like running out of ice cream. (Plan ahead doesn't always work, of course. Even today as I write this, we're groaning because Nancy has to make a special trip into town. When we were there earlier this week, we forgot to pick up the fixings for what we promised to take to dinner at a friend's house tonight. That's when "grin and bear it" applies instead.)
• *First aid is something everyone should know*. Unless you're already very old or have a serious chronic condition, chances are slim you'll have a life-threatening situation that requires a hospital within walking distance. In 15 active years on the farm, we've treated more than one sprained ankle (with no professional medical help), made several 30-minute trips to the closest

emergency room for stitches (and admittedly did not make one trip we should have—my second son has the scar on his arm to prove it), endured two broken fingers (only one that needed medical help), made the same 30-minute trip to the hospital for an emergency Caesarean delivery (this one truly was scary and comes the closest to making the too-far-from-the-hospital a legitimate worry), and coped with various muscle strains, stomach bugs, colds, flu, even a tick-born illness and appendicitis, and are all still around to share the war stories.

• *Right. Going out to eat takes longer*. Big whoop.

• *How often do you really go to the symphony?* If you are the rare person who attends weekly performances or can't live without season tickets to your city's every cultural event, then maybe country life truly isn't for you. Otherwise, make the drive every now and then to get your culture fix.

Meanwhile, here's *my* list of some of the things you'll be giving up by moving to the country:

• *The destruction of your soul* that comes with making regular trips to the mall.

• *Slow mental and spiritual death* that results from TV watching and video games as your primary source of entertainment and down-time recreation.

• *High-level exposure to other people and things that incite lust, greed, and envy*.

• *Increased potential to be discontent* because of not having what others around you have.

• *Distraction by noise and activity* that minimize times of solitude and growing closer to God.

And if you do head out of town, here's what you'll have to put up with:

• Frequent magnificent lessons from nature
• Quiet
• Solitude

- Privacy
- Fresh, natural foods
- Clean air
- Stars
- Awareness of the seasons.

So, you decide if the inconvenience is worth it.

CROP 10

Cracking the Dawn

If cities are known for their night life, I suppose it's arguable that country living is known for its up-before-sunrise patterns. But do you have to be a morning person in order to make it in the country?

Hardly.

I'll give a few passing nods to the potential that early-to-rise is helpful for rural living, but then assure you that "night people" can thrive outside the city limits, too. If you're commuting to a job in the city, up-early is probably a necessity, and I can't help you there. If not, though, read on because the good reasons for getting up early aren't etched in any stone on my farm.

Working in the garden or in the fields in summertime has the distinct advantage of lower temperatures early in the day. If you can manage to be outside by sunrise, you'll definitely enjoy the work more than if you don't venture out until it's noon, the temperature has already hit 90 degrees, and the high for the day is still two hours away. But then, what's a wide-brimmed hat for if not to build in some shade wherever you go?

Animals, too—especially chickens and milk cows—generally need tending twice a day. So the later in the morning you tend to them, the later in the evening you'll have to as well. But if you don't mind picking up eggs by flashlight or finding a Jersey cow in the dark, later evening works just fine.
In fact, having a cow or two—or some goats—to milk for the family (what I'm about to say does not apply to large-scale dairy operations) is likely the main

image that conjures the notion that waking before dawn is a requirement for country living.

Somehow that image also transfers to other country responsibilities, though not always for good reason. Let me share with you a summary of the truths we've learned about cows, in particular, that may help allay fears you have of your responsibility to be up before the sun.

People are all too easily intimidated by the thought of maintaining a dairy cow. Images of the dairy farmer rising each and every day at 3:00 A.M., spending several hours with the cows every evening, and never leaving the farm for more than eight hours at a stretch—let alone ever taking a vacation—give most folks a knot in the stomach over taking on a milk cow. But there's a vast difference between the required schedule of a commercial dairyman and a country home with just one or two warm, friendly, and productive members of the family to tend. The ten tips below make the low stress of a one-cow family well worth the rich, nutritious results.

