

Dear Mom, It's not easy being green...





Babe in The Woods

*A teenager—and her mom—explore what it really means to
be good stewards of the earth*



BY WENDY LOVINGER AND GAY DALY

THE MOM By sophomore year, my daughter Wendy was fed up with the private high school she attended in New York City. While I was away on a trip that fall, my husband okayed her plan to apply to something called Maine Coast Semester, a boarding school with an environmentally based curriculum on Chewonki Neck, a peninsula north of Portland. I was furious. He had opened the door for my baby to spend four months away from home not long before we'd be losing her to college. However, I quickly saw that this was a done deal. She was eager, he was confident she should have this chance, and I needed to simmer down. I prayed she would not get in. My prayers were not answered.

As I helped her pack her trunk the following year, I found myself wondering whether she considered herself an environmentalist. We had never really talked about it. I had just assumed my children were environmentalists, because I was one myself. But it dawned on me that this unconscious assumption needed some examining because there was plenty of evidence to contradict it. Better to keep my expectations low, I decided—to just hope that she would come home a person who turned off the lights when she left a room.

As we drove up to Maine one winter morning, I had one of those parent-of-teenager moments when I realized that we really knew almost nothing about this program except that her school heartily endorsed it. We were about to deliver our daughter into the hands of complete strangers for four months. I was relieved when Willard Morgan, the school's director, addressed the parents. This young man had a carefully articulated, impassioned understanding of his school and of what he expected from our kids—plenty of work, physical as well as mental, and a willingness to ask hard questions about their responsibility to this community, to themselves, to the land and the plants and animals that live on it, and ultimately to the world beyond. I was buoyed. If my daughter joined in, she would learn and thrive.

Cell phones were forbidden, so e-mails became our lifeline. Three weeks into the term, my curiosity got the better of me, and I wrote: "So, do you think you have become an environmentalist?" She shot back: "Not yet. Still waiting on tenterhooks for that to happen."

Wendy Lovinger
stands on a path lead-
ing to Hoyt's Point, one
of her favorite spots
on Maine's Chewonki
Neck peninsula.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BETH PERKINS

THE DAUGHTER On the first day of Maine Coast Semester, February 1, 2006, Willard Morgan, the program's director and resident science teacher, told the 36 students who had just arrived on Chewonki Neck that we would become a "community" over the next four months. My first thought was: "Who does this insanely tall guy think he is?" (Willard is 6 feet 7 inches—exactly two meters. On science field trips we would measure the height of a tree as five or six Willards.)

I was a jaded student from a New York City prep school, where the administration constantly told us that we were a community. But we weren't. The fierce competition for spots in top-tier colleges was one of the things that drove us apart. This is not a jab at my high school. I'm only telling you where I was coming from. So, when the c-word slipped out of Willard's mouth, I figured he was off his rocker.

Prior to my rendezvous with Chewonki, I was, to use a term Wendell Berry used in an article we read in English class that semester, an environmental sinner. I threw away soda cans when I wasn't close to a recycling bin; I left all the lights on in our apartment at night because I feared the dark; I wasted water when I did the dishes; and a favorite pastime was flushing my allowance away at the Westchester Mall.

Environmentalism was not a word I associated with myself or my interests. It was a word I associated with radicalism. It made me think of my mother, who carries Coke bottles home in her purse to recycle, and of Greenpeace, the group that tried to hijack the logging ships. Even though I didn't consider myself an environmentalist, I chose Chewonki because I needed to get away from my school, and I had heard from kids who had gone before me that it was an experience that could change lives.

For the first month at Chewonki I was...skeptical. In my English class, *Literature and the Land*, we discussed how the 10 of us saw the natural world. All of my classmates positively adored nature. Furthermore, most of them actually lived near it. They shared stories of climbing Mount Katahdin, of their favorite lakes, and of their farms. The only nature I knew was Central Park. I became the class's favorite example of urban ignorance. My friend Sallie Banta, from Atlanta, loved to tease: "Oh, Wendy doesn't know what trees are or what the ocean looks like. She's from *New York*."

