

# Radical Homemaking: Why Both Men and Women Should Get Back In Kitchen

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Long before we could pronounce Betty Friedan's last name, Americans from my generation felt her impact. Many of us born in the mid-1970s learned from our parents and our teachers that women no longer needed to stay home, that there were professional opportunities awaiting us. In my own school experience, homemaking, like farming, gained a reputation as a vocation for the scholastically impaired. Those of us with academic promise learned that we could do whatever we put our minds to, whether it was conquering the world or saving the world. I was personally interested in saving the world. That path eventually led me to conclude that homemaking would play a major role toward achieving that goal.

My own farming background led me to pursue advanced degrees in the field of sustainable agriculture, with a powerful interest in the local food movement. By the time my Ph.D. was conferred, I was married, and I was in a state of confusion. The more I understood about the importance of small farms and the nutritional, ecological, and social value of local food, the more I questioned the value of a 9-to-5 job. If my husband and I both worked and had children, it appeared that our family's ecological impact would be considerable. We'd require two cars, professional wardrobes, convenience foods to make up for lost time in the kitchen ... and we'd have to buy, rather than produce, harvest, and store, our own food.

The economics didn't work out, either. When we crunched the numbers, our gross incomes from two careers would have been high, but the cost of living was also considerable, especially when daycare was figured into the calculation. Abandoning the job market, we re-joined my parents on our small grassfed livestock farm and became homemakers. For almost ten years now, we've been able to eat locally and organically, support local businesses, avoid big box stores, save money, and support a family of four on less than \$45,000 per year.

Wondering if my family was a freaky aberration to the conventional American culture, I decided to post a notice on my webpage, looking to connect with other ecologically minded homemakers. My fingers trembled on the keyboard as I typed the notice. What, exactly, would be the repercussions for taking a pro-homemaker stand and seeking out others? Was encouraging a Radical Homemaking movement going to unravel all the social advancements that have been made in the last 40-plus years? Women, after all, have been the homemakers since the beginning of time. Or so I thought.

## The Origins of Homemaking: A vocation for both sexes

Upon further investigation, I learned that the household did not become the "woman's sphere" until the Industrial Revolution. A search for the origin of the word housewife traces it back to the thirteenth century, as the feudal period was coming to an end in Europe and the first signs of a middle class were popping up. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains that housewives were wedded to husbands, whose name came from *hus*, an old spelling of house, and bonded. Husbands were bonded to houses, rather than to lords. Housewives and husbands were free people, who owned their own homes and lived off their land. While there was a division of labor among the sexes in these early households, there was also an equal distribution of domestic work. Once the Industrial Revolution happened, however, things changed. Men left the household to work for wages, which were then used to purchase goods and services that they were no longer home to provide. Indeed, the men were the first to lose their domestic skills as successive generations forgot how to butcher the family hog, how to sew leather, how to chop firewood.

As the Industrial Revolution forged on and crossed the ocean to America, men and women eventually stopped working together to provide for their household sustenance. They developed their separate spheres—man in the factory, woman in the home. The more a man worked outside the home, the more the household would have to buy in order to have needs met. Soon the factories were able to fabricate products to supplant the housewives' duties as well. The housewife's primary function ultimately became chauffeur and consumer. The household was no longer a unit of production. It was a unit of consumption.

## Housewife's Syndrome

The effect on the American housewife was devastating. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, documenting for the first time "the problem that has no name," Housewife's Syndrome, where American girls grew up fantasizing about finding their husbands, buying their dream homes and appliances, popping out babies, and living happily ever after. In truth, pointed out Friedan, happily-ever-after never came. Countless women suffered from depression and nervous breakdowns as they faced the endless meaningless tasks of shopping and driving children hither and yon. They never had opportunities to fulfill their highest potential, to challenge themselves, to feel as though they were truly contributing to society beyond wielding the credit card to keep the consumer culture humming. Friedan's book sent women to work in droves. And corporate America seized upon a golden opportunity to secure a cheaper workforce and offer countless products to use up their paychecks.

Before long, the second family income was no longer an option. In the minds of many, it was a necessity. Homemaking, like eating organic foods, seemed a luxury to be enjoyed only by those wives whose husbands garnered substantial earnings, enabling them to drive their children to school rather than put them on a bus, enroll them in endless enrichment activities, oversee their educational careers, and prepare them for entry into elite colleges in order to win a leg-up in a competitive workforce. At the other extreme, homemaking was seen as the realm of the ultra-religious, where women accepted the role of Biblical "Help Meets" to their husbands. They cooked, cleaned, toiled, served and remained silent and powerless. My husband and I fell into neither category, and I suspected there were more like us.

## Meet the Radical Homemakers

I was right. I received hundreds of letters from rural, suburban, and city folks alike. Some ascribed to specific religious faiths, others did not. As long as the home showed no signs of domination or oppression, I was interested in learning more about them. I selected twenty households from my pile, plotted them on a map across the United States, and set about visiting each of them to see what homemaking could look like when men and women shared both power and responsibility. Curious to see if Radical Homemaking was a venture suited to more than just women in married couples, I visited with single parents, stay-at-home dads, widows, and divorcees. I spent time in families with and without children.