1) *Cows cannot tell time*. As long as they are milked on a regular schedule, they don't care if it's 5 A.M., 5 P.M., midnight, or noon.

2) *Milk once a day*. Although it is customary to milk cows every 12 hours, once-a-day milking is also possible by:

• Leaving the calf to nurse 12 hours, separating it for 12 hours, milking, and then returning the calf for 12 hours, and so on. This works for about the first six months of the calf's life.

• Manipulating the milking schedule so the cow's body gets used to once-a-day milking. Our cow has given two gallons once a day for more than six months on this plan.

3) *Take an occasional 24-hour milking vacation* by leaving the young calf with its mother. Friends willing to cow-sit are invaluable, too.

4) *Cows don't mind being milked from both sides*. Many hands (four to be exact) make light work—and better conversation. Two people milking make it more fun and quicker.

5) *Make friends with your cow*. It is proven that cows spoken to in a gentle, friendly manner and patted lovingly will give more milk.

6) *Fancy milking equipment is not required*. The essentials:

- A clean, stainless steel bucket with a lid,
- Something to sit on,
- Something to hold the cow still (rope or head catch),
- An old hay string (again!) to tie her tail to her leg (unless you like being swished by a cow tail),
- A clean handkerchief, strong paper towels, or a washable coffee filter through which to strain the milk into jars.

7) *Cows are easy to fence in*. All it takes is one strand of electric wire. They can also be tied to a fence post to eat grass wherever you need it trimmed (my daughter calls this a lawn mooer).

8) *Cows must have a baby every year or two to continue giving milk*. They will let you know (the word *bellow* comes to mind) when the time is right for a bull or an artificial insemination specialist to visit. Gestation is nine months.

9) *Bull calves can be raised for meat and heifer calves raised as a spare milk cow* or sold for a good price.

10) *Get the* Family Cow *book for more ideas*.

The bottom line here is that you can manage your country life to provide the lifestyle that suits you best. At our house, we cover both ends of the day-night spectrum. When there's extra work to be done, Nancy is the night owl. About the time I'm struggling to stay awake reading for a few minutes, she's shifting into high gear.

When I have extras to get done, I've usually been up for several hours before she's even ready to get out of bed for coffee. And when we're not needing to burn midnight or early morning oil, we meet comfortably in the

middle—and take our animals and other farm chores along for the ride. If we're a half hour late for milking, what's the cow going to do? Milk herself? No, she'll still be standing by the door of the barn, or she'll trot just as happily across the pasture at 7:*30* A.M. as she would have at 7:00.

There's no need to let someone else's pattern—or your own preconceived notion of what's "right"—keep you from arranging life the way you want it. Even the animals will know whether or not you're really happy with the way things are.

CROP 11

Preparing for Imperfection

A LOT OF PEOPLE love to ballyhoo the need for excellence in all they do. Some maintain life principles such as "anything worth doing is worth doing right." I don't.

Too often, I've seen those outwardly admirable notions used as masks for compulsion or perfectionism. Besides making it difficult to relax and enjoy life, perfectionism tends to manifest two vastly different but equally destructive extremes.

Early in my career, I worked for one sort of perfectionist. He knew exactly what type of equipment would be needed to do the best possible work in our field—video production—but the problem was, we didn't have it. What we had instead was really good gear which could have been used far more than we used it but which often lay idle because "we couldn't do it right" with what we had. So we often produced far less than we could have otherwise.

Later, I took a job with perfectionists of another sort. There was no such thing as good enough to these people. That meant every job we produced took too much time, went over budget, and got done when it needed to only because people gave up every other good thing in life to stay at the office long enough to meet deadlines. Countless evenings, weekends, and holidays with family were lost attempting to make perfect happen. Even so, attaining perfection is a fantasy. No matter how much you've put into something, there's always a way to make it even better if you have a bit more time and money to do it.

The words *good enough* have gotten a bad rap. If you take them literally, there's no reason to do anything else. Apart from the negative connotations that have been heaped upon the phrase, what does good enough mean?