DRIVING TO THE UPPER MAINE WOODS IN A WARM VAN surrounded by five of my classmates, along with Jenn Barton, my English teacher, and Willard, I nervously anticipated three days of winter camping. As snow fell outside the windows, all I hoped to accomplish on this trip was to not get hypothermia. After we bushwhacked two miles in to our campsite, I set out with another student, Steph Rendall, to collect balsam fir boughs to line our tent. With Willard's advice ringing in our ears—"Take only one or two per tree"—we pushed our way through the dense forest. The snow was up to our ankles, and we could see only what our flashlights illuminated. After unceremoniously ripping two boughs off the trunks of a couple of trees, we began to feel bad about how we were treating them. So we decided to ask the rest

of the trees for their branches, to let them know that we appreciated their sacrifice and that we would use each bough well.

Trekking back to camp, Steph and I discussed *Walden*, and how, after we had been forced to read it in class, we both wanted to build our own wood cabins in the forest and live in them, as Thoreau had done, for two years, two months, and two days. We also lamented the fact that this would be difficult, for there is little if any open land available to most of us. America is not covered by forest as it was when Thoreau was alive. Struggling to get back to camp, weaving through the wild, fallen trees with Steph, I was surprised to discover how pained I felt about the disappearance of our wilderness. There in the darkness, surrounded by trees coated with snow, I thought: Why are we so desperate to replace our forests with buildings and parking lots?

The second night, after returning from a snowshoe hike, the eight of us

found that the wind had blown all the snow off the pond near our campsite. In spite of our exhaustion, we ran out to play on the freshly uncovered ice. After an hour of Duck, Duck, Goose followed by tadpole racing—we created a finish line using the beam of a flashlight, then lay on our stomachs and used our arms and legs to propel our bodies across the ice—we gathered in a circle and yelled so our voices would echo in the mountains. There we stood, made anonymous by the night and the remoteness of the place; all we could see was the outline of the mountains and the forest all around us. As I howled like a wolf, the untamed part of myself was freed. Thoreau would have been proud.



I CAMPED OUT NEAR THIS SPOT ON CHEWONKI NECK.

EVERY MORNING, THE NINE GIRLS IN MY CABIN WOKE UP AT 6:42, rolled out of bed, threw on clothes, and dashed off to Morning Gather, which started promptly at 6:45. After a brief meeting, we would all hurry to our jobs. In April, it was my cabin's turn to do farm chores. My task was to brush the horses. Sal was a beautiful brown workhorse, Braego an annoying white pony. I always started with Sal because she was usually waiting for me in the middle of the barn. Brushing her was easy; she was calm and perfectly mannered. Braego was ill tempered and rowdy; he never stood still for more than 10 seconds at a time.

He became my daily battle. I would talk to Braego, urging him to behave for me. But this was to no avail. He was particularly fond of trapping me between his back flank and the wall in an apparent attempt to crush my feet when I brushed his side. It was tiring and occasionally painful, but I also enjoyed wrestling with this fidgety pony. Each time I completed his brushing, I felt victorious. His fierce streak of independence made me respect him rather than resent his brute strength. I had never worked with animals before. Never even had a dog or a cat.

A week after farm chores were over, I decided to become a vegetarian. Although I didn't recognize then what compelled me to do so, I now understand why: The environment is not "other"; we are a part of it. Deciding not to eat animals was an attempt to honor their right to live, too. Getting to know the farm animals and realizing that they all had different personalities made it impossible for me to eat them.

I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE JUST ANOTHER ENERGY TALK. BRENDAN Kober, one of Chewonki's energy experts, would talk at us about the environment, I would feel tired and listen to about half of what he was saying, and then the hour would be up. The 36 of us marched into the Whale Room—so called because a huge whale skeleton is suspended from the ceiling—and waited for the start of his lecture. That Thursday's energy talk was intended to teach us about hydrogen fuel: how it's made, what's good about it, but why it's not yet the miracle fuel some policy makers claim because fossil fuel is still required to manufacture it.

Brendan showed us a series of photos of two cars, one run by gasoline, the other by hydrogen gas. Both cars' fuel tanks had been punctured, and within a couple seconds, the car powered by gasoline was engulfed in flames, while the car that used hydrogen showed only a single, brightly colored flame shooting up from its trunk. With this presentation, he made it clear that hydrogen fuel is not as dangerous as some people think and is indeed another potential alternative to petroleum.

