



JEFF DWORSKY

## *A Place Slowly Earned*

*Chellie Pingree*

In 1971 I stepped off a ferry and was on an island. A Minnesota girl, all of 17 years old, I had a long blond braid, wire-rimmed glasses, and a metal-framed backpack containing all my earthly possessions. I had come to visit Charlie, a friend I'd met through a school program, who had taken up residence in an abandoned family cabin at the end of a mile-long dirt road. There was no running water, no electricity, and no TV. Armed with *Living the Good Life* by Helen and Scott Nearing, we wanted to go back to the land. During the summer we were surrounded by our friends from away who drifted through, shared our ritual diet of soybeans and brown rice, and talked about subsistence farming and forming an "alternative community." By fall they were gone, but I never left.

Charlie was from a summer family with a 100-year history, and when he didn't go home at the end

of the season, people were confused. Although there were two or three families we visited sometimes, people rarely spoke to us in the store or asked us questions in the post office. We naively thought we were unnoticed, and it surprised us when we heard the rumor that we were spies for the summer people.

Charlie was able to find a job with the road contractor, but there were no jobs for me, so I stayed home making candles for a mainland craft store. During my second winter, a creeping need to be involved drove me to ask if I could volunteer at

the school. The kindergarten teacher "from away" was pleased to have my offer of help, and the principal had only to propose it to the school board for approval.

I will never forget the principal's expression when he came in and sat next to the woodstove in our two-room cabin. Reluctantly he told me there was a problem: the board had unanimously voted not to allow me in the school. He quoted one of the board members: "The girl who drives that red pickup truck is not coming in our school."

At the time I felt only bewilderment at these

feelings of animosity from people I didn't even know. What I didn't understand was that upon stepping onto the island I had entered a community. There were standards and requirements, unconsciously crafted by a community to ensure its longevity and stability. I hadn't even known what a community was, but I spent the next 20 years learning — and probably will never stop.

We moved away for three years, and in the separation people seemed to warm to us a little. When we returned for summer visits, people would ask us when we were moving back. Although we fully intended to start a new life on the mainland — we even built ourselves a house there — the pull of the island was strong. We wanted to come back. We did — married, with our first child, armed with a college education and vocational training — determined to fit in.

We chose work that suited island life: I ran a farm (cows, chickens, sheep, and vegetables), and Charlie built boats. In the winter, I started an egg delivery route, dropping by my customers' houses once a week. I came in through their kitchen doors and was occasionally asked to sit at their well-scrubbed or cluttered tables and drink coffee. Talking about the small things that fill our lives, I gradually began to know my neighbors and find out who was in this community. I heard about their mother's health, how to cook salt fish, who was related to whom. Then I went home and scrubbed my table, did my chores, and retold the stories to Charlie.

Every day people dropped by to pick up their glass jugs full of rich yellow milk layered into skim and cream. I invited them into my kitchen and was honored if they accepted. I poured them coffee, proud of the clean glass milk jugs draining in the sink, and I'd ask them questions until they were tired. Gardening was a favorite topic of conversation: I learned to start my tomatoes on town meeting day, not to touch my beans after a rain, and how to fool the slugs. People loaned me their butter molds and told me how their mother got the last drop of buttermilk out of the rich yellow grease. I learned to quilt, I learned to knit. Before long I was the mother of two babies, then three. Sometimes a few other young mothers would come by, and we'd watch each other's children and exchange stories, wondering if we were good mothers. Older women would drop by too; they told me about rubbing vodka into a child's emerging tooth, staying away from Vaseline for diaper rash, and rubbing Avon crèmes into my own face to postpone the wrinkles that were sure to come.

In July and August I sold vegetables to the summer people on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from the shed attached to my house. Sometimes a customer showed up on a Saturday,

pleading for tomatoes for a critical dinner party, or called long after I'd gone to sleep, asking me to save the highly desired but rationed sweet corn for her the next morning. I began to understand the price my island neighbors paid to earn their living. Summer exhausted everyone; winter was when the community reconnected.

We raised pigs and they escaped from every pen and we chased them through our muddy pond and neighbors' fields. We bred a sow once, who rested on the backseat of my VW van as a friend and I took her on the ferry to meet her mainland mate. The sow returned a month later and got larger by the day. Shortly before the piglets were due, she became hopelessly lame. When no drugs or treatments would bring her back to her feet, we consulted the man in town who knew the most about animals — the chairman of the school board. He came over and shot her. Then he showed us how to rub her with tar and hoist her with the tractor bucket to dip her body in boiling water, so that we could scrape her hair off the hot skin. Finally we cut a slit down her middle and stood back while her hot insides and never-to-breathe piglets tumbled out.

We turned to him for advice on other occasions after that — how to hobble a cow who wouldn't keep her foot out of the milk bucket, how to treat a calf with diarrhea. I hadn't become an islander, but I was learning to ask questions.

People helped us with haying and we ate a big meal together when it was done. Friends came over when we plucked chickens or froze sweet corn and we shared the results. The more people learned about us, the more often they would speak to us on the long ferry rides, ask us along on Sunday picnics, invite us over for dinner. I learned a paradox of island life: to be accepted, or even given your privacy, you had to let people know a little about who you were. They had to know who they were allowing to join the community, whether you wanted to participate or not.

We began to go to meetings where the community plotted its course and made everyday decisions — town meetings where salaries were set for road crew workers and fire trucks were talked about and the recreation council defended the money for an outdoor basketball court; school board meetings where parents disagreed with teachers or principals and told them what they thought. At first I was silent, rehearsing the words in my head before I spoke, even though they were mild. Eventually I even learned to say things that others would disagree with, about taxes or schools or the ferry schedule. I learned that people could get angry at me in a meeting and the next day in the store would ask how my wood was holding up this winter or whether I would be plowing gardens



*Fox Islands Thorofare*

in the spring. I learned that on an island people depend on each other too much to hold grudges over any but the most important disagreements.

I rode the ferry, never knowing who I was going to sit next to. Often I found myself in conversations with people who had disagreed with an article I'd written for the local newspaper or who didn't like me because I was from away. We'd end up talking about which potholes in the road were hardest to avoid or how many trees were lost in the last storm or maybe how sad it was to have a relative die. As the boat docked, we'd both be thinking about our commonalities.

Sometimes the ride was rough. If there were children along, mothers would shuffle through their canvas bags looking for something for their children to get sick in. If the mother was sick, someone else would comfort the child while she went out on deck for fresh air. On one gray day, a northeast wind was building at boat time. The captain hesitated before starting the engines for home, but once the ferry was loaded, he set her out to test the waters and then he just kept going. The boat pitched and trembled in spite of the captain's best efforts to tackle each wave gently. An older woman sitting on a hard plastic seat was nervous, and everyone's attention gradually focused on her. The cabin, with seats for 30, became cozy and enclosed us all tightly as we huddled in the back. People

told stories about other storm crossings and joked with her. A young man whom I had watched grow up leaped up to share her seat, teasing her not to tell his wife. She laughed and blushed and for a moment didn't think about the next shudder and crash that was soon to come. It was almost an embrace — a small, random group of community members helping her through the ride and giving us all comfort.

I was two seats ahead of the old woman. In the seat between us was her daughter, a middle-aged woman, once a member of the school board that kept me out. She was not my valued friend. I had shared many ferry conversations with her and listened to her wisdom about children, the community, and the school board, of which I was not the chairperson. It had taken 20 years, but in spite of how little I knew when I made that first step, I was now part of this random group. I had never created the alternative community of chosen peers that my friends and I had once discussed. But here on and island, I had come to belong.

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