A glance into America's past suggests that homemaking could play a big part in addressing the ecological, economic and social crises of our present time. Homemakers have played a powerful role during several critical periods in our nation's history. By making use of locally available resources, they made the boycotts leading up to the American Revolution possible. They played a critical role in the foundational civic education required to launch a young democratic nation. They were driving forces behind both the abolition and suffrage movements.

Homemakers today could have a similar influence. The Radical Homemakers I interviewed had chosen to make family, community, social justice, and the health of the planet the governing principles of their lives. They rejected any form of labor or the expenditure of any resource that did not honor these tenets. For about 5,000 years, our culture has been hostage to a form of organization by domination that fails to honor our living systems, under which “he who holds the gold makes the rules.” By contrast, the Radical Homemakers are using life skills and relationships as replacements for gold, on the premise that he or she who doesn’t need the gold can change the rules. The greater one’s domestic skills, be they to plant a garden, grow tomatoes on an apartment balcony, mend a shirt, repair an appliance, provide one’s own entertainment, cook and preserve a local harvest, or care for children and loved ones, the less dependent one is on the gold.

By virtue of these skills, the Radical Homemakers I interviewed were building a great bridge from our existing extractive economy—where corporate wealth has been regarded as the foundation of economic health, where mining our Earth’s resources and exploiting our international neighbors have been acceptable costs of doing business—to a life serving economy, where the goal is, in the words of David Korten, to generate a living for all, rather than a killing for a few; where our resources are sustained, our waters are kept clean, our air pure, and families can lead meaningful lives. In situations where one person was still required to work out of the home in the conventional extractive economy, homemakers were able to redirect the family’s financial, social and temporal resources toward building the life-serving economy. In most cases, however, the homemakers’ skills were so considerable that, while members of the household might hold jobs (more often than not they ran their own businesses), the financial needs of the family were so small that no one in the family was forced to accept any employment that did not honor the four tenets of family, community, social justice and ecological sustainability.

While all the families had some form of income that entered their lives, they were not a privileged set by any means. Most of the families I interviewed were living with a sense of abundance at about 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That’s a little over \$40,000 for a family of four, about 37 percent below the national median family income, and 45 percent below the median income for married couple families. Some lived on considerably less, few had appreciably more. Not surprisingly, those with the lowest incomes had mastered the most domestic skills and had developed the most innovative approaches to living.

### Rethinking the Impossible

The Radical Homemakers were skilled at the mental exercise of rethinking the “givens” of our society and coming to the following conclusions: nobody (who matters) cares what (or if) you drive; housing does not have to cost more than a single moderate income can afford (and can even cost less); it is okay to accept help from family and friends, to let go of the perceived ideal of independence and strive instead for interdependence; health can be achieved without making monthly payments to an insurance company; child care is not a fixed cost; education can be acquired for free; and retirement is possible, regardless of income.

As for domestic skills, the range of talents held by these households was as varied as the day is long. Many kept gardens, but not all. Some gardened on city rooftops, some on country acres, some in suburban yards. Some were wizards at car and appliance repairs. Others could sew. Some could build and fix houses; some kept livestock. Others crafted furniture, played music, or wrote. All could cook. (Really well, as my waistline will attest.) None of them could do everything. No one was completely self-sufficient, an independent island separate from the rest of the world. Thus the universal skills that they all possessed were far more complex than simply knowing how to can green beans or build a root cellar. In order to make it as homemakers, these people had to be wizards at nurturing relationships and working with family and community. They needed an intimate understanding of the life-serving economy, where a paycheck is not always exchanged for all services rendered. They needed to be their own teachers—to pursue their educations throughout life, forever learning new ways to do more, create more, give more.

In addition, the happiest among them were successful at setting realistic expectations for themselves. They did not live in impeccably clean houses on manicured estates. They saw their homes as living systems and accepted the flux, flow, dirt, and chaos that are a natural part of that. They were masters at redefining pleasure not as something that should be bought in the consumer marketplace, but as something that could be created, no matter how much or how little money they had in their pockets. And above all, they were fearless. They did not let themselves be bullied by the conventional ideals regarding money, status, or material possessions. These families did not see their homes as a refuge from the world. Rather, each home was the center for social change, the starting point from which a better life would ripple out for everyone.

Home is where the great change will begin. It is not where it ends. Once we feel sufficiently proficient with our domestic skills, few of us will be content to simply practice them to the end of our days. Many of us will strive for more, to bring more beauty to the world, to bring about greater social change, to make life better for our neighbors, to contribute our creative powers to the building of a new, brighter, more sustainable, and happier future. That is precisely the great work we should all be tackling. If we start by focusing our energies on our domestic lives, we will do more than reduce our ecological impact and help create a living for all. We will craft a safe, nurturing place from which this great creative work can happen.

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*Portions of this story are excerpted from Shannon Hayes’ newest book, Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity From a Consumer Culture ([http://www.chelseagreen.com/bookstore/item/radical\\_homemakers:paperback](http://www.chelseagreen.com/bookstore/item/radical_homemakers:paperback)), Left to Write Press, 2010.*