Then Brendan demonstrated how energy is derived from hydrogen molecules. He asked for volunteers to act out an analogy he had devised about a nightclub (I played a hydrogen atom in an H_2 molecule trying to get past the bouncer, the proton exchange membrane). Once I was back in my seat, I realized what a powerful message Brendan had sent. For years I had taken biology and chemistry, but I'd never really understood what I could do with this knowledge. Suddenly I was learning about the practical value of being a scientist. Using the chemistry I'd been exposed to, scientists are creating sustainable fuels and making a true difference in the world. The way science was taught in my school, it seemed like just a bunch of facts to be memorized. Brendan's lecture opened me up to possibilities I had never even considered.

At graduation on the last Thursday of the semester, we all gathered in the Social Room for our final meeting. Willard invited everyone to speak one last time, and almost every person—teacher, student, and staff—seized the chance. I nestled in between two friends to listen to Willard. He told us that one of Chewonki's main goals was to make us prudent consumers, and that in order to do so, we would have to forge deep ties with our friends and family—to form, well, a community. Society tears at those bonds, and this makes many of us very lonely. We wind up buying more and wasting more and throwing away lots of useless items in an attempt to fill the emptiness with *things*.

For Willard, and now myself, being an environmentalist is not just about finding a pet cause; it's a way of life. Before Chewonki, I wasn't ready to make the sacrifices necessary to embrace this ideal. I went about my merry way, fueling capitalism, buying crap I never looked at twice, being generally ignorant of my negative impact on the land. The many things I bought created a strain on the environment—the energy and resources required to make them and the space they occupied after they were thrown out. But I thought they were just *so* important.

I first noticed a huge shift in my thinking when I came home from Maine for spring break filled with an insatiable urge to clean this useless

stuff out of my room. I didn't know why then, but listening to Willard on graduation evening helped me understand this impulse and put it in a larger context. Chewonki and the people there, beyond my wildest dreams, gave me a solid foundation that encouraged me to change. My base was a community of students, teachers, ospreys, house sparrows, a beautiful calf named Ely, newborn lambs, farmers, and a stubborn pony named Braego. So, as it turned out, Willard was right.

THE MOM Wendy returned home from Maine a changed person. Chewonki had inspired her; she had also had a lot of fun. But she was a darker person: Some of what she had learned about the state of the earth scared her. Global warming, for example, was no longer an abstraction but an imminent danger. She had heard the message that her teachers were trying to get across—that it was her responsibility to be a caretaker

of her environment, even on the least glamorous levels. She was not only carrying home her Frappuccino cups but also brooding about whether she was thoughtless for drinking out of plastic cups at all.

Housework no longer appalled her. Maine Coast had helped her to see that taking care of the environment included cleaning up the place she lived. When I asked for a volunteer to clean the bathroom, she asked which cleansers and sponges to use and where we stored them. That may sound like a small thing, but I expect there are mothers of teenagers not reading this sentence; they've dashed to their computers to search for the Maine Coast Web site in hope that their own children might come to this

same awareness. (Wendy did not, however, become an environmental saint. She didn't actually scrub that bathroom for three days.)

She has stuck to her commitment to vegetarianism. When I pointed out how aggravating it would be to cook two different meals each night, she countered, "I could never look Ely in the face again if I ate another hamburger." That slowed me down. At parents' weekend, I had seen Ely the calf—an animal so well cared for that his chocolate-brown fur gleamed even in the low light of the barn. I wasn't sure I could enjoy a hamburger anymore either. The simple acts of spending time in a barn, tending an ornery pony, watching a calf grow, created ripples that were spreading out and touching other lives.

The grownups at Maine Coast had asked my daughter not just to protect the environment but to lead the considered life. Seeing her struggle with this new awareness, I was struck by how frightening it is to be young and an environmentalist now. By contrast, I don't think my biology and chemistry teachers ever mentioned an environmental issue, and they were thoughtful men. Forty years later, Willard has to talk about the decimation of forests, the diminishing supply of oil, the scarcity of water, global warming; the list certainly does not stop there. In the face of this greater anxiety, I think my job as a parent is to encourage Wendy to believe that she can make a difference. ♣



WE WENT ON SCIENCE FIELD TRIPS EVERY WEEK.

WENDY LOVINGER is entering Pomona College next fall. Gay Daly wrote about endocrine-disrupting chemicals in the Winter 2006 issue of *OnEarth*.