• *It means the thing that is good enough accomplishes the intended goal.* Otherwise, it wouldn't be good enough.

• *It means the resources required to do the job have been optimized.* We met the budget. We did it with the people and materials available, or it wouldn't have happened at all. We delivered what was needed. Otherwise, it wouldn't be good, and it wouldn't be enough.

• *It still allows you to "under-promise and over-deliver."* Sometimes during a project, good enough grows legitimately. You discover in the process that what you thought at the beginning would suffice to accomplish the necessary end actually isn't sufficient. So you modify along the way (while letting everyone know the implications for budget and timing) and set the bar for a new good enough.

If you think that means I don't believe in hard work, you're wrong. I even believe it's worth working hard to enjoy life to the fullest.

So: let go of perfectionism (you'll have to convince your compulsions to let go of you in order to do this), and make friends with good enough. If you do, the life you enjoy may be your own.

CROP 12

So What *Does* Need to Be Right?

WHILE IT'S KIND OF FUN to chuckle over the various country living factors you can "get by with," even I have to admit there are a few things you really do want to get right. Some of these apply specifically to those who are still planning the move while others apply to all of us. You'll know which ones are which as you read through my get-it-right list.

(1) *Know what you want in a piece of land*. While our vision for country living morphed even while we were shopping for land (and even more so once we got here), the basic list of we wanted served well. Think it through and crash test your ideas against reality as you look for a place in the country. Just a few of the primary considerations:

• How serious do you want to get about farming? Professional? Enough to supplement your family's menu? Not at all?

• Do you envision recreation, production, or aesthetics as your primary motivator for moving out of town?

(2) H*ave a plan for making a living*. For most people who've never done the country thing before, even if you want to earn your livelihood from your farm, that is a long-term strategy. Meanwhile, you'll need to put food on the table that someone else grew—and pay for the table, too.

• Will you commute to town to keep your old job? Permanently, or for how long until you can create an alternative income stream?

• Is your current work portable, or do you need to start now to ready yourself for a home-and-farm-based alternative?

Having spent many months commuting 70 miles each way to a job in the city, I was gearing up to launch into self-employment when a co-worker reflected on my situation by saying, “I’ve always thought it would be fun to go live in the country and write stuff.”

Fifteen years later, I’m finally living here and starting to write stuff. My friend probably hadn’t thought of all the *other* stuff I’d have to try in order to make a living in the meantime. I, on the other hand, had thought of many alternatives and ended up trying a lot of them. And I’d be a lot wealthier today than I am if everything I tried had worked as well as I had hoped. (Notice that I didn’t say you had to be sure your plan would work; I just said that you need a plan.)

(3) *Feel okay about pursuing your dream*. We live in a world in which most people don’t pursue what they’d really like to do in life. That means you’re the odd man or woman out if you do. And that makes you a target—for everything from light-hearted quips at the office about whether or not “you’ve found Webster manor yet” to “you’re even crazier and more irresponsible than I thought.” We discovered, too, that the closer the relationship (i.e., extended family versus friends), the more likely the comment would tend toward the “crazy” end of the continuum. Just feel quietly confident that you’re doing what’s best for you and your family, and go about the business of making it happen.

(4) *Accept that you’ll make mistakes*. This is the overall corollary to everything I’ve talked about in this book. Even if you have all the time, money, and skills to do everything absolutely right, you still won’t. Learning curves and the innate hardness of life assure all of us that things will go wrong—often due to our own efforts (review Genesis 3:17-19 if you’ve forgotten the part about the ground and thorns and thistles). But it’s okay. If you set your expectations so as to allow for mistakes and problems, it feels much better than if setbacks shock you every time they show up.

(5) *Believe you can do it*. Accepting #4 is half the battle on this one. Enjoy the learning process. It never ends, but if you like learning, you’ll also realize if you learned how to do one thing outside your comfort zone, you can learn the next.

(6) *Persist*. Hang in there—especially at first. “At first” may even last for several years, but the longer you go without giving up, the less attractive giving up becomes.

(7) *Have fun*. Nancy once re-posted on facebook a vintage picture of a man on a simple tractor. The caption said, “The happiest people don’t have the best of everything. They just make the best of everything they have.” I admit it’s hard to laugh when the tractor gets a flat tire—again—but even the troubles sometimes have built-in compensation or at least a safety valve to make it bearable. Take chickens, for instance. They may get out of the pen at times, but rather than fret, it’s more fun to laugh at how innately stupid they look and sound as they cluck around the yard.

CROP 13

The Never-Ready Battery

YOU'LL NEVER BE READY to make the break with city life. There. I said it. You'll have to let your vision and desire carry you through the part of it you can't manage or don't know how to do.

Nancy and I debated about whether or not we should do our dreams the "safe" way. For us, that meant continuing life in the suburbs, working my regular job, and getting our kids grown up. Then we could retire to the country someday. After all, that's what "responsible" people do.

The problem with that scenario, though, was that it meant we would never get to share our vision for country life with our growing children. Their children might someday benefit from a visit to grandma and grandpa's farm, but we'd be raising city kids who'd never had a chance to walk out the back door, grab a saddle, and unwind on horseback for 30 minutes before dinnertime. My marksman-and-now-Army-officer son would never have discovered he could shoot a coyote through the heart at 300 yards with an open-site rifle from the front deck of our house. None of my curious, nature-loving kids would have ever experienced the science lesson provided by our annual "night of the toads" when many hundreds of hopping, chirping amphibians join together (literally) at the pond to lay eggs. None of us would have been dazzled on every clear night by ten times more stars than we ever saw from our neighborhood in town. No, only our grandchildren would have had even a portion of those opportunities—and that just wasn't good enough for us.

One more thing about the advantage of country living: In times of crisis, you'll fare better "out here." Our world—thanks to many dysfunctional economic things we've done in the United States to assure our own future

instability—will likely not continue on the way it has been. Although I'm not a full-blown "prepper," taking seriously what could happen in a social collapse is still a good idea. Getting away from urban areas and learning some agrarian skills will come in handy—to say the least.

So if you're not ready because of all the things you can't do or aren't sure about, I sympathize, but I strongly recommend that you get over it and move on anyway. And if you're struggling to make it after your move out of town and wonder what you've gotten yourself into, I can sympathize with that, too. The struggle is what it takes, but do the cost-benefit analysis, and you'll reassure yourself that it's worth it. On a good day, I know you know that, too. So on the bad days, just take my word for it. Adapt to the creative tension of accepting things as they are while aspiring to improve, and you'll discover the joy that makes life in the country better than perfect.

About the Author

When city kids Greg Webster and Nancy Stuart wedded in 1980, they talked about the "someday" they hoped would allow them to live on a farm away from places like Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Nashville where they ended up spending nearly 20 years of their married life.

As of Fall 2014, we're in the sixteenth year on our "partially working" farm, and we love it. Most things worth doing are difficult, and the sojourn here has followed that rule.

Although only one of our eight children has been born since we moved to our farm, half of them don't very well remember ever living anywhere else. Nancy has spent most of her time home schooling, learning about raising productive animals and plants, and leading us into all kinds of healthy, nutritious, and satisfying ways to eat better.

In one way or another, Greg has worked in publishing, advertising, marketing, and writing throughout his career. Thanks to the Internet, all of that blends very well with rural living.

Perhaps the least relevant part of our background is our education, but since this is an author bio, it belongs in here somewhere. Nancy earned a bachelor's degree in advertising at the University of Georgia (where we met), while Greg earned a degree there in journalism followed by an M.B.A. And as if that weren't enough, Greg also earned an M.A. in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. In those pre-children seminary days, we explored California and the West from top to bottom. As we like to tell people: "Los Angeles is a great place to visit other places from."

And to save the best for last: We do our utmost to keep at the center of all we do the faith that God is at work in and through us. After being raised as good Presbyterians and enjoying a fascinating spiritual journey in our younger adult lives, we now delight in worshipping in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

May God bless you with all good joys and trials!